

Alain Robbe-Grillet's "Le Mannequin" as a Cognitive Machine

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French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008), now revered as the father of Nouveau Roman, aroused much controversy when he, a former agronomist, entered into the literary circles in France in the 1950s. His seemingly anti-humanist and radically anti-psychological approach to writing, which manifested as substantially descriptive texts, was considered to be destructive to literature: it had no meaning whatsoever.

As the early texts of Robbe-Grillet consisted solely of uneventful but geometrically exact, almost scientific descriptions, "Le mannequin" (1954), a short 'story' of few pages, or rather an instantané, a snapshot, is one of the most radical, and philosophically significant, of these texts.

In this instantané there are no living characters at all – only one mannequin and its diverse reflections in a certain system of mirrors. The text consists of a description of this perspective system and the view this system opens up: 'three' mannequins in a row 'looking' out of the window.

The optical system, which is purely logical, and thus in essence without duration, fixes an abstract but precise point of perception, from which it is only possible to attain the image of the mannequin and its reflections as they are described.

If we understand the description, the text itself, as pure perceptive material, then the non-textual abstract point (of perception) – the 'anonymous presence' – can be seen as purely spiritual memory without any chronological or durational time (not to speak of any contentual meaning).

As a cognitive machine "Le mannequin" is thus a genuine creator of pure – and in this way 'over-human' – spirit out of purely perceptive material.

"Le mannequin" is also, as a cognition-image, an image of the human condition: body and soul separated, or dispersed; the mannequin(s) looking out of the window, without psyche, and the alienated mind, left alone, reflecting – this view. Or, as well,

Tiina Arppe, Timo Kaitaro & Kai Mikkonen 2009

Writing in Context: French Literature, Theory and the Avant-Gardes
L'écriture en contexte : littérature, théorie et avant-gardes françaises au XX^e siècle

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this is a deconstructive image of the reader's condition: the text read and the reader in separation; the text describing, and the described wondering and pondering the problem of representation.

However, the ultimate creation of "Le mannequin" as an anti-humanist work is – within the virtual pole of this text-image – the relation of durational human time, or human spirituality, to the 'whole of time', which is over-human, beyond the reach of the human individual. The latter is the ultimate singularity that "Le mannequin" as a text-image can bear, and at the same time it is the blind spot not only of the human(ist) condition but also of the anti-human(ist) condition – and thereby also the condition of all natural science; mathematics, geometry and optics included.

"The image can be seen by way of what it lacks."

Jean Louis Schefer (1995, 120)

This article is not a literary analysis of the short text called "Le mannequin" (1954), written by Alain Robbe-Grillet over half a century ago.¹ More than a piece of literary research, this article is an analysis of a particular cinematic image. That is, an analysis of a literary text as a cinematic image, albeit a very strange image in its movements – a textually distributed image that creates *the precondition* of its own visuality through its own becoming, through textual description.

This kind of imagerial event that makes known its own blind spot, or its point of gravity, or its *point de lumière*, of which it is a product, I call cognition-image.² "Le mannequin" as a cognition-image seems to be very close to Jean Louis Schefer's ideas about cinematic image.³

My ultimate effort, however, is to go even further. The French philosopher François Laruelle created a science of philosophy called non-philosophy. In the same way, my ambition is to set up here 'non-literary research' that can say

1 "Le mannequin" is the opening text of Robbe-Grillet's *Trois visions réfléchies*, his first "nouvelle", which was first published in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* in April 1954 (Lambert 2005, 23). In 1962 the text was published in a collection *Instantanés*, which still remains the only short prose collection of Robbe-Grillet. The English translation by Bruce Morrissette of this collection was published in 1968 under the title *Snapshots*.

2 Cognition-image is my proposition for a sequel of Deleuzian time-image (which was created in film history after the WWII bankruptcy of movement-image). See Deleuze 1985. The notions of cinematic *point de gravité* and *point de lumière* come from Jean-Louis Schefer (1997a, 93).

3 See Schefer 1997a, esp. 10–15, 93–94. For Schefer, the essential characteristic of a cinematic image is not its visible element but the spectacle of human species that it creates, without any present object, in a *chambre invisible* within us.

something relevant about the preconditions of all literature. In fact “Le mannequin”, the text-image created by Robbe-Grillet, motivates this attempt.⁴

Instead of textual or linguistic (not to speak of filmic) interpretations, this article will be a ‘non-interpretative’⁵ quest for something that is qualitatively different from “Le mannequin” as a ‘text-image’. That is, this is a quest for something real that has no actuality in “Le mannequin” in its textual details nor has it any extension in “Le mannequin” as an image, but still exists only through these two phenomena.

In a matter of fact, ‘going even further’ signifies here going even ‘deeper’. As philosopher Gilles Deleuze has argued, the cinema, unlike literature, is not language, nor a language system. It is “intelligible material” that consists of pre-linguistic images and pre-signifying signs.⁶ My purpose here is then – via “Le mannequin” the text-image – to ask the precondition of a cinematic image.

Jean-Luc Godard has argued that the cinema started with Édouard Manet,⁷ but Jean Louis Schefer’s standpoint is quite different. He thinks that the cinema had its origin in Palaeolithic art, in the insight that the human being as such is invisible, something other than e.g. a mere figure (Schefer 1997b, 27). From here started the history of images with blind spots.

Thus, in my journey through the various images of art history that have different kinds of ‘missing points’, or blind spots, or points of light, a journey that finds its end in “Le mannequin”, my ultimate objective is to decipher the three challenging propositions of Jean Louis Schefer on cinematic images:

Something is missing that constitutes the image (permits it to conceal the world we live in, not by means of a screen with figures on it, but by means of time).

4 Thus my approach is almost opposite to the textual-linguistic analysis of Yves de la Quérière (cf. esp. Quérière 1973, 960). Quérière’s article “Robbe-Grillet dans le sens du texte: *Le Mannequin*” (1973) is the only thorough study I am aware of on this particular *instantané*. Research on the short prose of Robbe-Grillet has, in general, been relatively scarce. (On “Le mannequin” see however Ricardou 1967, 36,41–2.) In his article Quérière analyses the text’s contents and structure sentence by sentence, and in this way he also cites the whole text within his article. Because I do not go into the textual or linguistic details of “Le mannequin” in my study, I recommend the reader to read the whole text from the Appendix, where it can be found in both the original French and in English translation.

5 With this term I follow the wisdom of Susan Sontag in her essay “Against Interpretation” (1964). Sontag 2001, 3–14.

6 Deleuze 1985, 342.

7 “[L]e monde enfin / le monde intérieur / a rejoint le cosmos / et [--] avec Edouard Manet commence / la peinture moderne / c’est-à-dire le cinématographe / c’est-à-dire / des formes / qui cheminent vers la parole / très exactement une forme qui pense / que le cinéma soit d’abord fait pour penser / on l’oubliera tout de suite / mais c’est une autre histoire” (Godard, *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, 3a). Cf. e.g. Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) or *Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1881–82).

If what's missing *were* within the image (of which we are a part – the virtual pole, or the phantom), the image would be invisible.

So the spectacle of visible man does exist: it's the awareness of the darkness of our interior lives by which any spectacle is made possible. (Schefer 1995, 120)

I will not stop before the significance of these three propositions that are important for “Le mannequin” the text-image is made clear. That is, when the ultimate blind spot of the anti-human condition in “Le mannequin” is made, if not clear, at least intuitively known.

The motivation for the objective above comes from the fact that for Schefer the principle of the cinema is actually *le mannequin derrière nos têtes*, the dummy at the back of our heads. In his book on cinema, philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes on Schefer's notion of cinema as follows:

Quand Jean-Louis Schefer invoque le grand automate spirituel ou le mannequin derrière nos têtes comme principe du cinéma, il a raison de le définir aujourd'hui par un cerveau qui fait une expérience directe du temps, antérieure à toute motricité de corps [--]. (Deleuze 1985, 349-350)⁸

For Schefer, the cinema has always been more a question of the invention of the spectator than a question of the spectacle or phantasmagoria – and above all else, the essence of the cinematic image consists, according to Schefer, of a temporal paradox and of effects of duration as such.⁹

In the same way “Le mannequin” is an imagerial event, or a cognitive machine, that invents its ‘spectator’ as a virtual point of its own imagery, and with this, puts the question of duration and temporality at stake.

Thus, it seems that as a textual-spiritual image of human cognition, “Le mannequin” might also picture for us, at the same time, something of the essence and of the possibilities of cinematic image (and its perception) in general. And in our contemporary world, in the society of the spectacle, this means the essence of our technologically cultured visual life¹⁰ and the cinematically critical possibilities that still exist in it.

8 Cf. Schefer 1997a, esp. 87–89, 93–94, 97–100, 154.

9 “[L]e cinéma [--] naît d'abord comme paradoxe moral et temporel (c'est la même chose) dans l'invention du spectateur. Le cinéma est une machine à varier des affects expérimentaux, c'est-à-dire essentiellement à nous faire éprouver en l'absence d'objets des effets de durée comme telle: celle du suspens d'action. [--] L'expérimentation sur le temps est ainsi l'objet du cinéma” (Schefer 1997b, 84–85).

10 Cf. *La Société du spectacle* (1967) by Guy Debord.

A Human Writing an Anti-Humanist Text

French writer and filmmaker Alain Robbe-Grillet, born in Brest 1922, is now revered as the father figure of *Nouveau Roman*. Robbe-Grillet aroused much controversy when he, a former agronomist, entered into the literary circles in France in the 1950s. His geometrically exact, almost scientific type of writing was said to be cold and inhuman, anti-literature. It was said that the texts of Robbe-Grillet had neither a proper story nor proper characters, and thus his texts had no meaning whatsoever, or at least no proper literary meaning.

The fiercest attack against the writing of Robbe-Grillet, and in this way a classical example of the *Nouveau Roman* controversy, was a book called *La cafetière est sur la table ou Contre le "nouveau roman"* (1967) written by Pierre de Boisdeffre. The main title of the Boisdeffre's book is a direct reference to "Le mannequin", which begins with the same words. William F. van Wert has summed up the message of Boisdeffre and his book:

No critic is more violently opposed to Robbe-Grillet than Boisdeffre. [--] He portrays Robbe-Grillet as a kind of pervert, a freak recluse from life, tired of thinking up plots, or maybe they're too complicated for him, so he stays at the level of "snapshots." Boisdeffre compares the new novel with the Chinese Cultural Revolution: burning books and forcing a taste on the public. Thus, Robbe-Grillet is a "profiteer." He concludes that Robbe-Grillet should be making films, not writing novels. (Van Wert 1977, 109)¹¹

Clearly the *cafetière robbe-grilletien* was too hot for the good old humanists who drank their coffee in literary salons with an uplifted little finger.¹² Accordingly, Gilles Clérences commented in *Le Magazine littéraire* on the attack of Boisdeffre in the following way:

La polémique fit grand bruit dans les salons où on boit le café avec un seul sucre en levant le petit doigt. Car en s'emparant de la cafetière, Pierre de Boisdeffre se brûla le petit doigt... (Clérences 1968)

But Boisdeffre himself wanted to burn something else.

Vos romans, Robbe-Grillet, n'ont jamais existé que sur le papier. Vos personnages ne se sont jamais promenés dans la vie.

Brûlez vos livres, Robbe-Grillet! Délivrez-nous de cette moisissure qui, d'année en année, s'étend sur nos Lettres. Epargnez votre temps et le nôtre. Etudiez le système métrique, puisque c'est là votre passion! (Boisdeffre 1967, front cover; also 149 & 150–51)

¹¹ Boisdeffre (1967, 114) in his own words: "[C]e n'est pas dans le roman mais dans un AUTRE ART [i.e. film] que Robbe-Grillet peut gagner sa partie."

¹² On the ethical opposition of Robbe-Grillet to the Western humanism and its narrative habits, see e.g. Meretoja 2006, esp. 101–103.

The accusations of Boisdeffre were of course true from the viewpoint of traditional realism – against which Robbe-Grillet had made his literary-philosophical attack in the first place. Robbe-Grillet wanted to destroy all the metaphysical systems of meaning that operate in the traditional, Balzacian type of literary realism.

About the characters in his texts, for example, Robbe-Grillet has himself said (in 1994): “Par rapport à un personnage balzacien, je ne suis fait que de trous” (Robbe-Grillet 2001, 296). In spite of these ‘human lacunas’, or just in congruence with them, Robbe-Grillet has always emphasised that *Nouveau Roman* is above all interested in the human being and his relations with the world: “Le Nouveau Roman ne s’intéresse qu’à l’homme et à sa situation dans le monde” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 116). The most important objective is “d’exprimer (ou de créer) de nouvelles relations entre l’homme et le monde” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 9).

“Le mannequin” is a good example of all that has been put forward above. This so-called snapshot text is an anti-humanist and anti-signifying piece of writing, almost anti-literature – which, of course, makes it highly interesting as a living work of art. It is also about the situation of man within the universe, which makes it philosophically important. In actual fact, “Le mannequin” is one of the most radical, and philosophically significant, of the early texts by Robbe-Grillet.

There really are no living characters in “Le mannequin”, and it seems that nothing is happening in the text. The text consists only of a description of some insignificant or banal objects, such as a coffeepot and a table on which the coffeepot is located. In the place of living characters, there is only a mannequin, a mere dressmaker’s dummy, standing in front of a large window, through which leafless trees in the garden outside can be seen.

Thus, deducing from all this, we can be quite sure that the space in which the description, or at least ‘the described’ takes place, is a fairly normal room – although *this* is never actually confirmed in the text itself! Actually the space could as well be a film studio, or even some more mysterious place in our world...

In the hypothetical room of “Le mannequin”, there are also several mirrors. These mirrors make up a certain system in which diverse reflections of the mannequin and leafless trees in the garden can be seen. The careful textual description of this perspectival system of mirrors finally reveals a view: ‘three’ mannequins in a row ‘looking’ out of the window.

And this is all. There is almost nothing more in the text – so, no real drama whatsoever.¹³ Or, should we look more closely? Let's begin our quest for 'the missing power point' of "Le mannequin".

In Search of the Missing Power Point

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze stated in his essay "La méthode de dramatisation" that "Il y a toujours un drame sous tout *logos*" (Deleuze 1967, 101), there is always a drama beneath every *logos* – that is to say, beneath every reason, or understanding, beneath every word, or meaning, beneath every order.

Now, what is the real drama beneath the *logos* of "Le mannequin"? Or, to put it differently: from where can a relevant context be found for this descriptive writing of Robbe-Grillet? And if there is a relevant context to be found, what kind of context is it? To begin to open the secret of the (hypothetical) room, it can be revealed that the so-called 'context' in question is not actual – it is virtual.

What happens in the text is that it creates something that is qualitatively different from the actual text itself. This something is virtual. But in this case, the virtual thing in the text has nothing to do with any meaning. It could be said that Symbolist poetry (e.g. Mallarmé) is an anti-mimetic case in literature in which the actual words create meaning that is qualitatively different from the text itself. At least this was the challenging ambition of symbolists in search for the absolute (truths). In their work, the possibility of absolute meaning as something virtual 'behind' the actual was worked out in a fully conscious way.

But in the case of Robbe-Grillet there is nothing *behind* the text! We can refer here also to Susan Sontag's classic essay "Against Interpretation" (1964): "The modern style of interpretation excavates, and as it excavates, destroys; it digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one (Sontag 2001, 6.)" In this kind of interpretative excavation of meaning "Le mannequin" falls short. The virtual 'context' is not any kind of 'sub-text'.

13 There are, however, some textual signs of human action in the text. Noting this Boisdeffre is – or he thinks he is – perspicacious: "Signalons toutefois à l'auteur une petite erreur typiquement 'anthropomorphe': la 'bonne odeur de café chaud' qui vient humaniser cet univers géométrique." Another humanising 'error' is of course the metaphor of an ear when the handle of the coffeepot is described. But this metaphor is luckily called off... Also the expressions of uncertainty ("probablement", "sans doute") have a humanising significance. And actually the object world of the text is thoroughly human. But this all is Robbe-Grillet's anti-humanist strategy: with these subtle means he keeps the line between human and non-human visible.

The Virtual

The Deleuzian schema of the philosophical drama beneath every *logos* takes the same form as Nietzsche's schema to interpret Greek tragedy and the music drama of Richard Wagner. That is, the reciprocal form of Apollonian (being) and Dionysian (becoming). The visual image comes from Apollo, and the visual Apollonian side is (simplifying things a little bit) for Deleuze the side of the actual.

In Nietzschean theory the Dionysian is the musical image, and this musical, Dionysian side is for Deleuze the side of the virtual. If then, as Deleuze says in his book on cinema, the Dionysian image, "l'image immédiate musicale est comme le noyau de feu qui s'entoure d'images visuelles apolliniennes, et ne peut se passer de leur defile", the Deleuzian virtual is, in a similar vein, the core of fire that cannot do without the actual (Deleuze 1985, 311).

The whole Deleuzian philosophy consists of these two qualitatively different planes, the actual and the virtual. Here it is enough to say that Deleuze distinguishes himself from the Aristotelian tradition of the possible and the actual. This tradition says that the actual is the possible that has become real. The reason for breaking out of this tradition is that when the possible becomes actual there is nothing new in this actualisation; there is no genuine creation. Thus Deleuze substitutes the conceptual pair of possible and actual for the pair of virtual and actual, which has its origin in the philosophy of Henri Bergson. Virtual is for Deleuze something that is not actual but nonetheless real (Deleuze 1966, *passim*).

Thus we can ask: what is the virtual of the text considered here, "Le mannequin"? That is, what is not actual but nonetheless real in it?

The Pure Anonymous Presence

We can now go back, for a moment, to the early reception of Robbe-Grillet. Certainly there were also critics who more or less understood the strivings of Robbe-Grillet.

Roland Barthes was the first to appreciate Robbe-Grillet's descriptive and 'meaningless' writing. Barthes named it *chosisme*: the objects and events in descriptions do not *mean* anything, they merely *are there*. Barthes declared Robbe-Grillet as the founding father of *école du regard*.¹⁴

14 Two essential articles Barthes wrote on Robbe-Grillet were "Littérature objective" (*Critique*, No 86–87, 1954) and "Littérature littérale" (*Critique*, No 100–101, 1955). Both the texts are republished in Lambert 2005.

However, Barthes perhaps overemphasized a little too much the objective side of Robbe-Grillet's writing – which does not mean that the decent alternative for this would have been to stress subjectivity in his writing.

Maurice Blanchot, in his reading of the novel *Le Voyeur* (1955), had more clairvoyance.¹⁵ In “Notes sur un roman” published in *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française* in July 1955, Blanchot asked:

D'où vient la lumière qui règne dans [un récit comme] *Le Voyeur*? Une lumière? Plutôt une clarté, mais une clarté surprenante, qui pénètre tout [--]. Clarté qui rend tout clair: la plus étrange, proche et lointaine, immédiate, insaisissable, et puisqu'elle révèle tout, sauf elle-même, elle est ce qu'il y a de plus secret. D'où vient-elle? D'où nous éclaire-t-elle? (Blanchot 2005, 218)¹⁶

In the middle of the novel *Le Voyeur* there is a lacuna, a central image we cannot see, a blank page, an invisible image of a *virtual crime*, which has nothing to do with the described objects or events themselves, but, as Blanchot in his article suggests, has something to do with temporality – and instead of *durée*, the experienced time, with pure time (Blanchot 2005, 222–226).

However, there is, in *Le Voyeur*, an actual lacuna, or break, around which everything described twists, whereas in “Le mannequin” there is no trace of this kind of lacuna, or break: in “Le mannequin” there is a real continuity in description. “Le mannequin” is a deconstruction of the conventions of narrative description (which is traditionally used as a background, as a milieu for action). However, in “Le mannequin” Robbe-Grillet does not use his (later) all too familiar deconstructive strategy attained by logical contradictions of narrative. The text is very coherent; its logic is strong as ever.¹⁷

But still, some kind of virtual ‘light’ really reigns there in “Le mannequin”. Same kind of obscure point, or a blind spot, that, according to Blanchot, permits us to see in the case of *Le Voyeur*:

Ce point obscur qui nous permet de voir, ce soleil situé éternellement au-dessous de l'horizon, cette tache aveugle que le regard ignore, îlot d'absence au sein de la vision, voilà le but de la recherche et le lieu, l'enjeu de l'intrigue. (Blanchot 2005, 220)

15 In an autobiographical romanesque *Le Miroir qui revient* Robbe-Grillet criticises them both (1984, 191): “Blanchot ne voyant que le crime sexuel et Barthes l'ignorant sans le moindre scrupule.”

16 Blanchot published later a new version of this article in his book *Livre à venir* (1959) with some modifications and additions (such as the addition “un récit comme” above).

17 However, there is a narrative opening for an epistemological paradox at the end of the text: the ceramic tile base is said to picture an owl although it cannot be seen – at the moment – because of the coffeepot on it. This creates a break between past and present on a narrative level. The same thing happens when it is said that the dummy is “no longer in its accustomed spot”, there where “it is normally placed”.

In an additional footnote for the book version of this article, Blanchot noted also that in *La Jalousie* (1957), which was Robbe-Grillet's third published novel, although this novel is purely descriptive, and, in its repetitions, even obsessively so, there is a some kind of 'subjective' presence, albeit not manifest. This 'something' *sans nom, sans visage* is, according to Blanchot, *la pure présence anonyme* of the narration of this narrative written in third-person in the present tense (Blanchot 1959, 200).

This 'pure anonymous presence' is the virtual pole of the actual descriptive text. But the difference between *La Jalousie* and "Le mannequin" is that in the latter there are no repetitions, nor is there any ambivalence or incongruity. In "Le mannequin" there is no excessive use of words – (almost) every word in its discourse is necessary for the intention to indicate a precise point of perception that can only make the description possible.

So there is actually nothing behind the description, or at least nothing significant, nothing alive. Instead, the description gives rise to something that must be *before* the description – which means a temporal paradox. This reminds us of Schefer's description of the birth of cinema out of temporal paradox within the invention of spectator (1997b, 84; see footnote 9).

In any case, this blind spot of description, or indescribable abstract point of perception, this virtual point, is, in the final instance, absolutely determinate, but at the same time open. It is a real singularity.¹⁸

Through the Art History of Missing Points

Could, then, the sought after virtual light, which is determinate and determining, present but not actual, be some kind of Royal Light, like in the famous painting by Diego Velázquez? In *Las Meninas* (1656; Figure 1), which is a royal snapshot, or *instantané*, the painter himself can actually be seen within the painting. The pair (to be) portrayed, the King and Queen, can only be seen in the mirror. But where stands the one looking at the picture...?

18 For this moment, an abstract point of *perception* is everything we can 'see'.



Figure 1. Diego Velázquez: Las Meninas

After we have contemplated a little, we can answer: no, no Royal Light at all in the case of “Le mannequin”. It is not a coincidence that Robbe-Grillet’s first novel was called *Un Régicide*, “a murder of the King” (1949; though not published until 1978).

On the other hand, the painting undermines monarchical power hierarchies, and, moreover, in these very liberated and democratic days, antimonarchic days *par excellence*, the media repeatedly tells us that the “consumer is the king”.

But how to consume a text like “Le mannequin”? Can it be consumed at all? Or, are *we* consumed by it?¹⁹ The reading of the text not only takes the reader’s time, but in fact the text *creates* its reader through temporal duration – and thus gives him his own (individual, singular) place in the universe. We will see later that this may lead to an almost Buddhist type of revelation process in which the text can be consumed only through the simultaneous creation of a free singular mind as pure spirit that finally surpasses all durational resistance of “Le mannequin’s” ‘textualised optics’. Robbe-Grillet’s ‘snapshot’ opens not only a question of optics but also a question of *chronoptics*.

¹⁹ In a somewhat different tone than mine, Boisdeffre (1967, 9) wrote that “ ‘Le Robbe-Grillet’ n’est pas un *produit* que l’on *consomme*, c’est un *vêtement* que l’on *porte*.” Ironically this criticism can now be understood as high praise.

One of the most widespread *topos* in the whole of Western art history, when the source of insuperable light is at issue, is of course the divine light from above. A good example of this is the fresco *Saint Ignatius* in Rome by Andrea Pozzo (1642–1709; Figure 2).



Figure 2. Andrea Pozzo: *Saint Ignatius*

However, this kind of light is impossible in “Le mannequin”. As we – and Robbe-Grillet – know, God has been dead for a long time, and the real problem today is that a certain kind of humanism is not. On the contrary, (abstract) humanism has taken the place of God. Humanism and traditional realism are the two intertwined enemies of Robbe-Grillet.

Qui décrit le monde dans les romans de Balzac? Quel est ce narrateur omniscient, omniprésent, qui se place partout en même temps, qui voit en même temps l’endroit et l’envers des choses, qui suit en même temps les mouvements du visage et ceux de la conscience, qui connaît à la fois le présent, le passé et l’avenir de toute aventure? Ça ne peut être qu’un Dieu.

C’est Dieu seul qui peut prétendre être objectif. (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 118)

Thus, the anti-humanism of Robbe-Grillet consists of a strong rejection of “l’idée ‘pananthropique’ contenue dans l’humanisme traditionnel, comme probablement dans tout humanisme” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 52). Robbe-Grillet is against all systems of references, whether they are metaphysical, philosophical, psychological, Freudian, religious, magical, sociological or emotional, because these universes of “signification” always draw upon “‘Au-delà’ spirituel de notre monde visible” (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 20, 37).

The critic Stephen Owen, who has written on description in Western literature, has noticed that “[t]here are rare exceptions, writers such as Robbe-Grillet who have an instinct for what it means to be finite and mortal.” Normally description in

Western literature means that the author “enters God’s time” – he pretends to be omniscient about the past, the present and the future (Owen 1981, 247).

Thus, the light we are looking for does not actually come from God, nor does it go into the heights of God. The anti-mimetic and anti-realist symbolist movement could have thought the latter option. The symbolist method of verbal ‘suggestion’ aimed at absolute truths, which could only be accessed by indirect methods. This is not the case for Robbe-Grillet – *although* the materiality of writing and cognitive activity is essential for both the symbolists and Robbe-Grillet. (This is why Robbe-Grillet has admitted his debt to Stéphane Mallarmé, the pivotal symbolist.)

Well, a finite and ‘mortal’ light, then? Or, on the other hand, a fixed point, but not a point that fixes *from without!* In *Print Gallery* (1956), which is a lithograph by M. C. Escher, we have a continuous depiction of a Print Gallery (Figure 3). A person in the gallery is looking at a picture of a city, in which this same gallery is also depicted, including a person who is looking, in the gallery, at a picture... etc.

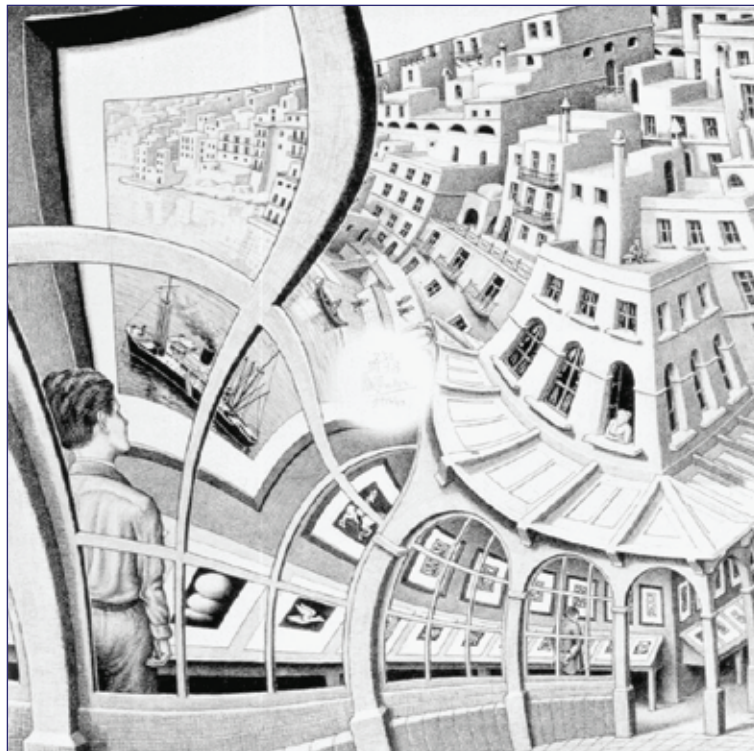


Figure 3. M. C. Escher: *Print Gallery*

This fantastically continuous world could have been actualised only because of the virtual point in the centre of the picture. This virtual ‘white light’ could have been much smaller, but it must be there, it is a necessity. Otherwise the continuity of the depiction would collapse.

The empty point at the centre of Escher's picture is, however, only a *pictorial* analogy for the abstract point we are seeking after: the virtual point of "Le mannequin" unfolds itself only in time, through duration.

In the *Laterna Magica* we can see the predecessor of cinema. Richard Wagner once described the perfect drama as a magic lantern, in which the music is the lamp of this lantern. There is no music in "Le mannequin", but the same kind of reciprocal structure of the virtual and the actual is at work in Wagnerian music dramas and in Robbe-Grillet's so-called 'snapshot' – which is, in fact, a very Wagnerian text also in its capacity to expand time and stretch duration.

It's Only Time

Reading "Le mannequin" properly – attaining the abstract point, the text's inmost *logos* – takes normally much longer than any of Wagner's music dramas. In order to quicken this process somewhat, the layout of the (hypothetical) room of "Le mannequin" can be seen in Figure 4.

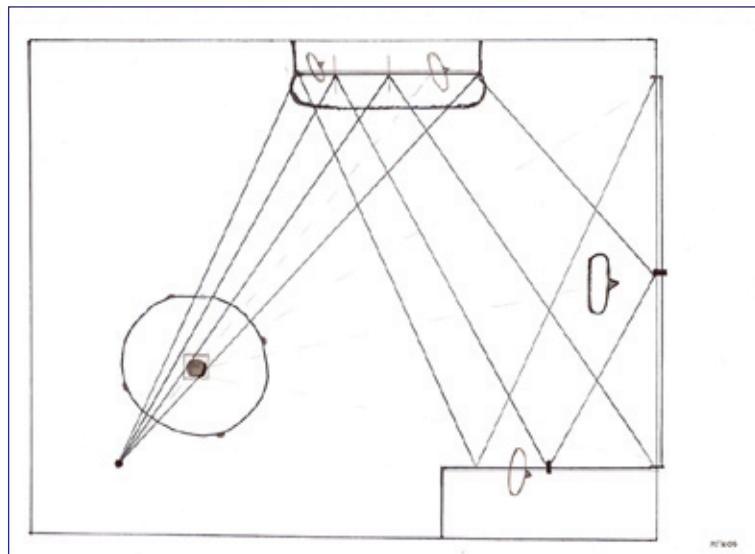


Figure 4. The layout of the (hypothetical) room of "Le mannequin"

This layout delineates the optical system of "Le mannequin". The system is purely logical (not metaphysical, for example), thus in essence without durational time. This system fixes a purely abstract but precise point of perception, from which it is only possible to attain the image of the mannequin and its reflections as they are described in the text.

Ben Stoltzfus (1985, 95) has argued, somewhat mistakenly, that "Le mannequin" is in essence a snapshot devoid of time, a mere photographic image in its immobility. This is true only from a pictorially understood and fixed outside perspective. In

“Le mannequin” image has been dispersed into a discursive continuum, which expands the present time. This makes “Le mannequin” more a cinematic image than a photographic image.

From the perspective of textual discourse there is almost nothing else than time in this short text. On the one hand there is a deconstruction of instantaneous time. The abstract time of the present has been expanded with a certain system of mirrors: one mannequin makes three mannequins – and the ‘objectal’ present has been tripled. On the other hand the text decelerates time with its textualised optics. The text is so complex that it effectively slows down every attentive reading and necessarily compels the reader to take part in the composition of the picture.

In this way, the text leads the reader, bit by bit, towards the virtual point written into the text-image as its invisible pole – the singularity that makes the image visible. Actually the text creates the reader’s situation in the world through the sense of duration, the reader’s own experienced time. Reading as a prosaic human activity that takes time is not the main point here. The time – its different kinds of dynamics – written into the text is a much more complex thing than that.

Let us first concentrate on the perspective of the deconstruction of instantaneous time. From this perspective it could be said that the text decelerates the time of abstract *logos*, creating a multitude of simultaneous and de-actualised points of present that are spatially distributed – a little like in the cubist picture *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp. In matter of fact this work of Duchamp was later reconstituted by Robbe-Grillet in his film *L’Éden et après* (1971).

Gilles Deleuze saw Robbe-Grillet as a master of cinematic images of the absolute present. According to Deleuze, in the films of Robbe-Grillet there is no past–present–future-axis of time, but only simultaneous peaks or points of present (Deleuze 1985, e.g. 63–64, 133). Robbe-Grillet never uses any flashbacks or the like – everything in his films is in the present tense. Instead, Robbe-Grillet frequently uses the technique of multiplying in his filmic worlds of present tense.

The same thing can be said also of this *instantané*, “Le mannequin”. Its description consists of simultaneous points of present that come into being through lines, surfaces, directions, reflections, sizes etc. that have been unfolded out of the abstract time of the formal optical system which has no durational resistance in itself.

Also, from Newtonian optics we can find a sort of parallel for the double (or bi-directional) event of unfolding and enfolding this abstract time – the ‘white light’ of “Le mannequin”.

We can compare the relation of the invisible 'white light' of the text and the 'signaletic material'²⁰ of the textual description with a Newtonian prism, which decomposes white light into a spectrum of colours. Here, in "Le mannequin", the (scientific) language (of Robbe-Grillet) works as a prism of the process of perception. But Newton found also that with another prism the colour-individuated spectrum could be recomposed back into white light. This second prism is the image, which the signaletic material (textually given directions, relations, proportions etc.) creates. Thus, the language-prism and the image-prism – in this case of Robbe-Grillet's purely descriptive writing – can actually be reduced to one text-image prism.

We could say that from this perspective the friction between textual description and optical image in "Le mannequin" is as small as possible – and when there emerges an increment of friction through human intervention (be the interventionist the reader or the humanising affects read from the text), this friction expresses itself in an immediate and forcible way.

There is, surely, immense friction between the textually distributed image and the reader's cognition when the text is read for the first time. However, between the textual description in itself and the image it opens up (creating simultaneously a virtual blind spot), there is as little friction as is generally possible between text and image.

When the textually distributed image is understood with all its relations and directions, it becomes an image seen from abstract *and* virtual points of view (the blind spot), and then it also is cognitively grasped within an instant. 'The way' to this durationless and logical 'nirvana' – of having an immediate picture, an *instantané*, or a snapshot – has been for the reader a prolonged cognitive fight to get rid of the illusory friction set by the inertia of the human cognitive faculty. But at some point one can say: there is no friction between one and the other.

Thus, in the case of "Le mannequin" the difference between the text and the image is not – in contrast to the much more mysterious abstract blind spot (and, as we will see, its continual retreat) – the most essential aspect in the work.

A De-Actualising Description

Already at the level of the dialectics between the text and image in "Le mannequin" there are, however, some special deconstructive qualities that prepare the reader to break out of his habitual cognitive practices of perception and representative understanding.

20 The term *matière signaletique* is from Gilles Deleuze (1985, 43).

In Figure 5, we can see a sketch of the room, or the visible image of the setting that the textual description gives. We can understand the three or actually four mannequins – since one of them is blurred – in the picture as de-actualised points of the present. They are de-actualised because they have been multiplied through reflections, which have blurred the difference between the real and the representation. The optical idea of a multiplied body in “Le mannequin” is somewhat similar to the Dadaistic work of Duchamp considered above.

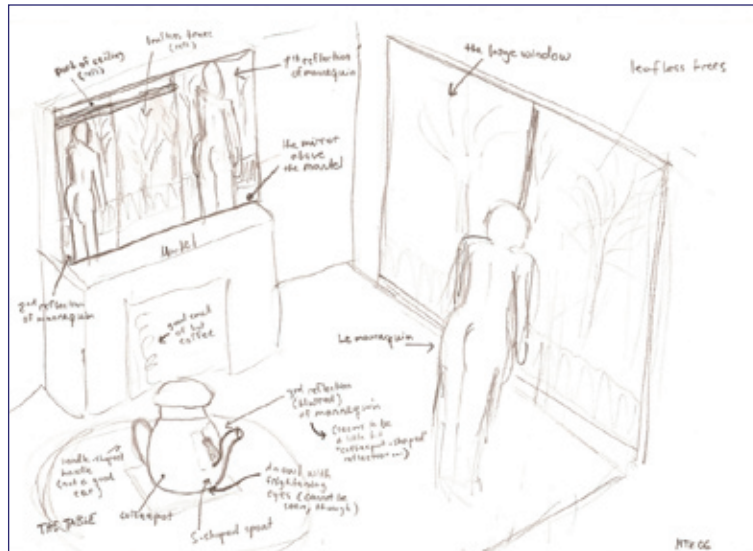


Figure 5. “Sketch of the room”

According to Deleuze (1985, 170) “[s]i le temps apparaît directement, c’est dans *les pointes de présent désactualisées, c’est dans les nappes de passé virtuelles*”. In an image of de-actualised points of the present, with its peculiarly chronic, decomposing relations, time can appear directly. Deleuze interprets Robbe-Grillet’s theory of description in the following, cinematic way:

[L]’image optique pure [--] n’est pas la chose, mais une “description” qui tend à remplacer la chose, qui “gomme” l’objet concret [--]. (Deleuze 1985, 63)

This means a double movement of erasure and creation (and, in this case, I would say, the minimum friction on the one hand, and a slight increment of friction, on the other).²¹ According to Deleuze

la description néo-réaliste du nouveau roman [--] *remplace* son propre objet, pour une part elle en gomme ou en *détruit* la réalité qui passe dans l’imaginaire, mais d’autre part

²¹ Deleuze appreciates this theory very much: “Si le nouveau cinéma comme le nouveau roman ont une grande importance philosophique et logique, c’est d’abord par la théorie des descriptions qu’ils impliquent, et dont Robbe-Grillet fut l’initiateur. [--] La conception de Robbe-Grillet, logiquement très forte, prolonge souvent celle de Bergson, et lui est apparentée” (1985, 63, 64). For the theory of Robbe-Grillet, see esp. “Temps et description” in *Pour un nouveau roman* (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 123–134).

elle en fait surgir toute la réalité que l'imaginaire ou le mental *créent* par la parole et la vision. (Deleuze 1985, 15)

Deleuze (1985, 15) also notes that Robbe-Grillet is fully conscious of the fact that “les déterminations les plus objectivistes ne les empêchent pas d’accomplir une ‘subjectivité totale’”.

As already said by implication, the optical system of “Le mannequin” is never given as a whole in the text. On the contrary, there is no pre-established space or any general view. The description starts from a coffeepot, locating it on the table, then gives directions, lines, reflections and so on, and returns finally back to the coffeepot on the table. Thus the percepts of description (plus a few affects in the final lines of the text) build up a circle.

In this way the text defines, gradually, an optical image, but never a whole that could be seen from the outside.

As readers we have no pre-established spatial context for the things described. The only context is a ‘pure anonymous presence’, an abstract point that has no extension. Thus the text deconstructs the human perceptive faculty of habitual orientation. It takes the reader to the realm of primordial perception, to the event of ‘First Perception’, which is the invisible spectacle of the invention of the human spectator (as Schefer argues).

The description that moves between the two-dimensional and three-dimensional perspective creates a literary-imaginary space that makes its own workings visible, undermining simultaneously the idea of dimensionality itself.

The same kind of deconstruction is at issue when the text gives a hint of a metaphor: taking back the metaphor renders it visible. The first example of the metaphorising event is the movement between the letter “S” and the partial object of the coffeepot, its spout. The second, anthropomorphising example is the movement between the shape of the handle and the shape of an ear.

Finally “une bonne odeur de café chaud” and the frightening picture of an owl that cannot be seen bring along a human intervention, human presence and human time. In these eye-catching expressions textual affectivity is expressed in a startling manner. It is also significant that the first affects bring along the first values, the first germs of moral judgements (coffee is *good*, an owl is *frightening*), and with this also some peculiarly human meanings. This gives the text a hint of Nietzschean philosophy: the origin of human meanings is closely tied to human morals.

Thus “Le mannequin” is a story of reading: it makes visible the habitual ways we construct things, events and emotions while reading. And of course, the problem of representation is made visible all the time.

But also from this perspective the text is, in its modernist way, a ‘Buddhist’ cognitive machine. Every kind of *almost* frictionless ‘perceptive recalls’ convey mental purification.

Sam Harris (2006, 40–42, 217–221, 283) has argued that “spiritual” or “mystical” Buddhist “introspection” or “meditation” is a strictly empirical and rational enterprise: the core of its “precise, phenomenological studies of consciousness” is in “recognising thoughts *as thoughts*” prior to any particular consciousness, in recognising the condition in which thoughts themselves arise; and this exploration of the reality of the present saves us from the illusion of ‘I’. Although the philosophical background of Robbe-Grillet himself is in Husserlian phenomenology, there is a clear congruence between these two approaches.

Tandis que les conceptions essentialistes de l’homme voyaient leur ruine, l’idée de “condition” remplaçant désormais celle de “nature”, la *surface* des choses a cessé d’être pour nous le masque de leur cœur, sentiment qui préludait à tous les “au-delà” de la métaphysique. (Robbe-Grillet 1963, 22–23)

Robbe-Grillet’s celebration of the notions of (human) ‘condition’ and ‘surface’ (of things) involves an empirical and rational enterprise that avoids any metaphysical illusion that the notions of (human) ‘nature’ and ‘depth’ (of the world) have formerly nourished.

Cognition-Image

In his book on cinema Deleuze designates Hans Jürgen Syberberg’s film version (1982) of Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882) as “the great spiritual automaton”. “Le mannequin” can also be said to be – albeit being in its appearance an extremely minimalist work of art – a great spiritual automaton. Or, as I would call it, a cognition-image, an image that pictures ‘within’ itself the cognitive activity fundamental to the experience of the image itself. Deleuze compares his notion of the great spiritual automaton – which means the highest exercise of thought, the way in which thought thinks itself – to Schefer’s notion of cinema as a giant or a dummy in the back of our heads:

[C]’est le grand automate spirituel qui marque l’exercice le plus haut de la pensée, la manière dont la pensée pense et se pense elle-même, dans le fantastique effort d’une autonomie; c’est en ce sens que Jean-Louis Schefer peut créditer le cinéma d’un géant derrière nos têtes, ludion, mannequin ou machine, homme mécanique et sans naissance qui met le monde en suspens. (Deleuze 1985, 343)

It is important to understand that “Le mannequin” is not a mere puzzle. The essential in it is the relation of the virtual to the actual, and how the cognition written into the text-image as its invisible virtual pole relates with the reader’s cognition. It should be noted, however, that “Le mannequin” as a cognition-image is independent of any individual reading of the text. Every individual reading only actualises a variation of the same cognitive picture.

If we understand the description, the text itself, as pure perceptive material, then the un-textual abstract point (of perception) – the ‘anonymous presence’ – can be seen as a purely spiritual memory without any *chronological or durational time* (not to speak of any contentual meaning).

As a prismatic cognitive machine, “Le mannequin” is thus a genuine creator of pure – and in this way ‘over-human’ – spirit out of purely perceptive material. The theme ‘human condition’ becomes relevant at the very moment the reader – a sort of a human prism – takes up residence in this cognitive ‘present-time’ machine.

At first there is a huge intellectual friction that has to be overcome. By giving directions, relations, reflections etc., the machine expands the present time with which the reader fights. This work stretches duration, the experienced time of the reader. There is also another kind of friction: the mysterious intervention of a few humanising affects in the text create affectual friction.

As a cognition-image “Le mannequin” is also an image of the human condition: body and soul separated, or dispersed; the mannequin(s) looking out of the window, without *psyche*, into the garden, where there are only lifeless trees and the alienated mind, left alone, reflecting – *this view*. Or, as well, this is a deconstructive image of the reader’s condition: the text read and the reader in separation; the text describing, and *the described* wondering and pondering the problem of representation. This image evokes the good old Cartesian type of drama, where there is a soul, which has no spatial extension, and there is an inanimate body with its regressive reflections.²²

But in this image-description of the mannequin(s) there is also to be seen a fundamental condition of cinema as Jean Louis Schefer understands it: the basic

22 And also, behold, there are the lifeless trees, the dead *natura naturata* – which is a Spinozist concept. Should we then call Spinoza for help? Spinoza thought, arguing against Descartes, that mind and body are not two separate substances, but only two different aspects of one substance. In a similar vein Bergson thought that there is a qualitative difference between matter and spirit, but that this does not indicate a dualism of the universe. We could compare the geometrical method of Spinoza in his principal work *Ethics* to the descriptive method of Robbe-Grillet in “Le mannequin”. Deleuze takes Spinoza as a master philosopher of immanence, in the sense that that which exceeds the geometrical in Spinoza’s system is pure immanence (see e.g. Deleuze & Guattari 1991, chapter 2: “Le plan d’immanence”). If the similarity holds, we could say that Robbe-Grillet is, with his descriptive method, a writer of the immanence of sensation and of spirit – Spinozist *natura naturata* being the described, and *natura naturans* being the event of describing.

movement in cinematic image consists of the exposure of extraordinary mutations of the human figure *and* of us as spectators who have become invisible as persons (1997, 85, cf. 27). “Le mannequin” lets one see this invisibility in the human condition. At the same time, however, the ultimate singularity takes a further move.

Within the Impenetrable Darkness

If we can remember the Deleuzian motto “there is always a drama beneath every logos” and the Scheferian challenge of “the dummy in the back of our heads,” we know that we should take one more step forward to reach the ultimate blind spot, the impenetrable darkness.

But before the last risky step after the continually retreating singularity, it is time to have a look at the three Scheferian propositions on cinematic images I brought out in the opening pages of this article. Here they are in a slightly modified form (cf. Schefer 1995, 120).

First proposition: The ‘missing power point’ that constitutes the image permits the image to conceal the world we live in – and not by means of a picture but by means of *time*. The time that conceals the world is duration, the experienced human time.

Second proposition: If the missing singularity *were* within the image, of which we are a part, the virtual pole, the image would be invisible. Thus, the cognition-image – which is visible at least in part – creates a new, unreachable singularity, or better: has its own blind spot (cf. the motto of this article).

The third proposition: The Scheferian spectacle of visible man exists in the awareness of the darkness of our interior lives by which any spectacle is made possible. Cognition-image gives and retains on this kind of awareness. Cognition-image can also give a hint of durationless time, or the ‘whole of time’, which, in its extremity, would mean disclosing the whole of the world we live in and its becoming invisible at the same time.

The ultimate creation of “Le mannequin” as an anti-humanist work is – within the virtual pole of this text-image – the relation of durational human time, or human spirituality, to the ‘whole of time’, which is over-human, beyond the reach of the human individual.

The latter is the ultimate singularity that “Le mannequin” as a text-image can bear, and at the same time it is the blind spot not only of the human(ist) condition

but also of the anti-human(ist) condition – and thereby also the condition of all natural science; mathematics, geometry and optics included.²³

The (anti-)human intervention, which means differentiation between the human *durée* and the over-human 'whole of time', contains all the beauty and horror of the human condition.

23 Thus "Le mannequin" has, as a work of art, an inextricable relation not only to philosophy (as a creation of conceptual differences) but also to natural science as a human activity (especially to the Euclidean and Newtonian set of laws of nature).

APPENDIX

Alain Robbe-Grillet: “Le mannequin”

La cafetière est sur la table.

C'est une table ronde à quatre pieds, recouverte d'une toile cirée à quadrillage rouge et gris sur un fond de teinte neutre, un blanc jaunâtre qui peut-être était autrefois de l'ivoire – ou du blanc. Au centre, un carreau de céramique tient lieu de dessous de plat ; le dessin en est entièrement masqué, du moins rendu méconnaissable, par la cafetière qui est posée dessus.

La cafetière est en faïence brune. Elle est formée d'une boule, que surmonte un filtre cylindrique muni d'un couvercle à champignon. Le bec est un S aux courbes atténuées, légèrement ventru à la base. L'anse a, si l'on veut, la forme d'une oreille, ou plutôt de l'ourlet extérieur d'une oreille ; mais ce serait une oreille mal faite, trop arrondie et sans lobe, qui aurait ainsi la forme d'une «anse de pot». Le bec, l'anse et le champignon du couvercle sont de couleur crème. Tout le reste est d'un brun clair très uni, et brillant.

Il n'y a rien d'autre, sur la table, que la toile cirée, le dessous de plat et la cafetière.

A droite, devant la fenêtre, se dresse le mannequin.

Derrière la table, le trumeau de cheminée porte un grand miroir rectangulaire dans lequel on aperçoit la moitié de la fenêtre (la moitié droite) et, sur la gauche (c'est-à-dire du côté droit de la fenêtre), l'image de l'armoire à glace. Dans la glace de l'armoire on voit à nouveau la fenêtre, tout entière cette fois-ci, et à l'endroit (c'est-à-dire le battant droit à droite et le gauche du côté gauche).

Il y a ainsi au-dessus de la cheminée trois moitiés de fenêtre qui se succèdent, presque sans solution de continuité, et qui sont respectivement (de gauche à droite): une moitié gauche à l'endroit, une moitié droite à l'endroit et une moitié droite à l'envers. Comme l'armoire est juste dans l'angle de la pièce et s'avance jusqu'à l'extrême bord de la fenêtre, les deux moitiés droites de celle-ci se trouvent seulement séparées par un étroit montant d'armoire, qui pourrait être le bois de milieu de la fenêtre (le montant droit du battant gauche joint au montant gauche du battant droit). Les trois vantaux laissent apercevoir, par-dessus le brise-bise, les arbres sans feuilles du jardin.

La fenêtre occupe, de cette façon, toute la surface du miroir, sauf la partie supérieure où se voient une bande de plafond et le haut de l'armoire à glace.

On voit encore dans la glace, au-dessus de la cheminée, deux autres mannequins: l'un devant le premier battant de fenêtre, le plus étroit, tout à fait sur la gauche, et l'autre devant le troisième (celui qui est le plus à droite). Ils ne font face ni l'un ni l'autre ; celui de droite montre son flanc droit ; celui de gauche, légèrement plus petit, son flanc gauche. Mais il est difficile de le préciser à première vue, car

les deux images sont orientées de la même manière et semblent donc toutes les deux montrer le même flanc – le gauche probablement.

Les trois mannequins sont alignés. Celui du milieu, situé du côté droit de la glace et dont la taille est intermédiaire entre celles des deux autres, se trouve exactement dans la même direction que la cafetière qui est posée sur la table.

Sur la partie sphérique de la cafetière brille un reflet déformé de la fenêtre, une sorte de quadrilatère dont les côtés seraient des arcs de cercle. La ligne formée par les montants de bois, entre les deux battants, s'élargit brusquement vers le bas en une tache assez imprécise. C'est sans doute encore l'ombre du mannequin.

La pièce est très claire, car la fenêtre est exceptionnellement large, bien qu'elle n'ait que deux vantaux.

Une bonne odeur de café chaud vient de la cafetière qui est sur la table.

Le mannequin n'est pas à sa place: on le range d'habitude dans l'angle de la fenêtre, du côté opposé à l'armoire à glace. L'armoire a été placée là pour faciliter les essayages.

Le dessin du dessous de plat représente une chouette, avec deux grands yeux un peu effrayants. Mais, pour le moment, on ne distingue rien, à cause de la cafetière.

Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Dressmaker's Dummy

The coffeepot is on the table.

It is a four-legged round table, covered with a waxy oilcloth patterned in red and gray squares against a neutral background of yellowish white that may have been formerly ivory colored— or white. In the center, a square ceramic tile serves as a protective base; its design is entirely hidden, or at least made unrecognizable, by the coffeepot placed upon it.

The coffeepot is made of brown earthenware. It consists of a sphere topped by a cylindrical filter holder with a mushroom-shaped lid. The spout is an S with flattened curves, widening out slightly at the base. The handle has, perhaps, the shape of an ear, or rather of the outer fold of an ear; but it would be a misshapen ear, too circular and lacking a lobe, which would thus resemble a "pitcher handle." The spout, the handle, and the mushroom lid are of a creamy color. The rest is of a very light, smooth brown, and shiny.

There is nothing on the table except the waxy tablecloth, the ceramic base, and the coffeepot.

On the right, in front of the window, stands the dressmaker's dummy.

Behind the table, the space above the mantel holds a large rectangular mirror in which may be seen half of the window (the right half) and, on the left (that is, on the right side of the window), the reflection of the wardrobe with its mirror front. In the

wardrobe mirror the window may again be seen, in its entirety now, and unreversed (that is, the right French pane on the right and the left one on the left).

Thus there are, above the mantel, three half-sections of window one after another, with an almost unresolved continuity, and which are, in turn (from left to right): one left section unreversed, one right section unreversed, and one right section reversed. Since the wardrobe stands in the corner of the room and extends to the outer edge of the window, the two right half-sections of the latter are seen separated only by a narrow vertical piece of wardrobe, which might be the wood separating the two French window sections (the right upright edge of the left side joined to the left edge of the right side). The three window sections, above the half-curtains, give a view of the leafless trees in the garden.

In this way, the window takes up the entire surface of the mirror, except for the upper portion, in which can be seen a strip of ceiling and the top of the mirrored wardrobe.

In the mirror above the mantel may be seen two other dressmaker's dummies: one in front of the first window section, the narrowest, at the far left, and the other in front of the third section (the one farthest to the right). Neither one is seen straight on; the one on the right has its right side facing the view; the one on the left, slightly smaller, reveals its left side. But it is difficult to be certain of this on first glance, because the two reflections are facing in the same direction and as a consequence both seem to be turned so that the same side shows— the left side, probably.

The three dummies stand in a line. The middle one, whose size is intermediate between that of the two others, occupies the right side of the mirror, in exactly the same direction as the coffeepot standing on the table.

In the spherical surface of the coffeepot is a shiny, distorted reflection of the window, a sort of four-sided figure whose sides form the arcs of a circle. The line of the wooden uprights between the two window sections widens abruptly at the bottom into a vague spot. This is, no doubt, the shadow of the dressmaker's dummy.

The room is quite bright, since the window is unusually wide, even though it has only two sections.

A good smell of hot coffee rises from the pot on the table.

The dressmaker's dummy is no longer in its accustomed spot: it is normally placed in the corner by the window, opposite the mirrored wardrobe. The wardrobe has been placed in its position to help with the fittings.

The design on the ceramic tile base is the picture of an owl, with two large, somewhat frightening eyes. But, for the moment, it cannot be made out, because of the coffeepot.

Translated Bruce Morrissette

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