Tableau Vivant and the Aesthetics of Modernity

by

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Dedication

To my family.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the use of *tableau vivant* — the recreation of a work of visual art through the medium of the human body — as a significant aesthetic feature of French, Italian, and British fiction of the twentieth century. Usually considered a nineteenth-century phenomenon, first in the form of aristocratic parlor games then in theater and literature, the tableau vivant reappears in later novels and films (post-1950), long after it ceased to be a common social practice. Framing the *tableau vivant* in these late contexts through Walter Benjamin's concepts of the ruin and the dialectical image, I argue that the very outmodedness of the tableau vivant freed it up to become an experimental form, capable of exposing truths otherwise buried in the detritus of history or ideologically co-opted by ideas of progress. By examining appearances of the *tableau vivant* in twentieth-century fiction and film, I contend that *tableau vivant* comes to express new aesthetic ideas and cultural meanings encompassing urban experience, colonial relations, gender identities, and postmodern forms of spectatorship.

After an Introduction providing historical context and the key Benjaminian concepts that form a throughline of the dissertation, Chapter One analyzes three early literary texts including scenes of *tableaux vivants*: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Emile Zola's *The Kill*, and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. These earlier novels present *tableau vivant* performances as straightforwardly narrated scenes aimed at exposing the social dimensions of the form during its heyday — its exhibition of wealth and power, and its claims on visual culture. Chapter Two examines Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Topology of a Phantom City* and Jean-Luc Godard's film *Passion* as works that involve staging and photographing of *tableaux vivants*,

connecting them to broader conversations of potential objectivity, representational violence against women, and the exploitation of laboring bodies. Chapter Three analyzes works of cinema depicting post-war European urbanization — Jacques Tati's *Playtime* and the *giallo* films of Dario Argento — which employ *tableau* compositions to thematize the insistent framing of vision and increasing rigidity of space that characterized the individual's encounter with others in the city. Chapter Four considers two works — Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* and Marguerite Duras's film *India Song* — that envision the *tableau vivant* as a visual emblem of growing European narcissism in response to the waning, or already extinguished, state of French colonial rule and influence. Using the works of John Banville to illustrate Pierre Klossowski's theorization of the *tableau vivant* as an inscribed form, I argue that these *tableaux vivants* represent delusive worlds within worlds, colonial fantasies of the end of time. Finally, the conclusion discusses the phenomenon of Instagram *tableaux vivants* as an expression of anxieties and desires awakened during the Covid-19 pandemic and demonstrates the form's ongoing potential as a dialectical image that can reveal new facets of the past, present, and future. Through extensive textual and visual analysis, this dissertation considers the *tableau vivant* as a distinctive modern literary and cinematic technique, tracing its passage from the stage to the novel in the nineteenth century, and its return in avant-garde literature and film from the 1960s onwards as a tool for social and political commentary.

Introduction — *Tableau Vivant* as a Dialectical Form

I.1 Historical Origins

> One day Tiburce entered Gretchen's chamber carrying a bundle; he took from it a skirt and waist of green satin, made after the antique style, a chemisette of a shape long out of fashion, and a string of huge pearls. He requested Gretchen to put on those garments, which could not fail to be most becoming to her… when she entered the salon, Tiburce could not withhold a cry of surprise and admiration. He found something to criticise, however, in the head-dress, and, releasing the hair from the teeth of the comb, he spread it out in great curls over Gretchen's shoulders, like the Magdalen's hair in the *Descent from the Cross*. That done, he gave a different twist to some folds of the skirt, loosened the laces of the waist, rumpled the neckerchief, which was too stiff and starchy, and, stepping back a few feet, contemplated his work.
>
> Doubtless you have seen what are called living pictures, at some special performance. The most beautiful actresses are selected, and dressed and posed in such wise as to reproduce some familiar painting. Tiburce had achieved a masterpiece of that sort; you would have said that it was a bit cut from Rubens's canvas. Gretchen made a movement.
>
> "Don't stir, you will spoil the pose; you are so lovely thus!" cried Tiburce in a tone of entreaty.
>
> (Gautier 94-95)

In the penultimate paragraph of the citation above, the omniscient narrator of Théophile Gautier's 1839 story "La toison d'or" ("The Golden Fleece"), describing its climactic scene, interpolates the reader, assuming familiarity with the pastime known as the *tableau vivant*, while at the same time offering a very simple definition of it. It is also an example of the straightforward literary representation of a form that was, primarily during the nineteenth century, really practiced in the drawing rooms of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie of Europe and the United States. As time went on, this social practice receded; surprisingly, however, the *tableau vivant* continued as an aesthetic form, becoming something immensely stranger and

perhaps more fascinating. In this dissertation, I will take traditional examples (like Gautier) as a point of departure and explore the use of the *tableau vivant* as it evolved in the latter half of the twentieth century to embody new aesthetic and social concerns.

At the origin of the *tableau vivant*, defined as "the art — or rather game — which consisted in imitating well-known paintings with the use of living persons" (Holmström 209), lies the art of sculpture. Most sources attribute the innovation, or at least the popularization, of the *tableau vivant* to the similar late eighteenth-century performances of Emma, Lady Hamilton's famous "attitudes." This was her name for a mimoplastic art in which she would imitate, as an amusement for the guests of her antiquarian/ambassador husband Lord Hamilton at their Naples home, famous works of ancient statuary. Kirsten Gram Holmström, in her seminal text *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends in Theatrical Fashion, 1770-1815*, provides a thorough account, based on various epistolary sources from the period, of the proceedings:

> The performance took place in the middle of a drawing room, not on a stage erected for the occasion…There was no scenery in the form of 'set pieces' such as trees, vases of flowers, broken columns, altars or similar objects, and nothing is said of any special arrangements for lighting. Lady Hamilton appeared as if in an arena…with the spectators gathered around her. She was dressed in a white tunic with a girdle and her hair was loose or kept up with a comb. Her only properties consisted of two or three cashmere shawls and occasionally she held some object such as an urn, a lyre, or a tambourine…she covered herself with one of the shawls so that under its concealment she could drape herself with the others. As soon as she was ready she suddenly lifted the first shawl, which had thus acted as a kind of curtain; sometimes she let it fall to the ground,

> sometimes she caught it half way, when it was to serve as drapery for the figure she was representing.
>
> (Holmström 114-115)

It should be noted that even from its inception, the art of the more sculpturally-oriented *pose plastique* (MacLeod 143) and the more pictorially-oriented *tableau vivant*, even in the private context of a parlor game rather than its more public performances (Holmström 209), has been framed as a clearly theatrical event through the presence of an audience, as well as the use of a curtain as a spatial and temporal marker to signal the beginning of the representation and to unveil the sculptural "presence" of its interpreter (or its human medium).

At various points (as it does here), this dissertation touches upon the question of gender in relation to the *tableau vivant*, but it is by no means exhaustive in this regard; indeed, these moments only scratch the surface of such a crucial dimension, which reaches into the very heart of the form. The *tableau vivant* by nature objectifies, petrifying human interpreters and transforming them into representational figures; perhaps because it is linked so closely to Western canons of painting and sculpture, it exerts this force particularly upon women, and significantly less so upon men. It therefore participates in the objectification and aestheticization of woman and, even in cases where the conditions surrounding the staging of *tableaux* are recorded and the participation of women in the compositions is voluntary, the resultant stilling, silencing, and offering up for viewing of the female body provokes many questions of gender politics and agency. Indeed, the history of the *tableau vivant* demonstrates the extent to which this form complicates (and therefore has the potential to participate in or, alternatively, subvert) the traditional hierarchy of gender as it relates to performance and viewing: Emma Hamilton's

famous “attitudes” were performed with upper-class male spectators in mind, while she, as a talented courtesan, was an individual who did not herself come from this same class. As becomes evident through this single example, in which social context forms an integral part of the dynamic surrounding the *tableau vivant*, the question of gender intersects with, and invites consideration of, other factors such as class, race, and sexuality. The texts that I examine in this dissertation range widely in their treatments of gender — from caustic representations of the eighteenth-century “marriage market” and depictions of women doing manual labor in factories, to compositions that violently fix female victims as if in amber — but this is always a significant dimension of the form; all of these texts could, and should, be used as support for further scholarly work that would thoroughly track and explore the ways in which the *tableau vivant* creates a complex web of relationships between men and women, subject and object, the viewer and the viewed.

Emma Hamilton’s well-publicized “attitudes” eventually moved beyond Naples and pervaded various levels of Western European society, both as upper-class “parlour game[s]” (Jacobs 90) and as more public performances: “Lady Hamilton’s attitudes were echoed in the music hall entertainment of the *pose plastique*, in which partially dressed figures assumed positions evoking ancient statues — a practice that was often considered a ‘debased art form.’ Since English stage censorship often strictly forbade actresses to move when nude or semi-nude on stage, *tableaux vivants* also had a place in presenting risqué entertainment at special shows” (Jacobs 90). In both of these examples, we find the device of the *tableau vivant* itself deploying, exploiting, and subverting characteristics of classical sculpture to other ends. The serious contemplation of an artwork becomes a guessing game, a light diversion based on the participants’ aesthetic and cultural knowledge. Nudity becomes both a disguise and a revelation

— a suggestive means and its "suggestive" end — through the imitation of statues and the attendant removal of motion from representation. Lady Hamilton's attitudes and the use of *poses plastiques* in this kind of burlesque context both rely on and seek to circumvent the properties of theatrical representation — the former, through its dramatic mode of presentation that nevertheless relocates the theatrical space to the private sphere of the parlor, and the latter, through its adoption of sculptural stasis to recontextualize and legitimately present the nudity of performers in order to circumvent the age's laws of stage censorship. Such representations push at external and practical real-world boundaries of the physical space of the theater and of the perceived propriety of representational subject matter, and they do so precisely through their pushing at the boundaries between art forms. This also demonstrates the capacity for *tableau vivant* to be staged and viewed in public and private spheres.

The most immediately obvious method of exerting such pressure we might describe as intermedial in nature: the *tableau vivant*, as part of its most basic definition, performs the exercise of basing a configuration, or composition, of human "actors" and other props or sets-pieces upon a pre-existing pictorial or sculptural representation. Thus translating a representational subject from one medium to another (in this instance, the theater), the *tableau vivant* is always, to a degree, "the embodiment of a precursor artwork" (MacLeod 148). I would like to emphasize the word 'embodiment' in Catriona MacLeod's phrasing: the second means of exerting pressure is corporeal in nature. Gilles Deleuze, in his essay "Coldness and Cruelty" describes a scene from Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* as a *tableau vivant*, expressive through its "suspend[ed] gestures and attitudes" of the painful, prolonged waiting — an integral part of the masochistic impulse — for "the whip or the sword that never strikes, the fur that never discloses the flesh, the heel that is forever descending on the victim" (Deleuze 70). Departing

from Deleuze's analysis, MacLeod picks up the device of the *tableau vivant* and discusses it at length, identifying "Titian's prolific output of (male) martyr paintings, as well as his Crucifixions" (MacLeod 163) as a pictorial source for Sacher-Masoch's novella and positing that "the practice of *tableau vivant* necessarily produces an interdependence of mortification and animation that recalls the psychodynamic of masochism" (MacLeod 167).

We can find related meditations even in the form of more practical considerations of the actual staging of *tableaux vivants*. In his discussion of specifically cinematic *tableaux vivants* and the film *L'Hypothèse du tableau volé*, Steven Jacobs cites the Chilean filmmaker Raúl Ruiz's "[fascination] by the 'slight, almost imperceptible movements' that are inevitably made by tableau vivant models who must continually strain to maintain their pose" (Jacobs 95). Ruiz himself talks about "a certain physical tension [that] results from this, the same that the original models must have felt" (qtd. in Jacobs 95). For Ruiz, the cinematic interest in the staging of such scenes is tied to their imperfection of immobility. The "slight movements" of the actors are, in the manner of Emma Hamilton's curtain-like shawls, a distinctly theatrical trapping that serve as a reminder of the live performance of the image and the human element in which it consists. Once again, we see the co-opting of what could be considered a regrettable weakness of the medium (a "human error," as it were) into a distinctive formal feature that serves its own thematic ends. The *tableau vivant*, then, is a form that: 1) oftentimes bases itself upon images of pain or death; 2) is thus theoretically linked with masochism; and 3) strives to generate in its viewer an empathy for, or at least an interest in, its representation of bodily tension. Such representational straining of frozen figures becomes yet another means of pushing at boundaries between media. It renders the *tableau vivant* sculptural or pictorial, in part, and theatrical, in part,

and in so doing, reinforces and boldly suggests its own position at the intersection between art forms.

Notably, in her book Holmström locates the origin of the *tableau vivant* in a bizarrely productive misunderstanding that relates to this question of artistic intersection; she recounts how Goethe writes in various places about Emma Hamilton's attitudes (rather more inspired by Classical art than bound to it as faithful reproductions), the Neapolitan practice of setting up elaborate "Christmas cribs" on the terraces of buildings around the city[1], and of "evening entertainment with tableaux" (Holmström 214), all of these being in fact accounts of spectacles that we might position adjacent to the *tableau vivant* rather than coinciding clearly with it. "Nor does it appear, as Holmström points out, "that [entertainment with tableaux] were as common as Goethe would imply, inasmuch as they are not referred to in contemporary sources. It is therefore impossible to establish whether they were really composed with specific paintings as prototypes or whether this is an impression which Goethe derived from hearing about Emma Hart's [i.e. Hamilton] posing in the 'picture box'" (Holmström 214).

It seems, then, that Goethe's synthetically-inclined imagination picks up elements of all these activities and combines them into the form described in his novel *Elective Affinities.* The question of whether or not what Goethe says about *tableau vivant* is entirely true would appear to be of limited use, since, per Holmström and contemporary critics of *Elective Affinities*, the immense popularization of the form *through* his writings about it (however dubious their claims) could encourage us to view his role as the innovator of the form, rather than merely as its chronicler. Holmstrom herself, in her exhaustive research on this topic, discovers the use of

[1] These cribs which were composed of elaborately painted backdrops and highly detailed and lifelike mannequins, "little 'actors'...[whose] figures were flexible; the body consisted of an iron framework wound around with yarn and so the postures were not fixed once and for all but could be altered as desired" (Holmström 213).

tableau compositions in French and German plays that predate Goethe's novel as well as in Goethe's own *Proserpina*, but notes the important difference between such scenes and the game the characters in *Elective Affinities* play: "In the *Proserpina* article Goethe refers to this spectacle as a 'tableau', i.e. *an imitation of pictorial art through the use of living people.* But it differs radically from tableau vivant in the ordinary sense of the word. It does not *reproduce a specific work of art* but is a free composition. Moreover it functions in a dramatically meaningful way. It is removed from the aesthetic dilettantism which distinguishes the 'living pictures,' a genre Goethe himself had launched as a harmless social entertainment but which — doubtless to his own surprise — was to gain entry to the professional theater" (Holmström 233).

There are other differences between earlier theatrical *tableaux* and the *tableau vivant*, according to its "ordinary" definition, as Holmström calls it. Some of these even relate to the confusing nature of the latter designation, since the earlier *tableaux* include scenes modeled after either specific works of art or painterly compositions more generally which are nevertheless *not static.* The earliest instance, during which a production of *Les Noces d'Arlequin* composed a single scene according to the visual model of Greuze's contemporaneous 1761 painting *L'Accordée de village*, lately exhibited at the Louvre, is a good example. These scenes are dynamic and do not truly interrupt the narrative flow of the plays containing them, but rather serve as frameworks *acted through* by their players. This has an entirely different effect from a non-narrative, totally still and silent recreation of a painting. It does not proclaim its likeness to its model so loudly, nor does it allow itself to be as constrained to its model as must a proper *tableau vivant.* We might be inclined to call it more of a visual reference (or an allusion) than a recreation.

Here, I would like to allow Diderot, in his role as theatrical and aesthetic theorist, to interject for a moment, to point another footlight at that more public, more ostentatious twin of the *tableau vivant* — the theatrical *tableau* — to which he famously refers as a kind of new ideal of the stage. In his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot,* Michael Fried lays out, summarizes, and analyzes in great detail Diderot's aesthetics as they are developed in his various Salons, writings on theater, and *pensées détachées* (or detached thoughts) on painting. For the sake of brevity, and because he has already done such a thorough job in synthesizing and re-presenting these ideas, I will rely on Fried for a succinct summary of Diderot's conceptions of painting and theater. Diderot's ideals for painting are dependent upon his own understanding of (and, accordingly, his prescriptions for) the art of theater; the two forms are conceptually linked, and it becomes clear as one reads his aesthetic writings that the one cannot be discussed without reference to the other. Diderot's position in regard to painting was a reactionary one, developed in relation to what he saw as an unacceptable 'theatricality' of certain works and artists:

> Probably the most striking of [Diderot's emphases and priorities from his Salons] is his abhorrence of the conventional, the mannered, and the declamatory, and his unqualified insistence that representations of action, gesture, and facial expression actually convey what they ostensibly signify. That insistence stood in implicit opposition with Academic practice...[which] tended mostly to perpetuate a limited repertory of postures and attitudes derived from the work of a few sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painters, notably Raphael and Poussin. And it signaled a dramatic difference between Diderot's dramatic conception of painting on the one hand and late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century equations of painting and tragedy on the other...Diderot held that the actual influence on painting of traditional theatrical conventions had been catastrophic, and called for the reform of the theater through a conception of the pictorial…
> (Fried 79)

Diderot called for the importation of the pictorial into the dramatic through the formal device of the theatrical *tableau.* Fried tells us that "The spectator in the theater, [Diderot]

maintained, ought to be thought of as before a canvas, on which a series of such *tableaux* follow one another as if by magic" (Fried 78). These theatrical *tableaux*, while not *tableaux vivants* in the strictest sense, because a traditional dramatic representation entails at least a degree of motion and speech, nevertheless closely approached the frozen status of that more specific form; "accordingly [Diderot] stressed the values of pantomime as opposed to declamation, of expressive movement or stillness as opposed to mere proliferation of incident, and called for the institution of a stage space devoid of spectators which in conjunction with painted scenery would allow separate but related actions to proceed simultaneously, thereby providing a more intense because more pictorial dramatic experience..." (Fried 78).

Despite their differences, both the "ordinary" *tableau vivant* and the theatrical *tableau* for which Diderot advocated depend for their effectiveness on the same impulse — that is, the impulse towards *recognition*. The Greuze *tableau* in *Les Noces d'Arlequin* would have been recognizable to a large public because of the fact that the painting and the play were produced during the same year, and exhibited in the same city. The *tableau vivant* takes up the playful metatheatrical gesture of the *tableau* and refines it, distilling its more generalized ludics into a true guessing game, and its staging is entirely dependent upon the audience's recognition of the visual model upon which it bases itself. If it does not adequately recreate (or even evoke) the original work of art, then it might be considered, in this context, an objective failure. While it is important to recognize the theatrical *tableau* as an important development of the *tableau vivant*, I would like to point out here that the examples I will examine belong to the latter category (even when presented onstage, as in a couple of cases) because of their marked stillness. The *tableau vivant*'s stasis plays a significant role in its use in later texts to provoke an analytical line of thinking in their readers and viewers.

If *Elective Affinities* is the main source from which people got the idea of staging such *tableaux*, then it is as much a rulebook as a representation. A conception like this — of the *tableau vivant,* the way it comes to be played and staged in the world, as having for its foundational model a written scene rather than a verifiable event — adds yet another knot to the intermedial tangle of the *tableau vivant,* but it also more closely aligns its parallel histories of real-world staging and literary representation. It is interesting to consider whether (as in Goethe's novel) the practice of staging a *tableau vivant* in real life is similarly inflected by an awareness of the interpreters' suppression of their own motion, voices, and identities in creating these compositions. In the real world, we are denied the kind of narratorial access to thoughts and motivations that is a privilege of the novel, but the intermedial nature and the surprisingly literary origin and propagation of the *tableau vivant* creates a kind of dual desire and frustration for just such a standard narrative structure on the part of the audience. In the later examples of the form that will be my focus, *tableau vivant*, employed in avant-garde artistic programs, can in fact both disrupt and supplement narrative structures.

I.2 Uses of the *Tableau Vivant* After 1950

During the twentieth century, as the practice of *tableau vivant* fell out of favor, the form is often recovered and applied to questions of new and developing artistic philosophies that reflect the broader social, economic, and political changes of the century. To situate better my own analytical perspective in the discussion of the *tableau vivant* to follow, I would like to begin with a rather general comment from Alain Robbe-Grillet, concerning what has been perceived as an agenda of, or a particular problem with, his writing. In a 1989 broadcast of the radio program *Entretiens (À voix nue)*, the interviewer asks Robbe-Grillet what he makes of charges that he is uninterested in meaning (even to a destructive, anarchic degree in the eyes of some detractors).

On the contrary, says Robbe-Grillet, he *is* interested in meaning; what he is *not* interested in, however, is what he calls "la coagulation du sens… *le sens qui se fige*" ("the coagulation of meaning… *meaning that is frozen*," my emphasis). The French term — "*se figer*," an evocative reflexive verb that captures the kind of immobilization of bodies, narrative, and time in a manner better than can an English equivalent — sets up an analogy between this fixed, stagnant meaning in Robbe-Grillet's mind and his extensive use of frozen scenes and *tableau vivant* compositions in his books and films.

But what is equally important here is the fundamental significance of dialectical thinking, not only to his project, but also to all of the decidedly avant-garde uses of the *tableau vivant* that this dissertation will examine. Gathering together contradictory terms, evoking each of them, and playing between them, the *tableau vivant* creates something like a montage effect that ultimately produces a third term. It can thus be examined in terms of dialectics, understood very broadly as "a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides" intended to effect the "development from less sophisticated definitions or views to more sophisticated ones later" (Maybee). This dissertation will, more specifically, present the *tableau vivant* as related to Walter Benjamin's conception of the "dialectical image" (more on this later in the introduction). It brings together into a single object of analysis elements or aspects that seem contradictory and, through the analysis of that object, can result in rather "sophisticated" or complex definitions of these terms in their own right; it can also elucidate the relationship of these terms to one other, and in many cases produces what we could consider an intermediary third term. I would propose that the reason for the recurring appearance of the *tableau vivant* — an image that might at first seem to be located clearly within the kinds of delineations against which Robbe-Grillet is constantly pushing — is that it is a dialectical form,

straining with all the tensions and contradictions of a modern life and a new literature. Somewhat paradoxically, the frozen form does not result in the dread *sens figé*; rather, the immobile image allows for meaning itself to remain dynamic and malleable because of the *tableau vivant*'s odd and suggestive characteristics, and the way in which they engender a shifting, analytical perspective on the part of the viewer or reader.

I will outline briefly here several of the most prominent dialectical pairings we can detect in the tableau vivant:

Stasis and Movement: The human body is rendered other — objectified, instrumentalized, artificed — by lack of movement; such stasis is simultaneously suggestive of imminent movement.

The Archaic and the Modern: The historical origins of the form seek to approximate classical sculpture with its most direct referent — the human body. Nevertheless, these performances were framed in clearly modern contexts and the evocation of a classical past causes the form (or the viewer's perception of the image) to shuttle back and forth between temporalities.

Subject and Object: *Tableaux vivants* take subjects, and in approximating their referent (a painting), they duplicate *its* subject, to the point where the proprietorship of the scene is indeterminable (i.e. is the *tableau* replicating the painting, or the painting's subject, and is there effectively any difference?).

Fixed and Mobile Perspective: The *tableau vivant* may be organized around the fixed perspective of a painting, and may, depending on its staging (i.e. if it is performed on a real stage, before a seated audience), retain this perspective. On the other hand, the use of the medium of the human body means that a mobile perspective — more in line with that afforded

by the medium of sculpture, which can be approached from multiple and diverse angles — is also possible. This might amount to an opening up of new dimensions of an image — not even necessarily by design, but by dint of the *tableau*'s medium — and this can be exploited to various ends within texts.

Commodity and Labor: The *tableau vivant*, as an exercise in objectification-cum-performance put on for profit or for the display of wealth (as was often the case), or simply as a recreation of a work of visual art, can be easily assigned the role of "commodity" and therefore be understood as a sort of insidious formalist dragging of the human into the realm of the inanimate and the transactional. On the other hand, its effect depends upon labor. But in its original upper-class context, it is necessary to emphasize that "labor" is an inappropriate term for the temporary bodily strain of its interpreters, who are, in the end, playing a game.

Other studies, which have focused on the *tableau vivant*'s dual evocation of life and death, brush up against this ambiguity through examination of that specific but inordinately evocative dialectic. While this aspect of the form is certainly interesting and ripe for analysis, it also obscures the complexity of the *tableau vivant* that causes me to define it as dialectical rather than merely double, contradictory, or paradoxical. Ultimately, the *tableau vivant* is neither perpetual life nor true death. It is, as John Banville's narrator in the novel *Ghosts* puts it, "some third thing" between the two, and this is illustrative of the productive nature of the form's ambiguity. Its dialectical relationships create an associative movement in the spectator or reader that, in defiance of the *tableau*'s very stillness, flickers between poles, simultaneously equilibrating the two distinct images of its initial terms and generating, from this montage, a new, third image and

term. For all its formal obduracy, it nevertheless proves to have something conceptually ductile, which becomes evident as it moves into incongruous or varied contexts.

This dissertation will seek to illustrate an analytical perspective suggested by the *tableau vivant*, an intellectual utility that might appear to fly in the face of the mystical allure that has already drawn a good deal of artists' and theorists' attention to the form. But these two qualities are not incompatible; rather, they constitute another set of possibilities that the stilled form holds in uneasy, temporary equilibrium. While Jean-Luc Godard may, for example, be crafting *tableaux* that function as commentaries upon the film industry of the early 1980s in Europe and in Hollywood, and upon capitalism's mechanization of the human body and human labor writ large, the images that he creates are also, on another level, expressions of existential dread and revolutionary hope.

Even as I enumerate elsewhere in the dissertation a variety of characteristics by which we might define the form (or variations thereof), always, posed and holding up the edifice of the entire structure like a caryatid or an Atlas, is the dialectical nature of the *tableau vivant*. This remains a constant, detectable in the most basic sense — that the *tableau vivant* is a performed duplication of a work of visual art — and in the more abstract ones — that it stands in for an inherent existential trembling, a pull between contradictory impulses and experiences, that is emblematic of Western European modernity and its artistic expression through literary and cinematic modernism[2].

It is easy enough to sense, and perhaps not so difficult even to catalogue, these kinds of dialectical dynamics through examination of different examples of the *tableau vivant*'s

[2] This is perhaps why the way in which Walter Benjamin "strives to make philosophy surrealistic" (Wolin 120) resonates particularly with me as I attempt to frame a dynamic that is at once metaphysical and pragmatic.

appearances in literature and film, but such an approach risks over-compartmentalizing and presenting each instance as a singular curiosity with its own narrow set of foci, therefore failing to draw a unifying framework that would account for its interest at a more general theoretical level. As I hope my own selection in the chapters to follow will demonstrate, authors who employ the form in the latter half of the twentieth century do so in order to throw into relief an exceptionally wide range of issues and aspects of modernity.

The *tableau vivant* can be considered in some ways as a dialectical image in the Benjaminian sense. Michael W. Jennings describes Walter Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image as elaborating a process in which the critic seeks "to fragment the cultural object and to reduce it to a discontinuous series of images, to mortify the text" so as to salvage "the revolutionary potential [that] lay buried in the ruins of nineteenth-century bourgeois life," to "reveal those few images [of the past] that might have a positive effect in the present" (Jennings 38). One of my goals in this dissertation is to examine the *tableau vivant* as an example of this sort of full, potentially explosive image produced through post-facto or avant-garde perspectives of the late twentieth century that have effectively disinterred it from "the burial ground of history" (Jennings 38). as a form that functions through many of the same principles and allows for the emergence of a similar analytical perspective to that which Benjamin sought to uncover in his massive *Passagenwerk*, or *Arcades Project.*

In order to enter concretely into this theoretical discussion, I will provide an initial literary example of the *tableau vivant*, and also highlights aspects of the form that echo Benjamin's ideas about the dialectical image. In his travel book about the Greek island of Rhodes, entitled *Reflections on a Marine Venus*, Lawrence Durrell chances, one dark, bewitched evening, upon the following scene:

> A horn-lantern with one feeble candle alight in it stands upon the ground, throwing its waxen light upon a half-circle of faces whose blank uncomprehending anguish, devoid of recognition, seems trained downwards, as if eternally fixed, upon the figure of a small child lying upon a dirty peasant blanket which is drawn back over his knees. He is dressed in a shirt of vivid whiteness open at the throat, and he gazes out beyond the circle of faces at the sky with some of that gentle vagueness which the human face wears at the approach of death. At the fringes of that puddle of sallow light crouch the patient sleeping forms of goats and a rough-coated sheep-dog. To the left a kneeling woman with her bright scarf drawn across her face and her head bent. [...][*Manolis's*] *features seem to have been stripped of all meaning — the gesture, mobility, or repose, which alone give an accidental significance to the inert structure of flesh and bone*, and which carry on them the index of the human personality, its masks. *He crouches there like a figure stamped on some old leaden seal*; and while my own startled senses clearly interpret his physical attitude as one of pain and misgiving, to someone else casually passing, he might seem to be like a man who has just been deafened by an explosion which has scattered the whole sum of human expressions by which his face might register some idea of its magnitude. *The very earth seems deaf around the little group*, fixed in the attitudes of a forgotten tableau around the flickering lantern. [...] A little circle of villagers have closed in about the actors, forming a web of human heads, a circle of compassionate helpless witnesses. All are silent. The whole scene has the veridic fixity of an old master — though the figures breathe, and though one recognises the brush which has so thoughtfully, so masterfully painted them in as the brush of pain itself. Some of the men have the faces of those whom shock has somewhat sobered; *one holds a mattress, one a bottle of wine, and even these objects so listlessly held in hands whose very pose suggests the uselessness of all action, seem somehow lost to common context. They are like the wreckage left behind after an invasion of the senses by all the armies of the unknown.* [...] *As for the child, he seems already to be entering that class of material objects whose context has been torn from them by the force of the tragedy — all these bottles held half empty in still fingers, the idle propellor of celluloid which his brother still holds in a thoughtless fist, the burning candle-stump.* [...] The heavy rope-like muscles of Manoli's body, already swollen and contorted by rheumatism, have further tightened under the pressure of unexpressed feeling and of shock. *It is as if in some old house, ruined by damp, the arterial system— the plumbing — had been revealed by a fallen wall, or by the incursions of damp or snow.* Yet he crouches limply, hands unclenched, gazing with a dumb and sightless longing at the boy stretched under the blanket. It is as if someone had drawn a wet sponge across everything else in the world leaving only this circle of fading light and the characters which peopled it as the whole content of his thoughts.
> (Durrell 174-77, my emphases)

This citation brings into focus the aspects of my material that are essential to this introduction, presenting all of the key ontological characteristics of the *tableau vivant* — stillness, silence, reproduction of a work of visual art, the use of human body as medium, all within a delineated compositional space; an extensive discussion of all these aspects of the "living painting" makes

up the bulk of Chapter 1 — but, more importantly, it includes vital intimations of the specific dynamic that constitutes the focus of this section.

Firstly, the subject of this particular *tableau vivant* — a Lamentation of Christ — depicts the scene of death (or, at least, imminent death). The language that surrounds this death, applied both to the child and to the attendant figures in the scene, builds upon this theme and leads us into the semantic realm of ruination. The body of Durrell's acquaintance Manolis becomes, in this *tableau vivant*, an "inert structure," more an architectural element of the scene's composition than an aspect of an individual's identity, and the facial or corporeal features that usually contribute to the differentiation of people have been worn away and depersonalized to the point that Durrell recognizes this man more as a "plaster effigy" (Durrell 175) than a living being; the strained musculature of this body is revealed as if by "a fallen wall" in an "old house, ruined by damp." The central subject of the composition, the dying peasant boy, "seems already to be entering that class of material objects," more "thing" than person now, and like the other objects scattered around this scene, to which category he is subsumed, he is "lost to common context."

Just as important as Durrell's comparisons to crumbling structures here is his emphasis on decontextualization as an integral part of the nature of this *tableau vivant*. He discusses this "loss of context" on two separate occasions in the passage. Objects like a bottle of wine or a mattress or a candle stub become "wreckage left behind," the placement of which in this scene suggest the "uselessness of all action" to a much greater extent. Further on, Durrell elaborates upon this idea, stating that the child, like these objects surrounding him, has had his "context…torn from [him] by the force of the tragedy." It is clear, however, that when one takes the description of this *tableau* in its entirety, the tragedy of the child's death contributes to, but is not entirely responsible for, this stripping away of context; the composition itself — the way it

exists as if in an enchanted circle of light and shadow, with its own temporal and spatial logic dictated by pictorial concerns — separates its constituent bodies and objects from the literary framing of Durrell's travelogue. The association between the generalized subject of death and the particular resultant elements of its staging generates the odd effect — of distance, effacement, separation — that Durrell attempts to establish in this passage of first-person narration. That the *tableau vivant* can be associated with death, as much as with life, is nothing novel. What makes Durrell's *tableau* unique is the way in which he explicitly deploys the general pictorial theme of death in order to develop a more precise language of ruination. This ruination, moreover, functions not merely as a visual metaphor to communicate the tragedy of the dying child and the grief-stricken onlookers more accurately, but it also emphasizes the way in which the image persists in some fractured form, independent of its original context but not unrelated to it.

These apparitions in the present day underscore another element of Benjamin's intellectual framework that may in part account for the *tableau vivant*'s survival long past its historical apogee. Benjamin believes that the ruin — broadly conceived as that which, in becoming separated from the specificity of its original historical context and/or use, becomes essentially a fragment of itself, prised loose, capable of speaking a truth that is not obscured by history or ideology — gains an odd kind of temporal mobility; it can be picked up, incorporated into new mental structures, and then re-examined across this juxtaposition. The *tableau vivant*, as I will observe repeatedly in this dissertation, takes on precisely this sort of special status in the twentieth century: it is no longer staged for its original purposes, in its original contexts, but, like an ancient frieze exhibited within a museum, it appears within the new, seemingly incongruous frames of modernist architecture, avant-garde cinema, or the *nouveau roman*.

The ruin is important to Benjamin's conceptualization of allegory (as a detached fragment to which can be arbitrarily assigned meaning), as it also is to that of the dialectical image. Richard Wolin provides a good summary:

> When the stream of life's movement is brought to an abrupt halt, 'sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers,' the customary and the familiar are viewed in a radically new light. The method of 'Dialectic at a Standstill' has an estrangement or shock-effect on objects: it temporarily freezes them as slides under the microscope of the critic, lifts them momentarily from their natural environment to make them relevant for the present. It is a game of philosophical freeze-tag in which objects, places, events are stripped of their immediacy, in order that they might be released from the sterile continuum of the always-the-same. The principle of estrangement is carried over from the surrealist technique of montage. As a result of the new, 'shocking' juxtaposition of everyday objects in the Dialectical Image, these objects demand a unique, critical consideration and thus cease to be serviceable for the ends of the ruling powers.
> (Wolin 125)

In some cases, as in the famous example of the Parisian Arcades, Benjamin's dialectical images *are* literal ruins. But this description (also perfectly applicable to Durrell's *tableau vivant* in *Reflections on a Marine Venus*), which synthesizes various descriptions and criteria of the dialectical image from across Benjamin's writings, makes clear that, while the estranged "objects" that constitute this sort of image need not always, in an explicit or literal sense, be ruins, the very fact of their being "momentarily lifted from their natural environment" means that they fulfill a similar function. In other words, the dialectical process might be understood as one of temporary or perhaps theoretical ruination, in which "objects, places, events" are removed from their proper time and considered within the frame of another; they thereby "cease to be serviceable for the ends of the ruling powers" and become obsolete insofar as their nominal functions are concerned, but do still emerge as evocative objects of contemplation, like a shattered tower on a hilltop.

The *tableau vivant*, no longer widely practiced, becomes a ruin of itself; no longer social nor yet antisocial, neither entirely unknown nor ubiquitous, in the twentieth century, the form

stands like the Maiden porch of the Erechtheion, gazing out across the horizon of Western European culture. It is a ruin in the Benjaminian sense — outmoded, fragmentary, one more image in the long gallery of history (which, as Benjamin points out, does not present us with a continuous narrative, but rather with discrete pictures). This status is precisely what frees up the *tableau vivant* for the kind of interpretive and creative possibilities for which a later generation of artists will eventually exploit it. In the present, it is critically not bound up within a particular social or historical context, and of that past in which it *was* so contextualized, it is now but a shard.

Benjamin's theorizations and my own observations and analyses of *tableaux vivants* run parallel in his massive, incomplete *Passagenwerk*, which, on one level, functions as an inventory of nineteenth-century Parisian ephemera, and on another, suggestively structures this catalogue into the sketch of a much larger thesis on their status as reflections of culture and history. There are indeed shared preoccupations between the *tableau vivant* and the *Arcades Project*: with architecture, with mirrors, with photographs, with mannequins and automata. Benjamin himself, in his essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* (practically the *tableau vivant* urtext), barely mentions the *tableau vivant*[3], though I believe that its constituent fragments, shards of its odd ontology, appear in many different spots across his body of work.

A reading of the passages in the *Passagenwerk* in which Benjamin elaborates (admittedly to a frustratingly limited extent) upon the nature of the dialectical image as he understands it reveals affinities at the level of vocabulary, but also of a certain spatio-temporal model for these sorts of images. He says, for example, that "the present… polarizes the event into fore- and after-

[3] See Chapter 1 for a discussion of Benjamin's essay on *Elective Affinities* and how its theorizations implicitly relate to the *tableau vivant*.

history" (*Arcades* N7a,8), and that "it does so at a distance from its own existence, in the present instant itself — like a line which, divided according to the Apollonian section, experiences its partition from outside itself" (*Arcades* N7a,1). This emphasis on the present, but also upon the ways in which the fore- and after-history are always attendant, calls to mind a decidedly practical description of the *tableau vivant* in Zola's *La curée* (*The Kill*, examined in Chapter 1), in which the author effectively ventriloquizes the image, focusing on the interpreters' pained experience of posing during an excruciating performance and how this makes them reflect upon the long preparations that have gone into it, as well as the people watching them from the audience with whom they will interact after it is done.

I do not wish to make the claim that the *tableau vivant* is the paradigmatic dialectical image, nor that it necessarily always is one. My claim is rather that, when placed within particular contexts (such as a factory or plantation), when its elements are thrown into relief rather than melded together so as to create an impression of absolute mimesis (or "lifelikeness," as was one of the form's goals at its inception) by artists who seek to expose through it concerns other than purely aesthetic ones, the *tableau vivant* embodies the characteristics of the dialectical image as outlined by Benjamin; what's more, it could be said to stage the conditions of the emergence of a dialectical image within specific historical and cultural frameworks. That is to say, though it is an image of striking stillness, Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image can help us understand how, with its odd temporality and artifice, the *tableau vivant* is also a form that foregrounds the process of its own creation and reception.

Susan Buck-Morss says that "the Arcades project was originally conceived as a 'dialectical fairy scene' (*dialektische Feen*), so that the Passagen-Werk [sic] becomes a Marxian retelling of the story of Sleeping Beauty, which was concerned with 'waking up' (as the 'best

example of a dialectical overturning') from the collective dream of the commodity phantasmagoria" (Buck-Morss 271). The same kind of stasis that marks modernity can be seen in the *tableau vivant*, and it is also true that when its dormant figures finally stir from their pictorial reverie, this happens in a manner that is distinctly temporal — that is, the return to movement or dissolution of the *tableau* calls attention to the fore- and after-history of the image, returning interpreters to the individuals they once were, and releasing them, now compositionally unfettered, into the future. In a similar way, it "awakens" the reader into an understanding of issues raised by the text, which might have otherwise been obscured.

Such a definition might already suffice to categorize the *tableau vivant* as an example of the Benjaminian dialectical image when it appears, outmoded and pointedly alienated, in these later texts. It is already a ruin because it is a vestige of another age, bobbing on the surface of history even as its context, from which it has been shorn, lies submerged beneath it. Such a claim, while valid, is ultimately limiting. We can already see further parallels within Wolin's description above: in its Image-form, Dialectics is "at a Standstill," in "a game of philosophical freeze-tag" which allows for the kind of critical analysis precluded by the obfuscating contextual continuum to which such objects are often relegated (just as the innocuous, banal objects like an empty bottle or mattress in the scene of the boy's death take on for Durrell new, powerful meanings through such a compositional process). This is the language of the *tableau vivant*, a paradigmatic frozen form in which life itself comes so strikingly to a halt.

The *tableau vivant* need not be read merely as a single dialectical image in itself, because it also holds a particularly important conceptual position in relation to this method, as its staging and composition entail fundamentally the same procedures drawn up by Benjamin. Its formation stages the moment of the arrest of thought that Benjamin points out, and that it does this leads to

its adoption by other thinkers in order to build up their own dialectical perspectives around it, to situate it within the new contexts of these broader ideas: it entails the present as a "perilous critical moment" (*Arcades* N3,1), since the present is always imperiled in the *tableau vivant*; its *Vorleben* and *Nachleben* are built into it and visible in a way that it is not in the case of a "true" or standard image — that is, we see the preparations of the *tableau vivant*, we see the aftermath, and we see glints, in the moment of performance, of its past and future through the present tense of its straining bodies. And, like some of Benjamin's dialectical images, it deals also with uncommon states of being that are proper neither to a clear past nor to the future — which is to say, while it can be placed within clear and particular socio-historical frameworks, it also always conveys a formal, surreal strangeness that is viscerally striking to viewers (like the Arcades, already haunted spaces by the time Benjamin writes about them). Its stillness always, at a fundamental level, evokes the all-encompassing existential categorizations of "life" and "death." It is for this reason that it also finds purchase in the works of artists (such as the *Nouveaux Romanciers*) who take as their subject and objective a radical subversion of traditional bourgeois aesthetics and artistic conventions.

The revolutionary aspect of *tableau vivant*, unlike that of a more clearly politically oriented dialectical image, resides within the realm of the aesthetic. In itself, it prescribes no particular action, but its constellation is meant to induce a temporal disjunction and an unmoored and shifting perspective, which are nevertheless theoretical preconditions for the kind of political action (true revolution) that is the focus of Benjamin's more Marxist critical tendencies. In this way, it aligns well with what has been described already as the metaphysical or surrealistic bent to Benjamin's philosophy; the former quality is determinant of the latter's implications for action or observation within the "real" world. Benjamin's goal in the *Passagenwerk* is the creation of a

"materialist history that disenchants the new nature in order to free it from the spell of capitalism, and yet rescues all the power of enchantment for the purpose of social transformation" (Buck-Morss 275). If, for example, Robbe-Grillet's *tableaux vivants* in *Jealousy* (Chapter 4) "disenchant" the stagnating nature of the French colonial enterprise and, in so doing, reveal the imminent dominance of a more explicitly capitalistic neo-colonial project, then they do so precisely, and paradoxically, through the "enchantment" of the image itself — an incongruous series of Narcissi gazing, as if bewitched, into the river cutting through the plantation.

In the texts that are the focus of my first chapter, we can see that the performance of the *tableau vivant* itself, as when it was current, produces in the spectator, through its insistent present tense, a desire to see the image stir to life; this is most often future-oriented — "what will these figures do when they return to motion?" — but the choice of image itself, particularly if it depicts an event that is part of a larger recognizable narrative, gestures also backwards, towards that which precedes the frozen moment. As ever, the *tableau vivant* operates on two levels in this respect: the first, diegetic and narrative, and the second, extra-diegetic and rooted in the real identities of performers and context of the staging.

Already in this early stage, before the form's "ruination," we can see that the *tableau vivant*'s suggestive conflation of tenses provokes in the viewer a particular kind of dialectical thinking. Chapters two through four of this dissertation attempt to demonstrate how this strain is magnified precisely through the decontextualization that comes as a result of its outmodedness in the mid-twentieth century, and how it is specifically within these new contexts and frameworks that the *tableau vivant* draws ever closer to Benjamin's dialectical image. For if seeing the *tableau vivant* staged in, so to speak, its natural environment (the drawing room, or another

clearly delineated space of performance) already spurs the mind to all kinds fascinating terrain — the ontological doubleness of theater, the desire for art to serve as a reflection of its audience, questions of leisure, culture, and class — , then when it later appears where it should not (and when it should no longer), this tendency can be played by its stagers to even more extreme ends. Godard, for example, illustrates that the potential for dialectical thinking is at once inherent in the *tableau vivant*'s internal formal qualities and dependent upon its external context; *tableau vivant* as an aristocratic parlor game in the eighteenth century might not cause one to think about manual and artistic labor, but relocated to the image-factory of movie production, it certainly can.

The decontextualized *tableau vivant* can also be *re*-contextualized, as, for example, in spheres as diverse as the history of photography, *nouveau roman* philosophies of writing, questions of gender and objectification in the horror genre, the urban poetics of Charles Baudelaire, and modes of inter-class dialogue and representation. That such disparate areas can be brought into conversation with specific delineated examples of the *tableau vivant*, can be understood as necessary and historically or artistically specific context for these images, underscores how these *tableaux* can be read as dialectical images linked to and reflecting upon phenomena that may seem at first glance to lie beyond their scope. My objective through such an admittedly wide-ranging discussion in this dissertation is to open up the *tableau vivant*, in order to highlight its own potential for theoretical expansiveness and conceptual capaciousness and to demonstrate that this form — seemingly frivolous at its inception — can lead us to reflect upon social, historical, and economic developments that are anything but trivial.

Benjamin says that "the dialectical image is that form of the historical object which satisfies Goethe's requirements for an object of analysis: to exhibit a genuine synthesis"

(*Arcades* N9a,4). It is the *tableau vivant*'s powerful potential to serve as an "object of analysis," rather than merely as a performance, that interests me as well as those authors and filmmakers whose work I discuss in this dissertation. Benjamin casts the process of thinking in terms of movement and stasis: "To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. *Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions — there the dialectical image appears.* It is the caesura in the movement of thought…" (*Arcades* N10a,3, my emphasis). Replace "dialectical image" with "*tableau vivant*" in the italicized sentence and it still rings true. The form is always temporally, spatially, conceptually multiple; its tensions are physical and metaphysical; and when it comes to a "standstill," it does something singular to our own thinking about the image that its sculpted or painted visual referent (the original) cannot. The *tableau vivant*'s explicit artifice, the way it brings to the surface the tensions with which it is "saturated," the oddness of its temporality — all this causes it to heighten those qualities that it shares with other dialectical images in which the analytical processes that designate them as such could otherwise be less obvious.

In a sense, like Benjamin's conceptualization of the ruin within his discussion of allegory, the mutually flexible and evocative formal qualities of the frozen image open up the *tableau vivant* to the point that the 'meanings' and readings that can be attached to (and analyzed through) it are, while not entirely arbitrary, at least heavily dependent upon particular socio-historical contexts in which it is placed. I insist that this is not *entirely* arbitrary because, as we shall see, there still needs to be some kind of echo between the basic, independent formal tensions of the *tableau vivant* and specific, contextually dependent and derived tensions of the setting — that is, if the *tableau vivant* functions as a vehicle for reflection upon colonial fantasies

of an escape from time (see Chapter 4), this is only because the image's essential stasis *rhymes* with the stagnation of crumbling systems of colonial political governance.

In Chapter One, by way of a sort of historical foundation, I discuss three early examples of *tableau vivant* in literary texts — in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Zola's *The Kill*, and Wharton's *House of Mirth*. I take this approach to provide context and counterpoints to the later, more avant-garde examples of the form what will be the focus of the subsequent chapters, as well as to draw attention to some of the dialectical terms and thematic resonances built into it since its inception (and later manipulated or undermined by other texts). These include: stasis and motion as literal states, but also in more figurative terms as illustrations of social restriction and mobility; private spaces and public performance, elements of the form that indicate how it is at once outwardly and inwardly oriented; and solipsism and class consciousness, as perspectives offered by, respectively, the interpreters of the *tableaux* and the authors of these more critically-oriented texts.

The second chapter discusses *tableau vivant* in the setting of the city. It situates particular texts within the context of the large-scale urbanization (and Americanization) specifically of France and Italy after WWII, and examines how filmmakers and writers use their works to comment upon the ways in which these altered spaces also transformed rapidly, and dramatically, the ways of life of their occupants. It focuses on the tensions between: subject and object, as categories applicable to encounters with the Other in city streets; surface and depth, as qualities of composition necessary to the tableau vivant, but also as architectural organizing principles that themselves create tableaux; individual and shared spaces as sites in which these artists consider subjective or idiosyncratic vision and the way these warp and weft the new urban fabric.

Chapter Three considers the ways in which *tableau vivant* has been used as a means of exploring the limitations and possibilities of photographic images (which flourished during the first half of the twentieth century and became ubiquitous by the second). In using primarily two examples — Robbe-Grillet's novel *Topology of a Phantom City* and Jean-Luc Godard's film *Passion*, which deal, respectively, with photographic portraiture and the cinematic image — , the chapter continues to develop ideas of gendered subjectivity and objectivity (broached in Chapter Two) within the context of the arts, and introduces analyses concerning the *tableau vivant* as a form that both reproduces and subverts tropes of bodily labor in the arts and in other industries. This chapter also discusses the ways in which these texts see aesthetic revolutionary potential in the *tableau vivant*, understanding it as a form of image (or the product of a montage-like effect) with inherent political potential.

The final chapter discusses *tableau vivant* in perhaps the least obviously connected context of those treated in this dissertation — that of colonialism and neocolonialism. Marguerite Duras, in her film *India Song*, and Robbe-Grillet, in his most famous novel, *Jealousy*, both utilize *tableau vivant* compositions as a means of creating particular atmospheres of lethargy and decadence within former French colonial contexts and for conveying a sort of spiritual malaise of their colonizer characters. This chapter also considers how the *tableau vivant*, in these cases, generates a greater thematic and aesthetic resonance in which the form stands in for the colonizers' response to History: as a fantasy of the abolition of the normal rhythms of time itself.

In comparing the *tableau vivant* to Benjamin's dialectical image, I do not mean to equate the two. Indeed, as this summary suggests, there are differences between the former aesthetic form and the latter theoretical framework. Whatever the focus of a specific chapter may be, my

analysis invariably is built around terms between which exist a certain tension; the outline above demonstrates that some of these pairings are more closely related to the formal properties of the *tableau vivant* and others are more like echoes of these properties. I would like to emphasize here Benjamin's use of the term 'constellation' to describe the ways in which he imagined the dialectical image to function; in my analyses of *tableaux vivants*, while certain terms may shine more brightly than others, while the mind might more easily sketch in the connecting lines between certain stars in order to form suggestive patterns, in the 'constellation' as a whole, each term exists in relation to every other term. The delineation of these tensions is meant simply to lay some basic pattern atop the image, to begin the kind of analytical work that Benjamin suggests is possible through a contemplation of the dialectical image. For what must come after the "caesura in the movement of thought" — much like what must follow the performance of the *tableau vivant* — is motion; if the image is the result of thinking brought to a "standstill," the further consequences of its establishment as an image must be understood in terms of a motion, either physical or psychological, that follows the necessary pause. However much Benjamin mistrusts the notion of "progress," as it has been traditionally defined, and turns to the dialectical image as the striking counterpoint to this way of imagining ourselves socially and historically, any kind of meaningful change would need realistically to be figured as an action (even one energized by the very negation of action which catalyzes it). And here lies another difference between Benjamin's dialectical image and my *tableau vivant*: while Benjamin is interested in political revolution rooted in the real world, the authors and filmmakers who employ the form of the *tableau vivant* do so in the hopes of establishing and exploring a revolutionary aesthetics, a sharp, novel representation of that real world that can provoke reflection and action in the reader or viewer. And so, similarly, even if the presence of the *tableau vivant* in these works is a sort of

"caesura" in itself, there is a marked dynamism, a movement of images and rhythm of words that characterizes the texts in which they are contained, and amidst which they stand out.

Chapter 1 The Literary Origins of the *Tableau Vivant*

The history of *tableau vivant* as a practiced theatrical form extends scarcely further back than does its history of literary representation; indeed, its popularization and spread throughout much of Western Europe are due in large part to the epistolary and fictional writings of Goethe and others. In this first chapter, I would like to trace these parallel histories by examining three texts — Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, Zola's *The Kill*, and Wharton's *House of Mirth* — that all contain notable and extended scenes of characters staging *tableaux vivants*, these performances becoming important setpieces in their respective novels. My aim in this is twofold: firstly, to establish the parameters of the form itself, to arrive at a definition of the *tableau vivant* built around concrete and pragmatic concerns of its performance, derived from these literary sources; and secondly, to establish the differences between texts that present actual scenes of the staging of the *tableau vivant* and texts that take the *tableau vivant* as a guiding stylistic principle, arriving at an *aesthetics of tableau vivant.* The latter category will be the focus of the majority of twentieth-century works analyzed in this dissertation; I will argue that as the practice of *tableau vivant* becomes outmoded during the beginning of the twentieth century, in books and films post-1950, its ontological peculiarities, meta-artistic suggestiveness, and historico-cultural associations remain important to numerous authors who deconstruct the form and, unbound to the dictates of proper (or "realistic") staging, inflect the atmospheres, descriptions, and narratives of their works with certain of its attributes. To put it another way, I will examine the *tableau vivant* in this first chapter as a truly bounded object, a picture framed by the stage. As we shall see, when *tableau vivant* appears in these earlier examples, it is in quite a different manner,

deployed to considerably different thematic ends from those to which it will later contribute. The emphasis in such early scenes of *tableau vivant*, as it emerges, rests above all on the social dynamics played out through its staging.

1.1 The Rules of the Game

In Goethe's 1809 novel *Elective Affinities*, an aristocratic group of friends gathers at an estate and, as part of their entertainments, decide to stage a pageant of *tableaux vivants*, recreating images they find in the manor's library and collections. Across this scene, Goethe not only recounts in detail how the game is practiced, but also establishes certain characteristics of and relationships between characters who are interpreters, stagers, and audience members. The scene of *tableaux vivants* from *Elective Affinities* is not only the preeminent literary example from the period in which this entertainment was actually practiced, but also, apparently, the main source of inspiration for its staging and the catalyst for its popularity across Europe. Much in the way the *tableau vivant* takes a specific work of art as its model, the scene from *Elective Affinities* is the literary model that real-life games of *tableau vivant* and subsequent literary representations themselves employ. Thus I take this work as the point of departure in a discussion of what, precisely, constitutes a *tableau vivant* as it is commonly understood. These are the elements of the game as Goethe enumerates them:

1. **"Famous paintings" (190) to serve as models for compositions:** *"Have you not yet tried representing real well-known pictures?" (Goethe 189) the Count asks the receptive Luciane.* The group ends up choosing Van Dyck's *Belisarius* (Goethe 190), Poussin's *Esther Before Ahasuerus* (Goethe 191), Terborch's *Instruction paternelle* (Goethe 191), and "a number of little pieces...depicting Dutch inn scenes and market scenes" (Goethe 192), about which Goethe declines to talk further. Of particular note here is that once the

idea is introduced to the guests, "there was now a search for copperplates of famous paintings" (Goethe 190). If the work of visual art is to be recreated perfectly, then it is necessary to have it before one's eyes, to have a visual aid in the new composition of the work. In this case, engravings and plates serve as these visual aids. The "original" version of the painting can only come to the guests in the form of a precise copy which, for pragmatic purposes, must serve as a substitute to aid in its recreation through the medium of human bodies. We find ourselves, therefore, several times removed from the notion of the "original."

2. **Players, interpreters, figures:** *'There are so many well-proportioned people here,' [the Count] said, 'who are certainly capable of impersonating the movements and postures of paintings'* (Goethe 189). Using the paintings as models, an adequate number of players must "impersonate" the human figures in them. (The word choice in translation here is telling, intertwining duplicity with duplication.) Each player must correspond to a painted figure and, through manipulation of the body, re-create its posture and positioning perfectly. Moreover, there is an underlying understanding here that the paintings, and their resultant recompositions, should be aesthetically pleasing, if not downright beautiful; to match the painted figures, their interpreters should be "well-proportioned," and Luciane's own "fine proportions, her full figure, her regular yet individual face, her braided brown hair, her slim neck, were all as if made for portraiture" (Goethe 190). We will return to the question of a fundamental desire (often, though not always, figured sexually) that directs the performance of the *tableau vivant*, but for now it suffices to say that in Goethe and elsewhere we can find the implicit suggestion that certain kinds of people correspond properly to certain painted figures because they correspond better,

more generally, to the human figures often appearing in painting that are also "well-proportioned" and "beautiful."

3. **Stillness and silence:** "*...had [Luciane] known that she looked more beautiful when she stood still than when she walked, since a certain lack of grace became perceptible when she walked, she would have thrown herself into the preparation of these* tableaux vivants *with even greater enthusiasm*" (Goethe 190). Interestingly enough, Goethe does not spend a great deal of time discussing the stillness and silence of these *tableaux*; he prefers these qualities be implicit in his descriptions of the preparations and the staging of the scenes. Other than noting how stillness becomes Luciane, there is only one place where Goethe refers to the lack of movement of the actors: this occurs when one eager spectator cries out a request that Luciane, who has her back turned to the audience in accordance with the painted composition they are re-creating, reveal her face to the spectators. At the most basic level, the primary importance of the form's silence and stillness lies in their deployment as a means of ontological mimicry — the theatrical "impersonating" the plastic. In order for the illusion to work easily, in order for the audience properly to recognize the painting in the scene, stillness and silence are necessary factors, at once operating in two domains: of alienation of the theatrical and of rapprochement to the plastic.
4. **A three-dimensional space of composition:** "*The Count gave the architect a few hints about how the* tableaux *ought to be mounted and the architect at once erected a stage for them and looked after the lighting that would be needed*" (Goethe 190). While historically the nature of the space has been significantly varied — from the "picture-box" of Emma Hamilton to cleared floor spaces in salons to full-scale theaters — there is

always in the performance of the *tableau vivant* a need for a designated area in which the human interpreters of the painting are to be arrayed and configured. In the case of this scene, we are told that "such an undertaking would demand considerable expenditure" (Goethe 190), and we learn later on that the small-scale stage erected by the architect includes a "curtain" (Goethe 191) that is raised and lowered and behind which the *tableaux* are prepared before being displayed to the audience. In the most fundamental sense, all that the *tableau vivant* in its informal and formal variations demands is that its space be demarcated and separated from the audience. Interpenetration between the audience and the interpreters or blurring of the distinction between representation and reception are prohibited in an orthodox staging of *tableau vivant* precisely because they ruin the illusion of perfect recreation and could potentially preclude the possibility of recognition of the scene that the *tableau* seeks to reproduce[4]. The space of the *tableau* here is a specially-constructed stage, and the pragmatic questions — lighting, props, perspective — have come to the fore, but if we look at the configuration of the stage from a theoretical distance we might consider it rather as a space of composition, the two-dimensional canvas suddenly, magically rendered three-dimensional[5]. What this means,

[4] Such interpenetration and blurring become, I will suggest, more and more common in later literary representations of the *tableau vivant* in the latter half of the twentieth century, a move I link to the abstraction of the form that comes with its falling out of fashion by this point. This will be a major focus of later chapters, though for now it is worth noting that while the authors of the novels in question in this chapter do not attempt to present their literary *tableaux* to us in a manner that renders their interpreters entirely opaque or seeks to replicate in the reader the experience of the diegetic viewer (i.e. audience member) of the *tableau*, they nevertheless build their scenes around the separation of the representation from the audience.

[5] This spatial dimension of the *tableau vivant* — more specifically, the fundamental spatial reconfiguration it effects as the image passes from plastic referent to theatrical rendering — is perhaps where it most closely approaches the Diderotian theatrical *tableau*, with its evocation of the "magical canvas" whose enchanted nature is imparted by the tension caused between the immovable fourth wall and the newly-opened three-dimensional space lying behind it, across which the narrative action of the play can move.

in effect, is that the staging of *tableau vivant* is an act of *de*-composition of the painted original, followed by *re*-composition of the copy through the medium of human bodies, in three-dimensional space, in such a way that it nevertheless preserves the appearance of the original to such a degree that it can be recognized as its reproduction.

5. **A recognizing, unrecognizing audience:** "*The evening arrived and the performance was given before a large audience and to universal approbation*" (Goethe 191). The element of reception Goethe most notably stresses in these pages is that of "comparison": in the *Belisarius*, "the figures corresponded so well to their originals" and in *Esther Before Ahasuerus* "[the] tableau really did attain an incomparable perfection" (Goethe 191); finally, in the last and most intricately-described of the *tableaux vivants,* Goethe notes that the group's rendering of Terborch's *Instruction paternelle* "was beyond question inordinately superior to the original picture and provoked universal rapture" (Goethe 192). (The reasons for this "superiority" and "rapture" are not entirely to do with the perfection of the group's "living copy" [Goethe 192], but are also due to one performer in particular — the beautiful Luciane.) These comparisons first center on the apparently 'perfect correspondence' of elements and interpreters making up the reproduction to their painted counterparts, and then on the ability of the reproduction eventually to supersede the original. This 'superiority' of the reproduction over the original hinges doubly upon its incredible resemblance *and* the audience's understanding that what they are looking at is in fact a reproduction consisting in human figures (that is, to the ontological peculiarities of the *tableau vivant* as a form). It is then a sort of double vision upon which the *tableau vivant* depends for its ultimate effect — a recognition on the part of the spectators of both the painting itself, and of its representation in the form of a *tableau*

> *vivant.* It must be simultaneously like *and* sufficiently unlike the original in order to take on the qualities that all the authors I will discuss in this chapter note as especially important for the overall success of the form — if, that is, success is to be understood here as the *tableau vivant* becoming *more than* the sum of its compositional parts. This may be especially necessary for earlier (pre-1950) works that depict *tableau vivant* strictly as a narrated event, a practiced theatrical/ludic form, for they also tend to emphasize the dimension of social recognition in the reception of such spectacles.

The word that the rudimentary descriptions of these elements invariably return to is "recognition." In considering the aspects that we might deem necessary to the performance of what would be unquestionably taken to be a *tableau vivant* (as opposed to a theatrical *tableau* or a generalized aesthetics of *tableau vivant* observed in a work), the conceptual thread of recognition emerges as linking them all. Goethe also clearly has recognition on his mind when he inaugurates the form.

For evidence of this, we need look no further than the subjects and compositions of the very paintings that he has his characters enact. Firstly, there is the story of Belisarius, the once-renowned Roman general who, as a popular version of the story has it, found himself blinded and begging alms on the street when he was recognized by a former soldier. The indignity of Belisarius has been a popular motif in literature and painting, but here we ought to remark briefly upon two elements of this evocative figure: firstly, his blindness, which parallels the illusion of blindness to the outside world (i.e. that which lies beyond the fourth wall) of the painting or, in a more complicated fashion, of the *tableau vivant*, which feigns its enclosure for mimetic purposes; and secondly, the unseeing body as the site and means of recognition of Belisarius by

his former soldier. While Belisarius quite literally cannot see beyond himself, and while outside bodies exist for him (though not necessarily as points of recognition because of his blindness), he is not immune or unsubjected to the gaze of others. But Belisarius' identity is double, and this is equally important. We ought to note something which Goethe here leaves out, which is the caption on the engraving after Van Dyck: *Date Obolum Belisario* ("Give an obol to Belisarius"). This, according to some sources, was what Belisarius was made to say to passersby (self-identification as a means of furthering his indignity). Thus his punishment rests in part on the twofold effect of dissonance created by, on the one hand, the degrading request for alms attached to so formerly illustrious a name, and on the other, the vision of the physically, spiritually, and economically crushed body pronouncing its own name which seems so incompatible with its present reality. For it is not possible to say that this man in Van Dyck's engraving is simply Belisarius the general *or* simply a wretched, blind beggar; he is both of these things at once, and in their improbable convergence, thrown into relief by body and gesture and name, they both become roles: is this Belisarius the general playing the part of a blind beggar, or is this a blind beggar playing the part of Belisarius? For the instant depicted, at least, we have no easy answer to this question, since he must be recognized as *both things at once* — himself and another, the domain of the *tableau vivant*. This third and composite identity is a quality shared with the interpreter of the *tableau vivant*, as well as the product of a dialectical process through which we understand Belisarius's status as a beggar and his former identity as a renowned general as inextricably linked and shaping each aspect of his personal history.

Likewise, the final and most detailed picture recreated in the form of *tableau vivant*, Terborch's *Instruction paternelle*, is not so explicitly linked at a conceptual level, but the composition of the image itself — in which the subject of the titular instruction is the only figure

whose face is not visible, but who is the picture's focal point; whose mother, sitting across from her, suggests a kind of mirror image through a visual parallel established by the two women's hair; and who is the only figure in the image standing up — invests the thematic of viewing with a kind of frustrated *desire to see* on the part of the extra-diegetic spectator. Moreover, all three of these first scenes (the other *tableaux* being mentioned offhand and summarily dismissed by Goethe himself as uninteresting) center around singled out figures being *viewed* in different capacities by different kinds of audiences.

This doubleness, this apparent collapsing of life into art that seems to be both an effect generated by the *tableau vivant*, as well as a principle upon which it is founded, is also of interest to Benjamin, who in his early essay on *Elective Affinities*, forms "a conceptual triad...to distinguish between three different modes of production — between the forces of creation, formation, and conjuration" (Koepnick 86-87). Benjamin himself makes little mention of the *tableaux vivants* in the novel, aside from briefly mentioning them as crystallizations of Ottilie's youthful beauty, and he does not discuss them alongside this conceptual triad, which begins and ends more or less in abstraction. But a connection between these two aspects of Benjamin's essay seems already to be stirring beneath the surface of his description:

> Conjuration intends to be the negative counterpart of creation. It, too, claims to bring forth a world from nothingness. With neither of them does the work of art have anything in common. It emerges not from nothingness but from chaos. However, the work of art will not escape from chaos, as does the created world according to the idealism of the doctrine of emanations. Artistic creation neither 'makes' anything out of chaos nor permeates it; and one would be just as unable to engender semblance, as conjuration truly does, from elements of that chaos. This is what the formula produces. Form, however, enchants chaos momentarily into the world. Therefore, no work of art may seem wholly alive, in a manner free of spell-like enchantment, without becoming mere semblance and ceasing to be work of art. The life undulating in it must appear petrified and as if spellbound in a single moment. That which in it has being is mere beauty, mere harmony, which floods through the chaos (and, in truth, through this only and not the world) but, in this flooding-through, seems only to enliven it. What arrests this semblance, spellbinds this movement, and interrupts the harmony is the expressionless [*das Ausdrucklose*]. This

> life grounds the mystery; this petrification grounds the content in the work…the expressionless compels the trembling harmony to stop and through its objection [*Einspruch*] immortalizes its quivering…it shatters whatever still survives as the legacy of chaos in all beautiful semblance: the false, errant totality — the absolute totality. Only the expressionless completes the work, by shattering it into a thing of shards, into a fragment of the true world, into the torso of a symbol.
> ("Goethe's Elective Affinities" 340)

This breakdown, appearing to make its distinctions vehemently while at the same time draping itself in particularly lyrical and obscure language, may actually be of more use to us in our discussion precisely for the fashion in which it opens up more interpretive possibilities for the *tableau vivant* than it precludes. Some possible avenues we might head down from this conceptual traffic circle: a) *tableau vivant* must, in a very basic way, "engender semblance" to function properly as either game or visual reference, and in this case it could be the product of conjuration; b) *tableau vivant* is more closely aligned with formation (i.e. "art-making") because of its "spellbound movement" and "expressionlessness," two of the criteria that set the work of art apart from the realm of normal life and help to delineate its special sphere; c) *tableau vivant* exists in some liminal space between conjuration and formation, its "expressionlessness" and "petrification," which are after all its ontological characteristics, *also* being part of the kind of grand illusion worked upon life by the conjurer. What further complicates the matter is the highly critical cast of Benjamin's view of what he calls conjuration: as Lutz Peter Koepnick explains in *Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetics of Power,* conjuration "violates the ethics of origin and continuity inherent to creation, and it violates the laws of appearance and interruption that govern the practices of formation" (Koepnick 87); what's more, according to Koepnick, the prime example of conjuration in Benjamin's context is the "fascist cult of beauty…[which] wants to apply the aesthetic principle of formation directly to the sphere of public and private life" (Koepnick 89). Relentless aestheticization, the work of art as public spectacle (along with the pragmatic and material considerations this entails), the illusion that turns on the

metamorphosis of life into art: these are what the *tableau vivant* specifically, and the more general category of the aesthetic vision that has been "conjured up," have in common; however, what separates the *tableau vivant* from the fascistic is its literal and conceptual framing, which establishes distance and reinforces (to varying degrees) the distance between spectator and spectacle, vacillating between recognition and alienation. And while it may be tempting for us, in turn, to distance the *tableau vivant* from the darker political terrain into which we stray when considering Benjamin's tripartite model of production, as we shall see in the discussion to come, the political has always been inherent, both implicitly and explicitly, in this peculiar form (from the biting social commentary of Zola to the alienating rendering of the colonial condition in Robbe-Grillet or Duras, among others).

Perhaps it is the *tableau vivant*'s special privilege to both be complicit in and subversively to comment upon such problematic social and political structures because of its unique staging in a sort of no-man's land between conjuration (understood as false aestheticization) and formation (understood as true art). Through its striving to *appear* as the product of creation (as a painting or a sculpture), it also throws into sharp relief its status as the product of a limited kind of conjuration (its expressionlessness and petrification being transient, like spells temporarily enchanting their objects which will inevitably be restored to life in the end). In a sense, the *tableau vivant* is a product of the *convergence* of the impulses towards formation and conjuration, and consequently what each *tableau* thematizes is the *difference* or *incommensurability* between these two modes. Whether or not we need, ultimately, to use Benjamin's specific terminology here, we might reasonably claim that the contradictory or the paradoxical form a crucial part of the *tableau vivant*'s ontology.

The interest of the *tableaux vivants* present in *Elective Affinities* lies not only in their novelty, their value as documentary evidence of this practice that once flourished in the drawing rooms of the European upper classes, but also in Goethe's clear, keen understanding of the *tableau vivant* as a visual form rife with possibilities for meta-artistic reflection. Let us take just one example:

> For a third they had taken the so-called "Father's Admonition" of Terburg, and who does not know Wille's admirable engraving of this picture? One foot thrown over the other, sits a noble knightly-looking father; his daughter stands before him, to whose conscience he seems to be addressing himself. She, a fine striking figure, in a folding drapery of white satin, is only to be seen from behind, but her whole bearing appears to signify that she is collecting herself. That the admonition is not too severe, that she is not being utterly put to shame, is to be gathered from the air and attitude of the father, while the mother seems as if she were trying to conceal some slight embarrassment—she is looking into a glass of wine, which she is on the point of drinking.
>
> Here was an opportunity for Luciana to appear in her highest splendor. Her back hair, the form of her head, neck, and shoulders, were beyond all conception beautiful; and the waist, which in the modern antique of the ordinary dresses of young ladies is hardly visible, showed to the greatest advantage in all its graceful slender elegance in the really old costume. The Architect had contrived to dispose the rich folds of the white satin with the most exquisite nature, and, without any question whatever, this living imitation far exceeded the original picture, and produced universal delight. The spectators could never be satisfied with demanding a repetition of the performance, and the very natural wish to see the face and front of so lovely a creature, when they had done looking at her from behind, at last became so decided, that a merry impatient young wit, cried out aloud the words one is accustomed to write at the bottom of a page, "*Tournez, s'il vous plaît*," which was echoed all round the room.
>
> The performers, however, understood their advantage too well, and had mastered too completely the idea of these works of art to yield to the most general clamor. The daughter remained standing in her shame, without favoring the spectators with the expression of her face. The father continued to sit in his attitude of admonition and the mother did not lift nose or eyes out of the transparent glass, in which, although she seemed to be drinking, the wine did not diminish.
> (Goethe 194)

Of particular note here is the "merry impatient young wit" voicing a desire on the part of the entire audience, and specifically that this desire is figured clearly through the terms of another medium: the written word. But a painting is not the same as a bound book, and here Goethe

lightly, winkingily draws our attention to ontological limitations and possibilities upon which the *tableau vivant* is constructed; this cry, imploring the performers to "turn the page" of their representation, is not asking merely for a kind of hundred-and-eighty-degree reversal of the painting — turn a painting over, and what does one see but the blank back of the canvas, the unfinished side of the frame? — but in fact demanding something rather more profound of the spectacle before their audience's eyes. It demands movement, metamorphosis, a return to time -- in short, it demands of the arrested scene a literary or theatrical narrative. But this is exactly what the performers, "[understanding] their advantage too well," will not — and what the scene, as the definitionally static *tableau vivant*, cannot — give to the "clamoring" spectators who hunger not only for a glimpse at the tantalizing Luciana, but also for her restoration to *life itself*, reconceived as a large-scale narrative in opposition to the *tableau vivant*.

In conceiving of the flow of time as a literary narrative, and of the frozen moment of the *tableau vivant* as an interruption of that narrative, Goethe's suggestive language also asks a roughly grammatical question about tenses. Again, the French is more apt: what is the *temps verbal* of the *tableau vivant*? What time does it have? There are many possible answers, and more questions still. Let us consider the grammatical issue through the figure of Benjamin. To merge the practical and the metaphysical sides of the *tableau vivant*, we might say that while the *tableau vivant* can, like most things, generate three tenses — it was, it is, it will be — the Benjaminian mode of production it represents differs across these tenses: in the present tense, as a stilled, expressionless image, it represents *formation*, or true art-making; in the past tense and in the future tense, as it first forms out of and then ultimately dissolves back into real life, with its other identities, its audience, its stage, its costumes, the *tableau vivant* suggests *conjuration*, or the enticing possibility of that real life to be aestheticized. This is what the inlaying of a scene

of *tableau vivant* into the moving, sliding construction of a literary narrative discloses to us. The unlikely fact that even through the stilling of motion, a less easily discernible transformation is still taking place — a near-imperceptible sliding between art and life — is one of the larger theoretical insights the incorporation of *tableau vivant* into a narrative can reveal, and is a way that the inherent tension of the *tableau vivant*, bared for just a moment, can resolve itself into at least a kind of conceptual harmony.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin states that "while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]" (*Arcades* N3, 1). This distinction holds, too, for the *tableau vivant*, which operates not merely on a temporal basis, but rather through a such a "figural" relation between the "what-has-been" (in this case, the real identities of its interpreters, the real context in which is is being staged) and the "now" (the interpreters become figures in a composition, the recreated scene in which they pose eclipsing that which lies outside of it). Generating a true image, the *tableau vivant* exposes the dialectical relation between these tenses, and Goethe's attention to the audience members' reactions to the scenes they are watching also indicates that they access and engage with the *tableau* not as merely another moment in time, but rather as an uncannily "figural" instant that is *unlike* the others, and in which easy distinctions — between real and false identities, the inside and the outside of the picture — seem less appropriate, less possible. When one of the audience members calls out "*Tournez, s'il vous plaît*" (something one would see on the page of a book) it sounds strange in the context of a performance. Nevertheless, in the context of this scene from *Elective Affinities*, it is spoken directly to one of the players, and its strangeness is a result of this kind of dialectical thinking it inspires in its viewer. It interpolates one of the interpreters as both the painted figure

of Terborch's admonished daughter (selected precisely, it is suggested, for her visage-obscuring pose[6] and the mystery that comes along with it), *and* as her interpreter, the real person (in the novel, that is) named, outside of the composition, Luciana. I would like to underscore two points related to this interjection: 1) *tableau vivant* renders all its players multiple, allowing them to occupy at once the role of the painted figure and its real-life interpreter, and placing them on two planes simultaneously — that of the painted image, and that of the three-dimensional, human world from which its performers are drawn. On a broader scale, we might say that *tableau vivant* as a form is based upon concurrent, even overlapping similarity[7] and difference: similarity to the visual work it recreates, and a difference of medium in its very literal fleshing out of the image. This central tendency, one of its ontological peculiarities, bleeds through to its performers in the duality with which they are invested once they freeze into the required composition; 2) *tableau vivant* creates desire in its viewers, and this desire relates to frustration — frustration of its viewers' expectations of movement and narrative in theatrical performance, and frustration of their notions of the ways in which we might qualify a static image as "alive"-seeming.

One might also make the claim that Goethe himself is being interpolated by this *bon mot*, or at least self-consciously drawing attention to his own activities as a writer; the stilled scene is framed within the moving narrative of the novel, and being as it is a purely literary construction, only Goethe has the power to maintain or bring to a close this spectacle. This scene, therefore,

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[6] The pose of the admonished daughter appears as the final narrated major composition of the players, and as the apogee of Luciana's performative trajectory that sees her slowly, as she interprets various painted figures, making less visible her face and, in so doing, emerging as the focal point and primary locus of interest for the ever more intrigued audience.

[7] While the playing of roles is one of the clearest connections between *tableau vivant* and traditional narrative theater (i.e. a play or tragedy), acting is also based here on a visual similarity that is not necessarily (with certain exceptions, of course) a requirement of the actors interpreting characters in a drama entailing speech and movement. When we recognize an actress as Hedda Gabler, for example, this recognition is drawn from the text itself and from notions of character that exceed physical appearance.

straddles the line between the narrated event and the metaliterary moment. But instead of an interlude that, carried on the winds of its metatextual concerns, veers off entirely into abstraction, what emerges here is a vision of the *tableau vivant* as a social spectacle, an aestheticized reflection of the aristocratic or bourgeois milieux of which they are a part. Insofar as authors may use the scene of *tableau vivant* as a kind of experimental or privileged space, the nature of the exploration that goes on is more of the "backstage" variety; as we will see in Zola's *The Kill*, and as Goethe has already demonstrated here with his discussion of the performers' canny choice of subject and refusal to break the image, to turn the page, there is a significant emphasis placed upon the subjectivities of characters stirring incongruously behind frozen and silent poses. As much as a means of characterization, the *tableau vivant* here can serve as a means of social critique, an acute, heightened depiction of constraints relating to class and gender, especially.

1.2 Zola's *The Kill* and the Fourth Wall as Mirror

In his 1872 novel *La curée* (translated into English as *The Kill*), Émile Zola affords pride of place to the *tableau vivant*: he stages a pageant of elaborate, densely-peopled compositions as the centerpiece of a lavish society ball, during which the threads of the text's plot come together in pointedly dramatic fashion. The sustained, detailed descriptions of the *tableaux* themselves, as well as the preparations that go into presenting them to the partygoers, offer us significant insight into the social realities of the form as it was practiced in the mid- to late-nineteenth century (perhaps its peak in popularity). But he also juxtaposes the *tableau vivant* with another type of theater, which we might call tragic or operatic, in the form of the discovery of the pseudo-incestuous and fully adulterous love affair between Renée Saccard and her stepson Maxime Rougon that results in the former's being thrown dramatically out of the house. Because the

resolution at the level of the novel's *plot* is contained in more traditionally theatrical scenes, Zola elaborates a less orthodox, more subtle kind of narrative as he writes the preceding *tableaux.*

Zola tells us, at the beginning of the chapter in question, that "there was a costume ball at the Saccards' on Thursday in mid-Lent. The great event of the evening was the drama, *The Loves of Narcissus and Echo*, in three tableaux, which was to be performed by the ladies. The author of the drama, Monsieur Hupel de la Noue, had for more than a month been traveling backwards and forwards between his Prefecture and the house in the Parc Monceau to superintend the rehearsals and advise on the costumes. At first he had thought of writing his work in verse; then he had decided in favor of *tableaux vivants*; it was more dignified, he said, and came nearer to the classical ideal" (Zola 207). Firstly, while taking place during a social function at a private residence, it is clear from the amount of preparation, the presence of the author, and the not inconsiderable expense entailed by all this, that this production is being approached at least semi-professionally and with an eye to seriousness. Also of note is that Hupel de la Noue writes his own version of an Ovidian tragedy and makes the decision to stage it as three *tableaux*, rather than "in verse." While not much is explicitly made of this in the text, we can see, like guests moving from Goethe's gathering to Zola's masked ball, what a dramatic shift in form this choice represents.

Although Zola himself uses the term *tableau vivant* to describe Hupel de la Noue's spectacle, the scenes he describes do not present all of the elements we have already listed in the discussion of Goethe. Some elements (interpreters, stillness and silence, space of composition, and an audience) are apparent, but not all (being based upon famous paintings). These three *tableaux* are based, rather than on specific works, on painting in general — a hazy kind of painting of Arcadian landscapes and mythological subjects that Hupel de la Noue seeks to evoke

through his rendering of Ovid's story of Echo and Narcissus, which serves as a general inspiration (and, as becomes painfully evident, rather flimsy narrative framework) for the production. This production has the least to do with recognizing specific artistic references and more to do with recognizing the players interpreting allegorical figures generally, which is to say that it is perhaps the most socially oriented of the scenes in question in this chapter. But while the first element falls away, making it less of a proper *tableau vivant* in the tradition of Goethe, it is nevertheless *not* a theatrical *tableau* in Diderot's sense, for it engages in and even privileges the characteristic silence and stasis of the *tableau vivant* form. These scenes do not come to interrupt — or offset or emphasize or undermine — a greater theatrical narrative; it is precisely in these stilled scenes that the "narrative" consists, and the sequential shifting from one to the next, as in the viewing of the stations of the cross, constitutes the "storyline" of the production. Zola's *tableaux vivants* are, then, something of a hybrid between the theatrical *tableau* and the *tableau vivant.*

Diderot tells us about the use of theatrical *tableaux*, based in the visual form of the painting, and how their use might enliven a play or serve to underscore key scenes and plot points through striking compositions that come to interrupt the "normal" flow of action; he does not, however, advocate for a play consisting entirely in such *tableaux*. The *tableau* has, historically, not been an either/or proposition, incompatible with more traditional forms of theater; in fact, its compatibility with drama is precisely what Diderot attempts to highlight in his aesthetical treatises. So when Zola tells us, offhandedly, that Hupel de la Noue has veered from "verse" to a sequence of three totally speechless *tableaux,* we can understand that this decision disregards as a possibility a well-established theatrical practice in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France. The reason for this lies in his assertion that *tableaux vivants* are "more dignified"

and "[come] nearer to the classical ideal." This ideal is plastic in nature, relating especially to Ancient Greek sculpture. Hupel de la Noue probably conflates the strictly "classical ideal" with the more recent artistic vogue in the seventeenth century for Arcadian landscapes peopled with mythological figures, a paradisiacal vision of the ancient world daubed by a Poussin or a Lorrain. Similarly, it seems as if the *tableau vivant*, here, becomes a terrain vaguely enough defined to accommodate very distinctive visual modes disparate in era and style, but with a shared subject matter; "classical," in this case, becomes a byword for a certain kind of mythological aesthetic and thematic distance rather than a designator of any kind of specificity. Hupel de la Noue equates a certain sort of "dignity" with the plastic forms of painting and statuary. And even when the third and final *tableau,* comparably unsuccessful, proceeds as the actors unprofessionally compose *themselves* without awaiting de la Noue's direction, he laments "'Echo is too near the edge. And Narcissus' leg, it's not dignified, not dignified at all'" (Zola 220); "dignified" becomes practically synonymous with meticulously considered, perfected posture, for the sculptural positioning and manipulation of the interpreters' limbs. It is clear that de la Noue's "classical" imagination works itself out in decidedly plastic terms. While his primary source of inspiration is the famed tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Zola 222) rather than a specific painting, de la Noue's compositions are nevertheless organized around groupings that recall famous works of visual art: "the three Graces, Mesdames de Guende, Teissière, and de Meinhold, all in muslin, stood smiling and intertwined as in Pradier's group" (Zola 213), referring to the 1831 marble sculpture *Les Trois Grâces,* by James Pradier; the Comtesse Vanska, always "recumbent" in attitudes of languor and luxury, calls to mind an archetypal odalisque. In general, Zola assures us, "The groups retained a statuesque immobility" (Zola 213-14), a formal quality that finds thematic parallel in the contents of the *tableaux*: firstly, when we

learn that between the first and second *tableaux,* "In the foreground, the story remained unchanged: Echo was still tempting Narcissus who continued to reject her overtures" (Zola 217); and secondly, when in the third *tableau* Echo herself becomes petrified ("she found herself caught, little by little, in the hard ground, she felt her burning limbs freezing and stiffening. She was no vulgar moss-stained rock, but one of white marble...retaining nothing of life in her cold sculptured body except her gleaming eyes…" [Zola 221]). A strain of stillness runs through the narrative linking all three *tableaux,* and when finally the protagonists of Hupel de la Noue's "dignified" drama do make progress along their own trajectory, it is at that moment that they are both transformed, silenced, and rooted to the spot (he as a flower, she as a stone). But more than using the first two *tableaux,* and the narrative fixity with which they instill these figures, as a means of foreshadowing or thematically underscoring these final metamorphoses, Hupel de la Noue appears to arrive at these banalities through his desire (or duty) to depict the entire company of Parisian socialites in a variety of lavish gowns designed to signal visually the kind of empty or allegorical roles they play in this production. Here we see what is perhaps the most significant dimension of the *tableaux vivants* to both its diegetic director and to Zola's text as a whole — that is, its social function.

One of the reasons for which we might decide that the *tableau vivant* is appropriate as a form for de la Noue's "drama" in spite of its purported source being a story from Ovid's text is because what the author stages *shirks* Ovid's narrative to a startling degree. It retains the story's two main characters, the nymph Echo and the youth Narcissus, but reduces the already rather broadly drawn mythological characters into a series of poses (just two, since, as Zola informs us, the second *tableau* replicates the first almost perfectly in the way it poses Echo and Narcissus and attempts to express corporeally her desire and his rejection). What's more, it adds redundant

scenes that occur nowhere in Ovid's tale — Echo entreating Narcissus in the grotto of Venus, trying to tempt him with the delights of love; Echo entreating Narcissus in the grotto of Pluto, trying to tempt him with riches and precious metals — and which serve no purpose in the "new" narrative of *The Loves of Narcissus and Echo*. Their entire *raison d'être* is to serve as a social showcase, presenting the various high-ranking doyennes of this social circle as deities major and minor, as gemstones and precious metals: in short, as flashy characterizations of wealth and pleasure that appeal to their own vanity. In one especially prominent example, the Comtesse Vanska, who appears on the scene first as Voluptuousness ("she lay outstretched, twisted by a final spasm, her eyes half closed, and languishing as if satiated" [Zola 213]), then "lending her dark ardour to [the role of] a Coral, recumbent, with raised arms loaded with rosy pendants, like a monstrous, seductive polyp displaying a woman's flesh amidst the yawning, pink pearliness of her shell" (Zola 217). While for Echo and Narcissus the case might be made that their roles, even so reduced to the barest of gestures and expressions, and with a good deal of the heavy lifting done through costuming (Renée as Echo is dusted in rice powder and dressed in a skirt like a block of "Parian marble" to create the impression of her petrification), are at least telling the story in basic terms, nothing much can be said of this large company of extras whose exhibitionism not only stops them from peaceably forming the backdrop of these scenes, but also becomes their entire *focus*. Aside from a social exhibitionism justified aesthetically, this staging, full of narratively inconsequential but visually arresting figures, also revels in certain tendencies often associated with the *tableau vivant*, to which we shall return in great detail in later chapters, namely: sexual voyeurism, explicit here in Zola's languorous, lustful description of the Comtesse Vanska's clearly orgasmic attitudes; aestheticization of the female body, which characterizes all but one (pointedly androgynous) member of this troupe; and ornamentation, which is perhaps

one way of understanding this proliferation of odalisques, statuary, and jewels surrounding, rather pointlessly, the central constituent figures of the narrative of Echo and Narcissus.

While one of the most conceptually fascinating elements of the *tableau vivant* is its seeming solipsism — the way it closes itself off from the outside, whilst at the same time offering itself as a spectacle — , Zola exposes this as its ultimate deception. He does this through his long and detailed descriptions that outline the compositions for his readers while simultaneously making clear what the unexpected focal points of these scenes really are, but also through the interaction between the inside and the outside of the image. Most remarkable is that these *tableaux* are performed at a costume ball, so that their audience consists of "a bewildering display of marquises, noblewomen, milkmaids, Spanish ladies, shepherdesses, and sultanas" (Zola 208). The troupe of elaborately costumed women in de la Noue's production finds their reflection in the similarly richly-appareled ladies in the audience. But if, as Zola mischievously suggests, the fourth wall of the stage is a mirror, then it maintains the appearance of a two-way mirror, for the constraints of the production force the *illusion* of solipsism on the part of the subjects on stage in the service of a kind of "realism" that is meant to convey the artificial impassivity of the art object. And while the costumed audience is not bound by the same theatrical conventions as the objects of their gaze — they can freely look, comment, point out people and details — the interpreters of the *tableaux vivants* are also aware of their looking; naturally, at the end of the day, they are not, whatever rigors of posture and composition or theatrical sleight of hand Hupel de la Noue might employ, truly transformed into the statuary everything about their performance strives to evoke. After the *tableaux* have been decomposed, as it were, the women circulate amongst the other guests and voice their experiences onstage: "'I almost exploded with laughter,' said the Marquise, 'when I saw Monsieur Toutin-Laroche's big

nose pointing at me in the distance.' 'I think I've got a crick in my neck,' drawled the fair-haired Suzanne. 'Really, if it had lasted a minute longer I would have put my head back in a normal position, my neck was hurting so much'" (Zola 223).

The capacity for commentary and for self-reflection on the part of the interpreters is one of the realities of *tableau vivant* with which novels like *The Kill* (which depict not only the representations themselves but also their lead-up and aftermath) are uniquely equipped to convey explicitly. Suzanne's descriptions of discomfort shifting into physical pain, while played here for somewhat comedic effect, in fact portray one of the foundations upon which the *tableau vivant* is built and by which it is sustained: the tension of living bodies unnaturally locked into the postures dictated by the original model[8]. For a painted figure, it is not a question of maintaining a posture or gesture since their entire being is bound up in a single immutable configuration. When the Marquise comments on her own desire to laugh during the performance and her successful attempt to stifle this, it is notable that her response is due to her noticing a particular member of the audience, indicating the bidirectionality of gazes within the room. While that of the audience is permitted to be naked, undisguised in its examination of the scene, and while that of the players is considerably more constrained — by the dictates of the posture they are forced to assume, by the assumption that the painting cannot look back at its observer — , Zola makes clear through this brief exchange that, unlike in the dynamic existing between a real painting and a viewer, both parties here can indeed look upon and notice one another. The discomfort Suzanne expresses relates more to her physical being, but we might also call the Marquise's laughter, the result of being *looked at* directly by M. Toutin-Laroche (whose nose was "pointed at" her), the result of her more general discomfort at being stared at by an odd looking man.

[8] This relates to Deleuze's discussion of suspension and pain, covered in the Introduction.

Moreover, what the commentary of the two players has in common is the expression of the fragility of the *tableau vivant* as a composition. It is fragile in two senses: firstly, it is physically untenable, built as it is upon the unnatural stasis of the living human body and therefore necessarily limited in its duration ("If it has lasted a minute longer…"); secondly, perhaps less obviously, it is psychologically delicate, calling upon the interpreters' capacities for deep concentration, for an adopted ignorance of the world beyond the frame, for a suppression of pain and laughter, and for — if not exactly "acting" — a serious attempt at embodiment of a role. What is at stake along with the *tableau vivant* is its illusion. When one breaks, the other shatters, too. Perhaps the greatest threat to the success of the *tableau vivant* is the subjectivity of the interpreter. In a way, we might say that the "humanness" of the players is what needs to be shorn away, but this humanness we have to understand as primarily psychological, since the body — the human body, flesh and blood — is the very medium of the *tableau vivant*. The ideal condition of the *tableau vivant* is the separation between mind and body, but this is ultimately unattainable. Working with living interpreters means accepting and working round, as best as possible, their inherent weaknesses. In the case of the *tableau vivant*, the body's weakness lies in the strength of its fundamental attachment to a mind and to an identity (as well as the strengths of social bonds crystalized in the searching gazes of the spectators). Suzanne and the Marquise can never, therefore, lose themselves entirely in their roles.

This commentary is also a post-facto ventriloquization of the temporary *objet d'art* that is the *tableau vivant.* Necessarily voiceless in its illusory present, it can only "speak" in the past tense, from the vantagepoint of its own future. Or, perhaps better, it can only find words to describe itself in its artistic afterlife, following the decomposition of the image and the return of the players to the sphere of the properly human. But these words, as Zola makes clear in his

interpreters' list of complaints, are more proper to the *medium* than they are to the content of the image itself. It is Suzanne who speaks — of her body, of her self-consciousness, of her discomfort — and not the allegorical figure she played during the production. This raises the question: is there, then, a language for the nymph Echo, for Voluptuousness, for Narcissus, as rendered figures? If so, then it is a language shared with the visual arts upon which *tableaux vivants* are based, a non-verbal lexicon composed of light, color, facial expressions, and postures. This *décalage* serves as a warning against conflation, useful for an analytical reading of the form of the *tableau vivant*. While interpreting painted figures with human beings could serve as a possible means of turning them into more standardly "literary" or "narrative" characters, the truth is that when the people involved in its staging speak, they do so as medium rather than as image. Using human bodies, endowed with consciousnesses and voices, is not a means of making stone or paint speak, and, just as in Hupel de la Noue's *The Loves of Echo and Narcissus*, Ovid's stories will once again be subverted, for the Suzanne we encounter after the performance is no Galatea now sprung to life; she is once again herself.

Tableaux vivants, when they appear in a novel, might often, like other more generally ekphrastic passages, serve as a *mise en abyme* of the text as a whole, or particular scenes and/or character dynamics. One of the advantages of the essentially bounded art object as literary *mise en abyme* is that it lends itself to a *total* verbal description (or at least to the attempt at one). Illusory as this may ultimately be, it is nevertheless easy to understand how such objects create the temptation for replication in miniature or are alighted upon by authors as a means of crystallizing a certain desire for recreation, circumscription, and reinsertion on a limited scale. To take the example of *The Loves of Narcissus and Echo* the mythical subject matter of this series of *tableaux* recreates visually and emphasizes through its repetition and gestural stylization

the forbidden love affair between Renée and Maxime. While their roles do not run entirely parallel to the nymph and the fair youth, Zola's description of the *tableaux* highlights "Renée's expression…[that] represented 'the pain of unsatisfied desire'...a bitter smile" (Zola 214) as well as the way, when Maxime enters the ball after the spectacle has come to an end, he is "unembarrassed, as if delighted with his part, [and] he continued to smile, joked back, confessed that he adored himself and that he was sufficiently cured of women to prefer himself to them" (Zola 223). There is enough water in Hupel de la Noue's classical source that we might yet see, albeit in broad ripples and wavering forms, the reflections of Zola's characters in this novel: the passionate, eventually disavowed Renée and the immature, vain, and callous Maxime.

I would like to take this drawing of parallels that the *mise en abyme* incites in the reader one step further, and to suggest that *The Loves of Narcissus and Echo* not only recreates aspects of the central conflict of *The Kill*, but also that in it Zola fashions a theoretically useful and more general *mise en abyme* of the form of the *tableau vivant* itself. Narcissism, as a concept, does not historically have a significant critical association with *tableau vivant*, but viewed through the lens of the social spectacle, as Zola makes clear here and as Goethe also indicates through the little party of *Elective Affinities*, Hupel de la Noue's choice can be read as a larger statement on our desire to see ourselves in the art we observe. Zola makes this clear by effectively silvering the fourth wall that transforms the elaborate *tableaux* into veritable reflections of the costumed aristocrats that make up the audience and look for shards of themselves — their peers, their desires, their riches, and their vices — in the visions forming onstage before their eyes. (Luciane, too, approaches the *tableaux* as a vanity project, savvily casting herself as the tantalizing, half-obscured figure that becomes the focus of the audience's gaze.) One might be inclined to say that the old trope of art as mirror is inoffensive and innocuous; what could be wrong with looking for

dashes of one's experience on a painted canvas, after all? Zola and Goethe take this fundamental temptation of art and, through the exceptional, heightened form of the *tableau vivant* -- the one place outside imagination where it becomes possible actually to cast oneself as a painted or sculpted figure, to reconstitute the bounded and practically capturable world of the art object — they consider the way it relates to the larger social sins of pride, jealousy, lust, and greed.

1.3 Wharton's *The House of Mirth* and the Reception Gap

Yet another important literary example of the social phenomenon of the *tableau vivant* comes to us in the twelfth chapter of Edith Wharton's great critique of upper-class East Coast society, *The House of Mirth*: here, the Wellington Brys launch their "attack" on society, attempting, through the "general entertainment" of a staging of *tableaux vivants,* accompanied by "expensive music," to "attract the desired prey" of the upper echelons they are attempting to scale (Wharton 129). This is the most explicit connection we have as yet encountered between, on the one hand, the performance of the *tableau vivant* and culture as proper to a certain class, and on the other hand, the *tableau vivant* and — simply put — money. That the music and other practical considerations of the staging are expensive is justified by the performance as a kind of investment that promises a return in the form of an ascendancy; the plastic immobility of the *tableau vivant*, in which the abstractions of cultural signifiers encounter the power of the dollar, ironically becomes a means of social mobility: moving up by standing still. Wharton precedes her description of the *tableaux* themselves with a mordant commentary that recasts them as a tantalizing visual bait in what amounts to a vulgar hunting party aiming to ensnare the prize bucks of New York society. Also of note is the way in which Wharton's assessment alludes indirectly to the hunting motifs of many an Ovidian tale, effectively connecting the diegetic and extradiegetic matter of the chapter's *tableaux.* Ovid seems always to be hidden in the

predominantly bosquet-and-grotto backdrops of the scenes we have been examining, and in part this is because he serves often as direct literary inspiration for these compositions; I have already suggested that there is also a thematic continuity relating to the *Metamorphoses'* themes of transformation and petrification, but I would like to now signal Wharton's critical rendering of the implications of these themes: the crudeness of the pursuit that underlies this staging, its instrumentalization of "a dozen fashionable women to exhibit themselves in a series of pictures" (Wharton 129), Wharton's pointed laying of this foundation *before* the distracting ekphrastic veneer of her later prose has a chance to obscure the political and social aspects of the spectacle — all these serve to remind us of the unfinished, raw, unembellished *material* of the art objects that the human body is called upon to emulate in this performance. A world away from Hupel de la Noue's declamations concerning the "classical" and "dignified" nature of these images, Wharton seems to view *tableau vivant* (at least in part, at least in this context) as a kind of debasement — a reductive act that renders the female body all surface, all ornament, that strips the significance of its classical and visual source materials, and that masks the crude "practical" considerations and eventual ramifications of its production.

Wharton's evaluation of the *tableaux*'s reception is no less barbed. We are told that the "experienced connoisseur" Ned Van Alstyne's "scented white moustache had brushed Selden's shoulder whenever the parting of the curtains presented any exceptional opportunity for the study of the female outline" (Wharton 133). Later on, he lewdly remarks upon Lily's "outline": "Gad, what a show of good-looking women; but not one of 'em could touch that little cousin of mine. Talk of jewels — what's a woman with jewels when she's got herself to show?" (Wharton 136) Van Alstyne is the leering male gaze made flesh and *hair*, and the uncomfortable brushing of Selden's shoulder by his moustache serves as a reminder of the tangibility of the *tableau vivant*,

as a composition of human bodies, and of the precarious distance separating the viewing subject from the viewed object. This telling tactile detail also serves as a sort of antithesis of another mode of (male) viewing with which Wharton confronts it in this same scene: Selden, observing in quite as captivated a manner as his neighbor, "in the long moment before the curtain fell [...] had time to feel the whole tragedy of her life. It was as though her beauty, thus detached from all that cheapened and vulgarized it, had held out suppliant hands to him from the world in which he and she had once met for a moment, and where he felt an overmastering longing to be with her again" (Wharton 133). Clearly seeing his experience of Lily's beauty framed thus as miles above, and apart from, the kind of "vulgarity" that he considers Van Alstyne and his ilk as pooling around her in daily life, Selden's perspective on his romantic interest is just as reductive. While he may not be physically leering, his mental swooning is no less objectifying in the end. What's more, as Emily J. Orlando contends in *Edith Wharton and the Visual Arts,* Selden's gaze may also crop out significant identifying details of Lily Bart's *tableau:* "Sir Joshua's Mrs. Lloyd carves her married name on the trunk of a tree [in the painting]...Wharton's account makes no mention of a carving utensil in Lily's hand; her readers would have to be familiar with Reynolds — and likely many of them were — to appreciate the reference to a woman writing. Although we cannot be sure Lily holds the instrument, we also cannot be sure she does not. What matters is that Selden's gaze fails to record it...Wharton compels us to mind the gap between female subject and the male narrative gaze through which she is presented" (Orlando 73).

This tendency towards limited perception and selective retention of visual detail is informed by two factors. First, the theatrical form of the *tableau vivant* itself, generally, which engages the imaginative capacity of a certain kind of viewer: Wharton informs us that "*Tableaux vivants* depend for their effect not only on the happy disposal of lights and the delusive

interposition of layers of gauze, but on a corresponding adjustment of the mental vision. To unfurnished minds they remain, in spite of every enhancement of art, only a superior kind of wax-works; but to the responsive fancy they may give magic glimpses of the boundary world between fact and imagination. Selden's mind was of this order: he could yield to vision-making influences as completely as a child to the spell of a fairy-tale" (Wharton 131). Second, the particular memories and experiences of the viewer (i.e. Selden): when, earlier in the novel, he and Lily stroll through the woods, the bucolic setting, along with Lily's "attitude of absorption" (Wharton 73), both mirror her later appearance in the *tableau vivant* of Joshua Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd* and, at the time of the scene in question, cause Selden to remark upon "poignant charm" ("*That is how she looks when she is alone!*" he exclaims) (Wharton 68).

Selden's "responsive fancy" (unlike the crude, "unfurnished mind" of a Van Alstyne, which accounts for his attitude towards the spectacle as a mere parade of female forms) is just one part of the overall effect of this particular *tableau*, which also draws upon this other moment in the novel during which he felt most acutely his attraction to Lily Bart. It is thus the confluence of the general and the specific that accounts for the "magic" of the spectacle. As much as we might agree that the *tableau vivant* presents a glimpse of a liminal zone "between fact and imagination," or between reality and representation, it also presents another "boundary world" in which the larger formal, generic, even artistic concerns are worked out through the *specific* bodies, identities, and contexts in which the *tableaux* are performed. Importantly, they also cannot be wholly separated from this sense of specificity. Hence we might easily see how Selden's temptation to "detach" Lily from society in the form of this aestheticized presentation can be both understandable and, finally, misguided insofar as it refuses to acknowledge this fundamental paradox of the *tableau vivant,* whose remediative and *social* aspect render it futile.

At the other end of the spectrum, we encounter Van Alstyne, who shares none of this sense of aesthetical wonder, whose imagination is effectively earthbound, and who accordingly makes lewd remarks about Lily's apparel in her *tableau:* "Deuced bold thing to show herself in that get-up" he comments, during the show, "but, gad, there isn't a break in the lines anywhere, and I suppose she wanted us to know it!" (Wharton 133) This double-entendre is not so much remarking upon a perfect replication of the *lines* of Reynolds' *Mrs. Lloyd* in the perfect posing of Lily's body, but rather suggesting that she is wearing little beneath her characteristic dress, scant undergarments to "break the lines" of the fabric, as it were. This supposition is supplemented by another: that Lily Bart's intention in presenting herself in this *tableau* is exhibitionistic, and that what she wants to show off, above all, is her figure. Van Alstyne's commentary betrays an imaginative failure on his part. She never for a moment ceases to be anyone or anything other than his attractive cousin, even so dramatically recontextualized, whose only concern, rather than the replication of a famous work of art, is displaying herself before potential suitors and guaranteed rivals. In a way, though, Van Alstyne's crass view brushes, moustache-like, against a truth, for Wharton informs us that Lily Bart chose this particular portrait not because of its subject matter, not merely because it presents an opportunity to appear in a state of undress before the crowd, but because of the significant *resemblance* between herself and the subject of Reynolds' portrait. This gives her the opportunity to appear (rather than as "*Mrs. Lloyd*") as "*Lily Bart posing* as *Mrs. Lloyd.*" Lily Bart games the system of *tableau vivant*, operating by its rules (understanding the need for faithful replication, for visual harmony between interpreter and interpreted) whilst at the same time subverting it: it is precisely because she can theoretically so perfectly recreate Mrs. Lloyd that she never fully becomes her, and the primary role that emerges here is Lily Bart herself. She manipulates the two tendencies of the *tableau vivant* — the general

and transcendent, and the specific and grounding (so as to avoid saying vulgar), embodied by Selden and Van Alstyne respectively — in order to captivate everyone, on her own terms. Once more, we see that these tensions built into the form allow for the savvy practitioner or commentator to create a very particular kind of tint or angle to the image even as it conforms to its goal as a simple reproduction.

Indeed, as Orlando notes, "a key distinction of Lily's tableau is that she uses the medium to display her wares [read: her body] on the marriage market" (Wharton 71). This scenario, in which Lily displays a good deal more agency than the other interpreters we have met thus far, plays to, and plays skillfully upon, both modes of viewing represented by the two male spectators upon whom Wharton focuses. Lily Bart "finds life" rather than death in her objectification through her own manipulation of the process, and "Wharton thus identifies and critiques a rather unfortunate undercurrent in her culture that would have women eagerly become art for the amusement of their peers as well as for their own personal profit" (Orlando 56). The larger social critique Wharton brings to bear upon this scene is echoed in the way Lily's *tableau* pushes at its own boundaries as a sort of closed, solipsistic system; while she conforms to the five elements identified in *Elective Affinities*, by choosing to represent a painted figure whose likeness to herself is present to such a startling degree that she becomes more of a point of recognition for the audience than does the visual model, Lily Bart is able appropriately and convincingly to turn her performance inwards while at the same time gesturing outwards to a broader social context — that is, the prospect of marriage, which she considers an acceptable narrative framework for her life.

This is not an entirely successful stratagem, for it cannot account for the breaches between viewed object and viewing subject; rather, it helps to reinforce and even generate them.

Recall the significant detail of the carving implement, and the act of writing or self-authorship it can symbolize, that evokes Lily's careful and deliberate plan for her *tableau*, but which is excised from Selden's rapturous mental version of it (and which is sexless enough to surely be of no interest to a Van Alstyne). This "gap," as Orlando calls it, is here figured through gendered viewing practices and is one of many "disjunctions within the narrative" which alternates between Selden's and Lily's perspectives, "creating a plot line that consistently demonstrates radically differing perspectives on Lily's effort to survive in her world" (D. Chambers 52); but beyond the specific context of *The House of Mirth*, it also provides us with a more generalized lesson about *tableau vivant* as a potential source of plentiful "narrative disjunctions" because of fundamental ruptures between the production and reception of art, and because of the lack of communication[9] between the inside and the outside of the *tableau vivant* in its performance.

1.4 The Novel-Theater Encounter, or "Why the *Tableau Vivant*?"

What is to be gained by reading these three texts together? At perhaps the most basic level, we might look at them as historical or even documentary texts that provide us with a variety of scenes that depict different, *realistic* stagings of *tableaux vivants* and together provide us with a set of elements that we can use to define this form. From this working definition, we should be able to see how examples from later literary and filmic texts can also be classified as belonging to the category of the *tableau vivant*, while also pinpointing the ways in which they stray from this initial definition; for rarely will it remain intact, and a central point of the

[9] As Zola reminds us through Suzanne's post-show complaints, while the employing of human interpreters can be seen as a way of making art "speak," it does so from an unexpected vantagepoint, as bodily material support or from the perspective of the interpreter rather than the character, and from a temporal distance that prises any such narration, however banal and practical in nature, away from the image to which it applies. Duras will later undertake an even more rigorous and radical experimentation with such disjunctures of narration in her film *India Song*, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

argument I wish to make is that the process the *tableau vivant* undergoes in later textual treatments is one of *de*-composition — in which certain formal features are stripped away, minimized, others magnified and embellished — the result of which is still recognizable as "*tableau vivant.*" That is to say, we will find ourselves passing from easily-isolatable, framed instances of *tableau vivant* inlaid within their texts into sometimes much broader swathes of territory that often appear as if eerily enchanted by the ontological oddities of the *tableau vivant* — silence, stillness, insistent spatiality.

On another level, we might say that one factor uniting Goethe, Zola, and Wharton (aside from the productive, historically-rooted pragmatism of their descriptions) is their insistence on the edge. While I have already noted above how these examples are much more easily locatable for their clear narrative circumscription, even pulled away for close examination and subsequently taken on their own like some kind of decontextualized *objet d'art*, they make pointed use of the edge, whether this be in the form of the audience-player schism (Goethe), the delicate, illusory, and allegorical mirror held up to the spectator (Zola), or the staged display and inspection of female bodies (Wharton). These authors recognize the fourth wall as an integral part of the construction of theatrical illusion in general, and as one that here takes on more specific and perhaps more troubling resonances as a translation of the impermeability of the painted or sculpted surface — that which allows us to classify it as a *tableau*. They do not, however, operate under the assumption that this fourth wall is *actually* impermeable, indeed taking pains to demonstrate how the desires and demands of viewers and interpreters alike flit back and forth across this barrier and affect their respective experiences of the performance. So while Goethe, Zola, and Wharton are uninterested in mounting a *tableau vivant* without this

dimension, they nevertheless abide by its status as a contemporaneous social reality, and the stagings they depict are relatively traditional and "ordinary."

The later authors to whose works I will turn to in subsequent chapters need not treat the *tableau vivant* as a social reality, largely because it has fallen out of favor as a practiced theatrical form or parlor game. It becomes, as a result of this diminution in popularity, more of a conceptual framework, distant in time and alien in experience. This oddity nevertheless remains a widespread aesthetic device even in what may at first seem a particularly unaccommodating new context. But since *tableau vivant* is a form and a game, strictures and rules remain in play; taking too many liberties may render it unrecognizable, for it is a form that creates itself in relation to other arts — performed by real people like theater, still and silent and unyielding like the plastic arts — claiming simultaneous resemblance to and difference from each, and staking out its own elliptical territory like the overlapping region of a Venn diagram. What this means is that authors wishing to remove the *tableau vivant* from the stage must do so while preserving the edge, the conceptual touchstone — the fundamental structure — around which this form is built.

It should come as no surprise, then, that a good deal of the literature that deploys the *tableau vivant* in the latter half of the twentieth century we might qualify as "experimental" in nature, a prime example being the French *nouveau roman,* and Robbe-Grillet in particular. This literary movement is concerned with breaking down traditional spatial and temporal elements of narrative, with highly-wrought and extended passages of description, and with geometry, architecture, and form in general. The result of such insistent manipulation of the "literary" or "cinematic" — a de-composition of artistic categories and rules in a much larger sense — is that the *tableau vivant*, which needs be transformed into an aesthetic principle while at the same time structurally respected, provides a tempting subject to undergo such experimentation. Another

way of thinking about this new quality of the form is in terms of Benjamin's ideas of ruination, and the ways in which ruins are freed up to serve as a powerful decontextualized image and object of wider-ranging historical and political analysis. Viewed from this angle, the avant-garde artistic manipulations of the form and its elements are permitted by a more natural, historical process through which their subject has been isolated from the flow of time. Using the form of the *tableau vivant* as a guiding principle for the composition of a text, or as a structure to be broken down and reassembled in new ways, forming innovative *cadrages* for non-traditional narratives, may represent a move away from the relatively clear and delineated definition that has been our topic in this chapter and which finds itself incorporated in clearly framed instances in older texts.

In some ways, this is a true statement, but not, I would argue, in all ways. For one of the remarkable aspects of the use of *tableau vivant* in Goethe, Zola, and Wharton is these writers' ultimate satisfaction of the frustrated desires instilled in the viewer of the *tableau vivant*, of which they are nevertheless acutely aware. It is this "return to life" — the temptation to restore to a traditionally temporal narrative the stilled scenes of the *tableau vivant,* composed of real, doubly-recognizable bodies — to which they finally and necessarily cede, since these are but isolated scenes within the larger, more dynamic structure of the novel. As *mises en abyme*, as proving grounds in which thoughts and concerns both diegetically oriented and meta-literary are worked out, such scenes make use of the peculiarities of the *tableau vivant*, but in so doing, they do not explore the arena that is to be one of the loci of later writers' efforts: that of mimesis, of the atmospherics of *tableau vivant* pervading an entire text.

I have spent the better part of this first chapter detailing what, precisely, the novel's narration can reveal to us about *tableau vivant*: its peculiarities magnified under the textual

loupe, its facets brought out by elaborate settings of its attendant characters and scenes. But there remains another question — namely, *why* exactly is the novel, as a literary genre, especially interested in *tableau vivant* even from a relatively early date? Is there more to the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel's interest in the *tableau vivant* than merely that, as a known practice, it formed a part of the real world the text reimagined and reproduced?

One reason has been implicit in my discussion of all three of the texts in this chapter: the *sociality* inherent in the *tableau vivant*, especially in its original context of parlor game or theatrical entertainment. In Goethe, Zola, and Wharton, parties of the upper classes enjoy these meticulous, visually striking devices, and all three authors take pains to craft a large and well-defined context for their respective *tableaux* by weaving together dialogues, reactions, and sensations deriving from the audiences in attendance. It is important also to emphasize that the *tableau vivant*, as an aristocratic or haute bourgeois entertainment, finds itself privileged simply because it was a somewhat common pastime of the social spheres that were of particular interest to these authors. Nevertheless, we must not neglect to consider that one way of conceiving of the writer of fiction's work is as a process of decision-making, a sequence of choices — which characters to shape, which scenes to depict, what content to be elided — that, while deriving in certain genres and narrative modes from the "real world," must not necessarily be dictated *by* that world. Even though *tableau vivant* forms a part of the social obsessions of the novel, its appearance therein should not be taken for granted, and cannot be ascribed merely to a kind of proximity to the narrated subject. Rather, it is also due to the rich thematic veins cutting through it that allow for the kind of implicit or explicit authorial commentary that finds fertile ground to grow in the sprawling fields of the novel. Any observer of the period might attend an aristocratic ball and witness a *tableau vivant* being performed, and subsequently record it as a fact; an author

sees the enormous literary potential in such a strange apparition, sees in the restrained human bodies, the rigorous compositions, the voyeuristic subject-object relationship an uncanny, deathly double-world with which the audience is confronted, locates in the lavishly-mounted scenes recalling famous works of art a means of satirizing these classes' relations to the ideas of money and culture.

The development of the nineteenth-century French novel, specifically, has been theorized by certain scholars as a response to the increasing prevalence of the theater and the way it captivated contemporary audiences through its spectacular grandeur. Already we have seen how the importation of the theatrical form from the public theater to the (semi-)private residence in the form of the *tableau vivant* as social entertainment trails along with it intimations of the luxury and lushness it broadcast wholesale on grander stages. We have not yet, however, touched upon the potential for rivalry between sister arts implied by the threat of theatrical dominance. Pratima Prasad and Susan McCready present a compelling case for such anxieties on the part of French writers in their edited volume *Novel Stages: Drama and the Novel in Nineteenth-Century France*, where, in their introduction, "Setting the Stage," they highlight the wide-ranging influence of theater on a variety of authors. They cite, for example, numerous notable writers who undertook either to write directly for or to adapt their novels to the theater, as well as the contention that Victor Hugo's theorization of the *drame* aligned with or perhaps even led to the advent and establishment of the realist novel. Broadly, as Prasad and McCready point out, "the theater remained a source of inspiration and an esthetic ideal for the novelists of the period" (Prasad & McCready 34-35). Likewise, Guy Ducrey, in his rather exhaustive study *Tout pour les yeux: Littérature et spectacle autour de 1900*, restates the major questions concerning writers and artists during this period: "Wouldn't literature bear the costs of all this dazzle? Doesn't the

text risk perishing before the blinding brilliance of the image? Poetic language suffering because of it? Could the immemorial reign of the written have reached its end?"[10] (Ducrey 10, my translation). Whether we call them the fruits of influence or of anxiety, these questions, arising from the undeniable effect of the presence of the theater upon the novel, remain the same. To what answer, ultimately, do they lead?

In "'At Once Drama and Epic': The Historical Novel in 1830s France," Stéphanie Dast suggests that "it is with Romanticism that the idea — still largely perceived as iconoclastic — of the fusion of drama and novel in a new genre capable of supplanting all the others emerged" (Dast 70). Such a generic hybridity should not be conflated with perhaps more extreme, avant-garde examples of the same from later periods and movements. Rather, Dast cites Victor Hugo's maxim that "There are two types of dramas: the drama that can be acted, and the drama that cannot be acted" and asserts that Hugo thereby "defined the novel as a drama whose dimensions were too vast to adapt to the stage" (Dast 71-72). The self-conscious "theatricalization" here is often decidedly more subtle, focusing more on the transformation of already extant features of the novel so as to approximate more capably the features of theater, i.e. adjusted pacing, an increase in dialogue, and a decrease in extraneous description. Ducrey points to an alternative strategy to bring the novel and the theater into contact, this time playing up the descriptive prowess of the novel so as to encompass what he classifies as a surprisingly broad repertoire of "gestures" proper to the stage: "…By gesture, we do not refer only to the corporeal ones of dancers and actresses, but rather, much more generally, to that set of movements (set design, scenery, lighting, costumes, music, the spectators themselves) which, if they elude the

[10] "La littérature ne ferait-elle pas les frais de tout cet éblouissement? Le texte ne risque-t-il pas de dépérir devant l'éclat aveuglant de l'image? Le langage poétique d'en pâtir? Le règne immémorial de l'écrit serait-il arrivé à son terme?"

[theatrical] text, nevertheless form the poetic reality of the spectacle. During the period of 1870-1914, writers and poets, far from turning their gazes, out of some haughty text-centrism, away from these material and ritual phenomena, on the contrary, are always interested in them and never stop describing them"[11] (Ducrey 14, my translation). This latter strategy comes across as less clearly imitative than the former, more interested in staking the novel's claim *against* the theater by proving itself adept at representing even those constituent elements that remain hidden because of the dictates or limitations of the stage. This tendency, too, we have seen in all our examples of *tableau vivant*, which devote significant portions of their descriptions to the scenic apparatuses and viewers situated beyond the representative realm of the stage itself. In this way, though their uses of the *tableau vivant* consist more in recounting scenes of life than in using the form to unsettle readers, these earlier texts also demonstrate something approaching a Benjaminian desire to expose the conditions and technologies of artistic representation, a reality that is otherwise pointedly veiled for the sake of illusion. These novels fall short, however, of taking a truly dialectical approach since their incorporation of two terms (the illusion of representation and the paraphernalia of the stage) is deployed more to prove their descriptive prowess than to arrive at some synthesis laying bare fundamental questions of the relation between fiction and reality within French bourgeois society of the nineteenth century.

Michael Irwin, while writing about a very different corpus of texts, nevertheless arrives at some broader ideas about the nineteenth-century novel which are applicable also to mine. As we shall see, his concepts echo a tendency on the part of the novel towards claiming greater territory

[11] "...par geste, l'on n'entend pas seulement ceux, corporels, des danseuses et des actrices, mais, bien plus généralement, cet ensemble de mouvements (scénographie, décors, éclairages, costumes, musique, spectateurs mêmes) qui, s'ils échappent au texte, construisent pourtant la réalité poétique du spectacle. Les écrivains et les poètes des années 1870-1914, loin de se détourner par quelque texto-centrisme hautain, de ces phénomènes matériels et rituels, ne cessent au contraire de s'y intéresser, et de les décrire"

for itself that Ducrey suggested[12] (though this time, such expansionary novelistic activities are not clearly marshalled directly against the theatrical foe). Irwin's interest lies in the descriptive function of nineteenth-century fiction, which "is full of attempts to make the reader *see* what is taking place" (Irwin 2, emphasis in original). He describes the work of Dickens, Trollope ("two of many novelists to claim that the scenes and characters which they invent are directly perceived by them" [Irwin 2]), et al. as a multi-stage but clearly visually-oriented process, in which the writers use detail, which "the writer himself has visualised intensely," to "[stimulate] the reader to visualise" (Irwin 2). This is an explication which, in turn, implicitly casts the type of description in these novels as an ekphrastic activity, recreating the image of the world through its lexical rendering. If this is the case, if this is indeed a main descriptive prerogative of novelists of this period, then we can view the *tableau vivant* as a *mise en abyme* pushed to the limits of the metaliterary: not only a replication of a complete and separate work of art set within the frame of another, a *tableau vivant* in the nineteenth-century novel, so obsessed with description as an insistently visual process, is also a heightened example of the fundamental descriptive strategy undertaken across the rest of the text. Indeed, it becomes a kind of ideal exercise in this very activity.

Irwin contends that "a major feat of the developed realistic novel was to make a character, a scene, an environment believable in a far ampler way, partly by providing more to believe in, partly through greater power and skill of presentation" (Irwin 4). There are limits to "believability," though, and the genre's lofty goals certainly run into significant obstacles:

> ...descriptive writing, of whatever mode or quality, must be uncertain in its effects, since so much depends on the responsiveness of the reader. Clearly in absolute terms description is impossible. One could not verbally convey an adequate idea of a tree to a

[12] See p. 69

> man who had never come across one. The novelist can persuade his readers to see only what they are capable of seeing.
> (Irwin 5)

The towering problem of absolute description is, as Irwin rightly points out, ultimately insuperable, however near the summit various strategies might scale. But the employment of *tableau vivant* (or ekphrastic description in general) represents an admirable ascent, a clever stopgap for the major problems posed by a lack of visual referent in the proper functioning and final success of any written description. *Tableau vivant* attempts to remove some of the complications of the issue Irwin raises. Logically, this could and should be taken further: it is true that a man cannot be made to picture a tree if he has not seen one, but even a man who has seen *a* tree is not necessarily capable of picturing the *specific* tree the author has in his or her mind's eye. But if the tree in question grows, for example, out of a Poussin canvas rather than a particular and unfrequented field, then the odds of the reader (or, realistically, of a certain type of reader — cultured, moneyed, well-traveled) having seen literally this same tree increase exponentially. In a way, the problem of specificity in description can be circumvented by the delegation of some of the descriptive workload to the medium of visual art. Description in the nineteenth-century realist novel is a weighty thing, and *tableau vivant* may represent a means of more evenly distributing representative pressure across works and media, of buttressing with a visible frame of reference a written language of the visual. Nonetheless, it is a temporary and limited strategy — at least in terms of the role it is allowed to play in the novels of this period. This we see even in the works that incorporate multiple examples of *tableau vivant*; unlike the ekphrastic poem, the realist novel cannot be constituted entirely of such scenes because of its other generic demands — for plot, for character, for narrative movement. We may linger on the

sight of Lily Bart's Mrs. Lloyd, but she and Wharton move on, and we are ineluctably borne along with them.

In short, the pervasive influence of the novel-theater encounter (or rivalry) that many scholars see as partly directing the course of the nineteenth-century novel's development may provide us with another reason for the written form's interest in depicting the *tableau vivant.* The actual results of its inclusion in these novels, however, are far more interesting, ranging from attempts to capture the visual magic of the spectacle, to creatively communicated social commentary, to larger theorizations of creative power and control suggested by the passage from the collaborative, compartmentalized theatrical work to the singularly authored novel. Even though the *tableau vivant*, at this historical juncture, still formed a part of the real world these novels depict, we would be remiss to dismiss it as something less than the prismatic, richly productive theoretical framework it was already beginning to form.

Chapter 2 Art and Work: Photographing the *Tableau Vivant*

Outside the social spheres in which the *tableau vivant* was commonly, and more publicly, practiced — balls, plays, festivals — there is another that forms a significant part of the nineteenth-century historical context in which it flourishes: the artist's studio. This is a liminal space, the site of production that lies between the object of representation and the finished work of art that would be accessed in a Salon, museum, or a private residence. As such, the traces and dimensions of the studio were often neglected or suppressed in the name of naturalistic artistic representation. But one of the most significant technological developments of the nineteenth century — the advent of photography circa 1840 — caused an upheaval in the realm of the visual arts through its intimidating mimetic capacities, and this 'new relation' had direct and significant effects upon its established sister arts, one of which was the increased visibility of their spaces of production. This is one example of the unexpectedly revelatory nature of photography — revelatory insofar as its growing prominence, viewed alternately with skepticism, pessimism, pragmatism, or optimism, forced into focus photography's always complicated relations with those media which could be considered its competitors or benefactors.

After a brief historical overview to establish the connections between photography, painting, and the *tableau vivant*, this chapter will look forward to the following century and consider the legacy of this practice of photographing the *tableau* in novel contexts: Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1976 *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (*Topology of a Phantom City*) and Jean-Luc Godard's 1982 film *Passion.* As we shall see, these texts are emblematic of the ways in which

the introduction of a third representational medium[13] allows for the opening up of otherwise sealed compositions to the meta-artistic tendencies and political dimensions of representation — in the former work, of pervasive institutional representation of violence against the female body, and in the latter, of the physical, psychological, and representational strain with which the proletarian body[14] is burdened in the realm of labor. Both texts can be understood as propositions of subversive artistic solutions to the thorny ideological problems generated or thrown into relief by photography (with its all-important attendant notions of "realism" and "illusion"), as famously formulated by Benjamin. Moreover, these texts fashion their *tableaux vivants* as clearly intermediary spaces (echoing the artist's studio) situated between the spheres of representation and reality, proletariat and bourgeoisie, remapping distinct artistic and political zones into a productive enfilade rather than a set of enclosures.

The discussion of both of these texts will broaden so as to encompass, in addition to analyses of specific *tableaux* within them, a description of more general artistic philosophies of each artist (for Robbe-Grillet, his conceptualization of a new, anti-bourgeois novel; for Godard, his unconventional use of cinematic montage). My aim is to demonstrate that the *tableaux vivants* in the novel and film are important elements of their commentary upon specific questions

[13] Or, perhaps, third *and* fourth. We will begin by discussing still photography and then move into a case of cinematic photography. While these are two different forms, the cases we will look at both use photography and its capacity for rendering visible the conditions and techniques of artifice implicit in much representational activity in very similar fashions. The aspects upon which I will focus in this chapter are derived from a broader conceptual understanding of photography.

[14] While it is true that the major characters of Godard's *Passion* who are factory workers and are eventually engaged as interpreters in the film's *tableaux vivants* are female, his focus here is more on class than on gender. Godard certainly does engage with the idea of gender in this film, and not in a superficial way; but I think that his interest in female forms and female interpreters is taken up more in the service of his larger themes of historical representation and is, in the end, subsumed somewhat to broader issues of social class.

of labor and gendered violence within society at large, but also of the development of their own styles and goals as idiosyncratic artists.

2.1 "The Servant of the Sciences and the Arts": Problems of Photographic Revelation

The quotation in this section's title comes from Charles Baudelaire, one of the most vehement opponents of the interloper, photography, into the world of art. His most famous attack on the emerging artform comes in his *Salon de 1859,* in which he warns against its claims to artistic independence. Instead of claiming a status for itself as equal or even superior to painting, photography, in Baudelaire's view, should be entirely instrumentalized, recognized for the *industry* it actually is — "to be the servant of the sciences and the arts — but the very humble servant, like printing or shorthand, which have neither created nor supplemented literature" (*Mirror* 230). Its purpose is to be primarily preparatory or exploratory (in the case of the photographic study as taken up by various painters of the period) or documentary in nature: "Let it rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins, those books, prints and manuscripts which time is devouring," he recommends, "precious things whose form is dissolving and which demand a place in the archives of our memory"[15] (*Mirror* 230-231). While this description sculpts an Ozymandian image of the photograph as a fragment of a vanishing reality, it is peculiar that the objects that are to be salvaged by the photograph — "books, prints and manuscripts" — are already artefacts originally conceived and created with the task of setting down in a concrete form otherwise intangible narrative or perceptual content. This aligns well with Baudelaire's focus on the subservience of photography to other arts and media, as the photographic image

[15] "Qu'elle sauve de l'oubli les ruines pendantes, les livres, les estampes et les manuscrits que le temps dévore, les choses précieuses dont la forme va disparaître et qui demandent une place dans les archives de notre mémoire."

becomes here a mere facsimile with the imperative to reproduce and thereby safeguard other, implicitly primary lexical and visual images.

Oddly, given his admission of photography's capacity to resist the ephemerality of *things*, Baudelaire seems not to see (or entertain) as a possibility the extension of this activity to the *moment*, or to human subjects. This is perhaps because in this context, the photograph hews too closely to the condition of primary representation than when it simply copies that which is already a copy — which is to say, it becomes *troubling*, a menace to the established forms. Baudelaire, in fact, veers into mockery when the question of photographic portraiture arises in the *Salon de 1859*, presenting the task of posing for the camera as a ridiculous sort of circus sideshow:

> Strange abomination took form. By bringing together a group of male and female clowns, got up like butcher and laundry maid in a carnival, and by begging these *heroes* to be so kind as to hold their chance grimace for the time necessary for the performance, the [camera] operator flattered himself that he was reproducing tragic or elegant scenes from ancient history. Some democratic writer [must] have seen here a cheap method of disseminating a [taste] for history and for painting among the people, thus committing a double sacrilege and insulting at one and the same time the divine art of painting and the noble art of the actor.[16]
> (*Mirror* 229, emphasis in original)

The sarcasm, conveyed through italics, of Baudelaire's use of the word "heroes" is indicative of the low esteem in which he holds such compositions and also implicitly compares them unfavorably with academic painting, the nobility of which they apparently insult through the banality of the photographic models' costumes. Strangely, though, Baudelaire's vision seems to

[16] "D'étranges abominations se produisirent. En associant et en groupant des drôles et des drôlesses, attifés comme les bouchers et les blanchisseuses dans le carnaval, en priant ces héros de vouloir bien continuer, pour le temps nécessaire à l'opération, leur grimace de circonstance, on se flatta de rendre les scènes, tragiques ou gracieuses, de l'histoire ancienne. Quelque écrivain démocrate a dû voir là le moyen, à bon marché, de répandre dans le peuple le goût de l'histoire et de la peinture, commettant ainsi un double sacrilège et insultant à la fois la divine peinture et l'art sublime du comédien." Note: the second and third sets of square brackets indicate corrections of the original translation.

skim right over the artistic realities of this kind of painting — namely, that it more often than not entailed the posing of costumed models for the artist, a kind of theatrical artifice exemplified by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721); in fact, the photograph was soon to provide a kind of relief for the model in that the posing could be held only long enough for the photograph to be taken, and then the *photographic image* could serve as a guide and model for the artist instead of the human bodies themselves, which were now liberated by this new technology. The idea of dressing up and posing is considered not only ridiculous, but insulting to the art to whose status this form of photography pretends. What's more, it is seen almost as anti-intellectual, a method of immunizing people against real, valid art. (Baudelaire say elsewhere that "If the artist makes the public stupid, the public pays him back in kind" [*Mirror* 227].) So insidious is this "double sacrilege" that it forms an insult to two artforms: painting and acting.

The problem, for Baudelaire, arises when the photograph represents the end in itself rather than simply a means to the painter or sculptor's end. His objections are reflective of underlying unsettling aspects of the photographic image in this early artistic context, related to, but separate from, the surprising new mechanical mode of the reproduction of reality that did not depend on a human touch, or human labor, in quite the same way as did the other arts; paradoxically, as contemporary scholars of these debates have highlighted, sometimes the traces of human work and spaces that were to be found in these photographs were equally troubling. The art historian Dominique de Font-Réaulx contends that "photography lifted another veil, revealing a hidden, more private auditorium: the painter's studio… Several photographs in collections that belonged to painters even record the decor and the subterfuge that lay behind their realization" (De Font-Réaulx 205), as, for example, in photos taken for (or, in certain cases, by) artists, in which models pose alongside or atop "boxes, frames, and blankets" (De Font-

Réaulx 207). In this way, one of the realities that emerges through the photographic image is its very *artifice* — the artifice implicit in any kind of image-making, and a commonality between photography and her sister arts.

The constraints of actually *taking a photograph* of human beings, regardless of the particularities of composition, were such that an affinity between this practice and one specific field of painting made the intermedial gestures of early photography all but inevitable. "The search for a lifelike expression lay at the heart of [photographic] portraiture, all the more since the *rigid pose* necessitated by long exposure times made this difficult. So, very early on, group portraiture enhanced the *artifices of the genre scene* to counteract the risks inherent in this technique" (De Font-Réaulx 197, my emphases); in other words, the oftentimes acute, dramatic gestures, the "exotic" or striking costuming, the pointed attention to nuances of light and shadow — all the theatrical tendencies — of genre painting were imported into much early portraiture not only because it sought a place alongside painting, but also because of photographers' pragmatism regarding the constraints of a new technology that they sought to camouflage. This results in careful considerations that formed a perhaps unexpected part of the photographer's task in creating a "genre" scene: "Not only did the models' features call for careful selection: there was also the choice of an appropriate costume. Indeed, attire was often the only way of distinguishing a scene set in Brittany from one taking place in Italy or the Orient; the garments in which the subjects were dressed thus diversified what was a limited range of attitudes" (De Font-Réaulx 202). This attentive selection of detail (in relation to the photograph's figures) is important in specifying certain aspects of the scene meant to be represented, and the photographers therefore found recourse to the trappings and tropes of genre painting *more generally* when it came to devising an original scene.

Painters, on the other hand, had a more ambivalent response to photography. As Elizabeth C. Childs points out in her essay "The Photographic Muse," "For this generation the photograph served not just as document, tool, or aid but as an essential intermediary — between the experience of memory and the knowledge of the eye, between the external world of nature and the private world of the studio, and between the phenomenological world of action and objects and the private exercise of creativity" (Childs 33). It is true that the photographic image could serve as a study to aid the painter in recreating a specific pose or architectural detail, but since it served as a *means* to a painted end, it was part of, and therefore inextricably integrated with, the site of production rather than the final product. While some artists were more open about their use of photography and engaged in the practice themselves, others publicly spurned it for philosophical reasons at the same time as they privately incorporated it into their practices:

> The avant-garde of the fin de siècle generally positioned itself in opposition to middle-class mass culture, with its values of convenience, speed, and technological progress. Yet of course these artists participated in modernity even as they spun a discourse of antimodernism and retreat from mundane urban life… Even artists (like Paul Gauguin) who claimed vociferously that they had little use for photography as an art form found it an enormously useful tool in the studio and in the management of their careers. (Childs 29)

This tension on the part of the artistic establishment — manifesting sometimes as repudiation, sometimes as ambivalence, and sometimes as befuddlement — results in photography's occupation of a kind of murky gray zone which finds parallels in the photographers' efforts to mimic painting and disguise the conditions of their own art, and in the location of much of this early photography within the space of the studio.

Robbe-Grillet and Godard are both highly attuned to this liminality, but find new ways of making that space thematically productive rather than obstructively puzzling, as it so often appeared during the preceding century. That both artists use the *tableau vivant* as a site for

engagement with the theme of photography demonstrates that they have also zeroed in on the form's occupation of a *zone between* painting and photography (in the sense that this kind of costumed, genre-inflected posing of models was an object common to both modes of representation, the image upon which were set both the human and the mechanical eye).

It would be insufficient, however, to say that they are merely engaging with a *theme* of photography in their respective texts. Robbe-Grillet's novel and Godard's film do not only present scenes of photography. The novel and the film exist in their own right as attempted solutions to problems of representation that come along with (or are brought into focus by) the advent of the medium. These problems are outlined succinctly and with great clarity by Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," which deals with photography's path to primacy, questions the illusions in which it traffics, and delineates parallels between this "modern" representational technology and modernity writ large. If Benjamin, in his discussion of the emergent artforms of photography and cinema, principally underscored the attendant, unstated problem posed by their development (i.e. the dubious nature of their illusionistic activities, the potential for their deployment to ideologically pernicious ends), then the works of Robbe-Grillet and Godard take up this problem and propose, through their own experimentations in literary and cinematic construction, possible solutions. Their strategies share a primarily subversive approach, identifying, isolating, and making use of units of meaning and reassembling them into unorthodox, revelatory structures.

In "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," Benjamin is chiefly concerned with the philosophical implications of technological advancement, especially as mobilized in a "cutting-edge" form like the moving picture. As he sees it, what some might call a certain productive liberty afforded cinema by its technology (that is, the ability to set still images

into motion, to create a scene more temporally commensurate, supposedly, with our unmediated experience of reality) is at the same time an enormous formal constraint placed upon the medium, one that, in the interest of 'duplicating' reality, in fact only further sharpens cinematic artifice. He says:

> The shooting of a film, especially of a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc. — unless his eye were on a line parallel with the lens… in the studio the mechanical equipment has penetrated so deeply into reality that its pure aspect freed from the foreign substance of equipment is the result of a special procedure, namely, the shooting by the specially adjusted camera and the mounting of the shot together with other similar ones. The equipment-free aspect of reality here has become the height of artifice; the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology.
> ("The Work of Art" 13)

An ontological paradox of film, in other words, is that the more it strives to approximate reality through the obfuscation of its own technologies and materials, the further it ends up straying from reality. The concrete stuff of filmmaking is kept out of view, behind the spectatorial prosthesis of the camera's lens; the cables, lights, film reels are like an optic nerve holding the eyeball firmly within its socket. A truly "immediate reality," then, would be a vision encompassing the very apparatus that makes the film possible; this vision would accordingly destroy the central illusion of the film, but would in fact make the artifice clear by more closely hewing to its mimetic aspirations, however unsettling such a feat would be.

At the same time, though, the illusions of film are, according to Benjamin, "incomparably more significant than that of the painter" in the modern age, since the picture fashioned by the painter "is a total one, [whereas] that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law"; this fragmentary nature is more indicative of "the thoroughgoing permeation of [our non-diegetic] reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is

free of all equipment" ("The Work of Art" 13-14). What this singular, fragmentary perspective of the motion picture reflects, in other words, are the very perceptual norms of modernity — specifically, as a capitalistically-oriented, urban phenomenon, architecturally figured in the rigorous perambulatory and ocular direction of the Arcades, or glimpsed through the ubiquity of advertising images, photographic portraits, and other iconic ephemera — so rigorously shaped by technology of all kinds, not just representational. This means, moreover, that the cinematic medium generally traffics, uncritically, in these same ideologically suspect structures and forms. Because conventional cinema has its roots so deeply enmeshed in that "land of technology" (which is simply a spatial metaphor for a particular historical period), it also has, lying latent within itself, behind its eye, the capacity to create especially explosive and even potentially epiphanic images that would (to a degree proportional to its conventions' mirroring of the condition of modernity) potentially lay bare modernity's broader ideological illusions *beyond* the film's images. This, following from Benjamin's theorization of the dialectical image, could constitute a dialectical *aesthetics* (another example of which would be the *tableau vivant*): the spectator broken free from the fixed perspective of the cinematic eye, the eyeball rolling back into the cavern of its skull and seeing the technological, societal body in which it is encased: such are the raptures of a hypothetically subversive photography uncoiling in the shadows its own paradoxes of reality and unreality, contemplating them before its own gaze.

De Font-Réaulx suggests the term "suppressed reality" (De Font-Réaulx 209) to designate the intriguing incursions of artifice into reality and vice versa in photographic images where the paraphernalia of the studio comes into view either expressly or through negligence; this is applicable to photographs mimicking academic or genre painting, or to photographic studies for use by painters. Such images provide us with a more thorough, stratified vision of the

so-called final artistic product because, thanks to the traces of "suppressed reality" they contain, they bear witness to a more concrete, more embodied reality belied by the tranquil impassiveness of a painting or sculpture, and they make legible the different kinds of work and bodies that lie beneath varnished surfaces like pentimenti. This "suppressed reality," in the form of costumes, props, postures, theatrical trappings of all kinds, is also another name for what so bothered Baudelaire in his assessment of photographic portraiture, and could also be used to describe that brief glimpse of photographic subversiveness at which Benjamin hints. But momentous disclosures of this sort are difficult, if not impossible, to cover back up, and even the most adamantly diverted gaze still retains in its periphery a niggling blur of the artifice already disclosed to it; this blur, these traces, will become magnified and will constitute objects of authorial interest and investigation in their own right in the twentieth century.

I propose expanding De Font-Réaulx's term "suppressed reality" beyond the frontiers of artistic representation considered from a purely formal perspective, and beyond the walls of the artist's studio; the texts I will consider in this chapter do the same, implicitly. Through their scenes of *tableau vivant,* they both depict photographic technologies and spaces of representation, but at the same time, they expose the suppressed *political and social realities* that underlie these representations. De Font-Réaulx's assessment of the photograph — which we might restate as its possessing an inherent and sometimes unconscious self-reflexivity deriving from the way it can make visible conditions of production that other media take pains to keep out of sight — helps to clarify how, in these texts, that same quality of self-reflexivity bleeds over from the formal to the thematic: the *tableaux vivants* staged by Robbe-Grillet and Godard are compositions through which they elaborate concerns about the gendered violence and cyclicality of bourgeois representation, and struggles to depict labor and the working class, respectively.

The work of the one auteur leads quite naturally into that of the other, as the former's literary project dismantles established and dominant cultural codes not by breaking with them completely, but rather by rendering them visible, pushing them to their limits; and the latter considers the artistic productions of these same codes in terms of their simultaneous dependence on and suppression of the proletariat. Finally, they share a vision — one primarily literary, the other primarily cinematic, but both in fact significantly engaged across these media — of the revolutionary potential of literature and cinema that might break free from the stifling contexts in which they are ensconced. They both use the form of the *tableau vivant* and the laborious processes of its composition and recording as a concrete image of that very potential, thereby engaging in a pointedly Benjaminian dialectical aesthetics. The *tableaux vivants* in these texts are liminal spaces between distinct social spheres that deny dichotomous thinking by utilizing "bourgeois material" and by coming together through distinctly *un*-bourgeois practices; these *tableaux* resist easy classification as either bourgeois or proletarian, and this quality is emblematic of the revolutionary path Robbe-Grillet and Godard blaze in their oeuvres.

Tableau vivant, as a form that approximates the condition of the posed composition (either for photography or painting), when situated before a camera, as in Robbe-Grillet's novel and Godard's film, suddenly reveals traces of such "suppressed reality"; their mannered, almost supernatural appearance is suddenly weighted down by the accoutrements of representational technology. Consequently, we can understand how these traces that link them again to the 'real world' are largely generated by and dependent upon this intelligible spatial context of the liminal area where a work of art is produced. A *tableau vivant* performed on stage exists unto itself, as an artistic end, whereas a compositionally identical *tableau* installed before a camera or a painter's easel suggests that it be read as a means to an end, an intermediary form existing before

and enabling the creation of an image. Its stillness becomes *instrumental* rather than essential, a quality that merely better allows for the careful reproduction of forms within an unmoving picture. Thus, while the artist's studio (or the camera's lens) is a distinctly liminal space and this marks the *tableau* as more of an ephemeral or transitional presence, this context also paradoxically links it to very concrete realities of artistic production, which Robbe-Grillet and Godard use to bring out connections to working bodies and class-based systems of manufacture and consumption.

2.2 Topology of a Liminal Space: *Tableaux* of *Tableaux* and Representation as Violence in Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Topology of a Phantom City*

To attempt a description of Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (*Topology of a Phantom City*) is a daunting task. The work is an existential murder mystery set in its imagined "phantom city," a topos with its own immense geography and complex history, that seems, through the text's unanchored narrative, to exist on multiple spatial and temporal planes all at once. A good deal of this literary construction work is accomplished through the composition, reproduction, and placement of *tableaux vivants* that function as aesthetic emblems, historical markers, and reproducible images. The novel opens with a description of the primary *tableaux* (groups of young women in various states of undress) in the "generative cell" of some kind of prison; this scene is ostensibly rooted in the ancient past of the titular city. Through a description of the *tableaux,* Robbe-Grillet relates its destruction by a volcanic eruption, and its foundational myths (which cast it as a sort of Amazonian society populated solely by women who worship a hermaphroditic deity). In the end, he reveals that this is in fact a play being staged in the city's municipal theater. Almost immediately after we learn this, however, Robbe-Grillet suggests that this *cannot* be a play because what the narrator describes violates the spatial and

temporal boundaries of the theater. (He sees through the windows of the cell, for example, and describes groups of people walking *outside* of it, on the street. This is decidedly not the perspective of a theater-goer.) This is the first sign that this text will constantly suggest a particular reading that will, just as quickly as it becomes acceptable (or plausible) to the reader, turn dubious and impossible when the reader is reminded of or newly provided with details and perspectives incompatible with that reading; Robbe-Grillet constantly strives towards meaning, then just as quickly undermines it, deviating towards another, so the more we learn about this city, the less we really know.

The second part of the book shifts towards a murder mystery narrative, in which a series of unidentified young women are killed, their hearts pierced by a golden stylet, their bodies often pointedly displayed by their assailant(s) for public view. The investigation reveals that the locations of the bodies form the four corners of a square, with the city's monumental watchtower as its center (another echo of the initial "generative cell" of the prison stage set). One of these sites, an exploration of which constitutes the third part of the book, is a decrepit building whose upper stories contained a brothel in which pubescent and prepubescent girls were, at some point, clearly imprisoned. The final part of the book, which begins as a description of the location of the last body, very quickly sheds any semblance of narrative cohesiveness, and describes a young boy at a seemingly abandoned seaside hotel, in which various discarded objects evoke different parts of the preceding narrative. Here, it is simultaneously suggested that: this really is the site at which a fourth body is discovered; the little boy may be creating the entire narrative of the novel from the incidental, often "junk"-like objects around him (pebbles, mannequins, bicycles,

butterflies[17]); or that he will potentially grow up to be the murderer of the story. Adding to the sense of logical dissolution are the frequent, unsettling shifts that unmoor the narrator's voice and identity as the book progresses; at various points, Robbe-Grillet suggests that the narrator is the little boy, the playwright, a detective, and/or the murderer.

This progressively unsettling plotting (in terms both of the reader's visceral response to the horrific scenes that make up the book *and* a growing sense of becoming lost in its labyrinthine construction) is part and parcel of the novel's larger aesthetic and political agenda. It is ultimately unconcerned with traditional narrative; it *is*, on the other hand, concerned with the ways in which images are generated, replicated, and incorporated into different kinds of narratives, and the *tableaux vivants* being staged in the theater, with which the novel begins and to which it constantly returns, are the source of this activity. For all its abstractions, disorientating turns, and unsatisfactory plot developments, Robbe-Grillet's fundamental concern in this text is, at heart, a pragmatic one: he is effecting an exploration of the material of literature and of images — specifically, the cultural productions and fixations of the bourgeoisie — , of the uses to which it can be put, and he conducts a series of experiments (or, perhaps better, demonstrations) of the versatility and durability of that material across a hypothetical time and space of his own design.

My previous description risks misrepresenting the book as a purely theoretical exercise in style, but Robbe-Grillet was also deeply engaged here with concrete questions about the *content* of the images around us, not simply their metaphysics. (Because of this focus of the novel, it is important to recognize that it consists almost entirely in images. This excess means,

[17] The effect is something like that employed in Jan Švankmajer's *Alice* (*Něco z Alenky*, 1988), in which the Wonderland explored by its titular character is an amalgam of the (relatively) more banal materials we see in her home — jam jars, bedside tables, taxidermied animals, poppyseed biscuits, etc.

unfortunately, that in this discussion, a judicious selection of these figures and *tableaux* will have to suffice, but that it in no way adequately communicates the nature of the text itself.) Let us take, by way of one example, the gruesome central image of a young woman in a white dress, maculated by blood at the groin. We come across this figure throughout the book: as one of the young women in the play's *tableaux vivants*, "tied down on a rectangular table" (*Topology* 18) and surrounded by onlookers; as a martyr of the ancient city, a mythological heroine injured by the arrows of an invading male fleet; as one of the murdered young women, potentially a prostitute, in the novel's "present," assailed by an unknown killer; as a little girl in a large city square, whose mother buys her a slice of watermelon and who proceeds to "[spoil] the spotless dress irreparably" (*Topolpogy* 45) in this same way with the juice from the fruit; and, more symbolically, as a pale butterfly violently pinned to the baize board of a rather sadistic collector. With this series of images, constructed around a recurring female figure who becomes an archetype through these iterations, Robbe-Grillet manages to draw us in two different but complementary directions — firstly, further and further into the mind of his narrator (whom we must increasingly consider to be unhinged and perspectivally fragmented) who, in the book's final pages, sees in these butterflies dancing across a dusky field images of fragile female beauty; and secondly, across epochs during which, in the transition from the mythological to the actual, we see an unflagging greater societal interest in this same image of the violated woman. The image series becomes a technique through which Robbe-Grillet accomplishes a perspectival conditioning, both on the part of his reader (who becomes entirely paranoid as patterns develop and images recur[18]), and on the part of the narrator who sees (and perhaps creates) echoes of this

[18] The reader of Robbe-Grillet transforms, in certain ways, into someone like the narrator of Witold Gombrowicz's 1965 novel *Cosmos,* ever on the lookout for patterns, connecting lines, and repetitions to the point of all-consuming obsession.

perversity everywhere around him. In this way, Robbe-Grillet identifies his narrator as an exemplary citizen of a city whose entire topology is pervaded by such repetitive images, which it either cannot, or desires not to, shake off — a citizen whose psychology is the product of a long history whose noxious cyclicality disguises itself as the stuff of lofty representation and, in so doing, easily jumps across eras and modes of thinking (from the mythological to the historical, from the fictional to the actual). By presenting this image in the derivative mode of the *tableau vivant* first and foremost, Robbe-Grillet underscores how its own reproducibility inheres in it, and also how it can be played out across real bodies, reemerging in different places and individuals and in various epochs.

The effect, at once distancing and eerily mimetic, of the *tableau vivant* also means that Robbe-Grillet is able to make this image seem at once oddly banal (by dint of its reiteration) and jarring (because of its violence). Likewise, in manipulating these effects of the *tableau vivant*, he is able to present the motif of the violated woman as one that is cynically reproduced in a variety of cultural objects across eras to the point of a public desensitization to the image, and at the same time to indulge in that perpetuation himself. In other words, Robbe-Grillet is guilty here (and in many other places) of committing the very crime he seeks to expose and condemn. At least, by placing these images in contexts that constitute an implicit critique of them and their ilk, he raises the specter of doubt concerning their broad acceptance outside of the text. Robbe-Grillet's emphasis on violence and sexuality throughout his literary and cinematic output[19], reveals the *tableau vivant*'s multiple status as a brutally immobilizing trap, a mobilizer of an

[19] Robbe-Grillet could be taken to task for, in this way, "trying to have his cake and eat it, too." In discussions about the deeply disturbing nature of some of his work (particularly his late output), he cited the Marquis de Sade and raised the question of the difference between fiction and reality, and the rights of the artist to play with and between these categories. He was also a consummate provocateur, and in some ways, a "troll" *avant la lettre.*

objectifying male gaze that characterizes most of the canon of Western European artwork, *and* a tool of critique that can be exploited against these same tendencies.

The theme of photography is constant throughout the novel, in keeping with its interest in the reproduction of images and the political uses to which this activity might be put. It plays an important role not only in the central *tableau vivant* that I will be primarily discussing in this section, but also in the investigation of the murders, at the site of one of which the police discover an undeveloped roll of film containing snapshots of the eerily deserted rooms of the abandoned brothel. The *tableau vivant* itself, as a reproduction, mirrors photography, as the scenes of the play echo both the mythical past and the lurid present of this city. While far from the only figures that are isolated and repeated throughout the book, the *tableaux*, as relatively complex compositions, are the sites at which Robbe-Grillet's technique is most easily identified.

Firstly, as images drawn from the city's pseudo-Amazonian mythology, situated within a theatrical rendering of the past and echoing a spate of crimes taking place in the present, these *tableaux vivants* illustrate the potential for the commingling and mutual co-opting of history, myth, and storytelling within a society; as a general trend, this is applicable not only to the diegetic society, but also to our real world within which Robbe-Grillet writes. As a result of this ceaseless shifting and blurring of narrative modes, these figures become *abstracted forms*, to the point where, because our own reader's perception has been so restructured by Robbe-Grillet's obsessive writing of the novel as a near-endless permutation of symbols and forms, we see the murdered young women of the second half more easily as mythological figures than we do as "real" people living within a specific (diegetic) society. This demonstrates how the *tableaux vivants* become, with relative facility, forms that haunt the collective unconscious and imagination of the city-dwellers, as well as the dreams and artistic visions of the novel's narrator,

and can even efface the specificities of their (not always voluntary) interpreters' individual identity.

Secondly, the *tableaux vivants* are sites of representation as violence, and of violence as representation, a pointedly two-way conflationary process for Robbe-Grillet, which significantly helps to shift the work into the realm of reception[20], of both the viewed image and read text. I introduce this function here to underscore another destabilizing dimension of the novel — in this case, in the realm of aesthetic pleasure of these *tableaux*, which is contested by constant intimations of murder and abuse as points of connection between discrete scenes set in different locations and time periods; I would describe this effect as being something akin to a sheet of tracing paper, upon which are lightly but clearly sketched the deliberately Classical outlines of female nudes, lain atop etchings whose more realistic detailing — always harsher, more squalid, such as the junk strewn across a beach, the rundown, dripping walls of a brothel, the pooling blood of a victim — are then made hazier, but cannot disappear entirely beneath the gauzy translucency of aestheticizing impulse (for example, the image of the victim with the bloodied dress cannot be separated from that of the girl with the watermelon stain on hers; they hover atop one another like phantoms).

In the very first pages, the entire novel emerges from a Turneresque landscape of ruins shrouded in a blazing, light-refracting mist, with margins of blankness, from which the narrator conjures the "phantom" of the fictional city. Thus the problem of prising apart representation and reality (or myth and history) is present from the first, and Robbe-Grillet, by making this the very foundation upon which he writes the work, goes so far as to suggest their ultimate inseparability.

[20] It would be far easier to categorize this novel, and his others, as a work focused on the task of representation, so thorough and obsessive is its descriptive language, and so hostile, in some ways, it is towards its reader, with its lack of plot, unresolved mystery, and pervasive, graphic imagery of sexual violence.

Read this way, the entire text becomes a tract expounding upon the social and political problems emerging from the inextricability of reality and representation.

One *tableau vivant* depicts not only classically "artistic" subjects, mostly in the form of female nudes, but also expands *backwards*[21] and incorporates into its staging the figure of the artist in the process of "representing," through different media, the scenes before her. This is, for my reading, the central *tableau vivant* because it visualizes most clearly the political and aesthetic concerns of Robbe-Grillet as a new novelist.

This *tableau* is a scene of three women portraying a photographer and her models, which Robbe-Grillet describes as being one of the series of *tableaux vivants* being staged in the municipal theater and viewed by an auditorium full of spectators:

> So now the great weight of the crimson velvet curtain has just risen slowly in the sudden silence on the set representing the vast cube-shaped cell with the dim, dark corners...where in the late afternoon they assemble the delinquent courtesans who have been shut up here for a variety of crimes…
>
> The three groups of characters, brightly lit by spotlights that isolate each of them in a circle of white light, are still in the positions already described, having held the same postures.
>
> In the middle, first, toward the back of the stage… a tableau vivant of two completely nude girls constitutes the subject of the young photographer — a girl no doubt hardly older than themselves — who is busy in front of them with a large antiquated-looking camera… Elegantly dressed in a sort of man's suit made of white linen with a tightly waisted jacket, the artist is bending forward to catch in the viewfinder the graceful bathing scene she has just posed so meticulously: two adolescent girls standing close together, the taller one pouring over her companion's shoulder the contents of a big-bellied water jug of blue-patterned china of the kind once used for washing; a matching bowl rests on the floor at their feet, in the left foreground, as well as a soap dish that is all

[21] The question of directionality in this description is significant but difficult to resolve. I have chosen "backwards" in an attempt to imply what we would customarily consider to be the sequence of representation — that is, that the composition, when staged by models, must exist (immediately) before the artist takes up his or her activities to capture that scene. Robbe-Grillet, as we shall see, often privileges a descriptive movement *forwards*, proceeding from the perspective of the artist to eventually arrive at the composition of models, thereby privileging artistic perception rather than a more pragmatic temporal sequencing. The reason I dwell on this, and the reason it is difficult to come to a conclusive answer to this problem, is that Robbe-Grillet's game proves ultimately to be a pointedly *bidirectional and circular* one.

> slippery curves and the traditional bell-mouthed jar containing a large natural sponge; the water streams in a gleaming sheet over a breast, a hip, the right half of a gently bulging stomach, the groin, and the downy mound of the pubis, drenches the insides of both thighs, and finally forms an irregular puddle on the floor between the parted legs, this puddle soon spreading, if at first imperceptibly, toward the white and blue porcelain utensils, which soon become like islands or ships or wrecks floating in the middle of the river. Opposite, that is to say behind and to the right, a large oval looking-glass, tilted very slightly on its mahogany stand, reflects back at the girl operating the camera the well-centered image of the bather's round buttocks.
> (*Topology* 46-47)

Though described in Robbe-Grillet's typically abundant detail, the subject at first glance appears to be a general, Neoclassical bathing scene or any number of the odalisques populating nineteenth-century French canvases. Specific sources for this image might include Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *La Source* (1856) [Figure 1], with its allegorical depiction of a nude young woman pouring forth a river from a terracotta jar held over her shoulder, or Diego Velázquez's earlier but extraordinarily influential *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) [Figure 2], with its evocative combination of the female form and a very artfully placed mirror. But while these references to widely-known examples of European painting are useful insofar as they clearly situate Robbe-Grillet's group within a well-established artistic lineage[22], the way in which he plays with these details — the liberties he takes, as an author, in composing them just so — at the same time estranges it from that very genealogy.

In the 1956 essay, "The Future of the Novel" (compiled famously in the volume entitled *For a New Novel*), Robbe-Grillet states that "the writer himself, despite his desire for independence, is situated within an intellectual culture and a literature which can only be those of the past. It is impossible for him to escape altogether from this tradition of which he is the product" (*For a New Novel* 18). In the case of *Topology of a Phantom City*, we might say that

[22] John Berger notes that "the nude is always conventionalized - and the authority for its conventions derives from a certain tradition of art" (*Ways of Seeing* 53).

the *tableaux vivants* of classical nudes are crystallizations of that past "intellectual culture" against which Robbe-Grillet is interested in defining his own autorial project. Through the images we encounter in this presentation of *tableaux* and elsewhere in the novel, we can see that this is an intellectual culture whose visual codes have left deep marks upon this clearly European imaginary locale. Even as he plays into classical ideas of the nude, of artistic representation, Robbe-Grillet, at the same time, subverts them; for all the seeming respectability conferred upon it by its various visual associations, the *tableau* being photographed emerges as, primarily, a *pornographic* parody of these same paintings through Robbe-Grillet's descriptive compendium: the presence of two nudes, rather than one, and "standing close together"; the way in which the water flowing out of the jug passes suggestively *over* one figure's body (its path followed lasciviously in Robbe-Grillet's obsessively descriptive writing), rather than alongside it, as in the Ingres painting; the placement of the mirror behind the figures that is angled so as to display, rather than Venus' visage, "the well-centered image of the bather's round buttocks." The mirror, in particular, is situated so as to make visible the entirety of the body — to ensure the totality of the display — rather than relegating the audience to a partial (and therefore presumably voyeuristically unsatisfactory) view. So while the components of the *tableau*, considered individually, align rather easily with an entire tradition of Western painting's fixation on the odalisque or the mythological female nude, the scene, taken as a whole, *also* registers as a corruption of these same elements because of the particularities of their *composition.* The authorial hand is brought to the fore, and perhaps the greatest recognition with which the reader emerges in "viewing" these scenes (by reading their descriptions) is one of the arranger. In this way, Robbe-Grillet effectively restores the *tableau vivant*'s fundamental "double vision"; while we cannot "recognize" the interpreters here as any particular characters within the text (they are

pointedly anonymous), we can recognize them as the images with which the novel is pervaded, or as stock figures from Western European painting, recontextualized in something slightly off, markedly titillating. The element of recognition, so important to Goethe's parlor game, is here rerouted to bring out the reader's presumed, all-too-easily predictable frame of reference; in both cases, recognition is the point, but whereas for Goethe, identification of the visual referent indicated the success of the *tableau*, for Robbe-Grillet, it is an indication of the failure of bourgeois cultural production and a measure of the damage it can do to collective imagination.

The *tableau vivant* has a very real history of serving as a means of acceptably presenting nudity onstage, its bodily stasis and its associations with sculpture and painting (i.e. "high art") justifying content that would otherwise have been deemed indecent and permitting a purpose that was clearly objectifying in nature. Indeed, the very fact that the female body's approaching the status of art object through its baring and the constraint of movement imposed upon it provided the key to this sort of presentation is indicative of its objective and of its audience's explicit and implicit desires. Robbe-Grillet here complies with these same censorial "standards" but modifies the *setting* in which these bodies are frozen by adding specular tools such as the mirror in order to flaunt and satirize them at the same time. The placement of the "large antiquated-looking camera" before this scene represents another one of these suggestive tools. While the audience members at the Phantom City's municipal theatre do not actually see the photographic image that is presumably being produced in that frozen moment, the camera's presence and proximity allow for an imaginative extrapolation of that hypothetical photograph and serve to reinforce the fixed nature of the composition, for we can tell that a "pose" is being presented, even as the photographer herself is also stilled. Robbe-Grillet is thus able cleverly to suggest two temporalities within a single moment clipped out of time.

Further complicating matters is the way in which the photographer herself is sexualized, as if somehow erotically contaminated by the very image she is in the process of capturing. Robbe-Grillet's description marks her as importantly both *like* and *unlike* the young women posing for her, and this difference is figured in terms of gendered performance: she is like the models in that she is "a girl no doubt hardly older than themselves" and her pose, while deriving from her taking their photograph, "bending forward to catch in the viewfinder the graceful bathing scene," is similarly suggestive when considered from the audience's perspective; she is, on the other hand, unlike the models in that she is "elegantly dressed in a sort of man's suit made of white linen with a tightly waisted jacket," this distinctively masculine attire standing in stark contrast to her nude subjects. She is coded as simultaneously masculine and feminine, and these dual statuses relate to the dual position she occupies in this composition. She is feminine insofar as she is, ultimately, a subject of the *tableau vivant* being presented onstage at the theater, but she is masculine insofar as she is playing the role (appropriately costumed) of the artist who is standing across a representational barrier from the other two women. This makes her both the "author" of a *tableau vivant* and a figure within one. In a single figure, positioned liminally at the threshold of occupations and genders[23] and linked thematically to the hermaphroditic god(dess) supposedly worshipped by the ancient people of his fictional city, Robbe-Grillet underscores the traditional parallel dichotomy within the world of art — the male artist and his female subject — while also hinting at the in-betweenness inherent in not only the act of representation (in which the real and the image fashion each other) but also in the site of this activity. This is the studio, in

[23] This dichotomy is also figured in the form of disturbing *tableaux* of young girls in a brothel being photographed by an older man, scenes to which Robbe-Grillet returns repeatedly and uses both to draw connections between this kind of winking, parodic scene of photography played onstage at the theatre and a similar "reality" that deals with the exploitation of women and the kinds of sexual and representational violence perpetrated against them in a wide range of contexts whose supposed "acceptability" varies and determines their general social approval.

which, as we have already seen, the suppression and revelation of reality can be undertaken or exposed by the camera's gaze.

All these disquieting details that leave us unsure quite what to make of the *tableau vivant* — its simultaneous Classicism and salaciousness, the uneasy coexistence of its planes of representation, its temporal modes slipping against each other — transform it into a *mise en abyme* of Robbe-Grillet's novel as a whole, a text in which we are similarly and pointedly confronted with juxtapositions that are incompatible only insofar as they do not align with our well-established visual and literary categorizations, like "beauty" and "violence," or "art" and "porngraphy."

This impulse towards unsettling the reader extends also to the framing for these images. An early chapter of the novel opens as the curtain is raised upon a staging of three spatially separate (though thematically interrelated) *tableaux:* the near-pornographic scene of two bathing nudes being posed and captured by a similarly eroticized photographer, with which we are already familiar; an oddly-reclined odalisque, apparently and improbably "asleep" atop a sort of operating table and watched by two barely-clad women in pseudo-Roman garb; and four card players gazing at a newly revealed card, which, oddly, seems to be of the tarot rather than the playing variety. Robbe-Grillet's gaze travels, meticulously describing every detail, within each *tableau* and then onto the next, but when it arrives at the last scene of the card players, his description disconcertingly delves *into* the very image upon the tarot card: it begins by detailing the iconography of the stone tower, surmounted by a woman flanked by two children, and gradually slips into a narrativization of that scene. Next, Robbe-Grillet begins to provide all sorts of details — of the landscape viewed from the tower, of the various structures and monuments of the unnamed city and their situation within its natural and manmade geography — and elevates

to the role of unexpected protagonist the little boy, leaning over the ramparts and taking in this vista. “This,” as Robbe-Grillet notes winkingly, “is where the descent begins” (*Topology* 51). It is a literal, rapid descent down the tower — the boy almost skipping steps as he travels through the interior of the structure — accompanied by a strange, vertiginous parallel ascent through the chapter’s preceding imagery. Glimpsing various parts of the city through the windows as he wends his way to the bottom of the tower, the boy finally peers through a barred aperture “looking straight onto the stage of the theater where, beneath the spotlights, the three groups of actresses are in position for the start of the performance as, just at this moment, right in the background, the curtain slowly opens on the auditorium with its three thousand seats occupied by three thousand motionless spectators whose rows of faces form lighter patches in the darkness, the thousands of mouths uttering at this point an ‘ah’ of amazement, or admiration, or expectation fulfilled, like a powerful if still pent-up sufflation” (*Topology* 51-52).

The passage moves from the controlled stasis of its *tableaux* and the minuteness of Robbe-Grillet’s surgically precise description to the frenzied narrative movement *through* this same series of images, relying on the establishment and subsequent destruction of the boundaries separating them from one another, and finally positioning the readers at the *back* of the stage, looking out at the audience — in effect, coming face to face with themselves. Caught in a recursive “cell” of images (recalling the pervasive imagery of imprisonment that marks the entirety of the novel), we have ended up boxed in along the walls of the theatrical representation of the *tableaux*. Or, considered from another angle, it is as if we have found ourselves in a hall of mirrors, recalling the *tableaux*’s props of the looking glass and the camera; the former, while being used for rather salacious purposes in this staging, nevertheless opens up a new dimension at the back of the scene and extends it spatially beyond its boundaries, and the latter, by

activating what Wharton refers to as the "imaginative faculty" in which successful *tableaux vivants* traffic and by causing the audience (and the readers) to envision the hypothetical photographic image, gestures towards another audience, one that would be viewing this composition in another time.

All this is to say that, in using his novelist's repertoire to create such an unusual literary frame for his *tableau*, Robbe-Grillet hangs it somewhere between reality and representation, causes its viewer's perspective to fluctuate uncannily between the auditorium and its backstage areas, and essentially makes coterminous these temporal and spatial zones that we are so used to considering as discrete. This, in a manner albeit much more non-naturalistic than the real photographs of artists' studios in the previous section, with their traces of "suppressed reality," accomplishes much the same thing and is indicative of Robbe-Grillet's profound interest in such a liminal space. The *tableau* is thus installed as a threshold that may lead us in either direction, and we eventually find ourselves, whichever way forwards or backwards we might choose to proceed, back at the multivalent image itself. This is a possibility that is neither courted by nor readily engendered through a real-world engagement with the *tableau vivant* in its "ordinary" form (to use Holmström's formulation[24] [233]). Keen literary framing, thanks to which Robbe-Grillet creates a kind of momentum[25], allows for a kineticism and a perspectival shifting that is not usually the stock-in-trade of the pointedly placid and enchanted form.

But what precisely *are* these different directions extending backwards and forwards from the image? The answer to this lies implicitly in *Topology*'s preoccupations with image creation

[24] See p. 7

[25] This momentum must be understood as an emphatic device within the context of Robbe-Grillet's novel, which otherwise comprises mostly long descriptions of unmoving subjects or patient perambulations around the fictional city.

and repetition, but it can also be found more explicitly formulated in Robbe-Grillet's more theoretical essays on writing, well-trodden territory for those seeking to define the nebulous category of the *nouveau roman.* For Robbe-Grillet, the question of a certain revolutionary potential of language itself is inextricably linked to the visual element and to the act of description. But this is not description divorced from historical and literary context; Robbe-Grillet believes, from his vantage point firmly located within twentieth-century French literature, that "There is today, in fact, a new element that separates us radically this time from Balzac as from Gide or Mme de La Fayette: it is the destitution of the old myths of 'depth'" (*For a New Novel* 23). Balzac, for example, is engaged in a realist mode of description that seeks to create an illusion of depth that we could characterize as the accrual of specific, material details that not only add a certain texture to a written space or scene, but also become emblematic of the characters' (that is, their owners') most narratively pertinent traits and qualities, especially as they relate to the omnipresent concern of socioeconomic status in the bourgeois novel of the nineteenth century; Robbe-Grillet, on the contrary, seeks to re-engage with the "surface" of spaces and scenes on his own terms. This does not mean less description, but indeed a great deal more: instead of selective inventory, he engages in a brand of minutely-detailed description pushed to a point of excess — the tangible, discernable fruits of "objectivity" rotting on the vine, unplucked beneath the almost unblinking sun of the author/narrator's ever-working gaze, to the point that the idea they might be harvested, pressed, mixed together into some profound vat of "truth" becomes patently ridiculous. These excessive descriptions could be read as parodies of the kind of descriptive imperative of Victorian novels that Irwin discusses[26], making absurd their goals of "visualization" on the part of the author and the reader. In this mode, the photographic

[26] See Chapter 1

myth of objectivity is also effectively deflated. Robbe-Grillet essentially turns a key tool of the supposedly realist bourgeois novel against itself, pushing it to a breaking point at which, instead, emerges a text that, while "shallow," claims vehemently to labor under no illusions with regard to the subjectivity of vision (the narrator's, the author's, even the reader's) that it expresses. Put another way, the "truth"[27] of the realist novel is that of an objective reality, while the "truth" of Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman* is that of a subjective perspective that shapes reality. The surface is the terrain across which subjectivity is in fact mapped out.

The way in which *Topology*'s narrator renders the phantom city as a space obsessively structured by images and objects, in incredible and unsettling detail, is a case in point. The *tableau vivant*, as an eminently describable form, contains within it something like a wink at these same concerns; even as its staging revolves around the introduction of two-dimensional figures into the phenomenologically objective depth of three-dimensional spaces, these compositions also employ, in the service of similitude, perspectives intended to *recreate* the illusion of the painting; hence spatial depth, for the most part, actually becomes something more like an obstacle to be surmounted rather than a new possibility for the subversion of the original image. Additionally, a fourth wall is set up to recreate the painting's boundary. The narration of *Topology,* which jerks the reader along by the arm to violate the space of illusion and see the *tableau vivant* from behind, from backstage, from a wide variety of angles denied by monoperspectival painting, therefore constitutes also a violation of one of the form's standard organizational principles. This may destroy the perfect illusion of the *tableau vivant* in its "ordinary" form, but it also frees it up for the kind of analysis — the turning over in the critic's

[27] The quotation marks round "truth" are appropriate here in both instances, I would say, for the way they call into doubt the proclamations of the first, and for the way they highlight the doubt inherent in the second.

hands — that Benjamin sees as being an essential characteristic of the dialectical image made discontinuous with its illusory original context.

This is an elaborate parry against a strict notion of "realism" which, in Robbe-Grillet's opinion, often trades significantly more in illusion than it does in reality, while at the same time excluding from its ranks other works that in fact reflect reality no less than they. In another essay from the same volume, entitled "From Realism to Reality," Robbe-Grillet suggests that "realism" is not a useful category insofar as it implies a reification of "reality" translated into the literary form; in truth, he says, all authors are concerned with "reality," even if we might call their work "surreal" or "absurd." When an author is considered not to be a "realist," Robbe-Grillet says that interpretative and critical practices slide reductively, when they are brought to bear on their texts, towards the "transcendent," "metaphysical," or "allegorical." For example, Kafka is often read with an eye to allegory and a simple meaning is imposed upon his work ("metaphysics loves a vacuum, and rushes into it like smoke up a chimney" [*For a New Novel* 166]); this distracts from the reality, however strange, of the world he creates, the extratextual legitimacy of his themes and preoccupations. The *tableau vivant* is a form that might be deployed to undermine such strict notions of realism: it uses real, tangible human bodies to create the impression of paintings or sculpture, works that are inherently *unreal* because they are without human life. The paradox of this kind of unorthodox realism (à la Kafka) is thus built into the *tableau vivant* at its most fundamental level, and, parallel to his interest in photography, is why Robbe-Grillet gravitates towards it.

The political dimensions of the *nouveau roman* (a term by which he designates not only his school, but also whatever is considered "new" and in opposition with the formal establishment) Robbe-Grillet figures temporally: "What *today's* art poses to the reader, to the

spectator, is in any case a way of living in the *present* world, and of participating in the *permanent* creation of *tomorrow's* world" (*For a New Novel* 167, my emphases). The *nouveau roman* of Robbe-Grillet is thus self-consciously engaged in this action, concerning as it does the immediate signification of the perpetually-present world of the text (composed of stilled moments, of *tableaux*, and in more works than just *Topology*) and in this way, the new novel is participating in the dissolution of "the categorical antinomies established by the rationalism of past centuries" (*For a New Novel* 166), such as "realism" and "reality," just as the *tableau vivant*, both generally and in its particular usage in this novel, blurs the boundaries between reality and representation, objective reference and subjective replication. Considered from this vantage point, we might consider a novel like *Topology* (and really all of Robbe-Grillet's literary works) as a slideshow of Benjaminian dialectical images, in which traditional notions of historical and narrative time appear absurd and inadequate, and literary distinctions of genre and style begin to crumble along with them.

Robbe-Grillet's interest in proposing different visions of "reality" in his work as a means of dismantling established structures of generic categorization leads him to a fascination with photography as a medium — especially cinematic photography — and his discussions of the mechanics of this process function also as lessons for literature, a demonstration of the kind of visually-oriented style in which he believed so much revolutionary potential lay. Unlike in literature,

> In the cinema, one *sees* the chair, the movement of the hand, the shape of the bars. What they signify remains obvious, but instead of monopolizing our attention, it becomes something added, even something in excess, because what affects us, what persists in our memory, what appears as essential and irreducible to vague intellectual concepts are the gestures themselves, the objects, the movements, and the outlines to which the image has suddenly (and unintentionally) restored their *reality.*
> (*For a New Novel* 20, emphases in original)

Firstly, by Robbe-Grillet's use of the term "reality" here, we must understand not that effect of "objective" but ultimately illusory "reality" of the realist novel, but rather that idiosyncratic, visually-oriented reality conveyed through renewed attention to the obsessively demarcating descriptive adjective (i.e. the reality of an individual perspective on the world). Secondly, Robbe-Grillet's version of "reality" is fleshed out in this excess of vision, a quality that photography brings out easily, but which has gone relatively unexplored in the realm of literature. In his summation of cinema, we can locate words that return us to the *tableau vivant*, too, such as "gestures" and "outlines"; the ways in which Robbe-Grillet's texts zero in on these forms, then constantly return to, recontextualize, and/or re-evaluate them is comparable to experiments in cinematic focus, framing, and montage. In real life, he points out, we obviously do not see things the way they appear in a movie:

> As a matter of fact, it is as if the very conventions of the photographic medium (two dimensions, the black-and-white images, the frame of the screen, the difference of scale between scenes) help free us from our own conventions. The slightly 'unaccustomed' aspect of this reproduced world reveals, at the same time, the unaccustomed character of the world that surrounds it: it, too, is unaccustomed insofar as it refuses to conform to our habits of apprehension and to our classification.
> (*For a New Novel* 20-21)

Robbe-Grillet sees in the medium of photography ontological formal characteristics that can result in the liberation of the viewer from the "conventions" — political, social, cultural — across which they examine the image; and when these characteristics are transferred in a deliberate, careful manner into the medium of literature, the residue of what seems like an inadvertently revolutionary aspect of the technology of photography can be deployed so as to liberate literature and its readers from their own conventions. The photograph — like the *nouveau roman* — does not create new objects from "nothing" (as one might claim, for example, an abstract expressionist painter does), nor does it, in its most significant form, simply capture

and replicate objects already present in the real world (as Baudelaire would have it do); rather, through the process of photographic (or cinematic) *composition*, concrete, familiar objects are formally estranged and take on unforeseen new dimensions. The idea of photographic seeing, on the part of the writer and the reader, is thus inextricably linked in Robbe-Grillet's thought to the project of the *nouveau roman*, which was to manipulate and subvert formal qualities of literature so as to add "something in excess" to language and to narrative; this conviction, so fastidiously translated into Robbe-Grillet's own authorial style, is also highly influential at the thematic level, as his novels consistently deal with questions of looking, voyeurism, and subject-object dynamics. The term *nouveau roman*, notoriously tricky to pin down because of the wide range of styles its practitioners employed, might be usefully understood through this notion of "excess" which Robbe-Grillet derives from the photographic image and the cinematic vocabulary. The "new" of the novel can mean that which is *added* to language and to literature, rather than simply something unprecedented and solitary, and Robbe-Grillet's definition of the revolutionary power of literature is necessarily developed against (and with) the trappings of a literary establishment. His works do not, in fact, mark a total break with that which precedes them, but rather an addendum, through which that which precedes them, and that which might come after them, can be reconsidered across an enriched contextual and historical framework, not divined from an absence, a vacant lot. Indeed, the question of pre-existing material with which the writer works is one of great importance in his *oeuvre* and relates directly to the *tableau vivant* as a new artistic formation created through classical and bourgeois visual signifiers and cultural markers.

Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of a camera in his *tableaux* and in other scenes from *Topology* is another way of signaling the ambiguities of realism in a fictional forum in which he cannot speak directly about his artistic philosophy. The camera's mechanical eye, as a utensil of

mechanical reproduction, provides the illusion of objectivity, of a specifically-framed view onto reality. In fact, this is far from the case, and by inserting the camera and photographer into the larger patterns of his *tableaux*, engaged in the process of photographing a scene very obviously staged by models imitating subjects of Neoclassical painting, Robbe-Grillet underscores the compositional side of the photographic image — a vision as deliberately manipulated as any painting. By utilizing recognizable schemas within his *tableaux,* Robbe-Grillet also aligns the photographer with a more traditional artist figure (featured in another of the play's *tableaux*), who is situated within the city's ancient past, engraving a sheet of copper with the image of her models. This has the effect of bringing to the fore the fallacy that would posit photography as passively observant of an outside reality, rather than an active force engaged in a delimitation and restructuring of that world. The *tableau vivant*, taking as its model a markedly mannered style of painting, as the subject of a photograph therefore becomes almost a visual shorthand to convey this aspect of the photographer's artistic activity. This is influential in our reading of other scenes of the novel in which photography features prominently.

Notably, these other scenes, which escape the boundaries of the *tableaux* being staged at the municipal theater, make use of photography in a way that is particularly demeaning and violent; in several vignettes set in the brothel populated by young girls, Robbe-Grillet describes them, unsettlingly, as being forced to pose for an unseen photographer. At the scenes of one of the murders, too, the police discover a roll of film with photographs of the empty rooms of a desolate building the reader recognizes as this same brothel. But the investigators, too, take photos of the victims' bodies at these crime scenes, and since their composition so clearly parallels the *tableaux* from earlier in the novel, and since the camera is a tool of both the murderer *and* the investigators, Robbe-Grillet collapses easy moral distinctions surrounding

crime into a more generalized view of representation as violence, perpetrated in these cases specifically against young female bodies who, by this point, after aeons of aestheticization and shoring up of iconic codes and artistic traditions, seem to have become abstracted forms more than real people. Whatever their context, be they photographs of violence or violent photographs, in this Phantom City, the image that is produced is always one that depends upon the subjugation of the female subject to its activity of representational violence. Robbe-Grillet makes this perspective explicit when he identifies the "generative cell" (i.e. the stage upon which these *tableaux* are being performed at the Municipal Theater) as the site where "the motionless ritual of violence and representation still continues" (*Topology* 33). Violence and representation are here clearly linked through the form of the *tableau vivant* and the medium of the female body.

Robbe-Grillet seems interested in linking these larger, established social and artistic codes with individual psychology (or, rather, the psychology of the individual shaped by these codes), and it is for this reason that he returns time and again, in his *tableaux vivants,* to photography. As a mechanical form whose technology functions, after a fashion, as a smokescreen for its true continuation of the compositional and editorial processes that have marked preceding modes of representation, the photographic image — just like so-called "literary realism" — is ripe for exposure as one of the particularly useful ideological tools of the regime of *bourgeois* art. That the photograph is commonly construed as a pure, unalterable image of reality is supported even by the vocabulary proper to it; the French word for a camera's lens is '*objectif*,' the same word for 'objective,' and of course etymologically linked to the concept of 'objectivity' ('*l'objectivité*'). Through his placement of the camera within especially repulsive scenes, Robbe-Grillet seeks to upend for the reader any sense of neutrality attendant to the concept of objectivity, rendering it a tool for abhorrent, sexually violent practices, putting it

in the hands of a contemptible individual. He goes further, describing the perspective of one of the victims in the following manner: "Weary at last of watching that *inscrutable eye* peer at her, she turns away with a shrug of her shoulders, curls up, and pretends to succumb to sleep like a child. She no longer wishes even to hear the *clicking eyelid* that opens and shuts periodically on *its prey*. Absent, offered up, guileless, indifferent, she lets it — as far as her image is concerned — all happen" (*Topology* 93, my emphases). How, when confronted with such a vision of photography, rooted in the numbed mind of the victim (that is, the subject of representation), can one maintain the illusion of objectivity? The '*objectif*' has transformed itself into a predatory eye, a prosthesis emerging from the perverse psychology of the photographer, and it is impossible to imagine the photo that this languid reptilian gaze would produce as an uninflected, 'realistic' picture of the world instead of the disturbing vision, warped by the hand and the eye operating the camera, that it truly is. And by keeping the photographer and the camera in focus throughout the text, by inserting it into different permutations of the scene of representation, Robbe-Grillet also makes clear that this vision is just an especially acute version of an endemic cultural violence that, even in socially sanctioned contexts (like the municipal theater, like paintings hanging on the wall), reproduces similar compositions. It is through the unsettling *tableau vivant*, rather than through more common, less ideologically troubling artforms, that this violence is exposed in Robbe-Grillet's novel.

The images of women recalling Classical and Neoclassical art, filtered so thoroughly through Robbe-Grillet's pointed and descriptive prose, bristle with spines, however familiar they may appear to us — indeed, *because* of how familiar they are to us. Here, one of the girls in the brothel stares at her own reflection in "an oval looking-glass" with "a frame of dark wood" (*Topology* 112) as the murderer approaches:

> She shifts her attention to her own image, it too completely still, like a watercolor portrait in its frame: the fair hair, the large, staring eyes with the turquoise-grey irises, the parted lips, the round, very long neck, the bare chest… She completes her suspended gesture, gently putting the brush down on the painted metal table… A little lower still and more toward the back of the room the red stain on the floor has stopped growing; just on a level with the divan, some thirty centimeters beneath the limply flexed left knee of the young victim lying naked on her back among the fur cushions… She is listening to the murderer's footsteps on the stairs… [the murderer] must enter the first room… Inside it the four walls are entirely covered with oval portraits in mahogany frames — photographic enlargements in pastel tints looking like old-fashioned paintings — each of which shows an adolescent girl or very young woman with her hair down and bodice wide open in order to expose her shoulders and chest… At the bottom of each frame is a name, a first name, written by hand on an ordinary gummed label; and two centimeters lower down an iron key for a large, antiquated type of lock hangs from a peg. (*Topology* 112-115)

Holding onto the central image of the immobilized young woman, Robbe-Grillet shuttles his reader across a series of permutations, the links between which are designed to disturb: from the potential victim staring vacantly at her own image in the mirror, to the corpse of another young woman stretched out like an odalisque, to the "old-fashioned" photographic portraits that serve as a perverse catalogue of captives, the motion comes full circle through our understanding of static contemplation in the mirror as a *tableau vivant* of the pictures from which the murderer selects his victims. Robbe-Grillet, all his excruciating detail generating frissons of dread and mimicking the painfully slow movements of the approaching killer, traces a trajectory from images of violence to images *as* violence, and the static *tableau* of the girl before the mirror marks the formal device round which everything turns. That her reflection in the looking glass is compared to a "watercolor portrait" underscores that this framed image, where mirror becomes painting, is the locus at which these distinctions blur and the representation of the young woman threatens to eclipse her status as a real person. Even more frightening than the presence of the ever-encroaching killer in this scene is the seeming inevitability that is built into its subject's

oneiric stillness and the cyclical movement of its writing: the inevitability of the image, the inevitability of the watercolor portrait of a young woman in an oval frame.

These *tableaux vivants*, then, offer Robbe-Grillet the opportunity to exact his own sort of aesthetic violence (the breaking down of images, their ironic reassembly and literary framing) against bourgeois written and visual texts: they take as their materials the stuff of traditional visual art, but only to create compositions that undermine established notions of realism and estrange their subjects from their readers; they incorporate motifs of photography as pieces of mordant commentary on the conventions of representation and as echoes of the novel descriptive optics and surface aesthetics of the author; and they are positioned in liminal zones as a way of situating Robbe-Grillet's project on the edge of artistic codes.

2.3 The Image Factory: Jean-Luc Godard's *Passion* and the Representation of Labor

Jean-Luc Godard's 1982 film *Passion* is comparable to Robbe-Grillet's novel in its relative lack of interest in a plot. This is perhaps one reason for which they are both especially interested in exploring the form of the *tableau vivant*, which could be considered as a means of resistance to traditional, event-based (temporal) narratives. *Passion* centers on the perpetually frustrated efforts of a Polish expatriate director, Jerzy (Jerzy Radziwiłowicz), to complete a film in a "state-of-the-art" Swiss movie studio. Jerzy's film[28] consists, as best *Passion*'s audience can tell, in a series of intricate *tableaux vivants* based on works by Ingres, Delacroix, Rembrandt, Goya, El Greco, and Watteau, and little else; Jerzy's *Passion* is, remarkably, even less concerned with plot than the Godard film that contains it. Running parallel to this production is the chronicle of a labor dispute and potential strike at a local factory led by worker Isabelle (Isabelle

[28] Jerzy's film is also entitled *Passion.* For the purposes of this chapter, I will be distinguishing, where necessary, between "Jerzy's *Passion*" and "Godard's *Passion*."

Huppert). Appropriately for a movie so engaged in the practice of *tableau vivant, Passion* focuses on inactivity — the factory strike, the stalled shoots due to lack of financial and other resources — and the inability to speak — linguistic barriers between the Polish-, French-, and German-speaking characters, Isabelle's notable stutter. This is to say that it is a film principally interested in depicting situational particularities, personal interactions, idiosyncrasies, and small moments, but situating them within larger political and philosophical frameworks with which Godard, in his long career as a director, has always engaged. One of the most unique and striking features of this film's incorporation of *tableaux vivants* is the insistent presence of the camera, conveyed through both an especially dynamic and roving cinematic gaze, and as a technical aspect of filmmaking in scenes that realistically depict how these compositions are being shot with the aid of camera dollies and large cranes [Figure 3], the precise apparatus that Benjamin points out most filmmaking goes to great lengths to obfuscate.

Godard's attention to these details aligns the studio with the nearby factory[29], making it a highly mechanized site of production, albeit of art rather than of what we might normally consider consumer goods. This film is important in terms of the historical trajectory of the *tableau vivant* because it represents a transition between the earlier examples of *tableaux* as narrated scenes (along with their attendant concerns regarding staging) from the first chapter, and *tableaux* as purely aesthetic elements of later texts. While we see the intricacies of staging, debatably in even greater detail than in Goethe, Zola, and Wharton, the aim and means of this production are different in that, rather than a leisurely diversion for a monied class, it is a *film,*

[29] Godard is interested in the labor of the factory and of the film studio — the former the focus of *Tout va bien* (1972) and the latter famously depicted in *Le Mépris* (1963), in which an adaptation of *The Odyssey* is being produced — but *Passion* is notable for its bringing together in the same film these occupations of the auteur.

intended for dissemination to a broader audience[30], that is being produced. This means that these *tableaux* gain a certain permanence in their commitment to celluloid, and that they escape from some of those original delimiting factors that we see in earlier examples, for they are now, projected and magnified on cinema screens, capable of reaching many more people outside of the parlor. This is not to say, however, that in the process these *tableaux* actually become immutable like true paintings or sculptures, since Godard does not use the technique of freeze-frame to transform them into static images within the movie. But we can say they take on the new quality (or, perhaps better, dynamic) of *repetition*, previously unavailable to the *tableau vivant* as a form. The filmic *tableau* is a variant that, unlike its forebear, can be sent out to cinemas and eventually households around the world in the form of film reels and VHS tapes, and these same images are seen by a much larger audience; what's more, it can be replayed and viewed over and over again. In other words, as Godard is pointing out through his movie itself (and making explicit through its frank discussions of funding and distribution), the *tableau vivant* can become, thanks to this mode of production, an improbable commodity, much like some item made in the factory.

A film is made, as Godard would be the first to point out, in order to make money. The *tableau vivant* now becomes a profit-generating spectacle, rather than merely something to do for the wealthy, those who have too much time and money on their hands already. Godard's *Passion* makes this clear, primarily through its persistent discussion of money (the Italians demand to see

[30] On the other hand, this film does not end up attracting an audience because it is never completed; we should also admit that its use of *tableaux vivants*, in which it entirely consists if we are to go by the scenes of filming we see in the movie, and lack of clear narrative or characterization, make it more of an arthouse feature, geared presumably towards a certain kind of "cultured" class of moviegoers. This raises the question: is there in fact such a thing as a "popular" *tableau vivant*? Or is it in its very nature an exclusionary form, living and dying by its self-selecting, elite audience?

progress being made; the Americans as a source of money are rejected, the Brazilians are considered); there is one remarkable scene in which Jerzy's producer takes an Italian investor round the studio and points out exactly how much all of the equipment costs. There is also a great deal of talk about how the studio itself is one of the most high-tech in Europe, and technical concerns are the ostensible reason for the delays in filming (which result in their losing money day by day): Jerzy repeatedly complains that the lighting is "wrong" for the scenes he intends to film, and this serves as an excuse not to get on with actually filming them. This detail is emblematic of the ways in which Godard, in this movie, sets about systematically deromanticizing the work of the artist; the lighting of the subject, one of the most evocative and technically challenging aspects of the kinds of paintings Jerzy is recreating, is obviously important, but rather than locating the problem and the solution in the solitary figure of the painter, Godard shows us scenes of Jerzy and assistants telling light operators in the studio's gantries and catwalks to fix this issue [Figure 4], since this is part of their duties and an area of their expertise. Recreation thus becomes a collective effort, and the virtuosity of the painter is compartmentalized and delegated to various crew members.

This sort of dispersal and displacement are characteristics of *Passion*'s treatment of the work that goes into crafting the *tableaux* and their effects can be seen in the fruits of these labors as well. There is, for example, a certain lack of stasis in the presentation of *tableaux* in *Passion* because much of what we see is the preparation for their staging rather than the "finished" compositions in the process of being filmed. However, even in this context, we see some "unnaturally" still and poised models when the cameras are not rolling, as if they are already posed for the scene; for example, one of the actresses in the pool during the first Ingres *Turkish Bath* representation lies there perfectly motionless even as preparations are ongoing around her

and the crew appears to be nowhere near ready to film the scene. Elements of the *tableaux* are thus temporally and spatially staggered, which we could compare to Robbe-Grillet's suggestion of different temporalities by making the act of posing for a photograph part of the *tableau* being presented. The preternatural readiness of the woman, which appears as a strange ceding to her aestheticized condition and a slippage out of reality, is juxtaposed with the chaotic preparations (and general unpreparedness) of the context in which she is to play her part. This particular moment is just one example of a more generalized tendency on Godard's part to prioritize less the actual *tableaux* being staged, at least in terms of consideration given to their content, and more what they can reveal through their juxtaposition with a quasi-industrial context, and the diffuse, involved, and deromanticized labor surrounding them — that is, by pursuing the possibility for subversion that Benjamin suggests in "The Work of Art." If the *tableau vivant* of a bathing female nude, for example, "is tainted with the sign of the fetishistic commodity" (as a straightforward and eroticized recreation to be presented and circulated via the medium of Jerzy's film), then Godard for his part shares "Benjamin's deeper, political aim [of] the demystification of the phantsmagorias of modern life, the penetration of the artificial world created by the bourgeoisie to disguise…social and economic reality" (Jennings 39).

While we see considerable activity and movement all round these scenes, the *tableau*'s characteristic stasis actually seems to bleed out into all of the difficulty surrounding the *making of* Jerzy's film, which culminates in the already stalled movie's incompletion. Godard's film revolves around twin poles of "Work" and "Love" (which was, in fact, originally the subtitle of *Passion*). Almost every main character compares the two activities and more often than not, they are made parallel or similar to one another in these evaluations. The *tableau vivant* (and, by extension, the film as a cinematic artwork) perhaps blurs the distinction between the two, insofar

as the artist's stereotypically "passionate" work is transformed here into the quasi-industrial "work" of their staging, which engages the bodies of many factory workers, taken on as extras, in strikingly similar and taxing ways.

As we have already noted, these *tableaux vivants* are based on widely recognizable and canonical works of Western European art, ranging from Rembrandt's *Night Watch* to Ingres' *The Turkish Bath* to Watteau's *Embarkation for Cythera.* While it is true that choosing such recognizable masterpieces is one way of ensuring a "successful" *tableau*, because this increases the audience's chances of making the connection and comparison between this composition and its famous (thus easily recallable) visual referent, Godard is also interested in thinking about the commodification and dissemination of artworks. These are paintings that are included in textbooks, visited by hordes of tourists at popular museums around the world, and turned into prints to be hung affordably in households. There also may be some less obvious internal logic that dictated Godard's choices. For example, Ingres' *La Grande Baigneuse* (*The Valpinçon Bather*) [Figure 5] is picked up and inserted into his later *Le Bain turc* (*The Turkish Bath*) [Figure 6] as a discrete visual organizing element. We see variations of both of these paintings in Jerzy's *tableaux,* and another way of understanding the occasional presence throughout *Passion* of individual figures that seem already to be posing for their *tableau* even when the rest is not yet in place, is as just this kind of discrete and separable element that finds its way *between* individual images and thus gains a limited independence. They also, to enter into the film's discursive mode, take on a certain use value, something like machine parts that can be removed, adjusted (or *corrected*), and reinserted at will. This amounts to a commentary on the replicability of a work, of the repetition built into even masterful works that we are accustomed to thinking of as "unique" in our common, frequently hagiographic ways of talking about certain paintings,

certain kinds of art. It also parallels Robbe-Grillet's use of young women and girls as motifs within his *tableaux*, highlighting the interchangeability of female figures in the realm of a predatory sexuality, and in that of labor (since it is clear that several of these young women are being exploited sexually for the commercial benefit of whoever owns and operates the brothel in the text). Thus the suppression of individual identity, while integral to the *tableau vivant* in its "ordinary" form, is utilized by both writers so as to reveal this same tactic as one of the primary strategies of both patriarchal sexuality and dehumanizing capitalist modes of production. The *tableau vivant*, because it takes as its reference works that often involve women and because it was often performed by women, provides an intersection in which these authors can in fact highlight how both of these systems of dominance operate by the same principle of willful ignorance of individual rights and identity. Additionally, while Godard's spatial comparison between the factory and the film studio, between the artwork and the consumer good, is especially applicable to our twentieth-century context, to the postmodern reality of 1982 Europe, his deliberate choice of well-known works of seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century painting, he runs this conceptual thread much further back and underscores how there are, however lofty our discourse and imaginations may be when it comes to so-called great works of art, always real conditions of labor, consumerism, and exploitation underlying their production and that these are far-reaching historical phenomena.

Whereas early photography's revelations of the conditions of its own production were not always intentional, the films of Godard do not shy away from their own making. This being the case, we might consider why the *tableau vivant* becomes a preferred form of image for a film like *Passion*. In the past, Zola considered the staging of the *tableau* from a somewhat more pragmatic position, but he did so by recognizing the odd temporal staggering of the form and

building his dialogue around it: in *The Kill,* we see the preparations for these scenes, then descriptions of the scenes themselves as they are presented to an audience, and afterwards, we have retroactive commentary provided by the interpreters. Godard employs this tactic as well, but the fact that his *tableaux* are being photographed for a film complicates matters. In a sense, this makes the representation of images less beholden to the delicate but strict temporalities of the traditionally-performed *tableaux* since they can be set up at length, without boring an audience waiting for the curtain to be raised, they can be re-staged and re-photographed as many times as necessary to achieve the desired effect, and adjustments can be made mid-course. This quality of "flexibility" finally becomes a burden in the world of *Passion* and leads to considerable shooting delays, budgetary excesses, and all manner of frustrations on the part of the cast and crew. Time is clearly equated with money, and it is the finiteness of "real time," at odds with the infiniteness of the representational time of the frozen *tableaux*, that causes the production to become mired in the economics of image-making — that is, in the business of film.

But unlike Zola, Godard also explores the spatial dimensions of his *tableaux* and uses them to situate these compositions within complex politico-social matrices, such as the labor dispute and funding problems fraying the edges of these living paintings. For Godard's extra-diegetic camera looks straight through the *tableaux* — from an odd angle, from behind, in short, from positions antithetical to the *tableau vivant*'s primary illusion of perfect recreation — and in so doing sees not only the diegetic camera (Jerzy's) in the process of filming these scenes, but also the accoutrements of filmmaking (lights, wires, dollies, crew-members, half-completed sets, extras milling about, etc.) that are standardly relegated to the periphery so as to become invisible, but without which the image simply could not exist. Godard, then, is engaged in a process of

collapsing the spatial stratification of center (image, product, love) and periphery (conditions, producer[s], work). In the shimmering, Fata Morgana land of filmmaking (which, as Benjamin warned, is riddled with all manner of invisible ideological and propagandistic pitfalls), the work of Godard appears as something of an oddity — strange-looking, because we are so unaccustomed to its perspective, but nonetheless tangible and real, quite as real as a simple strip of paper improbably folded into a Möbius strip, so that it assumes an almost magical aspect and seems not quite right.

In fact, this emphasis on the space in which the image is created, in the factory of images that is a movie studio, allows Godard to double back on the Time component. By looking through the image to show both it and its "generative matrix" (Robbe-Grillet's term, which pervades *Topology*), Godard manages to bring into the same instant the product and the conditions of its production; this itself constitutes a dangerously hybridized (therefore menacingly lucid) image that is more or less forbidden by the dictates of capitalism. And although we might conceive of this as an exposition of the distinct spatial layers that make up the image, Godard crystallizes all these layers into the same moment, and they are all immediately visible. In this way, he conforms (albeit only in the barest, most technical sense) to one of the elements of the standard *tableau vivant*: the instantaneousness of its reception by its viewer. In the end, however, Godard generates a paradox in which his cinematic *tableaux* both comply with this element of the illusion of painting, while simultaneously destroying it by pointedly showing the technologies of its production and the extent of its artifice.

The characteristic use of montage and voiceover further emphasizes the coexistence of seemingly incongruous elements of film as a major theme and artistic strategy of *Passion.* For example, in one scene Jerzy tells one of the actresses to practice her lines when she bothers him

with questions about the filming schedule, and she then reads them aloud and reveals them to be the opening lines of the chapter entitled "Quel horizon on voit du haut de la barricade" from Hugo's *Les Misérables*; these apparently are not directly related to the scenes in question, but, if indeed they do appear in the film, would seem to function more along the line of a characteristically Godardian voiceover — perhaps narratively disconnected, but thematically linked to what is being depicted on screen. But Godard is posing a question here: what, precisely, would be the words that are "proper" to a painting — or, for that matter, to a moving image? The apparent incongruity of the words of Victor Hugo and an unrelated painting by Delacroix might seem, on the surface, to form a disjuncture between these two filmic components, but it is rather in these interstices created by the process of juxtaposition that meaning can be generated. Godard would soon take this idea to new extremes in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, an eight-part, four-and-a-half-hour-long film that explores the history of film through clips from classic films (including works by Dreyer, De Sica, Hitchcock, and Pasolini) and documentaries, narration often drawn from literature, on-screen text, and short and often repeated clips of popular and classical music. This compendium, like the question *Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette histoire?* that opens *Passion*, operates by interrogating the lexically-linked concepts of "story" and "history"[31] in works of art from various media, and, in its general formal qualities — defined by mostly clipped, slowed, or stilled scenes from movies, looped or distorted audio tracks and narration, and images overlain by text in large, capital letters — insists on the role of *montage* as a method of creating meaningful connections and comparisons between disparate texts while also generating a capacious and self-reflective filmic totality. One might say that this is, in many ways, the apotheosis of Godard's decades-long auteurial project, which he has explored across various

[31] This connection is even clearer in French, which uses the same word, "*histoire,*" for both concepts.

types of filmmaking ranging widely in their aesthetics and narrative conventions. This montage is also a distinctly avant-garde, potentially alienating formal feature that constitutes another method by which the standard magic tricks of cinema can be subverted, announcing as it does the chopped, layered, and recomposed nature of all film and, through its ostentatious discontinuity, suggesting all kinds of interesting relationships between different images, sounds, and words.

As a hybrid form straddling media, and one that depends for its effect on a distorted temporal mode (of temporarily stilling posed human bodies) that could be compared to the glacially-slowed film clips Godard uses in *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, and as an image decomposed and reassembled with the bodies of actors, the *tableau vivant* recalls the self-conscious, introspective kind of montage Godard used to tell his filmic (non-)stories. In particular, placing this already conceptually rich form within the context of filmmaking (that is, in a movie studio) is a means of bringing it into contact, using all the technical methods at his disposal, with other works of art. The *tableau vivant*, in Godard as in Robbe-Grillet, thus constitutes a point of contact between different planes of representation and reality that we are accustomed to considering within their own frames, as separate entities.

The most meta-cinematic gesture in *Passion*, that which most clearly aligns Godard with Robbe-Grillet in working within whilst also unmooring the space of the (film) studio, is one which plays directly with the idea of contact between reality and representation. Since throughout *Passion* we follow Jerzy's film being made, we see (through the screen as surrogate for the camera) *other* cameras filming the *tableaux* [Figure 7]. Importantly, we as an audience are denied the view captured by these cameras. This has an effect of alterity, establishing that we are not, in fact, watching the diegetic film, which is shot through these diegetic cameras, nor are

we seeing the same images; we are seeing some kind of mirror image of it, a *different* version of *Passion* — Godard's *Passion*, which is, in some ways, a replication of Jerzy's *Passion.* Or is it the other way round? Because we share the same temporal frame as Jerzy's film (at least when we see them filming these *tableaux,* assuming Jerzy will not be manipulating the speed of film), but not the same images — that is, not the same filmic space of the image, since we see them from a different angle altogether — , the instant/simultaneous nature of the two films renders null the possibility of establishing which of the two is the "original," which comes first. They are being filmed — they are *happening* — at the same time. In this case, grappling for an anchor point, we have no recourse but to the original paintings themselves, forced back to pictorial spaces *without* time which are the point of reference common to both of these films.

The constant emphasis on the production of the film (and the *tableaux*) means that the spatial model in which we can situate ourselves that suggests itself most easily is that of the tripartite backstage-stage-audience setup, in which we are standing "behind the scenes" and seeing the work that goes into the generation of the image. But because of our own position as spectators of Godard's *Passion* ("Those people out there in the dark" as Norma Desmond refers to us in the final scene of *Sunset Boulevard*), and because of his *Passion* insistently showing us the conditions of production of *another version* of itself, when we see the diegetic camera staring directly into the lens of Godard's camera, we can by extension imagine *another version of ourselves*: another audience sitting in the dark, on the other side of that lens [Figure 9]; this simultaneity of cinematic gaze in fact also creates another *space*, to which we have access imaginatively. A further implication of this imaginative construction is the conferring upon the *tableau* the status of mirror, and this is accomplished here even more radically than in Zola's *The Kill.* The *tableau* is the threshold across which our mirror image rests, watching from another

angle like the boy who sees the curtain rising to reveal the scene of the photographer and models from some nebulous backstage vantage point in *Topology*. The presence of Jerzy's camera in Godard's shots and the suggestion of another, parallel audience functions in a manner similar to Robbe-Grillet's literary spiraling through images, creating an expansive, multidirectional framework for these *tableaux vivants* that at once roots them in reality, with its insistence on equipment and technical processes of filmmaking, and sends the spectator's mind reeling off into the realm of possibilities and difference. Godard, through his *mise en scène*, adds another dimension to the doubleness of the *tableau vivant*; not only are the diegetic individuals figuring this image possessed of double identities, they also have a double audience watching them. For a filmmaker especially concerned with questioning and depicting the conditions of filmmaking and filmgoing, this "duplicity" makes the *tableau vivant* an especially useful formal feature.

Godard's insistence upon the physical, corporeal reality of these *tableaux* is a reminder that their doubleness stems not only from such abstractions as identity (both fictional and non-fictional); it also translates into the human body's use in a composition that approximates that which gives the appearance of being timeless and effortless. The figure through whom this contradiction most clearly emerges is one of the *figurantes* in Jerzy's film, a beautiful, deaf and mute young woman named Myriem (Myriem Roussel) who, before joining the production, works at the factory in town alongside Isabelle. Unsettlingly, her physical beauty — specifically, her back, upon which Godard's camera and Jerzy fixate as she interprets the role of Ingres' *Grande Baigneuse*, who is only seen from behind in the original paintings [Figure 8] — and her involuntary silence are qualities that would seem to make her a perfect candidate for work as an interpreter of *tableaux vivants*. In this way, Godard comments clearly upon another of the underlying characteristics of this form — i.e. while it aims to recreate the visual referent with the

real body that most closely approximates it, the bodies it recreates are, more often than not, young, beautiful, female, and nude[32]. Godard, making a film in the 1980s, is permitted nudity and, therefore, a degree of fidelity that would have been impossible in the parlor games of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But he is also clearly aware of the costs, both figurative and literal, of this fidelity. It means finding an interpreter willing to bare her body and shed her identity, and this necessitates entering into power relations that are fundamentally unequal with the audience (who simply *gaze upon* her as upon a painting at the museum, from the comfort and anonymity of their seats) and with the director (the composer of the *tableaux*, who requires of her this exhibition but bares nothing of *himself* in the process). This troubling dynamic is yet another in a long chain of commonalities Godard forges between the factory and the film studio: "women are in the most precarious position, because the bosses, be it in the factory or the film studio, are male, and they exploit them not only as labourers but also as providers of erotic pleasure" (Mazierska 217).

Godard makes these dynamics even clearer by putting them in blatantly transactional terms. Myriem, who was selected from the factory by Jerzy, needs work and so takes on her new job at the movie studio, which is in this case merely the next factory down the road. She is economically incentivized to do this work, and she is being paid for it. We are now in a totally different world of *tableaux* from that of the idle rich looking to entertain themselves. With the reconceptualization of interpreting *tableaux* as a form of labor — a task, with its own well-defined parameters, to be performed successfully in exchange for monetary remuneration — obviously comes also the redefinition of the roles of interpreters and composer (director) as,

[32] The earlier texts examined in Chapter 1, though bound to certain dictates of decency because of their upper-class interpreters, nevertheless more covertly trafficked in the same kind of imagery and suggestiveness (for example, the Comtesse Vanska's orgasmic attitudes, or Lily Bart's displaying herself for the marriage market).

respectively, employees and employer. The specific condition of Myriem, as a silent body participating out of necessity rather than out of interest, allows for Godard to elaborate further this new dynamic as one that, while involving real people on both sides, is often and all too easily elided into one of laboring body-machines and human directors (and profiteers) of that labor. Myriem, unable really to understand what she is doing, is quite literally manipulated, even manhandled, by production assistants as she is positioned, like a piece of the décor, in the appropriate spot; this scene is difficult to witness, as Myriem's vulnerability — uncomprehending and bared under lights and cameras, made to wait in this endlessly stagnant composition [Figure 9] — is totally cast aside, her body passively repositioned and molded beneath the hands of the film crew. One cannot remotely imagine Zola's Hupel de la Noue, perfectionist though he might have been, daring to touch any of the Parisian society doyennes in this manner, but in this newly transactional context of production for consumption, the rules have all changed, even if the game appears, to the perspective of an audience like that of the film Jerzy is making, largely to have remained the same.

The larger social context of Godard's *Passion* also communicates how, whatever pretensions Jerzy may have to high art in the form of his creatively inert film, what he undertakes is fundamentally not so different from the work being done at the factory. A good number of Jerzy's actors, including Myriem, have been sourced from this factory, and the scenes which intercut the filming of Jerzy's film, detailing Isabelle's parallel struggles with her labor movement, describe the work the women do there — the factory's workforce is, from what we can see, predominantly female, but it is owned by a man — as involving positioning their bodies in specific, straining, uncomfortable ways for hours on end. At one of Isabelle's labor movement meetings, a factory worker reads a description of difficult working conditions, with which the

others clearly empathize, from Jacques Rancière's *Proletarian Nights*; she reads, "I have to sit in an awkward position all day — completely hunched over, with my chair behind me. After nine hours in an uncomfortable position at the factory, it hurts"[33]. The comparison between generalized deplorable conditions, the specific plight of the Swiss factory workers, and the bodily exertion — even pain — required by the *tableau vivant* becomes clear through this juxtaposition of words and images. However disparate the spaces of the factory [Figure 10], which looks to produce campers (though this is never stated clearly), and the movie studio, in which canonical works of Western art are recreated, may appear to be at first glance, the women's experiences of them are in many respects the same. Michel Cadé, in the essay "The Representation of Factory Work in Jean-Luc Godard: Reaching the Impossible Shore," describes this connection: "… for a filmmaker, the only honest way to stage factory work is to relate it to that of the filmmaker, the only work of which he has inside knowledge" (Cadé 60). I would argue that this correlation is established even more firmly through the form of the *tableau vivant* (which Cadé gives only a passing mention), as a kind of *mediating* aesthetic presence linking the factory and the studio, the worker and the artist. At the same time, even as it brings these different zones together, it also underscores the vast disparities between the intellectual or artistic labor of the director and the demanding physical labor of the actors.

The collapsing of these two spaces into one another is mirrored in the conceptual comparison of "work" and "love" which is formulated primarily by Isabelle in her interactions with the film crew[34]. She seems intrigued by them and what she sees in the film studio, and at the

[33] "La position de cette machine est très pénible. Je suis penché en avant, le dos courbé, avec une chaise en arrière. Alors, après neuf heures passées dans cette position, vraiment le soir je n'en peux plus."

[34] Cadé sees this "work/love homothety" as a "solution for honestly portraying factory work in film" (60) — that is, as an integral part of Godard's cinematic ethics when it comes to his objects of representation — but my reading, I hope, while not disagreeing with Cadé's assessment, will demonstrate that these two terms (or, as I emphasize, two

same time somewhat troubled by the deep disjunctions that she perceives as existing between the two worlds, great ideational rifts that have opened up and suggest some kind of relation between the two sides and a perhaps insurmountable division between them. She says she *sometimes* goes to see movies or watches TV, suggesting that these ways of passing time are out of the ordinary. But why, Isabelle asks the production assistant Mlle Loucachevsky, do they never show *work* in TV and movies? Godard's *Passion* buttresses her argument in that it constitutes a notable exception; we see the workers in the factory at their tasks, we see various members of the service industry working at the hotel at which the production members are staying, and we see the physical and mental work that goes into making Jerzy's film. This would amount to one of the main differences between Godard's *Passion* and Jerzy's *Passion*, the latter of which, to all appearances, seeks to disguise those traces of the suppressed reality of artmaking, in contrast with the former, which elevates them to objects of representation in their own right. In response to Isabelle's original question about how *le travail des gens*[35] is never shown, Mlle. Loucachevsky informs her that filming in factories is forbidden (even as Godard films this scene in a factory). Isabelle concludes from this explanation that *Le travail c'est pareil que du plaisir* ("Work is the same as pleasure"), because "in labor and lovemaking, the same gestures are involved. It's not necessarily the same rhythm, but the gestures are the same."

The example of the *tableau vivant,* preparations for which are being shown as Isabelle offers her explanation in voiceover, supports her maxim. The words she uses in French — "*gestes*" ("gestures") and "*vitesse*" ("speed," or as the subtitles translate it, "rhythm") — both

spaces) illuminate *each other* (as opposed to a more unidirectional understanding of filmmaking as a stand-in for industrial labor).

[35] This translates literally to "people's work," rather than "people working," the original French placing emphasis on the individual's fundamental role in and ownership over their labor, a pointedly disalienated perspective.

call to mind the formal specificities of the *tableau vivant* more than they do painting in general. This comparison of pleasure, or love, and labor gains its power also from the apparent tension between the two terms, which calls to mind the superficial stillness and subdermal anguish of the posed body in the *tableau vivant*, as well as between that which is considered beautiful and that which is considered indecent. Isabelle understands that the working body, because it is unromantic, because it is realistic, becomes something indecent. This distinction is parallel to that which John Berger makes in *Ways of Seeing* between nudity and nakedness: "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself" (*Ways of Seeing* 54). In other words, when a woman is posed in *tableau vivant* — "dressed up" in another identity, placed in the set, thoroughly "seen as an object" by this point (*Ways of Seeing* 54) — she is considered to be *nude*, but when that same body is seen working — firmly located within her own identity and context — she now appears to be *naked.* But Godard, at least half-operating in *Passion* in the realm of real labor and its real concerns, indicates an intriguing hitch in this dichotomy. Berger says that "A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The sight of it as an object stimulates *the use of it as an object.*) Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is *placed on display*" (*Ways of Seeing* 54, my emphases). His reference to the utility of the nude, following logically from its complete objectification (along with the active-passive verbal distinction he sets up between nakedness and nudity), implies that nakedness, with its revelatory qualities and subjective self-awareness, its construction less dictated by the male spectatorial gaze, is comparably less "useful"; but if, considering the orthodox representational disinterest in and disguising of the working body as pointed out by Isabelle, the worker in the factory can be described as "naked," she and her body are nevertheless still "useful" to the male proprietor, objectified this time not aesthetically, but mechanically. Godard suggests that if, in

Western art, ever entrenched in its own canonical "conventions" (*Ways of Seeing* 53), we still differentiate between the "naked" and the "nude" female body, in more practical terms — that is, in contemporary, quotidian labor relations — men have found a way to derive value from the same body, even as they dismantle and parcel out its identity into two categories that continue to haunt our conceptualization of the world around us. In other words, Godard's setting of the traditional nude of European painting within a context of naked utility therefore functions dialectically, generating a third term that is a synthesis of the two between which Berger distinguishes and exposing a broader exploitative tendency.

Godard, as if in answer to Isabelle, sets about simultaneously deromanticizing art and romanticizing work through the form of the *tableau vivant*, which is so intellectually evocative because of its self-aware, precarious position on the razor's edge between the effortless and the effortful, the straining and the serene. The Turkish baths, a site of luxuriance and sensuality, populated by the classical nude, becomes a workplace the moment the body enters into the rhythms of work — that which is, even in its repetition, constrained, prolonged, *paining*; Godard's framing, replete with extras, film crew, and cameras, never lets us forget this fact. He offers an example of the political ends to which the collapsing of spaces, concepts, and identities entailed in the composition of such an image can be mobilized; what's more, and perhaps more radically, he proposes as the basis for such an operation, and illuminates as a source of the *tableau vivant*'s particular powers, an empathy that is defined across the barriers separating reality and image, subject and object, and, most concretely, worker and proprietor. The *tableau vivant* is an image in which, because of its peculiar ontological characteristics and its insistent liminality, a figure can be alternately (or even at once) *nude* and *naked*, depending upon the

vantage point occupied by its viewer[36]; Godard's camera causes us to occupy several over the duration of his *Passion.* Once more, the tension generated between these two terms, visible in *Passion*'s *tableaux*, reveals a third — a hybrid of the two, in which plastic nudity is joined to the naked labor of the female body, the former draped atop the latter like a veil.

We have already touched briefly upon the appearance of Rancière's study *Proletarian Nights* in Godard's film, but I would like to suggest that this book exists as a sort of subterranean presence extending beneath the entirety of *Passion.* The scene in which the citation from Rancière is read at the union meeting is one place in which Godard's characteristic strategy of montage (which, not content to be purely filmic, often incorporates classical music and literary passages read aloud) is especially illuminating, setting up a series of parallels across eras and media. And while here the forms layered atop one another align rather well, giving us a clear perspective on Godard's material, this is not always the case; in fact, the suggestion of commonalities between artistic depictions and true glimpses of working subjects raises more questions. For example: Is this tripartite comparison fair and justified, and is Godard even claiming that it is? Is the visual conflation of artistic representation and political reality illuminating, obfuscating, or do light and shadow shift and play across their surfaces? What kinds of art can reasonably do justice to the harsh, concrete realities of labor, and what should they look like? Whose hands should be involved in fashioning these works?

These are the guiding questions that Rancière himself outlines in his introduction to *Proletarian Nights*, which describes what he sees as a paradox underlying workers' movements in nineteenth-century France — namely, that individuals seeking to free themselves from the

[36] This reminds us of Ross Chambers's note that sculpture, unlike painting, can be circled, approached from multiple perspectives. See Chapter 3 for further discussion in the context of allegorical statues.

reality of proletarian existence took on the project to "forge the image and the discourse of working class identity" (Rancière 12) crystallizing forms that they were at the same time trying to escape. These forms — pictures, words — were to serve as a language that would convey the conditions and the plight of the workers to a bourgeoisie whose modes and sites of discourse seemed so fundamentally other. "And what new forms of false construction affect that paradox," Rancière asks, "when the discourse of workers infatuated with the night of the intellectuals meets the discourse of intellectuals infatuated with the glorious working days of the masses?" (Rancière 12) Godard's *Passion* asks the same question, creating visual expressions of these often paradoxical discursive modes blending art and reality in the forms of its montages and especially its *tableaux vivants*, but also declining, in the end, to offer definitive answers to these questions.

Rancière speaks of intermediary figures in his work, individuals seemingly situated at the threshold between the salons of the bourgeoisie and the factories and homes of the proletariat; these are not gatekeepers, but rather go-betweens conversant in the two social "languages" and, ideally, capable of creating the images that would, on the one hand, speak *of* the conditions of the working class, and on the other, speak *to* the capitalist class. Forged between two worlds, these images would be necessarily multiple. But as Rancière points out, the matter of translation cannot simply be addressed by a "word-for-word" rendering of the material conditions of the proletariat. The problem calls for an improbable task: generating an image that both exposes the real, undeniable effects of dichotomous thinking (along class lines, but also more conceptual divisions) and calls these frameworks into question; an antechamber image that has entries to both the bourgeois salon *and* the factory floor. Such image-making cannot deny the prevalence of dichotomous thinking and socio-economic stratification, or that they have very real effects; to

do so would be politically unethical, resulting in what Berger refers to as the post-facto use of Millet's paintings as "a kind of pictorial label round the great clerical bottle of Bromide prescribed to quieten every social fever and irritation" (*Selected Essays* 61), a sort of romanticism of labor that only allows for its further entrenchment and exploitation; but it would also be unethical, and ultimately unproductive, to *accept* such dichotomous vision as a mode for the future. The temporarily frozen moment of the *tableau vivant* becomes, then, one in which we discover crystallized a recognition of the ways of the past, the communicative (or empathetic) uncertainty of present attempts at change, and a refusal to carry forth into the future these same goals and modes of thought; it bears within it, to use Benjamin's terms, intimations of its own pre- and post-history.

Here, Rancière describes the hypothetical meeting between the workers and their representatives (or 'spokesmen,' as he refers to them):

> But it is precisely because those men [i.e. the spokesmen] are *other.* That is why they go to see them the day they have something they want to *represent*, something they want to show to the bourgeoisie (bosses, politicians, judges). It is not simply that those men can talk better. It is that what had to be represented before the bourgeoisie was something deeper than salaries, working hours or the thousand irritations of wage labour. What has to be represented is what those mad nights and their spokesmen already make clear: that proletarians have to be treated *as if* they have a right to more than one life. If the protests of the workplace are to have a voice, if worker emancipation is to possess a human face, if workers are to exist as subjects of a collective discourse which gives meaning to their multifarious assemblies and combats, those representatives must already have made themselves *other* in a double, hopeless rejection, refusing both to *live* like workers and to *talk* like the bourgeoisie.
> (Rancière 12, emphases in original)

This description situates the go-between — we may as well, for our purposes, call this figure "the artist" — outside of the realms proper to the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, while enjoying access to and, most importantly, comprehending, both: in between chambers, as it were. The figure of the artist has the special, psychopompic capacity to conduct the viewer (or reader)

between otherwise trickily delineated zones of social class, but also the power, should he or she choose to use it, to compose and bring to the fore images of the unseen-because-unrepresented working class into the bourgeois auditorium.

While somewhat ambiguous in his own stance, Jerzy is a character we might measure against these parameters. Does he refuse to live like the workers? The answer would seem to be a categorical "yes"; he is a director, a professional artist, who, while not occupying the same socioeconomic position as the factory workers, nevertheless engages with them, observes them, seems to locate inspiration in them. Does he refuse to talk like the bourgeoisie? The answer to this question is more complex: while his stubborn refusal to comply with the demands of his financial backers might be construed as the kind of uncompromising artistic vision that is uninterested in more "bourgeois" audience demands, and patently unconcerned with the money his production seems to retain like a colander, his film of *tableaux vivants* nevertheless employs a decidedly bourgeois visual language of "masterworks" of Western European painting. To put it in the terms of Robbe-Grillet, he employs decidedly *bourgeois materials* in his construction. But is his approach formally experimental enough to make something subversive, something revolutionary of them? It would seem not to be the case, as Jerzy's film stagnates to the point of total abandonment by its author, who leaves Switzerland and his incomplete work behind, heading back, unfulfilled, to Poland at the end of Godard's *Passion*.

Jerzy, however, is not the only director figure we need to consider in this way: Godard is also right there beneath our noses, as he regularly reminds us with his Brechtian/Benjaminian intrusion of filmmaking reality (i.e. technology, process, labor) into his own film. Godard does not live like the workers; Godard talks less like the bourgeoisie than does Jerzy, if only because his proclivity for challenging, revealing montage allows him not merely to show "salaries,

working hours or the thousand irritations of wage labour" (Rancière 12) but to make connections between these aspects of life, and life and art more broadly considered. I propose that Godard's *tableaux vivants*[37], contextualized by the conditions of their own production and against the parallel story of the workers' dispute at the factory, are (primarily) striving to be the sort of images — directed towards the filmgoing, bourgeois public, conveying a reality of working class life — of which Rancière speaks, and as such, make up a kind of intellectual-physical threshold across which revolutionary interclass discourse can be formulated.

Also key in Godard's directorial "speech" is his use of *tableaux vivants*. Godard's are fundamentally different from Jerzy's, in that the latter's are illusionistically disconnected from the reality of their making and the world from which they emerge (in the same way that Benjamin critically describes most filmmaking in "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility"), while the former's are set within a capacious context that allows for them to maintain powerful thematic and formal connections between the images themselves and the bodies and conditions that create them. I do not simply refer to Godard's making visible the apparatuses of filmmaking by exploring the setting of the studio and strewing his compositions with wires and catwalks and dollies, but also to his use of montage as a means of offsetting these otherwise classical images with images of that subject which Isabelle complains we never see on film — people working. In this way, when we see the bodies frozen, straining in the *tableaux vivants*, we understand them also as working bodies, real bodies. The absence of qualities of "life" that characterize the *tableau vivant* become markers of the aspects of life that are selectively suppressed or go unexamined in class relations. The unmoving body reminds us of

[37] Importantly, *not* Jerzy's decontextualized *tableaux*.

what is missing: the body working; the unspeaking worker reminds us of what is unheard: the voice of the proletariat.

The *tableau vivant* also, crucially, allows for another basic premise of such artistic representation as Rancière describes it — that is, "that proletarians have to be treated as if they have a right to more than one life" (Rancière 12). This assertion of the identitarian complexity reduced to the role of "worker" within this schema returns us to one of the predominant characteristics of the *tableau vivant* itself, which I discussed in the first chapter: its ontological doubleness, founded upon the real human interpreters taking on roles of painted figures and emphasized in the form's duplicative imperative as a reproduction of an 'original.' This inherent quality perhaps makes the *tableau vivant* especially well-suited to the purposes of one, such as Godard, who would seek to subvert this aristocratic/bourgeois pastime into a powerful, vital expression of a subjugated and exploited class. Framed within Godard's narrative sketch of the factory strike and Jerzy's film production, these *tableau*x do not exist in a vacuum of decontextualization, and we never forget that the interpreters we see in these carefully composed and faithfully reproductive scenes are workers *and* warriors, nobles, odalisques, virgins, divinities. The *tableau vivant* is an artistic reproduction and — specifically in the case of Godard's *Passion* — a form that is explicitly linked to the toll of work on bodies and its systemic erasure from the realm of art. But it also, in a way, moves past the limits of representation (understood as artifice) by casting and dressing up working bodies as frozen, placid bourgeois cultural signifiers.

Rancière notes that "people like that [i.e. the working class] are the more to be admired the more they adhere strictly to their collective identity, and that they become suspect, indeed, the moment they want to live as anything other than legions and legionaries, when they demand

that individual wanderlust which is the monopoly of 'petty bourgeois' egoism or the illusion of the 'ideologist'" (Rancière 12). The unsettling of unified (and dramatically reduced) identities of the ideologically abstracted 'worker' figure is what Rancière identifies as the problem for their continued viewing and exploitation by the bourgeoisie. The marked plurality of identities is a way of effecting a perceptual change. To that end, Godard casts workers in multiple roles, offers them "different lives" to lead. But his Brechtian tactics of alienation do not allow these alternate lives to subsume or replace the anterior ones; instead, they cut them like gems, creating facets.

The *tableau vivant* is the perfect form for this type of representation of the proletariat because it transforms a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional composition of bodies, in the same way that the proliferation of "roles" and possibilities entailed in Godard's staging of these scenes results in the transformation of a reductive, flat image of the worker into a more nuanced, fleshed-out one — one that projects not only desires, but also *possibility*. At the same time, the *tableaux vivants* function as an ironic commentary on class difference because the new roles, while productively additive, are also more often than not archetypes. Being painted figures (as Godard underscores through the character of Myriem), they are also silent and still; they are replicating "famous" (also, common) images that function as a cultural signifiers of class, especially when understood through the lens of the *petit bourgeois* collection of prints that made all manner of art available to them and brought images more directly and frequently into the market. This is a caveat that we should keep in mind regarding Godard's own view of these iconographic politics, which are neither totally optimistic nor discouragingly cynical. If Godard is creating an image vocabulary that aims to express something of the conditions of the proletariat through bourgeois visual codes and patterns, part of what he is representing is a continuing, pervasive voicelessness (even absence) of this class within the realm of art. Through

these carefully contextualized *tableaux vivants,* he creates a template for future use more than a fully-fleshed out political statement in its own right, more an aesthetic theorization of the political and revolutionary dimensions of a medium's language: *Towards a New Cinema.*

I have been attempting in this chapter to demonstrate that the *tableau vivant* has the potential to bring together superficially divergent historical tensions and developments, authorial artistic and political preoccupations, spaces both real and abstract, beauty and violence, work and love. One of the lines Godard has his stand-in, Jerzy, speak would be a fitting way to sum up this complex of ideas. During one of his musings, he says that a given image is "forte, parce que la solidarité entre les idées est distante et juste" ("strong because the solidarity between the ideas is distant and accurate"). With a wink, Godard unites once more the concepts of the image and labor through the word "solidarity," a reference to the Polish trade union *Solidarność.* But this statement applies just as well to Godard's technique of montage and to the *tableau vivant* itself, especially as it is employed in *Passion.* Deriving power from its paradoxical, shifting revelations and obfuscations of identities, its capacity to weld together ideas that might even seem contradictory (as, for example, serenity and strain, art and labor, nudity and nakedness, the proletarian and the bourgeois), the *tableau vivant* has, as Godard and Robbe-Grillet demonstrate by setting and photographing it within unexpected new contexts, by analyzing respectively the labor and the materials that go into producing it, the chance to outlive itself and to take on unforeseen dimensions as it moves out of the parlors of the eighteenth century. In these texts, the photographic framing of their *tableaux vivants* becomes an especially useful means of historically situating it in relation to its sister arts, exposing the suppressed traces of exploitative working conditions and the insufficiency of representations of labor and gendered violence in the present, and also, through its unique ontology as a medium that calls into question traditional

views of subjectivity and objectivity, of pointing the way towards future forms of image and language in cinema and the *nouveau roman*.

Chapter 3 *Tableaux Vivants* and the Cinema of Urban Experience

À une passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!

— Charles Baudelaire

In the short poem above, "To a Passerby" ("À une passante"), Charles Baudelaire eloquently encapsulates a certain, common kind of urban encounter — a fugitive glimpse of a stranger passing on the street, a figure none the less arresting for the inevitable fleetingness of its appearance. "A woman passed, lifting and swinging / With a pompous gesture the ornamental hem of her garment" (lines 3-4) our observer tells us, and this, more or less, completes the description of her actions as she moves in and out of sight. Ten lines of the poem, however, remain, and they are concerned with the observer's corollary activities of looking, recording, imagining, and the ideas of the image and the spectacle that this passerby comes to embody. As I shall argue, Baudelaire's poetics of the urban *tableau* has implications for the *tableau vivant.*

This poem is one of several of Baudelaire's that, set in urban contexts and taking this very context as their proper subject, are foundational in the elaboration of his sense of the "modern" and of subsequent conceptualizations of "modernity" writ large. The poem dramatizes, and in so doing emphatically temporalizes and spatializes, the urban encounter. It is one of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, in which urban encounters and experiences are, as the title suggests, metaphorical "paintings" (or painting-like), even if they do not all deal explicitly with works of visual art. In this chapter, I will examine some examples of an aesthetics of *tableau vivant* presented in specifically urban contexts. I will explore the ways in which such scenes are encountered and demonstrate how they themselves are cinematically stylized explorations of the more quotidian kind of encounter that Baudelaire's poem also stages in so elegant a manner.

A close reading of the poem reveals some points of commonality with the historical/performed *tableau vivant* as we have already encountered it in chapter one. For example, the passerby's gesture, "Swift and noble," reveals her "statuesque limb" (line 5); the French here is more decisive, preferring a possessive formulation to the adjectival of the English translation[38]: hers is a "statue's leg." The sweeping aside of her skirts as she walks, in itself a dramatic gesture, also recalls the opening of a stage curtain. Taken together, this unveiled hint of statuesque nudity makes one think of the English stage with its rigid standards of "decency," where nudity was only permitted in the perfectly immobilized form of the *tableau.* The image of the statue and the "nobility" of the subject also remind one of Hupel de la Noue's invocation of Classical Greek statuary as the inspiration for his *tableaux* of Echo and Narcissus in Zola's *The Kill.* The adjective "fastueuse" ("luxurious" or "lavish") conveys a striking extravagance in her gesture, something incongruous in the otherwise banal comings and goings of the street. While

[38] Geoffrey Wagner, Selected Poems of Charles Baudelaire (NY: Grove Press, 1974)

there is a major difference here in that the setting for this vision is a crowded city street rather than a theater, we can see that a certain sense of theatricality is deeply embedded in the image itself, and in Baudelaire's poetic rendering of it.

What does it mean to have this kind of encounter in the street? We have discussed how one of the elements of the performed *tableau* is its delineated staging; the *tableau,* traditionally, is *spatially* detached. In this case, as the narrator tells us, "The deafening road around [him] roared" (line 1) and the graceful figure of the passerby emerges from this chaos for a second, frozen, only to be lost again to it; when the narrator asks himself where and when he might chance to see her again, the logical answer comes back: "Somewhere else, very far from here! Too late! Perhaps never! / For I do not know where you flee, nor you where I am going" (lines 12-13). This is a fundamental problem posed by the poem, an uncertainty roiling at its center, and it is the direct result of the disorientating crowd in which the fateful glimpse takes place. The pervasive crushing, the relentless flow of human bodies in this specific context — the city street — essentially precludes the kind of clear, sustained spatial detachment of the image that is necessary for the effect of the *tableau vivant* as normally conceived. Baudelaire's poem nonetheless presents a solution and makes the image function as a *tableau*: instead of being literally detached in a spatial sense, the passerby, the graceful, stepping statue, is *temporally* detached through the dual and linked processes of looking and recording.

Sight is the impetus to these actions and the result of a certain exceptional quality of this passerby noted by Baudelaire: she is dressed in black, "in deep mourning, making majestic grief" (line 2), and the exhibitionism of her gesture, however brief and possibly unintended for the voyeuristic eyes of the street, stands in sharp contrast to her sentimental condition — a brief vision of marmoreal flesh disclosed by the momentary drawing aside of a dark veil. In short, she

is herself like a vivid poetic image plucked from the more prosaic masses. The poem itself is a kind of meditation upon the nature of the chance, anonymous encounter in urban space, more often than not insignificant and unmemorable, but in some cases (like this one), representing an indelible meeting.

While the image of this statuesque mourner cannot really be *spatially* detached because of this setting, it is nevertheless detached in a different way for the same reason; as in a staged *tableau,* the narrator and the passerby may as well be separated by the theatrical fourth wall. For a second, the woman glances in his direction, resulting in "A gleam... then night" (line 9), blinding in its significance, and something akin to a photographic flash. We can read backwards and forwards in the poem from this snapshot: backwards, it is the foundational image from which stem the erotic meanderings of his narration ("I drank, twitching like an old roué, / From her eye, livid sky where the hurricane is born, / The softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills" [lines 6-8]); forwards, it accounts for the anxious line of questioning and terminal uncertainty of the final tercets. Faced with such a pervasive influence of the image in the construction of the entire text, we must understand the action of recording (following from the action of seeing) in two ways: firstly, in the proto-photographic *cliché* of the "gleam" or flash — a visual instant; and secondly, in the lexical, ekphrastic rendering of this same image in the form of the poem in its entirety — an expanded poetic moment.

Baudelaire's proposal here would seem to be the immortalization of the image in verse, building it into a clearly, poetically demarcated textual space that extends before and behind it. In this way, the fleeting, chance encounter with a passerby in a crowded street comes to resemble even more a *tableau*. She surfaces, is elevated to the edge of the *foule* because of the striking and poetic nature of her appearance (in both senses of the word), and is *detached* both temporally —

frozen in time before she can be lost to it — and, subsequently, spatially — a moment extended into fourteen perennial lines on an inviolate page. The improbable place of their meeting again, as the narrator envisions it, is "in eternity" (line 11), an evocative amalgamation of space and time. This line rings somewhat hopeless at first, a cry of futility in the face of the ineluctable twin flows of time and traffic, but it can also be read as a more positive affirmation of the possibility of reliving this moment — of freezing it, of expanding it, of *staging* it — under the spotlight of the poetic imagination. Considered in this way, "À une passante" becomes less a poem simply recounting a brief encounter than a prescriptive, performative exercise in what we might do with and to the ephemera of urban experience.

Through its emphasis on the possibilities of image-making, however, all this analysis reveals an apparent emptiness lying at its core, an emptiness it shares with the poem itself — that is, the absence of the poem's subject, of the eponymous "passante." Reduced from the very start by an anonymizing title, the woman who encounters the narrator on the street is only, as the poem goes on, further flattened through the aestheticizing, sculptural impulse towards salvaging beauty from impermanence. One way to consider the operations of the poet would be as the hewing of a graceful figure from the marble block of the overfull, chaotic urban world. And while this standard interpretation, which establishes the agency of the artist and the passivity of his subject, is well-supported by the text itself, it is also, I would like to suggest, an incomplete formulation of Baudelaire's play of glances.

"À une passante" is the first text that we have encountered thus far in which the interpreter of the *tableau* is an unwilling[39] — even unwitting — player. More than a truly active

[39] While her gesture of slightly lifting the hem of her skirt can be (and often is) viewed as a deliberate provocation, perhaps aimed directly at the poet there is nothing in the poem, even if we accept this premise, to suggest that she is aware of the *nature* of the imaginary construct that her viewer generates.

participant in the creation of an image, the female body is, in this text, clearly becoming *material support* for a mental artistic operation. Baudelaire is, however, certainly aware of the subjectivity of the viewed object and transmits it, rather than through retroactive speech (as in *The Kill*), via an instantaneous glance, a flashing in the eyes. Crucially, this flash comes from our passerby's eyes; the gaze is ultimately irrepressible, irreducible to the condition of the *objet d'art.* Her eye is a "livid sky where the hurricane is born," from which the narrator draws "The softness that fascinates and the pleasure that kills" ("Passante" lines 7-8). The poem's first-person narration might seem to occlude any glimpse of the passerby's agency, though in these lines we see that she does, indeed, *act* upon the narrator; this is accomplished not through the movements of her body, but rather through the power of her gaze meeting his. He is first "fascinated," then "killed" by it, language that depicts him as falling victim to this look, and finally, "reborn" by her glance (line 10). In another moment of detachment, the narrator's rebirth is figured as an escape from the deadening, stultifying effect of the noisy street and a return to a more focused vision of life. The final line of the poem — "Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!" ("Passante" line 14, "O you whom I would have loved, O you who knew it!") — sets up an equilibrium: two individuals (the narrator and the passerby) both detached from the crowd[40] by mutual glances, both rendered subject *and* object through this encounter. Instead of emerging as an image devoid of life the passerby becomes, grammatically, both object (in the first half of the line, "you whom I would have loved") and subject (in the second half, "you who knew it"); furthermore, in this phrase, even when she is the object of the narrator's gaze, he is verbally mired in the imperfect

[40] Eliane Françoise DalMolin, in her study *Cutting the Body: Representing Woman in Baudelaire's Poetry*, describes the passerby as emblematic of "the fragmented woman in Baudelaire's poetry" (DalMolin 127), focusing on his use of punctuation in particular to cut and mark the body of the text and to reinforce the violence of his gaze; to this I would like to propose that, if she is cut visually and lexically, she is also cut *out* through the process of aestheticizing decontextualization, of *tableau* staging I have described.

subjunctive[41] ("que j'eusse aimée"), whereas she has much more actively, *really* seen him and 'known' his desire ("qui le savais").

The shocking effect of self-estrangement that the passerby's gaze has upon the narrator is also conveyed through language that brings together the psychological and the physical: "In isolating his self from the world [i.e. the city street], the poet also isolates it from his body, which assumes a petrified position ('crispé comme un extravagant' ['tense as in a delirium'])" (DalMolin 124), transforming the poet himself, effectively, into a *tableau vivant*. Since we are constrained to the flattening, psychologically draining, corporeally carving perspective of our male poet, we have no real access to the image into which he, in turn, is being transformed as his gaze is met: we do know, however, that for a split-second, it *is* met. The detachment and the aestheticization are double, this reading indicates, and that which is so troubling in the poetic image, that which cannot be tamped down by the artistic processes at work, is the potential for the image to *look back.* This dynamic will be, as we shall see, in play in the cinematic works this chapter will examine in manners both implicit and explicit.

In this way, and in a few others, the cinematic works of Jacques Tati and Dario Argento form a continuation of a Baudelairean urban poetics exemplified by this poem. Ross Chambers, in his monograph *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*, outlines at length this novel poetics, which he describes as a response to the new, omnipresent background noise of the city, a way of generating images from the chaos of urban life. Chambers describes what this poem does (like others of the *Tableaux parisiens*) as centering on the creation and situation of figures (including our passerby) singled out in the public spaces of the city like

[41] This particular tense — rare and primarily literary — also places the narrator clearly within the sphere of the poetical, whereas the imperfect used to characterize the passerby's knowledge is much more common, more pragmatic.

works of sculpture, invested with allegorical significance, and forming loci in time and space that function as hyper-charged poetic centers. For Chambers, sculpture becomes a model for this new poetics because of the way it dictates no singular perspective (as in painting) but rather can be approached from all round, from a multiplicity of vantage points and distances. He says that in this way "it is as signifiers of Time and inscrutable bearers of atmosphere that statues *haunt* the modern city… If they seem likely to come alive at any moment — ready to walk — it is in uncanny compensation for the modern disinclination to budge from the narrow, alienated perspective that ignores the noise of existence…" (R. Chambers 71, emphasis in original). The films that I will discuss in this chapter magnify characteristics of the *tableau vivant* — its three-dimensionality and its framing — by making them features of city space, approachable from different angles, framed by its architecture, and in so doing, they align more closely with these kinds of urban sculptural figures.

For Chambers, the goal of this poetic project of Baudelaire's is the "disalienation" of the urban subject — of the viewer in the street, of the writer, and, by extension, of the readers of the poem — , by which he means a coming-to-awareness of one's existential alienation from/within this built environment (as opposed to being able to escape from it, which Baudelaire does not entertain as a possibility). It is through the uncanniness of these sculptural figures encountered on the streets that this condition reveals itself, and that our shifted relations to and occupation of time and space can be most acutely felt. The description above, of the statuary on the verge of movement, does not mention *tableau vivant* explicitly, but much of its content can apply equally well to the form that is of interest to us; it echoes and summarizes in many points the characteristics already outlined in Chapter One. I will locate, in Tati's *Playtime* and the *gialli* of Argento, precisely these sorts of uncanny, frozen figures and meticulous *tableau vivant*

compositions, and in this way, consider these films as extensions of Baudelaire's urban aesthetics. They have a common vision of the city as a space of encounter, deliberately framed by its architecture, in which one is inevitably confronted with otherness, and they stage this confrontation through the form of the *tableau vivant*, in which the image has the special power to return the gaze cast upon it. The unique architectonic framings of these uncanny urban scenes, as the next section will make clear, also add to the *tableau vivant* new considerations of contingency and design that relate to the ways in which city space was conceived and occupied.

3.1 The Architectonic *Tableau* and Two Roman Examples

In the modern city, Paul Virilio writes, "The contour of daily living and the framing of viewpoint in an architectonic constructed of doors and doorways, windows and mirrors are replaced by a cathode framework, an indirect opening in which the electronic false-day functions like a camera lens, reversing the order of appearances" (Virilio 87). I would like to draw attention to the setting of the 'direct' opening [architectonic] alongside the 'indirect' opening [televisual] in this excerpt. While there is a difference between the two types of openings, they resist being so easily placed in opposition in Virilio's analysis; rather, they are "old" and "new" technological forms performing the same action, albeit with different secondary effects because of their respective ways of organizing and shaping the world upon which they are trained. He elaborates upon this technological throughline here:

> More than any form of demonstration, it is this occultation [of the horizon of appearances] that is the common denominator of all technologies, old or new. It is the privileged analyst of all arrangements of space and time. For example, the first tableau, the first means of ocular representation, was the opening for doorways and windows. This was long before the easel-and-canvas painting, which so often was self-enclosed, as in a triptych. To understand the first tableau, we would have to try to return to the visual unconscious, to the nature of the opening and the closing, rather than attempt to repeat individual demonstrative performances of one electronic optic or another.

(Virilio 90)

Virilio, thinking through a less traditional 'architectonic' framework of doorways and windows, gives us some new dimensions by which to define the *tableau*: as "an arrangement of space and time," as "a means of ocular representation," as a product of the "visual unconscious," based in "the nature of the opening and the closing." The first dimension aligns more or less with a relatively common definition of the *tableau*, arrived at by the variable manipulation and consequent analysis of what I have been referring to as its ontological peculiarities[42]. The second, with its emphasis on the 'ocular,' as opposed to the 'corporeal,' seems to privilege the side of the receiver of the image, as opposed to the figures that constitute the image. The third is the most abstracted, as well as the most deeply rooted, reaching back into our unconscious desires and impulses to see, stoked and fanned by the opening and closing of apertures, the apparition and vanishing of figures grasped as purely visual fragments because of their distance and because of the concrete architectural boundary of the now revelatory, now obfuscatory portal that frames them.

Virilio emphasizes that, to understand the dynamics of viewing, even in the age of the digital transmission with its "false-day" and its pervasive, deceptive spatio-temporal collapses, we must venture even further back than the *tableau* understood as painting, to the *tableau* understood *as view*. But this view yields only temporarily to the gaze, emerging then disappearing via a series of architectural openings and closings, figures passing or immobilized within delineated areas that the eye can single out. Because of this quality, the *tableau vivant*, while tempting (and most often appropriate) to situate historically and conceptually posterior to

[42] Its transformation of the two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional composition of human bodies and its freezing of the normally moving human body.

the painting or sculpture — that is, the work of visual art as its compositional referent — , might perhaps find a more commodious niche anterior to the "painting"-*tableau*, since it, too, is based on an inherent and insuperable ephemerality. Like the view temporarily framed in the doorway that swings open, then closed, the figurative door must also eventually close upon the *tableau vivant* when the bodies tire, when the poses break. To consider it as an "arrangement of space and time" framed by architecture, the *tableau vivant*, as a spatio-temporal entity, is analogous to these built perspectives onto the city. Likewise, it is an example of "constructed space," which Virilio elaborates not merely as the literal and physical construction of space, but rather as a phenomenological framework through which our experience of space is figuratively constructed; time, so crucial to this structuring of life, forms a malleable but ineluctable transom.

To summarize: if the city itself, according to Virilio's theorization, could be said to consist in a series of "views" onto the shifting spatio-temporal dynamics that constitute it at a more fundamental, experiential level, we can see that the deliberate setting of *tableaux vivants* within urban spaces amounts to a stylized *mise en relief* of the quotidian, architectural *tableaux*[43] that are already so highly determinant of our perceptions. What's more, Virilio specifically describes the "technologies" of the window, doorway, or camera lens as "the privileged *analyst* of all arrangements of space and time"; by delimiting either spatially (the limited vista afforded us by the window or portal) or temporally (the passage of traffic before an aperture, for example), or in both of these ways (taking a photo and freezing time in just the zone that falls under the camera's gaze, or the "flash…then night" of the exchange of glances), these

[43] So as to retain Virilio's language, and because most of the cases I will be examining from here on out in this chapter deal with concrete buildings and structures, I have called these "architectonic" frameworks, but I think it is also fair to say that, as we have seen in the opening analysis of "To a Passerby," the crowd, that pronounced human element of the city that can be as massive and impermeable as any cyclopean wall, could also constitute a peculiarly urban frame from which the *tableau* can emerge.

technologies capture the dynamics of time and space and offer them up as arrangements that can be subjected to analysis. Indeed, the very forms these views take encourage us, through their stirring of our aesthetic impulses, to analyze *tableaux* and to consider more carefully the conditions and the components thereof in a way that often escapes us when our eyes roam unblinkered across the vast tracts of the city. These technologies of framing are didactic, teaching us how to see, and enlightening us as to the ways we view the environments of which we form a part. This conceptualization of the architectonic *tableau* as an "analyst" of spatio-temporal arrangements and experiences means that it can function as a tool installed in texts that consider the rapidly changing face of the city in the twentieth century.

It is useful to cast Virilio's image of the *tableau*-portal in a vocabulary of the cinema, the medium that will be the focus of this chapter's discussion. In that, as an architectonic framework, it directs and circumscribes our view of that which falls within it, the *tableau* performs the activity of focalization; it draws the eye, delimits its path, and deliberately picks out some particular element that we are *meant* to see. It pulls focus and achieves the remarkable feat of making our vision, after a fashion, cinematic — heightening it, controlling it, forcing us into a very specific, calculated relationship with space that develops over time. In this way, like the lightning-strike gaze of Baudelaire's *passante*, the *tableau*, while obviously the object of viewing, also exerts a clear power over the viewer. And, as Baudelaire's example illustrates, the view and what one makes of it (as its viewer), exert control over and even come to define one another. The example of two different films' use of a single architectural feature — the architectonic *tableau par excellence* — will highlight why this is the case.

At the top of the Aventine Hill in Rome, leading off the Piazza dei Cavalieri di Malta, is a tall, arched doorway, painted green, set in a wall carved with bas-reliefs and topped with

terracotta tiles and a row of ornamental urns. It is beautiful, but not remarkably more or less so than many other doorways in the city. It would be inconspicuous if not for the line of tourists that forms daily before it; each person takes a few moments to approach the door, put their eye to the keyhole, and look through at something. The walls obscure what that something is, but peering through reveals a remarkably designed vista — along a path cutting through a shadowy tunnel of trees, across gravel terraces of priory parterres, out over the rooftops of the city — culminating in a perfectly centered view of the monumental dome of St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. The piazza and this view leading off of it are the work of the architect Giovanni Batista Piranesi, dating from 1765.

Interestingly, this view does not allow for the kind of fortuitous, contingent *tableau* that Virilio describes, since the gardens themselves are not open to the public, except by appointment, and the view is from such an elevation, and the dome so enormous, that it can never be obstructed. Here we have a "perfected" view, unchanging except for the shifting of light and the clouding of the sky. And while it declares its painting-like permanence in its subject, its framing actually strives to create the impression of a chance glimpse of beauty: a vision, otherworldly, pristine in its perfection that one happens upon by peering through an unostentatious keyhole. The nature of this triple framing — the keyhole, the avenue of trees, and the geographical vantage point itself — shores up the image contained within it, but at the same time, through the size of the aperture, through the way it engages one's body and brings one into physical contact with that which blocks the body from the image *and* creates it at the same time (the doorway), it underscores the precariousness of the view; the image, it suggests, never ends, but the gaze cast upon it must. It becomes a statement on the interplay between the human, the natural, and the architectural elements of the city and calls into question the possessive drives

and powers of human vision. In the present day, it can serve as a humorous evocation of the construction of Rome as an amalgam of tourists' snapshots. It is certainly a beautiful view, but its interest lies also in its elegant elaboration of space and its visual statement on the ways in which we view and experience it.

I would like now, for reasons that shall become clear in subsequent sections, to attempt a sort of theoretical synthesis of Chambers (via Baudelaire) and Virilio through an exploration of one more striking architectural feature of Rome. In the Palazzo Spada, there is an arched gallery, designed by the Baroque architect Francesco Borromini, lined with columns, and ending at a small garden with parallel hedgerows leading to a large Neoclassical statue of a casqued warrior. As one walks through it, one becomes larger and larger in a kind of Carrollesque illusion. The reality, of course, is that this entire construction is an optical illusion: an elaborate feat of forced perspective, cinematic *avant la lettre* in that respect, designed to delight not only those who enter into its space and find it so unexpectedly small, but also those who stand outside and look into it, experiencing the warping and unsettling of their entire sense of spatial logic.

This construction works as a site for the integration of these two different theoretical perspectives, both applicable to the *tableau vivant*: like the Aventine keyhole, the *tableau* is designed carefully to frame a very specific view, and, like Baudelaire's allegorical statues, only reveals its true nature — that is, as a playful commentary on the susceptibility of that view to all manner of artful manipulation — through one's exploring it by walking *around* it, by approaching it from different distances and angles. In other words, it holds a dual status: as a sort of fixed-perspective painting when viewed from without; and as a sculptural-architectural installation when viewed from within. Quite appropriately, it makes its point about the variability of perspective and the manipulability of vision *through* its clever and very literal incorporation of

different perspectives into its functioning. Further, it serves as an architectonic frame whose subject changes radically when a person steps into its quasi-representational space, since the human interloper, magnified with each step further into the gallery, first reveals the statue at the other end to be a small ornament (only 60 cm. tall, in fact), then eclipses it entirely, effectively transforming into a colossal depiction of the human form straining within the ever-tightening space of Borromini's colonnade. Unlike the Aventine keyhole, which derives a certain interest from the ambiguity of its activities and its ultimate impenetrability, Borromini's forced perspective gallery is a space designed for the very infiltration and occupation that lay bare and exuberantly announce its artifice. I would like, moving forwards into discussions of *tableaux vivants,* to keep in mind this double status and, following from this, that the *tableaux*'s presence in the representational space of films can take the form of both a discrete object of viewing *and* a more generalized, diffuse quality of composed stillness in these movies' settings.

3.2 Jacques Tati's *Playtime* and the Frustrated *Flâneuse*

In 1967, Jacques Tati, the French film auteur and actor famed for his M. Hulot character and his unique, intricate *mise en scène*, produced, directed, and starred in what is sometimes considered to be his masterpiece, *Playtime.* This is a film concerning the rapidly changing face of the city of Paris. It follows two characters — two innocents, the continually bewildered M. Hulot swept along on the city's rhythms, and the idealistic American tourist, Barbara, who is always looking for more than the comically limited itinerary of her tour group can afford her. Tati's film resists summarization in terms of a plot; rather, it is constituted by a series of extended sequences based in and constructed around different urban spaces (for example, the airport, an office building, a trade show, an apartment complex, or a restaurant), whose primary aim is almost a kind of monitoring of the habitation of those spaces by an enormous array of

unnamed characters. Inevitably, the rigorously staged dynamics of movement within, and occupation of, those spaces result — most often coinciding with the entry of M. Hulot to the scene, akin to the introduction of a spanner into the works — in a protracted comedic breakdown of those dynamics, or in one or more of the human "pieces" breaking off and becoming lost in the system like loose cogs borne along and impeding the proper functioning of larger clockwork mechanisms. Since there is no real plot to tie the sequences together, the connective tissue between them, along which we (and the film) move, is the frequently aimless and unintentional wandering of Hulot or Barbara between these different zones. So while this film concerns itself deeply with its characters, it does so primarily by viewing them as the human elements operating (or struggling to operate) within larger systems, mechanical, architectural, societal, or otherwise.

The Paris of *Playtime* is a meticulously created and aesthetically heightened modernist version of the city, a complex of imposing and clinical-looking glass and steel buildings connected by a network of wide, heavily trafficked roads and roundabouts. Tati, because of the very specific image of the city that he had in his head, went to great lengths and expense to build this location through enormous sets (and a good deal of forced perspective to create a sense of geographical expansiveness) that the French press dubbed "Tativille." The city in the film is a kind of looking-glass Paris in which the post-war modernization (specifically, Americanization) of France results in a proliferation of modernist towers that have displaced the older architecture[44], the slate-and-limestone boulevards that were hallmarks of the capital city; in

[44] It should be noted that, while the architectural extremity of "Tativille" never came to fruition in the center of Paris, never superseded the city in its entirety, such a transformation is not unheard-of in the history of France; Baron Haussmann's massive building and infrastructure projects, after all, determined in large part the appearance and organization of the Paris of the latter half of the nineteenth century, of 1965, and of today, reordering and remapping the city and stamping the new surfaces they carved out with their own brand of relatively uniform structural aesthetics.

Playtime, whatever glimpses we catch of the recognizable, "old" Paris come to us in the form of fleeting reflections: the Eiffel Tower, seen for a split-second and only in the form of a reflection on a large glass door as it swings open, may as well exist in another world [Figure 11].

The relentless movement of the crowd is indeed a preoccupation of *Playtime*, and one of its most immediately evident formal characteristics; in nearly every scene, many of which are shot from afar and in long takes, a parade of actors and extras moves through the city's modernist architecture in well-defined circuits, from point to point and at a regular pace, almost like automatons. It is a kind of ceaseless and easy movement that communicates a widespread, new-urban *savoir faire,* against which are contrasted Hulot's meanderings and Barbara's apparently naive sightseeing. It might seem odd in an exploration of the aesthetics of the *tableau vivant* to focus on a film so marked by movement, but this kineticism actually serves two purposes: as a regular rhythm against which stillness may be juxtaposed more effectively; and as another way in which one of the ontological characteristics of the *tableau* — namely, its framing — can be brought to bear, in a broader sense, upon movement itself. It is easy to see the entire film, with its absurd and inventive comedy, as reproachful of this mode of urbanization, but Tati's use of stilled or restrained *tableaux* framed within the doorways, windows, and corridors of modernist architecture form a less obvious element of his critique. They also allow him to engage in a Benjaminian dialectical process, confronting that which lies inside the frame with that which lies outside it. This allows him to reveal, through these striking, still images, that the harsh rectilinearity of the "new and improved" Paris is merely a superficial manifestation of the deep-rooted sense of restriction that suffuses all aspects of life in this aggressively capitalistic space.

The most obvious (and famous) of *Playtime*'s scenes which thematize these architectural constraints is that which takes place in an ultra-modern apartment building. Tati here creates a matrix of clearly framed *tableaux* which, functioning as dialectical images that bring the film's motion to a "standstill," encourage viewers to reconsider notions of being inside and outside of both concrete physical spaces and the ideological currents of which they are a crystallization. The apartment units, set like boxes one atop the other on two vertical levels and over a considerable horizontal length, resemble, at various points, paintings, photographs, or television sets: from the street (our pointedly limited perspective as viewers of the film, now forced into that of a passerby on the sidewalk), their living rooms are visible, made of three opaque walls and a fourth, exterior wall made entirely of glass. Our view is framed by enormous windows, and we see a reluctant Hulot ushered into one of these apartments by an old acquaintance and subjected to an evidently uninteresting slideshow of family vacation photos projected onto the right-hand wall. At the same time, on the opposite side of this wall-turned-screen, the neighbor in the next apartment watches television on a unit set into that very same wall like a miniature replica of the glass-walled apartments themselves; illuminated by the cold blue rays of the cathode tubes, she watches motionlessly in profile, like a mid-century *Whistler's Mother* [Figure 12]. It should be noted that a good deal of the activity that we see in these vitreous apartment units could be brought together under the generalized rubric of "watching": watching of television, of slideshows, even on the outside, our watching of their watching from the street below. This watching entails a stillness, and it is in these moments of stasis that the views come to resemble paintings, engaging in an aesthetics of the *tableau vivant*; compartmentalized, with this stylized cloistration highlighting in particular the direction of their occupants' gazes and orientation of their bodies, the architecture of the entire building recalls a Renaissance altarpiece

in ironic recreation [Figure 13]. What's more, our watching of their watching is possible only through a concretization of the theatrical fourth wall in the form of those enormous glass panes; the sight offered to the viewer on the street is a spectacle of the everyday, a production of "Scenes from Urban Life" consisting in a battery of individual *tableaux* that seem to be basing themselves on the wide world of "Tativille" that encompasses them, which is the proper subject of the larger cinematic structure of *Playtime.*

The apartment scene is an especially evocative example of the restricted movements of capitalism because of the way in which the desired object itself (the brand-new, luxury apartment) becomes the restrictive framework. It transforms its occupants into emblematic properties or illustrations of its virtue to the consumer, represented figures trapped in a colossal advertisement like so many flies snagged in sparkling gossamer. The occupants of the apartment are basically instrumentalized, used as mannequins to visually demonstrate the product they have purchased and to engender in an observer that same desire that pushed them to buy it in the first place, participating in a seemingly interminable cycle of consumerism played out across the enormous glass window and the *tableau* it frames and creates. Essentially, there is no difference between the viewer of the *tableau* (apartment) standing outside on the street and desiring the image, and the individual who finds him or herself embodying that same image from within, both of whom are hopelessly caught up in this system of consumption. It is precisely across this dialectic of inside and outside (or the "framed" and the "unframed") that Tati unveils the falseness of this same distinction.

The subject of *Playtime*, when viewed through this lens, becomes the rigorous, insidious *mise en scène* of quotidian urban activity under capitalism. It is, in many ways, a kinetic counterpart of the new urban "noise" that Chambers identifies as the overpowering and

deadening sensual mode of the city, against which Baudelaire defines his allegorical figure of meaningful encounter; cinema, as a medium of moving pictures, is as appropriate a vehicle for the transmission of this movement, as much a part of the "atmosphere" of the city, as is poetry for a textual rendering of noise in the case of the *Tableaux parisiens*. This is one of the ways in which Tati might be considered an inheritor of Baudelaire's legacy — a kind of architect who raises hyper-stylized structures from the field of modernist architecture as a means of thematizing that same profound source. *Playtime* is itself a series of filmic "*tableaux parisiens*" that takes advantage of its medium's capacity for depicting movement in order to define and frame more effectively its innermost images, made up of isolated and constrained bodies against the incessant milling of the urban crowd.

If, generally, capitalism is "profit-driven de-territorialization… [that] flourishes best where old codes, regulations, rules have been abolished, and have not yet been replaced by new institutions for the regulating of social processes" (West-Pavlov 191), then where does this leave "Tativille"? It would seem at first glance to be a site in which these very kinds of "new" institutions *have,* indeed, firmly taken root, so smoothly does the machine run (Hulotian breakdowns aside); but it is not merely that these structures are "new" in the world of *Playtime* — rather, they are *novel.* New types of technologies, buildings, and institutions are presented, especially to outsiders like the tour group, or Hulot, who is not a city-dweller, as remarkable in their convenience and scope. Notably, *Playtime*'s Paris is periodically visited, specter-like, by the ephemeral, glassy reflections of the monuments that still exist, only at a further remove than ever before. Tati's vision is not that of a Futurist, nor is it one of a distant dystopia; people dress in more or less the same way as they would normally in the year 1967, the cars and buses are of their day, and the architecture, while magnified, is not unprecedented in its style. All these

features accumulate to result in a modernist Paris that is different but not unrecognizable, rendered other in terms of its heightened, creative, sometimes shocking composition of elements, rather than by those elements in and of themselves. In other words, it is a Paris on the edge indicated above by West-Pavlov, where the "old codes, regulations, rules have been abolished" and where the new structures that come to replace them are "novel" enough for capitalism to function at optimum capacity, as indicated by the effective mechanisms of movement upon which the film fixates.

Russell West-Pavlov says that "Capitalism is… a spatial economy, very much like becoming-being, because it is driven by flows of desire, and for that reason is constantly and restlessly fluid...constantly creating new connections, propelled by the force of desire, and dissolving them, likewise driven by desire" (West-Pavlov 190). The exploration of the "spatial economy" might be a way of rephrasing Tati's more visual thesis in *Playtime.* Shuffled along from one money-making institution to the next (the offices of Big Business, a trade show with all manner of products, a state-of-the-art apartment, a purportedly high-end but shoddily constructed restaurant/nightclub), the citizens of Paris and its visitors seem to do nothing during their day but either spend money, make money, or be tempted to spend yet more money by the spaces they pass through. The "force of desire" is what drives most of the actors through these spaces, and the sleek, modernist buildings that constitute them are reflective of the ceaseless "fluidity" of movement towards a strictly capitalistic concept of fulfillment.

At the same time, however, we can begin to detect here a profound, underlying ambivalence on Tati's part. While the sleekness of the modernist architecture of the city seems, on one level, to replicate the smoothness of movement and a tendency towards circulation of capital and of human bodies engaging in its exchange, it also appears decidedly limiting and

constricting. It could be said, therefore, to be creating conditions of perpetual motion *within constraints*, and we can infer that the very smoothness of this circulation is facilitated by those constraints, by those subject to the system not being allowed free rein to move in any way they would like. This is, as West-Pavlov states, a movement of desire, but it is more specifically one of a strictly *directed* desire, which finds a fascinating parallel in Tati's highly meticulous choreography and direction of the scenes that illustrate such motion. We might think of the saturated roundabout at the end of the film, with its unbroken wheel of cars all moving at the exact same pace; or of the seemingly endless corridor along which an anonymous bureaucratic intermediary clicks in his smart shoes, in a perfectly straight line, to meet Hulot; or even of Hulot himself, stuck awaiting some kind of never-really-defined meeting in a waiting room that is a glass cube. Once again, Tati's *mise en scène* both represents two seemingly contradictory terms (movement and restriction) and reveals them as being inextricably bound in an insidious hybrid form that seems to hide beneath the very notion of their difference. So much like a film director, the city itself "frames" its scenes of daily life through its architecture, spaces, and suggestions of movement between spaces.

It is not always the case, however, that a clear and noticeable framing in *Playtime* is meant to indicate a negative value. As we have already seen, when we get some brief glimpses of the beauty of an older Paris, they come in the form of perfectly framed reflections that look like photographs for the very short period of time in which we have access to them. Even characters in movement, such as the airport bathroom attendant in the foreground of the film's first scene, seen only from behind, passes in a straight line (parallel to the floor's colored tile variegations) along a succession of regularly-spaced, rectangular gray backdrops, and while she is walking throughout this scene, the motion is directed and spatially regulated in such a way that, more

than simply the movement of a character, we see emerging a series of receding reproductions of the same image, one which calls to mind the geometrically-divided spaces of Dutch interiors whose walls are hung with mirrors and prints and perforated with windows. These moments it would be tempting to qualify as ornamental rather than expressive of a comedic criticism of the structural repressiveness of capitalism. They are further small glimpses of beauty that recall more classical painted compositions.

In juxtaposing these instances of framed *tableaux* incorporated into *Playtime*, we discover that Tati displays a fundamental ambivalence to his material: on the one hand, he is very critical of the kind of ideologically and spatially delimited structures of a rapidly "Americanizing" France during the postwar period, and intent upon exposing the tireless clockwork of capitalism ticking away day and night beneath glass and steel architectural casings that are designed to house and streamline these processes; on the other, the film he creates from this perspective is one of astonishing formal beauty, itself, as we have already noted, meticulously directed and rigidly controlled, that also freezes moments of pictorial beauty by framing them in the panels of that same Modernist urban architecture. Again, we witness here something akin to the poetic operations of Baudelaire's narrator. How, then, are we to account for this ambivalence, this potent mixture of formal admiration and existential repulsion? People live, work, spend in these spaces that also seem, on an undeniable psychological level, to reject them. They are rather hostile edifices that still contain, here and there, niches of an old world beauty, these striking *tableaux* ensconced in steel and glass. This is also a second corner where Hulot and Baudelaire's *flâneurs* cross paths. Just as "noise is the inescapable accompaniment to city life that the poet of the modern must face in his effort to make beauty from the mundane" (R. Chambers 48), so too are the incessant movement and restrictive architectural structures

against which Tati — both as a filmmaker and in the more clownish guise of Hulot — must struggle and define himself and his art.

Here, Chambers defines a particularly Baudelairean sense of "modern beauty," which is, in many ways, the focus and product of the *Tableaux parisiens*: "Modern beauty: a beauty whose 'composition double' make it a phenomenon at once *contingent* — simultaneously fugitive and mnemonic, by virtue of its alliance with time and history — and *absolute*: able, that is, to convey a glimpse of the transcendence, supernatural and awe-inspiring, that lies behind and beyond the screen of temporality and leaves one thunderstruck" (R. Chambers 114, emphases in original). The defining characteristic of the *composition double* relates in several ways to what Tati achieves in *Playtime*: firstly, through the framing of specific, stilled images that are marked, by the division of the cinematic/architectural frame, as simultaneously a part of and apart from the space and time of the city, as both flatly ornamental and profoundly significative; secondly, through the artist's fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the category of the modern, an ambivalence that appears to be, in fact, generative of its own brand of beauty; and finally, as paralleling what I have described (in Chapter One) as the characteristic "ontological doubleness" of the *tableau vivant*, which depends for its effect upon the concurrent establishment of familiarity and otherness, recognition and alienation.

While Hulot, on his meandering, bumbling course, might seem like the most obvious choice as stand-in for the Baudelairean *flâneur* within Tati's dramatic new context, it becomes clear, as one watches *Playtime* carefully, that there is also another figure who plays this role: Barbara, the American tourist. Better still, we might say that she embodies not simply the *flâneuse*, traversing the city of Paris, but also, more specifically, the Baudelairean narrating poetic subject. Perhaps one of the misleading aspects of Barbara's character in the film is related

to her specific circumstances, her special constraint; she belongs to a tour group, under strict direction and following an apparently rigid itinerary. Thus her nominal role in the film is defined by motion — the touristic activity of sight-seeing, which we understand as a kind of perpetual motion from point to point across a significant geographical expanse. But Barbara's frustrations, which we see manifested at various points and also can infer from her brief but meaningful connection with Hulot, another lost soul hopelessly adrift on the currents of city life, also emerge in certain scenes. They concern, significantly, notions of beauty, pictorialism, and framing. During one of the earliest sequences in the film, after disembarking from their airplane, Barbara, perpetually on the fringes of her tour group, attempts to take some snapshots of Paris. Placing a camera in her hands and building an entire sequence around this device and its implications, Tati makes of Barbara perhaps more of a surrogate than the character he himself interprets.

In the first cinematic "snapshot," we see Barbara studying for a moment a poster for London tourism [Figure 14] — Big Ben on the left side, a red double decker bus on the right, a bobby in the foreground, all three dominated by an enormous glass and steel tower block that is identical to the ones that Tati has previously highlighted during the group's bus ride into the city. Called away from her examination, rounding a corner, Barbara sees the following vista before her [Figure 15]: on the left, in the periphery of the frame, two of the plinths, surmounted by their golden sculptures, of the Pont Alexandre III that crosses the Seine in central Paris; on the right, a green and white bus with the line "Opéra" indicated on the front; in the foreground, a police officer directing traffic; and in the center of the frame, overshadowing all three, an enormous glass and steel skyscraper, the perfect duplicate of that in the London poster. Barbara briefly looks back at the poster, then takes her camera in hand and takes a snapshot of the image, effectively recreating it. This is *tableau vivant* on a monumental scale, far larger than anything

we have thus far encountered, because it consists primarily in grand architecture. In this case, the image recreated is recognizable because we (and Barbara) have just seen it, but rather than actors replicating a painted scene, it is the city that conspires, in its spatial configuration, to mimic the visual referent.

We cannot consign this shot to the considerable list of the film's sight gags (it is not really "funny," *per se*, and Tati does not do much to make it seem so). It does, however, raise interesting questions about the nature of its replication. At first, we might say that it is the fortuitous result of the bus passing at the right time, of Barbara (and the camera) positioned at the correct angle, of the officer, the single human element and, as such, perhaps the most obvious parallel component in the image, being at the right place at the right time. But there also seems to be something rather more insidious about the nature of its composition; buses, after all, pass by with ostentatious regularity in *Playtime*, and in reality they operate on schedules, a uniform fleet following the same routes day after day; the police officer conducting traffic also takes up a fixed point around which the traffic flows; and the structures themselves — the skyscraper and the bridge — are immovable. One has the feeling that this scene replays itself over and over and over. This image could be defined as a specific kind of hybrid of others we have encountered thus far: a contingent architectonic *tableau*, which brings together elements both inanimate and human. What's more, the fact that in this *tableau* Paris recreates London, and does so when explicitly framed through the action of tourism, is telling of Tati's attitudes towards the homogenizing, flattening tendencies of this mid-century mode of occupying space. Paris is London, and London is Paris: either can be made to recreate the other and, in the world of the film (in which, as the poster makes clear, this radical architectural "modernization" has also found a foothold across the Channel), the tourist's snapshot is effectively the same thing as the

tourism poster. A particular brilliance of Tati's deployment of the *tableau vivant* in this scene is the very improbability of the London poster — to all appearances, a cobbled-together facsimile of notable, monolithic urban features that makes them coexist awkwardly within the same pictorial space — as an image that would even *be* recreatable. More to the point, in the film, it is recreatable in the real world, *without* recourse to artistic contrivance, and this is why it constitutes an image as troubling, in some ways, as it is amusing. Tati punctuates this scene with Barbara's own snapshot of this view; when we extrapolate the image framed thus — that is, photographically, within a delineated and unmoving rectangular pictorial space — we are left with yet another recreation of the London poster, perhaps imaginatively embellished with the words "Visit P A R I S" this time. Taken together, the effect is that of a visual motif that we might say defines *Playtime*: the recursive line of rectangular frames stretching off into the infinite. We see this sequence everywhere: the long corridors, the rows of floor-to-ceiling windows, the line of skyscrapers receding into the horizon; Tati suggests, ultimately, that this is perhaps the visual emblem of the modern city, and if this is so, then the *image* that recreates itself endlessly is its disquieting result. Considered non-diegetically, this vista is an extreme example of the Virilian architectonic *tableau*, heightened by its own cinematic artifice. It is, in some respects, a contingent image, created through the happily coincidental simultaneous occupation of the frame, defined by and large by architectural features, of the proper elements. But it is also precisely calibrated, no longer the product of chance but that of the director's manipulation, and it therefore lays bare, this dialectic of the contingent and the deliberate.

The second of Barbara's "snapshots" immediately follows this poster scene and adds another especially Baudelairean dimension to Tati's film. As she walks towards the vast trade show that is, cynically, one of the "sights" on her tour group's itinerary, Barbara's attention is

caught by an old woman selling flowers on the street corner [Figure 16]. She is distinguished from the gray crowd and her gray environs by the colorful bunches of flowers she sells from beneath an old tarp, and by the rather modest, old-fashioned nature of her clothing — shawl, polka-dotted dress, apron. She appears as a sort of remnant of an older Paris, an abandoned figure round which the metropolis of glass and steel has been erected — in short, one of those typically Baudelairean apparitions of the *Tableaux parisiens*, a symbolically-charged merchant of beauty and color in a modern, monochromatic world. When Barbara sees this striking figure, her instinct is to take her photograph, and make an image of her. She wants, like the Baudelairean poetic subject, to salvage her from the flow of time. But she finds herself foiled, time after time, as various passersby walk into the frame, ruining her shot. The city is too incessant in its commotion, and ultimately, Barbara herself is pulled into the composition by a soldier who likes the juxtaposition of the young American tourist and the older Parisian woman. In this sense, she is a failed artist, managing to create nothing like the *Tableaux parisiens* from this encounter. But, significantly, where his character fails, Tati himself, as filmmaker, succeeds; with his omniscient gaze, he picks out moments of beauty from the chaos, ridding them of the burdens of the urban everyday. *Playtime* opens, as if to emphasize this possibility, with a scene that, in the larger context of the film, might seem a surprising choice: the first shot we see after the opening credits is of two nuns walking side-by-side in striking, flapping wimples, along an airport corridor [Figure 17]; they are framed by a series of rectangular panes of floor-to-ceiling glass (shot by Tati from outside), and in their parallel movement along this line, they form, like the Vermeer-esque bathroom attendant in the next scene, a progressive enlargement of an image that clearly evokes a painting. These idiosyncratic figures, distanced from the rest of the crowd by their visual incongruity, almost an anachronism, seem not really to occupy this ultramodern

architectural space; rather, they pass as a compositional dyad along the line of windows, transforming them into picture frames.

With these figures — the nuns, the flower vendor, even posing humans and posed mannequins conspicuously arrayed in the background of shots — Tati, in his auteurial prerogative, uses cinematic and architectural framing to indicate that they should not be considered in a strictly diegetic fashion, where they are so often assailed by movement and noise. Here is Chambers on the way in which Baudelaire's textual treatment resituates similar figures:

> The chiasmic figure of allegory plunges, statue-like, into the darkest night of time… But it can also represent — without contradiction — a spatial configuration: that of a world conceived as an X-like site of conjunction, opening in one direction onto the everyday but stretching in the other toward infinity. Disalienating encounters can thus occur, in everyday life, with figures of a spatial beyond that is no less sinister in its purpose than the temporal abyss… As daylight specters, 'spectres en plein jour,' [Baudelaire's allegorical figures] are something like everyday ghosts, familiar phantoms, whose function is to reveal the street itself, their abode, as itself unexpectedly *connected*, allied in like fashion with an otherwise unexpected dimension of alterity… another dimension of the world. (R. Chambers 89-90, emphasis in original)

We can detect a similar construction in these marked, even more aestheticized figures with which Tati adorns his imagined city. A figure like Barbara, an unusually perceptive person who seems to possess artistic sensibilities, is attuned to this when she comes across certain compositions that emerge from the chaos of Paris, though her ultimate frustration in actually *making* art from this perspective is perhaps another of the rather pessimistic undercurrents of this comedy: a suggestion of the difficulty (if not impossibility) of making art from modern beauty as a very modern sort of tragedy. When considered with this in mind, however, the film is imbued with a redemptive grace. If Barbara can sense the other side of the "X," she cannot bring it into the required focus (as, for example, when the two outrageously Americanized teenagers in letterman jackets branded with the word "Paris" wander into and occupy the background of her

shot of the old flower vendor [Figure 18]), but Tati, creating compositions and moments in which this construction again emerges, can show us the other side. He saves these figures through cinematic contrivance and control, and in so doing implies that, in order to make such signifying — even allegorical — images from all the "noise" of modern life, one needs wield something like a divine and cosmogonic power; what exists on the other side of the "X" is twofold: the artist and the viewer, joined in the world of representation. Such an artistic philosophy, a desire, deriving from an irrepressible aesthetic sense of possibility, to make art emerge from the riotous overfullness of modern life, makes understandable the extreme lengths to which Tati felt he had to go to make this film, creating an entire "city" (under the filmmaker's total control) in which to shoot it, then taking over a year to edit the movie, and ultimately bankrupting himself in the process.

This dialectic of control and chaos again finds a formal parallel in Tati's use of compositions even closer to the *tableau vivant* than the previous examples. These are most often eerily still figures appearing in the background of long-shots. Perhaps the most notable examples are to be found in the film's opening airport sequence, in which the forms of men and women, dressed in black, often wearing hats and coats that obscure their features, are arrayed along a row of windows or on stairway landings and balconies. With his usual resourcefulness, Tati economically opted, for some scenes when many figures were required to convey a crowd of people adequately, to use cardboard cutouts and mannequins, some of which can be seen, upon close inspection, in this airport sequence. This is, in one sense, a cost-cutting move, but Tati's decision cannot be entirely put down to financial circumstances, since he in fact takes great pains

to draw the viewer's attention to these background figures[45]. They are first glimpsed as a row of three people — a Magritte-esque man in a black bowler hat, and two elegantly dressed women — each very deliberately framed in a separate windowpane at the back of the concourse [Figure 19]. During the entire scene, these figures remain within their frames, despite the crowds and various characters coming and going in the foreground, but rather than use mannequins to depict them, Tati uses three real people. We know this because, at various points, they move, but not in any naturalistic way; rather, they occasionally and quite subtly *shift*, going from pose to pose and holding them for extended periods. And, in a way, even though they are played by real people, they come to resemble mannequins because of this strange, self-conscious stillness and the oddly prolonged nature of their poses (as well as their telling positioning in front of windows). At other points, Tati uses a combination of obvious cardboard cutouts, less conspicuous ones, and real actors, sometimes mixed within the same configuration [Figure 20]; in one shot, an actor remains very still for several moments, only to reveal finally that he is, indeed, human by moving and turning slightly, all while the cutout facing him remains perfectly immobile (because inhuman). Why, if this were a purely economical move on the part of the filmmaker, would Tati prime us to pay attention to these dark background figures throughout the movie by so ostentatiously creating the tripartite gallery in his second shot?

There are a few possible answers to this question. First, there is a thematic connection between the hyperbolically rigid and controlled nature of these poses and Tati's larger ideas in *Playtime* concerning both the highly-developed system of constrained movement upon which the modern city functions, and what he depicts as a rather vacuous materialistic "posturing" on the

[45] This is perhaps something like the way in which Brian De Palma, through his consistent use of the background as a locus of surreptitious action, especially surveillance, spying, and stalking, eventually trains the viewers of his films to be hyper-aware of this filmic space and the vital elements of the plot covertly taking place therein.

part of its citizen-consumers who highly value new technology and the latest fashions — life, in other words, lived as an endless cycle of posing before the window of public view (as in the apartment block scene). Second, and specifically related to the use of cardboard cutouts, there is in the film an interest in the slick architectural surfaces of modernity as sites of a flattening not only of representation, but also of life itself, comically reduced to two dimensions. Third, these odd figures also open up the "X"-like configuration of allegorical statuary; so blatantly manipulated and positioned by the filmmaker, who, almost divinely, asserts a complete control over the human and the non-human elements of his elaborate *mise en scène*, the perspective behind them, onto which they open up for the careful viewer of the film, is of the director himself. Tati plays up this artifice to reveal his presence and its status as a markedly artistic *representation* of a nonetheless real trend in urban development in postwar Western Europe; but he also suggests that the film *Playtime* could not have been made in the "real" Paris and have made its particular point to the same degree. The film exists as a hyper-stylized and meticulously *controlled* vision of city life distilled from the very real patterns of movement and modes of existence based on Tati's observations of the historical development of Paris as an urban space. The striking instances of *tableau vivant* in the film constitute powerful formal tools around which Tati constructs his city and his scenes, and through which he elaborates and explores his themes and stages moments of significant encounter for his frustratedly poetic protagonists. The *tableau vivant* also creates noticeable figures of very deliberate artifice, from behind which Tati gazes back at his viewers, much like Baudelaire's *passante*. For these reasons, then, cinema — specifically a cinema profoundly marked by both relentless kineticism *and* keenly deployed stillness — is the perfect medium for Tati in the twentieth century, in much the same way that Baudelaire's poetic voice emerges out of and ultimately *against* the noise of the nineteenth.

3.3 Dario Argento's *Gialli*: The Gallery City

I would like now to turn to another, very different type of film which often incorporates *tableaux* into its filmic compositions and deploys them as devices for thematic highlighting and narrative markers: the Italian *giallo.* Often referred to as a "cinematic subgenre"[46], this term indicates very particular hybrid horror/mystery thrillers, especially noted for their theatrical, Grand Guignol-esque gore, their often Freudian preoccupations with aberrant psychologies, and their striking visual style, encompassing elaborate camera movements, peculiar angles, and expressionistic lighting and color schemes.

The cinematic *giallo*'s metonymic name — the famous yellow covers of Mondadori's crime thrillers and mysteries chromatically signifying the oftentimes similar narrative content of the films — underscores the subgenre's significantly intertextual nature, but it also serves as a reminder of the restrictions placed upon it by generic conventions; in fact, it could be argued that the use of the designation *giallo* for these films — especially insofar as they developed over the sixties, seventies, and eighties into distinctively lurid, baroque, aestheticized works transgressing into the even darker territory of horror movies — represents a kind of restraint in and of itself, aligning them with literary works with which they share certain attributes, but from which they also diverge significantly. It is, however, also worth considering the productiveness of assigning a name at once so evocative and so limiting to this body of films, given the fact that, from the subgenre's very inauguration and all the way through to its zenith, the cinematic *giallo* has concerned itself with and carefully represented, implicitly and explicitly, its own nature as a bounded object. The *giallo*'s self-reflexiveness manifests itself in the films' preoccupation

[46] The *giallo* is discussed in this way specifically in Anglo-American contexts, whereas in Italy, the term refers much more broadly to literary or cinematic detective and mystery narratives, even of the more prosaic variety.

with vision and visuality in general, and with delineated, strictly-bordered *objets d'art* in particular — paintings, sculptures, frames, mirrors, photographs, all become points of reference essential to the resolution of the diegetic mystery *and* to the larger thematic programs of the filmmakers. The formulaic, rigorously linear narrative trajectory of the literary crime thriller (and, to a certain extent, of *giallo* films, too) finds aesthetic and formal parallels in a bizarre, bloody painting upon which the protagonist fixates, for example, or in a gruesome and spectacular murder viewed through a window that sets the plot in motion. These works of art are not so much *mises en abyme* as they are abysses unto themselves, beautiful vortices around which plot and characters perilously swirl.

We need not limit ourselves to literal examples of framing, such as isolated images or specific shots that make up the film. In *La Dolce Morte: Vernacular Cinema and the Italian Giallo Film,* Mikel J. Koven notes that "many *gialli* confine themselves within clearly bounded spaces. Some restrict their action to apartment blocks or college campuses" (Koven 52). Even when this is not the case, when the plot in fact shuttles its players across a greater array of settings rather than limiting them to a single location, the *giallo* might still be said to work itself out through an exploration of "clearly bounded spaces"; a particular point of interest resides in the fact that many *gialli* are emphatically urban in nature, and the city, while often depicted as an expansive or overpopulated arena of action, is nonetheless a space of constraint, movement across which can be as restricted or restrictive as any physical location. If artistic representations of the city often trade in notions of endless possibility figured across interminable stretches of constructed space, the ways in which characters in *gialli* experience the urban setting calls this into question, highlighting the stark delineation of narrative movement, experiential trajectories, and points of view that nonetheless dissect the richly woven tissue of the city. Fittingly, the

works of directors like Mario Bava and Argento enact a kind of violence upon holistic, reductive visions of the city space; they flay it and expose the force the city exerts upon its denizens in a variety of ways, pitilessly slicing away so much dead flesh that obfuscates meaning, in order to extirpate and coldly examine, through the camera's lens, singular elements of urban experience, some more uncomfortable than others. While the major focus of Tati in *Playtime* was the large-scale, collective, ideologically-oriented movements of the mass through the city, *gialli* instead concentrate on, and revel in, deviant individual movement and reshape their urban settings so as to reflect these conditions. The protagonists of *gialli*, unlike Hulot and Barbara swimming upstream in a flow they cannot hope to staunch, find themselves in cities deformed and warped through the genre's unique aesthetics so that they come to resemble physical manifestations of the psychological derangement of investigators and murderers alike. In the Argento films that I will discuss in this section, the director places notable *tableau vivant* compositions around Rome, and these instill in this setting a certain uncanniness that serves as an outward manifestation of their protagonists' fears and of the looming menace of their antagonists. I will also demonstrate how these compositions serve as important narrative markers and as screens across which Argento develops relationships between his heroes, killers, and victims, formulating broader ideas about the ways in which we encounter others in the alienating, potentially threatening space of the city.

Bava's *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, also known as *The Evil Eye*) from 1963 is often considered to be the initiating film of the genre. Importantly, *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* "is the film that founded the genre of the Italian giallo from the point of view of the figure of the protagonist as eye witness and of urban representation"[47] (Acerbo &

[47] "è il film che fonda il genere del giallo italiano dal punto di vista della figura del protagonista come testimone oculare e della rappresentazione urbana"

Pisoni 117, my translation). This movie's heroine, Nora Davis, is a young American woman traveling to Rome for the first time, excited as would be any of her peers (the voiceover narration that opens the film informs us) at the prospect of visiting this city full of cultural touchstones. The film's extensive treatment of its urban setting, particularly the way in which it plays with pictures of the city, is an important element that has been noted by critics. Here, Acerbo and Pisoni provide a nice summary of the film's new cinematic urban vision:

> Once again, in terms of its *mise en scène*, the basis for the treatment of space across the entire genre is defined in this film: an unsettling nocturnal Rome shot in expressionistic lighting, in which even the super-touristic steps of the Piazza di Spagna become the grim theater for an attack; unsettling interiors because they are dark and over-furnished… or, vice versa, because they are totally empty and over-illuminated, like the mysterious white apartment to which Nora is directed by an anonymous phone call: this is a fundamentally important sequence for the future formulation of the genre, which anticipates the work Argento will do (guided by the lessons of Antonioni) with the empty and flat spaces of the art gallery in *The Bird with the Crystal Plumage* (1970).[48]
> (Acerbo & Pisoni 115, my translation)

The film toys with more established, decidedly Hollywood-influenced imagery of Rome, drawing most notably from the film *Roman Holiday* (1953, dir. William Wyler), and lampoons these picture postcards through rather aesthetically jarring juxtapositions of, on the one hand, romantic montages of a couple at major monuments like the Forum and the Colosseum, and on the other, scenes of murder and perilous investigation centered around the Spanish Steps, rendered sinister through Bava's black-and-white chiaroscuro and canted, noir-esque camera angles. While the romanticized images of a touristic Rome that are warped in the ensuing crime

[48] "Ancora, dal punto di vista della messa in scena, nel film vengono definite le basi del trattamento degli spazi in tutto il genere: una Roma inquietante e notturna riprese con luci espressioniste, in cui persino la super-turistica scalinata di Piazza di Spagna diventa il lugubre teatro di un'aggressione; interni inquietanti perché bui e sovraccarichi…o viceversa perché completamente vuoti e sovrailluminati, come il bianco appartamento misterioso dove Nora viene mandata da una telefonata anonima: una sequenza, questa, di fondamentale importanza per l'impostazione futura del genere, che anticipe il lavoro che Dario Argento farà (guidato dalla lezione di Antonioni) sugli spazi vuoti e piani già dalla galleria d'arte de *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (1970)."

narrative are not properly *tableaux vivants*, their compositions are nevertheless clearly based upon the visual referent of the picture postcard; their lighting (sunny, pleasant) and their subjects (historical buildings, picturesque streets) derive from a photographic tradition that in turn owes much to painting (for example, J.M.W. Turner's gauzy, glowing vistas of Roman ruins). The cinematic *giallo*, then, emerges from a consideration of the creative transformation and conditioning of urban spaces through works of art and individual psychological experience, and presents us with alternating glimpses of phantom cities cohabiting in these spaces.

Moving to the *gialli* of Dario Argento, perhaps the most obvious visual distinction is his dramatic, painterly use of color[49]. If both of these directors concern themselves with the issue of constraint, it could be said that Bava does so thematically, questioning the restrictions imposed upon his characters and his films by narrative and genre, while Argento does so through a carefully-deployed strategy of formal alienation. His *gialli* maintain, from the first, a peculiar aesthetics that render them oneiric and contribute to his drift towards the horror genre. The rationality of space and the logic of visual perception are almost entirely swept away by floods of unrealistically red blood and a prevailing atmosphere of dread projected upon the characters' surroundings. Argento is a highly visual filmmaker, whose often surprising use of color and light and (sometimes unfairly) maligned use of stilted or non-naturalistic dialogue cause many critics to compare him to painters. His camera also focuses obsessively upon architecture and constructed urban space; as Giulia Carluccio notes, "Argento himself often speaks of buildings as living organisms"[50] (Carluccio 58, my translation), and frequently it seems as if the elaborate

[49] Bava, too, was a colorist of note, especially in films like *Sei donne per l'assassino*, with its surreal palette and lighting, and traces of his influence can certainly be detected in Argento.

[50] "Argento stesso parla di edifici come organismi viventi"

set pieces that take place within these striking and baroque examples of architecture are just as organic, integrating the films' narratives inextricably into their surroundings. Often, the idiosyncratic structural and decorative details Argento's camera picks up on visually parallel the action taking place within these buildings — for example, a shot from the top of a stairwell positions a murder victim within its strange, sharp triangle, foreshadowing her demise by blade in *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo*; in the early and pivotal art gallery scene from the same film, the protagonist is framed between glass doors, dramatically shoring up his decisive status as witness and immobilizing him as if within an enormous *tableau* (I will return to this later on); in *Suspiria*, the ominous German dance academy, with its endless corridors and outsize doorways, is a manifestation of outsize evil and the disproportionate fears of childhood. What Argento achieves is a kind of psychologization of space, turning it surreal and using it to mirror his characters' — victims and killers alike — inward and outward trajectories, transforming places that ought to be recognizable (if not as specific structures, then at least as realistic *types* of places) into nightmarish manifestations of the violence both physical and emotional that always undergirds the films; mirrors are important thematically in his work, but they also serve as a model for the spaces that Argento uses to set his action, which become, after a fashion, enchanted reflective surfaces. Aesthetic alienation is all the more thorough because of the way Argento still works within extant and tangible spatial frameworks, but invests them with cinematic signifiers of their unworldliness, their otherness — eerily floating curtains, strange and disturbing paintings or sculptures, rays and flashes of vivid scarlet, yellow, or violet light. This is why the idea of "projection" is apt here: it is not as if the spaces in which Argento's films take place are totally *created* by the mind itself (indeed, they are often real locations rather than sets), but rather that they are reworked, distorted, dyed by the mind's eye. That much of this cinematic

"remodeling" is superficial in nature, layered atop pre-existing spaces in a blatant exercise in artifice, points, again, to the *giallo*'s focus on constraint and ways of getting around it, or perhaps getting *over* it.

In one particular scene from *Profondo rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975), we see these very idiosyncratic dynamics of cinematic urban design at work. Early in the film, in the scene that serves as the plot's catalyst, protagonist Marc Daly witnesses a murder from a *piazza* in Rome. This piazza — the Piazza CLN — is real, but it is located in Torino rather than in the film's ostensible setting of Rome. The site is explicitly Roman in the diegetic world of the film, but not in our extradiegetic geographical reality. To add another layer to this already complicated cinematic presentation of space, Argento's composition includes the important location in the film known as the "Bluebar," a piano bar located on the *piazza,* where Marc's friend Carlo works; once again, there is no such structure on the real Piazza CLN in Torino. But Argento means to draw attention to the incongruity of its presence in this location, even for those unfamiliar with the two Italian cities, for the Bluebar is clearly a strange duplication of the diner from Edward Hopper's 1942 painting *Nighthawks* [Figure 21]. Not only does the design of the bar explicitly mimic that in the painting, but Argento also brings the occupants of the space to eerie stillness. We see here a *tableau vivant* inserted into the framework of the city, this time in a more explicit fashion than in *Playtime.* As Marc and Carlo listen to a victim's cries for help from the empty square, the people behind the bar's large plate glass windows barely move an inch in the background [Figure 22]. Carluccio's reading of this visual detail opens it up to encompass Argento's vision of space and the city as a whole:

> It is not a question…of an artist reconstructing in the studio and *in toto* an ideal place, but rather of an artist who sees and makes visible an ideal place starting with a modification, an alteration, as it were, of reality, from a different way of looking at it and putting it together. In *Profondo rosso*, for example, the

> fantastical appearance of the "Bluebar" in the location of the real Piazza CLN in Torino introduces an alteration or an imaginary contamination into the realistic scenario of the site's architecture…[and] it also functions as a way of seeing and making visible more than what objective reality seems to offer to our perception. It is a way of deepening, intensifying perception, prolonging it… seeking an effect of hyperreality which, in the end, is a reality to the nth power… the synthesis of objective and subjective, real and imaginary (a real, objective, historical piazza in Torino, and the subjective hallucination of a painting, a work of art)…[51]
> (Carluccio 57, my translation)

The effect of "hyperreality" that she describes embraces the crucial spatio-temporal dimension of place; what Argento seeks to do is not only to "deepen" the perception of space, but also to "prolong" it, to call into question the way cinema can sometimes oversimplify the complicated nature of the gaze as something that roams through space, over time, in strange ways. If Argento's phantasmagoric depictions of architecture and urban spaces are "hyperreal," it is because they more accurately represent the dual physiological *and* psychological nature of perception, and in this sense, his aesthetics of alienation turns back around on itself and calls on his viewers to recognize in it something oddly approaching the reality of the way they see the world. For a wide variety of reasons, our perceptions of space include not only the objective, tangible reality of people and things, but also the subjective memories, imagery, and sentiments that we layer atop them. This kind of mental operation might be performed most dramatically in

[51] "Non si tratta…di un artista che ricostruisce in studio e *in toto* un luogo ideale, ma di un artista che vede e fa vedere un luogo ideale partendo da una modificazione, un'alterazione, come si diceva, della realtà, da un differente modo di guardarla e di metterla insieme. In *Profondo rosso*, per esempio, la superfetazione fantastica del "Bluebar" nella location dal vero di Piazza CLN a Torino, introduce una alterazione o una contaminazione immaginaria nello scenario realistico dell'architettura del luogo…[e] funziona anche come un modo di vedere e far vedere di più di quello che la realtà oggettiva sembra offrire alla percezione. È un modo di approfondire, intensificare la percezione, prolungarla…[va] alla ricerca di un effetto di iperrealtà che alla fine è una realtà all'ennesima potenza…la sintesi tra oggettivo e soggettivo, reale e immaginario (una vera, oggettiva, storica piazza di Torino, e l'allucinazione soggettiva di un quadro, un'opera d'arte)…"

the city, with its historical/sociological/conceptual repleteness, experiential diversity, and palimpsest-like nature.

The *tableau vivant* of *Nighthawks* serves two functions in this scene. First, the stillness of the space's occupants communicates in simple visual terms the incommunicability of Marc Daly's predicament; as a witness to a violent crime, he feels alone, and is alone, marked as the protagonist of the film's mystery and destined to resolve it on his own[52]. And second, this *tableau vivant* is also an elegant condensation of the broader indifference of the collective urban populace to the plight of individual citizens, and of its exclusion, to a degree, of Marc as a foreigner. Argento also, through the *tableau vivant*, contrasts the city's more general superficiality with the "hyperreal" and "prolonged" reality experienced by the occupant of a space for whom it takes on a more specialized meaning due to the extraordinary events taking place within it. Essentially, it is visual shorthand for many of the difficulties that are part and parcel of the urban life of the individual (and especially an outsider or solitary figure). And aside from this life-size recreation of *Nighthawks,* the piazza in *Profondo rosso* is also an apt example of the Malrauxian *musée imaginaire*[53], bringing into the same location not only a recreation of the Hopper painting, but also a monumental fountain with an enormous, sculpted human form, a

[52] His friend Carlo, who is also present, is drunk and therefore unable to comprehend the reality of what they hear and see. He also turns out to be an accomplice to the initial murderer (his mother) and a killer in his own right. Marc's companion for much of the film is a photo-journalist, Gianna Brezzi, but she is neither a witness to the murder, nor is she present in the film's climactic showdown between Marc and the killer.

[53] The *musée imaginaire*, a concept popularized by French author, art critic, and eventual Minister of Culture André Malraux, refers to the mental operation of self-selecting a personal canon of works of art and the consequent ability to arrange, juxtapose, or exhibit them at will and according to one's (changing) proclivities or purposes; we can see, through the accumulation of visual references in this piazza scene, all arranged very deliberately by Argento visually to complement and accentuate the movement of his plot, how the city itself becomes an art gallery in which the placement of pieces facilitates, mirrors, or contrasts the movements of the spectator-character through that space. Fundamentally, what Argento does is concretely spatialize Malraux's (already metaphorically spatial) mental process.

menorah turned into a decorative motif in the murder victim Helga Ullman's flat, and her hallways of haunting, Munch-like portraits. The characters in the *gialli* exist in a world overpopulated by, defined by, images, and by their artifice, at once part of their unique cinematic aesthetics and related thematically to the enveloping air of mystery and dissimulation; this instills in them and in viewers alike a sense of uneasiness and dread related both to the film's intrigue and, more broadly, the everyday existential crisis of living in a disconcerting world of pictures. Argento, throughout his oeuvre, also displays an obsession with windows and mirrors. In *Profondo rosso*'s piazza scene alone, we see the large plate glass windows of the Bluebar, a hallway lined in glass-covered prints and gilt-edged mirrors, the shining blade of the butcher's cleaver used as a murder weapon, and the victim, the medium Helga Ullman, first calling desperately for help by banging her fists against her apartment window, then pushed violently up against the window by the black-gloved hand of the killer. One could easily draw up similar lists from multiple sequences in all of his films, so developed is this tendency.

But the most interesting for us as it relates to this question of the glassy surface is the first murder scene in Argento's first film, *L'Uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970). Appropriately enough, it is a sort of mirror image of the piazza scene, involving a foreigner in Rome who becomes an inadvertent eyewitness to a brutal attack. In this scene, Sam Dalmas, an American, is walking home when he notices from across the street a struggle going on between two people in an art gallery. At first, what he sees is not at all clear: the initial distance and his perspective let him see just the lower halves of the two bodies, and because of the presence of a statue to their right, it appears as if there may actually be three people in the gallery [Figure 23]. Drawing closer, Sam enters what turns out to be a large glass vestibule separating the main gallery space from the street, just in time to see the trenchcoated

and black-gloved assailant running off into a back room and leaving behind a woman in white who has been stabbed. He wishes to help her, but ultimately cannot because the second door leading to her will not open for him; instead of rescuing her, Sam himself becomes a victim as the killer remotely locks the outer sliding glass door, trapping him in the vestibule between the street and the gallery, but having access to neither [Figure 24]. The hermetically sealed nature of his predicament is communicated aurally through Argento's eschewing of music and sound effects during this sequence. Sam cannot hear what is going on inside, and the woman cannot hear him as he tries to yell to her through the glass. This also has the effect of shifting the film into a totally visual narrative mode during this pivotal scene, which will become important later on as Sam discovers that he cannot trust his initial, purely visually-based reading of the attack.[54]

While the architectural constraints of the scene recall the literal framing of a painting, this attack scene is also explicitly a *tableau vivant*, though viewers do not discover this until later in the film, when Dalmas's investigation leads him to the original. The image in question is a primitive painting depicting the bloody scene of a screaming girl being stabbed by an assailant dressed in a black coat and hat, face obscured (just as is the killer in the Roman art gallery) against a Brueghelesque backdrop of snow-covered hills. The scene in the gallery that Dalmas witnesses replicates this painting in both its figures, engaged in the same victim-assailant dynamic, and its setting, the white walls and marble floors of the space replicating the wintry countryside. In an echo of Hitchcock's *Psycho,* a psychologist explains that the murderer saw this violent painting, which unleashed a repressed memory of a prior attack and caused her to begin the series of killings presented in the film.

[54] Dalmas fundamentally misreads the events as they occur and this leads him on a false piste for the majority of the film.

One way in which to interpret the spatial dynamics of this scene is as an enactment of the constraints of communicability. Dalmas finds himself moving between a series of spaces that "communicate" onto one another (in the sense of "adjoining") — the street, the vestibule, and the gallery — and the connecting architecture seeks through the large glass sliding doors to create a clear visual continuity between the three discrete spatial units, almost to efface the boundaries between them by rendering them permeable to the gaze. Ultimately, as Dalmas discovers, their translucence is a deception[55], for they are the main obstacles to oral communication between these same spaces: the stabbed woman cannot hear Dalmas, nor can he hear her; eventually, a passerby on the street notices Sam trapped in the vestibule and has difficulty understanding his request that he go and call the police [Figure 25]; when the police eventually show up, they cannot figure out how to open the outer door to the vestibule and Dalmas, weary now from his predicament, slumps into a corner to await his freeing, sitting on the floor beneath a small, white-painted decorative tree, a final pictorial flourish through which Argento shores up his painting-like framing of Sam as the eyewitness to a violent crime. Because of the duplicitous nature of the architecture, the occupants of the three communicating spaces have become nothing more to one another than silent, framed, separated images. In some ways, Dalmas's enclosure within the *tableau* created by the glass vestibule makes his existence discontinuous with his context, and brings him, in terms of his agency and ability, to a standstill: he cannot help the victim, nor can he get the attention of the passerby, and he finds himself suspended in a terrifying pictorial present tense. From his perspective, he is able to take the

[55] One may think here of M. Hulot in the glass waiting room, but there is an important difference between these two scenes: in Tati's film, none of the other characters is interested in hearing or interacting with Hulot, whose goals and interests are seen as insignificant to the larger workings of business, whereas in Argento's, individuals in all three spaces strive to speak to one another but find themselves unable to do so.

pictures of the killer's victim, the trapped eyewitness, and the tardy police and overlay them in a kind of collage that seems to convey a particular message — one that, in this case, turns out to be the wrong one.

The *tableaux vivants*, in both of these cases, constitute a backdrop against which the exceptionality of the events witnessed are thrown into relief, rather than objects of contemplation in their own right. The presence of the eerily stilled Bluebar in *Profondo rosso,* for example, communicates a feeling of dread and unnaturalness, as if the evil of the killer's act were seeping out into the broader atmosphere and contaminating it, but it also effectively cuts off Marc Daly from the rest of the world; there is no one but him to help the assailed Helga Ullman, and there is no one at all to help him. Indeed, the backdrop of frozen time seems to draw out this ordeal to a painful, terrifying degree. And as a filmmaker's successful deployment of suspense so often depends upon an establishment of space (the geography of the scene, the spatial relationships of relevant pieces and actors) and just such an unnaturalistic temporal ductility (painfully drawing out that which we fear will happen), Argento is well-served by this context. The juxtaposition between the stilled human forms in the background against the protagonist frantically *looking* for the traumatic scene he or she senses is taking place in the vicinity, in addition to emphasizing visually the ultimate stasis of the victim in these murder scenes, also serves the purpose of what I referred to earlier in the chapter as the *tableau vivant*'s ability to create a sensation of a more traditional cinematic focus-pull. Foregrounding the actions of the murderer, victim, and witness while bringing the world around them to a halt, it becomes a means of not only signifying the terror of the scene in question for these parties, but also of marking it as a pivotal plot point; thus the intrusion of a non-narrative formal feature serves as an important narrative marker.

Another function of such compositions is to highlight the films' consistent theme of the difficulty of communication; when the moment is frozen as in a *tableau*, an instant, rather than a sequence, is transmitted. The *gialli* of Argento illustrate how that instant can be dangerously, erroneously extrapolated into a narrative. The protagonists find themselves stranded in their own eternal, agonizing present, which in turn becomes the moment that haunts them for the rest of the film and which constitutes a limitation against which they constantly bump in the course of their investigations; the protagonist cannot be returned to "normal time," as it were, until the inherent fallacy of the instantly, visually-communicated information is recognized and a more complex narrative of the film's mystery emerges as the true one. In this sense, the *tableaux vivants* form *mises en abyme* of the (moving) scenes of murder; these killings are nonetheless often erroneously decontextualized and viewed as images, strictly or traditionally defined, more than as moments within larger mystery narrative structures (even though, as Argento takes great pains to show us, they are in reality *both*). Instead of employing them merely as a sort of eerie, pictorial backdrop for his murder scenes, Argento uses the presence of stilled human bodies trapped within images as a means of thematically underscoring the major perceptual obstacle to the plot's resolution.

As in these examples, *gialli* usually count amongst their plot twists a revelation that the entire investigation following the witnessing of the crime is predicated on a fundamental misunderstanding of a clue. These clues are not simply red herrings or dead end leads, but instead become fatally fixed images that fail to "speak to" their respective detectives because of an unfortunate lack of context or a separation of mutually dependent visual and aural referents[56].

[56] One might think, for example, of *Suspiria*'s heroine Suzy Bannion hearing, over the deafening roar of a thunderstorm the night of her arrival at the ballet academy, a fleeing girl saying the word "iris," of which she thinks nothing until she *sees* an iris painted on the mural in the headmistress's office; this turns out to be the secret switch revealing the passageway leading to the inner sanctum of the coven of witches running the institution.

This separation of the image from its context — that is, a further flattening out of the image and, consequently and by corollary, of the world that contains it — results in Sam Dalmas's misinterpretation of the woman as the victim and the man in the trenchcoat as the killer, an assumption upon which he bases the entirety of his detective work, when in reality, the exact opposite is true; as it turns out, the woman in white, whose name is later revealed to be Monica Ranieri, was attempting to murder her husband and she is responsible for the carnage that follows while he dutifully attempts to cover her bloody tracks. It would be easy to think of such plot twists as just that: moments that attempt to pull the rug out from under savvy viewers who know they are watching a mystery narrative. But the *giallo*'s generic subversiveness, part of its structure from its inception, and its obsessive interest in its sets and the visual components of those spaces indicate that it has more existential concerns. We might think of these twists through Virilio's description, in a chapter of *Lost Dimension* entitled "Improbable Architecture," of the changing architectural face of the postmodern city and how it relates to new possibilities and ideals of instantaneous communication:

> The perspectival effects of classical ornaments and the cinematic characteristics of certain styles, such as baroque, liberty or neo-liberty, is replaced by an integral cinematism, an absolute transitivity, involving the complete and thorough decomposition of realty and property. This decomposition is urban, architectural, and territorial. It is based on the deterioration of the ancient primacy of the physical separation and spatial limitation of human activities. And this very deterioration occurs so as to facilitate the interruption and commutation of time — or better, the absence of time — in instantaneous intercommunication. (Virilio 85)

The *gialli* of Argento can be viewed as ironic commentaries on this architectural ideology underlined by Virilio: attempts at such a "decomposition" have occurred, resulting in spaces that appear to open onto one another via their manifold translucent doors and windows (intended to

suggest through their heightened visibility the elimination of boundaries between zones), and indeed the *illusion* of communication is created because these deadly scenes are viewed by the films' protagonists in ways they could not have been without being framed by such an architecture; but in truth these panes of glass are great inhibitors, fatefully reducing the individuals existing on separate sides of them to decontextualized and misleading images who *believe* they are communicating unimpeded with one another. In this light, the *gialli*, with their alienated protagonists who find themselves sole witnesses, stranded in strange cities, and unable, until the very end, to comprehend the troubling sights they have seen, provide an incisive critique of the conditions of subjecthood in a postmodern urban space, where the appearance of transparency belies deeply carved chasms between individuals and an upsetting incapacity for the expression of personal experience. Once again, between two opposing terms — transparency and opacity — , the ever dialectically attuned *tableau vivant* uncovers a hidden third term: in this case, a kind of illusion of communication. These postmodern image-structures can actually rend the connective tissues between the individual and the other, the surface and what lies beyond, and problems of comprehension and communication emerge from these ruptures. Argento's sinister addendum is that that control and delimitation can become traps when we fail to recognize them, and that, consequently, there is something incomplete about our emotional and intellectual responses to the images that make up our world.

Throughout the film *Profondo rosso*, Marc Daly has been tormented by the idea that there was something "important" about a strange picture he saw in Helga Ullman's apartment when he unsuccessfully attempted to help her during the night of her murder. Shown briefly during that scene as Argento's camera pans the corridor, the painting in question appears as one among many that are all rather similar, depicting strange, distorted, ghostly faces in odd

groupings [Figure 26]. Needled by the feeling that something is amiss, Marc returns to the scene of the crime to examine the painting one more time, but discovers that it is not a painting at all; in fact, it is a mirror situated in such a way that it reflects a painting hung across the hall from it, a perfectly framed mirror image. What's more, when he looks at the facing painting that is the original of this image, he notices that it does not match up with what he visually registered the last time he was in the apartment. Standing across from the mirror, positioning himself in front of the painting [Figure 27], he finally realizes that he has known the face of the killer all along. He glimpsed the pallid face of his friend Carlo's "eccentric" mother Martha when, after committing the murder, she positioned herself in the same way and stood perfectly still, unblinking, making herself into one of the painted faces: an element of *tableau vivant* grafted atop the painted original [Figure 28]. (Argento flashes back to this initial scene and gives us a more sustained look at the brief glimpse we got earlier in the film.) In this way, the climactic scene[57] provides a neat formal parallel with the catalytic piazza scene, in which Marc Daly appears, immobilized by fear and suspicion, positioned before the "painted" *Nighthawks* backdrop. These visual palimpsests form arresting bookends to the movie's main narrative. In the first case, the protagonist is limited to existing *outside* of the *tableau vivant*; in the second case, the antagonist steps right *into* the *tableau*, deploying the transgression of its framing as part of her camouflage. The tricky mechanics of this revelation, an unlikely but perfect combination of mirror, canvas, and corridor, amount to one of the movie's primary theses: that this gallery of surfaces, of

[57] Just as Marc has his epiphany, the killer returns, surprising him and attacking him with a knife. After a struggle, she is decapitated when her necklace gets caught in the mechanisms of the elevator. The final shot is Marc Daly reflected in a pool of her surreally red blood, which looks more like a puddle of paint. It is worth noting that her decapitation mimics the earlier framing of only her head in the mirror/painting dyad, where her body was (fortunately for the purposes of her subterfuge) cut off at the neck.

images, can be highly deceptive, damning us to a partial (and often decontextualized) view, and that the truth lies somewhere *between* these superposed surfaces, amongst the strata of artifice.

Ultimately, the investigative viewpoint of Marc Daly and Sam Dalmas (and other protagonists of *gialli*) reproduces the analytical perspective of the text itself: our heroes find themselves caught like insects in these shiny surfaces (like the Bluebar and the art gallery's glass vestibule, or Helga Ullman's perfectly positioned mirror), subject to cinematically-rendered psychological focus pulls, but they eventually see through them because, for the purposes of their narratives, they *have to*: the murderer, too, is only revealed between the images, and this is achieved through the integration of the viewer *into* the framed, reflective surface. The obfuscating activity of this gallery city is mobilized by the killer and the cinematic mystery narrative in their service. Ultimately, however, it is the self-reflective position of the protagonist who must see through the conditions of his space (and how they relate to and help create his epistemological and existential crises) that allows for the mystery to be resolved.

So far, this section has primarily been focused on the *form* these images take, but I would be remiss not to discuss the subjects of these representations, especially because this is another of the ways in which Argento's work parallels Baudelaire's project; it is also, as we shall see, a way for Argento to consider more profoundly the nature of the images that make up works of cinema themselves, specifically horror films. In the images that form important thematic and narrative sites — for example, the murderer in the mirror or the "victim" trapped in the art gallery — the subject is, more often than not, a woman. We have already seen how Baudelaire's passerby and her female form are used to evoke ideas of classical grace and beauty, but the association between the horror genre and the victimized or murdered woman is a long and well-established one: Edgar Allen Poe, in his 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition," famously declares

that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”; Baudelaire himself often utilizes this “topic,” as in the poem “Une martyre,” an ekphrastic work that languorously elaborates a painting of the nude body of a beautiful woman reclined upon a bed, leading to the revelation that she has been decapitated and her head, “like a ranunculus” (“*comme une renoncule*”), sits on an end table, a morbid floral decoration. This is an affinity shared with Argento and other directors of *gialli*, whose work is often criticized for its misogyny and aestheticized depictions of the deaths of beautiful women.

Laura Mulvey explains in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” how “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story-line, *to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation*” (Mulvey 19, my emphasis). Argento takes this to an extreme in his films, where the contemplation is erotic and sadistic, voyeuristic and interpolating, and where the world literally comes to a halt around the hero during these moments in which he or she is looking at these normally female-gendered images of violence. While the women themselves are not so much frozen in these scenes (at least not to the degree we have seen with the more blatant examples of *tableaux vivants* in *gialli*), we might say that they still are fixed in two ways: 1) through their eventual death or violent immobilization; and 2) through their alignment with works of art in a variety of manners (via spatial juxtaposition with actual works of art [paintings in *Profondo rosso*, sculptures in *L’Uccello*] and through their portrait-like framing in windows and doorways). But while these sequences in some ways spring from this precise impulse underlined by Mulvey, they also are made to subvert it retroactively through processes of investigation: the women in these two films are in fact catalysts of the narrative, and while women usually fulfill the role of beautiful victim in *gialli*, there are also notable exceptions

which show women perpetrating violence, especially in the work of Argento, who often creates female antagonists.

More than this manifestation of a physical threat, however, I would argue that the active dimension that Argento develops through certain of the women in his films is that of a female gaze that is specifically figured, through his cinematic framing and thematic associations, as the image looking back. That the image looks back in the moment of violence (a moment that forms the image and at the same time sees the destruction of its subject) is upsetting, and results in the kind of voyeuristic complicity that Mulvey establishes between the male protagonist and the cinema-going audience. But the encounter of gazes, in these *gialli*, also constitutes in itself a kind of violent specular contact. The shock of these clashing gazes, magnified across panes of glass, forms the underlying basis for the films themselves, in which a great deal of the violence that ensues, perpetrated by a female killer, also centers around images and scenarios of "watching." Adam Knee, in an early critical essay on Argento entitled "Gender, Genre, Argento," likewise points out how "To the extent that Argento's films consistently foreground ambiguities of gender and sexuality and repeatedly suggest the instability of power relations implied by acts of looking and perceiving, they force us to move toward the kinds of critical positions… that question the rigidity of certain psychoanalytic schema and of certain assumptions about gendered binarisms in the horror film" (Knee 215).

Mulvey says that "In contrast to woman as icon, the active male figure...demands a three-dimensional space corresponding to that of the mirror recognition, in which the alienated subject internalised his own representation of his imaginary existence. He is a figure in a landscape" (Mulvey 20). But Argento turns the diegetic space around on his male protagonists, making it unreal (as in the eerily enchanted piazza), unnavigable to degrees (as in the treacherous glass

vestibule of the art gallery), unknowable and perilous; the female killers, on the contrary, exhibit a mastery of space and an intuitive understanding of its aesthetically-warped contours. Carlo's mother in *Profondo rosso* understands so thoroughly the optics of the apartment corridor lined in paintings and mirrors that she can effectively hide herself and her identity there for the duration of the movie, and Monica Ranieri, the killer in *L'Uccello*, stages her final attack on Sam Dalmas in the same gallery space, populated with unsettling, monstrous sculptures, where he saw her being "attacked" in the beginning. Unlike Mulvey's dynamic of recognition between the male viewing subject and the male movie character, facilitated by the camera's male gaze, Argento seems more interested in effecting a kind of cinematic "disalienation"[58] on the part of his characters and viewers. The space in which his protagonist finds himself, during these uncanny moments, is one whose strangeness he is suddenly attuned to, populated by sculptural figures and stalked by a menace that comes from, and returns to, the malevolent world of images. Urban space seems to be infected by this discomforting mode of seeing and being seen, and in this way the city is inextricably linked to the violence and terror for which it becomes a theatre. As we have already discussed, one of the main narrative conflicts in *gialli* is the protagonist coming to understand the extent to which the city consists in images *and* to interpret them correctly by properly understanding the clues around them. The implication in these striking scenes of horror in which the image enacts a retributive violence upon the occupants of an uncanny, gallery-like space is that this is the result of a wider-ranging, more realistically grounded impulse, at the

[58] I am borrowing this term from R. Chambers' discussion of Baudelaire, in which he uses it to refer to the sensation instilled in the poetic subject (and, by extension, the reader) through encounters with allegorical figures in the context of the modern city. This "disalienation" is an epiphanic understanding of a kind of mysterious under- (or other) side of one's "normal" existence — oftentimes revealing the unnaturalness or the contrivances of the modern, of the distance between one's self and others and surroundings — from which, however, the possibility of escaping is precluded. It is, in some ways, a kind of hopeless awareness.

individual and social levels, to transform the world around us into a series of pictures. But since the real world is composed of living beings — moving, breathing, seeing — the unsustainable *tableau vivant* is the appropriate form for depicting this tension and the dangers of aestheticizing, selective modes of seeing. The shock of exchanged gazes permitted by the *tableau vivant* in Argento's *gialli* is another way of translating the "flash" of the passerby's glance in Baudelaire's poem, a visual representation of undeniable otherness that manages to pierce the formal structures that seek to suppress it.

Women, in cinema and in the wider world, are most often subjected to these perniciously aestheticizing mechanisms because the auteur and the camera (as an extension of his gaze) have so often been male; consequently, a female presence in the world of film is frequently coded as "other." Mulvey points out that these representational techniques have, in fact, been instrumental in the entire history of cinema, and she says that in narrative film, male filmmakers and characters attempt to deal with an anxiety induced by female figures with two different tactics: "preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment, or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of the *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence overvaluation, the cult of the female star)" (Mulvey 21). Mulvey states that Hitchcock employs both of these avenues in his *oeuvre*, and Argento, who has sometimes been called the "Italian Hitchcock," does the same. The first avenue Mulvey calls "voyeurism" and the second "fetishistic scopophilia," and we can observe how Argento's murder sequences trade in both of these tactics. Watching the woman as she is violently murdered through windows and doorways is blatantly voyeuristic, even as the victims

implore the male protagonists to come to their rescue. But their transformation into images, added to the galleries of their surrounding spaces, might also be called fetishistic. It is worth noting that the professions of both of these female killers — a gallerist in *L'Uccello*, a former movie star in *Profondo rosso* — center on the concept of the image and cults of beauty, though Argento shies away from explicitly connecting these vocations with their psychological conditions and violent tendencies.

Logically, from his interest in the mechanics of cinema and other visual arts, Argento develops a fascination with eyes, which helps to shed light on his use of *tableau* compositions, but also relates to his interest in, and subversion of, gender[59]. The juxtaposition of a mobile, terrified gaze and a petrified, stilled body is, in fact, rather a common one in early *gialli*, and often brings together a sort of stylized visualization of the films' themes of looking and a narrative contrivance that establishes the nature of victimhood (of wholly bodily or merely traumatically ocular nature). Examples of this include: Bava's *Sei donne per l'assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964), whose stylish title sequence sees its cast of fashion-world characters (models and designers) positioned alongside their interpreters' names and faceless mannequins in immobile poses [Figure 29], a few of which are broken only by the sweep of a roving gaze; Paolo Cavara's *La tarantola dal ventre nero* (*The Black Belly of the Tarantula*, 1971), in which the poison of an exotic wasp is used to paralyze a killer's victims so as to keep them alive as they are disemboweled, the camera focusing on their panicked gaze; and Argento's *Opera* (1987), in which the heroine is forced to look on at shocking scenes of murder by a strip of needles taped below her eyelids, which prevents her from closing her eyes, and tied up so she is unable to turn

[59] Knee points out that "the eye becomes thematically pivotal as an organ which is itself not intrinsically gendered, but which is at the center of sensory and erotic experience nevertheless" (219).

away. The deployment of the *tableau vivant* and of the explicitly framed subject in Argento's films is another example of this thematically dictated form. The obvious temptation might be to think about the metacinematic implications of such compositions; they transform the movie screen into a mirror of its audience, the members of which likewise sit, immobilized in their seats and by their fascination, and made to look on at the horrors of the proceedings before them (the clearest example of this is *Opera*). But the movies' characters must not be neglected, either, for their always gendered nature relates more broadly to questions of artistic representation, agency, and subject-object dynamics. Even when men are contained in these frameworks, as in *L'Uccello*, their looking out implies a subject on the other side of the composition's boundary, one who is female, who is (by all appearances) a victim, and who, most significantly, *looks back*. The voyeuristic impulse is troubled in such scenes, where the desire to look (in a manner clearly coded as plastic or cinematic in the *giallo*) is confronted with another gaze that denies such easy 'pleasure' and instead initiates processes of alienation, discomfort, and empathy that inevitably take off into the films' investigatory narrative trajectories. Put another way, these scenes forcefully revise Laura Mulvey's cinematic "male gaze" and align more closely with the impulse that Carol J. Clover identifies as one of the characteristics of the slasher film[60] — namely, the potential for a male audience's identification with a female victim. This is, once again, a metacinematic gesture, but it also applies to the diegetic world of the film and to the *giallo*'s interest in questions of gender, agency, witnessing, and victimhood. If a *tableau* can be productively understood as an architectonic view onto our environment, a framework into which

[60] Clover, unfortunately, does not consider the *giallo* in her very influential study *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, no doubt because of her interest in American productions, particularly, and because of the relative unavailability of *gialli* for home viewing at the time of its writing. They would, in fact, have served as excellent support for her thesis.

individuals pass and through which we glimpse specific situations in a spatially delineated form, then the urban *gialli* of Argento interrogate the moral implications of this aestheticized vision of the world: what happens when the "representational subject" is a woman in peril? What is the obligation of the "viewer"? How does this image form and inflect its broader context? And what happens when the image (precisely because it is not *merely* an image) looks back? These are the questions that come into focus when, like the visitor in Borromini's forced perspective gallery at the Palazzo Spada, the protagonist (and the viewer) of the *giallo* finds him or herself surrounded by a space that has become surreal, whose senses of perspective and proportion are undergoing terrifying, kaleidoscopic slidings that cause them to doubt their easy conceptions of the world around them. The *giallo* considers the dangers of looking and while it usually does this a positioning of women within its frames that might be considered objectifying, the genre takes pains, through its deployment of the *tableau vivant*, to establish the ambiguity of the image that this process ultimately creates: women are victims, *and* women are killers. This represents an extension of the dynamic that we have already seen in play in "À une passante," in which the passerby is turned into a statue but at the same time is able to convulse the narrator into uncontrollable positions with her gaze and to enact upon him a kind of petrification.

We look at images, but, as the writing scrawled on a mirror in a dark room of Argento's Profondo Rosso memorabilia store and museum in Rome has it, "*Le immagini ti guardano*" — "The images are looking at you" [Figure 30]. If Argento's films center around the image — variously conceived as a site of violence, as a means of analysis, and as an aesthetic manifestation of individual and collective psychologies — and the act of looking, then the city, a place of encounter that can be by turns insidiously normalizing and shockingly alienating, is the ideal venue to magnify these concerns through his own carefully wrought cinematic style. His

films are narratively horrific in their violence, of course, but they are also formally unsettling in ways that seem to open up into greater questions of spectatorship in the realm of art *and* the ways in which we see and act upon each other in the real world. By transforming the entire city into a surreal gallery of *tableaux vivants* and architectonic *tableaux*, Argento emphasizes one of the most uncanny qualities of this form — its use of the human body as medium and the consequent ability of those human bodies, even when apparently subsumed by the image, to look back at their viewer — and makes the dark side of representation an inescapable part of the wider world.

Chapter 4 Worlds Within Worlds: *Tableaux Vivants* and Inscribed Colonial Fantasies

In previous chapters, I have attempted to further develop the spatial dynamics of the *tableau vivant* by identifying it, as it is incorporated into literary or cinematic texts, with different architectural features — a clearly delineated theatrical stage, a connecting space between separate rooms, and a framed view glimpsed through a doorway or window — that have in common a certain liminal status, a quality we can take either literally (as structural features mediating between inside and outside, between one chamber and the next) or figuratively (as compositions uniting or differentiating discrete phenomenological, artistic, and socio-political spaces). But now I would like to look at *tableaux* that we can situate clearly and totally *within* another space, as microcosms inscribed within wider worlds. Specifically, I will examine texts that detail the workings of and causes underlying such structures and consider the question of their ultimate collapse. The interplay of fantasy and reality in these scenarios is one of the reasons for which the *tableau vivant* (a form that exists, as if by enchantment, in a state in which time has seemingly been abolished), emerges as a useful aesthetic device for artists interested in the possibilities of depicting a world on the verge of extinction (or a structure at the point of collapse). It is also thanks to this dialectic, through which the most uncanny aspects of the *tableau vivant* are heightened, that their incorporation into novels and films, somewhat paradoxically, regains real-world political dimensions: the denial, the anxiety, the resignation that all find expression in these groves of petrified bodies need to be considered as abstracted responses — survival instincts or letting the abyss draw nearer — to historical realities, a slippage out of time that can be either willed or unwitting.

These worlds of *tableaux vivants* constitute meticulous fantasies and cloistered realities at one and the same time, and that these two apparently contradictory states create and sustain one another. I will primarily discuss two pairs of thinkers' exercises in this realm: Pierre Klossowski's theorization of the inscribed *tableau vivant* in the paintings of Balthus and John Banville's novel *Ghosts* as an illustration of Klossowski's model in a literary text; and Alain Robbe-Grillet's novel *Jealousy* and Marguerite Duras's film *India Song* as a cinematic extension of *nouveau roman* aesthetics that use their avant-garde formalism to underscore their political reflections upon the decadence of European colonial enclaves in South Asia.

These are all texts that might, at first glance, appear largely to eschew the political by sequestering themselves in niches of torpor and worldly detachment, by indulging in narcissism or solipsism as prevailing modes for their narratives. But these striking atmospherics[61] should also be considered as a *posture* taken on the part of the text in response to imminent collapse, a pervasive aesthetic immobility that reflects the frozen gestures, defensive or oblivious, of their characters who sense the end nearing, the fantasy fading.

4.1 Pierre Klossowski and the Artistic Inscription of the *Tableau Vivant*: Pictorial Containment of Time

Pierre Klossowski, the French literary theorist, visual artist, and author, develops a complex theory of the *tableau vivant* in a 1957 essay on the paintings of the artist Balthus, who also happened to be the writer's brother. In this article, entitled "Du tableau vivant dans la

[61] The film critic Pauline Kael dismissively referred to such texts as "Come-Dressed-as-the-Sick-Soul-of-Europe Parties" in reviews of Antonioni's *La notte*, Fellini's *La Dolce vita*, and Resnais's *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. Kael's description could just as easily refer to *India Song* or any number of *nouveaux romans*, the works of Julien Gracq, and even in the strains of decadence in Banville's *Ghosts*, which builds itself around Watteau's canvases of an endangered aristocratic world.

peinture de Balthus" (and re-titled as "Balthus: Beyond Realism" when it appeared in English translation by Lionel Abel), Klossowski begins by making a distinction between the word and the image: whereas the *parole,* requiring certain linguistic choices, performs an act of prioritization by consigning certain elements to the past while at the same time actualizing others, he says that:

> the image, on the other hand, has for its content precisely the existence which has been forgotten; it ignores devouring and distancing time; in it, past existence remains omnipresent. This is why painted perspective gives as much importance to the distant as to the near object…*Painted* space, visual simulacrum of physical space, restores the *felt* space which had vanished in physical space; but this simulacrum has the ability to restore and unfold the past experience in the form of an extended object, the picture, present with other objects in physical space. As an object, the painting is separated by its frame, its dimensions, from the rest of the world in which it is inserted; but as a simulacrum, it puts in question the reality of the other objects that happen to surround it.
> ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" [trans. Abel] 28, emphases in original)

> l'image a pour contenu l'existence oubliée même, elle ignore le temps qui dévore et qui éloigne, en elle l'existence passée subsiste omniprésente ; c'est pourquoi la perspective peinte donne autant d'importance à l'objet distant qu'à l'objet proche…L'espace *peint*, simulacre visuel de l'espace physique, restitue l'espace *vécu* qui s'était évanoui dans l'espace physique ; mais ce simulacre a la vertu de restituer le *vécu* révolu et de le dérouler sous la forme d'un objet, le tableau, présent parmi d'autres objets dans l'espace physique. En tant qu'objet, le tableau, par son cadre, sa dimension, se délimite par rapport au monde ambient où il s'insère en tant qu'objet ; mais en tant que simulacre il remet en question les autres objets qui l'environnent fortuitement.
> ("Du tableau vivant" 109-110, emphases in original)

This definition suggests a conceptualization of the image as a space in which the past itself is actualized in concrete terms, a vision of the simulacrum as sanctum that restores *lived* experience in the form of a tangible object. For the purposes of his argument, Klossowski rephrases (temporal) *lived* experience as this "*felt* space," thereby bringing to the fore one of the ways in which we attempt to concretize or render sensible the ephemerality of times and things past. This is the conversion of time into space, e.g. Balthus's paintings which, through an "innate

architectonic sense," visualize and re-compose the abstract temporal concept of 'childhood' in the form of the more easily graspable spatial unit of the 'childhood room' which is always endowed with "a certain '*Häuslichkeit*' — the bourgeois atmosphere of the parents' home with all the objects of daily living" ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" 50). This is a specific example of a general tendency of visual art, according to Klossowski, for inherent in his discourse is an understanding of the preservative, or even salvational, potential of the work of art which not only takes as its representational *subject* that which has been physically "vanished" by ravenous time, but which also performs a restitution, rendering it once more a clear, comprehensible *object*. We might thus consider the operation performed by a work of visual art as a kind of translation from temporal experience (taking the form of "felt space") into "painted space," with original and translation having as their common term and shared context the real, physical space of the viewer. Like the *tableau vivant*, the painting enjoys the privilege of re-working one of its ontological constraints into a considerable virtue: while the painting is always a simulacrum and can only ever *re*-present its absent subject, it can in so doing restore in the physical terms of its materiality, more ably than any other medium, that which *can never again* be present physically. More than the absent figure, the painting's subject is its vanished scene — not its physical existence, but the *time* of its existence; and the inevitable absence of the representational subject in physical space is the means through which the painting asserts its own presence as the restitution of that subject to the same physical space. This is what Balthus' paintings perform and thematize.

If the image in general represents, for Klossowski, the capacity for the physical manifestation of that which has been lost to the flow of time, then Balthus' paintings, specifically, are the apogee of this lofty artistic impulse because of the device through which

they highlight this common pictorial process — the *tableau vivant*. For Klossowski, Balthus' work has as its temporal center childhood, and isolated elements and figures from various canvases serve as reminders of this vanished period in the artist's life. The paintings become the bounded spaces in which Balthus achieves the restitution of that time through his ability to artistically "*contenir* le temps dans lequel vivent les êtres" ("Du tableau vivant" 115, my emphasis), to "contain the time in which its figures live" and which forms its true subject. Klossowski suggests that such pictorial "containment" of memory is accomplished through the device of the *tableau vivant*:

> Hence, perhaps, his way of posing objects, of assimilating the very poses of his figures to the linear rigor of things, in short, his tendency to *push the pose to the point of excess*. Hence, doubtless, a certain monomania of *attitudes*…A quasi-pedagogical will to re-educate the eye of the spectator by going back to the traditional understanding *of faces and things* is complicated in Balthus by his demand for something which his figures of children are called on to express; in *their stiffened attitudes* there is a strange obstinacy, a stiff-necked insistence on *making the ear deaf to the sounds of our industrial world*, of the world in which the spectator is standing…Balthus plunges his children into an atmosphere of prolonged siesta and perpetual recess…
> ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" 50, my emphases)

> De là, peut-être, cette façon de faire poser les objets, d'assimiler à la rigueur linéaire des accessoires, la pose même des personnages, bref de *pousser le pose à l'excès* ; de là, sans doute, une certaine monomanie des *attitudes*…Une volonté quasi pédagogique de rééduquer le regard du spectateur par un retour à la compréhension traditionnelle *des physionomies et des choses*, se double chez Balthus d'une revendication que ses figures d'enfants ont pour mission d'exprimer ; il y a dans *leurs attitudes raidies* je ne sais quelle obstination, quel entêtement de faire *la sourde oreille aux rumeurs de notre monde* usinier, ce monde même d'où le spectateur contemple le tableau…[il] plonge ainsi les enfants dans une atmosphère de sieste prolongée, de récréation perpétuelle…
> ("Du tableau vivant" 115, my emphases)

Klossowski locates in these canvases a general atmosphere of languid prolongation and perpetual stillness *within* the painting. The radical nature of Balthus's use of the *tableau vivant* has to do with this air of 'difference' or unreality it generates in his paintings, as it both reinforces Klossowski's general statement that the image is a means of physically recuperating lost

existences, *and* singles out this particular artistic corpus as emblematic of that capacity through the paintings' reflections on the act of restitution they perform and thematize.

But to what state of being, exactly, do Balthus's *tableaux vivants* return those "forgotten existences"? The answer, it would appear, is not quite to life: the artist, in composing these scenes, places his figures "in a space where they subsist outside of life, beyond death; hence this impression of a *tableau vivant inscribed within* the painting, of motionless pantomime that certain of his large compositions give us" ("Du tableau vivant" 115, my translation, emphasis in original). The compositional space of the painting becomes a sort of pictorial "great beyond," whose frozen denizens are neither alive nor dead, belong to no real time and space but that of the *tableau vivant* that Balthus deliberately "inscribes" within his canvas. These images acknowledge the utopian artistic impulse (and the extent to which that impulse can succeed) of spatially preserving and materially re-presenting that which no longer exists temporally, but they also cannily acknowledge something that one might consider either a limitation, or an unprecedented opportunity: that any existence we seek to preserve through art is, by its own nature — even before it succumbs to any kind of 'loss' to time — ephemeral. Life is finite. That fundamental ephemerality is that which Klossowski considers Balthus to be containing through his inscription of the *tableau vivant* within his paintings. Unlike Watteau, whose heavy theatrical "borrowings" Klossowski identifies and whence he claims a resultant impression of "la vie même" ("Du tableau vivant" 116), of life itself, Balthus' paintings are less concerned with precise simulation of life and more preoccupied with the capture of one of its ultimate, existential truths: "with Balthus," he tells us, "[there is] a to-and-fro of life between its own scene and that of its spiritual origin which lies outside of life" ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" 116). Another way of phrasing this would be to say that Balthus' canvases negotiate and fluctuate between the

physical and the metaphysical sides of life. This simple but profound assessment can assist us in different ways: first, it makes mirror images of life and the painting, of the temporal measure (and limit) of an individual's physical existence and its visual representation — which, as Klossowski informs us, succeeds in spatially capturing the time of lost existence; and next, it conveys the liminality of the painted space in which the *tableaux vivants* are situated, somewhere between the literal "scene of life" and its "spiritual origin which lies outside of life" — not quite life, nor yet quite death. This ambivalent status corresponds to the broader "predilection Klossowski displays for the *tableau vivant*, which relates essentially to the intermediary position the *tableau vivant* occupies between the work (the representation) and reality (life)" (Halimi 138, my translation). The scene of the *tableau vivant* in Balthus is a kind of limbo in every sense of the word, in which its figures are frozen and its scenes suspended.

The question of life and death similarly haunts John Banville's novel *Ghosts*. The main narrative arc of the "Art Trilogy," of which this text forms the middle panel, concerns our narrator Freddie's crime, punishment, (failed) re-emergence into the world, and fundamental existential crisis; he steals a valuable painting from the home of an acquaintance, is caught in the act by a maid named Josie Bell, then kidnaps her and brutally bludgeons her to death in his car with a hammer. All this takes place in the first novel in the trilogy, *The Book of Evidence*, and *Ghosts* finds Freddie, apparently released from prison, working as the amanuensis of a noted art historian on a sleepy islet off the Irish coast. The main painting about which he writes is a fictional work by a fictional painter — *Le monde d'or*, by Jean Vaublin. This painting, and others in the artist's corpus, incites a great deal of reflection on Freddie's part about where precisely their intrigue lies, what mysteries they contain. Here, Freddie waxes poetic about *Le monde d'or:*

> Such stillness; though the scene moves there is no movement; in this twilit glade the helpless tumbling of things through *time has come to a halt*: what other painter before or after has managed to illustrate this fundamental paradox of art with such profound yet playful artistry? *These creatures will not die, even if they have never lived.* They are wonderfully detailed figurines, animate yet frozen in immobility: I think of the little manikins on a music-box, or in one of those old town-hall clocks, poised, waiting for the miniature music that will never start up, for the bronze bell that will not peal. *It is the very stillness of their world that permits them to endure; if they stir they will die*, will crumble into dust and leave nothing behind save a few scraps of brittle lace, a satin bow, a shoe buckle, a broken mandolin.
> (*Ghosts* 95, my emphases)

In this description, Banville's narrator expresses an understanding of the temporal dynamics of the painted scene that is very similar to Klossowski's analysis of Balthus's works. It incorporates two key aspects of the *tableau vivant* — the notable "stillness" of its figures, and the attendant silence conveyed in Freddie's comparison between these characters and the figurines from "music boxes" and "town-hall clocks" that, in this world, never sound their bells or chimes — and situates this configuration within the delimited space of the "twilit glade." Like Klossowski, Freddie associates these qualities with a status that is set apart from the realms of life and death, and the figures in the painting are subject to neither the one nor the other within its confines. The relationship between this formal quality of *Le monde d'or* and what we understand to be its subject — namely, a certain troubling timelessness — is causal; it is "the very stillness of their world that permits them to endure." Banville's "endurance" amounts to a rephrasing of Klossowski's "subsistence," both formulations being decidedly temporal in nature, both based on general ideas concerning the permanence of visual art (only pushed to a point of excess), and both centering on the preservation of an existence whose nature is difficult to pin down accurately. *Le monde d'or* contains time and preserves forgotten existences, like Klossowski's image as the visual simulacrum of vanished space or experience. In other words, these paintings are existential *fantasies* related to, but distinct from, physiological and historical *reality.*

But what makes *Le monde d'or* like the works of Balthus in particular is the way in which it similarly thematizes this preservational capacity through its pictorial inscription of the theatrical *tableau vivant.* Here, Banville mirrors the themes of the novel's narrative and the mindset of its narrator. Freddie expresses his predicament: "Still the dream persists, suppressed but always there, that somehow by some miraculous effort of the heart what was done could be undone. What form would such atonement take that would turn back time and bring the dead to life? None. None possible, *not in the real world*" (*Ghosts* 68, my emphasis). His desire is to perform a restitution of an existence lost to time — of the life of the maid he murdered — and while he ostensibly acknowledges the impossibility of such a task, it nevertheless comes to constitute much of the narrative impulse of the two thirds of the trilogy that follow the first book, in which the decisive loss takes place: *Ghosts* deals in large part with Freddie's voyeuristic fixation on a young woman, Flora, who is one of the shipwrecked visitors to the island, and his relentless aestheticization of her; *Athena*, the last novel, centers around Freddie's interactions with a mysterious woman (known only as A.) with ties to the Irish criminal underworld, details their sadomasochistic relationship and sees Freddie frequently making comparisons between her and Josie Bell. A thematic continuity emerges between all three novels in the trilogy: *The Book of Evidence* chronicles an act of physical violence, *Ghosts* reflects upon it and unsettlingly presents various scenarios of aesthetic violence, and *Athena* merges these two strains. Though Freddie professes his desire to "bring the dead back to life" and undo what he has irreparably done, these intentions belie his actual interactions with the world around him and, especially, with the real women who people it; his unyielding aestheticism and unchecked solipsism result in a perpetual denial of subjectivity to the female characters in these texts. Paintings become the sites of conflict between Freddie's desires and his actions, for in them he sees the salvational

potential of the image as a means of effecting the kind of resurrection that is only possible "not in the real world." His drive derives from a real event but is finally incompatible with reality, and therefore the textual world he creates from it also exists within, but separate from, reality.

Accordingly, the feat Freddie's mind performs is to place his characters outside of the 'real world' and into an artificial, fantastic one. "Another dead one," Freddie rather insincerely laments after the passing of an elderly widow he met and briefly befriended upon his arrival on the island, "dear Jesus, I do keep on adding to them, don't I? Well, that's life, I suppose. I think of them like the figures in one of Vaublin's twilit landscapes, placed here and there in isolation about the scene, each figure somehow the source of its own illumination, aglow in the midst of shadows, still and speechless, not dead and yet not alive either, waiting perhaps to be brought to *some kind of life*" (*Ghosts* 82, my emphasis). Freddie's imaginative transfiguration of the deceased into Vaublin's "still and speechless" painted figures is an apt metaphor for his aesthetic outlook and would extend to the callous way in which he encounters living people even before their deaths. (For all the false-ringing sentimentality of the previous citation, his semantic reduction of this woman to merely "another dead one" and his subsequent addition of her to his morbid running tally speak volumes about this narrator's "coldness and cruelty," to evoke Deleuze.) But the real conceptual key to this passage, and the way to bring out its resonances with Klossowski's discussion of Balthus, is his insistence neither upon life nor upon death, but rather upon "some kind of life." This is not only a specification of the special kind of pictorial existence of Vaublin's painted figures, but also a better expression of Freddie's real desire — which, it becomes clear, is not so much to truly restore his victim to life, but rather to preserve her in the form of a *tableau vivant.*

"There are nightmares too, of course," Freddie discloses early in the novel, "the recurring ones, lit with a garish, unearthly glow, in which the dead *speak to me*: flesh, burst bone, the slow, secret, blue-black ooze. I shall try not to recount them, these bloodstained pageants. They are no use to me…It is not the dead that interest me now, no matter how piteously they may howl in the chambers of the night. Who, then? The living? No, no, something in between; *some third thing*" (*Ghosts* 29, my emphasis). The problem that unites the living and the dead, and which makes an unproblematic restitution to the world of the former or abandonment to the ranks of the latter an impossibility for Freddie, is that they both *speak.* Even the fetid "blue-black ooze" of decomposing bodies conjures images of ink stains on bone-white paper. "Some kind of life," then, "some third thing" lying in between, becomes the only option when written and oral forms of discourse become unbearable reminders of guilt. All language is a *memento mori.* Taking into consideration the endlessly chattering Freddie's unrepentant stance on his crimes and the uselessness or unbearableness of speech that always somehow relates back to it, we can better understand why the stillness and silence of Vaublin's "twilit groves" is enticing to him. "Some third thing" is like Klossowski's "subsist[ence] outside of life, beyond death." Freddie's association between the preservative quality of Vaublin's paintings ("if they stir they will die, will crumble into dust and leave nothing behind save a few scraps of brittle lace, a satin bow, a shoe buckle, a broken mandolin") and his goal of resurrection is made in bad faith; Josie Bell may find a liminal aesthetic pseudo-life in these images, but Freddie's relegation of her to the *tableau vivant* of a Vaublin painting offers him the additional benefit of stilling and silencing her, removing her from the realm of the word and perpetuating the very same identitarian violence — the stripping away of her subjectivity, her objectification — that allowed Freddie to commit the crime in the first place. In Banville, any statement of the salvational, eternal life of

images should be read not only as a particular understanding of the workings of visual art in opposition to the word, but also as a retroactive aesthetic justification for Freddie's philosophical "failure of imagination" (*Book of Evidence* 215) and its brutal repercussions.

Banville's attention to the tension between his endlessly talkative narrator and the images that he violently makes of the world further reflects Klossowski's theorization of the *tableau vivant.* When attempting to formulate the complex, difficult temporal modality of the *tableau vivant,* Klossowski chooses to do so in more abstract linguistic terms. Analyzing *The Room* [Figure 31], Klossowski questions what is happening in this cryptic scene:

> Have we happened on the issue of sinister adventures? Daylight falls on the physical charms of the victim; she is thrust back and offered to the sight. Is this the orgasm following rape? Or has nothing at all happened? The picture seems situated at the extreme point where the *nothing-has-happened* and the *irrevocable* are held in equilibrium. The determined gesture of the figure drawing the curtain is like an endless *reiteration* of the *flagrant offense* which only the cat on the table witnessed…
> ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" 50, emphases in original)

> Sommes nous au lendemain d'une sinistre aventure? La lumière du jour tombe sur la victime offerte et renversée sur la chaise longue ; est-ce par l'orgasme consécutif à un viol? Ou bien ne s'est il rien passé? Le tableau semble se situer au point limite où le *rien ne s'est passé* et *l'irrévocable* se tiennent en équilibre. Le geste décidé du personnage soulevant le rideau assure comme une réitération sans fin du flagrant délit dont seul le chat sur la table a été le témoin…
> ("Du tableau vivant" 116-117, emphases in original)

In yet another parallel with the subject matter of Banville's trilogy, Balthus' canvas is suggestive of crime, of an act of sexual violence. But to Klossowski it is merely *suggestive* and, a peculiarity of its *tableau vivant* form, it simultaneously presents a mystery and denies its resolution. Has a rape occurred, or has "nothing at all happened"? The answer — the best answer possible — is that both statements are correct. In its arresting of narrative time, the picture renders the crime both an inevitability and an impossibility. In the words of Freddie Montgomery, "time has come to a halt" in this painting through the deliberate artistic stratagem

of the *tableau vivant*, thus crystallizing the "fundamental paradox of art" that he sees Vaublin as so admirably and peerlessly elucidating. If *The Room* presents a suspended action (the drawing of the curtain that sheds light upon the vulnerable female figure reclining on the divan) during a frozen moment (the time of the painting), the same could be said of any image. This is, after all, the "fundamental paradox" of *all* of visual art, the bind in which it finds itself, the root of much of its affective power. Why, then, do artists such as Balthus and Vaublin set themselves apart from the crowd? Their adoption of the device of the *tableau vivant*, according to Klossowski, allows for a special refiguring and visual statement of narrative time that seems to breach the traditional constraints of the plastic arts.

Klossowski identifies two temporal modes, something like grammatical tenses, in the suspended visual moment of the canvas — the "nothing-has-happened" and the "irrevocable." While these descriptors do belong to the instant depicted in Balthus' painting and are, therefore, proper to the pictorial present tense, they also manage to pull into the fold both past and future tenses. The "nothing-has-happened" is the semantic production of an assessment of the present moment, but it defines this present in terms of the past, of the summation of all the moments preceding it (a swath of time that is otherwise excluded by the limitations placed upon the painter) — nothing *has* happened. The "irrevocable" also makes a statement about the present moment, in this case admitting that something *has* indeed happened, but instead it extends into the narrative time of the future — in all the moments yet to come, what *has* happened here can never be undone. This painting's *tableau vivant* form — with its sculptural nudity, its dramatic, excessive posing and gestures, its representational strain and bodily tension, and its undeniable theatrical presence, down to the drawing of the curtain to reveal the *mise en scène* — succeeds in detaching the visual moment from the canvas, bringing its figures into high relief, creating a dual

sense of corporeal reality and artistic illusion. It *extends* the composition spatially and temporally, and through its (literal) dramatic foregrounding of temporality it allows for the incursion of the past and the future into a knowingly suspended present. In its representation of the narrated event and its narrative time, the crime has both already occurred and never taken place. Less of a vignette and more of a novel, the painting inscribed with a *tableau vivant* is thus a work that situates itself at the edge of its medium, approaching something more like theater, more like literature, but not truly either — "some third thing."

It should be noted that the paedophilic overtones of *The Room* are remarked upon even by Balthus's brother, who detects in the nude figure the suggestion of a sexual violation. In this sense, the painting evinces a similar impulse to that observed in Robbe-Grillet's *Topology of a Phantom City*, and both serve as demonstrations of an especially insidious capacity of the *tableau vivant* to participate in, while also distancing itself from, such crimes: as Klossowski states, the painting's use of the inscribed *tableau vivant* form means that the rape both occurred and did not occur, and it therefore depicts *and* does not depict it at the same time. And, like Robbe-Grillet's meticulously described *tableaux* of similarly vulnerable female victims and of implicit violence, in both cases the *tableau vivant* offers up its subjects to a sadistic kind of viewing which it also takes pains to suggest is analytical or investigative. It could be said, therefore, that the *tableau vivant,* in which the moment is arrested and therefore prised loose from a larger condemnatory narrative, offers to some the opportunity simultaneously to "commit" (or to represent) a crime, and to be absolved for it. It is worth noting that the idea of the inscription of a work of art has also been, at least implicitly, part of recent discourse surrounding Balthus's paintings and their paedophilic nature: in 2017, Anna Zuccaro and Mia Merrill started a petition, which gained nearly 12,000 signatures, asking that the Metropolitan

Museum of Art in New York "remove, or at least reimagine the way that it presented [Balthus's painting] 'Thérèse Dreaming,' of a young girl in languorous, erotic recline" (Bellafante). This petition could be understood as a call to clearly inscribe Balthus's painting within the context of his noted practice of using young girls, including "the daughters of his servants" (Bellafante) in some cases, as models. This sort of contextual inscription, within an "expanded text for instance" (Bellafante), would go some way towards negating the slippery moral ambiguity that Klossowski himself recognizes as an attribute that is imparted upon these paintings through Balthus's use of the *tableau vivant* as an aesthetic feature of his work.

Klossowski's analysis of another of Balthus' large canvases, *Le Passage du Commerce St.-André* [Figure 32], further develops this confluence of the pictorially spatial and narratively temporal in the inscribed *tableau vivant*:

> *Passage du Commerce St.-André* does not refer exclusively to the external scene set in a Parisian alley of that name; it doubtless has the additional meaning of a 'passage' to freedom by virtue of the 'commerce' which every true artist makes with death, yielding to death the obsessions of life. It is for this price that the artist attains access to the realm of being of which art is only the simulacrum; and it is the curse of art that it is only such a simulacrum. If the *living picture*, a false genre in itself, informs us of this effort of life to find meaning in life's suspension, then the insertion of the '*living picture*' in the painting which I detected in Balthus' work, reveals the function of the suspending gesture as apprehension of the repose in which lies final perfection — coinciding with the supreme spectacle. Thus *Passage du Commerce*, as an image of suspended life, ought to reveal a certain expectation of the *beatific vision*, even as it reveals the desolation of life in its own reiteration…Light glides over the various figures, and plays a muted serene melody against a background of obscure rumors and long-felt suffering. Two answering voices seem to alternate: '*thus it was*' and '*thus it will always be*' — like an evocation of things long past, and the perpetual return of this evocation to the rhythm of a daily life that is resigned to be as it is.
> ("Balthus: Beyond Modernism" 50-51, emphases in original)

> *Le Passage du Commerce* ne réfère pas seulement par son titre à la réalité extérieure dont s'inspira l'artiste ; mais sans doute aussi au sens d'un franchissement accompli, du fait de ce commerce que tout vrai artiste entretient toujours avec la mort, lui cédant les obsessions de sa vie : c'est à ce prix qu'il accède à l'être dont l'art n'est que le simulacre ; et c'est à la fois la malédiction de l'art qu'il ne soit qu'un simulacre ; et une bénédiction qu'il puisse ainsi délivrer la vie dans son effort désespéré de se donner en spectacle à

> elle-même par sa propre réitération ; si le *tableau vivant*, genre faux en soi, nous renseignait sur cet effort de la vie pour trouver sa signification transcendante par la suspension de la vie, l'inscription du *tableau vivant* dans le tableau, que je décelais parfois chez Balthus, révèle la fonction même de la suspension du geste, en tant qu'appréhension du repos en lequel réside la perfection finale et qui coïncide avec le spectacle suprême ; ainsi *Le Passage du Commerce* en tant qu'image de la vie en suspens, refléterait quelque chose de l'expectative de la vision béatifique, en même temps que la désolation de la vie dans sa propre réitération…la lumière, glissant sur les contours des diverses figures, joue comme en sourdine une mélodie sereine sur un fond de rumeurs faite d'obscures et de longues souffrances ; deux voix semblent alterner et se répondre ; "*c'était ainsi*" et "*il en sera toujours ainsi*" — comme une évocation des choses passées et le retour perpétuel de cette évocation dans le rythme de la vie quotidienne résignée à elle-même.
> ("Du tableau vivant" 117-118, emphases in original)

Organized around a space, representing a space, and titled after a space, the *Passage du Commerce* serves as an excellent setting for Klossowski to stage the theoretical confrontation between the painter and death, which here takes on celestial overtones. The "beatific vision" that the *tableau vivant* approaches is both bleak and hopeful, combining the inevitability of physical loss and the salvational potential of the image, which, nevertheless, remains "only a simulacrum." Through his silent visual medium, Balthus calls up two voices — "thus it was" and "thus it will always be" — which correspond to his earlier binary of the "nothing-has-happened" and the "irrevocable" but recast this opposition in less equivocal terms. The reasons for which Klossowski now rephrases these statements of time could be related to the parallels between different types of paintings and different modes of writing: while *The Room* centers around the narration of an event (or non-event) and time is accordingly figured in its relation to that event, another canvas like the *Passage du Commerce,* depicting a street scene populated by a cast of characters rather than focusing on a singular occurrence, is more purely descriptive in nature. And, while the inscription of the *tableau vivant* here creates similar conditions for the image, its terms should nonetheless be made to reflect semantically this broader evocation of a certain type of atmosphere.

Drawing attention to the ways in which these tenses emerge simultaneously through the device of the inscribed *tableau vivant*, Klossowski's commentary reveals parallels between these images within Balthus's paintings function and Benjaminian dialectical images: brought to a standstill, they are set apart from their broader spatial and historical contexts by this unique temporality that unsettles standard notions of narrative and progress. *The Room* represents the seemingly endless "reiteration" of a crime (echoing Robbe-Grillet's bleak cycle of violence in *Topology*), while *Passage du Commerce* reveals more generally "the desolation of life in its own reiteration…the rhythm of a daily life that is resigned to be as it is." The inscribed *tableau vivant*, like the dialectical image, depicts a frozen "perilous critical moment" (*Arcades* N3,1), which Benjamin defines as the moment in which "the status quo threatens to be preserved" (*Arcades* N10,2). The *tableau vivant*, as a form which "finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history" as a Benjaminian dialectical image or "object of history" (*Arcades* N10,3), is capable of unveiling the vast scope of this ideologically-induced resignation to the established order and "rhythms" of life. In his own analysis, which closely mirrors Benjamin's conceptualization of the dialectical image and its complex temporality and relations, Klossowski helps to establish the *tableau vivant*'s status as an aesthetic form with the potential to "awaken" its audience to the conditions of their social and political existence.

The call-and-response of past and future tenses that rings out through the frozen present also, as an uncommon aesthetic strategy, also affords its practitioner new possibilities as an artist: it effectively opens up and unspools the pictorial instant, expanding its reach apparently interminably past its own spatial and temporal boundaries; this also means that it can be contextualized in or juxtaposed against the wider world(s) in which it is itself contained. An image invested with such qualities would seem to stand in direct contradiction to what Gotthold

Ephraim Lessing, in his *Laocoön*, so influentially identified as "the single moment of time to which art must confine itself by virtue of its material limitations" (Lessing 19). In a painting such as the *Passage du Commerce*, the moment is singular, but it is also frozen and therefore effectively collapses into itself the temporal continuum of past, present, and future — an afternoon street scene becomes that street on every afternoon, more a spatio-temporal condition than a true place. In a work such as *The Room*, which employs the formal device of the *tableau vivant* to represent, or at least suggest, what we might identify as a more "traditional" narrative event (the potential rape of its central figure), we do not see "the tempest in the wrecks and corpses it has cast ashore" — which is to say, the post facto violent, material traces of the event that Lessing prescribes as one of the visual artist's technical means of circumventing the occupational hazard of being forced to select a "single moment in ever-changing nature" (Lessing 19). In fact, there are so few material traces of the crime that may or may not have been perpetrated that it remains one of the canvas' principal mysteries. What we do feel, however, through the visual composition around the *tableau vivant* are the decisive, conflicting modes of time, the 'nothing-has-happened' and the 'irrevocable,' that mark this scene and enact the pictorial violence of its "reiteration" while also denying its easy classification.

Klossowski's insistently linguistic formulations find a parallel in Banville's narration and description of *Le monde d'or. "*Even in *Le monde d'or*," Freddie muses, "apparently so chaste, so ethereal, a certain hectic air of expectancy bespeaks excesses *remembered or to come*" (*Ghosts* 96, my emphasis). It is not so much that the painting's inability or reluctance to choose between past and future is beside the point; rather, it *is* the point: this central temporal ambiguity of the canvas is the product of the incongruously "hectic" intermingling of tenses within the single physical space of the picture. Once again, the pictorial present, highly theatrical in the

fictional work of Vaublin and explicitly related to the *tableau vivant*, manages to interweave the past and the future in its composition of a singular, frozen moment in time. This tendency extends beyond the descriptions of the painting and seeps even into Freddie's conception and representation of the world at large. At one point, describing the parlor in the Professor's house, he conjures the atmosphere of the novel as a whole: "It is a summer afternoon, but the room is dim…*Nothing happens, nothing will happen*, yet everything is poised, waiting, a chair in the corner crouching with its arms braced, the coiled fronds of a fern, that copper pot with the streaming sunspot on its rim" (*Ghosts* 40, my emphasis). If his description of *Le monde d'or* is based more in the indeterminate but undeniably intuited narrative of events (the vaguely-defined "excesses" past and future that can be read in the painted scene), making it more akin to Klossowski's analysis of *The Room*, then this passage, with its delineation of a physical space and its material attributes, pointedly devoid of characters and unrepresentative of any particular event, is more like the *Passage du Commerce.* "Nothing happens, nothing will happen," Freddie informs us, "yet everything is poised" to suggest that something *could* take place here, and the spatial composition of the present, of the physical space, comes to entail the different temporal modes Klossowski identifies in Balthus' *tableaux vivants.* This description, applying as it does to the diegetic world outside of *Le monde d'or*, indicates that Klossowski's productive confusion of temporal modes is in play, and forms part of the narrative structure of Banville's novel as a whole. If this strain of Klossowskian thought is omnipresent in the text, Banville's narrator tends more towards one side of the "beatific vision" that is generated by this form: though Freddie professes to sense a "certain expectation" in this room, what emerges as the dominant concern here is actually "the desolation of life in its own iteration" ("Balthus: Beyond Modernity" 50). Banville's trilogy is, at heart, an exploration of Freddie's fundamental failure of atonement for

his crime, magnified by the incommensurability of his general philosophical desires and his actual aesthetic proclivities and activities in the novels, and that desire to bring the dead back to life is ultimately an impossibility, a fantasy that expresses at once his understanding of his culpability *and* his unwillingness to own up to that same guilt. Though Freddie's outlook comes very close to Klossowski's (slightly) more optimistic statements about the possibilities of artworks, it is essentially negative, and this comes through in Banville's reformulation of Klossowski's "nothing-has-happened" and "irrevocable" as "nothing happens" and "nothing will happen." This persistent syntactic negation is a reflection of Freddie's desire for resurrection as being pragmatically doomed to failure, and a narrational betrayal — a Freudian flicker — of his realization that his desire, after all, is not so much to bring the dead truly back to life as it is to "restore" her as a framed, frozen object, like a painting. In other words, while the subterranean presence of past and future tenses within these inscribed *tableaux vivants* are a condition of their functioning (per Klossowski), they also (per Banville) represent a sign that these *tableaux* are perpetually trembling under all this weight and that they are, in the end, untenable because of the tremendous pressure of the *reality* beyond their boundaries.

Returning to the *Passage du Commerce*, Klossowski closes his essay with a mapping of the representational space that perhaps most clearly demarcates the way he sees the spatial and the temporal coming together in the *tableau vivant:*

> These children seem to live here yet the scene they compose gives the impression that they are no longer living, that they no longer belong to this world, and that they are beings that die in the revery of the young girl who, in the foreground, dreamily looks at the spectator. Behind her, at some distance, is a man seen from the back who is about to carry, with the assurance of a somnambulist, into the background of the painting a long, thin, yellow breadloaf. Between him and the girl in the foreground extends the zone of "*it was thus*": between him and the old woman — a reappearance of childhood in the face of old-age — lies the ultimate zone, so dangerous to cross, of "*it will always be thus*." ("Balthus: Beyond Realism" 50, emphases in original)

> …ces enfants paraissent vivre là et pourtant, la scène qu'ils composent n'est pas sans donner l'impression qu'ils ne sont plus ou n'appartiennent pas encore à ce monde, qu'ils sont comme des êtres défunts dans la songerie de la jeune fille qui, au premier plan, regarde rêveusement le spectateur ; derrière elle cependant à un certain intervalle se situe l'homme vu de dos qui, une baguette de pain doré à la main, va s'éloignant vers le fond avec une assurance de somnambule ; c'est de lui que procède l'ambiance d'expectative du tableau : au centre du cercle magique que forme le : "*c'était ainsi*" et "*il en sera toujours ainsi*", lui-même appartient à la fois à l'envoûtement et y échappe néanmoins : derrière lui s'étend comme une zone dangereuse à franchir, signalée par cette vieille…et dans ce sens cette réapparition de l'enfance sous l'aspect de la vieillesse est, elle aussi, la tentation du : "il en sera toujours ainsi."
> ("Du tableau vivant" 118-119, emphases in original)

Thus the two domains are no longer separated in the painting, for Balthus, in his employment of the *tableau vivant* form, actively combats the material and practical constraints of media as set down by Lessing. The *tableau vivant,* through its composition of excessively posed figures, allows for Balthus to translate incompatible and discrete modes of time into the physical pictorial space — foreground and background. In so doing, he further thematizes ideas of limitations proper to certain media while also flaunting them in a clear, visually comprehensible manner, narrating in the blink of an eye an experience without real beginning or end.

Balthus begins his laying out of time along the *Passage du Commerce* from the edge of the canvas. Klossowski identifies the pensive little girl, situated closest to the painting's viewer, furthest into the foreground, as the abstract psychological point of origin and the physical center of composition for the canvas' larger representation of the *tableau vivant*. She "dreamily looks at the spectator," layering atop this scene an additional film of 'theatrical' self-awareness and presence in the way she reaches outside of the painting and into the world of the viewer to pull them further into its composition. But more importantly, she, the compositional element closest to the edge, is Balthus' contact point for his inscription of the *tableau vivant*. By pictorially starting his inscription with this foregrounded figure and striking the first blow of the chisel through the painting of her form, Balthus thematizes another of the *tableau vivant*'s qualities and

justifies Klossowski's use of the term "inscription" for its remediation in other art forms. One of the greatest problems with Abel's flattening of the artist's use of the *tableau vivant*, rendering "inscription" as "insertion," is that it essentially buries the form within the content of the image. Theoretically speaking, and practically speaking (in the works of Balthus), this is fundamentally in opposition to the nature of the *tableau vivant,* which depends upon its placement at the edge and makes that situation into its representational subject. This is precisely the reason it becomes so tempting a device to employ for certain artists, be they theatrical, visual, or literary, who seek to push their works to the limits of representation and to consider their own position along the artistic spectrum. But, as Banville's novel demonstrates, that placement at the edge also emphasizes the edge's status as a limitation, and reminds us that there exists, beyond this edge, the reality of gnawing time that cannot be forever ignored.

I would like to end by noting an important and deliberate irony underlying Banville's real-life point of reference for his fictional Vaublin: Watteau. John Berger situates Watteau's paintings in their proper historical context, noting that "The eighteenth century in France saw the complete transformation of power from the aristocracy to the middle class… [embodied in] the transitional rococo art of Watteau, Fragonard, Boucher…" (*Selected Essays* 52). However pointedly theatrical, however absorbed Watteau's *fêtes galantes* may seem on the surface, Berger detects in them an acute, even painful awareness of that looming historical reality:

> The whispering in Watteau's paintings [...] is partly a nostalgia for a past order, partly a premonition of the instability of the present; partly an unknown hope for the future. The courtiers assembly for the embarkation for Cythera but the poignancy of the occasion is due to the implication that when they get there it will not be the legendary place they expect — the guillotines will be falling. The paradox is that whenever an artist achieves such a true expression of his time as Watteau did, he transcends it and comments on a permanent aspect of life itself: in Watteau's case on the brevity of it.
> (*Selected Essays* 53)

This idea — that the preservational capacity of art, the desire to contain time is inevitably delusive — is another indication of Banville's cynicism towards all his narrator's artistry, and of the nature both sinister and hopeless of the miniature world of *tableaux vivants* he conjures. It will be important to keep this in mind in the next section, as we examine two twentieth-century fantasies of colonialism that share this formal interest in and critical analytical approach to an aesthetics based on stillness and silence.

4.2 Inscribed Worlds in the Colonial Fictions of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras

Banville's novels concern the ultimate impossibility of the restitution to life of that which has been lost. The enchantments of art seep out into a world that seems to slip ever further away from reality and whose mirrored surfaces more clearly reflect the solipsistic psyche from which it issues. Marguerite Duras, on the other hand, in her film *India Song*, creates a similar milieu, but with precisely the opposite intention — that is, the self-conscious artifice and immobility of the cloistered sphere of the French embassy in Calcutta are not so much meant to represent a pointed distortion of the real world as they are a political reality unto itself: the purgatorial existence of "l'Inde blanche" ("White India," to use the film's term) presaging the transition from traditional, administrative European colonialism in Southeast Asia to the post-war neocolonialism of continued and intensified exploitative commercial interests and capitalistic influences of foreign powers in the same regions. Before, however, discussing *India Song*, I would like to spend some time parsing especially rich comments made by Robbe-Grillet regarding the idea of inlaid worlds of fantasy and reality and the functioning of time within them.

These ideas will be applicable not only to his own colonial novel, *Jealousy*, but also partially to *India Song.*

One significant way of thinking about the strange nature of the two writers' similarly circumscribed colonial worlds is that they constitute fantasies informed by, though not beholden to, the reality existing beyond their bounds, and as a "remedy" to which they have been developed. We have already discussed Robbe-Grillet's relationship to "realism," defined by his challenge to that category as a reification of bourgeois values and ideology, and his proposal to expand its definition through his work in the "new novel" as a way of legitimizing an apparently infinite range of idiosyncratic realisms that would reflect the subjectivity inherent in all acts of representation[62]. He further develops this line of argument elsewhere, and in other terms, this time discussing the literary mode of the fantastic.

On June 12th, 1981, Robbe-Grillet, appearing as a guest on the literature-based French television program *Apostrophes* hosted by Bernard Pivot, got into a protracted, somewhat contentious debate with another guest, the Belgian writer Robert Kanters. Kanters spoke rather disparagingly of Robbe-Grillet's work, criticizing it for its difficulty, its supposed impenetrability (and, perhaps tellingly, accused Robbe-Grillet of engaging primarily in "*le marketing*"). Robbe-Grillet affably responded to these claims of abstruseness by launching into a discussion of two different classes of writers: the first, he said, is made up of "writers for whom the world is reassuring, familiar," who write about "the world of man" where "man's conscience reigns supreme"; the second, to which he declares his membership alongside Camus and Sartre, is made up of those for whom "the world is constantly alien… it looks familiar… then, suddenly, something shifts…" Robbe-Grillet states that "the world poses problems" for him ("*le monde me*

[62] See Chapter 2 and the section on Robbe-Grillet's novel *Topology of a Phantom City.*

pose des problèmes") and that his writing is, after a fashion, an inquiry into how these are also problems of writing itself. But Kanters, taking him to task for in turn "posing problems" to the reader in the form of his texts, says that when he reads Robbe-Grillet, he has the impression of being a hunter searching for his dog, looking confusedly at his map, and finally catching sight of its silhouette through the shrubbery. Robbe-Grillet counters that this happens all the time in life, while Kanters asserts that it does not; rather, the hunter keeps his dog with him and isn't obliged to go through all this ceaseless searching. "*En réalité*," concludes a jovial Robbe-Grillet, "*nous ne fréquentons pas le même monde!*" — "In reality, we are living in two different worlds!" It appears here in rather flippant a fashion, a rebuke to the cantankerous Kanters (whom Robbe-Grillet characterizes as a guardian of the established order of Francophone literature and culture), but this statement is also fundamentally important to our understanding of Robbe-Grillet's texts, as well as Duras's *India Song*, because it admits of the coexistence of multiple subsidiary and subjective worlds within what becomes the significantly less solid and dominant framework of the greater, objective "world"[63]. These worlds, composed of individuals and of smaller groups, are, to use Klossowski's image, *inscribed* within the larger framework, like a globe whose surface is covered in innumerable series of concentric circles. These worlds, moreover, are in Robbe-Grillet's texts explored in ways that constantly wonder at their strange spatio-temporal dynamics. We might think of the palimpsest of epochs shuffled by Robbe-Grillet like a deck of cards in *Topology of a Phantom City.* We might also turn to one of his most famous novels, *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*).

[63] This is one of the places in which Robbe-Grillet's affinity with Borges is clearest. His dismissal of realism as any sort of meaningful literary category could be considered as a reframing of Borges's statement about the fantastic (made in conversation with Richard Burgin in 1967, in reference to Conrad), in which he said "it's almost an insult to the mysteries of the world to think that we could invent anything or that we need to invent anything. And the fact that a writer who wrote fantastic stories had no feeling for the complexity of the world" (Borges 32)

Jealousy seems like the most obvious parallel to *India Song* because of its similar setting and themes — an ambiguous colonial milieu, beneath the unbearable tropical heat of which motion seems to grind to a halt, peopled by white French colonizers ostensibly more concerned with the amorous intrigues and angsts of their own narrow social circles than with anything else going on around them. *Jealousy* presents itself as the construction of the narrator, the owner of a banana plantation, who, in meticulously detailing the layout of his house and the surrounding groves, progressively reveals the extent of his jealousy and his paranoia concerning a possible affair between his wife, A., and their neighbor, Franck. The bulk of the text consists in descriptions of the various rooms, views out onto the plantation, or scenes (the main characters' dinner on the veranda; A. writing a letter to person unknown) built upon the substratum of this possibility, and the novel's success rests upon a significant paradox — that is, that the affair between A. and Franck needs to be understood as both having occurred *and* never having taken place in reality. Like the crime in Balthus's *Room*, the affair in *Jealousy*, as far as we can ascertain, exists simultaneously in the realms of the "nothing-has-happened" and the "irrevocable." The text consistently supports and undermines the reality of this affair and never settles conclusively on a single interpretation of its anecdotes and images; what's more, insofar as the text is entirely mediated by the narrator's perspective (which, nevertheless, the novel's attention to concrete detail would lead us to believe is not a perspective entirely divorced from the real world, but rather one persistently colored by perceptions, by turns unreliable and insightful, of that world), the issue of the "reality" of the situation seems not to matter much at all. In short, we have here the psychological world, with its own malleable but potent feeling of reality, inscribed within the social world of the other characters (or the French colonizers more generally), which is in turn inscribed within the truly real-world sociopolitical context of waning

French colonial rule as it is being replaced by a new era of exploitative, neocolonial economic domination.

Because *Jealousy*, unlike *Topology*, utilizes a setting that, while deliberately ambiguous and ultimately unplaceable, is recognizable as a real *type* of place, and because its plot concerns the entirely plausible scenario of an extramarital affair, it is certainly more "realistic" than other works by Robbe-Grillet. Nevertheless, a good deal of scholarly work on the novel concerns its formal peculiarities rather than its implicit political commentary. One of the most notable exceptions is Jacques Leenhardt's 1973 *Lecture politique du roman:* La Jalousie *d'Alain Robbe-Grillet*, which locates in the interpersonal dynamics of the characters of the narrator (whom Leenhardt pointedly refers to as "le mari," the husband, in quotation marks, thereby further drawing attention to the pervasive unsurety of the text) and his apparent rival, Franck, something which mirrors the shift from an older mode of colonialism understood as the political domination of a country by an outside power and its representatives, to a newer postcolonial mode of capitalistic exploitation and mastery. (Though it speaks only of *Jealousy*, Leenhardt's study will serve us as vital connective tissue between Robbe-Grillet, Duras, and Klossowski/Banville; his insistence on the odd temporality of the novel as a crucial element of its implicit political critique will better help us situate all three in relation to one another.)

Leenhardt observes "that the universe of the colonizers is akin to an 'eternally-wound clock,' and that it functions as a 'closed system'"[64] (Leenhardt 175), which accounts for the generally "cyclical character of the colonial universe"[65] (Leenhardt 176) in *Jealousy.* He says

[64] "Que l'univers des colons s'apparente à une 'horloge montée pour l'éternité,' et qu'il fonctionne comme un 'système clos'" [N.B.: All translations of Leenhardt are my own.]

[65] "caractère cyclique de l'univers colonial"

that the colonizers living within the boundaries of this system are "frozen in [their] roles upon a stage abandoned by glory," which means that they "eternally reproduce the same image of themselves"[66] (Leenhardt 179). These images, which Robbe-Grillet in his novel presents as all manner of posturing on the part of his self-centered triad of main characters, are, for Leenhardt, in fact derived from a very particular reality. Here, he quotes Albert Meister on the state of affairs in European colonies in the first half of the twentieth century: "In the 1930s, and even more so later on, the white colonial society no longer had any mission, any vocation. They spent all their time at their clubs, criticized their servants, imitated from afar the intellectual life of London, traded their agricultural products for brandy — of which they made considerable use — and consumer goods, told themselves a story that they were already no longer participating in. [The colony's] historical mission had come to an end, its death was at hand"[67] (Leenhardt 179). Moving inwards from this general historical state of affairs, now analyzing the relationship between the narrator of *Jealousy* and Franck, Leenhardt establishes a correspondence between them and two different colonial eras: while the 'husband' represents a more traditionally imperial mode of colonialism, by now waning, Franck represents a more enterprising, capitalistically-driven form in the process of displacing that mode. Leenhardt explicitly links the "husband's" condition with this overriding sense of death and presents it as both an impending reality and a *fait accompli*:

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[66] "Figés dans ces rôles sur une scène que la gloire a abandonnée, les colons reproduisent éternellement la même image d'eux-mêmes…"

[67] "Dans les années 1930, et plus encore par la suite, la colonie blanche n'a plus de mission, plus de vocation. Elle vit dans ses clubs, critique ses domestiques, imite de loin la vie intellectuelle de Londres, échange ses produits agricoles contre le Brandy — dont elle fait grand usage — et des biens de consommation, se raconte une histoire que déjà elle ne fait plus. Sa mission historique est terminée, sa mort est proche"

> … the 'husband,' who already almost belongs to the past, is already deceased[68], *defunctus*, no longer functioning; and this is evident insofar as, even though in his position as a colonist he normally would have to remain in constant contact with the indigenous people, he is never depicted in his capacity as the director of a plantation. The other, Franck, is presented to us as a dynamic man, in direct contact with the black workers in the domain of work.
>
> … le 'mari,' appartiendrait déjà quasiment au passé, il est déjà défunt, *defunctus*, hors de fonction; est cela est évident dans la mesure où, bien que par sa position de colon il eût dû normalement être constamment en rapport avec les indigènes, il ne nous est jamais montré dans ses fonctions de directeur d'une exploitation. L'autre, Franck, nous est présenté comme un homme dynamique, en contact concret avec des ouvriers noirs dans le domaine du travail.
> (Leenhardt 183)

To Leenhardt, this difference is precisely what lies at the heart of the strange aesthetics and temporal rhythms of *Jealousy*. "The 'husband,'" he says, "'thinks' in 1920, wheras Franck 'thinks' in 1950, but both of them are revealed through *the continuity of a story told in the present.* In this way, the ruptures at all levels refer to this historical gap: rupture of values, rupture of the text, rupture of chronology. Only a metachronology allows for their unification"[69] (Leenhardt 196, my emphases). A reading through Leenhardt's suggested 'metachronology' allows us to make sense of the pervasive stillness, of the prevalence of *tableau vivant* compositions in *Jealousy*, for the 'husband,' "frozen in a continuous yet artificial present, intended only to conceal the cataclysmic advancing of time"[70] (Leenhardt 187), is ultimately the

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[68] The French word here is "*défunt*," which commonly means "deceased" when applied to individuals. But it is also etymologically related to our English word "defunct." I have chosen to translate it as the former, as this better communicates the existential implications of this discussion of the more practical discussion of the narrator's and Franck's working lives, but the original French is able to maintain this dimension alongside that of more general obsolescence.

[69] "Le 'mari' 'pense' en 1920, tandis que Franck 'pense' en 1950, mais tous deux se manifestent dans *la continuité d'un récit au présent*. Ainsi, les ruptures à tous les niveaux se réfèrent-elles à ce décalage historique: rupture des valeurs, rupture du texte, rupture de la chronologie. Seule une métachronologie permet de les unifier"

[70] "...le 'mari' est figé dans un présent continuel mais factice, destiné uniquement à masquer l'avance cataclysmique du temps…"

embodiment of "the lagging behind of the colonist in relation to historical reality"[71] (Leenhardt 189).

In this reading of *Jealousy*, which grounds its formal strangeness in a political and historical discussion that better situates its characters while at the same time doing justice to Robbe-Grillet's theoretical insistence upon relative realisms, it is the confrontation of two incompatible elements within the same space, each vying for control, that generates the temporal suspension of its *tableaux vivants*. The narrator's obsessive questioning of A.'s fidelity can be understood, in part, as a projection of the anxieties of inadequacy and extinction engendered by this conflict. It also represents a turning inwards on the part of the narrator, a claustration that serves as a defensive mechanism in the face of encroaching obsolescence, displacement, and figurative and literal death. In this way, the 'inscription' of the narrator's private world of jealousy and voyeuristic *tableaux* is clearly a *mise en abyme* of the already inscribed world of the French colonial outposts drowning themselves in brandy, wallowing in their clubs, and blinkering themselves when faced with the prospect of their own disappearance. This is also the world of *India Song*, though in the case of Duras's film, the impetus to this stasis of denial (or perhaps an easing into death) comes not from a representative of a new order coming into direct conflict with a bearer of the values of the old, as in *Jealousy*; rather, Duras employs formally audacious techniques that play up this dynamic of interior and exterior through *tableaux vivants* that deconstruct traditional cinematic conceptions of motion, sound, and image.

One way of considering the similarly stifling atmosphere of Duras's film and the decidedly non-naturalistic nature of its characters' movements within it is as a sort of fantasy construction, an elaborate defensive structure based in denial and set up by the colonizers as a

[71] "c'est le retard du colon par rapport à la réalité historique"

sort of windowless bulwark against the encroaching tide of historical change. I would like to return briefly to the *Apostrophes* interview with Robbe-Grillet, because he makes some interesting arguments concerning the fantastic, which connect to the question of grammatical tenses in Klossowski's understanding of the *tableau vivant*'s odd temporality. Discussing his novel *Djinn* — which, as he explains, was partially conceived as a pseudo-textbook to teach students of French about the strange, complex possibilities of the language's tenses — , Robbe-Grillet makes two points that elucidate *India Song* and *Jealousy.* First, he describes fantasy in spatial terms, as a special zone connected to reality: "The fantastic, if that means worlds that communicate with one another suddenly through locks. There are sluice gates, there are locks where worlds connect with each other"[72]. These flowing passages between fantasies are perhaps more easily locatable in *Topology* than elsewhere (for example, the slippery, cataract-like descent into the tarot card image discussed in Chapter 2). But the coexistence of multiple worlds can also be observed in *Jealousy*, in which spheres frozen by the narrator's jealousies and anxieties — enchanted petrified forests, for all intents and purposes — spring up amongst the rigorously delineated, real-world space of the banana plantation. In *Jealousy*, the recurring *tableau vivant* compositions mark points at which the internal psychological landscape of the narrator comes into contact with the external reality of others' actions and presences. When, for example, he trains his jealous eye on a scene of Franck and A. on the veranda, he believes he can detect an amorous complicity in their body language and hushed, inaudible conversation, and his gaze paralyzes them into a composition to be obsessively detailed and translated into the novel's

[72] "Fantastique, si c'est-à-dire des mondes qui communiquent tout d'un coup par des sasses. Il y a des vannes, il y a des sasses où des mondes communiquent." [While the French here uses the verb '(se) communiquer' in both sentences, I have translated the first instance as 'communicate' and the second as 'connect' in an attempt to maintain both of these senses that coalesce more clearly in a single word in French than they do in English.]

extensive descriptions: “Vague shapes indicated by the less intense obscurity of a light-colored dress or shirt, they are sitting side by side, leaning back in their chairs, arms resting on the elbow-rests, occasionally making vague movements of small extent, no sooner moving from these original positions than returning to them, or *perhaps not moving at all.*” One of the clearest indicators that this is the dynamic in play in the novel is that Robbe-Grillet includes a recurring image of one of the plantation’s workers looking down into the river at something the narrator struggles to identify:

> A… is standing in front of the right-hand window, looking out through one of the chinks in the blinds toward the veranda. The man is still motionless, bending over the muddy water on the earth-covered log bridge. He has not moved an inch: crouching, head lowered, forearms resting on his thighs, hands hanging between his knees.
> (*Jealousy* 54)

And later:

> In the hollow of the valley, on the log bridge that crosses the little stream, there is a man crouching, facing the opposite hillside. He is a native, wearing blue trousers and a colorless undershirt that leaves his shoulders bare. He is leaning toward the liquid surface as if he were trying to see something in the muddy water.
> (*Jealousy* 73)

Later still:

> There are five workmen at the bridge, and as many new logs. All the men are now crouching in the same position: forearms resting on their thighs, hands hanging between their knees. They are facing each other, two on the right bank, three on the left. They are probably discussing how they are going to complete their job, or else they are resting a little before the effort, tired from having carried the logs this far. In any case, they are perfectly motionless.
> (*Jealousy* 85)

Through this progression, it becomes clear how stubbornly distanced the narrator’s view remains. This is another manifestation of his tendency, as Leenhardt maintains, to disconnect himself from the workings of the plantation. In the first two descriptions, the image of the worker staring into the water resembles a Narcissus gazing into the fountain at his own reflection — a

mirror image of the narrator's own growing narcissism, seeing ever less of the reality of the world around him and ever more of his own mental and emotional anguish projected onto it; a line of reflections swallowing up a series of gazes as it plumbs the depths of the infinite.

It is only in the last of the three glimpses of the scene that the narrator seems even capable of entertaining the possibility that this configuration represents real-world action rather than an icon of his existential crisis, and even then, it is only when the *tableau vivant* has been multiplied *ad absurdum* — one Narcissus become five Narcissi sprouting along the riverbanks — that the real-world origin of this scene (workers building a bridge for the plantation) suggests itself; and even *then*, the meaning of this grouping remains, to the narrator, inscrutable: are they discussing their work or taking a break? The hypothetical is a hallmark of this encounter between worlds, the bridge an evocative but untraversed threshold between the narrator's fantasy and the reality of the workers employed and exploited on his plantation. And though this repeated encounter shows, in large part, the extent to which the narrator's perspective is sealed off from the larger world around him, it also demonstrates Robbe-Grillet's theory of "communication" between zones, and of the connection between relative realisms and fantasies. The aestheticizing, immobilizing fantasy of the colonizer is nevertheless composed of repurposed images that impress themselves upon the membrane separating it from colonial reality, figures that occasionally approach and rustle the gauze between the two.

Robbe-Grillet's second main point in this portion of the interview connects fantastic narrative content with what he describes as the fantastic dimension of French grammar: "There are fantastic tenses in French. The future anterior… the conditional… what do these mean? These are things… do they exist or do they not exist?"[73] In this admittedly unpolished

[73] "Il y a des temps qui sont fantastiques en français. Le futur antérieur… le conditionnel… qu'est-ce que ça veut dire? Ce sont des choses… ça existe ou ça existe pas?"

formulation, we can nonetheless detect that for Robbe-Grillet, there lies a latent magic within grammar, and tenses, when deployed in literary works in unconventional ways, can shape and mould narrative time into interesting, powerful new forms. And when, as we can see in the innumerable examples from *Jealousy*, the narrator describes the paralyzed scenes he is scrutinizing, this method (based on the fallacy of objectivity, Robbe-Grillet's old bugbear) consistently returns him to a state of epistemological instability which we can chalk up to both: a) the coexistence of two equally plausible worlds (one in which A. is engaged in an extramarital affair with Franck, the other in which she is not); and b) the implicit presence of an odd conditional tense (A. *could* be flirting with Franck; she *could* be writing to him…) manifesting in the stasis of these scenes, which is the result of the narrator's inability to resolve his anxieties into one clear idea of a future, a certainty about past events, or even a comprehensible present.

In *India Song*, Duras uses spatial and temporal strategies to demarcate the fantasy world of her colonizers. One way in which Duras's film situates itself more decisively in relation to the "real world" is in its insistent filmic aesthetics, an extension of the already cinematic tendencies of the *nouveau roman*'s literary aesthetics. As we have already seen in our extensive discussion of Robbe-Grillet, this approach, while perhaps appearing even more abstruse, impenetrable, and uninterested in standard definitions of "realist" representation than would Banville's *Ghosts*, is in fact one that derives from and defines itself against the limiting and ideologically suspect conventions of the bourgeois novel. Duras makes a similar move, pitting her peculiar vision against that of a "standard" film operating in an easily-comprehensible, linear model in which narrative, aural, and visual elements are lined up to create the illusion of a clear story, clearly told. She instead indulges in Brechtian tactics of alienation: absolutely no on-screen dialogue; *voix-off* that are neither clearly diegetic nor extra-diegetic, that participate and narrate, called

"the voices of the reception" and "voices out of time"[74] in the credits; extremely long shots, during which characters compose themselves, one by one, into groupings and then often disperse; a unity of place, confining the goings-on primarily to the consulate and its grounds; a soundtrack consisting in multiple variations of the titular "India Song" and the haunting chants of a beggar woman who is never seen but always heard; etc. In fact, the film tells a very simple story, almost banal in its melodrama, of a diplomat's wife, Anne-Marie Stretter, and her relationships with a trio of men who long for her. That this brittle sketch of a plot goes nowhere is precisely the point: the film is first and foremost concerned with its characters' philosophical responses to the inescapable torpor endemic to their particular milieu. It presents an atmosphere of longing, not a story of longing. For this reason, the space of the story (broadly understood, encompassing built structures and natural areas, light and shadow, and even the odd sense of distended time that adheres to rooms and corridors) is particularly important. The characters operate in a colonial space that, like Banville's enchanted isle or Balthus's *Passage du commerce* or Robbe-Grillet's banana plantation, is inseparable from its time, and its time, just like that of those other works, is a deliberately hazy one that can only be properly approached through the convergence of tenses that work backwards and forwards, triangulating the deathless no-man's-land of the embassy. Duras's pseudo-sequel from a year later, 1976's *Son nom de Venise dans Calcutta désert*, is made up almost entirely of long tracking shots exploring the now decrepit rooms and grounds of this building, devoid of any signs of human or animal life — entirely new images set to the original sound and dialogue track from *India Song*. If the latter film already effects a dissociation of image from sound, of body from voice, of narrative from cinematic

[74] "Les voix de la réception," apparently representing unseen guests from a party featured in the movie, and "les voix intemporelles," which are far stranger, asking questions and providing answers about events and characters depicted on-screen, and most closely resembling a Greek chorus.

vision, then the former widens these gaps even further by toying with the viewer's audiovisual memories of the first film as these new scenes of architectural desolation are overlain by pictures from a past that was, already in *India Song*, barely aglow with the trembling light of a nearly extinguished flame. In short, the sequel grafts atop *India Song*'s palimpsest of tenses another: a sort of past perfect progressive tense, in which the voices still speak the story of the first film, long after the characters have abandoned the set, which the camera, fascinated, continues to investigate.

For Duras, the slowness, the fixity of the scenes of *India Song* are not a distortion of the world produced by the mental processes and fixations of a narrator, as they are in Banville; rather, they are faithful representations of a distorted world unto itself — the world of "*l'Inde blanche*," the liminal colonial enclave whose curiously frozen nature emerges as a kind of defense mechanism sprung by the rapidly changing rest of the world that surrounds it. If the scenes of *India Song* are so many *tableaux vivants* assembled into a most basic narrative, then we might certainly call them, after Klossowski, inscribed *tableaux*. With the peculiarity of their spatio-temporal characteristics, they stand out as archaic against the dynamic, moving politics and historical processes of their surroundings. Duras herself uses a vocabulary of predator and prey in her descriptions of Anne-Marie Stretter as a figurative "maneater" — a panther nocturnally stalking the banks of the Ganges — , which suggests that, to some degree, we could think of the reactionary listlessness of these scenes of a waning colonial life as "playing dead," a withdrawal into the self in hopes of being simply passed by as the world changes around these characters.

The stasis of *India Song*'s scenes cannot really be understood as the result of a conflict between characters emblematic of their own distinct colonial periods and therefore operating in

different grammatical tenses, as it were. If Robbe-Grillet's *tableaux* result from that shock of encounter, then Duras's seem to surface slowly from the morass of a uniform, pervasive colonial ennui, in which her characters, with no exceptions, appear to be mummified like bodies in a peat bog.

The title of the film refers, on one level, to the song sung by the beggar woman who seems to follow Anne-Marie Stretter around. But on another level, if we understand the title as applying to the film as a whole, then we can better bring into focus aspects of its construction as a musical piece made up of repeating dialogue, snatches of song, variations on its piano theme, etc. And if this larger song has a refrain, then it might be the term *ne pas supporter*, meaning "not to put up with." This expression is used multiple times over the course of the film and helps to develop an all-encompassing sense of insupportability of life generally in this geographical context, which characters ascribe to its climate — its tropical heat, its monsoons. But clearly there is also a kind of spiritual malaise, of which we see symptoms throughout (and which could rightly be considered the film's subject). Curiously, the ailment of the "insupportable," per the characters, can be remedied by another state, which we have already been speaking of in terms of its own sort of insupportability: the fixity of the *tableau vivant*. Unlike in Robbe-Grillet, in which one colonist's crises of History and of his own marriage paralyze a miniature world through his gaze, the denizens of a parallel miniature world in *India Song* willingly throw themselves into *tableaux*. They are not truly subjected to this condition; rather, they *choose* it. In *Jealousy*, the *tableaux vivants* are much more clearly the unintended result of a denial of the world at large, but in *India Song*, the stasis of the *tableau vivant* is a condition into which the characters willingly sink, as into the cooling waters of the river delta. At the party, two of the 'voices of the reception' discuss the heat and its effects on the guests: "Why is no one dancing?"

one asks; the other responds that "the only remedy is immobility… slowness… slowing down the blood"[75].

Duras sets this dialogue atop a party scene at which the only guests we *see* are the primary characters of the film (though we hear plenty of other voices whose provenance, as commentary or as diegetic speech, remains opaque), and what we see of them amounts mostly to their shifting, in small increments, around the space before the unmoving camera lens. The following sequence is representative of Duras's dour party scene: Anne-Marie Stretter walks into an ornately decorated salon — with a crystal chandelier, an elaborately patterned rug, a gilt-edged floor-to-ceiling mirror, a grand piano — and considers herself in the glass for a long moment, positioning herself so that she stands side-by-side with her reflection [Figure 33]; next, she walks out of the shot (the camera does not move) so that her body is no longer visible, but her reflection remains framed within the mirror [Figure 34]; then she walks back into the shot and drapes her torso over the top of the piano [Figure 35]; finally, she is joined by one of her lovers, Michael Richardson, who walks over and stands behind her as she remains slumped over the piano [Figure 36]. This brief series of simple actions makes up nearly five minutes of the film. Duras draws out time excruciatingly here, and develops her scene as four progressive still frames rather than five minutes'-worth of standard cinematic motion; we might say that what she does amounts to an abolition of conventional ideas of movement within a standard cinematic schema. But rather than employing this technique merely as a formally strange gambit, Duras, by overlaying it with dialogue, narratively rationalizes this as a manifestation of the characters' "slow-bloodedness," a kind of pronounced bodily response to the sweltering heat. Unlike in *Jealousy*, in which the novel's stasis is an effect of the narrator's psychology and perception, in

[75] "le seul remède, l'immobilité… la lenteur… ralentir le sang" (30:35)

India Song, Duras foregrounds environmental factors and their effects on the body: her characters are trapped within the embassy and its grounds, its overbearing ornamentation hung with wreaths of incense smoke, and the tropical climate draws their bodies constantly downwards like a gravitational force [Figure 37]; there is no breeze ("pas un souffle") in Calcutta, the narrating voices tell us more than once, and the monsoon ("la mousson"), to which various voices frequently allude, brings unusual atmospheric pressures and piles heavy clouds over the city.

And while it is clear that Duras certainly does not mean to ascribe solely to the climate of Calcutta her characters' torpor[76] she is able, by emphasizing the question of climate, to create successfully a sense of a contained and containing *atmosphere*, as well as to underscore further the important "interior-exterior" dichotomy, against which her themes coalesce and upon which, on a broader level, the formation of the colonial fantasy depends. In addition to establishing regularly, from scene to scene, a clear compositional edge by filming extended sequences (a single shot lasting several minutes) with a stationary camera to which the viewers have time to habituate themselves, Duras uses the dislocation of the "voices of the reception" and the "voices out of time" from the visual elements of the film so as to underscore the disjuncture between the fantasy world of her characters and the real-world context of 1930s India. That the images are prised away from the soundtrack indicates, on the one hand, that they might represent a separate and distanced sphere, divorced from the voices that provide exposition and comment upon the events and atmosphere of the film, or ask and answer questions that sometimes elucidate the characters' motivations. Anne-Marie Stretter, Michael Richardson, and the rest are

[76] There is plenty of evidence of this: the resignation and indifference with which most characters throw themselves into their 'romantic' entanglements; the fact that we see no kind of administrative work being done despite the fact that the film is primarily set in an embassy; the film's pointed plotlessness; etc.

living in their own slowed world that exists, like a sea wall, to staunch the tide of history that will soon swallow them up. On the other hand, that this film is composed of both those images *and* a soundtrack indicates that Duras is consciously utilizing the qualities of the moving picture with sound as a means of bringing that little world into irrevocable contact with the wider world in which it has defensively inscribed itself; the at first jarring dissociation of image from dialogue, the disruption of conventional filmic diegesis is another way for Duras to inscribe, as Balthus did through the theatrical gestures of his painted figures, a *tableau vivant* world within her movie, to both establish the narcissistic fantasy world of Stretter et al. as distinctly separate from and, at the same time, irrefutably existing *within* reality.

The dialogue set atop the images seems oftentimes to belong both to the pictorial present ("et elle qui ne bouge pas") and the narrative past ("pour elle, il avait tout quitté…"). Sometimes, the voices seem positioned in the future, as if looking back on the events of the film. For example, near the beginning of the film, when we see Anne-Marie Stretter dancing slowly with Michael Richardson as another of her lovers looks on, unmoving, from before the mirror, one of the 'voices out of time' says "They were dancing. They dance"[77]; the use here of the imperfect in French, with its ambiguous intimations of habitual or progressive action, places both the scene we see and the voices we hear describing it into a hazy grammatical and temporal limbo. The effect here is akin to the "décalage" Leenhardt detects in *Jealousy*, but in the cinematic medium, because we are so used to thinking of image and sound, analogous to voice and body, as a unity, it appears perhaps even more striking. Since that disjuncture is, in Robbe-Grillet's novel, entirely presented to us through the voice of the narrator (he describes to us what he sees, he provides commentary on it), it remains hazier than in Duras's film, where *we* see with our own eyes, *we*

[77] "Ils dansaient. Ils dansent."

hear with our own ears, and we feel more acutely the gap between words and images and the destabilization that occurs as it opens up before us, particularly in these early scenes.

Even more interestingly, it is not only the viewer of *India Song* that hears voices from outside. Anne-Marie Stretter — as our protagonist, as the most ennui-afflicted of the bunch — is periodically haunted by sounds that manage to breach the walls of the fantasy pleasure garden in which "white India" is languishing. The very first thing we hear, for example, is the song of a beggar woman from Savannakhet province (in present-day Laos, formerly French Indochina). Later on, we hear it again and the voices tell us that the woman stands outside the gates of the embassy and sings it. And finally, we learn that Anne-Marie Stretter, before arriving in Calcutta, traveled all around Southeast Asia with her diplomat husband and at one point lived in Savannakhet. It is implied that the beggar woman has, almost as if by magic, followed her all the way to Calcutta, by foot, and that her song continues to haunt Anne-Marie. In plain terms, she is a reminder of the real world outside the embassy — of the poverty, of French colonial rule, and of the humanity beyond the bounds of the fantasy represented by *India Song*'s unmoving pictures. Tellingly, we never *see* this woman; we only hear her singing. Similarly, at various points in the film, the 'voices out of time' refer to lepers and paupers living outside the embassy gates, and another character, the Vice-Consul, whose love for Anne-Marie goes unrequited, screams to her from outside these same gates (offscreen) as we watch her standing still and impassive *inside* the embassy. As we have seen in *Jealousy*, signs of reality brush up against the edges, but whereas the novel's narrator is quite good at aestheticizing them to the point of decontextualization and subsequently incorporating them as yet more *tableaux vivants* into the frozen fabric of his world, the voices of *India Song* — irrepressible, unplaceable, out of time and out of frame — cannot be so easily assimilated to the fantasy of images made up of all these

barely-stirring, listless bodies. The voice of the representational subject is, after all, one of the qualities excluded from the *tableau vivant.* The characters of *India Song* seem to look at the *tableau vivant*'s silence and stillness as a means of halting history in its tracks (petulant or desperate entreaties: 'make the world be quiet, make it stop moving!'), but Duras makes it clear that this arrangement only works for those who have acceded to that condition of stasis. And because, as Robbe-Grillet says, there are locks and sluices between all worlds, these voices flow or drip or flood into a fantasy that can never be made watertight. The characters in *India Song* long for the *tableau*'s "deafness" to the sounds of the outside world, as Klossowski describes it, but this is one way in which their fantasy disappoints them.

There is another significant difference between Robbe-Grillet's and Duras's approaches to this similar material that relates to the form of the *tableau vivant.* Whereas in *Jealousy*, these scenes seem simply to come instantaneously into existence within the narrative (we *encounter* them, having already seemingly coalesced into their static form, from the narrator's perspective), the *tableaux* of *India Song* are constructed before our eyes. This is accomplished in a similar manner to the party sequence I have already described, in which Anne-Marie drapes herself over the piano [Figures 33-36]: the image changes over time as the camera remains in place for minutes on end, but instead of characters slowly displacing themselves around the space to take up different frozen postures, for the most part what occurs is that discrete *elements* of the composition are added to it gradually. For example, in Figures 38-44, we see first an image of Anne-Marie, smote by the heat, lying face down on the floor; then she is joined by Michael Richardson; then she turns onto her back as he gazes over her sleeping form, as in Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* [Figure 45]; etc. This scene, which lasts a remarkable twelve minutes, ends in a composition of three of our main characters, lying side by side, asleep on the floor as the light

fades and the darkness gathers around them. In effect, what we observe as viewers here is the 'painting' of the scene taking place before our eyes, and this has the result of bringing to the fore another of these forces (in addition to the haunting offscreen voices) that exist beyond the closed realm of the *tableau vivant*: that is, the filmmaker, Duras herself. Here, though, authorial self-declaration is not an act of vanity (at least, not fully) but instead another blow to the walls of fantasy, a reminder that, in addition to the judgment of history, art, too, sits biding its time, awaiting the hour of critique, just outside the gates. *India Song*, after all, concerns itself with exposing the decadence and rot of colonial power structures. Considered from another perspective, this scene also says something about the construction of the colonizers' fantasy — that is, it must be *built* piecemeal, it seeks to reinforce itself through the accumulation and assimilation of bodies, and it is, at base, a fundamentally social structure.

Considered thus, the *tableau vivant* compositions that are built up in *India Song* gesture simultaneously to the construction of a divorced fantasy world of images as the colonizers' defensive structure and to the ultimate untenability of this world (highlighted by Duras's inventive decoupling of the sound and image components of the filmic medium) when faced with the haunting and undeniable voices of reality that slip through the gaps in its walls. One cannot help but see, in the film's inclusion of specific historical information only at the very end (final shots of maps of India and Indochina marking Anne-Marie Stretter's itinerary through the colonies, from Rangoon to Bangkok to Savannakhet; the first clear mentions of the film's setting in September 1937, discussed alongside historical events like the Nurmeberg rallies and the Battle of Shanghai), the resumption of historical time, the walls coming down, the dissolution of

the intransigently impassive *tableaux vivants* contained within it like so much statuary in an overgrown garden, and the return to motion of this "suspended continent"[78].

In using such a mannered and striking form as the *tableau vivant* to evoke not only the ennui of these colonial subjects, but also the extent and elaborateness of their fantasy-building, the strange world they create for themselves set adrift in strange currents of time and space, both Duras and Robbe-Grillet are participating in a Benjaminian mode of criticism. One of the important distinctions of the examples of *tableau vivant* in this chapter — and one of the reasons for which they become more of an aesthetic principle that pervades the entirety of these texts (or at least a much greater portion than in the more isolated instances discussed in previous chapters) — is that as images understood to be fantasy constructs, they come to represent "artificial world[s]" unto themselves (Jennings 39), proper to a certain class of people. Also in these examples, we can see that the controlling classes create such illusions so as to veil the truth of their condition "*from themselves* as well as from the proletariat[79]" (Jennings 39, my emphasis). If *tableau vivant* can be understood as a form based on the creation of an aesthetic illusion that merges reality and representation to the point that they become difficult to disentangle from one another, then we must also take into account its self-delusive capacity. More so than the examples in other chapters, which foreground the ways in which the *tableau vivant*'s framing can help to disguise exploitative systems of production or suppressive and violent social structures from those who find themselves trapped beneath their weight, the *tableaux vivants* in the colonial contexts of Robbe-Grillet and Duras cause us also to recognize that its enchantments

[78] "Ce continent, suspendu?"

[79] In this case, the colonized subjects of these regions.

are not always unidirectional and top-down, but rather that they can ensnare, too, the beneficiaries of such systems.

The possibility of questioning the ethics of these survival strategies of inscribing small, contained, stilled worlds seemingly immune to the tyranny of time within texts that suggest the historical reality of waning imperial power and European influence in colonized lands is another reason for which Robbe-Grillet and Duras have recourse to the *tableau vivant* in their works. To return to this chapter's initial discussion of inscription through the paintings of Balthus and the novels of Banville, the *tableau vivant* becomes a form that creates a certain textual ambivalence concerning the criminality and violence of its subject matter. Perhaps un-self-critically in Balthus and certainly sardonically in Banville, the *tableau vivant* is a means of concurrently affirming and negating, "committing" and "undoing" a violation. As I have said above, this troubling formal possibility also engenders a perspective on the part of the creator of such images that seems both to revel in and to deny the grim details. In the pervasive, saturating *tableau vivant* aesthetics of *Jealousy* and *India Song*, whose stilled scenes depict the manual labor of indigenous workers and the callous self-interest and narcissism of their overseers, I would suggest that we can also perceive this same impulse (though here both of these writers are clearly leveraging it against their characters as sharp criticisms of colonial power structures). Through the diegetic perspectives of both texts and the stylized non-depictions of the violence of colonialism that they engender, we can nevertheless detect unsettling realities and large-scale culpability about which they are in denial. Klossowski's theorization of the inscribed *tableau vivant* aids us in seeing through these artificial historical fantasies.

Conclusion *Tableau Vivant* and the Pandemic

On March 14, 2020, the Instagram account @tussenkunstenquarantaine published its first image, along with a caption in Dutch: "*Één schilderij, drie voorwerpen uit je huis. Deze is makkelijk*" ('One painting, three objects from your house. It's easy.'). The picture to which this is attached shows a woman, a navy blue dishrag wound round her head, a green IKEA placemat draped across her shoulder, a bulb of garlic pressed to her left earlobe. She is looking, at an angle, over her left shoulder and into the camera's lens [Figure 46]. Swiping to the next image in the post, one sees the painting she has simply, effectively recreated — Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. In the following weeks, the responses to this initial challenge became ever more elaborate, in many cases incorporating many more props, taking on more compositionally complex works (sometimes with multiple people, as in one family's backyard recreation of Emanuel Leutz's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* [Figure 47]), crafting backdrops or manipulating lighting (for example, a version of Caravaggio's *Boy Bitten by a Lizard* [Figure 48], which duplicates its chiaroscuro). From the improvisationally quotidian character of that initial image, painstaking, time-consuming, endlessly creative efforts have been born.

I was, in part, caught off guard by these Instagram *tableaux vivants* because the way in which, in the United States, the pandemic and the institutional responses to it had escalated so rapidly, the way in which, seemingly, all news and communication had been subsumed by the rising tide of the Coronavirus, made it easy to allow my mind to drift away from my work. Literary scholars can be acutely aware of the perceived gulf that yawns between the textual worlds we traverse and the so-called "real world," that exterior "everything-else" that begins

where the page ends. As the pandemic spread, I had turned my gaze away from that chasm and felt that I had my feet firmly planted on the terrain of the concerning "real world" that had risen up in so unexpected a manner and harshly supplanted my fictions. So when these Instagram *tableaux* suddenly came to my attention as a very part of that strange new reality we now found ourselves living, this intrusion of my "work" into my "life" felt something like a shifting and fusion of tectonic plates.

At the most basic level, what these Instagram *tableaux* represent is a return to the original function of the *tableau vivant*: they are undertaken by individuals around the world as a sort of entertainment or (better yet, in the context of a pandemic that has provoked or exacerbated widespread, acute sentiments of hopelessness) as a pleasant diversion. I believe that an analysis can be brought to bear on these images that would reveal latent questions about, and surprising visual formulations of, our relation to the world which now looks so different. I would like here to employ a dual approach that treats these new *tableaux vivants* as products of the pragmatic realities of our Covid-19-stricken world and as images of our greater existential concerns about that world.

My approach throughout this dissertation has been to analyze the *tableau vivant* as a striking form or aesthetic organizing principle that involves many of the same processes as does the dialectical image as a general concept. In this conclusion, however, I would like to propose the *tableau vivant* as it reemerged on social media and in popular culture during the Covid-19 pandemic as a specific example of a Benjaminian dialectical image; analyzed with this particular context in mind, the *tableau vivant* discloses realities about the pre-pandemic world, phenomena of the present of quarantines and lockdowns, and questions about the future.

In the Vermeer recreation that has been identified as the probable originator of this Instagram trend (Ghabayen), we can see that the way in which the image confronts directly the problem of quarantine restrictions with pragmatic solutions is striking: the three items used — washcloth, placemat, garlic bulb — are kitchen staples and therefore resources which do not necessitate leaving the safe, controlled environment of one's own home to obtain. But the limited number and clearly approximative nature of these props underscore another important component of *tableau vivant* as a practice — that is, the selection of an appropriate subject. Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is easily replicable because of its simplicity, and perhaps has gained popularity because of the novel and Hollywood film of the same title. The black background, while strikingly theatrical, is suitably blank enough a surface that the mind can easily substitute it for any number of home settings; its subject's clothing consists in wide horizontal strata of unbroken, unpatterned colors (blue, beige, gold, white) that make for a reproducible and readily identifiable color scheme; the pearl earring — glinting, enormous — is a clear focal point round which the image can be structured and which indicates the painting's well-known title; and, not least, the subject's aqueous gaze over her shoulder, her mouth slightly open as if on the verge of speech, constitute a posture one might adopt with rather minimal effort. That this image can be so clearly called to mind through the careful application of bands of color, a large white bulb, a glance over the shoulder, and a photographic framing speaks to the ingenuity required by such composition within constraints. Inspired by the success of these explicitly homemade *tableaux*, which often take pains to reveal the improvisatory, even apparently banal nature of their accoutrements, many art and art history instructors in the United States took up this challenge as an assignment for their students. One of the reasons for this is that so many of their students, at that point being instructed at home rather than at school, lacked

the resources with which they would have been otherwise working — paint, canvas, pencils, etc. — which were not only difficult to obtain when stores were closed and deliveries often held up, but also prohibitively expensive during a period of widespread financial precarity. Such recreations become a way of subverting the constraints placed upon students by lockdowns, transforming them from creative impediments to imaginative spurs; *tableau vivant*'s need for visual approximation as a way of ensuring its ultimate success (as a duplicate that can be easily recognized by its original image) means that students must pay attention not only to composition of figures, but also color, form, setting, and even, for the more ambitious, light and shadow. Framing *tableau vivant* as an educational assignment (rather than as a pure amusement) thus underscores something latent about the form even in its most purely diversionary application — its analytical dimension, its deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of an image based upon observation and analogical ways of thinking.

One of the major differences between this new exercise in artistic recreation and many more traditional forms of *tableau vivant* is the fact that the latter, even when played as a charades-like parlor game, was performed before an audience. During a time in which mass (and even relatively sparse) gatherings of people in a single space was understandably prohibited with the aim of stymying the spread of the virus, such live public performances were not viable. That this trend emerged via the channels of social media, however, speaks to its continued need for an audience, if in an altered form. Indeed, the @tussenkunstenquarantaine account is a repository of *tableaux* submitted by people from around the world and has amassed, as of the time of writing, over 250,000 followers and more than 800 posts, many of which have been "liked" over ten thousand times by users. While it is clear that the staging of *tableau vivant*, at least initially, derived some of its interest from its paradoxical human "liveness," contrasted with its mimicry

of the immutable plastic arts, the photographic Instagram *tableau* sees that tangible, visceral response of a physically present audience substituted by a digital, quantifiable metric of its reach and reception. It consequently benefits from social media's virtues of its relative geographical unboundedness and its odd combination of temporal immediacy and permanence: the image is made visible in an instant, and remains visible (conceivably) forever. There is also, especially in the projects that heavily incorporate handmade or household objects as props, a certain intimacy to these images; they can seem like invitations of the viewer into the homes of their makers, even as these spaces were physically closed off during lockdowns.

Underlying this creative challenge is an ideal of interpersonal connection forged through a common appreciation of the visual arts, a passion that manifests itself in clever, fastidious, or complex recreations. As is to be expected of our age, this ideal has been seized upon by institutions and businesses, which are prime mobilizers and beneficiaries of social networks. To wit, museums (notably the Getty Museum in Los Angeles [@gettymuseum]) have promoted the challenge, showcasing entries submitted to them or variations created by their staff, themselves working from home. We might safely, somewhat cynically, say that this is a marketing tactic, designed to maintain connection with a clientele from which these institutions had suddenly found themselves cut off physically; as emphasis shifted to digital, contactless methods of interaction, the *tableau vivant* seemed like an excellent way to ensure continued and continuous engagement between museums and would-be visitors, especially because it is so emphatically active, requiring of participants that they take the time to look at the museums' social media profiles and/or online collections to find a work to recreate; analyze the image and come up with a means of replicating it within the bounded space of their own homes; and finally stage, photograph, and submit it.

On another level, however, the *tableau vivant* underscores a fragility inherent to the institution of the museum and exposed by the pandemic: traditionally, it is a physical space that serves as a repository of art and which, through its curatorial practices and architecture, through its foundational ideology, values the physical presence of the work and the possibility for a kind of transcendent contact between the viewed object, in all its concreteness, and the viewing subject. This idea of contact, it must be said, is for the most part specular and could even in most cases be called an illusion of contact, since it is relatively rare for a museum to allow visitors actually to touch their collections; a certain haptic quality of looking is closely hinted at by a museum visit rather than actually permitted and realized. When the possibility of physically being in the same space as a work of art is precluded, and when the intangible, digital image has become the only form of access, how can museums and their patrons approximate this sensation of physicality, of an embodied encounter with art? One possible solution is the *tableau vivant*, the practice of which generally shifts what I described as the haptic side of viewing away from the imaginative impulse (engendered by brushstrokes on canvas or chiseled stone) and towards the active viewer, who now looks in order to reproduce. Instead of merely perusing digitized collections across the insistent two-dimensionality of a computer screen, the interpreter of a *tableau vivant* must also re-compose the image within the three dimensions of their own home; instead of projecting themself into a canvas purely through the powers of imagination, the interpreter physically feels the work's visual repertoire of bodily attitudes — introspection, voluptuousness, pain; instead of inferring texture from a painted fold of silk, the interpreter feels real fabric against their skin. So even if the inevitable result of this is a two-dimensional, digitized image posted to a website, the process of its creation has entailed an intensely tactile, literally embodied approach to looking at art. These *tableaux* could be read as expressions of

longing for a physical object, of a kind of appreciation for the suddenly, unexpectedly cloistered artwork, and as an unusual foray into the making of images by amateurs who might not consider themselves to be artists.

Many of the more recent *tableaux* that have appeared on the @tussenkunstenquarantaine account are considerably more elaborate than the take on Vermeer that initiated the trend; in fact, the "challenge" aspect seems to have, for many, fallen away entirely. But the idea of constraint in the execution of these *tableaux* remains; it is simply displaced from a very pragmatic constraint of three household objects as props or visual markers to one of extreme visual approximation that seeks to duplicate the original as closely as it possibly can. A recreation of Millais' *Ophelia* [Figure 49], for example, sees its interpreter partially-submerged in a full bathtub that has been meticulously lined in potted house plants and sprinkled with leaves and blossoms, a surprising merging of garden and bathroom that effectively renders the original's darkly verdant riverbanks and also cleverly suggests the way in which the pandemic has greatly frustrated our experiences of indoor and outdoor spaces. A *tableau* of Botticelli's *Primavera* [Figure 50] uses eight interpreters to depict all eight figures in the painting, dresses them in carefully draped, properly colored togas and gowns, and covers an entire wall in sheets and artificial flowers to capture the original's shadowed, blossoming thicket. In this way, even though they still make use of people and objects confined to limited spaces, these more ambitious projects are able to take on more complicated subjects, and the activity of staging such *tableaux* brings us back to the activity's primary original purpose — a pastime. The most obvious connection we might make between their degree of difficulty and their context within the pandemic is that the former is a result of the "extra" time re-allocated by the latter's exclusion of activities outside the home; the more complex the picture, the more time it takes to

plan and execute, and the more hours slip by in a state of pleasant distraction. Many of these *tableaux* also incorporate young children, and it is clear that families took up this activity as one they could do together (or that parents turned to it as a means of occupying bored children).

In some of these more complex variations, a more parodic perspective emerges or even predominates. This is a newer element of the form, and is distinct from the uses to which we have seen it put in the examples from twentieth century literature and cinema that I have discussed. In those cases, such a parodic or ironic slant was not always absent, but instead was established primarily through context and framing of the images, which in themselves principally exist as reproductions of paintings or as distillations of peculiar aesthetics. For example, Wharton's incisive commentary upon the institution of the marriage market really only presents itself through the gestures and dialogue of characters in the audience, rather than through symbolism or visual parallels within Lily Bart's *tableau vivant* itself. In these newer examples of Instagram *tableaux*, on the other hand, the use of improvised props (especially those relating to the pandemic itself or clearly cobbled together from a standardly equipped kitchen or bathroom) to construct the images, and even to build into it significant telltale signs of the context in which they were produced, instead generates an ironic tone or parodic rephrasing that is more immediately visible, more a marked and deliberate element of the picture. Such details are not merely a historical marker to designate these *tableaux* as proper to the pandemic, but serve also as statements on the part of their makers regarding their own positions vis-à-vis the world around them. They might signal a hopefully humorous take in contrast to the dire news that inundated people daily, a critique of particular phenomena such as the "panic buying" of toilet paper and other supplies that was widespread during the initial days of the pandemic, or an exploration pushing at the boundaries of confining or protecting spaces in which people spent so much time

during lockdowns. In other words, one of the possibilities of this new kind of *tableau* is the inclusion of an individual perspective or more personal reflections into the image, something that could be considered at odds with the *tableau vivant*'s mimetic prerogative.

Interestingly, these *tableaux* demonstrate that the two approaches are not incompatible, and can help to more firmly establish the interpreters or stagers as artists in their own right, rather than mere copyists. Such an altered relationship between the contents of the *tableau vivant* and the individuals staging it also signals a departure from the majority of examples of the form I have discussed in that it ascribes to them a certain agency that is pointedly lacking in the compositions of, for example, Robbe-Grillet, Balthus, or Banville. In these latter *tableaux*, the constraints inherent to the form are mobilized in order to thematize, problematize, or perpetuate an aesthetic violence against primarily female subjects; while in some cases, this use is intended as a criticism of the same, this still entails a continuation of these subjugating cycles of representation. And if there is a political perspective brought to bear against them, it is to be found in the context and framing of the image — which is to say, the domain of the extradiegetic (usually male) artist — rather than within it. In the Instagram *tableaux*, on the contrary, the actual people we see posed in the photographs are often the ones who conceived of and composed it (or, at the very least, who are aware of the winking gesture of recreating, for example, Rembrandt's *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* [Figure 51] using latex surgical gloves and rolls of toilet paper for a ruff); this has the effect of collapsing from *within* (rather than breaking through from *without*) the self-enclosure of the *tableau vivant*, effectively helping to foreground the image's context and to collapse, or at least complicate, the notion of the form's delineated space of performance, even as it abides by it. To use terms from the discussion of photographic *tableaux* in Chapter 2, these images no longer bear traces of a *suppressed* reality,

but rather wear with pride such traces. The parodic, mischievous nature of these gestures also signals a shifting of the gameplay inherent in the *tableau vivant* away from the figure of the author or filmmaker, and, interestingly enough, back towards the interpreter. So while in some ways this playfulness seems to be a new development, it also could be seen to represent a step back towards the form's origin (albeit with significant differences).

But a perhaps less obvious way of considering the flourishing of complex *tableaux* is that this underscores class and labor divisions that have been thrown into relief and often renamed during the pandemic. While it is true that many people have found themselves housebound and working from home via the now ubiquitous Zoom meeting and through our omnipresent communications technologies, there are also many more, deemed "essential" or "critical" workers in Anglophone spheres, who have continued to work, often in deplorably dangerous conditions; when limiting exposure to others is the most effective method of preventing infection, workers in even the best-equipped workplaces who must be in contact with each other and with others are placed in harm's way in the interest of maintaining services upon which so many people depend. The essential workers — grocery store and pharmacy workers, some in the food service sector, such as cooks and delivery drivers, doctors, nurses, and healthcare practitioners, many public service operators, to name a few — are very often so-called blue collar workers, while many non-essential workers are white collar professionals. So while part of the country found themselves stuck in their homes, there were others who had no choice but to leave them in order to continue working and providing for themselves and their families. And then there are workers categorized as non-essential who simply did not have the option of working from home, such as restaurant waitstaff or hair stylists, many of whom found themselves on the treacherous ground of supposedly temporary but open-ended and unpaid

periods of leave, or who were officially furloughed, or who were even let go by their employers. When we look at these *tableaux* on Instagram, we might ask ourselves who, exactly, had (and has) the time and opportunity to engage in this practice, and what states of minds vis-à-vis their employment, their security, and their physical and mental wellbeing the leisurely, aestheticizing undercurrents of the *tableau vivant* might bespeak. This is not, by any means, to come full circle and equate the practitioners of contemporary *tableaux vivants* with the aristocratic ennui of Goethe's or Zola's novels, nor to condemn it as an activity; rather, my aim is to point out that when we look at these images, we should not be so drawn into them that we lose sight of their very distinct sources in, or points of contact with, the outside reality of the pandemic, which has exacerbated and laid bare inequalities deeply rooted in many world economies. Tellingly, it seems that many of the creators of these *tableaux* also seek to incorporate reminders of the context from which they have emerged, as the images regularly contain, with more or less prominence, objects that are now emblematic of Covid-19 and public health responses to it — medical masks, surgical gloves, toilet paper.

Ultimately, it is this multi-directionality (drawing us in, pulling us out) and literal and thematic tension inherent to the *tableau vivant* that has ensured its survival long after its first performances. This is also, I believe, what makes it a productive framework through which to examine historical periods or artistic contexts in which it is situated. As it is traditionally staged, *tableau vivant* generates and plays on an uncanny vacillation between solipsism and outwardly-oriented performance (unflinching, unspeaking actors enclosed in their pictorial roles, playing to a room full of people), between the human and the non-human, the ephemeral and the permanent, life and death. In the midst of the pandemic, one of these dichotomous tensions — which are really more like uneasy coexistences — has arisen in surprising ways: that of sociality

and asociality. As various cities, states, and countries went into periods of mandated lockdown and terms like “social distancing,” “quarantine,” and “remote” overtook so much of our daily discourse, necessary asociality became a means of curbing the spread of infection, a means of survival. Restricted, except for absolutely necessary trips to restock groceries, medication, and other supplies, to very limited physical spaces and to encounters with only those who already lived together, the now greatly pared-down social dimensions of our lives often became objects of nostalgic longing. With the world outside looming perilously, teeming with others whose mere presence came with a measure of risk, people nonetheless felt compelled to *see* each other, and the scope of our communications technologies is such that “seeing” without proximity was a possibility that became suddenly de rigueur. Video conferencing programs, once used mostly to connect people across borders and oceans, are now a common means of talking with people who live and work in the vicinity of one another. A good deal of work — from meetings to schoolwork — is now done online, often “synchronously,” with Zoom meetings. And after the work day is done, for many people, entertainment primarily takes the form of engagement with screens projecting social media or streaming services like Netflix and Hulu. In short, the pandemic, in limiting our movements and physical encounters with other people, in confining many to their homes, has effectively transformed the world, for many, into a series of images: family and friends reduced to two dimensions and tinny voices emanating from speakers, scenes from around the world captured in short clips and photographs posted online.

On one level, the *tableau vivant* challenge could represent a cession to this new state of affairs, so many more images added to the internet’s seemingly endless gallery. The activity of *tableau vivant* is, in itself, an escape from reality and into enchanted pictorial worlds, a retreat into the beauty and irreality of paintings. It is telling that a great deal of these interpretations take

as their originals works of art with mythological or historical subjects; to even the most violent of subjects, painting's evocative temporal crystallization lends an apparent serenity, and across the surface of the already serene, it can suggest eternal bliss and beauty. To recreate Millais' *Ophelia* or Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* is to step through the frame, out of our own world and into the self-contained realm of the canvas, seemingly existing out of time. To take on the role of a painted god or saint or hero is to immerse oneself in a fiction. When life and our world have become too much, a reality too awfully, crushingly present in the way it absents us from what now looks like our past, where better to look for respite than in a universe unto itself — unconcerned, unmoving, unchanging. *Tableau vivant* is, aside from being a diverting activity that brings us to engage with art (especially kinds of art that seem to be ever more distant), a deliberate conflation of life and its representation, and there is perhaps comfort — albeit necessarily temporary — in this ambiguity. I do not wish to suggest that all of the practitioners of these Instagram *tableaux* undertake their art with this idea in mind, but I do believe that their popularity may be, perhaps almost subconsciously, linked to the way in which, as a creative process, they mirror many aspects of our existential "new normal." It entails looking at and studying images, and then *becoming one*. It demands a questioning and an understanding of how one might exist as an image to another living being (in other words, ontological inquiry). It involves taking up often painstaking poses and holding them at least long enough to get one picture, and in all likelihood for longer, in order to capture an image that is a clear and precise enough copy of the original. And, for the interpreters of these images, this staging means entering into a liminal state, between living being and painted figure, between normal movements, between art and quarantine (in Dutch, "*Tussen kunst en quarantaine*"). These *tableaux vivants* take on new resonances in the time of pandemic, as works of art in their own

right that, while recreating images whose sense of inner calm and deathlessness we might desire as an antidote to the pervasive uneasiness and unshakeable sense of mortality surrounding all of us, are also simply photographs of people waiting, of life standing still.

This is the double-edged sword of *tableau vivant*: in its sublime silences and ecstatic stases, it can seem almost utopian, an exercise in suprahuman existence, an incursion of living beings into glossy, rarefied atmospheres of oils, marbles, watercolors, where all is form and where time holds no sway; but it is also an illusion, and one with a definite end, when its interpreters' bodies, even if pushed to the point of collapse, must return to movement and to the world from which they have temporarily, pointedly retired. As transformational and transcendent as the *tableau vivant* can undoubtedly be, there is also always within it the promise of its collapse, the reassertion of the insuperable divide between life and art. But, I would argue, there is also something redemptive about *tableau vivant*, and specifically its inherent brittleness. Even as it can be understood as a highly aestheticized reflection of technology's and biology's transformation of the people and world around us into a series of images, "flattening" us into pictures and freezing us in an uncomfortable posture of waiting, *tableau vivant* can — and should — be read bidirectionally: it also entails the transformation of painted figures into people, of two dimensions into three, of plane into space, of stasis into movement. It can be read as a manifestation of our lives trembling on the edge between life and death, health and sickness. In the end, the *tableau* has to break, and life must once again take up its rhythms.

Benjamin's dialectical image is one in which we can discern past and present as distinct but mutually inflected points in the continuum of history. Covid lockdowns, and the pandemic as a whole, have been broadly experienced as an excruciating present — one in which vaguely regular existence, entailing social interactions, work, etc., was suddenly and dramatically

rendered ‘past’ — and the idea of a ‘future’ under these new circumstances has often seemed hazy or uncertain in its particulars. Instead, for many, the *now* was jarringly dislocated, both temporally and spatially. People worked or attended school from their homes (sometimes as the sole individual in a household), engaging with coworkers, peers, and instructors through Zoom meetings, looking into windows whose panes are made up of pixelated pictures of people they would otherwise be meeting physically, and with whom they would otherwise be sharing real space. In fact, ‘work from home’ opportunities have been discussed increasingly as possible long-term arrangements, intended to outlast the pandemic.

The way in which this connects with Benjamin’s theorizations of history is that, in these changes which seemed, in the moment, to be dramatic shifts, we can in fact detect the rapid acceleration of tendencies towards which our society had already been drifting since long before the catalyzing urgencies of the pandemic. Increasing technologization of labor; dependence upon technology generally, even in social contexts; alienation from our natural environments and isolation from others; the ballooning of wealth inequality and the steady corporate erosion of workers’ rights: all these were already present in the United States, and many other places besides, back when it was ‘business as usual,’ before March 2020. If a Zoom room or a QAnon message board or a home gym setup or any other artefact of the pandemic can be considered a dialectical image, it is not because it merely applies to the context of the specific ‘present’ in which it became prevalent, but rather because it emerges at that time as an image formed *also* by its own past, the ideologies, trends, and exigencies of which it reflects even as it seems in other ways to be something entirely novel. The same might be said of the *tableau vivant’*s reemergence via social media during this time period.

The reinvigorated practice of the *tableau vivant* expresses both 'positive' and 'negative' emotional and pragmatic responses to the pandemic. In the positive sense, it represents creativity, rerouted energy, social connection through the medium of images, and communication and collaboration cutting across space and time, international and intergenerational in scope. In the negative sense, it can be seen as an outlet for frustrations surrounding the isolation of individuals and smaller units from the rest of society, the physical distance created between viewer and work of art when museums were shuttered to the public, movement and bodily exertion during a period of confinement, and the difficulties parents and other caregivers faced as they were made to take on more responsibilities for their children's educational activities. On a more abstract, less conscious level, I would add to this list of rather practical concerns significant existential and psychological ones: anxieties about restriction of movement, conflicts between ideas of collective and individual rights, desires to connect with loved ones, uncertainties about a 'new normal' and the effects of the pandemic upon physical and mental health. To put it another way, this resurgence of *tableau vivant* took place at a point when many felt suspended between a past way of life that seemed largely to have dissipated and a future roiling with medical uncertainties and political strife (both actual and theoretical). These images can function as expressions of exasperation with "the fallenness of the world order that produced them" (Jennings 38), even if the full dimensions of their indignation might not become completely visible until later on. This, then, might be called a moment in which the qualities of Benjamin's dialectical image, which must emerge as an isolated object of analysis, as one of the "fragments of truth scattered amidst the dross" (Jennings 38), can be acutely felt, a straining beneath the surface as people are tensed expectantly for what is to come next.

The *tableau vivant* appears when the regular rhythms of time are accelerated, disrupted, or slackened, and when confinement, of the literal or figurative sort, makes itself felt by individuals and groups. In short, artists return to it because in certain respects, it resembles real life, and in others, it is insistent in its artifice. It is a way of making sense of an odd new present-tense by referring aesthetically to a past against which it is defined, and a future about which it knows nothing apart from its own mortality. What its resurgence during the pandemic makes clear is that it can express trepidation, hesitancy, liminality — its compositional rigidity in fact springs from and represents the fluidity, unknowability, and chaos of the undelimited world beyond its boundaries.