

Robbe-Grillet and Balthus: Art and the Adolescent

V. Harger-Grinling and A. Thoms, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Until recently the French New Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet has denied any iconographic influence on his work. However, with the film *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (1974), critics noticed what seemed to be an almost cinematic transposition of certain paintings by Yves Klein. In an interview in December 1976, Claude Duverlie spoke with Robbe-Grillet about this film and about the influence of René Magritte on his works, and above all on *La belle captive* (1975) and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (1976). In the latter it became obvious that it was not merely Magritte who represented a major influence and whose paintings are literally integrated into the text, but that Delvaux, Rauschenberg, and the photographer David Hamilton all have fictional and thematic roles to play in the novels and films of what is known as the second period of Robbe-Grillet's writing. This period began with the publication of *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (1970), and was the starting point for the production of what are now known as New New Novels. David Hamilton was integrated into the Robbe-Grillet text, *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, as a "fictional" character while in real life he collaborated with Robbe-Grillet on two publications containing a Robbe-Grillet text and his own photographs, *Rêves de jeunes filles* (1971), and *Les demoiselles de Hamilton* (1972).

Hamilton provides an interesting link with two other artists whose inspiration and development parallel those of Robbe-Grillet: Lewis Carroll and Balthus. Count Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus, produced paintings from the 1930s to the 1950s which today seem to have found their photographic realization in the work of David Hamilton. The subjects of these paintings, presented with the simplicity of a children's book illustration and the anachronic setting of a Robbe-Grillet novel, disturb the viewer's conscience, much as did similar photographs taken by Charles Ludwige Dodgson a century earlier. Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), is recognized as an important influence in the paintings of Balthus and on the writings of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Balthus and Carroll share with Hamilton and Robbe-Grillet a fascination with girls and young women, while all of them, like their young female protagonists, are also fascinated by mirrors: Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice found there* (1872), Balthus's paintings in which mirrors are essential elements, Robbe-Grillet's works where mirrors frequently offer multiple textural readings, and Hamilton's soft-focused photographs also often featuring a mirror.

The four artists can be considered revolutionary in their time. They offer a new view of the world, a reflecting on society, as the mirror found in their works

offers a lateral inversion of the real world so that what is on the left appears on the right, and vice versa. The illusion of depth created in a mirror or the fictional depth created, is used obviously by Carroll to comment ironically on the world of superficiality in which we live. Carroll, Balthus, and Robbe-Grillet play sophisticated paratextual, intertextual, intratextual and referential games with their audience. Their manipulation of everyday images to produce grotesque distortions adds an element of the fantastic. Similarly, their manipulations of the accepted laws of science accompanies the acknowledged interest each artist has in the laws of mathematics and geometry implying indirect questioning of the assumptions upon which these laws are based. The riddles posed by Tweedledum and Tweedledee are one obvious application of this game-playing.¹ It is also interesting to find Tweedledee appearing in Balthus's painting, *La rue*.

Balthus was born Balthasar Klossowski in Paris on February 29th, 1908. His parents were of an old and aristocratic Polish family from Eastern Prussia. Balthus's childhood, like that of one of the main characters in Robbe-Grillet's novel *Les gommes* (1953), was isolated and sheltered. One of the principal influences on Balthus was the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke who remained a very close friend of Balthus's family until Rilke's death in 1926. Rilke's work was also dominated by children like the children and adolescents found in the works of Robbe-Grillet, Balthus, and Lewis Carroll. These children all seem to exist in a world to themselves, a world peopled with fantastic figures of their imagination. In the Balthus and Robbe-Grillet works there is often a shadowy, menacing adult figure whose physical traits tend to resemble those of their creator - the mysterious Dr. Morgan comes to mind in the case of Robbe-Grillet. These adults tend to emphasize by their presence the remoteness and dream-like nature of adolescents. These adolescent female figures exhibit a strange sensual serenity and a fixed, absent, or dreamy gaze whether in sleep, reading, or looking into a mirror, suggested as part of Alice's personality in Carroll's books and obvious in the young women of Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels and films. According to Sabine Rewald (*Balthus*, 1984) in the case of the artist this particular form of serenity and innocence would seem to have been inspired by the work of the 15th century painter, Piero della Francesca.

Balthus's style has been described as "an uneasy mix of three ingredients: an idolatry of the great art of the past, an immediately obvious sexual content, and an acute awareness of the structures of modernism"² the latter of the two of which could apply equally to Robbe-Grillet. Similarly, the same critic's description of the Balthus work as "open-ended" brings it into line again with the modern text, in particular with the Robbe-Grillet text which can be variously described as open or circular compared to a closed traditional text. Kingsley's remarks on "this cool, calculating geometry" (referring to a Balthus painting) which "would be unthinkable prior to twentieth-century

¹See article by V. Harger-Grinling and A. R. Chadwick, "Mirror, Mirror on the fence: Reflections on and in Alain Robbe-Grillet," *International Fiction Review* 13 (1986): 33-40.

²April Kingsley, "The Sacred and Erotic Vision of Balthus," *Horizon* Dec. 1979: 30.

developments in cubism and abstraction" bring us back again to Alain Robbe-Grillet.

M. Henkels in his article "Perversion and the Nouveau Roman"³ describes as "perverse" the act of contradicting established rules, rebelling against accepted standards of "right and good" and negating what is traditional. He also describes as perverse the New Novelists' persistence in writing obscure and difficult works for the sake of change, continuing to do so in spite of lack of financial success or real public recognition. The adjective "perverse" has also been applied to the erotic imagery in Robbe-Grillet's work. Extending this description to cover the paintings of Balthus, it might be said that the works of both artists, Robbe-Grillet and Balthus, seem perverse in content and intent. This perversity has not added to either man's popularity, despite what the casual reader of a Robbe-Grillet novel, or the average museum visitor faced with a Balthus painting, may think. In the case of Robbe-Grillet this reader, in search perhaps of a cheap thrill, will find the Robbe-Grillet writing frustrating in every way. Robbe-Grillet's novels and films are not aimed at satisfying any salacious tendencies. The wickedly black humor implicit in the destruction of expectation and the frustration of that same expectation demands an advanced level of sophisticated game playing on the part of the reader. Paradoxically, and it might even be added, ironically, some of the more sophisticated readers, who are able to appreciate the game-playing, are not however willing to accept some of the images prevalent in more recent Robbe-Grillet texts. But the too facile condemning of these sadomasochistic images reveals a lack of comprehension of the author's intent and a lack of appreciation for his ability. While Balthus's paintings have never met with the approbation of the general public, certain of his admirers were or are artists of consequence ranging from the most conservative to the most epitomizing modernism: Marlauz, Jouve, Camus, Cassandre, Giacometti, Arnaud and even Picasso. If the fascination Robbe-Grillet and Balthus, together with Carroll and Hamilton, have for the adolescent female figure borders on the obsessional, this does not detract from their art. Those unable to see beyond the sexual content of these artists' work miss the technical mastery, subtle ambiguity—one of the hallmarks of Robbe-Grillet's work—and the complex symbolism characteristic of Balthus's work.

³*Kentucky Romance Quarterly* 26.1 (1979): 101-11.