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Representing Absence: Contemporary Ekphrasis in “Apesh-t”¹

ABSTRACT

Traditionally, ekphrasis has been defined as the description and analysis of works of art in poetry, and so it has been understood as the verbalization of visual images (Sager Eidt). The article examines the concept in the light of contemporary definitions that include non-verbal media as targets (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj; Sager Eidt; Bruhn; Pethö) in order to analyze its applicability to music videos.

It concentrates in particular on “Apesh-t,” a video for a track by Beyoncé and Jay-Z from the album *Everything Is Love* (2018). The video is filmed in different interiors of the Louvre, where the singers appear, together with an ensemble of dancers, in front of selected artworks. The discussion focuses on an analysis of a single shot which presents an ekphrastic re-configuration of one particular work of European art, Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800).

The author argues that the use of ekphrasis in the video—through elaboration (close-ups and editing) and repurposing of the source material (painting)—plays an important role in the construction of the theme of “absence”: invoking not only what is represented, but what is *not* represented in David’s painting. It also foregrounds the potential of ekphrasis as a tool of political and cultural resistance, in the way it intervenes in the representation of the “other” in art and in the museum space.

Keywords: Beyoncé, Jay-Z, ekphrasis, music video.

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In Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800), the Parisian socialite reclines on a Directoire-style sofa (Schnapper 360). The room is bare, except for an antique-style sofa, stool and candelabra, painted in warm hues and in the same colour scheme as the unfinished background (Schnapper 360).² The empty space around the figure seems to be there to accentuate the fluid shape and neoclassical ideal of the sitter’s reclining body (Schnapper 360). Madame Récamier is wearing a fashionable, Empire-line dress, which (as Alicia Caticha suggests) personifies “the aesthetic values espoused by classical sculpture” which were prevalent in eighteenth-century fashion and decorative arts (Caticha). Antoine Schnapper observes that the sitter “is seen from some distance, so her face is quite small, but this is less a portrait of a person than of an ideal of feminine elegance. Madame Récamier (1777–1849), although then only twenty-three, was already one of the most admired women of her time” (360).

The painting is featured in the 2018 Beyoncé/Jay-Z video, “Apesh-t,” directed by Ricky Saiz. In the video (for a track from the album *Everything Is Love*), the singers, together with an ensemble of dancers, appear in different interiors of the Louvre, in front of selected artworks. The painting appears only once in the video, and at the moment of its appearance, it is accompanied by the low, subdued sound of a tolling bell (Caticha), marking a break in the video’s flow. In the image, two black dancers are sitting on the floor in front of David’s painting, and a length of white, fluid fabric flows between them.³ Both ends of the fabric are wrapped around the dancers’ heads. The shape of the fabric “repeats” the shape of Madame Récamier’s white dress, imitating her silhouette.⁴

² Victoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff notes: “As is well known, the artist did not finish the painting because of a serious quarrel with Juliette Récamier, resulting in a complete rupture. David did not respond to the sitter’s wishes concerning her portrait, defending his position as artist in a letter: ‘Madame, women have their caprices, artists have them too’” (334).

³ The camera zooms towards the portrait and stops, positioning it at the centre of our focus. The two smaller paintings on both sides of the portrait are kept in the shadows. Their content is not clearly visible to the viewer.

⁴ The fabric worn by the dancers recalls the tradition and history of the “headwrap,” as discussed by Helen Bradley Foster in her book *New Raiments of Self*. Bradley Foster defines this as “a piece of cloth fabric wound around the head, usually completely covering the hair and held in place either by tucking the ends of the fabric into the wrap or by tying the ends into knots close to the skull. The distinct head covering has been called variously ‘turban,’ ‘head rag,’ ‘head tie,’ ‘head handkerchief,’ or ‘headwrap’” (272). The different meanings of the headwrap, which historically came to be associated as much with “servitude and poverty” as with the representation of “communal identity and . . . resistance” (Bradley Foster 273, 313), create opportunities for multi-layered interpretations of the image in the video; however, this is beyond the scope of the present article. Caticha suggests that the fabric worn by the dancers refers also to John Edmonds’s 2017 series “Du-Rags,” bringing in contemporary photography as a possible interpretative context for the video.

Arguably, the dancers in the *tableau-vivant*⁵ are intended to represent those people whose labour underpinned the very existence of the garment worn by the society woman: those who made the material, who sewed the dress, and who kept it clean. In this way, the video comments on the chain of production, in which the people who make the goods are not the ones who consume it. It offers a political comment on silent, unrepresented blackness and “otherness”; it asks the viewer to focus, not on what the painting represents, but on what it fails to acknowledge: the identity of the “other” on whose labour the very existence of the sitter depends.

The scene may be viewed as an example of the use of ekphrasis, as a gesture which extends the painting outside the frame, and also questions the limits of the frame (and what is shown within it). This article will focus on an analysis of this one shot, as it highlights the theme of absence in the video; and also foregrounds the potential of ekphrasis as a tool of political and cultural resistance, in the way it intervenes in the representation of the “other” in art, and in the museum space.

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The concept of ekphrasis dates back to antiquity; traditionally, it has been defined as “a verbal description of something, almost anything in life or art” (Krieger 7); and more specifically as “a symbolic (verbal) representation of iconic representation” (Elleström, “Transmediation” 9), most notably in the description and analysis of works of art in poetry. The theoretical approaches to ekphrasis that have emerged since the 1960s have emphasized the increasingly intermedial character of contemporary art forms; and this makes the concept very relevant to the analysis of music videos. Leo Spitzer’s work has been crucial in stimulating new thinking about ekphrasis (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 10). He defines it as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer 72). In this definition, however, the “target” medium is still verbal (i.e. poetry). Other critics have sought to extend the boundaries of the concept. It has been defined, for example, as the “verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 297); “the verbalisation of a graphic representation” (Mitchell 35–36); and “the verbalisation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (Clüver 35–36). As Elleström explains, according to Clüver both “the representing and the

⁵ Caticha proposes that “the scene recalls the popular *tableaux vivants* of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which aristocratic and bourgeois elites would pose in imitations of artworks or dramatic historical and literary scenes for personal entertainment.” For further discussion on the subject see Caticha.

represented text may be non-artistic; and the represented text may belong to an extensive range of media types” (*Media* 32). Even as Clüver widens the notion of ekphrasis, however, “the target medium is still considered to be verbal . . . whereas the source medium may be any type except verbal” (Elleström, *Media* 32–33). This position has itself been challenged by readings of ekphrasis which problematize the idea of language as “the only acceptable target medium” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 10). Siglind Bruhn, for example, proposes one of the “most radical re-definitions” (Sager Eidt 17) of ekphrasis, as the “representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (Bruhn 7–8). In other words, the “recreating medium need not always be verbal, but can itself be any of the art forms other than the one in which the primary ‘text’ is cast” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 12). As Elleström notes, “Bruhn’s notion of ekphrasis covers the entire field of (complex) media representation” (“Transmediation” 9).

Elleström sees ekphrasis as the “complex representation of media products”⁶ (*Media* 32). “Simple” representation occurs (according to Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj) when “the media product is briefly referred to or quoted in a different media product” (13); “complex” representation, on the other hand, is “more developed, elaborated and accurate,” and more elements are “transferred from the source medium to the target medium” (13). Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj claim, moreover, that in order for “simple media representation to become ekphrasis,” there must be both a “a certain degree of elaboration” and a “repurposing of the source—for instance through a semiotic process” (14).⁷

The form and degree of repurposing and elaboration are unique for each instance of ekphrasis. It is, of course, debatable how far the notion of ekphrasis can be extended; nevertheless, it should be acknowledged (as Elleström observes) that “representations of media products are possible, common and worthwhile to theorize about far beyond the more conventional modern borders of ekphrasis” (“Transmediation” 8). Taking

⁶ Elleström explains ekphrasis within the framework of media representation; however, he notes that “representing a media product in general includes transmediating it to some extent. Ekphrasis would indeed seem quite pointless if the characteristics of the source media product were not represented again by the target media product” (“Transmediation” 8).

⁷ To illustrate their argument, Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj offer an analysis of a sequence from the 2012 film *Barbara*, directed by Christian Petzold and set in 1980s East Germany. One scene features Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). The authors offer a detailed analysis of the “relation between *energeia*, as a potentiality in the object (the media product), and *enargeia*, as an actualisation in the head of the subject (receiver)” (14).

this as a starting point, the following discussion seeks to go beyond those conventional “borders” and investigate the effects of the repurposing and elaboration of a particular source medium (i.e. David’s painting/ museum space) in a non-traditional target medium: the music video.

Music videos may contain representations of, and allusions to, other works of art (through language, sound and image). This strategic appropriation may be analyzed in terms of those definitions of ekphrasis that “include non-verbal media as targets” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 12). Parallels may be drawn with the use of ekphrasis in cinema. Agnes Pethö has argued that in cinema, there is a complex and mixed mediality; and in place of the unity of image, language and sound (etc.), there is an unstable set of interrelations between elements; cinema as a medium can, indeed, “remediate” all other forms (Pethö 211). Pethö defines ekphrasis as “a case of media being incorporated, repurposed by other media” (213); and in this way, it contributes to the “interrelation” of elements. As an example, she cites the “remediation” of poetic texts by Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Valéry in two films by Jean-Luc Godard: *Bande à part* (1964) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965). The presence of poetic texts in these films (introduced through voice-over) creates an additional layer of meaning, enriching and complicating the “visual.” The cinematic concept of ekphrasis can, by extension, be applied to the music video, which similarly forges “unstable” relations between sound, image and text.⁸

Cinematic ekphrasis has also been examined by Laura M. Sager Eidt. She accepts the broad definition of ekphrasis as “the verbalization, quotation, or dramatization of real or fictitious texts composed in another sign system” (19); and she proposes four distinct categories, which differ in their “degrees and kinds of involvement with or of the visual arts in the text or film” (45). These categories are the “attributive,” “depictive,” “interpretive” and “dramatic.” Each of these categories implies an increased level of complexity (or elaboration); and all four can, in fact, be found in the “Apesh-t” video. Sager Eidt’s first category, “attributive,” accounts for the lowest degree of complexity and involvement. It may manifest itself in verbal allusion, explicit naming or visual introduction (as an actual image or tableaux), but without further description, and with limited frequency or distribution. “Depictive” involves a more extended discussion and reflection on a given work of art/literature. The last two categories are especially relevant to the present study. “Interpretive” ekphrasis takes the form of “a verbal reflection on the image, or a visual verbal dramatization of it in a *mise-en-scène* tableau vivant” (Sager Eidt 50). It involves a “degree

⁸ This article is not an attempt to analyze the “Apesh-t” video in terms of its cinematic form; rather, it has a narrower focus, on the use of ekphrasis in just one shot.

of transformation” (Sager Eidt 50) which extends the possible meanings and ramifications of the original. “Dramatic” ekphrasis involves the dramatization and theatricalization of the source. Sager Eidt suggests that, in terms of “frequency and distribution, this type of ekphrasis will occur at the central moment in the work and for the extended period of time” (56–57). Sager Eidt’s “interpretive” and “dramatic” categories include, then, an *elaboration* of the source media object (for example, a painting), and a *repurposing* of this object in the target medium (in this case, a music-video) (14).

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In her book on ekphrastic practices in cinema, Sager Eidt discusses the work of German photographer Thomas Struth as an example of visual ekphrasis. She focuses in particular on a series entitled *Museum Photographs*. Created between 1989 and 2005 and collected in several publications, the photographs capture people and works of art in museum spaces around the world; some staged and others unstaged.⁹ The images highlight the “narrative the museum provides for the work in relation to its setting” (“Thomas Struth”) and probe the relationship between observer and observed. They also illustrate the ways in which the “visual culture of another era, gathered by later ages, informs the visual and social arenas of the present” (Wylie 152). One of the photographs, for example, taken in the Louvre, portrays spectators in front of Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, a painting which documents an event (a shipwreck) which is also a moment in the history of European colonialism.¹⁰ The museum visitors are on “terra firma” but their gaze is uniformly drawn to the painting so that “they seem to be eye-witnesses of the human drama” of the shipwreck (Belting 13). Within the painting itself, almost every gaze “is directed towards the distant signal of rescue. The gazes of the [museum] viewers follow the gazes of the shipwrecked sailors, but our own eyes have already taken in this double sequence” (Belting 13).

Belting argues that, in images such as this, “the well-known topos of image versus viewer . . . loses its familiar contours” (13). The photographs

⁹ Most of the compositions are a result of Struth’s patiently waiting for the right moment to capture the scene; however, the images in the second part of the series, created in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin (1996–2001), were fully staged (Baxter 203).

¹⁰ In 1816, the ship “Medusa” set off on a journey, the aim of which was to colonize Senegal. It ran aground on a sandbank. 150 crew members boarded a raft which floated for 13 days; ultimately there were only 10 survivors. The painting features in the “Apesh-t” video, where its colonialist context is played against the contemporary politics of race.

highlight the question of the “gaze” and, as Baxter aptly states, confront the viewer with “the mechanism that the modern authority relies on: the eye (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 171–76; *The Birth of the Clinic*, 108–18, 131–43)” (209). What we focus on, where we cast our gaze, what we look at and how, is a *political* act, and potentially a gesture of power. Ekphrasis is used in Struth’s photographs as a strategy to draw attention to the “museum as a medium and its exhibitionary practices” (Baxter 206). The photographs engage in an implicit critique of the conditions in which art is experienced, by exposing the museum space as a “site of dialogic exchange between work of art, site and audience” (Baxter 207).

Sager Eidt notes that the museum visitors in Struth’s photographs “seem to represent tableaux vivants” (32). Other critics (including Belting) have emphasized the way that “the paintings’ spaces and figures often seem to extend to the spaces and people of the photograph” (Sager Eidt 32). As Belting observes: “Just as the paintings form a stage for the figures who have been painted, the rooms form the stage for the persons being photographed. . . . The painted tableau, with its composition, corresponds to the tableau vivant of the observers” (9). Belting also argues that blurring of spatial boundaries affects our perception of time (9). The museum space, and the space within the painting, are two very different locations “disparate in time”; but the person looking at the photograph perceives them “simultaneously” (Belting 20). The painting¹¹ “which bears a different time within it, represents an enclave within our time”; and so “we can experience the presence of what is absent, the visible location of a long since vanished time” (Belting 20). Baxter suggests that Struth’s photographs make us aware, as viewers, of this absence, in part through becoming *self*-aware of our position as a “reflexive museum visitor” who is “critical about the site and conditions” (206) in which art is presented.

Michael Fried has questioned Belting’s claim that there is a blurring of boundaries in the photographs; rather, he sees a demarcation of different “realms”: the people in the paintings and the museum visitors “belong absolutely to two disparate and uncommunicating realms or, as I want to call them, ‘worlds’” (119, 128). Arguably, however, one process does not necessarily exclude the other: the boundaries between the two realms are *both* reinforced *and* blurred in the photographs. There is an interplay of different times and “realms”; and in the tensions between these realms, the very act of viewing is defamiliarized.

¹¹ The most recent paintings which Struth has chosen to photograph are from the nineteenth century (Belting 16).



In the “Apesh-t” video, the presence of dancers in the Louvre creates two “realms.” The dancers “dramatize” and so act as an extension to the paintings. They merge with the framed image in that sense; but they also comment on the image. In the dynamic between the image and the performers, the space is created for (political) comment. The choreography in the video interacts with the content of the featured artworks, resulting in their dramatization and theatricalization, to the extent that the paintings seem to be “brought to life,” offering at times a kind of *tableau vivant*. The boundary between the world within the painting and the world outside is simultaneously blurred *and* reinforced. The shot of David’s painting, for example, confronts us with an interplay between the composition of the painting and the composition of the *tableau vivant* in front of it; a contrast, or dividing line, between the space within the painting, and the space outside it.¹² The presence of the *tableau vivant* within the image renegotiates the borders of David’s painting, and so leads to a destabilizing of boundaries; but it also draws attention to the *separateness* between the two spaces (painting and museum). The “world” of the women in front of the painting, and the world of Madame Récamier, are clearly “two disparate and uncommunicating realms” (Fried 16). There is no physical connection between the painting’s subject (Madame) and the two women, and no exchange of looks or “gaze.”

It is through the contrast or interplay between different “realms” that the video foregrounds the relation between disparate times—past and present—in the context of postcolonial politics. Paradoxically, it is the co-existence of the two “realms” in one video frame, and the ekphrastic renegotiation of space, which thematizes otherness. There is an implication that, even as social and political rules have kept them apart, the two worlds have always been closely connected: the world of Madame Récamier was dependent on the labour of the Other, whose presence/absence is symbolized in the video by the two black dancers in the *tableau vivant*. In this way, the *tableau vivant*, inserted in the contemporary space of the museum, forges a new interpretation of the painting’s narrative, and acts as an intervention in the historical context from which it stems.

¹² In the case of the “Apesh-t” video, the viewer is not looking at other “viewers”: there are no museumgoers present (as there are in Struth’s photographs). At the same time, the context for the viewing of an iconic work of art is defamiliarized. The viewer of the video is confronted with a composition which contains both the museum space, and the painting itself. The space where visitors would normally stand to view David’s painting is occupied by the *tableau vivant*. The view of David’s painting is not literally obstructed, but it is rather reconstructed. The *tableau vivant* can be read as an intentional obstacle inserted between the viewer and the painting, to disrupt the usual process of viewing as intended/ designed by the museum.

Ekphrasis occurs throughout the video, and can be seen as central to its conception and development. Art historian Alexandra Thomas has called the video “an embodied intervention” in Western art (qtd. in Lang). The Louvre itself may be seen as a space which sanctifies and confirms the Western artistic “canon.” The use of ekphrasis in the video—through elaboration (close-ups and editing) and repurposing of the source material (paintings and sculptures)—functions as an attempt at the defamiliarization of the context, in the way that it draws the attention of the viewer, not only to what the art exhibited in the Louvre represents, but also to what it *fails* to represent; in particular, the agency of non-white, non-Western bodies and identities.

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One of Struth’s aims in his photographs was to highlight the issue of the “iconicity” of art works. He observes: “I wanted to remind my audience that when art works were made, they were not yet icons or museum pieces” (qtd. in Tuchman). Through the iconic status that a work of art has acquired, it continues to confirm the canon, and consequently, the way that museums visitors view art (as an elitist Western, and predominantly white endeavour). In the “Apesh-t” video, the ekphrastic repurposing of works of art draws attention to wider questions of the way in which a shift in “location and ownership effectively changes the discursive site within which particular socio-political and politico-cultural hegemonic narratives are exercised” (Baxter 207–08). A work such as David’s portrait of Madame Récamier has been given a particular place in the Louvre’s collection—presented for the public to engage with it, within the boundaries of a designated order; and affirming its status as an iconic painting. Creating a collection of canonic works attests, in turn, to the “museum’s authority,” establishing its “identity through representation” (Baxter 209).

In the video, the space of the Louvre itself undergoes a process of repurposing; occupied by the Carters and the dancers, it becomes a stage for their performative action. There is a process of “elaboration” through the addition of tableaux vivant, music and choreography. This process of repurposing and elaboration not only questions the museum’s “authority” but also more importantly generates new possible relations between the viewer and the art object, and between different art objects.

Ironically, our awareness of the fact that a form of political intervention is taking place, is dependent on our knowledge of the cultural status of the Louvre, and the canonical status of the art works, and so on an awareness of the museum as “a space outside the image” (Baxter 211). In this way, ekphrasis works in the liminal space between what is outside the frame, and inside it. The repurposing and elaboration invoke the viewer’s own awareness and memory of both the artwork, and the museum space. The canon is evoked and paradoxically even re-affirmed in the act of transgression. In

this way, the transgression is always-already a possibility, an attempt which can never be fully completed. As we gaze at the video image, our memory of seeing the painting—or similar artworks, displayed in museum spaces—is invoked. Again, then, two time-planes are superimposed on each other, through ekphrasis; and it is this “doubling” which triggers our awareness of the defamiliarizing of the image, and the political intervention which is taking place. In this way, engaging with the video itself “represents viewing” (Baxter 206) as a politically charged experience.

In the video, the re-presentation of David’s painting of Madame Récamier makes it part of a new “order,” through being set against other images—both within the frame (the positioning of the dancers), and outside the frame (the preceding and succeeding shots). The sequence is marked by an interruption or pause in the song, and the insertion of an electronically modified sound which, as music theorist Małgorzata Grajter suggests, has associations with the sound of a tolling bell. This is (Grajter notes) an example of a “general pause” (*grand pause*) or “rest” in the musical narration; a device which is generally used to denote “an ending of a certain stage of a given process, often symbolising death or disappearance.” In musical language, the figure is called *aposiopesis* (Grajter). Etymologically, the term comes from the Greek *aposiopesis* (“becoming silent”) or *aposiōpan*, to be fully silent (*siōpē*: silence). Outside the world of music, it refers to a “rhetorical artifice wherein the speaker suddenly breaks off in the middle of the sentence” (“Aposiopesis”). By means of this rhetorical device, meaning is generated through discontinuity, forging a strong connection between the absence of voice and its presence; between silence, and the sound which is interrupted (and which, in the case of the video, resumes within seconds). On the level of sound, then, the use of *aposiopesis* results in the representation of absence as something palpable, embodied through the artistic process. This parallels the visual representation of absence in the tableau vivant. As such, it can be read as a comment on the absence of the black voice in artistic discourse. The lack of agency is understood as a lack of both visibility and voice (the two being closely related).¹³ The

¹³ It should be acknowledged that visibility has to involve both subjectivity and agency, leading to expression. Mere visibility alone can itself be a form of oppression. Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz point to the fact that slavery is historically associated with a state of “hypervisibility” of the slave, living under the “surveilling gaze of the master and/or its surrogate figure, the overseer” (6). Often, “permission to leave the plantation involved not just a written document stating that such a licence was indeed granted to a particular slave (within restricted spatial and temporal limits) but also an ekphrastic act of verbal portraiture—‘the description of the slave’ by which his or her visual particularities . . . were to be recorded” (7). So the verbal act of “portrayal” actually rendered “the slave subjectless” (6), making him/her a “mere instrument for economic production,” an object of possession (6).

embodiment of black presence—the movement from invisibility to visibility—has to be accompanied by the restoration of the black “voice” in the public sphere (represented in the video by the museum space). The absence of this voice is here implied by means of *aposiopesis*.

The sound of the bell seems to be somewhat incongruous in the museum interior, and so the viewer/listener assumes it is coming from outside, awakening an awareness of the existence of the outside world which stretches beyond the frame. Additionally, the solemn sound of the bell introduces associations with religious shrines (and church bells summoning to prayer); and this can be read as an ironic comment on the role of museums as artistic “shrines” constructed to celebrate art and elevate its status. It follows that the “order” introduced by the museum itself appears sacred and canonical, explaining the world of art to the viewer, and teaching him/her how to experience it “properly” and respectfully. Indeed, the portrait positioned in the middle of the shot—in the centre of a symmetrical composition—brings to mind an altar, adorned by the figures sitting beneath it, and the accompanying paintings on either side. The image of a church is only fleetingly superimposed on the museum space; subtly implied by means of sound and composition, which are replaced a few seconds later by new compositions and new sounds.

David’s painting forms the background for a composition which echoes its shapes and colour palette, focusing in particular on Madame Récamier’s white dress, and introducing a considerable level of transformation. The dancers in the image are physically restricted by the length of fabric suspended between them; sitting with their backs to each other, they form a kind of “frame” for the composition. The source media object (itself present in the frame) becomes extended by means of the tableau vivant. The dark background of Jacques-Louis David’s painting is echoed in the form of two “dark” human bodies. The ekphrastic gesture defamiliarizes the painting, extracting “blackness” from the impenetrable background; and this may be seen as a comment on the ideological and historical erasure of black bodies and black skin from art. Cécile Bishop has observed that it was “a widely held notion” in traditional art theory “that the representation of flesh, because it is intimately connected to the living and expressive nature of the body, is . . . the highest achievement of the art of the colorist and its unreachable limit” (2). However it was *white* flesh which was seen as having a range of nuances in colour, and was associated with features such as animation, expressiveness, translucency and, in the case of female portraiture, with purity and propriety (Bishop 4). In his *Essais sur la peinture* (1765), Denis Diderot—discussing the reproduction of skin in painting—stressed the difficulty of the task, and suggested that skin can reflect subtle changes in the sitter’s inner life:

the face of man . . . this canvas which flickers, moves, stretches, relaxes, or fades according to the infinite multitude of alternatives of this light mobile breath we call the soul. . . . Flesh is what is difficult to render; this unctuous white . . . this mixture of red and blue which imperceptibly perspires. (qtd. in Bishop 4)

Bishop argues that, in this case, the text should not be read as racist; however, she also quotes an 1810 treatise by Francois Richard de Tussac, in which the author opposes any criticism of slavery. Like Diderot, Tussac compares (in this case female) white skin to canvas, and draws a connection, firstly between white skin and morality (female modesty), and secondly between white skin and individual sensibility: its transparency allows for the recognition of the emotional state, and so, of that which is unique and which comes from within: “fine, white skin, whose delicate and transparent fabric reveals the pink of modesty and its infinitely varied shades, each painting a feeling of the soul and turning their appearances into a magical and enchanting *tableau*” (qtd. in Bishop 5). In comparison, black skin (for Tussac) reveals nothing; it is flat and allegedly opaque, and as such, represents a “collective” (Bishop 5), an anonymous, undifferentiated mass. It becomes “a marker of race” (Bishop 5) and, in Tussac’s overtly racist argument, this justifies exploitation.

In her study *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Practice* (2015), Krista Thompson points to the tendency in Western art to represent black bodies in a manner which has led to their subjugation and reification. She argues that “surfacist representations of black subjects, that is, representations emphasizing material and visual surfaces are historically connected to the commodification of African bodies” (220). The depiction of black skin as an opaque, flat (sometimes shiny) surface has likened it to an object of desire that can be touched, sold and consumed. Indeed the “two women seated in front of David’s Portrait” can be said to delineate with their bodies the shape of the “meridienne” which the sitter reclines on (Vernallis 33). Carol Vernallis notes that they “suggest a piece of furniture” or “Madam’s Slaves” positioned as if at the feet of the painting (33). As Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz have observed, another way in which black subjects were commodified in visual arts, especially in portraiture, was to position them on the margins of paintings, where they functioned as accessories and signs of status. In European art (they write), “the inclusion of . . . servile figures in portraiture often became conventionalized into a type” (2). In a related process, the black subject may be occluded or blurred, almost dissolving into the background, thereby creating a context of otherness, which only affirms the white identity and individuality of the sitter (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1–3). An interesting example of this is John Michael Wright’s painting *Portrait*

of *Miss Butterworth of Belfield Hall* (1660s). The painting was cleaned in the 1960s. Previously, it had seemed as if the figure of Miss Butterworth was oddly gesturing “toward the column at her side” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1). Technical analysis, however, “exposed ghostly traces of a figure, a black male slave, who appears in servile position pouring water into his mistress hand, and whose presence overpainting had eliminated” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1). The figure was concealed under a layer of paint, probably at some date after 1772 (Poulter) when the presence of such an enslaved figure in an artwork was no longer fashionable. The painting was, as Maud Sulter has observed, “doctored, so as to paint out that history, that black presence in Britain” (263). The black subject had been “forcefully absented from our collective memory”; following restoration, however, “he is now brought back into the frame” (Sulter 263). In this case, then, the revelatory cleaning has brought the memory back and re-introduced the historical narrative into the frame; but it has not granted subjectivity or individuality to the figure. His presence in the painting was always/already a form of ideological effacement, as within the frame, the artist had granted subjectivity only to the sitter. Arguably, her subjectivity and identity as free and white was constructed partly through the contrast with the “subordinated presence” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 2) of the enslaved figure. The subsequent overpainting only produced, not simply a literal erasure but also a “historical erasure” as it eliminated “the historical trace of subjugation” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 2).¹⁴ As Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz observe:

The cleaning of the . . . painting, and the reemergence of the black figure from behind the column, does not simply bring to life a lost identity. Actually, *stricto sensu*, it does not do it at all. If anything, even at the moment of its initial inscription, the subjective black figure was already, symbolically, under erasure, his presence predicated on a relation that affected his symbolic absenting in the face of the dominant and nonchalantly subjugating white presence. . . . [T]he enslaved presence in representation often becomes a constitutive component of white identity. (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 4)

In the case of the portrait, then, the reintroduction (or rediscovery) of the black figure does not change its basic premise or inner order: the figure returns to “his” place, as designed for him initially by the “oppressor.”

¹⁴ Although it is not the focus of discussion here, it should be stated that the composition represents the wealth not so much of the sitter herself, but of the family she enters through marriage, and so the wealth of the male members of the family: “In this portrait, thought to be of either Ann or Mary Butterworth, the subject of the painting is presented as an object of her father/husband/lover’s wealth, with water being sprinkled on her hand as she inclines her marriage finger” (Poulter).

To return to “Apesh-t”: the video plays on the dichotomy between white and black, alluding to this dichotomy in art, and in society. The black female dancers appear as if emerging out of the painting. The vacant, anonymous background becomes politicized: now, it not only delineates the white figure of the sitter, but stands for the “absence” of black bodies in the canons of Western art (the art works presented in Louvre feature predominantly “white” subjects).

In the painting, Madame Récamier confronts the viewer directly as she looks straight ahead. Without the intervening tableau vivant, “the exchange” of glances between the viewer and the subject of the painting would remain undisturbed; but the presence of the two dancers destabilizes its dynamics. They do not look at the viewer, and there is also no visual contact between them and Madame Récamier. If we follow their gaze, it will take us outside the frame. In one of Struth’s photographs, entitled *National Gallery I London 1989*, the arrangement of the museum visitors mimics the composition of the painting (Sager Eidt 33; Baxter 208; Belting 20). Two people positioned at the outer edges of the photograph, however, “seem to extend the visible wall of the room to include the side walls we cannot see which carry the paintings they are looking at” (Belting 20). The video does not give any hints about the objects of the dancers’ gaze; what they are looking at can be only imagined. However, as in the photograph, the existence of the frame of the composition is highlighted, through the trajectory of the gaze which ventures outside of it. The awareness of the frame, in turn, reminds us of the existence of the multifaceted viewer: the cinematographer who shot the video; the viewer who is seeing as if through the cinematographer’s lens; and, indirectly, the artist who painted the portrait at the centre of the composition, and who was, after all, the first to cast his gaze. However, even as the power of the gaze¹⁵ is

¹⁵ It can be claimed that, in the case of Struth’s photograph, the power of the gaze and its presence as the subject of the photograph, is reinforced by the subject of the painting. The photograph features a work by Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano entitled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1502–1504), originally an altarpiece (Belting 20); the very title raises the question of doubt, and the relation between seeing and believing. Belting suggests that one of the museum visitors in the photograph, a “girl bending down to read the artist’s signature,” exhibits a similar “curiosity as shown by the Apostle Thomas in Cima’s painting, who places his finger in the wound in the Christ’s side” (20). Baxter goes further, and draws attention to the way that, in the photograph, the sense of sight is related to the sense of touch—like Saint Thomas’s “invasive finger in Christ’s wound” (208). Struth’s lens “echoes the transgressing, prodding touch of the eye, blending sensory experience—touch and vision” (208). The shot of David’s painting in the video does not refer to touch directly; but the idea of physicality is introduced by the presence of the black bodies in the tableau vivant, who are in a way “extracted” from the anonymous black background of the painting. The movement from invisibility and opaqueness, to visibility and clarity of vision, takes place through embodiment: the tangible presence of the black body within the frame.

foregrounded, the control over what we see—the integrity and stability of the composition—are being challenged: the viewer’s gaze is led towards that which he/she *cannot* see, that which is absent from the shot.

In this way—through the use of ekphrasis—the scene problematizes the question of representation: who is being represented and how; what is *not* represented; and how the gaze is framed. David’s painting becomes an element in a new, elaborated composition, re-framed both by the symmetrical arrangement of the tableau vivant, and by the cinematic frame itself. The original purpose of David’s painting can be debated; but in the video, it undergoes a new, expanded repurposing. The tableau vivant is a “dramatization” of David’s painting which forges a comment on a political context and regime in which, as Bishop argues, “individual subjectivity and blackness function(ed) as incompatible codes” (2). It is precisely through the conjunction—the separateness *and* blurring—of incompatible codes, times and spaces, or “realms,” that the artwork is defamiliarized, and the “absent” order or code is brought back into the “frame.”

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