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# Making Meaning with Mistakes

Mieke Bal

## Introduction: Mistakes and Meaning

One of the most perfectionist literary writers, Gustave Flaubert, made “mistakes.” He was unorthodox in his grammatical uses of verb tenses, in his refusal of a plausible proportion of direct discourse, and in his deployment of incongruous comparisons. I will argue below that he willfully made mistakes in order to shake up the automatism with which readers presuppose transparency in their routine use of language. This is especially remarkable in the case of such a meticulous word artist. But other artists, including great ones, working in different media, did comparable things. Below I will call on modernist painter Edvard Munch to argue he also made such willful mistakes. The meaning of mistakes goes farther and becomes more complex when we consider relations of difference between media. For, there is more to this artistic behavior than a self-reflexive attention to the artists’ own medium.

As Yuriko Saito recalls in her timely reminders of the continued effects of aesthetic values on political and social life in this volume, there are movements and currents that “celebrates ... irregularity, rough surfaces, asymmetry, and defects” (Chapter 1, this volume, p. 36) To her, “thinkers from various world locations have taught us from the fourteenth century onwards [that] imperfectionism is beneficial to our aesthetic and moral life” (Chapter 1, this volume, p. 39) Saito connects this affirmative take on imperfection to a moral open-mindedness, and the necessary value of relinquishing control over objects, including over nature. Imperfection, in current artspeak, is a refusal of the formal perfection that conventional criticism requires, now that electronic media are providing the means to achieve it. Such revolts can be punctual,

My revisions to the conference paper have greatly benefited from the discussions, not only at the Imperfections conference from which this volume emerged but also at a seminar at the Centre for Intermediality and Multimodality Studies at Linnaeus University in Växjö, Sweden.

and I want to distinguish those from overall willful imperfection as an overall strategy for a work. I use the word “mistake” to denote an act rather than a trend; a willful and punctual case of “imperfection”; a symptom of a revolt against the requirement of perfection, but in specific, often small incidences. With “willful” I seem to be alluding to authorial intention, but this is not my interest.

I propose to bracket authorial intention. In combination with “willfulness” this may seem contradictory. But it is a paradox only, an apparent contradiction. I am talking about the “will” of the artwork, in the sense that the mistake has an effect, if only we heed its pointing to norms and rules. Whether or not the artist has the kind of effect and meaning in mind that I derive from the mistakes, the point is that such mistakes alert us to the ease with which we assume and endorse different kinds of norms of technical—linguistic or painterly, videographic or sonic—perfection. The authority of the artist is not at stake; I want to explore the authority of norms. I focus in particular on the *intermediality* of mistakes. Moving between literature, painting and film, I raise the question if and how such effective mistakes can find their equivalents in other media without translating them and thereby distorting what each medium allows. Then, an intermediality emerges that is not a one-sided adaptation of one work into another, nor a translation of one artistic language into another, but a dynamic I call an intermedial conversation. This is where my punctual mistakes fit in with Saito’s nuanced account of perfectionism and imperfectionism as aesthetic trends with social consequences.

In a triangular conversation, I will analyze some of such mistakes, selecting ones that seem typical within the use of each medium. Moving between literature, painting, and film, I will examine if and how such effective mistakes can find their equivalents in other media without translating them and thereby distorting what each medium allows. In this move I imply a slight disagreement with Virgil Nemoianu, who contends that literature is the domain par excellence where the imperfection of mistakes is most readily displayed. Without unwarrantedly ignoring what has been called “medium specificity,” I resist any attempt to prioritize and essentialize different mediums. Nor do I wish to separate form from content, or to equate imperfection with loss, as he seems to do. Instead, an intermediality emerges that is not a one-sided adaptation of one work into another, nor a translation of one artistic language into another, but a dynamic I would propose to call an intermedial conversation. Nor is the discussion limited to formal issues. Instead, I hope to make the case for the intertwinement of formal aspects such as the mistakes in question, and their political and aesthetic effects.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For Nemoianu’s argument see his *Imperfection and Defeat* (Central European University Press, 2006), 3.

This inquiry is part of what is now commonly called “artistic research”—research of which the working method or mode is doing and making the work about which one has questions. I have been involved in this from the moment I realized the surplus value of making art as a form of analyzing cultural issues. Inevitably, in image-thinking, the researcher, when an academic, also participates as an artist. Hence, I participate myself in this inquiry. As did, by the way, Leonardo da Vinci, who can be seen as its inventor, when he sought to visualize his abstract ideas and considered painting the ideal way to do that.<sup>2</sup>

As it happens, without being aware of this as an artistic issue, Michelle Williams Gamaker and I, when making the film *Madame B* (2013), have also made willful mistakes. Initially simply because when they occurred we liked the effect, but we eventually began to see the meaning that emerged from them. Thus, the idea of examining mistakes more generally and in depth began to dawn on me. Retrospectively, in the endorsement of mistakes—different, of course, since our medial position was different—we realized we were being *loyal* to Flaubert’s novel, in a specific sense: loyal to its aesthetic and political positions. Nevertheless, rejecting the idea of making an “adaptation,” we flaunted our indifference to “faithfulness”—to personality traits of characters, even their age; to similarity of events, and other elements usually considered in terms of faithfulness.<sup>3</sup>

## Historical Mistakes

My first encounter with such effective “mistakes” happened decades ago. I noticed it because I endorsed the view that the present consists of *multiple perspectives*. Consider Rembrandt’s “Bathsheba at Her Bath” from 1654 (Figure 2.1). We see that she crosses her legs. Now, try to do this. Try to cross your legs and put your feet the way she does. You cannot do it! Because the foot is on the far side of her knee while the calf is on this side of her knee. This is physically impossible.

<sup>2</sup> I developed the concept of “image-thinking” as an alternative to the problematic “artistic research” in *Image-Thinking: Artmaking as Cultural Analysis* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2022). See Francesca Fiorani and Alessandro Nova, *Leonardo’s Optics: Theory and Pictorial Practice* (Venice: Marsilio Editore, 2013), esp. 265–92.

<sup>3</sup> There are many excellent studies on adaptation, but here I want to draw attention and pay homage to the argument of the great specialist of adaptation studies, Thomas Leitch, who published an article in 2003 ominously titled “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory.” Needless to say, the normative concept of “faithfulness” is high on his list.



**Figure 2.1** Rembrandt, *Bathsheba at Her Bath* (1654). Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre.

What does that mean? It is generally assumed to mean—if people notice it at all—that Rembrandt made a mistake. In my view, Rembrandt is making a point about narrative. The spectator looks from the front and sees a nude, really a nude. She is a bit shy so she looks sideways, but it is a nude. You get to see her body and you can think, hum, I wish I had that body at my disposal. Which is exactly what the other, barely visible character in the story, King David, is thinking. He is a focalizer. But there is also this other woman who is a servant, and who is cleaning Bathsheba's foot—the foot that is logically in the wrong place. Making her ready for royal rape. And so, this is a bad story, a story of abuse. But how can you make a story of abuse so that the spectators get it in their present, not to imitate the abuse but to reflect on it?

I imagine Rembrandt is making a collage of two genres. One is the nude that entices people to desire Bathsheba. The other is the narrative, which is in the direction from her to the servant and the man who is spying from the roof; this is what is going to tell the story of rape. What she has in her hand is a letter. That letter has no direct bearing on the story, other than being an allusion to the letter that the king has sent to the head of the army to say “put her husband in the line of danger.” In the biblical story Bathsheba never sees that letter. But, with the crumpled letter and the melancholy look, she is already in a sort of subjection and acceptance that her life is going to change. Her husband is going to die and she is going to be taken by the king. It is a completely different story from the one we see at first sight, of a nude woman presented for your pleasure. Then you notice that because of the foot directed to the left and behind where it should be, she is not there for you. You can conclude that she is basically in that nasty narrative. So, there are two stories in the painting, two “takes” if you see it as a film: one take from the front and one take from this side, in a montage that combines them. That tells you that there are multiple focalizing positions.

You are made *aware*, you can even “feel,” that there are not one but at least two images, stories; two genres even. It is also a play on the genre of narrative. That is, for a smart artist like Rembrandt, you can assume he must have had his tongue in his cheek. For the teacher or the general public, the question is, how do you get others to be sensitized to this? I do it a lot in the Louvre where this painting hangs. I stand there and I see people look, and when I see them slightly puzzled, I often say: “Have you tried to do this; cross your legs and put your foot on the other side?” Oh, yes! That is difficult, you can’t do that. No, you cannot, and we start to talk.

I think that on an unconscious, or maybe even on a conscious level, viewers think Rembrandt made a mistake. Well, he was a good painter, so don’t worry. Rembrandt doesn’t make mistakes of such magnitude. Do you see this woman? What would be her position if she wasn’t directed in your direction, her body more compatible with her gaze? In my book *Reading Rembrandt* (1991), in which I develop such arguments, my view of Rembrandt was a construction in the present of looking. An anachronism if you like, but one we always necessarily “commit” when writing on art because looking can only occur in the present. Working with anachronism is taking yourself seriously and taking responsibility for your interpretations, the narratives you construct.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> This example was developed at length in my book and later taken up in a book of interviews on teaching (Jeroen Lutters, *The Trade of the Teacher: Visual Thinking with Mieke Bal* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2018)).

## Face It

Like the other arts, cinema also has its rules, even if, as an intermedial art form producing multimodal texts, it must by definition stay away from the “medium essentialism” that has plagued the study of art for so long now. One example makes this clear: in documentary, it is crucial that the interviewee does not look into the camera but slightly to the side. This is a rule so strong that it is often the first critical remark I get when showing my films. Thus, the invisible interviewer is indicated but not seen. The point is that the “subject” is the person represented. I have always found this a false modesty, insincere, and the resulting image seemed to be turning the interviewee into an animal in the zoo; objectified, instead of a participant in a dialogue with the viewer. The viewer is rigorously kept outside. Let’s face it: this is (epistemically) false and (ethically) wrong. Moreover, there is nothing about this tradition that pertains to the medium of film or video. It is entirely conventional. If considered a “mistake” it is, in this respect, a clash with conventions, and as such it can have the productive effect imperfection can have.<sup>5</sup>

A resistance to the perfection enabled but then also demanded of the contemporary electronic media with their high-definition technology can make us forget that artists have for a long time played with the edges of what art can do, and what it should not do. I am not confining my discussion to the post-1989 period, but consider such artistically strategic collisions with the rules of a medium and its conventions of all times. In his “glitch theory,” according to which sonic and visual mistakes are invariably effective, Michael Betancourt discusses examples from different periods.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of the insincere convention of making interviewees not look at the viewer, which I mentioned above, in my video installation *Nothing Is Missing* (2007), I attempted to achieve the opposite goal: a very personal interaction between interviewer and interviewee, which I made to coincide with that

<sup>5</sup> On the position of cinema within the realm of media and the resulting methodological issues, see, for example, Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik (eds.), *Cinema between Media: An Intermediality Approach* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018). On a conceptual discussion of intermediality and multimodality in the two wider perspectives of semiotics and communication, see Lars Ellerström’s contribution to the volume *Meanings & Co: The Interdisciplinarity of Communication, Semiotics and Multimodality*, ed. Alin Olteanu, Andrew Stables, and Dumitru Borțun (Berlin: Springer, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Betancourt, “Motion Perception in Movies and Painting: Towards a New Kinetic Art,” *CTheory*, October 23, 2002; and Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, 2017). In this respect, Ernst van Alphen’s recent book on photography, significantly titled *Failed Images: Photography and Its Counter-Practices* bases the entire theory of photography on mistakes in the sense of disobedience to conventions. This book is highly illuminating for my conception of “mistakes” as imperfection in this chapter (2018).



**Figure 2.2** Mieke Bal, *Nothing Is Missing* (2007). Elena listening to her son Simion speaking to her from behind the camera. Video still from 17-channel video installation. Courtesy of the artist.

between the speaker and the viewer. In that project, mothers of migrants talk about their child who left in migration: an obviously emotionally loaded topic. I made the willful mistake of showing the mothers looking straight into the camera, while the interviewer, often the migrated child who is visiting her, or another intimate person, is positioned behind it. Thus, the person looks at the viewer, for affective contact, and at the interviewer at the same time (Figure 2.2). That the interviewers are intimates doubles the effect of the mistake, or the refusal of the convention. The dialogue is a real one, whether or not the interviewer needs to prompt the mother to talk. My mistake, according to the classical rule of interviewees looking obliquely to an invisible interviewer, had meaning. What is more, the effective making of meaning depends on this dispositif.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> For an analysis of this project, see Mieke Bal, “In Your Face: Migratory Aesthetics,” in *The Culture of Migration: Politics, Aesthetics and Histories*, ed. Sten Pulz Moslund, Anne Ring Petersen, and Moritz Schramm (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015). For more on my experimental documentaries, as well as fiction films, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/films/>.



From this and other experiments with breaking the rules of documentary, I have learned the meaningful deployment of “mistakes”: aesthetic decisions that go against habits or rules, which are thereby anticonventional forms of imperfection. Here, the issue was primarily one of communication, on the level of affect. The face of the speakers—the mothers with their ambivalent emotions, the pain of missing their children and worrying about them, yet also their support of their children’s determination to get a better life—becomes strongly semiotic, meaningful, precisely due to the mistake of making them address the viewer directly. It is as if the position of the camera vis-à-vis the two speakers, and the composition of the image, participate as much in the conversation as the words spoken and the facial expressions.

In *Nothing Is Missing* this was a decision made beforehand, purposefully. But quite often, it is only in the editing process, when I notice a mistake, that I decide to keep the “wrong” footage in, and place it so that the montage gives it meaning. This experience served me well in the large project *Madame B*. An example from my fiction films (“theoretical fictions”) is the opening sequence of this film, a feature film made concurrently with a series of video installations responding to Flaubert’s novel *Madame Bovary* (1856). I have written about this project and the stakes that motivated making an audiovisual work that places Flaubert’s contemporaneity—his fierce critique of his time—into our contemporaneous culture of “emotional capitalism,” a cultural economy that instils in people the unfulfillable desire for constant excitement. This is a contradiction in terms; excitement is by definition temporary. But capitalism needs to cultivate the illusion that it is not or, at least, that it is possible to replace one form of excitement by another. Slightly shifting the critical focus from “bêtise” (stupidity) and “idées reçues” (clichés) to a stronger focus on emotional capitalism was a way of being loyal not in spite of, but *through* being unfaithful: a mistake in faithful adaptation.<sup>8</sup>

Here I am interested in Flaubert’s “mistakes” and cinema’s potential for different but somehow equivalent mistakes. Most conspicuous are his grammatical oddities, especially with verb tenses, the idiosyncratic use of the conjunction “and,” and unsuitable, bizarre comparisons. All these mistakes,

<sup>8</sup> See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), for this illuminating concept, defined thus: “Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange” (5). Prophetically, Flaubert describes the syndrome explicitly in chapter II, 5: “Then the desires of the flesh, the longing for money, and the melancholy of passion all blended into one suffering, and instead of putting it out of her mind, she made her thoughts cling to it, urging herself to pain and seeking everywhere the opportunity to revive it.”

instances of imperfection, are forms of activating readers.<sup>9</sup> If I am interested in his “mistakes,” so strange in a novel by an author known for perfection, it is also because of an academic “mistake” I have been willfully making since 1999: anachronism. I see in Flaubert’s mistakes a precinematic form of “cinematism.” The cinematic quality of Flaubert’s writing is generally recognized, and critics are not worried about the anachronistic feature, since Flaubert predated the invention of cinema.<sup>10</sup>

But rather than claiming some vaguely prophetic stylistic talent, I want to allege this is an argument for what I have termed “pre-posterous history.” This seemingly astonishing property of Flaubert’s writing, in other words, solicits a reversal of the usual chronological view according to which the technical invention of cinema has influenced artists and writers. While this is doubtlessly true, I argue that the opposite also holds. Artists creatively imagined and “imaged” situations that called for the invention of cinema. Instead of tracing the influence of cinema on art, therefore, I take the term “the cinematic” not as a concept that causally explains the paintings but as a frame; as an entrance into a discussion of looking at images—still as well as moving—as a mobile relationship between image and viewer.<sup>11</sup>

## Double Movement, Montage, and Incoherent Space

One form of anti-chronology is the said opening of the film *Madame B*. There, Emma stands alone and, in the end of the credit sequence, falls out of a ruined house. This image is narratively functional; it predicts the

<sup>9</sup> On imperfection as a tool for activating audiences, see also Saito and Kromhout in their contributions to this volume.

<sup>10</sup> With apologies for citing my own work, which I do to avoid the two academic mistakes of self-plagiarism and repetition, in what follows I refer for the conception of history to my book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> On preposterous history, see Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio*. For an illuminating reference to the cinematic quality of Flaubert’s writing, see Pierre-Marc de Biasi, *Gustave Flaubert: Une manière spéciale de vivre* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 2009), 319–21. De Biasi examines the way Flaubert took notes for possible “sets,” visited actual sites, and studied possible “takes.” He also draws attention to the fact that Flaubert called his outlines “scenarios.” These scenarios, or scripts, have been published in a belated complete edition of all the drafts, versions, and preparatory notes (Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary. Oeuvres complètes, Tome I. Edition nouvelle établie, d’après les manuscrits inédits de Flaubert, par la Société des Etudes littéraires françaises, contenant les scénarios et plans des divers romans, la collection complete des Carnets, les notes et documents de Flaubert, avec des notices historiques et critiques, et illustrée d’images contemporaines*. Paris: Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1971). This publication is my primary source.



**Figure 2.3** Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Madame B* (2013). Emma (Marja Skaffari) precariously standing in ruined house. Film still. Courtesy of the artist.

unhappy ending, undermining narrative suspense through anachronism. The “mistake” it contains is a particular deployment of the narratological device of focalization that is unorthodox in cinema. You see Emma in the ruined house that stands for her ruined life—an implicit comparison; or a metaphorical image (Figure 2.3). But the mistake is that the image is slightly wobbly, indicating a handheld camera. Why not use a tripod and make a perfect image? That typical cinematic “imperfect” feature usually signifies a claim to authenticity—which is a standard I don’t see as relevant in art. It can also be the consequence of the presence of others, but here, no others are to be seen. I was actually criticized for this unmotivated wobbliness. A stable

image is like a “third-person” narration: a ploy to suggest objectivity. An unstable image, suggesting the opposite, must be justified by the visibility of the focalizers.<sup>12</sup>

Here, however, the barely visible movement has a double meaning. It “metaphors” Emma’s instable position. I turn the noun metaphor into a verb to underline the dynamism, the activity of process. And the wobbliness points to the presence of invisible, anonymous others: focalizing witnesses. These others, whom we do not see in the image but only in that slight movement, witness Emma’s ruin. Do these witnesses look on with empathy, or with relishing, as the neighbors do in the novel? We see this anonymous and indeterminate witnessing several times later in the film, when Emma is alone, including at her own wedding. In the opening sequence it predicts the indifference, even hostility toward Emma’s problems in her environment. This predictive imaging is loyal, not faithful to Flaubert. He predicted, let’s say, Marx and Freud, but with very different means: the former by showing the capitalist exploitation and ruining of people, here Emma; the latter by depicting an unhappily married woman as “hysterical.”

The not-quite-stable image hints at spying, meddling, or possibly empathizing others, compelling the film viewers to realize their own affective response. The handheld camera creates the audience as a “*nous*,” the “us” from Flaubert’s opening sentence. “*Nous*” is the novel’s first word, even though after a mere few pages, this witnessing “*nous*” disappears. This mistake by omission is a meaningful decision on the part of the novelist. After involving readers as witnesses, the “*nous*” can be left to the readers. It sets the tone, distributes the roles, and can be dispensed with further. In the same vein, in loyalty but without emulating the medium of literature, because we as viewers are “with” the moving camera, no viewer of the film, in 2013 and after, can claim that the mid-nineteenth century does not concern us.<sup>13</sup>

When, in 2015, I was invited by the Munch Museum in Oslo to curate an exhibition from their extensive collections and to include the exhibition pieces of *Madame B*, I had an opportunity to reflect more on cinematic and narratological imperfections, as well as on painterly ones, and see the differences among the three media. It turned out that Munch was, like Flaubert, a master of meaningful mistakes. Here, since Munch’s art is

<sup>12</sup> On strategic aesthetic uses of handheld camera work, see Pepita Hesselberth, *Cinematic Chronotopes: Here, Now, Me* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> This and the other “mistakes” are primarily the work and initiative of cinematographer Christopher Wessels. When filming the ruined house sequence, he had a tripod with him but chose to film the sequence both with and without using it. As the film’s directors, Williams Gamaker and I decided to use the take that contained mistakes, rather than the perfect one.

visual and hence implicated in rendering spatial situations, I limit myself to imperfections in the rendering of space.

In the wake of its long tradition, linear perspective is the royal road to perfection in the depiction of three-dimensional space in the two-dimensional medium of painting. Munch drew attention to this tradition by making mistakes against it. He would exaggerate the depth of field, making perspective overly steep. Or he would deploy linear perspective but at the same time break up the unity of the field that it construes. He did this most emphatically in his masterpiece *Workers on Their Way Home*, from 1913 to 1914, where three central figures each emerge from a different “take,” one filmed frontally, one from above and from the side, and one cropped to indicate he is on his way out of the frame. On both sides, an excessively high perspective positions the smaller figures that together constitute the mass of workers.<sup>14</sup>

Something like this breaking up of the space happens in the lesser-known painting *Uphill with a Sledge* (Figure 2.4) but in a different fashion. The snow is painted in heavy white, gray, and sometimes bluish impasto in curls and waves. The man in a green suit is situated closer to the picture plane than the sledge puller, if we think in spatial terms; it is as if he is just passing by without paying the slightest attention to the heavy work of the other man. That main character has no face, no eyes, really just something like a snout, and only one leg is visible. The colored shape at the left top of the painting seems closer to the mountain, as if it is even larger—small as it is—than is plausible to the realism-seeking eye. The different volumes of the hill are made of blue, green and dark brown lines, with their own shadows. One sees volumes better from some distance than from up close. That the central figure takes more space of the picture plane than the cityscape down at the fjord is a normal effect of distance, but the imperfect perspective makes this discrepancy ambiguous.

The painting’s spatial effect comes from an exaggerated perspective, but one that is not unified. It is not simply elongated but tilted, or dipping. On the left half of the image we see something without the presence of humans. This is a view from above that emphasizes the steepness of the hill and makes the shape below (in the depicted scene) or above (on the flat image) entirely flat. At first, I made a mistake of interpretation. I thought this was a cargo boat. It

<sup>14</sup> Among Munch scholars who mention the cinematic is Arne Eggum who calls *Workers on Their Way Home* a “study in movement” (in *Edvard Munch: Paintings, Sketches, and Studies*, trans. Ragnar Christophersen. Oslo: J.M. Stenersens Forlag A.S., 1984, 253). The catalogue for the exhibition *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye* (Lampe and Chéroux) pays serious attention both to the cinematic aspect of the works and the photographic activities of the artist. I have analyzed *Workers* in *Emma & Edvard Looking Sideways: Loneliness and the Cinematic* (Oslo: Munch Museum/Brussels: Mercatorfonds; Yale University Press, 2017), 27–32.



**Figure 2.4** Edvard Munch, *Uphill with a Sledge* (1910–12). Oil on canvas. Munch Museum, Oslo.

was as if I was seeing it not just from the top of the hill but from a bird's-eye view, straight above it. But on closer inspection, I saw that my misreading was caused by another spatial particularity. If it is a protrusion of the land into the fjord, it still has a deceptive shape at both ends that had me fooled. In that case, it offers a mirror image of houses and their reflection in water.

The larger left part of the image is shot from above but not straight up; a bit more obliquely, not from a bird's-eye view or from the frontal position, which would be the two opposed views of either my misreading or the realistically correct one. The scene seems to have been shot from the top of an adjacent hill. But this is not a single “take” either. The picture of the man pulling the sledge makes him more sharply diagonal than is humanly possible without losing one's balance. Hence, he must have been shot from an oblique position, which emphasizes his struggle with the steep height and the heavy burden he is pulling. The man in green, in contrast, although right next to the sledge-puller in the flat image, is standing straight up, walking effortlessly, as if on a flat plane. This must be a frontal take of his side from eye level. But he seems smaller, narrower, as if more distant, than the hard-working sledge puller. The spatial organization makes the painting look more like a collage or multiscreen film than a single image. This gives the viewer the task to reconcile these different positions physically.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Playing with spatial organization is more than a protest against the domination by linear perspective, see Nanna Verhoeff, “Surface Explorations: 3D Moving Images as Cartographies of Time,” *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma* 4 (2016): 39–58. Her commentary

These incongruities in depicted space originate not only in the cinematic but also in the precinematic device of editing, or montage. Most famously, in his book *Film Form* (1949), Russian avant-garde filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein reflected on the aesthetic effects of various strategies of montage. Perhaps surprisingly, the key example he alleges is Flaubert's precinematic *Madame Bovary*. Eisenstein cites not a visual but an aural example of montage, explained through the famous scene of the *Comices agricoles*, the annual market during which Rodolphe seduces Emma and becomes her first lover. Eisenstein analyses the discourses that intermingle, of the officials and the would-be lovers, a hotchpotch that many *Madame Bovary* films have taken on board as an audio montage. For him, montage is conflict.<sup>16</sup>

The concept of montage, with the discrepancies montage creates, also helps us understand the aspect of mistakes in Munch's painting. The key decision Eisenstein made in alleging an audio image rather than a visual one implies a clear statement on the intermediality of cinema. The double movement of the wobbly image, the self-affirming exaggerated perspective, and the montage of different takes within one frame of the paintings, or in a single scene, as in the novel, all make the works moving, in more ways than one. They move viewers and readers into asking questions, and thus questioning their routine ways of reading and looking.

The most important opponent, in this, is realism: the assumption that what we have before us corresponds to reality, including a fictional world, by means of smooth representation, or perfect depiction. Thus, whereas Flaubert's novel is, supposedly, a classical example of realist literature, the mistakes militate against this assumption. And Munch, who was trained in the tradition that in Norway was called "naturalistic," denaturalized his scenes, turning depictions into images, to be contemplated in a questioning of the possibility and the desirability, both aesthetic and political, of the naturalism the art academies of his day took for granted and viewed as the norm.

shows how Werner Herzog's 3D film *A Cave of Forgotten Dreams* both espouses the natural walls that support the millennia-old cave paintings and designs a "cartography of time" that brings the long-gone past to life in an animation. Her analysis demonstrates the cultural relevance of the self-reflection of the medium of 3D film, the moving image more generally, and exploration in time and space together. Verhoeff examines the layeredness of time and space in the moving image, and as such, her article can be considered a fundamental theorization of the movement of images.

<sup>16</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, "Through Theatre to Cinema," in *Film Form*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, [1949] 1998), 12–13. On Eisenstein's view of montage as conflict, see David Company (ed.), *The Cinematic* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 30. This conflictual nature of montage does justice to the willful incongruities, both in Flaubert's transitions in "takes" in his descriptive passages and in Munch's spatial dis-arrangements.

## Double Effects: Mistakes against Realism

“Mistakes” are characteristic of Munch as well as Flaubert. And while these artists differ greatly and target the different media in which they work on these media’s own terms, the simple fact that they both deploy an aesthetic of mistakes brings these two artists closer together. They both undermine cliché views of realism. The devices I discuss here are mistakes in relation to a norm of technical perfection, but according to the standards of realism only. This is remarkable, in view of the tenacious interpretational tendency to turn Flaubert’s novel into a model of realism. The work of Jonathan Culler is crucial in its revision of the conception of realism in Flaubert. Instead of the aim of transparency that realism is supposed to pursue, these devices attract attention to the medium itself. Inducing viewers to make reading mistakes is one way of drawing attention to the ambiguities of painting. On the part of the artist, shifts, errors, glitches, blurs, bad cropping, and mistakes in perspectival drawing are all examples of a movement from one image to another that deploys the technical elements of the medium to make a change.<sup>17</sup>

Artists have always cultivated the boldness of daring to make what would be considered mistakes by, for instance, the conservative judges of the art academies and art criticism—what I have mentioned above: habits turned rules. Such mistakes can have an avant-gardist flavor.

Willful mistakes make viewers consider the medium and its lack of transparency. Calling them cinematic is my way of bringing together the kind of mistakes Munch makes in his paintings, Flaubert in his writing, and Williams Gamaker and I in the videos. The property of cinematic mistakes is that they have double effects; one self-reflectively medium-oriented, and one specific, generating meaning for the work at hand. I would like to insist that the one is meaningless without the other.

A wonderful “mistake” in Munch that addresses the portrait and its genre of portraiture through challenging the medium is the gleaming reflection in the lorgnette of the figure in the *Portrait of Karl Jensen-Hjell* (1885) (Figure 2.5).

<sup>17</sup> See Jonathan Culler, “The Realism of Madame Bovary,” *Modern Language Notes* 122 (2007b): 683–96. A good starting point of self-reflection of mediums is Rosalind Krauss’s widely read book *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*. Annotation by Joanna Slotkin (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). Janna Houwen discusses the contested concept of medium specificity with great subtlety in a discussion of differences between film and video (*Film and Video Intermediality: The Question of Medium Specificity in Contemporary Moving Images* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017)). On mistakes, which he calls glitches, see Betancourt, “Motion Perception in Movies and Painting”; and Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice*.





**Figure 2.5** Edvard Munch, *Portrait of Karl Jensen-Hjell* (1885). Nasjonalmuseet for kunst, arkitektur og design/The National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo.

Øivind Storm Bjerke writes succinctly about this reflection: “It functions both as an eye-catcher and to emphasise the significance of observation in a visual culture that is dominated by the sense perception of surfaces.”<sup>18</sup> The conjunction of the motif of observation by the figure and the viewer makes their gazes meet in that visual culture. The surplus value of Munch’s “glitch,” which anachronistically looks like a pixel, is the attention to surfaces; both as the root of “superficial” as an ideological criticism, and as the proliferation of

<sup>18</sup> Øivind Storm Bjerke, “Meaning and Physicality in the Art of Munch,” in *Cinema between Media: An Intermediality Approach*, ed. Dieter Bruhn, Jørgen and Anne Gjelsvik (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 51.

the presence of reflections, prominent in the then relatively new phenomenon of shop windows. It is a well-rehearsed criticism of (post)modern visual culture that the multiplication of surfaces promotes a superficiality of social and individual life.

A cinematographer about to capture the gleam in an eyeglass would risk being scolded for such a blatant “mistake,” but it can easily happen. A painter must make a special decision to achieve the gleam. Munch’s brush is speaking to a colleague painter, and probably considering the latter too conservative, too realistic, encouraging him to be more daring. Used tongue-in-cheek, the word “mistake” makes visible how traditionalist judges censor innovations while making their judgments appear self-evident and without the possibility of questioning them. Like a post-1989 avant-gardist, Munch foregrounds what “normally” remains invisible. We can see this as an alternative realism, of the kind Culler analyzed.<sup>19</sup>

In Flaubert, this kind of strategy of errors often uses verb tense incongruities to shock readers into paying attention to the texture of the work and the limits of language—his equivalent of the attention to flatness, reflection, and dis-unified spaces in Munch. In Munch’s painting, the cinematic quality can be enhanced by the fact that the image quality seems to be due to a camera that limits depth of field. It is almost as if we see camera movement and change of focus—two notorious “mistakes” in filming that, along with cropping, can also be used to enhance certain aspects and meanings. In this respect the painter is freer than the cinematographer. He can, and does, vary with sharpness and blur regardless of how the depth of field justifies it, whether it is shallow or deep. This is most radical in *Uphill*.

An example of a verb tense irritant in Flaubert’s novel comparable to Munch’s variations of “camera handling” in *Uphill* and *Workers* is the first sentence of chapter 5 of the third part of *Madame Bovary*. Emma has just begun her liaison with Léon. She has plotted a way of seeing him weekly, with the pretext of piano lessons (III, 5). This is our scene 7 of the video installation, *Loving Léon*. It is installed as a single-channel, large-screen projection in a dark space with rows of red-velvety chairs, meant to suggest a (romantic) cinema theatre that at the same time has the dimension of a homey living room. “C’était le jeudi” (It was Thursdays), begins Flaubert’s chapter that described the liaison. The verb tense indicates routine. The

<sup>19</sup> Thus, they confirm Foucault’s statement on invisibility as a key property of fiction: “Fiction consists . . . not in showing the invisible, but in showing to what extent the invisibility of the visible is invisible” (Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits*. 4 volumes (Paris: Gallimard, 1994)).

detailed narration of the small events that precede the encounter with her lover, all in the *imparfait* of routine, are plausible enough as iterations.

The passage ends, however, with the following sentence that, in isolation, would be considered a grammatical mistake: “Puis, d’un seul coup d’œil, la ville apparaissait.” (Then, in the blink of an eye, the city used to appear; my translation). The suddenness implied in the adverbial clause (“in the blink of an eye”) is contradicted by the tense of routine (“used to appear”). Routine, by definition, cannot interrupt; it lacks temporal agency. Yet, using the *passé simple* of interruption would also have been awkward, since the entire passage describes what happens every week, on Thursdays. There is no “correct” way to say this. Flaubert constructs a temporal equivalent to Munch’s broken spaces; an incongruity that constructs a strong focus on an aspect that matters, but that could otherwise have remained unnoticed.

Preceding this sentence is a clause that “explains” the apparent contradiction: “afin de se faire des surprises, elle fermait les yeux” (in an attempt to surprise herself she used to close her eyes). Rather than a simple mistake, this is the use of language to irritate and thus alert readers. In self-deception and captured in emotional capitalism’s lure of permanent excitement, Emma tries desperately to recover the thrill of a liaison that already, we can gather, bores her.

Closing her eyes is a Flaubertian form of “looking sideways” (my concept for the exhibition in Oslo). In other words, this is Emma’s avoiding to face others, and reality. Also, it is an example of Flaubert’s prediction of the tragic ending by means of subtle indications.

How to be loyal to this without being faithful—in other words, how to convey a similar sense of self-deception without attempting to imitate the play with verb tenses? We have tried to make this self-deception tangible by filming reiterated beginnings of the amorous meetings in the same hotel room. In this series of beginnings, the images show the difference between the initial excitement and the subsequent boredom on Emma’s face. Using her face as a projection screen is our way of rendering the subjectivity of the narrative prose. The change, from desire to boredom, in just two consecutive sequences is our way of doing what the writer did with the verb tenses.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Flaubert’s “wrong” use of the *imparfait* has been discussed widely in the critical literature. See the precious collection by Didier Philippot (ed.), *Gustave Flaubert: Mémoire de la critique* (Paris: PUPS, 2006).

## Double Meanings: Telling Imperfections

The mistakes in literature, painting, and video I have so far pointed out all do more than self-reflect on their respective mediums. While seemingly anti-narrative, they contribute to the meaning of the narrative itself; they give it, to use the word tongue-in-cheek, more depth. They make the story into literature, the picture into an image; the film into a tool to show without telling, or telling otherwise, and thus to avoid explicit statements. These mistakes all add up to a sense of imperfection as a tool for self-reflection. In our video installations we have, in addition to camera movement, also deployed the mistakes of blurs and excessive cropping to enhance the social isolation of the main character, and her being looked at by invisible others as a response to her own “looking sideways.” This is clear, for example, in scene 3, *Wedding*, where observing and gossiping guests surround Emma with contempt. The sense of isolation, resulting in loneliness, is not so much the consequence of her looking sideways in a literal sense, but of an avoidance of dialogue, which amounts to the same. Her insecurity is expressed by an excessive cropping of the image of her face when she is getting ready for the wedding ceremony, asking the friend who is doing her makeup if she looks all right (middle frame of Figure 2.6a–c). These three mistakes make the scene decisively imperfect.

In *Uphill with a Sledge*, both the man pulling the sledge and the figure in green are barely readable, blurry figures, consisting of stains of paint rather than clear brushstrokes. The main character, a patch of blue and brown paint, has a snout by way of a face, which makes him look like a wolf in human clothes. This is one of the effects of the overly steep perspective indicated by the path that runs up from his body to the upper right. His legs are molten into a single one, his left arm also seems to be missing. The bright suit of the man on the right may have been colored for chromatic effect of contrast, rather than for profilmic reasons. The contrast between their colors attracts so much attention, making viewers notice the rough brush work—hence distracting from the narrative of the effort the left man is making—that it makes the painting almost abstract. Abstraction, like everything else in looking at art, is in the eye of the beholder. Hence, the viewer is free to consider the abstract work with color or the depiction of a narrative event.

Color is one of the aspects that painting has in common with cinema, although not yet generally in Munch's time. The artist used color not only to transgress the boundary between picture and image and, in the wake of that distinction, between figuration and abstraction. He gave color synesthetic



**Figure 2.6** Mieke Bal and Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Madame B* (2013). Three mistakes in the Wedding scene. Video stills. Courtesy of the artist.

functions by means of allusions: in a medium that serves the sense of sight only, he “argued” through painting that sight is never alone; that the other senses participate in sense perception. This brings us to another form of interrelation, what I have termed intership: a form that has also been called multimodality.<sup>21</sup>

Flaubert deployed sound and color-coding for political effect. An instance occurs in the seduction scene during the *Commices agricoles*, the prime example of montage for Eisenstein. A bent-over old servant who receives a medal for fifty years of service in subaltern, abject subordination is dressed in blue, white, and red, as a mute protest of the lowly against the lie of the French flag. There is an even closer connection between Munch and Flaubert in their inclusion of “sound tracks,” when we consider how, according to some scholars, *The Scream* also has a soundtrack. In that motif, color is used to suggest sound; not to color-code the political message as in Flaubert, but to color emotion. If viewers “hear” the scream in the colors, both are instances of synesthetically working signs that transgress the boundaries of their respective media. The comparison, or framing of the one through the other, shows both the similarity—synesthetic signification—and the differences—the use of color, political in Flaubert, emotional in Munch.<sup>22</sup>

In Munch’s art, the moments that the figuration is confused—almost erased—by abstraction are key to our understanding of the ambiguity that is his primary political issue and position. Frequently, it is in the blurring, the emptying out, or the lack of focus of the depicted eyes that the limit of figuration becomes the site of resistance to the relentlessly persistent romanticism; not shaped but, precisely, left unshaped. Areas of unclarity in paintings of love scenes, for instance, point to another side of the figuration of love. From physical movement, then, the work guides us to consider movement as persuasion, but not solely intellectually; moving us to change, to act, or to refuse. Unclarity of color in realistic terms is also couched in uncertain color in Flaubert’s novel. It is well known that the olor

<sup>21</sup> On intership, see Mieke Bal, “Intership: Anachronism between Loyalty and the Case,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas Leitch (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179–96. There was actually an extensive use of color in early cinema (see Giovanna Fossati (ed.), *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015)). On Munch’s use of color to express sound in *The Scream*, see Ydstie, “Painting Is What the Brain Perceives through the Filter of the Eye,” in *Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye*, ed. Angela Lampe and Clément Chéroux (London: Tate, 2012), esp. 259. See also Clarke’s close analysis of *The Sick Child* from 1885 to 1886 (“Originality and Repetition in Edvard Munch’s *The Sick Child*”). On color in relation to abstraction, see the last chapter of Mieke Bal, *Endless Andness: The Politics of Abstraction According to Ann Veronica Janssens* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). I learned about multimodality from Lars Ellerström (“Modelling Human Communication: Mediality and Semiotics”).

<sup>22</sup> On the mute protest, see De Biasi, *Gustave Flaubert*, 245.

of Emma's eyes varies between blue, green, gray and black, depending on who is looking at her.

Munch declares the line between figuration and abstraction nonexistent; for him, it is an ideology that traps us within a binary opposition whereas continuity is subtler and more complex. Preposterously responding to Foucault, Munch "argues" that visibility does not depend on sharpness.

Flaubert, the makers of *Madame B*, and Munch deploy "mistakes" in their art, enhancing the medium itself. The blur and variation of depth of field tell us that we are not watching a transparent depiction of a pro-filmic reality, but a crafted image. Similarly, the uneven application of paint of which Munch was a master keeps us aware that what we see is not a real-life situation. Instead of avoiding the realistic illusion by eliminating figuration altogether and moving toward pure abstraction, the artist keeps the figuration in sight while emphatically showing how it is made, using abstraction to do so. Mistakes can be a mediator between the false opposition of figuration and abstraction.<sup>23</sup>

Art historian Nils Messel recalls that "mistakes" had always been Munch's strategy—and the target of the conservative criticism that was in fact Munch's implicit target. He writes: "In Munch's art the naturalistic critic saw and cherished what Frits Thaulow once called Munch's 'astonishing *courage de défauts*' [dare to make mistakes]." That is, "his audacity to accept that art was not to copy nature, but to give a highly personal, subjective impression of it." Rather than the word "impression," I would use "fusion" here, as in "subjective fusion" (De Biasi's term). It is what Culler drew attention to when he argued that frequently, narration and focalization positions—the two forms subjectivity takes in narrative—remain undetermined, undecidable. Such subjective fusion renders the ambiguity that Munch's mistakes also foregrounded.<sup>24</sup>

The moment when, in the Wedding scene of the video installation, Emma and the priest supposedly talk together without having anything to say to each other is rendered in an exceedingly blurred image. This is a literal rendering of subjective fusion, where the fluid image shows two people without in the least foregrounding subjectivity. The composition shows Emma from the back, hands holding her purse behind her back, the priest consuming a piece

<sup>23</sup> Bjerke sees abstraction as the consequence of "a loose painterly treatment of colour where the references to specific objects almost dissolve" ("Meaning and Physicality in the Art of Munch," 52).

<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Culler, *Flaubert: The Uses of Uncertainty* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 1974 (revised ed. 1985; 2006). Thaulow cited by Messel, "Edvard Munch and His Critics in the 1880s," in *Madonna*, ed. Ingebjørg Ydstie (Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke/Munch Museum, 2008), 166.

f the wedding cake. It suggests a schoolgirl being either scolded or seduced by someone who has power over her. See the first image of Figure 2.6.

Subjective fusion is at stake in all those passages where, as Culler has so persuasively argued, it remains unclear if focalization must be attributed to Emma or to the narrator, so that the reader must make autonomous decisions. One reason for this is the wish to solicit compassion for Emma, who is caught in boredom. Culler describes this state as a process with double meaning astutely as

a literary category of the first importance; it is the background against which the activity of reading takes place and which continuously threatens to engulf it. The strategies of reading and interpretation must be understood as attempts to avoid boredom, and, on the other hand, boredom itself is a literary device whose usefulness modern literature has increasingly forced us to appreciate. To recognize the potential sources of boredom in a work and the different rhythms of reading which can be used to neutralize them is to discover important facts about its structure.<sup>25</sup>

Comparable to those fur caps which bring the distant view into an excessively close cropping is the image in the Wedding scene, when Emma is being prepared, “made beautiful,” and driven to insecurity (see the middle frame of Figure 2.5). Here, her subjectivity is not fused but eliminated. As a bride, to be handed over from her father to her husband, she is completely objectified. In the third image of Figure 2.6, when the beggar woman—an unfaithful version of the blind beggar in the novel—takes over and ridicules Emma in her song, this party-spoiler is cropped, while her sharpness pushes the bride and groom back as small blurs.<sup>26</sup>

Eisenstein’s choice for an audio image as the key example of montage is not as surprising as we might think once we realize that Flaubert was obsessed by the sounds of his words and sentences. The rhythm of reading and the sounds of the text mattered to him so much so that he strolled through his garden saying his sentences out loud, as if tasting them. In the installation sound also performs the boredom. In most of the scene where Emma is at home, bored out of her skull, not a word is spoken, while a clock is ticking relentlessly.

<sup>25</sup> Culler, *Flaubert*, 19. For a lucid and succinct overview of the concept of and debates on performativity, see Jonathan Culler’s chapter “The Performative” in *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007a), 137–65.

<sup>26</sup> This beggar (played by Lila König-Saarikko) shows up as early as Emma’s wedding, whereas in the novel the blind beggar comes in during the affair with Léon. In both works they are coming around during the death scene.



Solitude and boredom merge into a single, exasperatingly durational state. We see Emma arrange dry flowers, remove a spider, pick up a tea glass, and gaze at her own reflection in the teaspoon.

Meanwhile, the young neighbor Léon appears, in turn in an over-the-top, unmotivated closeup. But although unmotivated, such a mistake is not meaningless. This incongruous closeup that makes no sense outside of Emma's desire suggests he may be interested in Emma, even stalking her. A narrative imperfection predicts the liaison to come. After some time, she gets up from the couch, starts washing the dishes, and sees Léon, long after the viewers have seen him. She goes to the door, opens it, and they look at each other. This mutual look initiates a new phase. If something is bound to happen, it is due to that silent mutual gaze. Flaubert describes Emma's perception of Léon's passing by, his craving for her, yet incapability to do anything about it, their mutual longing without contact. Short as the take is, it stretches out time while nothing happens (in chapter II, 4).

Later, we see the two as they walk in the forest. This insinuates or, for those who know the novel, recalls what in Flaubert's text is an over-the-top exalted conversation. Condensing this episode with that of Emma's pregnancy and her wish to have a boy because "men at least are free," the image is implicated in its performativity, in the incomprehension between the two would-be lovers. In our version, Emma suddenly sees a baby boy playing in the sand. Moved, she rushes up to him. Léon, walking by her side, sees nothing. The spectator sees the baby—and making the vision more plausible, the baby shouts with delight; a sound that, like the ticking clock, we hear "with" Emma. Only then, in the next take, Léon and the viewer see the empty patch of sand. The baby is a ghost, a vision, an expression of Emma's desire to have a boy, which in turn betrays that she is pregnant.

Because they are subjective, the two images are incompatible. But because of the time-based medium, they succeed each other in linear time. The spectators see and hear the baby too, even though the idyllic forest-scape and the fairy-tale sunset derealize the scene. Only after seeing the baby they see the empty area. In the mirage of the baby boy the two characters are put on the same level of "hysteria." Emma hallucinates; Léon tumbles from his romantic cloud into his failing imagination. The dilemma of whether it is mad to expect happiness or to be unable to imagine it dawns on the viewer, who cannot at first make out the logic of the scene. The mistake in narrative logic, again, activates the viewer and reflects on the medium with its relentless linearity.

When one jumps from one art form to another, as I have done here, mistakes begin to take over and bring art to life. Artworks that faithfully follow the rules and their predecessors tend to remain flat, even when made with

perfection. The episode of the first, failed infatuation with Léon, ending in the birth of Emma's daughter, has the Flaubertian rhythm of long durational thoughts and brief, instantaneous (non-)events. In the middle of a chapter is the brief statement: "The baby was born one Sunday morning, about six o'clock, at sunrise.—It's a girl! cried Charles. She turned her head away and fainted" (II, 3). Hours of labor, the information, the reaction: all this in a mere twenty-one words; the tension between duration and instantaneousness is at work. In the video, this takes the form of a scream that interrupts a pedantic and anachronistic conversation (which nevertheless responds to Flaubert's staging of that between mother nursing versus hiring a wet nurse) about home versus hospital childbirth, between Charles and Homais, immediately followed by the newborn's crying. That Emma faints upon hearing that the baby is a girl, and not the hoped-for boy, is telling. The baby's crying metaphorically connects to Emma's deploring her status as a woman, always disappointed, confined, unable "to taste the pleasures of the world," the desire for which was instilled in her by the lures of emotional capitalism. Is this a bad mother or an oppressed housewife? The viewer is drawn in to reflect on this issue.

This is crucial for the novel, because the character ruins herself by making fatal mistakes, following her desires and believing in her illusions, but from there to the frequently uttered judgments that she is stupid, romantic, a bad mother, and more is ignoring the novel's artistic achievement. But also, it is ignoring the specific Flaubertian realism, which is not based on illusions of transparency, but a relentless, mercilessly ironic indictment of the culture in which the novel is steeped. In that sense, nothing of the events can be considered punctual, or instantaneous. Everything, in light of Flaubert's critical ambition, is part of a descriptive discourse.<sup>27</sup>

## Mistaken Identities

These examples of mistakes all have as their primary characteristic the double meaning they produce. They signify an element of the narrative or the scene. But they also de-naturalize the medium of the artwork. The mistakes tell us what the medium is that the artist deploys. We can say that the medium

<sup>27</sup> To Michael Fried, instantaneousness is one of the characteristics of Manet's modernism (*Manet's Modernism, or, the Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 291); the two temporalities are material qualities of the painted surface. Instantaneousness suggests that the painting can be seen in one glance. I don't believe it ever can. To me, the temporalities are more important in "cinematicity," subjectivity and its fusion, and experience.

becomes visible through the imperfections. But they also make us question its homogeneity—what Rosalind Krauss, among others, has called “medium specificity.” This questioning leads not only to a loosening of the boundaries between media but also to a “discussion” between media, a genuine intermediality. And it facilitates an awareness that the artwork is more than a transparent rendering in some medium of a story, an event, a person, a thing. The self-identical nature of each medium is thus undermined. The media can communicate among themselves, but more importantly, this communication can only happen with the help of the reader or viewer.<sup>28</sup>

The relevance of such intermedialities for our communication in general and our interaction with art becomes emphatic when a plurality of mediums is involved. This is the case with a contemporary artwork, an installation so contemporary that it is not yet finished, by Dutch artist Jacomina van Loon, titled *Mona Lisa Chanel* (Figures 2.7–2.9). Van Loon is a multimedia artist, primarily a painter but also a video maker, and a theatre actress. Her paintings often become series, with installation-like hangings that already waver between single paintings and series, albeit not really like comics. Although not definitive, for now this installation consists of two rows of three relatively small paintings, hung in a corner; some larger paintings; and a video on a small screen. The first thing that struck me when I entered the studio was the thick black lines that seem to frame the six paintings. That, I thought, is a mistake; you don’t frame paintings on the canvas itself, and not in black, and if so, not so thick. The lines turned out to be the canvas surface, the colored pictures painted on it, with visibly rough edges. Another mistake, or an allusion to the materiality of paint? Hung vertically, they become frames of an obsolete celluloid film. Why would an artist in 2018 make her paintings look like film strips? Only then did I notice the image itself, with theatrical scenes, sometimes doubled, overlaid with colors in blocks, rectangular or square, that make harsh lines over faces; doublings, and elements that mean nothing; symptoms of abstraction.

Soon, my understanding of the installation’s intermediality expanded. Film, but based on a video recording of a play, remade by the artist into an experimental video. The play, *Fashion Is a Tirant* (2016), written and directed by Yve Dubois, performed by Monalisa Toneel Amsterdam, stages Coco Chanel and her band of women friends. Theatre as an already intermedial and multimodal art form lets Chanel as a fashion designer contribute to her own medium—drawing, textile, fashion shows. Show, then, receives a crucial, central status. The artist plays herself in the play, and is visible in

<sup>28</sup> Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea*.



**Figure 2.7** Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

one of the frames—significantly, the doubled one, bottom right, where the symbolic rainbow is foregrounded.

The color effects speak to video and its postproduction tricks; experiment with form, when lines in primary colors, or whirling semicircles, come to disturb the figurative image. Tall vertical mirrors (in the middle frame on the right) add the distorting effect of mirrors on fairs, which deform not only the figures but also their scale. Van Loon made a video on the basis of the recording of the play by BubbleEyes, editing and adding color to a color video, or taking out color (as in the bottom left image) to suggest a photographic negative. The video is shown on a small screen. It is as if



**Figure 2.8** Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail of panel with the artist pouring champagne. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 2.9** Jacomina van Loon, *Monalisa Chanel* (2018). Detail. Courtesy of the artist.

the installation explores the history of media, seeking to confuse our assumptions about them. The play between the black box of film and the white cube invoked through its opposite and through the materiality of painting includes the space of exhibiting in the questioning of mediality. The idea of the photographic negative confuses us yet again: if this is reversed, the borders would be white, as in the white cube!

With the increasing, turbulent forms of intermediality, the possible mistakes multiply. But with things artistically “not done,” social issues pop up. The distorting mirrors bring in the popular, non-elitist fun fair, in a serious artwork, at a time art is unsuccessfully attempting to interest working classes; the allusions to the rainbow flag introduce the issue of homosexuality, which makes us realize that all players are women, and that a lesbian tone predominates. And the text of the play itself addresses the divide between the wealthy (those who can afford designer clothes) and the poor who remain unseen. Meanwhile, the painter, critically probing all such divides along with the artistic ones, shows her complicit hand, literally, in the portion in the middle frame on the right, where a towering Karl Lagerfeld (played by Monique van Miltenburg) clutches, in a shiny leather-gloved hand, something painted with great ambitious precision. It is a toy dog, with the price tag still on it. That this is the frame where the distorting mirrors entice figures, artist and viewers into self-reflection is no coincidence.

This is the way mistakes undermine the autonomy of the artwork according to the formalist conception. But denying art a different kind of autonomy would jar with the use of mistakes outlined above. The impossibility of defining art ontologically, to say what it *is*, and the need to resort to considering it as an act, saying what it *does*, comes from the dual, paradoxical status of art. Both its relative autonomy, which resides in its agency, and its sociality are crucial aspects of its status in the world—where it must function. “Art cannot live, *qua* art, within the everyday *as* the everyday,” writes British philosopher Peter Osborne, quoting from Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*. “Rather, it necessarily disrupts the everydayness of the everyday from within, since it is, constitutively, both ‘autonomous’ and a ‘social fact.’” The disruption Osborne mentions is the mistake operating the paradox of autonomy. The “everydayness of the everyday” consists, in the case of art, of the routine assumptions from which we consider the respective media both as distinct and as tools, as instruments at our disposal. It is these assumptions that mistakes undermine. And in doing so, they enforce a different, more active attitude in which viewers and readers recognize their indispensable participation.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 255 and 140.

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