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Minor Moments
in Modern Literature and Film

Adam Chambers

Doctoral Dissertation



UNIVERSITY
OF AMSTERDAM

Minor Moments
in Modern Literature and Film

Minor Moments in Modern Literature and Film

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

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aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek

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Washington D.C., September, 2023

*Para Isa,
luz de mi vida*

He recalled the torture of counting one by one the days to which there seemed to be no end.

– Dino Buzzati, *The Tartar Steppe* (1940)

There is no true art without a strong dose of banality.

– E. M. Cioran, *Anathemas and Admirations* (1986)

Introduction

Minor Moments

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event...the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. ...as if life reveals itself only by what is spectacular...

– Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (1973)

In recent years, the concept of the event has received growing attention across a number of related fields. For example, there have been studies on events in cinema, literature, and theory.¹ The term is also central to a number of recent writings on the philosophy of art, including works on aesthetics, ethics, and also an academic journal devoted to the subject.² But what is in fact behind the concept's popularity? And also, what is obscured if all we presently see are events? What might be overlooked by both a discourse and a way of living that is constantly consumed by the phenomenon? As the French novelist Georges Perec asks when outlining the main problem: in place of such events, "how should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian...the common, the ordinary?" (Perec 210).

While addressing these central questions, the present study is an attempt to uncover moments in both literature and film that diverge from a dominant experience of culture: one that is based mainly on great events. These are moments that fall outside of official narratives of history, and that also, as Perec suggests, seem to escape the accelerating rhythms of modern life (210).³ Similarly, as I would like to propose, beyond the overwhelming influence of events, we also experience moments in both life and art that resist these categorizations. We encounter

¹See for example, "The Film Event: From Interval to Interstice" (Conley, 2000), *The Event of Literature* (Eagleton, 2004), and *The Event: Literature and Theory* (Rowner, 2015).

²A select number of examples include, *Being and Event* (Badiou 2007), *Event and Time* (Romano 2013), and *Event: Philosophy in Transit* (Zizek, 2014). The academic journal celebrating events in philosophy and aesthetics, is titled, "Evental Aesthetics": www.eventalaesthetics.net

³For a similar argument, see also Guy Debord's influential study, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967).

instants, often hidden and beyond one's view, that provoke another way of seeing that is particularly minor in scale.

For example, if we look to modern literature, throughout Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), the most moving moments of all are also those that seem the most banal: a misplaced step on a cobblestone street, a few indistinct trees by the beach, and most famously, a moist pastry dipped into tea. Similarly, in Virginia Woolf's writings, there are "moments of being," which from a distance, appear mundane, but that also awaken sensations that lie deeper than the everyday (Woolf 70). And in modern cinema, for André Bazin, there are films that create poetry from the most "banal incidents" of life (Bazin 50). For instance, in *Umberto D* (1951), the morning rituals of a maid; in *La terra trema* (1948), a fisherman rolling a cigarette; and in *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), a father and his son, waiting for the rain to pass, so they can continue their journey through the streets of Rome (50).⁴ In all such cases, we face moments that may at first appear unassuming, but turn out to be surprisingly challenging. These moments are not events. They are not obvious, nor particularly grand in their scale. But as I will argue, they have the potential to fundamentally question the subjects who they encounter.

In more detail, the main aim of my project is not to provide a complete history of such moments; a task that might prove impossible, or at least endless in practice. Rather, what I would like to demonstrate is how a distinct set of forms in modern literature and film reveal themselves through unsuspecting encounters. These moments appear in modern works from the past two centuries, and from within both major and minor aesthetic movements. But also, as we will see, they do so in ways that question our understanding of modern aesthetics to begin with. For example, the differences between realism and naturalism, modernism and postmodernism, are less relevant to distinguish than the experiences of the works themselves, that each pass through these traditions, but in their own marginal ways.⁵ As I demonstrate, through the writings of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, André Bazin, and Alain Robbe-Grillet; a minor aesthetic

⁴ All three examples are highlighted by Bazin in *What is Cinema? Vol. II*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

⁵ On this point, my project follows recent studies on world literature and comparative global modernisms that view a rigid definition of modernism as ultimately limiting, geographically, historically, and conceptually. These studies include, David Damrosch's *How to Read World Literature* (2009), *The Work of World Literature* (2021), ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson, and Derek Attridge's *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading* (2004). In the latter study, Attridge writes, "much of the dispute about the relation between modernism and postmodernism would disappear if there were less compulsion to define, in a totalizing and positivistic spirit, diverse contemporaneous cultural practices (Attridge 4).

emerges in modern literature and cinema alongside major aesthetic traditions. It also challenges the dominant influence of events, by shifting one's attention toward apparently ordinary encounters and experiences.

After further outlining these positions below, the main case-studies of the project follow this aesthetic through a late and light novel by Milan Kundera, *Ignorance* (2000), a lesser-known short story by Jorge Luis Borges, "The Secret Miracle" (1943), and a mysteriously quiet film by the director Nuri Bilge Ceylan, *Distant* (2002). As I will demonstrate, while on the one hand, these works present everyday themes and details, they also stage unsettling encounters for their characters, readers, and viewers. The moments provoke feelings of estrangement and deep ambivalence. But through the process, they also reveal lighter experiences that fall outside of the constant bombardment of events, and the often overwhelming ties to history that accompany them.

Methodology / Concepts / Themes

From the outset, it is important to situate the present study in relation to works that are focused similarly on themes of the minor and the everyday in literature and film. In so doing, I would like to first acknowledge that my project is influenced especially by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's seminal study, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1975). In their analysis of Kafka's oeuvre, Deleuze and Guattari provide a helpful framework for thinking about the concept of the "minor" as a form of literature that contrasts subversively from an established literary tradition (Deleuze and Guattari 18). They also argue that a minor literature is a literary aesthetic that focuses on marginal themes and characters, both within and against the dominant traditions of Western literature (18). But more than a group of specific literatures, per se, they propose that the concept of the minor more accurately represents, in their words, "the revolutionary conditions for *every* literature within... what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 18; my emphasis). What this means is that although Deleuze and Guattari emphasize the politics of marginality in their theory of minor literature, they also argue that we should look within the canon itself for helpful examples, since these are the novels and stories that will highlight most effectively those works that have already resisted, and continue to resist

the very traditions in which they appear. Nowhere is this point made more convincingly than through the central examination of their study, Kafka's writings, which although largely unpublished during the author's lifetime, are now clearly embedded within the Western canon.

One of the main issues then, is not solely about the politics of representation and how to locate "obscure" works that have been underrepresented, or simply left out of the literary canon. But rather as I argue, the concept of the minor relates more importantly to a series of literary "forms" within the canon itself.⁶ To be clear, although Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of Kafka is explicitly political, it is also critically "formalist," as it addresses a conception of the minor as a series of forms that are already associated with a clearly established literary tradition. It is specifically through the relationship between this formalist and political approach that my study engages most closely with Deleuze and Guattari's theory, while also opening-up a dialogue with other authors whose writings on literature directly overlap with these themes, such as Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

The second way that my project relates to, but also differs from similar studies on the minor and the everyday, is in how it addresses questions about modernism and a mimetic mode of representation in literary history and theory. Recently, there have been several studies that outline the clear link between the movement of literary modernism and themes of the everyday, including Bryony Randall's *Modernism, Daily Time, and Everyday Life* (2007), and Liesl Olsen's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009).⁷ These studies share an overarching argument, first canonized by Erich Auerbach's, *Mimesis: The Study of Realism in Western Literature* (1946), which highlights how literary works have become more prosaic throughout literary history, with the rise of the realist novel, and with a growing preoccupation with everyday themes and details. In particular, as Auerbach argues, this process in literary history takes on characteristics of a gradual "transfer of confidence," in which the great external events of history that had previously shaped many narratives, have subsequently become less significant in relation to random moments and details that could easily be, "plucked from the course of a life at any time..."

⁶ Recently, scholars have interpreted Deleuze and Guattari's concept to mean, primarily, the underrepresentation of a specific "languages" in the Western literary tradition. Their focus is on works yet to be translated into English, and circulated in today's "World Literature" market, underscoring the politics of translation and publication that highlight the work's lack of representation. To be clear, these studies are necessary and important, however my own analysis centers more closely around the canon itself, as outlined above.

⁷ For a similar argument, see also Michal Peled Ginsburg and Lorri G. Nandrea's essay, "The Prose of the World," in the edited anthology, *The Novel, Volume 2: Forms and Themes* (ed. Moretti, F., 2007).

(Auerbach 547). Importantly for Auerbach, this focus on everyday details only intensified with the modernist writings of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf at the turn of the last century (547). My aim is not to dispute these arguments, but rather to expand upon them further, by examining how certain modern works from the past two centuries display characteristics of a minor aesthetic that challenges both the dominant literary traditions in which they are produced, and the grand historical events in which they have been most explicitly influenced.

Thirdly, I would like to be very clear that my examination of the minor is also distinct from studies on “minimalism” in art and literature. Initially, it may appear that a study on minor forms in literature and film would overlap with an aesthetic of minimalism. Although it is often a loose term associated with a diverse range of art forms, minimalist works tend to highlight a reduction in form, and express this reduction as their defining feature. As Warren Motte argues in his study *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature* (1999), any “art that insists upon that reduction and mobilizes it as a constructive principle can be termed minimalist” (Motte 1999). However the works that I address, by contrast, are minor not because they are necessarily “small,” but rather because they express a minor style and tone, and above all, a series of values that resist dominant themes and traditions. In other words, regardless of a work’s formal length and composition, I argue that certain novels, stories, and films can appear minor if they express these specific values. Once again, this is a position that shares qualities with Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the minor outlined above, and which according to the authors can include both longer works, such as the exhaustive novels of Marcel Proust and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, or shorter texts, such as the stories and plays of Samuel Beckett (*Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* 34, 19).⁸

Fourthly, and relating to the above points, following these examinations of modernism and everyday life, there have also been a group of studies devoted to events and moments of epiphany in literature, especially in relation to the modernist writings of James Joyce.⁹ The focus here is on a type of “prosaic sublime,” as I would like to describe it. These epiphanies share characteristics with the traditional category of the sublime, in that they address events that seem

⁸ See for example, Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927), Louis-Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932), and *The Lost Ones* (1970) by Samuel Beckett.

⁹ See for example, John McGowen’s “From Pater to Wilde to Joyce: Modernist Epiphany and the Soulful Self” (1990), and David Hayman’s “The Purpose and Permanence of the Joycean Epiphany” (1998).

larger than life, and that provoke an overwhelming experience.¹⁰ However, they also take place in more prosaic locales and situations. For example, in works such as *The Dubliners* (1914) and *Ulysses* (1920), the Joycean epiphany is famously an event of unexpected clarity and personal transcendence within the flow of everyday life.¹¹ By contrast, the moments in my study diverge significantly from these events, in that I am interested primarily in the banality of such encounters that are marked above all by their ambiguity. In such moments, there are no illuminations of truth or transcendence, but rather instances of resignation, exhaustion, and confusion. With the help of writers such as Roland Barthes and Milan Kundera, I argue that these moments are far removed from the exhilarating events that define Joyce's epiphanies, and throughout my study, I attempt to identify a critical quality to such moments that, when grouped together, forms the basis of a minor literary and cinematic aesthetic.

Finally, much scholarship has been devoted to studies on movement and time in film history, film theory, and film philosophy. Works such as Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (2002), and Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x per Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006) stand out especially for how they approach a series of overlapping themes concerning modernity, temporality, and film aesthetics of the twentieth-century. In particular, both works argue that cinema is inseparable from broader trends in history that have moved closer towards the material rhythms and temporalities of everyday life. For these reasons as I would like to argue, if the history of literature is marked by a gradual turn towards the everyday, as mentioned above, then similarly, a critical movement takes place in cinema's more recent history, that also breaks away from grand events and dramatic actions as the main driving forces behind its films.

For example, in film theory, this position was first examined by André Bazin in his now famous collection of reviews and essays, *What is Cinema? Vol. 1 & 2* (1958-1962). It is well established that for Bazin, a clear turning point took place in film history following the Second World War, and in particular, with a group of Italian Neorealist films that focused their

¹⁰ Traditionally, the sublime is defined as a grand event that overwhelms the individuals in its presence. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (1792), Edmund Burke famously describes the concept as an overwhelming sense of terror (Burke 1998). Likewise, in his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant emphasizes the magnitude of the experience as an overwhelming event, through both his analysis and definitions of both the "dynamic" and "mathematical" sublime (Kant 2009).

¹¹ In his posthumously published and autobiographical novel, *Stephen Hero* (1944), Joyce describes his understanding of the epiphany as a "sudden spiritual manifestation... a memorable phase of the mind itself" (Joyce 211).

narratives almost exclusively on marginal characters and themes. According to Bazin, with films such as Luchino Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1948), and Vittorio De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), to name only a few, a new cinematic aesthetic was introduced that highlighted slower rhythms and scenes, and that prioritized the most "banal incidents" of everyday life (*What is Cinema? Vol 2* 50). Moreover, through the use of cinematic techniques such as deep focus and the long take, these films explored marginal moments in the lives of their characters that had previously been under examined in the history of narrative cinema.¹²

Moving more explicitly though beyond a discussion of realism, in his influential cinema books, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983), and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), Gilles Deleuze argues that the above transition in film aesthetics also marked a clear break in film history towards a new form of cinema that could for the first time be classified as "modern." For Deleuze, the movement away from dramatic events and actions was not only a movement that veered closer towards realism, as Bazin had argued, but also, a challenge to the very concept itself. According to Deleuze, this shift in postwar film-aesthetics led simultaneously to a new mode of perception in cinema, through moments and scenes of introspection that no longer depended exclusively on linear narratives and events as their most dominant characteristics. As Deleuze argues, through moments of "everyday banality" in these films "it is as if the action floats in the situation, rather than bringing it to a conclusion or strengthening it" (*Cinema 2* 4, 5). In other words, we find characters who are passive, who no longer know how to act, or what to do, and who also question the very purpose of their lives, their identities, and their surroundings. One of the reasons for this, as Deleuze argues, is because in these films, "objects and settings [*millieux*] take on an autonomous, material reality which gives them an importance in themselves" (4). In short, these are the "time-images" that Deleuze witnesses through loose and wandering films, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954), Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949) and *Tokyo Story* (1953), among others.

While addressing these arguments, my own approach to cinema expands on these positions, while also examining the importance of a text by Roland Barthes on the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, titled, "Dear Antonioni" (1980). I include this work in my analysis of modern cinema, because I would like to argue that it provides an additional approach to thinking

¹² For a similar argument on the importance of banal moments in Italian-Neorealism, see for example, Cesare Zavattini's, "Some Ideas on the Cinema" (1953).

about the concept of the “modern” in film history through Barthes’ own concept of “fragility,” a key characteristic that he observes in Antonioni’s films (“Dear Antonioni” 63). Moreover, by following Barthes, I would like to demonstrate how fragility becomes the condition *par excellence* of modern cinema, in dialogue with Bazin’s and Deleuze’s theories, and my own understanding of minor moments in modern films, including works by Lucrecia Martel, Pawel Pawlikowski, and most closely, through the final case-study of my project, the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan.¹³

Having introduced the main methodology, concepts, and themes of my study, allow me to now outline the subsequent chapters of my analysis below.

Outline of Chapters

The first chapter of the project, titled, “Minor Forms and Minor Values: A Sketch of the Past,” provides the main theoretical focus of my analysis, and follows a distinct set of works in modern literature and cinema that privileges the minor moment. As outlined above, these are works that address themes of the everyday, but that also, as I will demonstrate, circumvent the main aesthetic traditions in which they appear. The works challenge a dominant aesthetic tradition that prioritizes grand events at the expense of everyday moments and experiences.

In more detail, the chapter begins by rethinking the important value of the event in literary and cinematic history, and also revisits the concept’s central role as a dominant aesthetic in the establishment of cultural myths and narratives. Through the writings of Roland Barthes, François Jullien, Georg Lukács, and Mikhail Bakhtin, I show how there is an epic ideal that favors great events in literary history, and how this ideal continues to influence works of modern literature and cinema through to the present day. Additionally, I demonstrate how there is also an alternative group of works in modern literature and film that prioritizes everyday scenes and details, and above all, the importance of minor moments. Once again, my aim is not to provide a complete history of such moments. Nor do I wish to provide an overview of specific aesthetic movements such as naturalism, realism, modernism, and postmodernism, that might relate

¹³ See for example, *Zama* (2017) by Lucrecia Martel, *Cold War* (2018) by Pawel Pawlikowski, and “Chapter 4” of my study on the film, *Distant* (2002) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

separately to the moments in question. But rather, by examining a selection of scenes in modern novels and films by Nathalie Sarraute, Juan Carlos Onetti, Eileen Chang, Dino Buzzati, and Michelangelo Antonioni, among others; I attempt to highlight a set of unifying themes, characteristics, and values, that each in their respective ways, helps to illuminate an understanding of the minor moment as a critical aesthetic in modern literature and cinema.

In the second chapter of my study, “Forgetting Monuments: Kundera’s Ignorance,” I turn more closely to the examination of minor moments in Milan Kundera’s novel *Ignorance* (2000). As a late, and as I will argue, “minor” work in Kundera’s oeuvre, *Ignorance* recounts the travels of two Czech émigrés who return to Prague following the Velvet Revolution. However, upon their return to the city, they experience a profound sense of displacement. The characters feel detached from the history that they had each fled following the Prague Spring, and have now encountered upon their arrival. The aim of this chapter is to juxtapose monumental images in *Ignorance* with minor moments and scenes to emphasize the ambiguity of historical memories that shape one’s identity. I also argue that specific moments from the past, in the form of affects and sensations, can effectively change the way that one thinks about one’s place in history, regardless of how insignificant it may initially appear. In short, through my analysis of the novel, I examine the manner in which *Ignorance* reverses a dominant view of historical events, by emphasizing the importance of minor moments in the lives of its characters.

The third chapter of my study, titled, “A Secret Demand: Borges’ Courtyard Miracle,” looks further to the examination of minor moments in a critical scene in Jorge Luis Borges’ short story, “The Secret Miracle” (1943). As a relatively “under-theorized” work in Borges’ oeuvre, I argue that the story challenges conventional conceptions about time and history, including the values that we associate with grand events from the past. In more detail, through my reading of Borges’ story as both a minor moment and minor work, I argue that individuals can sometimes overcome the constraints of history, through acts of aesthetic creation. While facing a firing squad at the outset of the Second World War, the protagonist in the story searches for a degree of autonomy over his situation, by performing a literary gesture, which I argue, becomes a means of both resistance and survival. In short, by experimenting with one’s understanding of history and time, Borges’ story reaffirms a sense of life and pleasure to both the reader and his character. As I hope to make clear with my analysis, through a minor mode of writing, the moment is also transformed from an initial experience of insignificance, into an act of possibility and difference.

My fourth and final chapter, titled, “The Indecisive Moment: Ceylan’s *Distant*,” analyzes the effects of minor moments in modern cinema, and specifically in a seemingly unremarkable scene in Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s film *Distant* (2002). Through a close reading of the film, I attempt to demonstrate how minor forms in film can help to challenge a series of dominant hierarchies of representation in aesthetics, and through the process, alter our everyday experience of cinema. By engaging with Roland Barthes’ writings on photography and film in *Camera Lucida* (1981), I also attempt to reveal how the passing moment can be viewed not only a site of mourning and melancholia, but also as a renewed site of possibility.

Above all, my aim throughout the present study is to show how the above works resist a traditional understanding of the event in literary and cinematic history. I also hope to make clear how certain moments in modern literature and film influence a mode of criticism that helps us to rethink the important value of the minor in a contemporary culture that overwhelmingly favors great events.

PART ONE

History and Theory

Chapter 1

Minor Forms and Minor Values: A Sketch of the Past

Why do some people, including myself, enjoy in certain novels, biographies, and historical works the representation of the “daily life” of an epoch, or a character?

Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules...meals, lodging, clothing, etc.?

– Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973)

To help gain a better understanding of minor moments, the aim of this chapter is to rethink the importance of aesthetic values in literature and cinema that may initially appear insignificant. As noted above, the values of which I am referring do not present themselves as grand events in literary and cinematic history. Rather, they circulate through a series of modern novels, stories, and films, that each in their respective ways, privilege the minor moment. As we will see, these works highlight instants of everyday life, and focus one’s attention on ordinary themes. They also do so in ways that thwart the main literary and cinematic traditions in which they appear. Most importantly, as I will argue, the works resist the main qualities of narrative action and event that most often characterize these traditions. In doing so, they move their readers and viewers closer toward a more intimate, yet ambiguous set of forms in modern literature and cinema that, following Deleuze and Guattari, we can describe as “minor.”¹⁴ In short, through a select overview, I would like to examine how these forms have emerged in modern literature and film, and to show how they display a series of characteristics that appear removed from a dominant experience of events, and the main aesthetic traditions that most clearly influence them.

To begin, I will first provide a rough outline of the popular aesthetic traditions that have most clearly shaped a representation of great events in literary and cinematic history, including our most common understanding of the term. In doing so, I turn to the literary theories of Roland Barthes, François Jullien, Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin, to revisit how the concept of the

¹⁴ As outlined above, the concept of the “minor” will be developed in relation to the above theorists, by rethinking Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s seminal study, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975). My aim is to open up a broader understanding of the term as a set of aesthetic forms and values, both conceptually and methodologically.

event has influenced a set of *epic ideals* in literary and cinematic history that demands rethinking.¹⁵

Following the above overview, I then turn to a select group of works in modern literature and cinema that resists the main influence of events, and in their place, elevates the significance of ordinary moments. In more detail, and through a series of close readings, I examine how this alternative, and yet less imposing set of forms appears in the writings of Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, André Bazin, and Alain Robbe-Grillet; through the novels of Nathalie Sarraute, Eileen Chang, Dino Buzzati, and Juan Carlos Onetti; and finally, through the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, among others. Above all, with the help of these examples, my aim is to demonstrate how a minor aesthetic lingers at the periphery of modern literature and cinema, and to show how through its forms, a series of values are uncovered that resists grand events, and the central themes and figures that most often accompany them.

The Myth of Great Events

Before examining minor moments in more detail though, what I would first like to outline is the central role that the concept of the event has played historically over one's main expectations and understanding of literature as a popular art form. The main reason for this approach, is to uncover qualities about minor moments, by first examining closely the very forms and traditions that they are in fact opposed to, or overshadowed by, in the history of literature and cinema. As Franco Moretti reminds us in *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1988), "...a form becomes more comprehensible and more interesting the more one grasps the conflict, or at least the differences, connecting it to the forms around it" (Moretti 32). With this in mind, although the concept of the event has become a clear trend within many academic fields, as highlighted above, it is also difficult to overstate the main influence it has had historically over a traditional understanding of literary history. In other words, it is apparent that a broad understanding of events has helped to shape the most popular genres in literary history, from the epic to the novel, and from ancient Greece to the present era. Theorists such as Roland Barthes and François Jullien have argued

¹⁵ The concept of the "epic ideal" will be developed in more detail below, in relation to Hegel's views on literature in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835).

further: that the event has become one of the most foundational concepts in all of Western aesthetics, and for this reason, its influence over literary history is worth revisiting. To help gain a deeper understanding of the concept's influence, I would like to now begin by examining Barthes' and Jullien's positions in more detail.

If we turn first to Barthes' lectures in his study *The Neutral* (2005), in a section titled "Western Frenzy," we will see that he describes a dominant sensibility in Western aesthetics that favors grand events (Barthes 154). Providing a broad history of the concept, "from the Greeks to the nineteenth century," Barthes argues that since the earliest epics of Western literature, there has been a view of great events that champions heightened levels of action, and that is usually expressed as a series of "wars and politics...a diachrony of battles, of dominations, of arrogances" (154).¹⁶ In this sense, according to Barthes, events are most often represented through powerful displays of force and conflict across a range of aesthetic genres. As he explains, this aggressive and "arrogant" view of events, mainly focuses on a select group of dates, heroes, and victories, and fails to make room for life's most minor details (154).¹⁷

Although sweeping in its historical scope, what is most important to highlight from Barthes' lecture is that he invites his readers to rethink the *value* of the event as an aesthetic concept, and to question how it is represented through discursive and literary forms. In other words, Barthes demonstrates how as readers, we tend to gravitate toward those forms that we are most accustomed to, and also, how they tend to best represent the ties that we establish with narratives of literature and history. Put simply, through our reading and viewing habits, we become familiar with the most important dates, actions, and events within a culture, and we adopt them as a set of dominant forms to remember. For example, in Western literature, one could bring to mind a collective image of events that might include the battle of Troy in Virgil's *Aenied* (700 BC), to the battle of Austerlitz in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869).

As Barthes explains in his famous study *Mythologies* (1957), in the cultures in which they appear, these dominant forms perform a specific ideological function as myths and

¹⁶ In his lecture notes, Barthes states that the method of his observations on history and aesthetics takes place on a "macroideological scale" (*The Neutral* 154). In other words, he is examining a broad trend across many centuries of Western aesthetics and culture. In "Chapter 2" below, I examine Barthes' position further alongside other important critiques of history, including Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (1873), and Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1934).

¹⁷ As Anca Parvulescu helps to explain, Barthes' overall project in *The Neutral* aligns with his other writings where he attempts to critique a dominant culture by searching "for a "thing" that might suspend, thwart, or elude the paradigm, what Barthes calls its *arrogance*" (Parvulescu 33).

“collective representations” (Barthes, *Mythologies* 8). In practice, these are the novels and works that provide a comfortable sense of what is widely known and established (152).¹⁸ In this way, we can approach a dominant view of events similarly as yet another cultural myth, which through a series of collective representations (the wars, politics, and histories that Barthes mentions above), become reduced to a common meaning over time.¹⁹ As Barthes argues, this common meaning takes shape in a culture because the very principle of “myth” is that it will always “*naturalize*” the phenomenon in question (128).²⁰ A dominant myth becomes habituated to us, and as a result, we no longer think critically about it: we simply receive it, “without wondering where it comes from” (152). In short, the main problem with such myths is that they tend to rob a phenomenon of its prior complexity, and reduce its potential for multiple meanings (131).²¹ They limit an artwork’s possible interpretation, and a reader’s or viewer’s ability to think beyond the prescribed myth. Thus, what Barthes outlines most importantly in both *The Neutral* and *Mythologies*, is how a dominant myth can shape a series of cultural values that greatly narrows one’s understanding of literary and historical events.

Making similar observations in a chapter titled, “Mythology of the Event,” in his recent study, *The Silent Transformations* (2011), François Jullien also argues that in the history of Western aesthetics, we tend to take the concept of the event for granted, and overlook its central role in the structure of narratives (118). For Jullien, one of the main reasons why the event is so influential, is because in his terms, it represents a dominant “ideology of rupture” that is foundational to Western approaches to philosophy and aesthetics (Jullien 118).²² As with Barthes,

¹⁸ In his other writings, Barthes uses different terms to describe any closed genre or form of cultural discourse. For example, in *S/Z* (1970), he describes such forms as “readerly,” which are comfortable and complacent, and which do not invite a critical reading. Likewise, in *Camera Lucida* (1980), he refers to an obvious meaning within a photograph, as the “*studium*.” And similarly, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), he uses the term “pleasure” to convey an uncritical form of readership across wide range of texts.

¹⁹ See also, Michael Tager, who summarizes that “Barthes found myth consisted of a group of images and ideas emanating from a wide variety of sources including the press, advertising, movies, consumer goods, cultural or athletic events, and indeed almost anything capable of conveying meanings to people” (Tager 631).

²⁰ See also, Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Myth and Meaning* (1978) for an in depth analysis on this point (Lévi-Strauss 11).

²¹ In his study, Barthes describes the reduction in meaning in myths as a form of “language robbery” (*Mythologies* 131).

²² As a sinologist, specializing in ancient Chinese thought, Jullien’s wider body of writings comparatively examines the early philosophical traditions of Eastern and Western philosophies. For a further elaboration of this comparative approach, see also such works by Jullien as: *The Propensity of Things: Toward a*

Jullien claims that in the Western aesthetic tradition, the concept of the event is associated with a sense of immediacy and grandeur that sets it apart from other moments in time (118).

Accordingly, it is also this dominant understanding of the term that most often shapes one's collective views about narrative forms (121).

In particular, when turning to literary history, Jullien argues that since ancient Greece, most myths and stories, to varying degrees, have been dependent on an underlying understanding of the event that prioritizes action as its qualifying feature (121). In this sense, events are not only moments in a narrative development, but crucially, they are also the main purpose and driving force behind that development. As Jullien explains, when one approaches the traditional myths and epics of ancient Greece, “the event is not simply what monopolizes [one's]... attention; it also structures the narrative and serves its dramatization, which means that it is really the constitutive element of a *muthos*” (121).²³

What I would like to highlight is that this is a well-known argument about narrative forms that echoes Aristotle's description in his *Poetics* (330 BC). Here, Aristotle states clearly that *mythos* (story), is the representation of actions and the “plot of the events” (Aristotle 24).²⁴ Myths and stories are traditionally dependent on dramatic actions (both individual and collective), and as a whole, they are made up of the total sum of events that they recount.²⁵ However, as Guido Mazzoni argues in his *Theory of the Novel* (2017), for this same reason, a hierarchy of representation was also first established in ancient Greek narratives that sought to prioritize events that were worth retelling, over those that were not (Mazzoni 22). Mazzoni explains:

...lacking the capacity to remember everything...[the poets could only] choose a restricted canon and condemn...a virtually infinite number of beings and actions to

History of Efficacy in China (1995), *The Impossible Nude, Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics* (2007), and *The Book of Beginnings* (2015).

²³ See for example, Maurizio Bettini, who outlines how “...in the early Greek tradition—from Homer to Hesiod—the term *mythos*...meant “word,” “discourse,” and “account”” (Bettini, “*Mythos/Fabula: Authoritative and Discredited Speech*,” 2006, 195).

²⁴ As Guido Mazzoni explains, for Aristotle, “the term *story*...is intended to signify a series of episodes arranged in a form...called *mythos*: the assemblage of incidents (*synthesis ton pragmaton*), the structure that holds together the disparate elements that make up the narrated event” (Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* 40).

²⁵ See also, Teresa Bridgeman, who writes that within a general understanding of narrative, “we tend to think of stories as sequences of events” (Bridgeman, “Time and Space,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, 2007, 53).

oblivion. This is why the Greek *epos* [epic] defines itself by naming its own content, that is, the events worthy of being safeguarded in the story (Mazzoni 22).

What Mazzoni highlights is that in the epic tradition, only those events that are presumed to be “great” are passed on to future generations. Those that are not, unfortunately, are left to be forgotten. Thus, similarly to Jullien’s arguments about the founding myth of narrative, Mazzoni’s argument demonstrates why the event can be understood as both the constitutive element in the structure of narrative forms, but also as an important value that prioritizes a sense of greatness (its own right to be retold) as its most essential characteristic.

It is for the above reasons that both Barthes and Jullien help to highlight how a specific attachment to the concept of the event in Western aesthetics is so widely prevalent. Once again, for Barthes, this attachment is made apparent through cultural myths in the forms of artworks (novels, films, etc.) that distract us pleasurably through common and collective representations, as highlighted above.²⁶ Likewise, for Jullien, the concept is also constitutive of how narratives unfold on a foundational level in the history of Western aesthetics, giving precedence to heightened scenes of action and conflict that are elevated, above all, for their presumed importance.²⁷ Most significantly though, as I have been attempting to demonstrate, one of the central concerns that both Barthes and Jullien help to bring our awareness to, is the underlying *value* assigned to the event, and how this value influences one’s own ties to narrative and literary forms. In short, both theorists help to reveal how a dominant hierarchy of values is established in Western aesthetics that favors great events, and how these values are most often depicted through monumental representations, grand narratives, and the epic form in literature.

Looking more specifically though, at the history of literary forms, where can such events be located? What are their main aesthetic features? And also, and perhaps most importantly,

²⁶ This argument about the “pleasure” of texts, appears throughout Barthes’ oeuvre, but especially in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where he makes a distinction between cultural forms that produce experiences of “pleasure,” those that are comfortable and complacent; and those that are especially critical and engaging, and produce experiences of “bliss,” [*jouissance*]” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973).

²⁷ Barthes argues similarly about the foundational characteristics of representation, and the importance of “scenes” [*tableaux*] in Western aesthetics, in his essay, “Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein” (1977). He claims that representation (mimesis) involves, “...the act of cutting [*découpage*] and the unity of the subject of that action” (Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, 69-70). He states, “the scene, the picture, the shot, the cut-out rectangle, here we have the very *condition* that allows us to conceive [of] ...cinema, literature...” (70).

how do they reinforce a set of dominant values in literary history that influences one's main understanding of modern literature and cinema?

Epic Events in Literature

To answer these questions, and to build upon Barthes' and Jullien's observations, what I would like to examine more closely now, are the main representations of dominant events in literary history, and the key roles that they play in reaffirming the above cultural myths. As I would like to make clear, the myth of great events is central to the epic tradition, and it has also reinforced a set of *epic ideals* that have remained dominant throughout literary history, including the various histories of the novel, through to the present day. My main argument here, in dialogue with the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács, is that these dominant forms have played a significant role in shaping a traditional understanding of the epic and the novel as literary genres. They have also historically reinforced a set of dominant values in literature that celebrates the unquestioned importance of grand events. To help gain a better understanding of these events and their corresponding values, allow me to first examine more closely their main influence over the epic and the novel as historical literary genres.

To be clear, the first examples of great events in literary history can be found in the form of the epic. It is in fact, one of the most defining characteristics of the genre. As Aden W. Hayes argues, since "the wanderings of Odysseus, fiction has drawn upon the epic tradition for character-types, plot, ideas and values, and...in so doing...has exploited the reader's expectations of, and perhaps nostalgia for, archetypal situations and conflicts, and heroic acts worthy of glorification" (Hayes 280). In other words, great events are central to the epic tradition, and they have also influenced a subset of literary characteristics and values that have become dominant as an aesthetic paradigm to follow.²⁸

Most famously, this point is presented by Hegel in his *Aesthetics* (1835), where he argues that the epic form in literature is celebrated not only as a literary genre, but also as a literary ideal

²⁸ See for example, Andrew Ford's study, *Homer: the Poetry of the Past* (1992), where he reaffirms the unquestioned value of the epic, and argues that, "...epic is poetry of the past in the obvious...sense that it defines itself by its subject matter, [and lends a]...prestige and reality on a past that which the poetry pretends merely to disclose" (Ford 6).

(i.e., a dominant value) (Hegel 593). As Hegel demonstrates in his lectures, as the epic form gradually developed in literary history, beginning with the earliest works of ancient Greece, so too did its main worldview that celebrated the unquestioned value of great events (593). For Hegel, and for reasons similar to those outlined by Mazzoni above, in the epic tradition, events were not random, disconnected phenomena, but were rather key actions that took center stage in the history and development of the world. As Hegel makes clear, great events in literature are meant to “change the world, to improve it, or at least in spite of it to carve out of it a heaven upon earth...” (593). In other words, such events are not only the actions of individual heroes, but they also serve a greater purpose in the collective development of the world.

Thus, when considering the main values of great events, it is important to emphasize that Hegel’s view of the concept aligns closely with his broader philosophy of history, which also celebrates the impact of what he termed, “*World-Historical*” events (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 29). Most importantly, in both his aesthetics and his philosophy, great events contribute toward a collective value of historical progress (29).²⁹ In practice, these events can be located in literary works that represent the world as a collective order, and “totality,” (i.e., the order of a shared community) (Moretti, *Modern Epic* 11).³⁰ Likewise, as Hayes highlights above, they can also be found in the actions of great heroes facing many difficult challenges that stand in their way (i.e., the trials of Odysseus versus the Gods, or the battles of Achilles, etc.). As Hegel himself argues, when looking to the epic tradition, a hero often “...finds before him an enchanted and quite alien world which he must fight because it obstructs him...” (Hegel, *Aesthetics* 513). In other words, individual heroes are tested by a series of great conflicts and battles whose outcomes affect the wider community.³¹ In short, this is Hegel’s position on great events, and it has significantly influenced literary theorists, such as Georg Lukács and Mikhail Bakhtin. In particular, the emphasis on the event as a defining feature of the epic is present for all three theorists. However, there are also important differences between their views of the genre’s dominant values, which I would like to now examine in more detail.

²⁹ As Eric Michael Dale explains, for Hegel, “...history is not simply the abstract course of discreet events, but the actual development of the events...” (Dale, *Hegel, the End of History, and the Future*. (Cambridge: CUP, 2014, 20).

³⁰ As Franco Moretti argues in his study, *Modern Epic* (1998), “The Hegelian conception of the epic rests on three foundations,” which are: action, totality, and event (Moretti 11).

³¹ See, Guido Mazzoni also explains in relation to Hegel’s position on epic literature, “during the heroic age, a few extraordinary individuals acted in the name of the entire community” (Mazzoni 254).

The first point to emphasize is that great events can paradoxically take on qualities of timelessness that mark them clearly as myths. It is within this context that epic events in literature impose their most grand and totalizing effects. Mainly, we see this dominant characteristic of the event in literary history through a common “myth of origins,” and the constricting values that it represents. As Massimo Fusillo argues in his essay, “Epic, Novel” (2007), for Hegel, and later for Georg Lukács, there is a:

...critical myth...of the epic as the primeval form *par excellence*, the genre that inaugurated literature and established national identity through its choral, impersonal, and totalizing poetry; and of the novel, instead, as the preeminent secondary form, a fragment longing for a lost totality (Fusillo 32-33).

Accordingly, this “myth of origins” clearly separates the genres’ formal characteristics, and it is a viewpoint that is endorsed wholeheartedly by both Hegel in his *Aesthetics*, and later by Lukács in his *The Theory of the Novel* (1920). Both theorists, as Fusillo argues, see “...the epic as a kind of Paradise Lost...[that] evokes the great dualities on which Western identity is constructed... [and] whose first term of reference is always the original and hence superior term” (Fusillo 34).

For example, we see this idealization of the past in Lukács’ *The Theory of the Novel*, where, like Hegel, he celebrates the ancient Greek epic as a perfected literary form, whose wholeness is essentially closed-off from the present world. In particular, in Lukács’s view, epic events are timeless because they are located in a literary form whose perfection is represented in spatial terms (Lukács 29).³² Lukács argues that the epic is “...complete in meaning...complete for the senses...[and] rounded because its...center...draws a closed circumference round itself” (29). The key point for Lukács is that the genre’s main qualities are timeless, and now forever out of reach. Their aesthetic features can only be mourned nostalgically from the present, and from within later literary forms, such as the novel. As Lukács famously concludes, “...the novel is the epic of an age in which the...totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem” (56).

³² This point is emphasized by Ian Watt in his famous study, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), where he explains that in Ancient literature, there is a “celebrated unity of time...in accord with the classical world’s view of reality as subsisting in timeless universals...” (Watt 23).

Importantly though, and against Lukács' and Hegel's positions as I would like to make clear, Bakhtin's theory of literature challenges this idealization of great events as a dominant form in literary history. Specifically, in his essay "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel" (1941), Bakhtin provides the clearest description of the genres' dependence on a dominant myth of events, and unlike his predecessors, he challenges their representations of an idealized literary and historical past.

In particular, in his essay, and throughout his wider body of writings, Bakhtin makes an important distinction between the novel and the epic as literary genres. As Simon Denith helps to explain, it is an "...evaluatively charged distinction, in which the formally attractive features of the novel – its stylistic and linguistic variety, its openness to the world...are juxtaposed to the monologic stylistic elevation and fixation on the past of epic poetry" (Denith 46-47). What Denith means is that there are two main aims to Bakhtin's distinction between the genres. First, it helps us to establish a formal difference between each literary form (the epic as a fixed form from the past; and the novel as an open form from the more recent past and present). Secondly, the distinction emphasizes a series of cultural values that we can associate with each genre, and by extension, their representations throughout literary history. As values, the openness of the novel, (its "dialogic" qualities, to use Bakhtin's term), is to be embraced; whereas the closed and insular form of the epic (its "monologic" qualities as an authoritative voice), is to be avoided; since not only is it outdated as Bakhtin argues, but crucially, it limit's one's freedom.

The key point to highlight is that against Hegel and Lukács, Bakhtin sees a clear danger in glorifying the epic as a lost literary form. He argues that it is culturally and discursively limiting to do so. More specifically, he claims that because of its dangerous timelessness, the epic is "walled off absolutely from all subsequent times" (Bakhtin 15).³³ We see this warning in his own definition of the genre, when he argues that the epic can be characterized by three main qualifying features, which are:

...1, *a national epic past...*

...2, *national tradition* (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it)

³³ As Thomas Pavel argues, "Bakhtin noticed that the action in ancient Greek...[epics]...takes places in an abstract space and time...and that episodes do not follow one another according to the laws of causality (Pavel, *The Lives of the Novel*, 13).

...3, *an absolute epic distance* separates the epic world from contemporary reality...(Bakhtin 13, emphasis added).

When considering these three features, what immediately stand out are the dominant values of epic works that have been subsequently passed on throughout literary and cultural history. For example, we can bring to mind Odysseus' valorization of the ideal of "home" throughout his long journey in the *Odyssey*. Or equally, we can highlight Achilles' decision to honor the value of "family," when agreeing to turn over Hector's dead body at the end of the *Iliad*. Even the actions of Agamemnon, when sacrificing Iphigenia, are meant to uphold collective values of the "nation," and of the national "tribe," in order to provide safe passage for his ships to sail and conquer the city of Troy.³⁴ In all such examples, we can recognize that for Bakhtin, the epic connotes a negative value of authority and nationalism, and an outright absence of personal freedom.³⁵ As John Neubauer argues, within his definition of the epic, "the hegemonic domination of myth...corresponds to the rule of what Bakhtin calls..."authoritative" discourse"" (Neubauer 541).³⁶ As Gary Saul Morson also reaffirms, for Bakhtin these types of discourses, "...leave no room for human freedom...[because when] consistently applied they reduce all choice to the operation of pre-given laws..." (Morson 1072). In short, for Bakhtin, these dominant values of the epic reinforce a sense of historical timelessness. In other words, they become, "a-historical." As we find similarly with Barthes' definition of myth above, within such collective representations, "history evaporates...[and] can only come from eternity: since the beginning of time" (Barthes 152).

To summarize then, Bakhtin's critique demonstrates how great events and the grand narratives that they represent, reinforce a problematic set of values in literary history that demands rethinking. Again, these are epic values that feel too detached and disconnected from

³⁴ As Agamemnon states in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (409 B.C), "taking this awful step fills me with horror...but not to take it is horrifying too. *I have to do it*. ...how huge is the army, fenced in with ships, how many chiefs of the Greeks in their bronze armor, for whom they'll be no voyage to Troy's towers, who won't get to overturn its famous foundations..." (Euripides 375). Søren Kierkegaard also uses this example in *Fear and Trembling* (1843) to highlight the collective values of the archetypical "tragic hero" (Kierkegaard 51).

³⁵ Bakhtin states, "the world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of "beginnings" and "peak times" in the national history, a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of "firsts" and "bests." " (Bakhtin 14).

³⁶ As Neubauer argues, these views of Bakhtin are also a "...thinly veiled condemnation of the Stalinist dogma that seized power in the literary discussions of [the period]" (542).

the more personal and minor details facing our everyday lives. It is a critique of history that expands upon Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations* (1873), where Nietzsche also warns us against the dangers of a "monumental" view of the past that in his terms, no longer "serves life" (Nietzsche 68).³⁷ We also find elements of the critique in Walter Benjamin's famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940), where he argues that a collective view of history can take on the appearance of a "homogeneous, empty time," that feels not only inevitable, but also out of one's control, and devoid of individual purpose and meaning (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 261). Although as Franco Moretti argues, following Hegel and Lukács, officially, "...literary history has never ceased to be *histoire événementielle*, where the 'events' are great works or great individuals" (*Signs taken for Wonders* 13); for Bakhtin, such events also represent a dangerous timelessness, whose collective values of the "nation," of "home," and of an "epic national past," ultimately overshadow the more personal moments and experiences of everyday life.

Old Values, New Settings

As noted above, it is important to remember that in literary history, the evolution of the novel corresponded with a gradual shift towards more prosaic themes and details in its narratives, and in the lives of its characters.³⁸ As Ian Watt makes clear in his seminal study, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (1959), while the novel gradually broke away from the timeless myths and stories of Ancient literature; in its place, it also adopted a view of the world that "interested itself much more...on its characters in the course of time...[and on the] detailed depiction of the concerns of everyday life" (Watt 22). Similarly, as Erich Auerbach argues in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), this shift in emphasis towards the everyday, brought with it, a closer examination of the minuteness of daily

³⁷ In his text, Nietzsche describes monumental history, as an "apathetic habit...filling every corner of the earth...on its way to immortality...[that] retards, deceives, stifles..." (Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 68).

³⁸ See Thomas Pavel, who reaffirms this point when he argues that the epic and the "premodern novel insist on the primacy of an idea that is more important than the observation of the empirical world" (Pavel, "The Novel in Search of Itself: A Historical Morphology," in *The Novel Vol. 2: Forms and Themes*, edited by Franco Moretti, 2007, 3).

life, and through the process, also developed a literary aesthetic that we can now clearly describe as “realist” (Auerbach 556).³⁹

However, it is important to emphasize that by embracing more prosaic themes and details, not all novels, by default, became more “open” and “dialogic,” to use Bakhtin’s terms from above. In other words, collective epic values continued to influence the novel’s evolution as a literary form, and also continued to constrict the ways in which novels could examine everyday themes and characters, and by extension, an alternative set of values. As I would like to demonstrate in more detail, it is worth looking to the nineteenth century, to see how a clear turning point developed in literary history, through the presence of two competing sets of realist novels that both explored everyday themes and settings, but provided far different results. To be clear, we can find on the one hand, a group of nineteenth century novels that further perpetuates the dominant epic values outlined above, through grand actions, powerful events, and above all, through the representation of dramatic scenes (i.e., Balzac, Scott, Dickens). On the other hand, we can locate a second group of works that by contrast, embraces the marginal, the banal, and the insignificant as subjects worthy of exploration in themselves (i.e., Stendhal, Flaubert). Allow me to outline these two groups more closely, and to show how they both contribute, either directly or indirectly, to the development of a modern literary aesthetic that favors minor moments.

The first point to highlight, is that when looking to the nineteenth century, the presence of history becomes an increasingly dominant force in its novels, and in the lives of their characters. Most novels could not escape this totalizing effect of a “great events” view of history, as outlined above, and the dominant values that it represents.⁴⁰ The point is reaffirmed by Milan Kundera in his collection of essays, *The Curtain* (2005), where he argues that a form of historical self-awareness became increasingly present during the nineteenth century that closely shaped its literature (Kundera 14). In particular, as Kundera claims, with the rise of the realist novel, historical references became more prevalent, and as a result, a hyper-awareness of history also began to influence the aesthetics of these works (14). For example, if we look to the novels of

³⁹ Admittedly, throughout his study, in place of the term “realism,” Auerbach prefers to describe this aesthetic in literary history as “the category of “realistic works of serious style and character”” (Auerbach 556).

⁴⁰ See also, Walter Benjamin’s posthumously published, *Arcades Project* (1939), where he describes a dominance of historical events, as a “feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century’s conception of History” (Benjamin 14)

Balzac's *The Human Comedy* (1829-1848), and within their detailed descriptions of nineteenth-century Paris, Kundera argues that history "became everybody's experience...[and] the clock of History began to toll the hour in loud tones, everywhere...[and] within novels whose time was counted and dated" (14). Moreover, as Kundera explains, "...every scene in the novel is stamped (be it only by the shape of a chair or the cut of a suit) by History which, now that it has emerged from the shadows, sculpts and re-sculpts the look of the world" (14).

We find such historical references especially in a work such as Balzac's *Old Goriot* (1835), where a description of the novel's famous boarding-house, provides the kind of "time-stamp" that Kundera is referring to. On the opening page of the novel, Balzac writes:

For the last forty years the elderly Madame Vauquer, *née* de Conflans, has kept a family boarding-house in the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Genève between the Latin Quarter and the Faubourg Saint-Marcel.

...in 1819, the time when this drama begins, an almost penniless girl was living there. ...[and] only between the heights of Montmartre and Montrouge are there people who can appreciate how exactly, [and] with what close observation, it is drawn from life (Balzac 27).

To be clear, from Balzac's description, there is no mistaking the historical setting in which the novel takes place. The detailed overview of the boarding-house continues for several pages, highlighting specific furniture, house-hold objects (paintings, tablecloths, etc.), that all imprint in the reader's mind, a clear view of Paris in the early nineteenth century, and in the aftermath of Napoleon's First French Empire. As Balzac continues, we see outdated "...chairs upholstered in haircloth...[and] white china...with its gilt decoration half worn away, the kind of tea-service that is inevitably found everywhere today [in 1819]" (30). But more than simply minor details within the novel's opening pages, it becomes clear that these historical references also reinforce a sense that history is represented through an all-encompassing force, or "totality," (to use Hegel's term), that touches all aspects of life.⁴¹ In other words, the dominant theme in the novel is historical, and the events in the lives of its characters are all determined by this extra-diegetic

⁴¹ In his *Philosophy of History* (1837), Hegel defines the term, when describing the omnipotence of world history, as the "...one universal Spirit, which...elevates and completes itself to a self-comprehending *totality*" (Hegel 82).

phenomenon. As Auerbach argues, when analyzing the works of Balzac, "...people and...atmospheres, contemporary as they may be, are always represented as phenomena sprung from historical events and forces..." (Auerbach 480). Thus, we can see more clearly what Kundera means, when he claims that within such novels, history "...sculpts and re-sculpts the look of the world" (Kundera 14). In short, there is little escape from a "grand view of history" in the nineteenth-century realist novel, and it becomes difficult to ignore its influence as a dominant mode of viewing and thinking about the world. This is especially the case, even in works such as Balzac's, that begin to explore everyday themes and settings, and the most common details of ordinary life.

In addition to an overwhelming sense of history, a second way that older epic values and "the myth of great events" continue to develop in nineteenth century literature, is through the construction of overly dramatic scenes. Although nineteenth century novels begin to focus their narratives more attentively on everyday details and settings, as outlined above, in many cases, they also hold onto previous epic values, archetypal characters, and above all, to the elevated importance of powerful events. In his study, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (1976), Peter Brooks provides strong evidence for these qualities, when arguing that in the nineteenth-century realist novel, we find in particular, a dominant form of melodrama through, "...dramatizations... the extravagance of certain representations, and the intensity of a moral claim impinging on their characters' consciousness" (Brooks xiii). Although such novels are located within the context of realism, as Brooks argues, they nevertheless stage "...a heightened and hyperbolic drama" (xiii). This is surprising, since we tend to assume that nineteenth century literature is predominantly realist because of its central focus on everyday settings. However, as we can see, in practice, many of these novels are still influenced by the predominance of powerful events and the representation of dramatic scenes.⁴²

If we remain with our example from above, we can identify such scenes in particular, in the final pages of Balzac's *Old Goriot*. For example, when Father Goriot is lying in bed, waiting for his daughters to arrive by his side, he cries out in desperation:

⁴² We also find such dramatic scenes in the works of Charles Dickens, for example in *Great Expectations* (1861). In addition to Balzac, Brooks categorizes Dickens and other nineteenth century authors, such as Henry James, Gogol, and Dostoevsky as "social melodramatists" (Brooks 22).

“If they do not come?” ... “But I shall be dead by then, dead in a burst of rage, rage! Rage is getting the upper hand of me!”

... “they do not love me – they have never loved me: that is clear as day.”

... [and] “They are committing every crime when they commit this one. Go and tell them that not to come is patricide!” (Balzac 289).

Once again, in such scenes, the building of suspense provokes an experience closer to theatre, than to a typical “realist” novel.⁴³ The heightened actions of the characters drive the narrative forward, leading to grand and suspenseful events (i.e., will Delphine and Anastasie arrive before their father dies?; will they even bother coming?). As Brooks argues when analyzing the novel, “the essential mode... is melodramatic, and all its tropes correspond to this mode: in particular, the characters’ attitudes are “sublime” and “immense,” their gestures of heroic proportions, hyperbolic” (Brooks, “Balzac: Melodrama and Metaphor” 213). In this sense, we find especially that certain characters reaffirm older archetypes and collective values (i.e., Father Goriot is honorable; whereas, Vautrin is evil and corrupting). Above all, the everyday setting in *Old Goriot* serves as an outer mask, covering what is essentially an older model of tragic drama. Balzac foreshadows this dramatic tone himself in the novel’s opening pages, where he states: “... you may be certain that this drama is neither fiction nor romance... *All is true*, so true that everyone can recognize the elements of the tragedy in his own household, in his own heart...” (28). To paraphrase, Balzac is telling the reader that she will receive the dramatic tragedy that she is expecting; but only now, in the grimy alleys of Paris’ streets, and in an outdated boarding-house from the previous century.⁴⁴ In short, the settings may have changed in such novels, but the epic values and events from the past have remained the same.

A third, and final way in which the nineteenth-century realist novel perpetuates epic values and the “myth of great events,” is through its basic narrative structure. Moreover, in addition to overly dramatic scenes, and a “grand view of history,” as outlined above, the elevated significance of great events continues to influence the nineteenth century novel’s narrative model

⁴³ To highlight the theatrical quality of the novel, for example, two stage-productions of *Old Goriot* appeared in Paris in 1835, only months after the novel’s initial publication (Kanes 15).

⁴⁴ See for example, the opening page of the novel, where Balzac describes the narrative’s everyday setting directly to the reader: “they live in a valley of crumbling stucco and gutters black with mud, a valley full of real suffering” (Balzac 27).

as a dominant literary aesthetic. The main point to highlight, as Alain Robbe-Grillet argues in *For a New Novel* (1963), is that by the nineteenth century, certain narrative conventions had become so firmly engrained in the novel's history, that they became generally "naturalized" as a popular art form (Robbe-Grillet 32). Explaining the point in more detail, and highlighting Balzac's *The Human Comedy* as his main example, Robbe-Grillet argues that:

In that first half of the nineteenth century...[we] saw the apogee...of a narrative form which understandably remains for many a kind of paradise lost of the novel...in particular the confidence in a logic of things that was just and universal...the narrative-systematic use of the past tense and the third person, unconditional adoption of chronological development, linear plots, regular trajectory of the passions, impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc. – everything tended to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, unequivocal, entirely decipherable universe. Since the intelligibility of the world was not even questioned, to tell a story did not raise a problem. The style of the novel could be innocent" (32).

What Robbe-Grillet means in the above passage, is that through a specific style of writing, with its omniscient narrator, and the recounting of events in the third person, the nineteenth century novel reaffirmed a set of epic and timeless literary forms. In other words, the basic foundation of Aristotle's poetics, favoring actions and the "plot of the events," as mentioned earlier, goes unchanged. But more than only an aesthetic constant over many centuries, this dominant form of narrative also becomes heavily "mythologized" to use Barthes' term, because we assume it is "natural," and because again, we simply receive it, "...without wondering where it comes from" (Barthes 152).⁴⁵ Once again, although these novels may have focused their settings more closely on everyday life, the older values and forms from the past continue to show their influence.

⁴⁵ As Robbe-Grillet questions, "who is describing the world in Balzac's novels? Who is that omniscient, omnipresent narrator appearing everywhere at once, simultaneously seeing the outside and the inside of things, following both the movements of a face and the impulses of conscience, knowing the present, the past, and the future of every enterprise?" (Robbe-Grillet 139). A similar set of questions also appear at the beginning of Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1967), where Barthes famously asks in relation to the narrator of Balzac's short story *Sarrasine* (1830), "Who speaks in this way? Is it the hero of the tale...? Is it Balzac the man...? Is it Balzac the author...? We can never know..." (Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* 49).

However, as I would like to now demonstrate, there are also clear examples of nineteenth-century realist novels that begin to break away from these older literary models and forms, and the dominant values that they represent. As noted above, and in particular, we find examples of such novels in works by both Stendhal and Flaubert, that begin to explore minor moments, not only as secondary characteristics in the works' settings, but rather, as subjects worthy of full exploration in themselves.

The Power of the Pointless

A first example to highlight is Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), which is also mentioned by Robbe-Grillet for the above reasons. In particular, as Robbe-Grillet argues, Stendhal's depiction of the Battle of Waterloo in the novel, "...no longer belongs to the Balzacian order" (Robbe-Grillet 136).⁴⁶ What he means is that through its specific style and tone of writing, and also through its representation of the historical battle itself, *The Charterhouse of Parma* no longer adheres fully to the nineteenth-century novel's dominant model of narrative, as a "stable, coherent, continuous...[and] entirely decipherable universe" (32). Not only does the novel unfold in minute detail, describing events, actions, and the natural environment as indifferently as possible. But throughout its depiction of the battle itself, it also introduces an important reversal of the dominant epic values, outlined above, especially those of "honor," "heroism," and the "nation."

For example, in the novel's early chapters, we follow Fabrizio, a young, handsome, but naïve aristocrat from Lake Como, with romantic ideals of war, who decides to join Napoleon's army (under a false name and a borrowed uniform), as it advances towards the Battle of Waterloo. Though what is especially unique about the novel's depiction of Waterloo, is that the battle itself is largely omitted from the narrative. In other words, Stendhal goes against the reader's typical expectations, and does not provide her with a traditional representation of war. For instance, there is one specific scene where Fabrizio notices some fighting ahead in the distance. But rather than representing the event as suspenseful, and by depicting the brave

⁴⁶ When referring to Battle of Waterloo scenes in Balzac's preface to Stendhal's novel, Robbe-Grillet writes, "did not Balzac already note the "confusion" in the descriptions of *The Charterhouse of Parma*?" (Robbe-Grillet 136).

actions of heroes (as we might find in a traditional literary epic), the scene instead is portrayed ironically by Stendhal, who continuously mocks Fabrizio's ignorance and romantic ideals of heroism. At one point, Fabrizio cries out in astonishment, as some stray bullets pass by his head: "Ah! so I am under fire at last!...I have seen the firing!...Now I am a real soldier!" (Stendhal 59). However, rather than advancing closer towards the actual fighting himself, what follows are a series of disastrous scenes in which Fabrizio experiences one failure after another. First, his horse is stolen; then his leg is injured; and following these disasters, he even has to beg for food. At one point, he eventually falls asleep for several hours in a muddy ditch, and upon awakening, sees the battle, and the larger war for the absurdity that it is. Stendhal describes the moment as follows:

The little cart pulled up; Fabrizio awoke with a start. The sun had set a long time back; he was quite astonished to see that it was almost dark. The troops were running in all directions in a state of confusion..." (Stendhal 66).

Finally, after almost a hundred pages of describing these disasters in minute detail, Stendhal summarizes Fabrizio's depressing experience in the following two questions: "Was what he had seen a real battle? And, if so, was that battle Waterloo?" (88). In other words, rather than glorifying the epic ideals of the "hero," the novel demystifies them, and subverts the dominant values that they represent. In doing so, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, begins to open up a pathway in literary history for novels to move away from grand events and dramatic actions, and to explore instead an alternative set of forms that breaks away from these older literary models and ideals.

As both Robbe-Grillet and Kundera argue though, nowhere is this break from the past more evident, than in the works of Flaubert, and in particular, his novel *Madame Bovary* (1857). More specifically, while addressing the above transition from an older model of literature that had come to its full fruition with Balzac, to the arrival of *Madame Bovary*, Robbe-Grillet argues that "...with Flaubert, everything begins to vacillate" (Robbe-Grillet 32). This is because, as Robbe-Grillet explains, with his novel, for the first time in literary history, Flaubert is able to "...make something out of nothing" (162). Or to be more precise, we find the clearest turning away from dramatic scenes and events that had come to define the dominant model of the

nineteenth century realist novel.⁴⁷ Lydia Davis reaffirms the point, when she argues that before *Madame Bovary*, “...this had not been done before – to tell a story with so little action” (Davis xx).

In more detail, Kundera, outlines further what is precisely at stake with such a critical transformation in literary history. He argues that with *Madame Bovary*:

...it is not a matter of an *artistic mannerism*; it is a matter of a *discovery* that might be termed *ontological*: the discovery of the structure of the present moment; the discovery of the perpetual coexistence of the banal and the dramatic that underlies our lives (Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* 129).

What Kundera means is that for the first time in the novel’s history, Flaubert reveals how the banal and the everyday could become central subjects in themselves, and not only secondary characteristics of a larger narrative structure. In *Madame Bovary*, the banal is on equal footing with the dramatic actions and events that surround them; and what this does is to actually flatten those dramatic elements, or at least to minimize their importance in relation to everyday scenes and details.

For example, in the first part of the novel, and not long after Emma marries Charles, she begins to notice his extremely boring and suffocating habits. As Flaubert explains: “his effusions by now followed a pattern; he would embrace her at set times...this was a habit among his other habits, like a dessert course foreseen in advance, after the monotony of dinner” (Flaubert 37).⁴⁸ In more detail, Flaubert describes such scenes as follows:

He would return home late, at ten o’clock, sometimes midnight. Then he would ask for something to eat, and since the maid had gone to bed, it was Emma who would serve him. He would take off his frock coat in order to dine more comfortably. He would tell her one by one all the people he had met, the villages where he had been, the prescriptions he had

⁴⁷ As Linda Nochlan highlights in her study, *Realism* (1971), “Flaubert...disclaimed any affiliation with the Realist movement...[and once wrote himself] “I hate what is conventionally called realism, though people regard me as one of its high priests””(Nochlan 49).

⁴⁸ In his *Lectures on Literature* (1980), Vladimir Nabokov also highlights the banality of these scenes and repetitions, for producing a sense of, “dreariness in Emma’s life” (Nabokov 173). (Quoted in Leopold Reigner’s “Nabokov’s Flaubert: Influence, Deviation, Continuity” (2017), (Reigner 52).

written, and, satisfied with himself, he would eat the remains of the beef hash with onions, cut the rind off his cheese, munch an apple, empty his carafe, then go off to bed, sleep on his back, and snore” (Flaubert 36).

Through these boring repetitions, the main point to highlight in the above passage is how a specific mode of literature moves beyond realism in its embrace of the minor details of everyday life.⁴⁹ In other words, through such scenes, Flaubert’s focus on the everyday did not just uncover a new set of themes to write about; it also revealed the true possibility of an entirely new way of writing; a new approach to literature.⁵⁰

For these reasons, as Barthes argues in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), and through such passages, “Flaubert – finally established Literature as an object, through promoting literary labor to the status of a value” (Barthes 4). What he means is that, as a result of this meticulous crafting of sentences, with their focus on the mundane details of everyday life, literary language itself became a new form to explore in the art of the novel. As Barthes explains, by elevating literary writing as a value, “...form became the end-product of craftsmanship” (4). That is, by describing such ordinary scenes with a specific type of literary language, writing itself became a new form to explore in the art of the novel. This new approach to literature as an aesthetic object is reaffirmed by Robbe-Grillet, who argues that if we “...change the arrangement of words in *Madame Bovary*...there [would]...be nothing left of Flaubert” (Robbe-Grillet 44).

However, it is not only that Flaubert began to treat novelistic prose as an object in itself, as Barthes and Robbe-Grillet argue; but also, and once again, that such passages in *Madame Bovary* are able to flatten the event, to slow it down, and to show how such banality is equally a part of our own lives. As Kundera makes clear, Flaubert was consciously aware of the effects and rhythms of his novels, and intentionally slowed down certain passages and lengthened his sentences (Kundera, *The Curtain* 19). In more detail, Kundera argues that in doing so, Flaubert was able to “de-theatricalize” the novel (19). In other words, certain passages like the one we find above, slowly work against the theatrical qualities that typically characterize the nineteenth

⁴⁹ As Mieke Bal argues, Flaubert’s use of description in the novel is “...distinct...from the illusory sense of mimetic representation.” This is because it “...undoes the self-evidence of...[what] we think we know” (Bal, “Over-writing as Un-writing,” 608).

⁵⁰ Jacques Rancière makes a similar argument in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), where he states that by writing about everyday settings and objects, Flaubert’s novels opened-up a new aesthetic experience for their readers; an aesthetic phenomenon he describes as, a “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 12).

century realist novel. Such passages seem to reveal Flaubert's true aesthetic intention, which according to Kundera, was to "...to *de-theatricalize* the novel; to de-dramatize ("de-balzacize") it; to enclose an action, a gesture, a response within a larger whole; [and] to dissolve them into the running water of the everyday" (19). And as Kundera argues, nowhere is this slowing down of events more apparent than in the famous carriage-ride sequence in *Madame Bovary*.

If we remember, in the novel, Emma and Leon decide to meet in secret at the cathedral in Rouen. However, once there, they are unable to be alone together, because an annoying tour-guide begins ushering them around the church, while describing in incredibly boring detail, all of the religious monuments and paintings that fill the rooms. It is one of the most humorous scenes in the novel, since Flaubert includes these boring historical speeches in full length in the text, with all of their mundane trivialities. The speeches work as digressions, interrupting both Emma and Leon's affair, but also the reader's expectations of when, where, and how the two lovers might finally be alone.⁵¹ Eventually, after suffering these tediously long passages, they finally escape the tour-guide, and Leon hails a carriage. Flaubert describes the scene as follows:

The cab went out through the gates and soon, having reached the promenade, trotted quietly between the lines of tall elms. The coachman wiped his forehead, put his leather hat between his legs, and urged the carriage on beyond the side avenues to the water's edge, by the grass. It went along the river, on the towpath with its surface of dry pebbles, and for a long time, toward Oysel, beyond the islands" (Flaubert 217).

Ingeniously in the above passage, the consummation of Leon and Emma's affair is omitted completely from the reader. We cannot focus on their touches, kisses, or caresses (or any other gestures we might try to imagine), because as with the bored and annoyed coachman, we are also left outside of the carriage and the scene's main action. This is not simply a matter of censoring these details from the reader, to conform to the literary standards of nineteenth-century France.⁵²

⁵¹ See, Viktor Shklovsky's *Theory of Prose* (1929), for a closer discussion on literary digressions. Importantly, Shklovsky argues that in literature, the "...role played by digressions...is, of braking the action, of holding it back" (Shklovsky 192).

⁵² In her "Introduction" to her recent translation of *Madame Bovary*, Lydia Davis highlights the enormous scandal that the novel produced upon its initial publication in 1857. She explains that Flaubert did in fact remove certain passages and scenes from the novel for fear of prosecution. Nevertheless, the government of the Second Empire still brought charges against the novel: "...for being a danger to morality and

If this were the case, and Flaubert's intention, he could have simply included an ellipsis in the scene to signal a "before" and an "after" of the event itself. But rather, by choosing to leave the reader outside of the carriage, and by closely outlining its long journey through the "lines of tall elms," and the "side avenues to the water's edge," with its "surface of dry pebbles;" Flaubert in fact, flattens the event, slows it down, and shows us how this banality could equally be a part of our own lives, or for that matter, anyone else's. As Kundera aptly summarizes in his own analysis of the novel, "...one of the most erotic scenes in literature is set off by an utter banality" (Kundera 20). Most importantly, through such scenes in *Madame Bovary*, we can begin to see how minor moments appear themselves as distinct sets of forms in literary history that demand our closer attention.

Minor and Modern Literatures

We have now seen in more detail how certain novels began to challenge the grand epic ideals and events of the past, even within a literary aesthetic such as nineteenth-century realism, which as demonstrated above, still overwhelmingly favored dramatic actions and scenes. Once again, with Stendhal these older values and models began to fade away, and in their place, a new line of novels began to emerge. Although we should be careful not to reinforce yet another "myth of origins," as cautioned above; we can nevertheless single out the influence of Flaubert, whose detailed focus on the minor moment became a clear precursor to the novels that will follow, and to works that will become for similar reasons, as I would like to argue, distinctly "modern."⁵³

More specifically, following Flaubert, and moving firmly into the twentieth-century, the next works under examination not only oppose great events and dramatic actions, but also continue to explore a form of writing that goes further beyond realism and into territories of literary ambiguity and estrangement. We can include in this line of novels and stories, works by Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Dino Buzzati, Kobo Abe, Clarice Lispector, Juan Carlos Onetti,

religion." According to Davis, "...the trial took place on January 29, 1857, and lasted one day; Flaubert...[was] acquitted a week later" (Davis x).

⁵³ The notion that a "modern" aesthetic in literature begins with Flaubert, is supported by Roland Barthes, in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Alain Robbe-Grillet, in *For a New Novel* (1963), and Jacques Rancière, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004).

and Eileen Chang, among others.⁵⁴ As I would like to argue, it is reductive to only view these novels and stories as “modernist,” since some of them clearly do not fit easily into that rubric. Likewise, others seem to go beyond modernism entirely, but contain none of the “postmodern” characteristics that we typically associate with the term, such as irony, pastiche, and parody.⁵⁵ The *Nouveau roman* novelists especially belong to this latter group, which includes, in addition to Alain Robbe-Grillet, writers such as Natalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Michel Butor, and Marguerite Duras, whose works all critically resist literary labels and historical categories.⁵⁶ But rather than dwelling further on these terms, it will be more helpful as I would like to argue, to continue to engage with the works themselves, and to highlight their distinct characteristics, qualities, and themes. In particular, when looking to a series of modern works from the twentieth century, in addition to an increased focus on minor moments, there are also two main qualities that stand out especially, and that I would like to now examine in closer detail.

A Reversal of History

The first quality to highlight, is that these modern works express an even greater turning away from a dominant form of history. Moreover, what is now increasingly different about these modern novels and stories, is that unlike in the nineteenth-century realist novel, these works begin to diverge further from dominant historical representations, including dramatic actions, scenes, and events. Most importantly, as we will see, the exploration of minor details and moments is no longer a secondary characteristic in these works, but is rather, their central focus.

For example, while examining Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Eric Auerbach highlights how the novel is especially centered on insignificant details which guide the

⁵⁴ See for example, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931), Franz Kafka’s *The Castle* (1926), Dino Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe* (1940), Kobo Abe’s *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962), Clarice Lispector’s *Água Viva* (1973), Juan Carlos Onetti’s *No Man’s Land* (1941), and Eileen Chang’s *Love in a Fallen City* (1943).

⁵⁵ See for example, Linda Hutcheon’s, *Irony’s Edge* (1995), *A Theory of Parody* (1985), and *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), which outline literary characteristics such as irony, parody, and pastiche, as distinctly “postmodern.”

⁵⁶ See for example, Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *The Erasers* (1953), Natalie Sarraute’s *Portrait of a Man Unknown* (1948), Claude Simon’s *Triptych* (1973), Michel Butor’s *Changing Track* (1957), and Marguerite Duras’ *L’Amante Anglaise* (1967).

various scenes of the narrative.⁵⁷ As he explains, Woolf's novel "...holds to minor, unimpressive, random events: measuring the stocking, a fragment of a conversation with the maid, a telephone call" (Auerbach 546). But the crucial point to highlight, as Auerbach argues, is that in doing so, "...great changes, exterior turning points, let alone catastrophes, do not occur; and though elsewhere...such things are mentioned, it is hastily, without preparation or context, incidentally, and as it were only for the sake of [secondary] information" (546). Thus, Woolf's focus on minor details in the novel is not superfluous, but rather brings to the foreground a critical perspective that lends new value to such moments, and which reverses a traditional view of narrative, that had previously given precedence mainly to major events, dramatic actions, and to historical scenes. Once again, as noted earlier, Auerbach terms this radical reversal of perspective in modern literature, a "transfer of confidence" (547). In more detail, he explains the concept as follows:

This shift of emphasis expresses something that we might call a *transfer of confidence*: the great exterior turning points and blows of fate [and History] are granted less importance; they are credited with less power of yielding decisive information concerning the subject; on the other hand there is confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed (547, emphasis added).

What Auerbach means, is that through such minor moments in modern novels, there is a "shift of emphasis," towards a new set of values. More specifically, in such works, a random moment can be equal, if not even more significant, than a major historical event.

For example, if we turn to Eileen Chang's novella, *Love in a Fallen City* (1943), we can see in more detail what Auerbach is referring to. The narrative follows the slow, back-and-forth courtship between its two protagonists, Liusu and Liuyuan, during the Japanese occupation of

⁵⁷ To support the above point that such writers resist literary classifications, although Woolf has clearly been canonized as a "modernist" author; her deconstruction of narrative and identity in works such as *The Waves* and *To the Lighthouse*, has also been described as "postmodern" by some scholars. See for example, Bill Martin's "To the Lighthouse and the Feminist Path to Postmodernity" (1989) (*Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 13, number 2, October 1989, pp. 307-315). See also, Patricia Waugh, who argues in her study, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), that: "...to read her [Woolf's] novels purely [as modernist]...is to ignore her commitment to...change expressed through a 'postmodernist'...aesthetic ideal" (Waugh 96).

Shanghai in 1941. In addition to the occupation itself though, the two characters face overwhelming obstacles from their families, since Liusu is divorced. It's not until after they are both able to flee the city for Hong Kong, that they can finally begin to pursue their relationship together. But towards the end of the narrative, and not long after they both arrive in the city, Hong Kong is unexpectedly bombed, and then swiftly occupied by the Japanese forces. The moment is presented by Chang as a strange reversal of fate. She explains:

Hong Kong's defeat had brought Liusu victory. But in this unreasonable world, who can distinguish cause from effect? Who knows which is which? Did a great city fall so that she could be vindicated? Countless thousands of people dead, countless thousands of people suffering, after that an earthshaking revolution... Liusu didn't feel there was anything subtle about her place in history. She stood up, smiling, and kicked the pan of mosquito-repellent incense under the table" (Chang 167).

The passage stands alone as one of the few occasions in the novella where an historical event is so explicitly mentioned. But what is most striking about the passage, is also how clearly it displays Auerbach's "transfer of confidence," outlined above. The passage reveals how the private moment in Liusu's life could be of equal importance, if not greater than the bombardment and fall of Hong Kong. In other words, the overwhelming force of history that had once so dominated the lives of characters in nineteenth-century novels, is now moved to the background in Chang's narrative. As Nicole Huang argues in more detail, this is because in Chang's novels, "...the presence of history is often concealed by masquerade, by an aesthetic that fuses inward...[and] described from the imagined margins"⁵⁸ And furthermore, as Huang explains, in such works, "characterized by chaos and reversal, history appears to be no more than a shadowy presence in our consciousness" (Huang xiii). What this means, is that even if only momentarily, as we find in Chang's novels, and through an act of historical "reversal," insignificant details can be elevated to the status of major events in the lives of their characters.

In some cases though, this reversal of history is so extreme, that historical references are omitted completely. More specifically, we can find such an example in Dino Buzzati's *The*

⁵⁸ Huang argues that, "Chang's most important literary legacy from the 1940s is her construction of an alternative narrative of war...that contradicted the grand narratives...that dominated the wartime literary scene" (Huang xii).

Tartar Steppe (1940).⁵⁹ In the novel, we follow Giovanni Drogo, a young soldier who is sent north from an unnamed city, to defend a mountainous fort overlooking a barren desert (the “Tartar steppe” of the novel’s title). However, unlike in Balzac’s *Old Goriot*, no specific date is given at the beginning of the novel to mark the year. In fact, there are no “time stamps” or explicit historical references whatsoever in the narrative. All we know for certain, is the name of the fort Drogo is stationed to, is “Fort Bastiani;” and that also, he will need to get there by horseback to make his journey. But once Drogo arrives, he soon realizes that all he will be doing at this desolate fort is waiting for an enemy that might never appear.⁶⁰ The soldiers around him have already been there for many years, and have resigned themselves to dutifully following orders and their boring routines. In the face of such endless waiting, Drogo begins to acknowledge the utter futility of his assignment, with its endless tasks, and wasted days. Buzzati describes the situation as follows:

He felt as if the flight of time had stopped, as though a spell had been broken. Lately the whirling motion had grown; then suddenly it stopped altogether; the world lay horizontal, listless, apathetic, and the watches ran vainly on” (Buzzati 195).

And similarly, in another passage, Buzzati writes:

...time was slipping past, beating life out silently... Everything goes by – men, the seasons, the clouds, and there is no use clinging to the stones, no use fighting...the tired fingers open, the arms fall back inertly and you are still dragged into the river, the river which seems to flow so slowly yet never stops (163).

⁵⁹ Interestingly, it should be noted that a mysterious quality also follows the history of the novel’s publication in English. The two most recent translations inaccurately cite the novel’s original publication date as “1945” (see, Verba Mundi, 2012; and Canongate, 2018). Strangely, the Canongate translation also provides two different dates for when Buzzati completed writing the novel (at different points in the same publication, it states in “1938,” and in “1940”); and mentions that he did so following his return from the war. In fact, Buzzati completed the novel in 1938, before the war began.

⁶⁰ As we know, a similar theme is explored in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1952). We could add to our list of modern novels, additional works by Beckett, including his famous trilogy, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951), and *The Unnamable* (1953).

As we can see, through such endless waiting, both time and history become abstract concepts in Buzzati's novel. The days blend into one, and seem to lose all meaning for both Drogo and for the reader. Crucially though, by abstracting these concepts, the novel also fully uproots any importance that we might associate with the collective historical values outlined above, such as progress, honor, duty, and the nation. As Buzzati writes towards the end of the novel, Drogo, "then...saw how unimportant it had been to wear himself out on the ramparts of the Fort, to scan the desolate northern steppe, to strive after a career, to wait such long years" (197). And when Drogo's health begins to deteriorate in the novel's final pages, Buzzati makes clear the full extent to which this reversal of values is complete. For these reasons, he writes, "...it was much harder to die a hero's death in Drogo's state..." (197). Thus, unlike in Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*, which as outlined, had already begun to break away from the epic values of the past; in Buzzati's novel, there is not even a battle for Drogo to fight in. In short, as with Chang's novella, we can see further how modern novels begin to challenge older epic ideals and events, and also, the full effects and literary consequences in doing so. With novels such as *To the Lighthouse*, *Love in a Fallen City*, and *The Tartar Steppe*, a new set of values emerges in modern literature, focusing on minor themes and characters, but also on a complete reversal of major events to minor moments; and sometimes even, as we have just seen, the omission of history altogether.

Literary Ambiguity

Now, the second quality that I would like highlight in such modern novels, is that in addition to their focus on minor moments, they also further challenge older models of literature and dominant forms of representation. Once again, and as argued above, by following in the footsteps of Flaubert, these novels continue to explore a form of writing that goes further beyond realism, and into territories of literary ambiguity and estrangement, especially through their treatment of language as an aesthetic object.

To help to understand this point in more detail, we can return to Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, where the authors single out Kafka's writings for precisely this type of literary experimentation. In particular, Deleuze and Guattari argue that within

Kafka's novels and stories, we experience a distinct turning away from older models of literature, because in these works, "*language stops being representative...*" (Deleuze and Guattari 23). Moreover, by breaking away from a mimetic mode of representation, as they argue, Kafka's works provide a new literary "escape for language...[and] for writing" (26). Once again, they term this form of writing, a "minor literature" (26).⁶¹ As Claire Colebrook helps to explain, such a form of literature: "...does not appeal to established models...[but rather] produces what is not already recognizable...it does not just add one more work to the great tradition; it disrupts and dislocates the tradition" (Colebrook 103). Thus, as outlined above, a minor literature is not overt and obvious; it is not an explicitly political form of writing; but rather, it resists quietly from within the margins of an already established literary canon.⁶² For Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka's writing is especially representative of this type of literature, because it undermines previous literary forms, such as nineteenth-century realism, and also, because it resists the established dominant language in which it is written.

As Deleuze and Guattari demonstrate, a first way to interpret this resistance within Kafka's novels and stories is to recognize how as a Czech-Jewish writer, his prose subverts both the Czech language of his native Bohemia, and also the dominant (and "official") German of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (Deleuze and Guattari 19). That is, while deliberately choosing to write in German, it is precisely the manner in which Kafka uses the language that is especially distinct, and that breaks from older literary models and forms, such as realism.⁶³ Thus, Kafka's writings make use of a dominant language, but only to undermine it, by producing a form of literature that is formally experimental.

Most importantly, the main critical effect of this form of literary experimentation, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, is that it creates what they term, a "deterritorialization;" meaning, a destabilization of established literary conventions (Deleuze and Guattari, 19). The reference to space is deliberate in their concept, because they would like us to imagine the effects of this

⁶¹ As highlighted above, for Deleuze and Guattari, a minor literature is the "revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (Deleuze and Guattari 18).

⁶² As Katy Masuga argues in her study *The Secret Violence of Henry Miller* (2011), Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature is not a systematic theory, but rather, a description of, "qualities located in literature that challenge conventional literary expectations by disrupting, and drawing attention to, the very fabricated engagement that all texts generate with their readership" (Masuga 31-32).

⁶³ As Theodor Adorno argues, "...Kafka's pointedly conservative... prose...accentuates its content by contrasting with it" (Adorno, *Mahler* 16).

destabilization as an act of disruption. In this sense, we can think of a deterritorialization as a liberating moment within a novel or story that manages to break away from established literary models.⁶⁴ For example, we can experience this kind of disruption in modern novels, when the narrative does not develop linearly and chronologically; when it does not serve a specific purpose and goal; and also, when it undermines and destabilizes the lives of its characters. It is within this context then, that Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of Kafka is especially illuminating, as it helps to open up the full critical possibilities of the concept.

For example, through their analysis of Kafka's *Amerika* (1927), they demonstrate how space appears disjointed and unsettled in the novel, because its "rules of usage and...locations aren't very well known" (Deleuze and Guattari 3). For instance, they point out how the main hotel where Karl works in the narrative is perplexing, as it destabilizes the reader's assumptions about novelistic space.⁶⁵ This is because, as they argue, the hotel, "has innumerable main doors and side doors...[and] entrances and exits without doors" (3). In more detail, they explain:

We will enter, then, by any point whatsoever; none matters more than another, and no entrance is more privileged even if it seems an impasse...the principle of multiple entrances prevents the introduction of...the Signifier and those attempts to interpret a work that is actually only open to experimentation" (3).

Through the above description, Deleuze and Guattari's main point is that by destabilizing one's conventional understanding of space, Kafka's writing also resists a fixed interpretation of language. The strange doorways and entranceways in the hotel, make us question the relationship between the words Kafka uses in his prose, and their connotation in representing what we think a typical "hotel" should resemble.

Similarly, in a passage in Kafka's *The Castle* (1926), we experience a related type of destabilization, when the land surveyor "K," initially attempts to reach the castle from the village beneath it. Strangely in the scene, and as we find similarly in the description in *Amerika* above,

⁶⁴ It is important to note that a "deterritorialization" for Deleuze and Guattari is not limited to literature, but also includes a challenging of forms that goes "beyond laws, states, regimes" (Deleuze and Guattari 19).

⁶⁵ If we recall in the novel, eventually after departing his uncle's house, Karl is offered a job as a lift-operator at the "Hotel Occidental" (Kafka, *Amerika* 223).

there is no direct route or road to take him there; and the space the novel presents is both exhausting and confusing. Kafka describes the scene as follows:

...he set off again, but it was a long way. The street he had taken, the main street in the village, did not lead to the Castle hill, it only went close by, then veered off as if on purpose, and though it didn't lead any further from the Castle, it didn't get any closer either" (Kafka 10).

As we can see, the passage creates a sense of disorientation and frustration for both "K" and the reader. When reading the text, as with "K" who is following the village road, we similarly expect the narrative to move forward in a linear and logical manner, and that it will eventually guide us to a clear and stable conclusion; or in "K"'s case, to his destination (the Castle). But through the process of reading, as we also find with "K," the scene problematizes one's established understanding of both space and the self, and the experience becomes ultimately unsettling.⁶⁶

As I would like argue though, in addition to Kafka's works, we can also find such destabilizing moments in other modern novels that, following Deleuze and Guattari, we can describe as "minor." For example, if we turn to Nathalie Sarraute's *Tropisms* (1939), we will encounter such an experience in the novel's opening pages. Here, Sarraute begins to describe a strange phenomenon that, although enmeshed in everyday language, seems to slowly destabilize our typical understanding of the "everyday," and also of what we might typically expect from an establishing scene in literature. Although the passage is quite long, I would like to quote the text in full, to highlight the moment in question, and to share the full experience that Sarraute is describing. The scene begins as follows:

They seemed to spring up from nowhere, blossoming out in the slightly moist tepidity of the air, they flowed gently along as though they were seeping from the walls, from the boxed trees, the benches, the dirty sidewalks, the public squares.

⁶⁶ As Patricia Pisters argues, for Deleuze, the experience of deterritorialization, is "always a process of deidentification and defiguration" (Pisters 187).

They stretched out in long, dark clusters between the dead house fronts. Now and then, before the shop windows, they formed more compact, motionless little knots, giving rise to occasional eddies, slight cloggings.

A strange quietude, a sort of desperate satisfaction emanated from them. They looked closely at the piles of linen in the White Sale display, clever imitations of snow-covered-mountains, or at a doll with teeth and eyes that, at regular intervals, lighted up, went out, lighted up, went out, lighted up, went out, each time at the same interval, lighted up again and again went out.

They looked for a long time, without moving, they remained there, in offering, before the shop windows, they kept postponing till the next interval the moment of leaving. And the quiet little children, whose hands they held, weary of looking, listless, waited patiently beside them (Sarraute, *Tropisms* 3).

Strangely, what unfolds in the scene is an initial abstraction, caused by a microscopic view of shapes and figures slowly congregating in an unfamiliar setting. As the opening scene in novel, we are not quite sure what the narrative is describing, and where the novel is set. However, gradually we begin to identify shops and windows, and products on display (“piles of linen,” “a doll with teeth and eyes” etc.); and we realize that these abstract figures and movements are in fact, mothers shopping with their children. The scene is oddly destabilizing, because as with the examples from Kafka above, it uses seemingly straightforward language, but in an unsettling manner. The everyday setting is turned upside-down, and what we slowly realize is that what we are witnessing as readers, is something else entirely: moments that seem separate from the characters, and that lay slightly beneath the surface of the ordinary.

Remarking on these moments in her “Forward” to the novel, Sarraute claims: “what I tried to do was to show certain inner “movements” by which I had long been attracted...these movements, which are hidden under the commonplace, harmless appearances of every instant of our lives” (vi). And furthermore, she continues:

these movements seem to me to be...hiding beneath the most commonplace conversations, the most everyday gestures, and constantly emerging up to the surface of

the appearances that both conceal and reveal them... a series of moments... in slow motion” (vi-vii).

What is especially destabilizing about these moments is that they are defamiliarizing to their readers, because they break with a mimetic mode of representation. In other words, Sarraute’s prose in the above passage has moved completely beyond realism, and breaks free from the dominant paradigm of the nineteenth-century realist novel. As Alain Robbe-Grillet argues, when describing the writing of the *Nouveau roman* novelists, including his own works and those of Sarraute’s: “it is... no longer *verisimilitude* that is at issue. The little detail which “rings true” no longer holds the attention of the novelist, in the spectacle of the world or in literature; what strikes him – and what we recognize... is more likely, on the contrary, the little detail that rings *false*” (Robbe-Grillet 163). Furthermore, as Robbe-Grillet argues: “...partial objects, detached from their use, moments immobilized, words separated from their context... whatever rings a little false, that lacks “naturalness”... is precisely this which rings truest to the novelist’s ear” (163).

To be clear, what Robbe-Grillet is describing, in his own and Sarraute’s novels, is a complete separation between a form of literary description, away from the plot of events, and a novel’s characters. As Arthur E. Babcock helps to explain in his study, *The New Novel in France* (1997), this is because what is strikingly different about these modern novels, is that for the first time in literary history, they begin to present objects and details independently from any anthropomorphic context (12). More specifically, as Babcock argues, “traditional novelists never present a thing apart from its meaning: Balzac never describes an empty chair... except to signify that such-and-such a character is absent, and the entire existence of the chair is subordinated to the meaning Balzac overlays on it” (Babcock 12). For these reasons, in nineteenth-century novels, there is always a narrative link to the objects that are being described. Even in Stendhal’s meticulous descriptions of the natural environment in *The Charterhouse of Parma*, they are always there to provide further context for a character, or to serve the larger events of the narrative (such as Fabrizio’s misadventures during the Battle of Waterloo).

Such anthropomorphisms though, are clearly absent in Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, and in the passage from above, where as we have just seen, the novel details a series of strange moments that are completely independent from any characters or events. Again, as Sarraute describes in

the scene above, such moments “...flowed gently along as though they were seeping from the walls, from the boxed trees, the benches, the dirty sidewalks, the public squares” (Sarraute 3). What we are experiencing then, as Ben F. Stoltzfus argues in *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the New French Novel* (1964), is a complete elimination of “plot and characterization...” (Stoltzfus 5). This is because, as Stoltzfus argues, unlike in nineteenth-century novels, *Nouveau roman* novelists such as Sarraute, “...are not interested in creating [character] types like...le Père Goriot...they do not want to repeat what has already been done and...no longer believe in the verisimilitude of such creations (5). Thus once again, within novels such as Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, we begin to experience narratives that no longer move forward, characters that no longer drive the actions and events, and in some moments as we have just seen, we experience the complete separation of such characters from the objects and settings altogether.

What I would like to now argue though, with one final example, is that nowhere are such separations more apparent than in the modern novels of Juan Carlos Onetti, and in particular, his early writings, such as *The Pit* (1939) and *No Man’s Land* (1941). Set in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, respectively, these modern works by the Uruguayan novelist stand out especially, because not only do we find a new independence of objects and literary language as outlined above; but also, we encounter characters who no longer know who they are, no longer know how to act, and no longer know what to do with their lives. In other words, as I would like to demonstrate, in Onetti’s novels, the protagonists are mere witnesses to their own lack of characterization, and to the deterritorializing effects of the modern settings around them.

For example in *The Pit*, the protagonist and narrator, Eladio Linacero, describes his own experience of emptiness and solitude in his dirty apartment in Montevideo. Although he admits that the setting is rather unremarkable and “ordinary,” he nevertheless begins to focus on its everyday details and objects, and shares these with the reader. The novel begins as follows:

Earlier on I was walking around the room and suddenly it occurred to me I was seeing it for the first time.... I walked up and down half-naked, bored from being holed up there since midday, suffocated by the wretched heat coming through the ceiling and now spreading into every corner as it always does in the afternoon” (Onetti *The Pit* 3).

What stands out immediately in the passage is that although Linacero is describing his familiar room, he states that it felt as though he was “seeing it for the first time” (3). As I would like to demonstrate, similarly to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization as outlined above, the moment in fact shares many qualities with the Russian Formalist, Viktor Shklovsky’s theory of literary “estrangement.” For example, as Shklovsky argues in his seminal study, *Theory of Prose* (1925), “by “estranging” objects and complicating form...[literature] makes perception long and “laborious”” (Shklovsky 6). That is to say, for Shklovsky, rather than imitating reality, certain novels force their readers to see the world in new ways, even in everyday objects and settings, as if “...perceived for the first time” (6). Although Linacero is trapped in an inertia that keeps him from leaving his apartment, he nevertheless chooses to write down his observations, and in this sense, details the strangeness of the ordinary and the everyday objects around him. As he explains: “...I want to do something different...something better than recounting the things that happened to me...I should like to write the story of a soul, all alone, without any of the events...I’ve nothing else to tell” (4-5). Thus, Linacero’s life is without actions and events. Without the hope of a future, all he can do is stay home and write down his eventless life, and to “estrangle” the details around him.

As Mario Vargas Llosa argues in one of the few studies on Onetti, *El viaje a la ficción: El mundo de Juan Carlos Onetti* (The Journey to Fiction: The World of Juan Carlos Onetti) (2008), for these reasons, *The Pit* is one of the first examples of a “modern novel” in Latin American literature (Vargas Llosa 35). This is because, as Vargas Llosa claims, it is the first Latin American novel to escape the regionalism of the nineteenth, and early twentieth-century literature on the continent, that had up until that moment, dominated most fiction (35).⁶⁷ With *The Pit*, as outlined above, we experience a novel exploring the alienation and suffocation of the modern city, and Vargas Llosa argues that, “as in the first novels of Sartre and Camus, pessimism, loneliness and...anguish condemn their characters to become marginal beings, in existential question to the world...” (34, my translation).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ As Vargas Llosa argues, that with few exceptions such as Borges and Roberto Arlt, by “...1939, in Latin America the narrative fiction had not yet abandoned regionalism and *costumbrismo*...” (Vargas Llosa 35, my translation). “*Costumbrismo*” is a literary genre that originated in Spain, and that focused on local and regional customs and folklore.

⁶⁸ Published in 1939, Onetti’s *The Pit* arrives in between Sartre’s *Nausea* (1938), and Camus’ *The Stranger* (1942).

But in Onetti's novel, it is not only that the characters lose hope in the unfolding of the narrative, such as Drogo in Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*; but rather, that there is already no hope to begin with at the beginning of the novel. In this sense, Onetti's novels are unique because, the characters themselves are aware of their own lack of will and action to do anything with their lives. As mentioned above, for these reasons the characters become witnesses to their own lack of characterization, and to their own personal narratives that lack any meaningful events, dramatic actions, or overall purpose. As Vargas Llosa argues, by creating such characters in modern narratives and modern cities, Onetti "...opened the path of modernity to the novel...and set the foundations of its own novelistic world, to which later fictions would continue..." (34; my translation). In other words, a path is opened for novels that no longer need a plot, nor actions, nor events; and that by focusing on the mundane details of one's life, a whole new territory of exploration is made possible in modern literature.

In particular, we find such a territory as well in Onetti's second novel, *No Man's Land*, where we can witness even further how the groundwork for such literary exploration is formed. For instance, in the novel, we encounter a similar protagonist, in a similar modern city (Buenos Aires this time), in a similar dirty apartment; who is also alone, with nothing to do, and with no will to engage with the world. The novel presents some "red herrings," like a gun on a dressing table (as if to play with our expectation that this could be a detective novel); but there is no murder, no dead body, no crime, no events, no dramatic actions, only the complete stasis of a protagonist who barely leaves his apartment. As J.A. Irish argues, the main character, Aránzuru, "...deserts his friends and gives himself over in abandonment to a life of inertia, debauchery and uselessness...[and] he is...bored with the false pretenses and emptiness of life as seen on the surface of modern Buenos Aires" (Irish 51).

In many ways, it seems as if nothing has changed from *The Pit* to *No Man's Land*. The modern cities appear the same. The characters seem the same. In both novels, they could be anywhere, and nowhere at all. In this sense, they occupy a strange space that Deleuze describes elsewhere, as an "*any-space-whatever*" (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 109). It is a space that in Deleuze's sense of the term, is "...no longer a particular determined space" (109). What is clear is that the novel's title especially makes reference to such an indeterminate place: "*No Man's Land (Tierra de nadie)*," could mean both, "a land without humans" – "the land of no men." Or, it could mean simultaneously: "a man without a place" – "an inhospitable territory for men (humans)." Thus, as

highlighted above, the only respite in such a space is to write down one's thoughts and to focus on the everyday details in one's life. As Onetti reveals towards the end of the novel:

No longer in the whole wide world was there an island to go to sleep, or friends...to keep you company. He caught snatches of accordion music coming from the black boats by the ferry, or from the cafés along the shore. End of day. Behind him, invisible, was the city, and its grimy air and tall houses, people coming and going, their greetings, deaths, faces and hands, their games. Now it was night and the city hummed beneath the lights, men hats, children, headscarves, shop windows, footsteps, footsteps like blood, like hail, a stream of footsteps going nowhere. He sat there on the stone, watching the last flurry of the seagull through the air and the film of grease on the dirty, still and hardened river” (Onetti, *No Man's Land* 277).

The protagonist is alone, but he could also be replaced by any of the other characters in the novel, or even by us, the reader. Onetti makes this clear by shifting back and forth between the second and the third person narration (the “you” and the “he” in the passage above). But ultimately, what both the passage and Onetti's novels help to demonstrate, is that to counter the major events of the world, modern novels can describe the eventless lives of their characters, in non-descript spaces, who sometimes also, use fiction to “estrangle” the minor moments and objects around them.

To summarize then, there are two key qualities that stand out in modern novels that focus on minor moments. First, as we have seen above, in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, and Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*, there is what Eric Auerbach describes as a “transfer of confidence,” away from the great events and historical representations that had previously dominated the narratives of nineteenth-century realist novels. Secondly, what we find within modern novels such as Kafka's *Amerika* and *The Castle*, Sarraute's *Tropisms*, and Onetti's *The Pit* and *No Man's Land*, is that they fully express Deleuze and Guattari's concept of “deterritorialization,” which in effect, means that they destabilize literary language and reveal new forms of experience, by breaking away from older narrative models of writing and representation. These works have all demonstrated further how specific moments in literary history can diverge from a traditional view of great events, and through their opposition to these

older narrative models, they have also helped to pave the way for an alternative set of forms in modern literature (and later modern cinema) that celebrates the minor.

The Fragility of Modern Film

More specifically though, where do such moments appear in modern cinema? This is a question that I would like to now answer in more detail. Developing mainly in the twentieth century, we know that cinema's history is far more recent and compressed than that of literature. However, as I would like to argue, there are still important parallels between the two art forms in relation to minor moments and how we experience them. As highlighted above, if the history of literature is marked by a gradual turn towards the everyday; then similarly, as I would like to demonstrate, a critical movement takes place in cinema's more recent history, that also breaks away from grand events and dramatic actions as the main driving forces behind its films. For example, we can see that film's presence in the twentieth century also highlights two competing movements that are similar to those outlined above. First, as I will demonstrate, we find on the one hand, an aesthetic in cinema that clearly perpetuates the grand events and epic ideals of older literary models. Secondly, as we also see in modern literature, a more subtle movement takes place in film history, that breaks away from dominant forms, and moves closer towards an exploration of minor moments and the subtle values that they uncover.

As mentioned, in his cinema books, Deleuze makes a similar argument when describing two sets of film aesthetics that have come to define the history of cinema in the twentieth century. Once again, for Deleuze these are both a series of images, but also and importantly, different modes of perception. Let's turn first to the older, traditional aesthetic in cinema, which I would like to argue, shares many qualities with the "myth of great of events" as outlined above.

In Deleuze's theory, the "movement-image," is a term he uses to describe a film aesthetic that developed with the origins of cinema, and that came to its full fruition with the classical Hollywood system of filmmaking in the first half of the twentieth century. More specifically, as I would like to demonstrate, the aesthetic of the movement-image is best represented in epic films with great events, and with what Deleuze describes throughout his study as, "action-images" (Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, 142). As he explains in more detail, "the action-image is...[the] model

which produced the universal triumph of the American cinema...” (142). In other words, action-images in American cinema have become the dominant form in film history. For example, according to Deleuze, we can clearly recognize such action-images, especially in Classical Hollywood films, such as D. W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), Howard Hawks’ *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), and Cecile B. De Mille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1956), among others (142). In these large-format epic films, actions are prioritized through great events, and often, through grand displays of force and conflict.⁶⁹ Similarly, as I would like to argue, through such “action-images”, we can also find examples of the collective epic values outlined above by Bakhtin, such as: a national epic past, a shared myth of origins, and a sense of individual heroisms that serves to uphold this larger collective myth. As Deleuze argues himself, when describing this dominant form of American cinema in more detail:

...the American cinema constantly shoots and reshoots a single fundamental film, which is the birth of a nation-civilization, whose first version was provided by Griffith. It has...the belief in a finality of universal history; here the blossoming of the American nation. ...it and it alone is the whole of history, the germinating stock from which each nation-civilization detaches itself as an organism, each prefiguring America” (Deleuze *Cinema 1*, 148).

What is important to highlight is that for Deleuze, these films serve as “placeholders” for the American Dream: an American mythology of great events and action-images that preserve the nation’s myth of origins. Moreover, in the passage above, and in Deleuze’s philosophy of film, the American Dream is a “mythology” that is reinforced through historical epic films, such as *The Birth of a Nation*, and *The Ten Commandments*, where American collective values of dominance, arrogance, and manifest- destiny, become inevitable driving forces of history (i.e.,

⁶⁹ Interestingly, the original film poster for *The Ten Commandments* includes the promotional slogan: “The Greatest Event in Motion Picture History!” (Designed by Macario Gómez Quibus. Copyright, 1956, Paramount Pictures).

American exceptionalism).⁷⁰ In this sense, as Deleuze confirms, “the American cinema...has succeeded in putting forward a strong and coherent conception of universal history...” (151).

Importantly though, as a dominant form in cinema, these action-images also reinforce older literary models and forms. As András Bálint Kovács argues in his article, “The Film History of Thought” (2000), “Deleuze’s “cinema of action” seems to be a translation of the Lukácsian principle of the classical novel: the hero becomes a hero by virtue of his/her capacity to act, to respond to a situation, to bridge the gap in order to bring about a new, global situation” (Kovács 164). In this sense, as with Hegel’s conception of epic literature above, an individual hero is meant to change the course of the world (or “totality”), through great actions and events. As Kovács continues, “...to accomplish that task, the hero rises to the level of the global situation, and this can only happen if he/she represents something that is much bigger than himself or herself, that is, a community.” (164). Here, we can see how Deleuze’s action-image in cinema reaffirms the traditional epic literary values highlighted above, where great heroes drive both the narrative, and the course of history forward towards a logical end, and a state of inevitable progress. Regardless of whether the film’s setting is in United States or ancient Egypt, these epic films maintain the dominance of great actions and events, and of the Classical Hollywood cinema as a dominant form of influence.

But as with our analysis of literature above, we can also argue that this dominant form of great events becomes similarly “naturalized” as a cinematic aesthetic in film history. The clearest parallel here is with the nineteenth-century realist novel, which as we have seen, is both a dominant aesthetic and mode of perception. Once again, as a dominant form of narrative, or “story” as Alain Robbe-Grillet argues (when referring to the nineteenth-century realist novel); there is a similar experience that takes place in Classical Hollywood cinema, through its reliance on dramatic actions and scenes. As I would like to make clear, in addition to great events and action-images, Deleuze’s concept of the “movement-image” also defines an experience of viewing films that are seemingly “natural,” and that, sharing similarities with the nineteenth-century realist novel, presents an aesthetic that is not meant to be noticed in the process of viewing. For example, in *Cinema I*, Deleuze describes this mode of perception as the “sensory-motor schema” (Deleuze 160). The concept defines a logical and rational aesthetic for staging,

⁷⁰ For example, the American Film Institute (AFI), lists *The Ten Commandments* as one of the top ten “Epic” films of all time. They define an, ““epic” as a genre of large-scale films set in a cinematic interpretation of the past” (AFI.com).

filming, and editing narrative films as “naturally” as possible. As Paul Schrader helps to explain, “...such movement perceived on screen continues in our minds...we’re hardwired for it” (Schrader 25). And providing an example of a man running on screen, he explains: “even after the image...is cut on screen...our mind continues a movement...after the image has gone” (25).

In much simpler terms, the clearest description of this dominant form of “naturalness” in Classical Hollywood cinema, can be found elsewhere in the writings of cognitive film theorists, such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Bordwell and Thompson argue that such a form in filmmaking is supported by what they term, the “continuity system” of filmmaking (Bordwell and Thompson 68). Again, similar to Deleuze’s sensory-motor-schema above, the continuity-system includes the cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scène of a film, that all work together to provide an experience of narrative and cinematic “continuity” for the viewer. As Bordwell and Thompson explain, what happens when we view such a film, is that: “...we have anticipations [and expectations] that are characteristic of narrative form itself. We assume that there will be characters and some action that will involve them with one another. We expect a series of incidents that will be connected in some way” (Bordwell and Thompson, 68). As Deleuze argues similarly, “...characters themselves reacted to situations; even when one of them found himself reduced to helplessness...as a result of the ups and downs of the action. What the viewer perceived therefore was a *sensory-motor-image* in which he took a greater or lesser part of *identification* with the characters” (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 3). In short, the movement-image provides continuity to films, through great actions and events, and also by making this process seamless for viewers, who identify with the characters on screen, and who follow these characters that are in fact, driving the narrative forward through their actions.

But what happens to such continuity in modern cinema? More precisely, how do minor moments begin to challenge this dominant form in cinematic history that overwhelmingly favors great events and actions? As mentioned above, in his collection of essays on cinema, *What is Cinema?*, André Bazin became one of the first film theorists to identify a clear break in modern film, that moved away from both the continuity system of Classical Hollywood, and the great events and actions of dramatic films (both American and Soviet), that had dominated film form during the beginning of the twentieth century. In more detail, what Bazin famously observes, and especially in a series of Italian Neorealist films made during and after the Second World War, is

a loosening of cinematic form through a closer attention to minor moments and details of everyday life.

To see what he means, let's turn to one of his well-known examples, Vittorio De Sica's *Umberto D* (1955). In particular, in his review of the film, "Umberto D: A Great Work," Bazin focuses much of his attention on a specific scene that takes place in the film's opening sequence. The scene is set at the boarding-house where the elderly "Umberto D" rents a room with his small dog. More specifically, in the scene we are introduced to the maid of the house, Maria, who lives down the hall, and through De Sica's camera movements, we are brought into her room to watch her morning routine. As Bazin describes himself, "the camera confines itself to watching her doing little chores: moving around the kitchen still half asleep, drowning the ants that have invaded the sink, grinding the coffee" (Bazin, *What is Cinema? Vol. 2*, 81). But what stands out in particular for Bazin, is the length of the scene, in which nothing really happens. For instance, in a Classical Hollywood film, the representation of these chores would be tightly edited, or perhaps, entirely omitted, since they would add little to the overall narrative action and events of its main characters. But here, through De Sica's long take, we go through the same boring routine as Maria does every day, and we wait impatiently together for the water to slowly boil for her morning coffee. But once again, and more specifically, what makes the scene particularly "modern" for Bazin?

With these details, although the elderly character and the boarding-house setting might bring to mind Balzac's *Old Goriot*; we can argue further that a more fitting comparison is in fact, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. If we recall from above, Kundera's main point was that by focusing on boring details, Flaubert's novel introduced to us a new discover in modern literature that he terms, "ontological" (Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed* 129). Once again, he argues that with Flaubert's novel, we are introduced to a new "...discovery of the structure of the present moment...[and] of...the banal that underlies our lives" (129). As I demonstrated above, what this means is that boring moments and details are no longer secondary characteristics in these modern works, but rather they become central themes worthy of exploration in themselves. If we recall, Flaubert famously wrote that with *Madame Bovary*, he wanted to write a novel in which "nothing happens."⁷¹ Similarly, as Bazin also argues in his article on *Umberto D*, the scene

⁷¹ See Flaubert's letter to his lover, Louise Colet, from January 15, 1853, where he writes, "I have now lined up five chapters of my second part [of the novel] in which nothing happens" (Quoted in; Davis xi)

above reaffirms the screenwriter's [Cesare Zavattini's] "...dream to make a whole film of ninety minutes in the life of a man to whom nothing happens" (Bazin 82). In his most helpful passage in his review of the film, Bazin summarizes these points succinctly when he argues, that in modern cinema:

the narrative unit is not the episode, the event, the sudden turn of events, or the character of its protagonists, it is the succession of concrete instants of life, no one of which can be said to be more important than another, for their ontological equality destroys drama at its very basis" (81).

In other words, for Bazin, modern cinema rejects great events and dramatic scenes, and instead, creates an "ontological equality" between such events and minor moments, by turning its focus towards life's most boring details. In short, in films such as *Umberto D*, these moments in modern cinema, are what Bazin describes as, "banal incidents" (50).

Though as mentioned above, for Deleuze it is not only that modern films reveal an equality between events and minor moments that focus on the "realism" of everyday life. But rather, as he argues, these films also go beyond realism entirely, by creating unfamiliar images and experiences for their viewers. As he claims, with modern cinema "...what tends to collapse, or at least to lose its position, is the sensory-motor schema which constituted the action-image of the old cinema" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, xii). In other words, rather than "continuity," which had defined the Classical Hollywood cinema as outlined above, the films that appear for the first time after the war, begin to express a form of "discontinuity" to their viewers. The reason for this shift, as Deleuze argues, is that, "...the post-war period has greatly increased the situations which we no longer know how to react to, in spaces which we no longer know how to describe" (Deleuze xi). Once again, through loose and wandering films, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1954), Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959), and Yasujiro Ozu's *Late Spring* (1949) and *Tokyo Story* (1953), we encounter characters who are passive and who question the very purpose of their lives, their identities, and their surroundings. But to be more precise, it is also that the films themselves begin to question their own purpose, and the images and events that they present to us on screen. As Deleuze argues in more detail:

...thanks to this loosening of the sensory-motor linkage, it is time...which rises up to the surface of the screen. Time ceases to be derived from the movement, it appears in itself and itself gives rise to *false movements*. Hence the importance of false continuity in modern cinema: the images are no longer linked by rational cuts and continuity, but are relinked by means of false continuity and irrational cuts. Even the body is no longer exactly what moves; subject of movement or instrument of action, it becomes rather the developer [*révéléateur*] of time, it shows time through its tirednesses and waitings...” (Deleuze xi).

In other words, as Alain Robbe-Grillet argues above, in relation to literature, in these modern works “...what we recognize...is more likely...the little detail that rings *false*” (Robbe-Grillet 163). Once again, similarly to Deleuze, Robbe-Grillet describes these “false” details as “...partial objects, detached from their use, moments immobilized” (Robbe-Grillet 163).

To better understand what Deleuze and Robbe-Grillet mean, let’s turn to a famous scene in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960). The main characters, Claudia and Sandro are searching for their friend and lover Anna, who mysteriously goes missing in the first half of the film. They are in Sicily, and have just received a possible “lead” to where Anna might be found, although it seems quite unreliable. The wife of a pharmacist tells the pair that she saw a woman resembling Anna head towards the town of Noto. Sandro and Claudia then drive towards the town. However at one point along the way, they see some buildings next to the road, and mistakenly think that they have arrived in the town. After parking their car, they begin to explore the area, and find a series of deserted churches. The scene is especially eerie, since there are no other people around, and most importantly, because Antonioni’s camera begins to drift away from the two protagonists. In the final minutes of the scene, Sandro and Claudia have driven away and disappeared from the frame, as the camera continues to linger on the narrow alleyway between two buildings. The shot portrays what in film theory is termed *temps-mort* (or “dead-time”). As Deleuze explains, in such scenes, “...objects and settings [*milieux*] take on an autonomous, material reality which gives them an importance in themselves” (Deleuze 4).

But also, as both Deleuze and Robbe-Grillet argue above, it is not only that these objects and details have become independent from their characters and the plot of events. It is also that they defamiliarize these objects and settings to the point where they seem “false” to us viewers.

As in modernist aesthetics, discontinuity and disruption are celebrated as virtues for Deleuze. But again, these “false movements” are not only aesthetic and formal characteristics in modern cinema; they also reveal the beginnings of new ways of thinking and engaging with the world through film. For these reasons, as Deleuze argues, the introduction of modern cinema (through the time-image), is like “...the conquering of a...[new] space in painting, with impressionism” (Deleuze 2).

Finally, as Roland Barthes helps to highlight most convincingly in a critical essay on Antonioni’s cinema; what makes these works especially modern, is precisely their “fragility” (Barthes, “Dear Antonioni” 63). Moreover, as Barthes argues, against the arrogance of older literary and cinematic forms, as outlined above, Antonioni’s films show us how the “...Modern is...not just at the level of grand History but that of the little History of which each of us is individually the measure” (63). Moreover, through their exploration of minor moments, as detailed above, Antonioni’s cinema reveals a critical openness in modern film that turns against dramatic events and dominant forms. As Phillip Watts helps to explain in his study, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema* (2016), what Barthes demonstrates most effectively, is that “...Antonioni’s films provide a form of resistance...because they never attempt to impose a truth on the spectator” (Watts 47-48). In other words, as with the *temps-mort* sequence outlined above, viewers are left with more questions than answers. For example, as Barthes explains further when analyzing Antonioni’s *Il grido* (1957):

...the work is, one might say, the very uncertainty of meaning: the wandering of a man who cannot find his identity confirmed anywhere and the ambiguity of the conclusion (suicide, accident?) lead the spectator to doubt the meaning... This leakage of meaning, which is not the same as its abolition, enables you to disturb the psychological certitudes of realism (Barthes 65).

The “uncertainty” arises because as viewers, we spend most of the film wandering through the Po Valley with the protagonist who has fled his town, and who also has no actual plan of where to go, or what to do. As Deleuze argues similarly, when commenting on Antonioni’s films, this is because we are now witnessing “...a cinema of the *seer* and no longer of the agent” (Deleuze *Cinema* 2, 2). In other words, as I argue above when analyzing the modern novels of Onetti, we

encounter characters who are self-aware of their own lack of characterization and inability to move. But ultimately, as I hope to demonstrate, this uncertainty and “fragility” in modern cinema, also allows for a critical openness between both the work and the viewer, that challenges older models and forms in literature and film.

In the next chapters, we will continue our exploration of minor moments in modern works, through several key novels, stories, and films that each help to further highlight a clear turning away from great actions and events, and the values that they represent.

PART TWO

Case Studies in Modern Literature and Film

Chapter 2

Forgetting Monuments: Kundera's Ignorance

There is nothing insignificant in a human life, no hierarchy of events...

– Danilo Kiš, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983)

We have just seen how certain works of modern literature and film began to challenge the primacy of the event in literary and cinematic history, including the dominant values that it represents. In this chapter, I will continue to analyze such modern works, by turning more closely to the examination of minor moments in Milan Kundera's novel *Ignorance* (2000), a late, and as I argue "minor" work in the author's oeuvre.⁷²

Unlike Kundera's most celebrated novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), which in large part is devoted to the historical events of the Prague Spring; I argue that the author's most recent works, which include the novel *Ignorance*, are shorter and lighter writings that are strangely displacing for the ways in which they resist categorization. Written in French between the years of 1995 and 2014, the novels *Slowness* (1995), *Identity* (1997), *Ignorance* (2000), and *The Festival of Insignificance* (2014), stand out critically from the author's other novels. Not only are they shorter in length and quieter in tone, but as I argue, they also offer experimentations in both narrative and form that explore the effects of minor moments in opposition to grand historical events. In this chapter, I will demonstrate that nowhere are these critical effects more apparent than in Kundera's *Ignorance*.

As we will see, although the novel is set twenty years after the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, Kundera's *Ignorance* is much more concerned with the personal memories of that event than with its official history. This is because, while the events of August 1968 quietly shape the novel's narrative, Kundera both refuses to provide an extensive account of the invasion,

⁷² A shorter version of the section in this chapter on "counter-monuments," was published previously as "Adam Chambers, "Prague 68": Photo-Monuments and the Memories of Others," in the edited anthology, *Cinéma, critiques des images*, edited by C. D'Alonzo, K. Slock, and P. Dubois (Pasion di Prato: Campanotto Editore, 2012).

and also challenges the dominant historical and literary values that would oblige him to do so.⁷³ In other words, much like the critiques of history outlined above by Barthes and Bakhtin, Kundera's novel invites us to reevaluate our understanding of the concepts of "home" and "nation," and also our relationship to the past. Likewise, the novel also asks both its readers and characters to be wary of a notion of history that might, in Nietzsche's terms, "uproot the future" and be opposed to "life and action" (Nietzsche, *Untimely Mediations*, 59). In his essay, "On the Uses and Abuses of History for Life" (1874), Nietzsche famously describes this debilitating effect that the past can have over an individual, as "monumental History" (59). As I will argue, both this static image of history and its corresponding view of nostalgia are playfully subverted in Milan Kundera's novel.

In more detail, *Ignorance* begins by recounting the travels of two Czech émigrés who decide to return to Prague following the Velvet Revolution. Through the novel's images, we are reminded that the lives of émigrés are largely determined by often overwhelming and grand events of history. That is to say, the protagonists, Irena and Josef, inherit conditions that are largely external to them, but that also dramatically uproot their lives. As we learn, the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia forced both characters to flee Prague in 1968, to Paris and Copenhagen respectively. And twenty years later, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Velvet Revolution, set in motion a series of events that would eventually allow them to return.

However, as I would like to explore in the present chapter, upon their return to the city, both characters experience a profound sense of displacement. Strangely, this feeling is not only geographical but also temporal. It challenges both characters' identities and memories, as they find it difficult to reconnect with a Czech people and culture from which they had been removed for so long. As a result, Irena and Josef also begin to reevaluate their ties to their homeland, and begin to feel nostalgic for a specific idea of the past that had previously provided them with a stable sense of "home." In short, as a result of their displacement, Irena and Josef are caught between a Prague they no longer recognize, and a past that seems frozen in time. They are trapped in what we might term, an "in between" state, which according to Plato, is "...an instant

⁷³ It is important to note that although *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* provided Kundera with much fame and recognition, he also felt that this included the constricting label of the "Eastern-European émigré writer," which he rejected. As his friend, the American novelist Philip Roth writes in the introduction to *Laughable Loves* (1969): "I would think that...Kundera too would prefer to find a readership in the West that was not drawn to his fiction [only] because he is a writer oppressed by a Communist regime..." (Roth, "Introducing Milan Kundera," xii).

which would be neither of one time, nor of the other”, but instead, “would thus be... ‘outside of time’ (*exaiphnes*) ... which, as such, has effectively no possible ‘place’” (Francois Julian, *The Silent Transformations*, 18)

Again, much like the critiques of history outlined above by Barthes and Bakhtin, this overwhelming sense of displacement is influenced by a traditional view of nostalgia that reinforces the belief that one’s essence is rooted in one’s homeland, and that a life lived in exile is unworthy since it is taking place away from “home.” As I have been arguing, this “myth of origins” philosophy dominates traditional ways of thinking and relating to history, and prescribes that both place and origin condition the course of our lives. It also reinforces the view that the past should be memorialized mainly as a collective set of images of historical events. Thus, similar to Nietzsche’s notion of the “monumental,” this understanding of nostalgia attempts to capture the past as a static image, and as a collective myth of both a people and a nation. But critically, as Barthes reminds us again, such myths ultimately limit one’s capacity to understand both the past and ourselves, and reduce the potential for multiple meanings (*Mythologies* 131).

In short, by reevaluating the concept of nostalgia, and the monumental forms that shape its paths, I will demonstrate how Kundera’s *Ignorance* resists a paralyzing view of the past that is weighing down its protagonists. In doing so, I will argue that *Ignorance* challenges its readers to approach nostalgia not only as an experience of mourning and melancholia, but also as one of uncertainty and pleasure. In other words, we will see how the novel overturns the conventional understanding of the concept, by questioning the presumed “weight” that we typically ascribe to the idea of the original in both literature and culture, and also within the narratives that we construct about our own lives. In particular, there are three scenes that best illustrate these “counter-monumental” effects in Kundera’s novel. These include: the challenge to Homer’s *Odyssey* as the archetypal image of exile; Josef’s encounter with a Fauve-like painting from his past; and Irena’s walk through a Prague suburb towards the end of the novel. Ultimately, through close readings of these scenes below, I will attempt to demonstrate how *Ignorance* stages a series of displacing encounters, that both challenges the myth of great events, and that also reveals the critical potential of minor moments in modern literature.

From Myths to Monuments

In order to demonstrate how *Ignorance* resists a dominant view of history, we must first examine how the traditional understanding of the concept of nostalgia relates to both the mythical and the monumental. As mentioned above, both Irena and Josef suffer from a monumental sense of the past that shapes their image of Prague and themselves as subjects. But what exactly do we mean by the terms mythical and monumental? And also, what is so mythical about monuments? Finally, how do these concepts relate to one another?

First, it is important to highlight that monuments conventionally evoke a sense of stillness. Although they are undeniably historical, monuments usually convey a sense of permanence that is stubbornly immobile. That is to say, they embody a strange paradox in this sense: on the one hand, they are designed to defy temporality through their solid and permanent structures. While on the other hand, they are meant to stand-in for a history that is unconditionally bound to time. Moreover, we can argue that monuments are meant to represent history by erasing their temporality, the very phenomenon that makes them historical. Thus, by denying temporality, and by extension mortality, monuments, like myths, present an eternal image of the past that is both out of this world, but more importantly, out of this time.

Once again, as with Barthes's and Bakhtin's critiques of history, Nietzsche describes this monumental sense of the past as a dangerous idea, because it ultimately negates one's sense of life in the present. In his view, we should "...serve history only to the extent that history serves life" (Nietzsche 59). In more detail, he argues:

When the historical sense reigns *without restraint*, and all its consequences are realized, it uproots the future because it destroys illusions and robs the things that exist of the atmosphere in which alone they can live (95).

What Nietzsche means is that a monumental sense of history destroys our capacity to live our lives in the present. It prevents us from imagining a future in which things could be different. Above all, it destroys the future as a possible concept that is full of potential. Again, for Irena and Josef, this monumental weight of nostalgia manifests itself in the novel through a cherished but static image of Prague, the collective "home" each character left behind when emigrating

abroad. As I would like to emphasize, this nostalgic image is culturally reinforced through one's common understanding of the term, which, according to Kundera, is most popularly rooted in Homer's *Odyssey*.

To help explain this point further, the opening pages of the novel offer an important linguistics lesson on the etymology of the term "nostalgia." As we are reminded by the novel's narrator, in ancient Greek, *nostos* means return, and *algos*, means suffering. So when combined, nostalgia designates "...the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return" (Kundera, *Ignorance* 5). This definition can be taken to represent the conventional understanding of nostalgia, describing the sense of longing that the protagonists felt when living in exile, as well as their overwhelming desire to return to Prague. However, what we also learn from the novel is that there is another, and perhaps more significant way of comprehending the term. According to Kundera's narrator, in Spanish, the word for nostalgia, *añoranza*, is rooted in the Latin word for ignorance: "...*ignorare* (to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or to miss" (Kundera 5). In this second sense of the term, nostalgia takes on an added significance as the "...pain of ignorance", [or] the pain of "not knowing" (5). Thus, in this "etymological light," according to Kundera, we can also understand nostalgia to mean the pain of being far away from one's homeland, and to not know "...what is happening there" (5).

Importantly, the first scene in the novel to address this sense of nostalgia appears on the opening page. Irena is sitting in a café in Paris with her French friend, when all of a sudden, the friend compels her to return to Prague, the city she had been forced to abandon more than twenty years before. The friend urges Irena, like Odysseus returning to Ithaca, to finally revisit the city, and to experience her own "great return" (5). As Kundera describes in the scene, Irena imagines the words written out before her in capital letters: "GREAT RETURN" (5). She is then captivated by, "...images suddenly welling up from books read long ago, from films, from her own memory," and even "from her ancestral memory" (4). At this moment, for both Irena and the reader, we are presented with a series of images that embody what can best be described as a collective and conventional understanding of nostalgia. For Kundera, we remember it together as:

...the lost son home again with his aged mother; the man returning to his beloved from whom cruel destiny had torn him away; the family homestead we all carry about within us; the rediscovered trail still marked by the forgotten footsteps of

childhood, [but most important of all], Odysseus sighting his island after years of wandering (4-5).

What the passage reaffirms is that Irena cannot think of returning to Prague without envisioning a series of references that are all informed by Homer's story. In other words, the predominance of the *Odyssey* in Western culture has produced what Kundera describes as a "moral hierarchy of emotions" in relation to the past (9). Crucially, this hierarchy informs an ethics and set of values, that conditions the dominant ways in which individuals remember and relate to one's place of origin.

In more detail, and to help reinforce the point further, Kundera focuses in particular on the many years that Odysseus spent living on the goddess Calypso's island in the *Odyssey*. As Kundera explains, although Odysseus spends several years living happily with Calypso, he remains fixated on his former life, and is determined to return to Ithaca. Kundera writes:

Odysseus lived a real *dolce vita* there in Calypso's land, a life of ease, a life of delights. And yet, between the *dolce vita* in a foreign place and the risky return to his home, he chose the return. Rather than ardent exploration of the unknown (adventure), he chose the apotheosis of the known (return) (Kundera 8).

In other words, Odysseus chooses the "apotheosis of the known" because, in the myth, the past is glorified over the present, and as a result, his sense of identity is forever tied to his homeland. Although he has spent several leisurely years living and sharing a bed with the beautiful Calypso, he is still determined to return to Ithaca and to his wife, Penelope.⁷⁴ Likewise, even though Irena had spent many years living in Paris, including making friends and enjoying a new life that she begun to accept in the city, this "founding epic of nostalgia," as the narrator describes it, forces her to question the overall value of her life abroad (7). In short, as with Odysseus, Irena's sense of nostalgia is tied to an overwhelming desire to return "home."

⁷⁴ See for example, Book V in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus explains to Calypso his desire to return to Ithaca: "Powerful goddess, do not be wroth at what I say. Full well I know that heedful Penelope, compared with you, is poor to look upon in height and beauty; for she is human, but you are an immortal, young forever. Yet even so, I wish – yes, every day I long – to travel home and see the day of my return" (Homer, *Odyssey* 82).

But just as Irena questions the life that she has built in Paris over the past twenty years, after fleeing Prague, she also becomes skeptical of the dominant nostalgic images that she begins to confront upon her return. To be clear, there are a series of common monumental images, which reduce the entire city – its history, its culture and its people – to a series of touristic icons, such as T-shirts, souvenirs, and postcards. For example, on one of the first days of her return, one such image jumps out at Irena as she is walking through the center of Prague. Standing outside a souvenir shop, she “...sees in the window a T-shirt showing the gloomy face of a tubercular, with a line in English [which reads]: KAFKA WAS BORN IN PRAGUE” (Kundera 100). Although Irena finds the T-shirt incredibly ridiculous, she decides to buy it for her Swedish husband Gustaf, who happily celebrates such souvenirs.

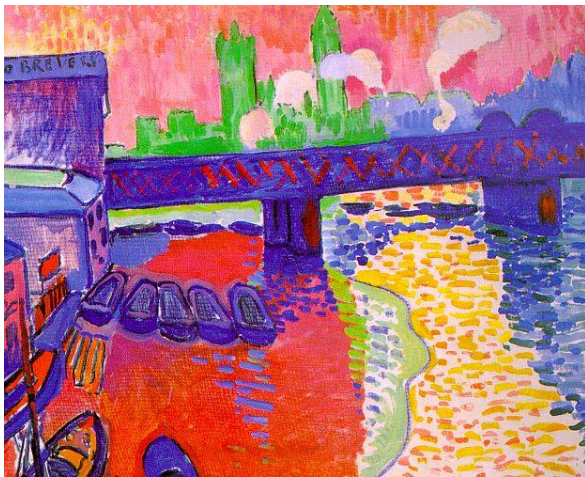
On another occasion, as Irena walks behind Prague Castle, similar monumental images of the city begin to appear. As Kundera writes:

She looks over at the Castle: It’s no more than fifteen minutes away. The Prague of the postcards begins there, the Prague that a frenzied history stamped with its multiple stigmata, the Prague of tourists... the Prague of restaurants so expensive that her Czech friends can’t set foot in them, the belly-dancer Prague writhing in the spotlight, Gustaf’s Prague. She reflects that there is no place more alien to her than that Prague. Gustaf town. Gustafville. Gustafstadt. Gustafgrad (137).

In this moment, the Prague of Irena’s childhood, the Prague that she fled after the Soviet invasion, all of a sudden feels foreign to her; so foreign that the image of her husband, with whom she feels emotionally detached, merges together with her image of the city. As Kundera describes, Irena pictures “...his jovial figure, dressed up in his T-shirt, shouting that Kafka was born in Prague” (138). The grotesque image of Gustaf becomes inseparable from Irena’s own image of the past. It is in this way that her experience of nostalgia traps her in a state of the in-between: a state, as mentioned above, that feels not of one time or another, but rather, outside of time altogether.

Josef's Painting

Now, as I would like to highlight in the novel, there is second monumental image that comes to stand-in for the city and its history. Unlike Irena's image of the Kafka T-shirt above, this monument is a painting, and as I argue, performs a special function as a monument. As readers, we first encounter the painting, when upon returning to Prague, Josef visits his brother and recognizes a familiar image hanging on the wall. What is important to highlight is that in this moment, Josef is confronted not only by the painting; an object he once owned and cherished, but also by the memory of the painting that serves as a monument of his final days in Prague before leaving the city in 1968. In more detail, as Kundera describes in the scene, the painting depicts, "...a working-class suburb, poor, rendered in that bold welter of colors that recalled the Fauve artists from the turn of the [last] century, Derain for example" (61). Furthermore, we learn that the painter had given it to Joseph as a gift in the 1960s, when as the narrator explains, Czech artists were celebrating a new sense of aesthetic freedom, as the government was in a process of relaxing "some of its force" (62).⁷⁵ [See figure below].



(Figure 1: André Derain, *Charing Cross Bridge*, 1906)

⁷⁵ During the "Prague Spring" of 1968, President Alexander Dubcek announced a series of cultural reforms that would allow more freedom of the press, and would "open up" the ability for artists to become more critical of the regime. His famous slogan called for a form of "socialism with a human face." All of the arts took advantage of this new found freedom (the Czech New Wave in cinema is probably the most famous example.) Unfortunately, it was the implementation of such reforms that led directly to the Soviet invasion (with the Warsaw Pact army) in August, 1968.

However, the actual painting that Josef selected from the artist's studio as his gift, was in fact painted in 1955, a period when restrictions against artists were far more severe, and there was a strong demand by the Czech authorities for "realism" (61). As Kundera explains:

...this artist, who was a passionate modernist, would have preferred to paint the way people were painting all over the world at the time, which is to say in the abstract manner, but he also wanted his work to be exhibited; therefore he had to locate the magic point where the ideologues' imperatives intersected with his own desires as an artist; the shacks evoking workers' lives were a bow to the ideologues, and the violently unrealistic colors were his gift to himself (61).

Now, as I would like to argue, although the painting is not actually reproduced in the novel, we are able to imagine its presence. For instance, we can imagine the outline of a Prague suburb in the bright and beautiful colors that we know from Derain. It is specifically these unrealistic colors that also first caught Josef's attention when he discovered the painting, as they stood out from all of the other canvases in the artist's studio (62).

It is also for the above reasons that when seeing the canvas again hanging on his brother's wall, the Fauvist-like composition carries a special significance and serves as a monument in Josef's mind. In other words, the painting comes to express Josef's memory of Prague, and it is in this sense that it becomes an imaginary monument that differs from the more conventional icons of the city (as described above) and of the 1968 invasion. As I would like to argue, what distinguishes Josef's painting then, is not its monumental iconicity, but rather, its familiarity and indexicality. Moreover, in the novel, the painting acts as an index that challenges the presumed stasis of the monumental, and the dominant form of history that it represents.

Again, one of the main problems with a traditional understanding of the monumental is that it is called upon to stand-in for, and so to replace, an historical event. Individuals are asked to imagine an instant frozen in time; preserved eternally as an icon to be passively received. And as such, these icons reduce the multiple, and often-personal and particular ways in which events can be understood and remembered. As outlined above, traditional monuments also often reduce the event into a single *eidos* (image/idea). That is to say, when a dominant image of the past

comes to represent an historical event, it comes to serve as its official gathering point for how that event can be collectively remembered.⁷⁶ Thus, the ways in which we remember the past are conditioned by a myriad of cultural forces. And as with our experience of nostalgia, the visibility of the past – including the images we remember as memories – are sites of intense political contestation. For these reasons, we can argue that Josef’s painting in *Ignorance* performs an important critical role as a minor monument. As a semi-abstract painting, it challenges the more conventional icons of the invasion.

For example, if we look to popular culture, these icons include the famous photographs of the Soviet invasion taken by the Czech photographer, Josef Koudelka.⁷⁷ As official traces and documents of the event in August, 1968, Koudelka’s photographs of Soviet tanks on Prague’s streets, Czech flags, Molotov cocktails, and students setting up barricades, have become the dominant visual monuments of the invasion [See Figures below]. When viewing these photographs then, we can argue that the images also represent the dominant collective memory of this historical event.

However, as mentioned above, such dramatic scenes are strangely omitted from Kundera’s novel. For example, in contrast to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, where the Soviet invasion is depicted in several key scenes, and where it adds moments of dramatic action in the narrative; there are no explicit descriptions of the event in *Ignorance*. One of the few instances where the event is in fact referenced, reads as follows: “The occupier took over in full force in the autumn of 1968 and then, to everyone’s surprise, took off in autumn 1989 – quietly, politely, as did all the Communist regimes in Europe at that time” (Kundera 11). In other words, as if to undermine the official dominance of the event, this sparse passage presents us only with a bland historical image whose message seems to be directed simultaneously at everyone and no one; a lifeless monument that tells us little of the past. The passage appears in opposition to the detailed descriptions of Josef’s and Irena’s memories and experiences that preoccupy our main focus throughout the novel. In this sense, I would like to argue that the passage also reaffirms Auerbach’s “transfer of confidence” outlined above, where the greatest events and turning-points

⁷⁶ See for example, the “Tank Man” photograph from Tiananmen Square in 1989. It is difficult to now remember the event without envisioning this iconic image. With little video or photographic evidence of the Tiananmen Square massacre, this single image has now become the dominant visual “monument,” influencing how we remember the event.

⁷⁷ Koudelka first sent the images anonymously to the Magnum Photos International office in New York, in 1968.

of history, are given secondary status in a modern literary work, to the more intimate details of the characters' lives.



(Figure 2, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)



(Figure 3, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)



(Figure 4, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)



(Figure 5, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)



(Figure 6, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)



(Figure 7, Josef Koudelka, *Invasion '68*, Prague, 1968)

Josef's painting thus plays an important role in *Ignorance* in opposition to the well-known photographs of the invasion highlighted above. It challenges a negative, melancholic experience of nostalgia, and also as a result, succeeds in opening up an alternative possibility for Irena and Josef's lives. Given that the more conventional images of the invasion, the tanks, the fires and the protesters seen above, are completely absent from the novel; Josef's painting of a quiet Czech suburb, thus gains significance as an alternative "monument." Through its absence, representationally (as it does not depict the event itself), as well as aesthetically (since it is not printed as an image in the novel), the painting challenges the temporal permanence of a conventional monument.

Counter-Monuments

In his article, "The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today" (1990), James E. Young provides another concept that is helpful to approach the subjects of memory and history in Kundera's novel. Focusing in particular on architectural monuments and the politics of memory in 1990s Germany, Young refers to a critical artwork that has the potential to challenge a dominant narrative of history, as a "counter-monument," a monument that is absent, does not exist, or lacks material form (Young 267). In more detail, for Young, the most effective type of counter-monument, is specifically a monument that draws attention to its own impermanence and immateriality (267). In other words, as a result of its absent and disappearing form, the counter-monument challenges its viewers to examine the process of collective memorialization as a temporal practice. Its focus is not just on traces of the past, but also on acts of memory in the present and for the future.⁷⁸

To help support his argument, the main example that Young refers to is the "Hamburg Monument against Fascism" (1986), by Jochen and Esther Gerz. Interestingly, their monument was designed to slowly sink into the ground over a period of time. As a result, to contribute to the artwork's possible interpretations and significations, visitors were encouraged to write their

⁷⁸ The notion of a "memory act", and of memory as an active cultural process, is developed further in the edited volume, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1999), edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer.

thoughts in chalk on the monument's façade before it eventually disappeared from view. [See both Figures below].



(Figure 8: Jochen and Esther Gertz, *Hamburg Monument Against Fascism*, 1986)



(Figure 9: Jochen and Esther Gertz, *Hamburg Monument Against Fascism*, 1986)

Drawing attention to its moving temporality then, this monument actively encourages viewers to take part in a more critical act of remembering: an act that escapes the presumed permanence of the structure. Moreover, the monument's ultimate absence calls into question something beyond its material presence. In other words, once the structure has vanished, former viewers must create a memory of the monument in their minds. In this way, its disappearing form reminds us that history is not static, but rather an affective and temporal process in the present, that in Nietzsche's terms, has the potential to serve an individual's own "life and action" (Nietzsche 59).

Thus, seen from this perspective, and also in relation to Young's concept, we can argue that Josef's painting functions as an effective counter-monument to the official history of Prague. As mentioned above, in sharp contrast to the black and white photographs of the invasion, the painting instead boldly expresses "violently unrealistic colors" reminiscent of the Fauve artists (Kundera, *Ignorance* 61). Once again, while the "shacks evoking worker's lives," appear on the canvas only to appease the authorities of the regime, there is also a "bold welter of colors" that takes on a counter-monumental quality that we can argue, commemorates the painter's own sense of freedom: his love of life, expressed in color. As Kundera confirms in the novel, in the face of such censorship, these colors were the painter's "gift to himself" (Kundera 61). In other words, what is important to highlight is that the unrealistic colors allow the painting to function indexically rather than iconically. That is to say, they produce a direct sensation for the viewer in the present moment, rather than a fixed image that is meant to stand-in for some distant period of time.

To help better understand the effects of the painting's indexicality, let's turn briefly to the Fauves artists of the turn of the last century. As Sarah Whitfield argues in her study on the artistic movement, *Fauvism* (1991), from their first showing at the Salon d'Automn in 1905, the Fauves painters ("Wild Beasts" in French) became the first group of artists in modern art history to truly "...revel in the texture, the color and the very substance of paint" (Whitfield 27). Moreover, as Whitfield claims, "...the strokes of paint used by Derain and Matisse can sometimes be so assertive, so solid in themselves that they take on an almost three-dimensional physicality" (70-71). It is precisely this physicality that I would like to argue, is one of the two main qualities that define the index (as an aesthetic sign) and its counter-monumental effects.

Again, because we cannot actually see Josef's painting, readers of Kundera's novel are forced to imagine it. In other words, the novel asks us to search through our own memories of

Fauvist artists, and to attempt to remember some of their canvases for inspiration. For example, while on a famous retreat with André Derain in the South of France, Henri Matisse painted what is considered to be one of the earliest Fauvist paintings, titled, *View of the Port, Collioure* (1905). [See figure below.]



(Figure 10: Henri Matisse, *View of the Port, Collioure*, 1905)

With its fast movements and sharp disharmonies, the painting demonstrates the intense indexicality produced by Fauvist color. On the canvas, we see houses evoking a village landscape in the South of France, but these discernible figures also play only a secondary role to the thick vibrations of color that lean out at the viewer from the canvas. In other words, the quick brushstrokes and the fullness of colors overpower the representational certainty of the houses.

In his notebooks, Matisse reinforces this indexical effect of his painting when he writes that, “...the Picture... is not a mirror which reflects what I have lived through in making it, but [is rather] a powerful, strong, [and] expressive object, which is as *new* for me as for anyone else”

(Whitfield 81).⁷⁹ Thus, the visceral experience of confronting patches of color in Matisse's paintings, the slow sinking of Gertz' counter-monument against Fascism, and the "proletarian Fauvism" of Josef's painting all produce a new temporality for the viewer that affirms their singularity. In short, we can describe this temporality as the index's ability to heighten our sense of life through a more personal and intimate experience of time and history.

Now a second, and I would like to argue, equally important characteristic of the index is its ability to resist dominant representations through its temporality. That is, unlike the document, the monument, or the icon, the index resists being fixed to a single place or locale. In this sense, it resists an explicit or concrete form of representation. Although the index always points to a specific referent, this act of pointing nevertheless resists being fixed in time. For these reasons, in his theory of semiotics, Charles Sanders Peirce describes the index as a "trace" (Peirce 109). His famous examples are of a weathervane, footprints in the snow, and a bullet hole in the wall – all signs which affect us directly, but that escape a fixed representation (109).

Another helpful example of this temporal resistance to representation can be perceived in a Fauvist work by André Derain, titled *Effect of Sunlight on Water* (1905-1906). [See figure below]. As Sarah Whitfield describes:

It is a landscape that has no sense of place: it could be London (a vaporous mist hanging over the Thames perhaps), or even Paris, or a view from one of the fishing ports along the southern coast of France. This, however, is not a painting about the particular place, or about the motif; it is an expression of pure sensation..." (Whitfield 108-109).

Paradoxically, by expressing no particular place, Derain's canvas resists a representational correspondence with reality. Although the painting's title promises a reflection of reality (*Effect of Sunlight on Water*), what we experience instead when staring at its surface is a bombardment of colors that seem to abide by no natural laws. In this sense, not only does the painting transcend a single locale, it also resists being reduced to any particular time. Thus, in opposition to photography, and the Impressionists' desire to capture "the instant," Derain's canvas resists the stasis of the referent. As Whitfield reaffirms, instead of representing a picture of nature, it produces "...an expression of pure sensation" (108-109).

⁷⁹ Quoted in Whitfield (1991).



(Figure 11: André Derain, *Effect of Sunlight on Water*, 1905-06)

Similarly in Kundera's novel, when Josef observes his painting hanging on his brother's wall, he is confronted by a sensation expressing his memory of the invasion, as well as the overwhelming sense of liberation he felt when leaving the city. Moreover, although the canvas gives us an outline of a scene from Prague, this outline could also be from anywhere else in the world. It produces an effect that has no representational limits to what can be imagined. In this way, Josef's painting acts as an index, producing a direct sensation of freedom. The effect is produced not only through the painting's "violently unrealistic colors," but also through the memory of the painting. That memory, combined with the colors on the canvas, reminds Josef of the liberating sensation he experienced immediately before leaving Prague.

In this scene in the novel, a young Josef has just driven to his parents' house a few days after the invasion, and sits in his car contemplating whether to "leave the country" (Kundera, *Ignorance* 68). Then we learn from the narrator that with a quick rush of emotions, the same character, who days before the invasion was "ready to hurl himself against the tanks," is

suddenly touched by an overwhelming sense of liberation (67). In other words, although the occupation had convinced Josef of how much he loved his homeland, in this moment, it had also awoken him to the notion that, as a temporal subject, he is not bound to history or to a melancholic sense of nostalgia. Moreover, the scene expresses Josef's realization that beyond his sense of presumed duties and obligations to his homeland, he is in fact, temporally and historically "free" (68). As Kundera explains, when facing this pivotal moment in his life, Josef "...reflected that he had only one life, and that he wanted to live it somewhere else" (68).

Thus, in direct opposition to the myth of nostalgia, this sensation of liberation affected by the painting, counters Josef's "recollections" and shields "him against their intrusion" (76). Moreover, as an index, the painting not only challenges the dominant representation of history as an icon, but also becomes a minor moment that affirms a sense of singularity in Josef's life. As such, it is also a reminder that the possible is not simply a hopeful idea, but also, a sensation of time.

Monumental Art

To further understand how *Ignorance* resists a melancholic sense of nostalgia, I would now like to explore in more detail how the monumental functions in artworks. In particular, how can a fixed, monumental sense of the past be transformed through a work of art? Again, how can the apparent stillness and absence of temporality that typically marks most traditional monuments and official historical narratives, be transfigured into an intimate and personal experience? In short, how does Josef's painting produce the liberating sensation of time highlighted above?

To answer these questions, it is useful to return to Nietzsche's essay on history. While warning his readers of the dangers associated with an obsessive focus on the past, what he terms again, as an historical sense that "reigns *without restraint*," Nietzsche also celebrates in the same essay, the role that history can play when it is expressed through a work of art (Nietzsche, *Untimely Mediations* 95) He argues that "...only if history can endure to be transformed into a work of art will it perhaps be able to preserve instincts or even evoke them" (95, 96). In other words, especially through the effects of certain artworks, history has the potential to serve "life and action," and to affirm one's sense of self (59). This Dionysian capacity of art is produced

when a work resists a fixed representation of the past, and in doing so, opens up a possible future. Most importantly, such artworks celebrate a moving, and personal temporality that emphasized the particular over the universal.

As noted above, the critique of history at the center of Nietzsche's essay is also similarly expressed in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940). This similarity is made explicit by Benjamin himself, when he includes an epigraph from Nietzsche in his essay, demonstrating the close affinity between their philosophies. The epigraph reads as follows:

We need history, but only the way a spoiled loafer in the garden of knowledge needs it (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 260).

The reference does not appear until Thesis XIII of the essay; yet throughout, it is clear that the "knowledge" of history in the passage corresponds to Benjamin's own critique of the ideology of universal history. For Benjamin, the concept of universal history escapes a tangible sense of temporality, because its projection into the future is perceived as inevitable. In other words, its historicity is seen as predetermined, eternal and beyond human control. As with Barthes above, Benjamin argues that dominant images of history are in fact myths. Historical images are structured to convey a master-narrative of history, and in doing so, determine how individuals should relate to the past, and more importantly, how they should live in the present.

Furthermore, for Benjamin, universal history projects an "'eternal' image of the past" that stifles one's sense of agency and subjectivity (Benjamin 262). Moreover, the idea of universal history paradoxically eliminates the future as a possibility through its ideology of inevitable progress; it supports the image of a "boundless" and "infinite perfectibility of mankind," the projected *telos* of history (260).⁸⁰ Thus, the atemporality of this ideology results from the supposed inevitability of the future. In short, when the course of history is perceived as inevitable, the future is robbed of its necessary contingency. It is for this reason that Benjamin refers to this static image of history as a "homogenous, empty time" (261). Most importantly for our purposes here, Benjamin's essay also demonstrates how that empty time can be brought to life and transformed through a work of art.

⁸⁰ From ancient Greek, *telos* signifies the 'goal', 'purpose', or 'course' of time.

More specifically, when writing his essay in Paris, the same year that Hitler and Stalin signed their nonaggression pact and the fate of the future seemed hopeless, Benjamin became suddenly inspired by a work of art that was already very close to him, a painting that he had purchased from the painter Paul Klee.⁸¹ This slightly abstract image, *Angelus Novus* (1920), which has since become a familiar reference in critical and cultural theory, depicts a winged figure looking directly at the viewer with its mouth and wings stretched wide open. In particular, with its back turned towards the future, for Benjamin, it is as if the figure is being pulled from behind against its will (Benjamin 258). The angel is propelled forward by what Benjamin interprets as the storm of historical “progress” (258). Thus, moving blindly into the future, the angel appears as a flash of hope for Benjamin; a reminder to its viewers, in the present, that an alternative course of history is still possible. [See figure below.]



(Figure 12: Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920)

Although a great deal has already been written on Benjamin’s treatment of Klee’s painting, I would like to highlight that what is missing from these analyses is a deeper

⁸¹ The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact was signed by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union on August 23, 1939.

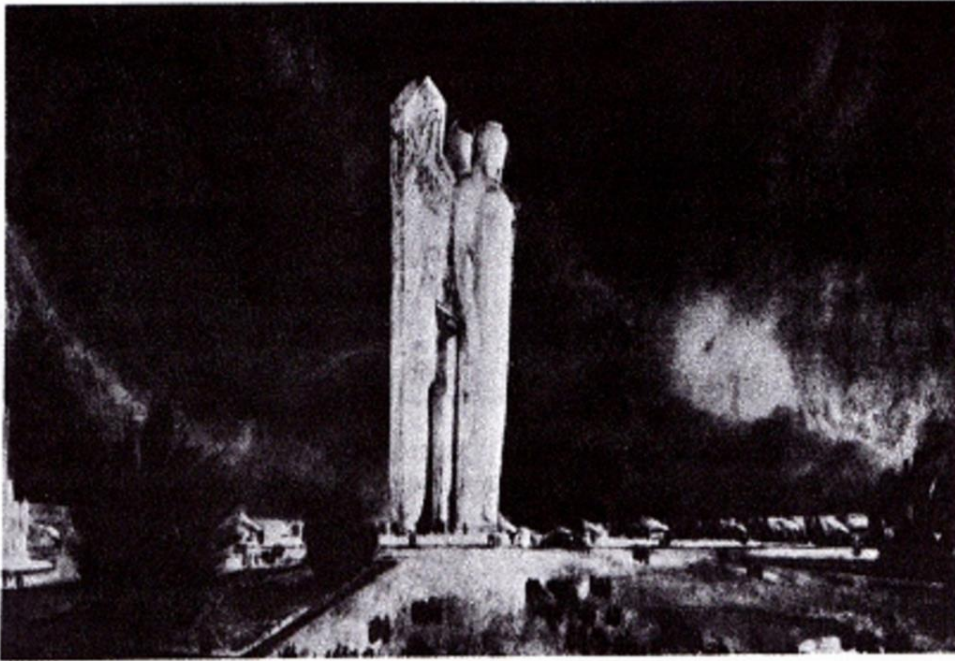
examination of the clear fact that, as with Josef's canvas, the painting is also a work of art. That is to say, in addition to Benjamin's interpreted message of the "Angel of History", there is also an important aesthetic effect of the painting produced by the fact that it is an actual painting.

In *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1991), Susan Buck-Morse comes closest to also highlighting this aesthetic importance of Klee's painting in relation to Benjamin's theory. However, she does so by way of a subtle juxtaposition of images rather than by an explicit analysis of the painting's formal features. The main suggestion that Buck-Morse makes is that Benjamin's reference to *Angelus Novus* stands in direct opposition to another "angel" from the period: Paul Bigot's prize-winning monument, *Statue of Victory* (1931). [See figure below.] Bigot's design was proposed for the Rond Point de la Défense, Paris in 1931. As Buck-Morse describes, the statue was created to celebrate the monumental progress and perceived grandeur of the French state. She writes:

[It is] ...a gigantic winged sculpture, an "angel of victory" celebrating the history of French military triumphs... A classical figure, [which] ...faces the future with calm confidence. Her monumental grandeur dwarfs the crowd that feels its insignificance as a consequence, [of] its childlike dependence on forces greater than itself, given the cosmic scale of world events and the destinies of nations (Buck-Morse 93).

Bigot's sculpture thus represents a dominant icon of history which helps to propagate the myth that as Buck-Morse argues, the "present course of events cannot be resisted" (79). The crowds who witness the statue are meant to feel insignificant in the face of larger forces and events of history. For these reasons, George Bataille also critically proposes that we should acknowledge how "...monumental productions are the real masters of the world...[since they group]...servile multitudes in their shadows...[and impose]...admiration and astonishment, [through] order and constraint" (Bataille 172, my translation).⁸²

⁸² "...les productions monumentales sont actuellement les véritables maîtres sur toutes la terre, groupant à leur ombre des multitudes serviles, imposant l'admiration et l'étonnement, l'ordre et la contrainte" (Bataille, George. from the essay, "Architecture", [my translation] *Oeuvres complètes de G. Bataille*, Vol 1. 1922-1940. (Paris Gallimard, 1970.) p.172.



(Figure 13: Paul Bigot, *Statue of Victory*, 1931)

Importantly then, Benjamin's interpretation of *Angelus Novus* is physically and formally, in direct opposition to Bigot's monument. As Buck-Morse argues, "...what could be more unlike this monument to mythic progress than Paul Klee's painting...[that]...in relation to the viewer, retains human proportions" (Buck-Morse 94-95). Klee's painting does not exert authority over the viewer, but rather meets her on an intimate level. Buck-Morse stresses that the representational message of the painting provides the real "critical force of this image" (95). Thus for Buck-Morse, more than the actual painting, it is Benjamin's description of Klee's figure that "...provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress" (95).

Although this interpretation is perfectly convincing, we should not overlook the painting's powerful formal function as a work of art. In other words, as I would like to argue, the force of the image also comes from the painting itself. Indeed, the dominant view of history that the monument represents, must be critiqued by more than yet another representation of history, as Buck-Morse suggests. Rather, as I would like to argue, it must be critiqued through and with the sensations and expressions we encounter directly in works of art.

To help support this point further, Georges Bataille also argues in his essay “Architecture” (1929), that we need to be wary of a monumental tendency in art history that attempts to reduce these artistic sensations into a collective “official ideal” (Bataille 171).⁸³ Bataille terms this monumental tendency as the “academic construction in painting” (171).⁸⁴ What he means is that such traditional paintings aim to freeze an important event in time, and to preserve it as an eternal ideal (and myth). This task is rooted in traditional aesthetics, where paintings (along with statues and sculptures) are relegated to what can be termed the “spatial-arts.” Here, they are assigned the impossible task of representing historical events. As assumingly static art forms, they only have a single instant to do so.

As Lessing famously argues in the *Laocoon* (1767), spatial arts such as paintings and monuments are thus required to “...use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most *pregnant* one, the one most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow” (Lessing 92). The assumption passed down from Lessing is that the material constraints of spatial arts require them to represent historical events through a single, unmoving image. In this way, monuments are not simply limited to depicting the past, but must also project a fixed vision of the future: the inevitable temporality that, as Lessing states, will most likely follow the pregnant moment (Lessing 92). Thus we arrive at Walter Benjamin’s “eternal image of the past”: an image, which because of its desire to capture all of history, becomes devoid of time (Benjamin 262).

Nonetheless, as I have been arguing, by contrast, the works by the Fauves and Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* are marked by a propensity for movement. In other words, there is a direct quality to Klee’s painting that, like Josef’s canvas, draws attention to the act of viewing itself as a moving and living experience. In Klee’s composition, the angel’s eyes look directly back at us, the viewers. We are forced into a process which self-reflexively highlights our own experience of viewing the painting in the present. The canvas thus inverts our gaze back on our subjectivity, providing the potential for self-reflection, action, and agency. In short, this sense of directness

⁸³ “...la volonté de contraindre l’esprit à un idéal officiel” [my translation.] (Bataille, Georges. from the essay, “Architecture”, *Oeuvres complètes de G. Bataille*, Vol 1. 1922-1940. (Paris Gallimard, 1970) p.171. For a more detailed examination of Bataille’s views on architecture, see Denis Hollier’s *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille* (1989).

⁸⁴ “...la construction académique en peinture” [my translation.] (Bataille, Georges. from the essay, “Architecture”, *Oeuvres complètes de G. Bataille*, Vol 1. 1922-1940. (Paris: Gallimard, 1970.) p.171.

and temporal awakening is the “shock” that Benjamin describes in his essay (Benjamin 261). It partakes of the necessary “time of the now” that he celebrates, as opposed to the “empty time” of historical mythologies (263, 261). As with the Fauvist experimentations with color then, the indexicality produced through the painting’s intimacy is yet another way of countering the myths of the past, creating the opportunity of in Benjamin’s terms, blasting “open the continuum of history” (262).

Thus, for the above reasons, we can argue that Josef’s painting is a counter-monumental work of art precisely because of the canvas’ temporality. It produces a moving and particular effect in the present that reminds Josef of the intimate sense of liberation that he felt in 1968. It is a sensation not of negativity or melancholia, but rather of possibility and of uncertainty, which allowed him to eventually leave his country and to cross the border “...with a brisk step and with no regrets” (Kundera, *Ignorance* 76). Again for this reason as Kundera explains in the novel, Josef’s canvas reminds him of his necessary “attachment to the present” that he feels over the past (76). As such, as Kundera claims further, Josef’s nostalgia “...did not become less malevolent but, disregarded and kept at a distance, it lost its power over him” (76). In short, in the moment Josef reencounters the painting, he realizes that if he had never left Prague twenty years earlier, he would never have met his wife in Copenhagen and experienced a more personal form of “history,” away from the grand events of his homeland. As Kundera confirms, in this moment in the novel, the sensation that Josef experiences counters his “recollections,” and shields “him against their intrusion” (76). Thus, rather than representing a traumatic event from his past, Josef’s painting instead acts as an intimate monument for both his present and future.

Irena’s Walk

Towards the end of the novel, a similar moment take place for Irena, when she decides be alone and to take a stroll through the city. As with Josef, in this moment, Irena realizes that she is no longer possessed by the historical events of her country, and that she is capable of breaking free from its hold and its crippling nostalgia. In particular, while walking through a quiet suburb behind Prague’s castle, she is suddenly awakened to the fact that her identity is not defined exclusively by the historical events of the city. In other words, Irena questions the supposed

permanence of her nostalgia, and realizes that she is also capable of moving on from the city's traumatic history. Crucially, in this moment, she begins to reevaluate her identity as an émigré, which had been the defining characteristic of her exile since the invasion. Describing the moment in more detail, Kundera explains:

[Irena] had always taken it as a given that emigrating was a misfortune. But, now she wonders, wasn't it instead an illusion of misfortune, an illusion suggested by the way people perceive an émigré? Wasn't she interpreting her own life according to the operating instructions other people had handed her? (Kundera, *Ignorance*, 23)

What is unique about this moment in the novel is that it takes Irena away from the grand event of the invasion, and its overwhelming dominance over her life. As with Josef's painting then, there is also a specific indexicality to the scene effecting both Irena and the reader. As I would like to now demonstrate, through moments of temporal deixis, Irena's stroll through the Prague suburb offers an expansive sense of the present, free from the crippling myth of nostalgia and of great events. More specifically, to help understand how such indexicality is expressed through literature, let's turn briefly to the concept of deixis

In more detail, according to the literary theorist Mieke Bal, deixis is indicated by "...words that only have meaning in the context in which they are uttered, such as 'I' and 'you,' 'yesterday,' 'here,' or 'there'" (Bal, *Narratology* 30). Moreover, as Bal explains, "the 'essence' of language lies in deixis, not reference, because what matters in language is not the world which subjects communicate 'about,' but the constitution of subjectivity required to communicate in the first place" (30).⁸⁵ Thus, similar to the index outlined above, when deictic words are expressed in literature, they become temporal markers for the present. In other words, they imply that what we are reading, seeing, or feeling, is taking place in the present moment. Thus, through what we can describe as a self-reflexive and co-affective process, the reader is made to share Irena's sensations in the novel. We are forced to feel what she feels.

⁸⁵ Bal makes this statement in connection with the French linguist Emile Benveniste, who she argues, "gave currency to the importance of deixis" (30).

More specifically in the scene, deictic markers are used to highlight Irena's movement through the Prague suburb. The use of a scene to express Irena's movement is also no coincidence. As Kundera explains in *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (2005), one of his writings on the art of the novel: "...a scene, even one recounted in the grammatical past tense, is ontologically the present: we *see* and *hear* it; it unfolds before us *here* and *now*" (*The Curtain* 13, emphasis added). Thus, reading the scene it is clear that the constantly shifting temporality is emphasized through Kundera's use of deixical words, such as "here," "now," and "this." For example, if we return to the scene, we will see that it begins as follows:

...in the autumn sunshine *this* garden neighborhood scattered with little villas reveals a quiet beauty that grips her heart and lures her into a long walk
(Kundera, *Ignorance*, 133, emphasis added).

In particular, the word "this" in the passage brings us directly into the text. What we are reading is a moving process taking shape in the present moment. In other words, Kundera expresses a similar sensation of the city that we experienced previously with Josef's painting. During Irena's stroll, Kundera describes the image for us in full detail:

Seen from where she is strolling, Prague is a broad green swath of peaceable neighborhoods with narrow tree-lined streets. *This* is the Prague she loves... the Prague born at the turn of the previous century, the Prague of the Czech lower middle class, the Prague of her childhood, where in wintertime she would ski up and down the hilly little lanes, the Prague where at dusk the encircling forests would steal into town to spread their fragrance" (133, emphasis added).

The scene creates an intimate bond between the novel and the reader, a bond that we also experienced in the case of Josef's imaginary painting. Representationally the two images are similar; compare the Prague suburb of the "lower-middle class," the "leafy neighborhoods" and "bright colors." But what most unites them is the expression of sensation. Following Irena on her stroll through the city, the readers' senses become engaged with "a single touch of *this* kindly intimacy, a single whiff of *this* idyll she inhales *here*" (134 emphasis added). In opposition to the

Kafka T-shirt and the static Prague of the postcards and tourists, according to Kundera, "...*this* is the picture she has harbored as the emblem of her lost country: little houses in gardens stretching away out of sight over rolling land" (*Ignorance*, 134 emphasis added). More than just a picture then, a sensation of particular intimacy arises in Irena: "she suddenly understands how much she loves this city...[and is]...suffused with the certainty that she will escape; that she will not stay on in this city... nor in the life this city is weaving for her" (134, 138).

The use of deixis then, is not a random literary trope employed by Kundera to evoke a particular style of prose. Rather, it is used to create affective moments in the text, which serve to counter the myth of nostalgia, which is the overarching philosophy of the novel. The temporal indices during Irena's walk are not references about her state of mind or her personal relationship with the city; on the contrary, they produce and constitute these acts of subjectivity as temporalities. They show us that subjectivity is an affective process that depends on temporality; it depends on the active embodiment through which we become ourselves through the time of the "now." It depends on the possibility of the future, which opens up through the contingency and uncertainty of both time and subjectivity. To affirm the point further, as Kundera describes in the novel, at the end of her stroll, Irena reflects that:

...*today* she is finally carrying out the farewell walk she failed to take last time; she is finally saying her Great Farewells to the city that she loves more than any other and that she is prepared to lose once again, without regret, to be worthy of a life of her own (138).

In short, as with Josef's painting, this minor moment in Irena's life is transformed into an intimate and personal encounter. That is to say, through the novel's use of deixis and the index, the singularity of Josef's painting and Irena's walk are provided with an attention to detail, and with a sense of significance, that would otherwise be overshadowed by the grand events of history, and by the characters' own initial feelings of nostalgia. The moments take on sensations that further reaffirm their decisions to leave, and the intimate senses of freedom that came with them.

Memories as Monuments

In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes sensation as a process of subjective and temporal embodiment:

...the fusion of soul and body in the act, the sublimation of biological into personal existence, and of the natural into the cultural world is made both possible and precarious by the temporal structure of our experience (Merleau-Ponty 97).

Merleau-Ponty goes on to support his argument by referencing a specific scene in Saint-Exupéry's memoir, *Pilote de guerre* (1942). In the passage, Saint-Exupéry describes this particular moment as a sensation of time, which he experiences while flying a fighter-plane during the Second World War. Saint-Exupéry writes that in the moment:

It is as if my life were given to me every second, as if my life became every *moment* more keenly felt. I live. I am alive. I am still alive. I am always alive. I am now nothing but a source of life" (97, emphasis added).⁸⁶

What better phrase to describe Josef and Irena's experiences? Josef's canvas prompts the "glorification of the present" through its celebration of a moment of apparent freedom. Irena's affirmation of the present is experienced similarly while walking through a Prague suburb, "suddenly, like a gust of wind" (Kundera, *Ignorance* 76, 138).

Once again, it is important to highlight that in the novel, these sensations are mediated by memories. When Josef confronts the "Czech Derain," he not only encounters the painting, but also the memory of the painting, a memory that jumps out at him from the canvas. After gazing at the picture for quite some time, the narrator specifies, "Josef thought about his painting" (68). Through that moment of reflection, a memory was formed in his mind, embodying the full significance of his decision to leave the country. Similarly, when Irena is struck by a minor moment during her stroll through the Prague suburb, her pleasure is produced most forcefully by

⁸⁶ Saint-Exupéry, *Pilote de guerre* (1942). p.174.

her memories of the city. While Irena walks through “those leafy neighborhoods” of Prague, her memory takes over, and paints the following picture for her:

...and instantly there come rushing the names she loved as a young girl: Macha, poet at the time when his nation, a water sprite, was just emerging from the mists; Jan Neruda, the storyteller of ordinary Czech folk; the songs of Voskovec and Werich from the 1930s, so loved by her father, who died when she was a child; Hrabal and Skvorecky, novelists of her adolescence; and the little theatres and cabarets of the sixties, so free, so merrily free, with their sassy humor; it was the incommunicable scent of this country, its intangible essence, that she had brought along with her to France (Kundera 135-136).

Staring at the city from the park, Irena remembers art and literature, and the sensations of pleasure that these works instilled in her. Irena’s joy in the Prague suburb is not only produced by her sensations in the present, but also by their recombination with older sensations that have become monumentalized in her mind as memories. These memories-as-monuments reproduce the effects of the artworks and performances that she lists, collectively embodying what she feels to be the “incommunicable scent” of her past. Not so much the artworks themselves, then, but rather the memories of those works, combined with sensations, together produce an affirmation of life for Irena.

The recollections that Josef and Irena experience are not rational, knowledgeable, or voluntary. On the contrary, they are unexpectedly ignited through very particular experiences and sensations. They are what Marcel Proust outlines as involuntary memories in his novel. His most famous example is of course the “Madeleine Incident” in *In Search of Lost Time*.

In the first volume of the novel, immediately before the narrator is about to return home from his mother’s house, upon a cold winter’s day, he is offered “...one of those squat, plump little cakes called ‘petite madeleines’ which look as though they had been molded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell” (Proust 60). After dipping the cake into his cup of tea, the pastry touches his lips, and he experiences an intense “shiver” running throughout his body (60). The sensation is described in more detail in the following passage:

An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence... I ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal (Proust 60).

Upon closer inspection, the narrator realizes that the experience comes with a memory. Proust writes:

The taste was that of the little piece of Madeleine which his Aunt Leonie used to give him on Sunday mornings [during his childhood] at Combray (63).

For Combray as for Irena's and Josef's Prague, it is not the sensation in isolation, but rather the memory of the sensation that creates "...something which does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual, which it alone can bring into the light of day" (Proust 61). Thus, Combray is transformed into a work of art: a work with no obvious limits, since its sensations are no longer reduced only to the past. From the petite Madeleine, a series of sensations and memories become transformed into minor monuments for the future; monuments that will continue to be brought to life by future readers touched by Proust's novel.

The famous scene also shows us that the dominance of a common narrative in representing the past can be subverted through involuntary, affective acts of remembering. In *Ignorance*, Irena and Josef do not consciously think about the past, but are forced to do so by the sensations that they each encounter. In *Proust and Signs* (1964), Gilles Deleuze also stresses this power of the involuntary for Proust. He writes:

...thought is nothing without something that forces and does violence to it. More important than thought is 'what leads to thought'... [This is because] the poet learns that what is essential is outside of thought, in what forces us to think. The *leitmotif* of Time regained is the word *force*: impressions that force us to look, encounters that force us to interpret, expressions that force us to think" (*Proust and Signs*, 61, emphasis added).

Similarly in *What is Philosophy?* (1991), Deleuze and Guattari argue that Proust's novel provides us with the most valuable illustration of an alternative understanding of the monumental. They argue, "...it is true that every work of art is a monument, but here...[Proust's]...monument is not something commemorating a past, [rather] it is a *bloc of sensations* that owe their preservation only to themselves" (Deleuze and Guattari 167-168, emphasis added). Furthermore, they write, "...a monument does not commemorate or celebrate something that has happened but [rather] confides to the ear of the future the persistent sensations that embody the [moment]..." (176). In this sense, artworks such as *In Search of Lost Time* and *Ignorance* can give such moments, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, "...a body, a life, a universe" (177). As they explain in more detail:

This was how Proust defined the art-monument by that life higher than the "lived," by its "qualitative differences," its "universes" that construct their own limits, their distances and proximities, their constellations and the blocs of sensations they put into motion... These universes are neither virtual nor actual; they are possibles, the possible as aesthetic category ("the possible or I shall suffocate"), the existence of the possible..." (177).

Through its consistent emphasis on such moments, the novel shows us that our memories can become reignited and brought to life through a creative ignorance of the future; that is, through an openness towards the "unknown." Thus, by revealing minor, yet liberating sensations of time, *Ignorance* overturns the myth of nostalgia and Homer's "moral hierarchy of emotions," which for centuries have instructed us on how to relate to the past. In more detail, Kundera summarizes this argument in his novel, when he writes:

For twenty years [Odysseus] had thought about nothing but his return. But once he was back, he was amazed to realize that his life, the very essence of his life, its center, its treasure, lay outside Ithaca, in the twenty years of his wanderings. And this treasure he had lost, and could retrieve only by *telling* about it" (Kundera, *Ignorance* 34, emphasis added).

In other words, Kundera's novel challenges the myth that our lives are only rooted in historical events, and the traditional values that are usually ascribed to them. Again it is through such minor moments that the novel upends these traditional values and historical structures. As Kundera writes, following Irena's stroll through the suburbs, she is "...finally saying her Great Farewells to the city that she loves more than any other and that she is prepared to lose once again, without regret, to be worthy of a life of her own" (Kundera 138).

A Narrative of One's Own

Finally, it is important to note that such moments for Irena and Josef do not lead to any clear resolution at the end of the novel. There is no restoration, nor equilibrium, nor harmony in the novel's conclusion. By contrast, unlike Odysseus' Great Return in the *Odyssey* that had established a "hierarchy of morals" and a duty to one's homeland, as Kundera argues; Irena and Josef each decide to leave Prague once again, and to continue their lives abroad, for better or for worse. From this narrative standpoint, we can argue that *Ignorance*'s conclusion is intentionally ambiguous, and as such, it propels both its protagonists and readers forward into an unknown future.

Ultimately, as I would like to argue, the novel's ending is also fitting with our understanding of the critical qualities of modern literature as outlined above, and similarly to Kundera's own writings on the art of the novel. In particular, if we return to Kundera's essay *The Curtain*, he states that in relation to literature, and when "...applied to art, the notion of history has nothing to do with progress; [but rather] it resembles a journey to explore unknown lands" (Kundera 15). Thus as we experience similarly in Kundera's *Ignorance*, against the larger forces of history, and the overwhelming events of the twentieth century, the novel uncovers experiences of ambiguity and openness, and the possibility of difference through the lives of its protagonists.

In short, what I have been trying to make clear is that Kundera's *Ignorance* helps us to challenge a traditional understanding of history that is constricting, not only because it is often imposed upon us from others, but also because it can overshadow the more minor forms of experience that importantly shape our lives. That is to say, in place of grand events, including the Soviet Invasion of Prague in 1968, *Ignorance* reveals quieter moments that emerge slowly and

subtly, and that however small and insignificant they initially may appear, are brought to life through the inner lives of its characters. The novel exposes how great events and nostalgia are both unhelpful myths, and also shows us that a life in exile can be worthy, although ambiguous and unpredictable.

Chapter 3

A Secret Demand: Borges' Courtyard Miracle

I have long suspected that history, true history, is far more modest, and that its essential dates may well be, for a long time, secret as well.

– Jorge Luis Borges “The Modesty of History” (1952)

Through their exploration of minor moments, we have now demonstrated further how certain modern novels such as Kundera's *Ignorance* can reverse a traditional understanding of history and the dominant values that it represents. Additionally, as I have been arguing, a second key characteristic that we find in such works, is an experimentation with language that clearly challenges the “event” as the most dominant feature of literary and narrative forms. Once again, and as outlined above, there is a specific type of writing found in modern literature that moves beyond realism in its expression of minor moments. In this chapter, I examine this type of writing more closely in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, and in particular in his short story “The Secret Miracle” (1943), a lesser-known work that as we will see, both destabilizes a traditional understanding of the ordinary, and resists a dominant representation of history.⁸⁷

Although Borges' writings are often revered as master-works of twentieth-century fiction, we can argue that his stories, or *ficciones*, still sit uncomfortably within the literary canon. This is because, while they are often grouped within specific literary movements such as modernist and postmodernist fiction, they also remain largely elusive to their readers and resist a clear understanding.⁸⁸ In particular, through their many contradictions, perplexing details, and

⁸⁷ A shorter version of this chapter was published previously as, “Adam Chambers, “A Secret Demand: On Endless Forms of Fiction in Borges' *El Milagro Secreto*,” in the journal, *Elephant & Castle*, edited by R. Calzoni, M. Gardini, and V. Parente-Čapková (Bergamo: University of Bergamo, September, 2019).

⁸⁸ The debate regarding where to place Borges' works in literary history is ongoing. He has been described as both a late modernist and an early postmodernist. For example, in John Barth's seminal article “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), which famously highlighted a type of writing that is now understood to be postmodern, Borges' fiction is used as a primary example (Barth 29). Alternately, for a strong endorsement of Borges as a modernist writer, see Sylvia Molloy's “Mimesis and Modernism: The Case of Jorge Luis Borges” (2022), in the edited collection, *Literary Philosophers: Borges, Calvino, Eco* (Molloy 109).

condensed narratives, the Argentine author's works are strangely unclassifiable; not bound to a single national literature, they also fail to unite their readers around a set of recognizable literary forms.⁸⁹ For these reasons, as I would like to propose, Borges' stories are strangely "secretive" (from the Latin: *secretus*); meaning, they are set outside of, and set apart from what readers typically understand to be the established borders of literature.⁹⁰ While his stories often travel between alternating temporalities, both ancient and modern;⁹¹ they also present a series of secrets that refuse to be answered. I would like to argue that these secrets are demands in Borges' works that continuously challenge their readers, while also seeming to escape the limits of literary genres. In short, they question the meaning of literature, and in so doing, also help to expose literature's most secret quality of all; its inherent uncertainty and ambiguity.

In more detail, there is a particular moment in Borges' "The Secret Miracle" that best highlights these critical qualities in his writings. The moment takes place just immediately before the protagonist, Jaromir Hladik, is about to be killed by a firing squad during the German occupation of Prague in 1939. Hladik, a Czech-Jewish writer, is desperately awaiting his execution, when all of a sudden, and to his own surprise, the universe freezes before his eyes. Standing inside a prison courtyard, along with four Gestapo soldiers, and a bee that is frozen in mid-air, Hladik cannot move or speak. And yet somehow, in this strange state of suspension, he is still fully conscious and aware of his surroundings. Most importantly as Borges reveals, Hladik is still capable of thinking and creating (Borges, *Fictions* 130).

As we discover further from Borges, the stillness of time arises not as a random event, nor as a dream, but rather as a "secret miracle" performed by God. Specifically, we learn that in answering Hladik's prayers from the night before, God has granted him exactly one year to complete his unfinished play, entitled, *The Enemies* (a verse drama set in the nineteenth century

⁸⁹ My point is not to suggest that Borges' stories are "universal," but rather that there are qualities within them that resist such classifications altogether. Although Borges was an Argentine writer, his writings are so elusive that they no longer belong to him alone, nor to any literary movement, nor to a national literature. In this sense, they are clear examples of what Deleuze and Guattari describe as a "minor literature," in that they paradoxically resist such conventions from within the literary canon – from within, "great (or established" literature" (Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 18).

⁹⁰ For example, in *Borges: A Writer on the Edge* (1993), Beatriz Sarlo argues that, "...placed on the limits between cultures, between literary genres, between languages, Borges is above all, the writer of the *orillas*" (Sarlo 6). From the Spanish, Sarlo translates the term roughly as, "...edge, shore, margin, [and] limit;" but more importantly, as she highlights, "...for Borges, the *orillas* possess the qualities of an imaginary territory, an indeterminate space..." (Sarlo 20, 21).

⁹¹ See for example, Borges' short stories "The Garden of Forking Paths" (1941), and "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" (1939) in his collection *Fictions* (1944).

that he had been perpetually putting off writing). And so finally, without distractions, and with “no document but his memory,” Hladik works on his play during the little time in his life that remains (Borges 130). However, after exactly one year elapses, and at the same moment that he finishes the final line of the drama, time and the universe resume their usual course of motion, and Hladik is killed by the soldiers’ bullets. At the end of the story, Borges writes, “Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March, at 9:02 A.M.” (131).

What makes the moment especially critical is that despite representing Hladik’s death, it also portrays a surprising gesture of life. That is, against the stark circumstances of Hladik’s execution, the moment also expresses an intimate celebration of art and the imagination. This sense of affirmation is articulated most forcefully through Hladik’s decision to finish writing his play during the year he spends frozen in the courtyard. As the narrator reveals, Hladik “...did not work for posterity, nor did he work for God, whose literary preferences were largely unknown to him,” but rather, he composed his play from the “sudden gratitude” that comes with a free act of creation (130). While facing certain death at the hands of his Nazi captors, Hladik’s only wish is to produce a work of art that he knows no one will ever read, and that will only exist in his mind. In this way, the story demonstrates a clear form of artistic autonomy. We can argue that it presents, in Immanuel Kant’s terms, an experience that is “agreeable on its own accord” (Kant 133).⁹²

However, spending the final year of one’s life frozen and trapped in a courtyard is not only an aesthetic fantasy, it is also an ethical proposition. In writing “The Secret Miracle,” Borges poses the same ethical question to Hladik as he does to his readers, which is namely: “how would you spend your time, if you were totally alone, but completely free?” Hladik’s decision to compose his play is not, as one critic has argued, an attempt to “deny the passing of time through the use of imagination and art” (McMurray 66), but is rather, as I will try to demonstrate below, an act of transforming the very experience of time itself.⁹³ Rather than obediently waiting for his scheduled execution, Hladik asserts a degree of agency over his life; or, to be more precise, over the way that he uses his time. Although he is eventually killed by the firing squad in Prague, the work of art that he creates, stages an experience of time that is free

⁹² Kant famously argues that the category of aesthetics should be separated from those of science and morality. For a more detailed discussion of “aesthetic autonomy,” see below.

⁹³ See also, Clive Griffen, who reaffirms that the central theme in Borges’ writings is time: “...of all the metaphysical questions that absorbed Borges, the most important to him was time” (Griffen 9).

from outside control. In this sense, the specific form of autonomy that the story celebrates is not only artistic but also temporal. But what does it mean to be temporally free? And how can art play an important role in creating this sense of freedom, in the face of overwhelming and horrific events of history?

In the present chapter, I attempt to answer these questions by examining the critical relationship between art and time in “The Secret Miracle.” More specifically, through a close reading of Borges’ story, I argue that individuals can sometimes overcome the constraints of time, through an act of aesthetic creation. As we will see, Hladik achieves a degree of autonomy over his situation not so much by creating an “object,” but rather by performing a “gesture;” one that I argue, becomes a means of both resistance and survival. After first discussing the roles of ethics and aesthetics in the story, I examine this gesture in more detail. Specifically, in relation to Giorgio Agamben’s use of the term as a mode of ethical action, and to Michel Foucault’s analysis on the infinite repetition of language, I argue that by offering the reader an autonomous experience of time, Borges’ story critically reaffirms one’s sense of life and pleasure.

Free Play

Before we can understand the critical impact of Hladik’s verse drama, it is first necessary to analyze the ethical implications of his actions. To demonstrate Hladik’s ability to temporarily overcome the circumstances of his execution, a crucial relationship between ethics and aesthetics needs to be outlined. One way to approach this relationship is through a discussion of artistic autonomy and its ties to both temporality and pleasure.

As I’ve already pointed out, Hladik’s decision to compose his play can be seen as an example of the autonomy of art: it represents an activity that is both free from any outside control, and is also “agreeable on its own accord” (Kant 133).⁹⁴ The courtyard scene reinforces Kant’s theory that art operates within a distinct realm of human experience, which can be pleasurable in and of itself. Kant’s aesthetic philosophy is grounded above all in the subjective

⁹⁴ By “outside control” here, I mean political, religious, or social interference.

experience of artworks, and not solely in specific artworks themselves.⁹⁵ In other words, in Kant's theory there is a significant emphasis placed on the mind of the author, viewer, or reader, as she experiences a work of art. In his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant states that:

The judgment of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgment, and so not logical, but is aesthetic – which means that it is one whose determining ground *cannot be other than subjective* (203).

In the above sense, one can argue that Hladik's subjective experience is autonomous, more so than any particular "object" that he creates. Since Hladik cannot move his body, and has no access to a pen or a typewriter during the year he spends frozen in the courtyard, he is forced to compose his play only from memory and through the powers of his imagination. In this way he "writes" *The Enemies* through a form of internal monologue that only he and the reader can "hear." What makes this experience autonomous, then, is precisely its expression of aesthetic freedom. While waiting in the courtyard, Hladik asserts a degree of agency over the Gestapo soldiers by creating an artwork that is free from their knowledge and control. In the process of composing his play, he also becomes totally immersed in an experience that feels both justified and satisfying. In Kant's terms, the experience is "...something which could only prove purposive...as *play*" (emphasis added, Kant 133). After initially moving between states of "stupor to resignation," and then "from resignation to sudden gratitude," as Borges reveals, Hladik eventually understands that the moment is right to work on his play, and the act of doing so provides him with an intense sense of pleasure (Borges 130). Not only does he successfully finish his play at the end of the story, but as Borges highlights, in the process of doing so, he even comes to "...love the courtyard, [and] the prison" (130). In this way, pleasure becomes the critical source of Hladik's autonomy.

In short, what makes this sense of pleasure especially critical is that it represents an alternative experience of time, one that functions in direct opposition to the chronological time of the diegesis, (i.e. the fictional world of the story). It becomes clear that the narrative of the "The Secret Miracle" stages an aesthetic tension between two opposing forms of temporality. On the

⁹⁵ I think the fact that there are relatively few examples of artworks in *The Critique of Judgment* reinforces this point.

one hand, readers will notice a quantitative, chronological form of time, representing the oppressive time of the German occupation. While on the other hand, readers are confronted with a qualitative, personal form of time, expressing Hladik's own *subjective* experience of art and pleasure. To help differentiate between these two forms of temporality and to try to uncover their critical significance within the story, let's look closely at how Borges' begins his narrative.

Free Time

From the opening lines of the "The Secret Miracle", the reader is presented with a series of references to "everyday" chronological time. For example, the story begins, "...on the night of March 14, 1939, in an apartment on Prague's Zeltnergasse" (Borges 124).⁹⁶ In the second paragraph, we learn that on the nineteenth of the month, Hladik's address is given to the Nazis by an informer (124). Later that day, "towards dusk," he is arrested by the Gestapo; and then finally, during his interrogation by the Gestapo captain, Hladik's execution is scheduled for "March 29, at 9:00 A.M" (124, 125). When grouped together, what becomes clear is that more than just markers of narrative development, these dates and times in the story also act as signs of regulation over Hladik's life. That is to say, they outline a political form of control over Hladik's experience of time.

Nowhere is this form of control more apparent than in the interrogation scene just mentioned. When examining the passage closely, we will notice that there is a significant delay between Hladik's arrest on the nineteenth of the month, and the actual date of his execution, which is scheduled for "March 29, at 9:00 A.M" (125). This delay is crucial, because it demonstrates how time can be used as a form of punishment in the story. Instead of directly shooting Hladik during or after their interrogation, for no apparent reason, the soldiers decide to wait an extra ten days before they actually kill him. As a result, Hladik is forced to endure an increased level of suffering while waiting in prison. What makes this form of punishment even more tragic for Hladik, is the fact that it was decided upon purely arbitrarily by the Gestapo captain. As Borges writes, "...that delay (whose importance the reader will soon discover) was

⁹⁶ Borges' reference to the street "Zeltnergasse," is a clear homage to Kafka, who also resided on the street around twenty-five years before the story takes place.

caused by the administrative desire to work impersonally and deliberately, as vegetables do, or planets” (125). Following the scheduling and sentencing of his death, Hladik imagined and “...anticipated the process endlessly, from the sleepless dawn to the mysterious discharge of rifles” (125). Metaphorically speaking, Hladik “died hundreds of deaths” before the actual date of his execution (125). Thus, through a bureaucratic act of indifference, and with absolutely no regard for his life, in the days leading up to the execution, the Gestapo not only control Hladik’s body, they also control his experience of time.

As I would like to demonstrate though, in contrast to this temporal form of control, we also find an alternative experience of time in the story, one that expresses Hladik’s imaginative sense of freedom. This alternative experience of time appears most clearly through what is known in narrative theory as a “slow-down,” a critical moment when there is a significant decrease in the story’s tempo (Bal, 75). As Mieke Bal highlights in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1997), unlike a “pause,” a more common literary device in which “no movement of the fabula-time is implied,” with a “slow-down,” the reader’s attention is “directed towards the fact that the passage of time has slowed down” (76). In this way, we are invited to follow a more “subjective” experience of time, in which the main action and thoughts of the story’s characters are condensed into an extremely short period of time.

More specifically, although as readers we follow “an entire year” in Hladik’s mind during the frozen period in the courtyard, if we pay close attention to Borges’ final sentence, we will discover that, in fact, only two minutes have actually passed by before Hladik is killed by the firing squad (130). The execution is scheduled for “March 29, at 9:00 A.M.,” but as I mentioned above, the story’s final sentence states that “Jaromir Hladik died on the twenty-ninth of March at 9:02 A.M” (125, 131). Clearly only two minutes have passed in the objective time of the setting; yet during the *subjective* time of the narrative, an entire year has elapsed in Hladik’s mind. What this seemingly small detail reveals is that Hladik’s “frozen year” in the courtyard takes place exclusively in Hladik’s imagination. The narrative slow-down expresses an alternative experience of time, which cannot be measured by the oppressive world of the occupation – a world that systematically attempts to reduce temporality to the realm of the functional and the useful. That is, Hladik’s creative experience takes place in an alternative mode of time that resists such chronological calculations.

What makes the courtyard scene so powerful then, is the fact that for the first time in the story, Hladik is capable of experiencing a temporality that is uniquely his own. In direct opposition to the chronological time of his execution, Hladik engages in a form of temporality that is grounded above all in pleasure, and as Kant would argue, in “play” (Kant 133). In this way, the autonomy that Hladik experiences is both aesthetic and temporal. The relationship between these two forms of autonomy can be described as a celebration of life in the “The Secret Miracle.” Through the story’s emphasis on pleasure, readers witness a way of resisting the constraints of time through an act of aesthetic creation.

Present Pleasure

As we have just outlined, one of the main ways in which the Nazis control Hladik is by regulating his use of time. The Gestapo control Hladik’s relations with everyday, chronological, or “clock” time. And in doing so, they attempt to reduce Hladik to being simply another body among many others (Jewish bodies, that is), in a particular space and time (Czechoslovakia in 1939).⁹⁷ However, what the Nazis fail to recognize is that there are alternative experiences of time which cannot be reduced to such purely biological and linear conditions, and that can be creatively uncovered through works of art. In other words, they fail to realize that there is an important relationship between ethics, temporality, and aesthetics that can be critically brought together through an experience of pleasure. To help understand how pleasure functions as a form of resistance in Borges’ story, let’s look more closely at how the concept relates to both time and autonomy.

In his essay “The Instant and the Continuum,” Giorgio Agamben writes that “...for everyone there is an immediate and available experience on which a new concept of time could be founded” (*Infancy and History* 104). He argues that this experience is “pleasure” (104). According to Agamben, the experience of pleasure falls outside of any “measurable duration,” because it stands in clear opposition to a dominant and linear form of time (104). In the same essay, and throughout many of his other writings, Agamben often returns to Aristotle’s

⁹⁷ The registration and tattooing of numbers on the bodies of Jewish individuals during the Holocaust is the extreme example of this mode of temporal and bodily regulation.

Nicomachean Ethics (350 BC) to help illustrate this autonomous experience of time and to highlight its correspondence to a critical understanding of ethics. More specifically, Agamben illustrates how Aristotle reserves a special place and definition for time, in order to help describe the subjective experience of pleasure. He writes:

Aristotle had realized that pleasure was a heterogeneous thing in relation to the experience of quantified, continuous time. ‘The form [*eidōs*] of pleasure’ – he writes in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – is perfect [*téléion*] at any moment’, adding that pleasure, unlike movement, does not occur in a space of time, but is [rather] ‘within each now something whole and complete (Agamben 104).

The main point that Agamben wants to make is that the experience of pleasure cannot be reduced to any measurable number or to any movement in space. He wants to highlight a form of temporality that functions in opposition to the chronological understanding of time that would reduce human experience to that of a body and a number; to what he describes elsewhere as “naked life” (*Means without End* 4).⁹⁸ As I highlight above, we witness this experience of time throughout the Gestapo’s imprisonment of Hladik in the story, when his very being is reduced to a scheduled date in a calendar. During those anxious days, the exact date and time of Hladik’s execution dominate the purpose of his life.

However by contrast, there is also a form of critical pleasure that can resist the disciplinary nature of both the clock and the calendar. Agamben argues that pleasure is especially unique because it corresponds to an alternative experience of time which, at least for the subject experiencing it, is in Aristotle’s words, “...within each now something whole and complete” (104). The key term in Aristotle’s phrase is the word “now.” The term highlights Aristotle’s main claim that the feeling of pleasure is always a sensation that we experience in the

⁹⁸ The term, “*nuda vita*,” is translated interchangeably throughout Agamben’s writings as, “bare life,” and “naked life.” He develops the concept most thoroughly in his study on the ethics of ancient Roman law, titled *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). In this work Agamben argues that the legal term “*homo sacer*,” represents a clear example of how individuals can be reduced to merely a body in space in time. Specifically he give the example of an individual subject who has been charged with a crime, but because of his status as a non-citizen under Roman law, this subject cannot be religiously sacrificed if he is sentenced to death. Furthermore, if someone else murders this person, it will not be considered homicide. In this way, Agamben writes that “bare life,” is a “life which cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed in sacred life” (82).

present moment, outside regular time, and for this reason, is self-satisfactory. Pleasure does not depend or rely upon a predetermined point in the future. Its main temporal quality then, is that as a phenomenon, it exists exclusively in the *interim* – or, in the in-between (Bartoloni 12). As Aristotle states more specifically in Book X of his *Ethics*, pleasure is a process that “...does not acquire meaning or value in terms of its completeness, but is a certain experience of the present: it is not dependent upon a projected future point at which it will become whole” (Aristotle 318).⁹⁹ Pleasure is in this sense temporally autonomous; it cannot be timed. It is grounded in the present moment, and as a result, it resists serving anyone else’s plan or goal. It resists being reduced to a means towards an end. Immersing himself in an experience that is defined above all by play, Hladik momentarily enjoys a feeling of time that seems to never end. The moment is bound neither to the future nor to the past. It exists purely for itself.

A Pointless Exercise

But how can an experience of pleasure be understood as critical? More specifically, how can a sensation that is usually characterized as positive, be understood in terms that are negative?¹⁰⁰ Although Hladik is totally alone during the “year” he spends frozen in the courtyard, the sensation that he experiences completely overwhelms him to such a degree that it becomes a critical source of resistance in the story. The main reason for this transformation is because he encounters an experience of time that is removed from the chronological time of the Gestapo. Another reason is that Hladik spends his time in a way that is totally useless to those around him. The work of art that he creates can serve no purpose to the soldiers who have been ordered to kill him. Even if the Nazis could somehow penetrate Hladik’s thoughts, his artwork would be of no use to them. For these reasons, we can argue that the pleasure he experiences in writing is, as Roland Barthes would say, “*without function*” (Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* 17).

Thus, another way of phrasing Hladik’s experience of pleasure in the story is to state that it is “pointless”: it is not governed by any specific point in time. Nor can Hladik’s experience be reduced to a specific purpose or function. In other words, it has no point; it has no easily

⁹⁹ Quoted in Paolo Bartoloni’s “The Stanza of the Self: on Agamben’s Potentiality” (*Contretemps*, 5, December 2004, p12.)

¹⁰⁰ I mean “negative” here in a critical and conceptual sense.

recognizable use. Although it may seem paradoxical to state that something pointless is at the same time critical, this is essentially the central philosophy of the autonomy of art, and it is an ideal that Borges reinforces consistently throughout his body of writings. For example, in another short story, the famous “Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote” (1939), Borges writes that “...there is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately *pointless*” (emphasis added, Borges 41). The word “pointless” in the sentence has been translated in other English editions of the story as “useless,” from the Spanish, “*inútil*” (Sturrock 205).

In his study on the author, John Sturrock argues that this word *inútil*, “...is a key one in assessing the view which Borges ultimately takes on the purpose of literature” (205). To call literature “useless” is another way for Borges to say that it should be free and protected as art; that it should be autonomous. Sturrock writes, “Borges is only pretending to belittle what he has spent part of his life doing; he is really defending and not condemning ‘intellectual exercises’ when he calls them ‘useless’” (205). What Borges is defending, then, is the freedom of art to have no predefined or utilitarian function. Again, there is a paradox in the claim that literature can be “useless.” As Sturrock highlights in more detail:

At first sight it is a negative view...to regard something as ‘useless’ seems to disregard it altogether. But nothing which is made wholly useless, certainly nothing which is made with the care and patience required of the maker of a fiction. If a fiction is ‘useless’ then we need to know what it is useless for? One would have to be far gone in utilitarianism not to be able to grasp that the useless may also be valuable (205).

The uselessness of literature may serve an important critical and constructive purpose. But what exactly is so valuable about uselessness in “The Secret Miracle?” In other words, what makes Hladik’s experience simultaneously valuable and useless, and how do these qualities, when brought together, create a powerful gesture of resistance?

Aesthetic Autonomy

A common misunderstanding of the concept of autonomy is that it implies an actual detachment or isolation from the social and political world. Such an understanding incorrectly assumes that autonomous artworks are strictly formalist in nature, and are created for purely aesthetic purposes, what is commonly referred to as, “*l’art pour l’art*” (*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 182).¹⁰¹ As I’ve already pointed out, this does not have to be the case. Actual autonomy in art “...simply requires that works of art – be there concerns political, ‘purely’ aesthetic, or somewhere in between – remain under the control of artists, and the art world in which they work” (182). Moreover, the aim of artistic autonomy is not to “isolate artists or to separate art from the rest of life”, but rather, to “protect art and artists from political interference” (182). The notion of artistic autonomy promotes the idea that art should maintain a special place or status in society, and that artworks should exist in a realm that is free and distinct from everything else. This agrees with Kant’s philosophy of aesthetic autonomy, which claims that art is distinct because it exists as an “autonomous form liberated from the scrutiny of science and the principles of morality” (Kearny and Rasmussen 3). I argue that it is the very idea of autonomy which gives art its critical force, an idea that ultimately becomes a form of resistance in Borges’ story.

In addition to being granted the free time that he needs to work on his play, the clearest form of autonomy in “The Secret Miracle” still remains the fact that Hladik composes his drama solely from his imagination and from his memory – two faculties that, at least to some degree, remain under his own control. Moreover, as I’ve already pointed out, Hladik writes his play not for any personal fame or recognition, but rather for an anonymous form of pleasure that arrives once he has completely immersed himself in his work of art. He knows his play will have no readers, and yet he chooses to turn it into the final embodiment and gesture of his life. As José Eduardo González argues in *Borges and the Politics of Form* (1998), the courtyard scene

¹⁰¹ The concept of *l’art pour l’art* is very misleading because it is commonly thought to mean only the “purely aesthetic.” However, when it was first introduced by Théophile Gautier in the nineteenth century, the concept also implied that the creation “art for art’s sake,” was in fact a way of life – or in other words, a social ideology on how to live as an artist. In particular, artists that created art without any explicit political aims and goals were, whether they intended to or not, implicitly resisting the socio-economic roles and “uses” imposed upon them by the institutions in power. For the most critical overview of aesthetic autonomy, and to understand how the concept has evolved historically between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974).

represents “the most perfect example of literary autonomy” (González 189). As González argues in more detail:

It is a purposeless work of art...The social reality that is altering Jaromir Hladik’s life cannot interfere with the completely *autonomous* work of art that he has created inside his mind.” (emphasis added, 189).

As González continues in his reading of the scene, it becomes clear that “...the act of composing this play is [also] an individual’s rebellion against a fascist government” (189). The uselessness of a work of art becomes critical in relation to another subject, object, or ideology.

As I would like to also highlight, the strongest support for this negative view of autonomy can be found in Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). In his most in depth study on the subject, Adorno argues that the critical function of art lies in its inherent “functionlessness” (Adorno 297)¹⁰² In other words, the autonomy of art becomes critical as a result of its inherent resistance towards society. In more detail, Adorno argues:

...art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as “socially useful,” it criticizes society by merely existing (Adorno 296).

What Adorno means is that the uselessness of art can perform an important critical function, not in spite of, but rather, as a direct result of its lack of purpose. Adorno claims that art is at its most critical precisely when it resists any overt social, political, or ideological use.¹⁰³ In this way, Adorno argues that autonomous art “...embodies what does not allow itself to be managed and what total management suppresses” (306). Not only does art occupy a distinct realm of human

¹⁰² Again, I mean “negative” here in a critical and conceptual sense.

¹⁰³ For example, Adorno refers to the Greek dictatorship of the 1950s, whose “...tyrants knew why they banned Beckett’s plays, in which there is not a single political word” (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 306). The government banned the plays because it understood that through their ambiguity and uncertainty, artworks can reveal political truths about society, even if their content is not explicitly political.

experience, as Kant would argue; but also, this very distinctness according to Adorno, enables it to perform a critical function in society.¹⁰⁴

For the above reasons, the theory of aesthetic autonomy helps to highlight how Hladik's experience in the courtyard can be viewed as critical in Borges' story. Once again, this is because his artwork becomes autonomous only *in relation* to the Gestapo's control. Moreover, Hladik's play resists being reified or reappropriated by the Gestapo soldiers, because as Adorno would argue, "...it does not allow itself to be managed" by any outside forces (306). In short, we can argue that Hladik's play has no use for the Gestapo because ultimately, its uselessness becomes its sole *raison d'être*. In more detail, I will now demonstrate further how Hladik's verse drama becomes a critical source of resistance in the story.

An Endless Drama

When addressing the autonomy of Hladik's play, it would be wrong to simply describe it as an "end in itself."¹⁰⁵ This is because the play resists the term "end" in every sense and form. What becomes clear though when reading "The Secret Miracle," is that in addition to being critically pointless, Hladik's play is also strategically "endless." In other words, the play's narrative is structured in such a way that has no "end." The final moments of the drama bring us back to the beginning, and thus the action of the story continues in a perpetual circle, without ever stopping. As I would like to now demonstrate in more detail, similar to Aristotle's definition of pleasure, Hladik's play resists any fixed point in the past or the future. Rather, it attempts to remain suspended in the present moment, through an act of ongoing creation.

If we turn more closely to Borges' story, we will see that in the fifth paragraph, we are given a brief synopsis of Hladik's verse drama, *The Enemies* – the work that he had been perpetually putting off writing until the moment just before his execution. As I would like to argue, much like the greater story in which it is found, Hladik's work is also an experimentation with time. Moreover, Hladik's play attempts to stage an alternative experience of temporality, by

¹⁰⁴ For a further discussion of literary autonomy, including on the works of Franz Kafka, see also the novelist Gao Xingjian's excellent essay "Cold Literature," in his collection, *The Case for Literature* (2006).

¹⁰⁵ The phrase is often associated with notions of *l'art pour art*, and autonomous art.

resisting the constraints of a conventionally linear and chronological structure. This alternative experience of time is revealed to the reader, as Borges describes Hladik's drama through the following key details.

As we read in "The Secret Miracle," set in the castle district of Prague, Hladik's *The Enemies* begins in the library of its main character, Baron Römerstadt, on "...one of the last evenings of the nineteenth century" (Borges 127). During the opening act, Borges continues, Römerstadt meets a visitor. As the clock strikes seven, a ray of fading sunlight gently shines through the windowpane to the sound of a Hungarian folk song (127).¹⁰⁶ Soon afterwards, more visitors enter the room, and gradually Römerstadt begins to develop the uncomfortable sense that, instead of being strangers, he has actually met all of these men before, "perhaps in a dream" (127). The visitors "...all fawn upon him, but it is clear – first to the play's audience, then to the baron himself – that they are secret enemies, sworn to his destruction" (127). Through the play's dialogue, the audience also soon uncovers that Römerstadt is engaged to a woman named Julia de Weidenau, and that, at some point in the past, she had been courted by another man named Jaroslav Kubin. Slowly but surely, Römerstadt's paranoia increases, and as he drifts further into madness, he kills one of the characters in the room.

However, as Borges informs the reader, by the third and final act of the play, various flaws begin to appear with regard to narrative continuity. Actors "...come back onstage who had been discarded from the plot"; and at one point, "the man that Römerstadt killed returns" (Borges 127). In the closing moments of the drama, the first visitor also returns to the stage and repeats the same lines that he delivered in the opening act. Simultaneously, the clock strikes seven as it did before, and we are told that the same ray of sunlight shines through the windowsill, as "...the thrilling Hungarian melody floats upon the air" (127). Finally, the audience realizes that Baron Römerstadt and Jaroslav Kubin are in fact the same character, and that actually, as Borges reveals, "the play has not taken place" (128). Rather, "...it is the circular delirium that Kubin endlessly experiences and re-experiences" (128). Thus, by uniting the first and final scenes of the plot, and through the aesthetic motif of repetition, the drama has no end. It perpetually repeats itself in an endless circle.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ At the end of the nineteenth century, Prague was governed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

¹⁰⁷ See also, Borges' short story "The Circular Ruins" (1940), in his collection, *Fictions* (1944).

Although he does not succeed in completely stopping the flow of time, with his verse drama *The Enemies*, Hladik accomplishes the next best thing in his situation, which is to transform the conventional way in which we experience temporality. In other words, by structuring his play in such a way that will never end, Hladik is able to momentarily postpone his execution through a state of suspension. With his play, he creates an alternative experience of time that temporarily resists the chronological constraints of the world around him. The main way that Hladik produces this transformation is through the use of literary repetition. In addition to the recurrent motifs in the narrative (the clock-hand striking seven, the Hungarian folk song, the fading sunset), the strongest form of repetition in the play is the structure of the drama itself, and the way it is situated within the story. It is through the play's form then, that Hladik is able to overcome the circumstances of his execution. This formal device is best described as "mise-en-abyme."

Mise-en-abyme

As with many of Borges' other short stories, Hladik's play acts as a work within a work, what is commonly referred to in literary theory as "mise-en-abyme." The term was first coined by the French writer André Gide, who as Chris Baldick highlights, used it to describe the "...internal reduplication of a literary work or part of a work" (Baldick 211). As Baldick argues, a good example can be found in one of Gide's own novels, *The Counterfeiters* (1926), which recounts the life of a novelist who is also working on a novel by the same name (211). Another well-known known example of the concept can be found in Italo Calvino's novel, *If on a winter's night a traveller* (1979), in which the narrative depicts a reader who is also reading a novel titled, "If on a winter's night a traveller," by the author Italo Calvino. As Baldick reaffirms, the key characteristic of mise-en-abyme then, is the "'Chinese box' effect", which "...often suggests an infinite regress, i.e. an endless succession of internal duplications" (Baldick 211).¹⁰⁸

As outlined above, in "The Secret Miracle" these reduplications are found within Hladik's play and the larger context of the story in which it is framed. In other words, the

¹⁰⁸ See also, André Maurois, who argues similarly that in Borges' works, our thoughts often circle back upon themselves in perplexing ways: "...we find roads that fork, corridors that lead to nowhere, except to other corridors, and so on as far as the eye can see" (Maurois, 1964 xiii).

relationship between these two levels best characterizes the effect of *mise-en-abyme* in Borges' work. Additionally, as Lucien Dällenbach argues in *The Mirror in the Text* (1989), the most exhaustive study on the subject, "...'*mise en abyme*' is any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it" (emphasis in original, 8). Accordingly then, even though Hladik's play is not specifically titled "The Secret Miracle," it nevertheless shares important "similarities" with the story in which it is contained. In particular, Hladik's play also depicts an individual who is struggling with the constraints of time. And as Clark M. Zlotchew helpfully argues:

The play [also] deals with time and is premonitory of the subjective year Hladik will live within the split second of objective time between the command to the firing squad and the execution of the command (Zlotchew 29).

In other words, the play foreshadows Hladik's own experience in the courtyard, which will permit him to live an entire year within his mind before he is killed.

Moreover, much like in Borges' story, Hladik's drama also creates a contrast between the two opposing forms of time outlined above. That is, the reader encounters the same aesthetic tension between objective and subjective experiences of temporality. On the one hand, in Hladik's drama the reader is confronted by the oppressive chronological time of the clock in Römerstadt' library, which strikes the number seven during one of the last evenings of the nineteenth century. While on the other hand, the experiential time of Kubin/Römerstadt's thoughts similarly resists and escapes such objective temporality, as it does for Hladik in Borges' story. In this way, "The Secret Miracle" creates an experience of affirmation for both its protagonists and its readers. We see that against the themes of imprisonment and death that are present in the story, the *mise-en-abyme* produces a powerful experience of celebration and life.

Although he only discusses Borges' story in passing, in one of his most poetic essays on art and literature, Michel Foucault addresses the themes of affirmation and literary repetition, and outlines their close ties to the technique of *mise-en-abyme* (although he does not use the term himself). More specifically, in his essay "Language to Infinity" (1977), Foucault highlights "The Secret Miracle" as one in a series of works in western literature that successfully plays with the motif of duplication as a means of ethical and aesthetic resistance. The literary works that he

discusses all present figures of aesthetic repetition and duplication as modes of reconciling an ethical confrontation with death.¹⁰⁹ More specifically, the works deploy techniques of repetition to escape the temporal limits of mortality. Foucault's main point is that forms of *mise-en-abyme* present a way of overcoming the finitude of life through the infinite movement of language and art. This is because at their most fundamental level, art and literature have the potential to resist the finality of death through their infinite movements of creativity and imagination. Foucault argues:

...from the day that men began to speak toward death and against it, in order to grasp and imprison it, something was born, a murmuring that repeats, recounts, and redoubles itself endlessly (Foucault 91).

In other words, Foucault is arguing that literature was first formed as a way of staving off the inevitability of death, or at the very least, as a way of postponing its ultimate effect. Importantly, as Foucault continues, when such works are:

...headed toward death, language [in fact] turns back upon itself; it encounters something like a mirror; and to stop this death which would stop it, it possesses but a single power – that of giving birth to its own image in a play of mirrors that has no limits. From the depths of the mirror where it sets out to arrive anew at the point where it started (at death), but so as finally to escape death, another language can be heard (90).

What Foucault means, is that through such figures of *mise-en-abyme* in literature, an alternative language can be opened up that resists the finite limits of death. It is through such a language that we can potentially escape the limits of our own mortality, by having one's life extended through the ongoing life of a literary work. In Borges' story this other language is created through the play within the story. Foucault describes this aesthetic process further, as:

¹⁰⁹ See also, Maurice Blanchot's essay, "Literary Infinity: The Aleph" in *The Book to Come* (1959), for a further discussion of Borges' engagement with literature as an infinite and aesthetic "space."

...a virtual space where speech discovers the endless resourcefulness of its own image, and where it can represent itself as already existing behind itself, already active beyond itself, to *infinity*” (emphasis added, 91).

The key term in the passage is the word “infinity,” and how it constitutes Foucault’s description of a space and time in language that is based in repetition. As Borges describes similarly, time in this sense, becomes the main material from which Hladik forges his “grand invisible labyrinth” (Borges, 130).¹¹⁰

In this way, the endlessness of Hladik’s play is not so much centered on the future (the anticipated execution he is eager to postpone), but rather on the present. This, I want to argue, is the main paradox of *mise-en-abyme* that the story highlights. On the one hand, *mise-en-abyme* creates an image of infinity through its repetitions and duplications. Whereas, on the other hand, this image is always suspended in the present moment, much like the experience of pleasure according to Aristotle outlined above. Again, this emphasis on the present takes on ethical significance in “The Secret Miracle.” Hladik’s experience in the story is not what one might term, a “means towards an end” (i.e. preventing death), nor an “end in itself” as argued above; but rather, a pure form of “means:” a pure means of expression. By embracing the present moment in all of its force and immediacy, and by immersing himself in the process of writing, Hladik momentarily recuperates what is most “fundamental to his life” (Borges, 128).

Gesture

As I would like to also argue, what makes Hladik’s moment of expression in the story especially critical is the fact that it can be viewed in both an active and a passive sense. The expression seems passive at first glance; after all, Hladik is completely immobile during the year he spends trapped in the courtyard. Yet, Hladik’s experience can also be felt as singularly mobile as it has a palpable, “moving” effect on both his character and the story’s readers. In other words, during one of the most dreadful and existential situations imaginable (a scheduled death by a firing

¹¹⁰ As with the mirror, the ‘labyrinth’ is also a recurrent motif in Borges’ short stories. Both are good examples of *mise-en-abyme*.

squad), the reader is also directly thrown into the setting with the protagonist. And in the face of such despair, we are also forced to confront one of the greatest ethical questions of all, which is namely: how should we use our time?

In “The Secret Miracle” this question is presented through Hladik’s actions, which become an expression of creative freedom. In addition to the notion of aesthetic autonomy and endless temporality that I have outlined above, what characterizes Hladik’s expression in the story is also a sense of vital freedom, or what I would like to term, drawing on Agamben’s concept, a “gesture.” What the concept of gesture reveals is that the question of how we should use our time is invariably linked to the question of how we should act. The concept of the gesture shows us how questions of time are inseparable from questions of ethical action. If we recall, we left our discussion of ethics above by stating that the effect of pleasure is unique, because it is experienced in the present moment. It’s now also important to highlight that this sense of temporal autonomy is above all experienced as an activity. Temporal freedom does not exist in a state of being, but as we will now see in relation to Agamben’s concept of “gesture,” it is rather produced through a process of becoming. Although we can say that Hladik’s experience in the story is aesthetically still, it is also, and at the same time, ethically moving.

In his essay, “Notes on Gesture” (1992), Agamben argues that the gesture proposes a way of thinking and acting outside of the traditional binary between means and ends (Agamben, *Means without End* 57). In particular, he explores a way of thinking beyond the traditional opposition established between action (*praxis*) and production (*poesis*) that has come to dominate debates on ethical activity since Aristotle (57). What he proposes is that we look to the Roman scholar Varro (116 BC – 27 BC), to see how a third and autonomous form of ethical action can be experienced. According to Aristotle, “production [*poesis*] has an end other than itself, but action [*praxis*] does not: good action is itself an end” (*Ethics*, book VI 1140b).¹¹¹ Thus, “good action” is self-justified. According to Agamben, what Varro demonstrates through his reading of Aristotle is that the concept of gesture can help to explain an alternative form of action that is not bound to notions of a final state, or to an end – even if this “end” is seen as an “end in itself” – as noted in Aristotle’s definition of *praxis* above. According to Agamben:

¹¹¹ Quoted in Agamben, *Means without End* 57.

What is new in Varro is the identification of a third type of action alongside the other two: if producing is a means in view of an end and praxis is an end without means, the *gesture* then breaks with the false alternatives between ends and means (emphasis added, 57).

In other words, according to Agamben, a “gesture” is in a constant state of motion, never resting long enough to be classified as an end or a goal. It is in Agamben’s terms, “a pure and endless mediality” (58). Thus, much like the experience of pleasure according to Aristotle, the gesture is also in a perpetual state of becoming, a form of expression that is uninhibited by any external use. Through its potential endlessness, it is temporally autonomous. It opens up an experience of time that is subjectively free from a fixed moment in the past or the future. It is here that the concept takes on its most critical potential.

According to Agamben, the best way to understand the critically emancipating quality of a gesture is through Nietzsche’s doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, or the Eternal Return (53). More specifically, Agamben states that, “the thought of the eternal return...is intelligible only as a gesture in which power and act, naturalness and manner, contingency and necessity become indiscernible” (53). If we relate this understanding of the term to Borges’ “The Secret Miracle,” it becomes clear that Hladik shares important similarities with Nietzsche’s readers, or the second-person “you” in his parable “The Greatest Weight” (1882). If one recalls, in Nietzsche’s text, the reader is approached by a demon in the middle of the night, and is told that she will have to relive every moment of her life “...once more and innumerable times more” (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 273). Similarly, while Hladik is dreaming that he is in one of the corners of the Clementine Library in Prague, he is met by a librarian who tells him that he can find God “...in one of the letters on one of the pages of one of the four hundred thousand volumes in the *Clementine*” (Borges 128). After picking up an atlas that someone had just returned, Hladik is confronted by a voice that miraculously offers him the free-time that he needs to finish his play. As Borges writes, “...a voice that was everywhere spoke to him [and said]: *The time for your labor has been granted*” (128).

Although Nietzsche writes specifically about an experience of temporality that will never end, and Borges describes an “uncertain” amount of time that we later discover to be one year; in both cases, an individual is confronted by the question of how to use one’s time? Specifically, it

is this question of how one will use one's time that forms the decisive moment for both writers. Moreover, both Borges and Nietzsche force us to confront our relation to the present moment with all of its force and complexity. For Nietzsche, the idea of repetition is meant more as a "thought experiment," or as a way of testing one's dedication to life. It is the question of how one should live that he actually wants us to consider in his parable. After first outlining the metaphysical conditions of eternal recurrence, Nietzsche famously asks the reader:

Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous *moment* when you would have answered him: "You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine." If this thought gained possession of you, it would change you as you are... The question in each and every thing, "Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?" would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 273-274).

Nietzsche argues that one should embrace the present moment, without recourse to the past or to the future. His doctrine calls for an affirmation of life – regardless of the consequences. He celebrates a state of becoming in his writings, a mode of existing in which he argues elsewhere, "...the present must absolutely not be justified by reference to a future, nor the past by reference to the present" (Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 377). If one could embrace the present moment then, and strive for a state of becoming (a state of life in which every action would feel self-justified), we would have no regrets about having to possibly live through such moments endlessly.¹¹²

This philosophy of life resonates closely with Hladik's actions in "The Secret Miracle." As in Nietzsche's parable, during the courtyard-scene, the present is celebrated as a site for resisting the past and the future. Since the future in the story is represented by Hladik's scheduled death (a 'future anterior', one can argue), and the past is represented by his sense of inadequacy and failure (he is unhappy with his literary works to date), the present becomes the most critical site for experiencing an individual and artistic form of freedom. As Borges writes, during those final moments of his life, and "with his verse drama *The Enemies*, Hladik believed

¹¹² According to Gilles Deleuze, "...the lesson of the eternal return is that there is no return of the negative... only that which affirms or is affirmed returns" (Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* 189).

he could redeem himself from all that equivocal and languid past” (Borges 127). Again, this process of immersing oneself in the present moment is vitally important for Hladik, and can be best described as a gesture in Agamben’s sense. As Agamben reminds us, a gesture is “...not the sphere of an end in itself but rather the sphere of a pure and endless mediality” (Agamben 58).

Humor and Tableau

With the above concept in mind, let’s now return once again to the courtyard scene in Borges’ story, and attempt to see more clearly how Hladik’s gesture is brought to life. The dominant mood in the courtyard is characterized by a strong sense of tension between different forms of movement and stillness. In this way, Hladik’s actions can be viewed in both an active and a passive sense. He is not physically moving while awaiting his execution, but the decision to complete his play immediately before his death, enacts an active gesture of movement and hope in the story. Borges thus describes an image in the moments before the execution, which foreshadows the sense of freedom and optimism that is about to arrive. He does so in two crucial ways that I will now try to analyze. The first is through humor. And the second is through the figure of the *tableau*. In more detail, Borges describes the scene as follows:

The firing squad fell in, lined up straight. Hladik standing against the prison wall, awaited the discharge. Someone was afraid the wall would be spattered with blood; the prisoner was ordered to come forward a few steps. Absurdly, Hladik was reminded of the preliminary shufflings-about of photographers. A heavy drop of rain grazed Hladik’s temple and rolled slowly down his cheek; the sergeant called out the final order. The physical universe stopped (Borges 129).

The scene continues with the subtle moments of humor that have already marked much of Borges’ story. Hladik’s state of being is brought to an absurd extreme when the soldiers’ indifference towards him is comically overshadowed by their concern for the wall behind him. Again, in this moment, Hladik’s own sense that he is posing for a photographer allows him momentarily to laugh at his situation.

In the scene, Borges also paints a visceral image for the reader that seems closer to painting and theatre than it does to literature.¹¹³ In addition to the positioning and mise-en-scène of the characters, we read that "...a heavy drop of rain grazed Hladik's temple and rolled slowly down his cheek" (129). Importantly, emphasis is placed on Hladik's body, so the story also asks its readers to feel movement in an otherwise static scene. That is to say, the stillness of the scene is accentuated by only the slightest of movements: the drop of rain rolling down Hladik's cheek (129). Quite paradoxically then, the image asks us to experience motion where there seems to be none. As Borges writes:

...the weapons converged upon Hladik, but the men who were to kill him were immobile. The sergeant's arm seemed to freeze, eternal, in an inconclusive *gesture*'. [And] on one of the paving stones of the yard, a bee cast a motionless shadow. As though in a *painting*, the wind had died (emphasis added, 129).

The same painterly image reappears when Hladik realizes that he is frozen in the courtyard:

When he awoke, the world was still motionless and muffled. The drop of water still hung on his cheek; on the yard, there still hung the shadow of the bee; in the air the smoke from the cigarette he'd smoked had never wafted away (130).

In these moments of stillness, the passing of time is not merely resisted or denied in the narrative, but is transformed. With the comparison of the scene to a painting, the story reminds us that art can produce temporal experiences that are moving, even if on the surface, there is seemingly no motion at all.

¹¹³ We see this dual understanding of the term already when it first appeared in the writings of Denis Diderot during the second half of the eighteenth century (Worvill 2010). Specifically, in his *Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel* (1757), Diderot uses the 'tableau' to describe both a theatrical scene in a painting, and a 'painterly' scene in a play. In doing so, he writes, there can be "as many realistic *tableaux* as there are favorable moments of action in a painting" (Diderot 95). "La scène offrirait au spectateur autant de tableaux réels qu'il y aurait dans l'action de moments favorables au peintre" (95).

Out of Time

As mentioned above, at the end of Borges' story, Hladik is killed by the soldiers' bullets after his time in the courtyard runs out, and the call to fire has been ordered. However, it is also important to note that immediately before the event takes place, Hladik also successfully manages to finish the final line of *The Enemies*. At this exact moment, as Borges reveals, Hladik releases a "maddened cry" (130). Rather than a call of desperation and fear, I argue that this gesture is by far the clearest proof in the story that Hladik dies in a state of bliss and affirmation, rather than one of despair. We can state this fact with certainty, because the moment is clearly a continuation of the same sense of pleasure that Hladik had been experiencing while composing his play. For example, previously in the narrative, we learn that he "came to love the courtyard, the prison", and even one of the soldier's faces standing before him, which began to alter his conception of Römerstadt's character (130). Against what could be considered conventional behavior for a prisoner, he learned to love the very setting of his execution, including one of the faces of his executioners. Moreover, through the sheer determination and power of his will, he managed to transform the actual event of his death into a work of art and pleasure. It is precisely the play's status as a work of art then, that allows Hladik the freedom to overcome the constraints of time that have been placed upon him.

Although we are told by Borges that Hladik composes his play with no readers in mind (which I argue is a necessity for his autonomy in the story), we can also assert that this statement is only partially true. Hladik may believe that he has no readers, but he is also a creation in Borges' short story, which by the very fact that we are reading it, confirms that his thoughts will carry on, and have a life of their own, even after he's gone. This is not simply a nice idea to contemplate at the end of the narrative, but rather further proof that both the temporality of a fiction, and the number of ways in which it can be interpreted, are truly endless.

While reinforcing a similar idea in his essay *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), Roland Barthes describes the open and endless interpretation of texts as his "circular memory," a term he uses to highlight his own intimate relationship with the infinite movement of literature. For example, when writing about his constant habit of reading Proust into almost every text that he comes across, he states:

I savor the sway of formulas, the reversal of origins, the ease which brings the anterior text out of the subsequent one... Proust is what comes to me, not what I summon up; not an “authority”, simply a *circular memory*. Which is what the inter-text is: the impossibility of living outside the infinite text – whether this text be Proust or the daily newspaper or the television screen: the book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life (Barthes 36).

And so for Barthes, whenever we are reading a text, we are also bringing with us a selection of “anterior texts” – that are only ephemerally present in the work before us. These other texts create a dialogue with the primary work under consideration, and open-up its possible meaning. The other term for this process is “intertextuality,”¹¹⁴ which describes the infinite relations between texts, and the circular movement of our interpretations. I argue that it is above all this process of intertextuality, which through the reader’s circular memory, guarantees a future temporality for Hladik’s artwork beyond the one in the story.

For example, “The Secret Miracle”, is eerily similar to a scene in one of Balthus’ paintings (the Franco-Polish painter of the twentieth century). The painting is called, *Le Passage du Commerce* (1952-1954), and depicts a group of Parisians carrying out their daily tasks on a narrow shopping street at Saint-André, in Paris (See Figure Below). As with Borges’ story, what makes the image stand out is especially its sense of stillness, that I argue virtually comes off of the canvas, and in the process, viscerally touches the viewer. That is, beyond the material fact that paintings are conventionally seen to be static, the image manages to create a sense of vital movement. Such movement in the painting is formed precisely in opposition to the immobility of the scene. That is, as in Borges’ story, we also find characters who are suspended in mid-action; and similarly, there is a critical tension created through such movement that jumps out at the viewer.

¹¹⁴ For a further discussion of the term “intertextuality,” see also Julia Kristeva’s seminal text on the subject, “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1966), in *Desire and Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature* (Kristeva 64).



(Figure 14: Balthus, *Le Passage du Commerce*, 1952-1954).

Balthus' brother, the theorist and philosopher Pierre Klossowski, analyzes this form of tension in the painting, and describes such heightened moments of suspense as, “*tableau vivant*” (Klossowski 115). He argues that in such frozen moments like the one we find in *Le Passage du Commerce*, Balthus skillfully elevates the tension of a scene through a suspended gesture (117). What he means is that against the assumed stillness of the scene, the tension created by the figures' poses is actually brought to life through a sense of internal movement (117). In his own words, Klossowski writes that in such moments of suspense, the viewer experiences a feeling of, “it was”, and “it will always be” – or what he describes immediately thereafter, as an affirmation of “eternal return” – a gesture that seems to momentarily transcend the constraints of time altogether (my translation, 117-118).

Is this not the ultimate quality of Hladik's actions in the story – to confidently answer Nietzsche's question, and to affirm without hesitation that he would repeat his gesture infinitely and eternally until the end of time? With his “maddened cry,” Hladik not only finishes his verse

drama *The Enemies*; he also asserts an important degree of agency and autonomy over the way that he uses his time. What his actions reveal is that to create one's own sense of time is a valuable lesson in a world that is increasingly reducing temporality to the realms of the functional, the useful, and to official "events."

We can now see that through his writing, Hladik critically overcomes this oppressive and chronological sense of time. When his year in the courtyard elapses, he critically transcends that dominant view through his writing. He finishes his play, and in so doing, metaphorically ends his life before the Gestapo can physically shoot him. Ultimately, after he finishes *The Enemies*, (the greatest ambition of his life); the only thing left for the soldiers to shoot is a body.

It should now be clear that the gesture I have been analyzing is not bodily, nor physical, but rather literary. What "The Secret Miracle" reveals is that writing is not the assertion of a body, but rather the effacing of a self; it is the ability to lose oneself in one's art, and through a gesture, to at least momentarily enjoy a sensation that feels everlasting. In short, through this literary gesture and minor moment, Borges' story both destabilizes a traditional understanding of the ordinary, and resists a dominant representation of history.

Chapter 4

The Indecisive Moment: Ceylan's Distant

The question is: how to give human life its historical importance at every minute?

– Cesare Zavattini, “Some Ideas on the Cinema” (1953)

With our analyses of Kundera's *Ignorance* and Borges' “The Secret Miracle” above, we have now seen more closely how certain works of modern literature began to challenge the dominance of great events in literary history. In this chapter, I return once again to an example from modern cinema, to attempt to demonstrate further how a similar movement takes place in cinematic history that also breaks free from grand events and dramatic actions as the main driving forces within its films. In particular, and to help highlight these qualities in more detail, I examine the effects of minor moments in the cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, and in particular, in his film *Distant* (2002).

While slowly gaining in popularity over the past two decades, the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan are also quite anomalous for both viewers and critics alike. Strangely, their reception has been relatively “silent,” and one of the main reasons, I would like to argue, is that they possess a minor quality that, as we also find in the works above, resists any easy attempts at understanding and categorization. More specifically, with his nine feature films to date, including: *The Small Town* (1997), *Clouds of May* (1999), *Distant* (2002), *Climates* (2006), *Three Monkeys* (2008), *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011), *Winter Sleep* (2014), *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), and *About Dry Grasses* (2023), Ceylan's oeuvre stands out critically from both the recent wave of contemporary Turkish Cinema (the director's native country), and also from within the international festival circuit from which at this point, it has been most favorably received. Aside from a slew of prestigious awards, especially the Palm d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival for *Winter Sleep* in 2014, the films' reception has been relatively “quiet” within academic circles,

from which only a few articles and interviews have been written, most notably in Robert Cardullo's edited volume, *Nuri Bilge Ceylan: Essays and Interviews* (2013).¹¹⁵

But how can one account for such a strange absence of criticism? What is it about the films that ultimately eludes one's attempts at understanding and interpretation? Clearly, they elicit a peculiar demand on their viewers; but where does it come from? And what is it in fact demanding? In closer detail, it is precisely the effect of this demand that I wish to examine in Ceylan's cinema by specifically uncovering how it arises through both its minor aesthetic and through its subtle expression of minor moments.

Curiously, although it will appear as a paradox, what is in fact most peculiar about Ceylan's cinema is also what is most familiar; namely, its precise yet poetic depiction of everyday details and incidents.¹¹⁶ As I have been arguing above, this is a challenging paradox to confront, because there is always a clear difficulty in approaching those subjects which are closest to us, since they often go unnoticed, or simply resist our initial attempts at interpretation. Consequently, such encounters also require an important shift in perspective to help uncover their critical, yet subtle effects.

Specifically, with regard to the aesthetic of Ceylan's films, while depicting seemingly banal encounters and everyday details, an easy conclusion to draw would be that they are typically "realist" works of art. The fact that Ceylan produces, writes, directs, and edits most of the films himself, uses non-professional actors (his family and friends in the early films), and even uses his own apartment as a setting, are all details that would support such a claim. However, once having viewed them, one will also soon understand that they are quite mysterious and surreal works that are mostly filled with a looming sense of critical and formal tension. For this reason, as Geoff Andrew argues, it is more accurate to describe the aesthetic of the films as "essentially poetic" (Andrew 18). Andrew explains, "both...[Ceylan's] narrative and his visual style might be termed "impressionistic"; he favors ellipsis, discreet metaphor, repetition, rhyme,

¹¹⁵ Another exception to this lack of scholarship on Ceylan, is Bülent Diken, Graeme Gilloch, and Craig Hammond's recent study, *The Cinema of Nuri Bilge Ceylan: The Global Vision of a Turkish Director* (2018). Also to highlight Ceylan's relative lack of popularity in Turkey, Mahmut Mutman highlights that following the Grand Prix award to his film *Distant* at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival, "...if people had been asked then, few would have recalled Ceylan's name or the movie's title" (Mutman 124).

¹¹⁶ As it is well known, Freud famously brings our attention to such a paradox in his essay, "The Uncanny" (1919).

and rhythmic flexibility; and he is acutely alert to place and time, as expressed by the seasons, by changes in sound and light, and to how they affect our moods” (Andrew 18).

As one finds similarly in the films of Antonioni, within Ceylan’s cinema the camera often views characters from a distance, focuses intensely on inanimate objects, and sometimes lingers within a scene a little too long after the action has departed.¹¹⁷ For example, we experience such shots during the opening scenes of *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, as we are introduced to the barren yet beautiful landscapes of the region with a group of detectives in search of a body.¹¹⁸

Importantly, what I would like to demonstrate in this chapter is that it is especially in relation to this minor aesthetic that Ceylan’s cinema is most critically experienced and brought to life for its viewers. In particular, through a close reading of Ceylan’s third feature *Distant*, which details the sudden reunion of an Istanbul photographer with his cousin, I aim to show how it is precisely a minor moment in the film that becomes the main source of critical tension. Moreover, through this strange yet seemingly banal moment, I argue that the film also challenges a series of dominant hierarchies of representation in aesthetics that alter our experience of modern cinema. Finally, by engaging with Roland Barthes’ writings on photography in *Camera Lucida* (1980), and Jacques Rancière’s theory of aesthetics in *The Future of the Image* (2007), I attempt to demonstrate how this minor moment in the film can be viewed not only as a site of mourning and melancholia, but also as one of renewed possibility.

An Indecisive Moment

To begin, allow me to first describe the moment in more detail. Towards the end of Ceylan’s *Distant*, there is a seemingly unremarkable scene in which the main protagonists are returning home from a commercial photography expedition. Mahmut is a photographer by-trade, and Yousef is his cousin from the country, who sometime before the trip had arrived at Mahmut’s doorstep unannounced, seeking employment in Istanbul. In the scene, the two men are in

¹¹⁷ Once again, the latter shot is known as “temps mort” in Antonioni’s cinema, and in film studies more generally. The term also appears in Seymour Chatman’s in-depth study of the director, *Michelangelo Antonioni: The Investigation* (Chatman 71).

¹¹⁸ There is a clear influence here by Antonioni’s *L’avventura* (1960), which similarly spends the opening half of its narrative in search of a missing person.

Mahmut's car on a country road. Above the road, there is a flock of sheep scattered on top of a green hill. Down below, there are a few small houses leading further down to a silver lake. As the sequence begins, the car decelerates and then comes to a complete stop.

"Why did we stop?" asks Yousef who is sitting in the passenger seat of the car. Mahmut suddenly orders Yousef to open his window. "God what a place to photograph," he says, and allows some direct sunlight from the sunset to pass through both the driver's and passenger's side windows. While admiring the view again, he claims, "It's best to shoot from the top. Sheep in front and the lake behind." Following a long pause, Yousef asks, "Shall I set up the camera now?" And he asks again, "Shall I?" And again, "Mahmut?" And Mahmut finally replies after a deep sigh, "Fuck it. Why bother?" "I'll set it up right now," insists Yousef." Another long pause, and then Mahmut's reply as he starts his car again is, "Forget it."

The sequence is significant for the reason that viewers of the film are presented for the first time with a moment in which Mahmut might emerge from his depressed state and engage himself with the world. As Janet Harbord notes in her detailed analysis of the film, the rural landscape during the sequence momentarily "inspires" Mahmut (Harbord, 167). The reaction is in sharp contrast to his demeanor until this point, which can be characterized as desireless, apathetic, and emotionally impotent. Again, until this moment in the film, Mahmut is distant from his work (he merely "goes through the motions" as he robotically photographs images in his apartment/studio for a tile company), and he is also socially distant from those around him (he has been living alone until his cousin arrives, and he has a weekly sexual affair with a woman that, like his work, is also quite "mechanical.")¹¹⁹ His distance from photography and life in general is made clearest during an earlier sequence in the film where he is having a conversation with some photographer friends. One of the friends asks him, "...have you already forgotten our climb to the summit of Reshko to get a better shot of the white valley? You used to say you'd make films like Tarkovsky. So why are you trying to forget those days?" "Photography is dead" declares Mahmut, and "so are the mountains too" (*Distant*, 2002).

In light of such a response, the sequence on the country road becomes a crucial moment in the film. In other words, we witness an experience that confronts and disturbs Mahmut's inner

¹¹⁹ In the post-title sequence, Mahmut's mistress removes her clothes in an emotionless fashion, and Mahmut, sitting in another part of the room, sighs deeply, then approaches her and pushes her legs open as if he is performing a "chore." After the woman leaves, Mahmut grabs some tissues and meticulously wipes some fluid off of the bedcovers where moments before they had just been.

sense of “distance.” As Harbord argues again, “the scene literally arrests Mahmut, [and] bursts into his interiority momentarily as an affectual experience” (Harbord 167). During the sequence, for a brief moment it seems as if Mahmut might actually photograph the setting that he is viewing through the car-door window, and he also seems genuinely “moved” by the experience. However, when confronted with the decision to photograph the scene or not, he chooses the latter, and says “Forget it.”

Why does Mahmut choose not to photograph the moment on the country road? Based on his reaction during the sequence, one can argue that the main reasons are that he does not want to intervene and disturb what he believes to be the authenticity and purity of the experience, and also, that he holds the view that photography as a medium is not capable of capturing the impression. At one time in his life, as his friend mentions, he would have “climbed to the summit” of the hill to get a “better shot” of the valley. But now, he is unable to make such a commitment. As with other aspects of his life (including a former wife who he stalks from his car-door window in one particular scene), he is nostalgic for the past. However, with regard to the moment on the country road, one can argue that he is also nostalgic for the present. He sees any attempt to photograph the image of the valley as an action that is already “too late.” In other words, the act of producing a photograph will not capture the moment the way he is experiencing it, in the present. Rather, for Mahmut, the moment is at its purest when it is simply witnessed and not acted upon. One can say it is the presence of experience that Mahmut recognizes in the moment on the country road, and his belief in the supposed purity of the moment is what traps him in a life where he is constantly mourning for the past, from within the present.

Although I have described some aspects of Mahmut’s character while questioning his decision not to photograph the moment on the country road, my aim here is not to answer this question by unraveling his fictional psyche. Rather, I attempt to answer this question with another question, one that will open up the discussion to include the notions of medium specificity, artistic purity, and the role the concept of an “un-mediated presence” can play in defining such categories. The second question is: can we deduce with certainty that a photograph has not been taken in some form or another in Ceylan’s film? In other words, can one argue that an image is in fact produced of what Mahmut is experiencing through his car-door window, even though we do not have the physical photograph to prove it? And if so, in what medium will such

an image fall, if it is true that media are largely defined in relation to fixed notions of temporality and spatiality?

By way of the sequence on the country road, as well as Mahmut's confrontation with the decision to photograph or not to photograph the moment, I would like to demonstrate how *Distant* demands that its viewers rethink the question of artistic representation in relation to the medium of photography. Specifically, the film asks its viewers to rethink this question in relation to the concept of an unmediated present or pure moment of presence, which according to Mahmut is believed to be unrepresentable through artistic means. By incorporating the themes of photography and its so-called "death" in contemporary culture, the film challenges the general assumptions that art is bound by a fixed temporal order, and that artworks are closed autonomous media that are either spatial or temporal; moving or still.

After considering the constraints of what I call the "myth of pure presence" in art, I will now argue that the visual and textual mediation and *impurity* of Mahmut's experience on the country road in fact produces a new image for the viewer; one that is not confined to his initial encounter with the scene, and that challenges notions of medium specificity that are based on rigid understandings of time and space. Furthermore, I will attempt to demonstrate how a new photograph of the scene on the country road is actually created through an ongoing process of visual and textual mediation that is informed by Jacques Rancière's concept of "De-Figuration." What I propose is that such defigurations will allow Mahmut, along with viewers of the film, to look forward into the possibility of new visibilities in the scene, and in the process will create future images that go beyond the engulfing sense of distance that can accompany one's initial encounter with an elusive moment.

The Unrepresentable

In her analysis of Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* in *The Evolution of Film: Rethinking Film Studies* (2007), Janet Harbord argues that during the above sequence on the country road, "the potential of photography to grasp the moment, its history as a medium able to select the significant detail in the flow of time and 'capture' that experience, is a belief without substance" (Harbord 168). In the scene, she argues that for Mahmut, the role of photography "has failed expectation" (168). In

other words, the idea that photography could at one time represent presence or experience arrives at its confirmed death for Mahmut with his decision not to photograph the scene. Following Harbord's point, I think there are also two ways that we can approach Mahmut's belief in the supposed failure of photography. One relates to medium specificity and the supposed limits of photography; the other to the role of art more generally, and its assumed inability to adequately represent the purity of a moment in time and space.

In the history of Western aesthetics there are two key texts that come to mind which both argue for the unrepresentability of certain objects, experiences and events. The first is Lessing's *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), which we highlighted in an earlier chapter above; and the second is Plato's *Republic* (380 BC).

Arguing for medium specificity in relation to representation, Lessing claims that there are certain experiences, for example the pain in the sculpture *Laocoon and his Sons* (160 BC to 20 BC), that cannot be adequately captured by a medium that he argues is predominantly spatial.¹²⁰ In the sculpture, a moment from the Greek myth is depicted in which Laocoon along with his sons are being strangled to death by serpents. Although Laocoon's expression is supposed to represent a scream, Lessing argues that the expression represented on the sculpture is merely a sigh (Lessing 17). (See Figure below)



(Figure 15: Laocoon and his Sons (160 BC to 20 BC))

¹²⁰ In his essay, Lessing states that some arts such as painting and sculpture are spatial, whereas poetry is temporal. In his own words he writes, "The rule is this, that succession in time is the province of the poet, co-existence in space that of the artist" (Lessing 109).

Lessing claims that this is the case, because the medium of sculpture is spatial as opposed to temporal, and for this reason the artist could not capture the duration of the scream, which in both the myth and in reality should take place as a duration of moments (17). Therefore, in a spatial medium such as sculpture, the durative event of Laocoon's cry is unrepresentable. Thus, for Lessing, the unrepresentability of certain events can be reduced to a question of medium specificity.¹²¹ This could partially explain Mahmut's decision not to photograph the landscape that he encounters from the country road, if his decision not to photograph the scene was only based in his belief that, in contemporary society, "photography is dead." However, I think his decision not to photograph the rural landscape is rather an action (or inaction) that is more significant, in that it reveals a greater rejection, not just of photography as a medium, but of art in general, of its ability to serve a purpose in the world.

As suggested possibly, Mahmut does not want to photograph the scene because he believes that it will disturb the authenticity of what he is experiencing. It can be argued that this philosophy on the unrepresentability of the world through artistic means is tied closely to the concept of *mimesis* as described in Plato's *Republic*. In book X, through the infamous analogy of a carpenter's bed, Socrates claims that a painter's reproduction of that same bed will always be at "third remove from the throne of truth" (Plato 339). Although for Plato the pure form is the idea of the bed (as part of the transcendental realm of the forms), a hierarchy of representation is still established with this particular analogy that places more importance on the object of the bed than its representation in a painting. In doing so, the hierarchy of representation maintains a strict division between art and life, and asserts that the latter is closer to what Plato argues is the truth.

More importantly for our discussion, Plato's hierarchy of representation also has a way of temporally ordering and placing precedence on that which came before. Since the painting of the bed would be created later than the physical structure of the bed, it suffers in its potential meaning and importance. The painting will always be seen as containing less value than the original bed.¹²² Like Mahmut's potential photograph of the valley in *Distant*, one can argue that because of its place in time, as with the painting of the bed for Plato, it will always come at a

¹²¹ For an in depth critique of Lessing's essay, see the chapter "Space and Time: Lessing's Laocoon and the Politics of Genre" from W.J.T. Mitchell's *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

¹²² For a critique of this argument, see in particular Jacques Derrida's writings on the metaphysics of presence in Western philosophy, in his study *Of Grammatology* (1967).

moment that is “too late.” Under such a model of representation, the painting or photograph can only disrupt and disturb the purity of the original form.

Thus, as with the bed in Plato’s analogy, Mahmut’s experience of the moment in the valley on the country road takes on an original purity that for him is only fleetingly accessible in life, and is not representable in art. For this reason, if we recall from above he says to his friend that not only is photography “dead,” but “so are the mountains too” (*Distant*). The moment he experiences on the country road is already dying in front of his eyes. It is a failure not just of photography, but of “life” in general to grasp in time the unattainable present, what he views as an unrepresentable event.

Mourning the Present

In a chapter entitled “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?” from his study, *The Future of the Image* (2007), Jacques Rancière is critical of what he describes as “an inflated use of the notion of the unrepresentable” in contemporary discourses on art and culture (Rancière 109). In more detail, he argues that:

This inflated usage subsumes under a single concept all sorts of phenomena, processes and notions, ranging from Moses’ ban on representation, via the Kantian sublime, the Freudian primal scene, Duchamps’ *Grande verre* or Malevitch’s *White Square on White Background*, to the Shoa; and it surrounds them all with the same aura of holy terror (109).

Rancière argues that notions of the unrepresentable are often associated with a concept of the purity of presence. In other words, the unrepresentable, or the incapacity of art to represent certain moments, objects, and events, is often “characterized by its surplus of material presence, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation” (110). In certain instances, one can be confronted with a moment of presence that becomes a “specific mode of address that delivers the thing represented over to effects of pleasure, play, or distance which are *incompatible* with the gravity of the experience it contains” (110 emphasis added). In Mahmut’s case, one can argue

that the direct confrontation with the sense of presence on the country road produces an overwhelming effect of distance that completely engulfs and immobilizes him. In the scene, he is virtually frozen in time and space, and is unable to move, act, or photograph (*Distant*).

Thus, as in Plato's mimetic hierarchy of representation above, the confrontation with the unrepresentable also establishes a temporal order. First we have the event, following this, its recognition, and then finally, some sort of interpretation of the experience. In such a model, all meaning is located at the site of the event, and it decreases with each subsequent stage (i.e. recognition and interpretation). Or, to put it another way, the experience of a surplus of "material presence," to use Rancière's term, is an event that almost immediately becomes past, and the attempt to represent or express it through artistic means will inevitably fail. For these reasons, one can argue that individuals such as Mahmut feel a sense of nostalgia for the present while they are experiencing what they assume to be an unrepresentable event. The perceived purity of the event is an illusion that slips away as it is recognized. I propose to describe this experience as a "mourning for presence in the present."

Writing in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (1991) on the ontological characteristics of the event in relation to the sublime, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes how a specific mourning for presence can take place from within the present. He writes:

Because it is absolute, the presenting present cannot be grasped: it is not yet or no longer present. It is always too soon or too late to grasp presentation itself and present it. Such is the specific and paradoxical constitution of the event... The event testifies that the self is essentially passible to a recurrent alterity (Lyotard 59).

Thus, we never fully enjoy the present moment because it is always "too soon or too late." This reinforces the point that Mahmut can feel a sense of nostalgia while experiencing the event that literally arrests him on the country road, since Mahmut experiences the moment as something that is "absolute" (59). According to Lyotard, the moment escapes time and will always be experienced as an event that is "not yet or no longer present" (59).

However, in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Rancière is critical of Lyotard's views on the sublime and on what he sees as a larger trend in contemporary aesthetics and critical theory. He writes, "'aesthetics' has become, in the last twenty years, the privileged site where the

tradition of critical thinking has metamorphosed into deliberation on mourning,” and argues that in discourses on art and culture there has been an unfortunate transformation of “avant-garde thinking into nostalgia” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 9). This is especially evident, he claims, in Lyotard’s work on the sublime, interpreted as “the scene of a founding *distance* separating the idea from any sensible presentation” (29 emphasis added). According to Rancière, Lyotard attempts to make “art a witness to an encounter with the unrepresentable that cripples all thought” (10). Rancière describes this recent phenomenon as “the witness’ narrative” and claims that in recent years it has become a “new mode of art” (*The Future of the Image*, 110-111).

Although both the Platonic model of representation and this allegedly new mode of art are similar in that they place emphasis on the authenticity of the original, they differ in that this new mode of art is not concerned with representative accuracy, or faithfulness and likeness in form. According to Rancière, as previously mentioned, it simply designates the artwork as a witness to an ontological event. Thus, the witness’ narrative records the experience of an event that is simultaneously both before and beyond representation. Rancière explains this in more detail:

This involves not so much recounting the event as witnessing to a *there was* that exceeds thought, not only through its own particular surplus, but because the peculiarity of the *there was* in general is to exceed thought (*The Future of the Image*, 111).

In other words, according to Rancière, there is a peculiarity involved in an encounter with an event that is sublime in that it exceeds thought. However, this same element of peculiarity also becomes the certainty of the event itself – the certainty that what one has just encountered has really taken place.

This conceptual knot (moment, exceeding thought, pastness) is attributed in particular to the medium of photography. In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Roland Barthes describes the certainty of this “*there was*” as a “that has been,” which according to him is the “*noeme* of Photography”: an ontological quality that cannot be contested, regardless of the multiple semiotic and rhetorical significations that can be found in the image (Barthes 115).¹²³ In film studies, Laura Mulvey also

¹²³ For a similar argument, see also Bazin’s famous article, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1945), where he argues that with photography, “...we are forced to accept as real the existence of the

develops the notion of a non-representational certainty with the work of Barthes as a starting point. This certainty can accompany the indexical nature of photography. In her study *Death 24x a second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), highlighted above, Mulvey calls this a “cinema of observation” (Mulvey 125). For her, film viewers are witnesses of the certainty that cinema is always a trace of an actual event. Jean-Luc Nancy argues similarly for a non-representational type of realism in his book on the films of Abbas Kiarostami, *The Evidence of Film* (2001).¹²⁴ As with Mulvey and Barthes, the tone is one of nostalgia, specifically for a presence that can only be hinted at and never fully realized. In all instances, emphasis is placed on the indexicality of the photographic image, and on an unquestioned analogy between photography and film, which in semiotic terms is not necessarily a copy, but a trace of an original moment.

As I argue above, the belief in the incapacity of art to capture the moment either through verisimilitude in the Platonic hierarchy of representation, or as an observer of an event in the witness’ narrative as proposed by Rancière, produces a sense of stasis or inaction on the part of Mahmut. Specifically, the philosophy of the purposelessness of art inhibits him from photographing the rural landscape. In his eyes, the site of signification and meaning must be a definitive point of origin, an assumed experience of presence. Or, put another way, Mahmut experiences a sense of novelty on the country road that for him will inevitably become stale. His experience will become a temporally fixed moment in the past. As a result, one can argue that it is the novelty that Mahmut already mourns. This is the novelty of being a witness to an event that he knows will become past. This philosophy of experience is what keeps him in an emotional state of stillness, dominated by mourning, nostalgia, and distance. However, the supposed unrepresentability of the rural landscape in *Distant* is something that can be challenged by reconsidering the claim that certain events are essentially un-mediated and beyond expression. As I would now like to demonstrate, by exploring the alternative possibilities that can arise from an encounter with the moment, a potential to transform the stillness and distance of the scene from *Distant* into a more productive and meaningful form of movement is created. Let’s now turn briefly to Rancière’s concept of “De-Figuration” to help to illuminate how such a creative transformation and re-viewing of the scene can potentially take place.

object reproduced, actually re-presented, set before us...in time and space” (Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, Vol I, 15).

¹²⁴ Mulvey also references Kiarostami’s films in relation to what she describes as a “cinema of observation” (Mulvey 125).

Defiguration

Throughout *The Future of the Image*, but specifically in a chapter entitled “Painting in the Text,” Rancière develops the term “De-Figuration” to describe what he sees as an alternative to a representative order that fixes meaning in the past. More specifically, he develops the concept to argue for a mobility of meaning between artworks that extends them beyond their material form. As we will see, the concept helps to move beyond a fixed notion of media and a temporally static notion of the present, in which artworks are not limited strictly to their materiality.

In more detail, and in order to understand Rancière’s concept more clearly, we must first look to his general theory of images, specifically his notion of the dual nature or “double poetics” of the image (*The Future of the Image*, 11). According to Rancière, there is in his terms, an important “inter-convertability between two potentialities of the image: the image as raw, material presence and the image as discourse encoding a history” (11). In other words, images have both a signifying quality – as a “discourse encoding a history,” and a non-signifying quality – as simply a “raw, material presence” (11). This makes clear that Rancière is not in fact opposed to the notion that images can possess a non-signifying quality. However, for him, the non-signifying quality of the image should not be inflated or elevated above and beyond its signifying quality. In this way, unlike Lyotard, who understands raw presence as “the scene of a founding *distance* separating the idea from any sensible presentation,” (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 29 emphasis added), Rancière argues that we cannot completely dissociate presence from its counterpart in the image, that is, its discursive and representative qualities. The relationship between these two aspects of the image opens up a productive space for Rancière – a space where the visible can be transformed in new ways through commentaries about it, and through forms of description and writing.¹²⁵

For Rancière, the relationship is the manifestation of what can be called the democratization of art, or what he names as the “aesthetic regime” of art, an aesthetic movement that for him begins to develop around the nineteenth century (*The Future of the Image*, 13). According to Rancière, around this time, a gradual break from representation begins to occur in literature and painting which helps to cross the boundaries between the arts and their specific

¹²⁵ For a further discussion on this topic, see also the concept of “ekphrasis” in art history and literary theory.

respective materials (42). Rancière describes this phenomenon and its relation to medium specificity in more detail, in the following passage:

The fact that the suffering of Virgil's Laocoon cannot be translated exactly into sculptor's stone does not entail that words and forms part company; that some artists devote themselves to the art of words, while others work on the intervals of time, colored surfaces, or volumes of recalcitrant matter. Quite the opposite deduction can possibly be made. When the thread of history – that is, the common measurement that governs the distance between the art of some and that of others – is undone, it is not simply the forms that become analogous; the materialities are immediately mixed [as well] (42).

In short, the break with representation did not further separate art forms and media, but on the contrary, helped to widen the surface in which they could interact, so that their materialities could freely “mix” (42). According to Rancière, this “mixing of materialities is conceptual before it is real” (42). Thus, rather than being understood as merely secondary in importance to an original event, artworks and the writings about them should be seen as a conceptual spaces, “determining the way[s] in which they can be viewed and conceived” (76).

When considered in this light then, the hypothetical painting of the bed from Socrates' analogy takes on a new form of meaning that is not confined to the original bed. It produces a “new status of the visible” for its viewers, and in doing so, also produces an alternative form of novelty, which in fact, to use Rancière's terms, “sees novelty in the past” (82-83). What this suggests is that the concept of newness or presence in an artwork can be reignited by subsequent re-readings and re-writings.¹²⁶ Defiguration for Rancière, is a discourse that shows the image differently. It is capable of doing so because in his terms, it can remove “pictorial presence from an epiphany of the present” (82). As such, an artwork's presence can be felt across various temporalities – past, present, and future. Therefore, as both a concept and a practice, defiguration challenges the notion that experiences of novelty and presence are essentially fixed in time and space, as pure moments in the present.

¹²⁶ This is similar to Barthes' concept of *writerly* texts, and reading in a *writerly* manner that he develops closely in his study, *S/Z* (1970).

Barthes' Winter Garden

I have just described how a work's surface can be transformed over time through the creative use of language, and through the practice of description. Again, this is achieved through the act of writing (both textually and pictorially on a work's surface), but specifically through a theory of description that reconfigures the visible qualities of a work.

To demonstrate further how such defiguration takes place in the sequence from *Distant*, I would first like to bring together Rancière's theory with an example from the medium of photography. As Janet Harbord reminds us, the very life of the medium is directly put into question when Mahmut decides not to photograph the landscape that "arrests" him on the country road (Harbord 168). A useful example from photography is found in Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, and it is also analyzed by Rancière. Although the example is extremely familiar, let me describe it for you in full detail, so that you can see closely how it relates to both Rancière's theory and Ceylan's film.

Similar to Mahmut's belief that his experience on the country road is essentially unrepresentable, in his study on photography, Barthes famously reacts to a photograph of his recently deceased mother when she was a child. As you may recall, he names it the "Winter Garden photograph," and it becomes the central image forming his reflections on photography. Although he devotes more pages to this particular photograph than any other in the book, Barthes decides in the end not to physically reproduce the image. Here are his reasons why:

I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the "ordinary"; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of a science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound (Barthes 73).

Barthes' encounter with the photograph of his mother produces an intense affect that for him cannot be reproduced. He admits that viewers might make some connections with the photograph's cultural codes, its *studium*, but that ultimately, its *punctum*, the detail that touches

each viewer in an intimate way, what he calls “the wound” of the photograph, is beyond representation.

What stands out negatively for Rancière is that Barthes is able to completely divorce the *punctum* from the *studium*. He argues that Barthes does so by assigning too much importance to the temporal immediacy of the former. He writes:

By projecting the immediacy of the latter [here the latter is the *punctum*] on to the process of mechanical imprinting, he [Barthes] dispels all the mediations between the reality of mechanical imprinting and the reality of the affect that make this affect open to being experienced, named, [and] expressed (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 15).

Rancière argues that the actual effects of the *punctum* are not isolated and self-contained, but are rather dependent on the effects of the *studium*. In this way there is a necessary equivalence between the two, which can never truly be separated. In Rancière’s view, the “visibility of the ‘immediacies’ of presence is still configured through the mediation of words” (79). That is, however traumatic and immediate they might feel, the effects of Barthes’s *punctum* are still mediated through language. The effects of the *punctum* are still open to being discursively “experienced, named [and] expressed (15).

However, what Rancière fails to recognize is that such mediations are in fact produced through Barthes’ own descriptions in *Camera Lucida*. In other words, against Rancière’s critique, I argue that an image of the Winter Garden Photograph is in fact created through a process of description in Barthes’ text. That is, by incorporating Rancière’s own theory, I argue that an image of the Winter Garden Photograph is made present for the reader through a process of defiguration.

Specifically, Barthes’ writing works to transform what is present in the text by playing on the tensions between the visible and the invisible. That is, through his detailed descriptions and by showing you what you cannot already see, Barthes’ specific form of writing changes the surface of what is visible, or in the case of the Winter Garden Photograph, what is not visible. This process becomes clear when he describes the image in the following passage:

The photograph was very old. The corners were blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print had faded, and the picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days. My mother was five at the time (1898), her brother seven. He was leaning against the bridge railing, along which he had extended one arm; she, shorter than he, was standing a little back, facing the camera; you could tell that the photographer had said, “Step forward a little so we can see you”; she was holding one finger in the air as children often do, in an awkward gesture. The brother and sister, united, as I knew, by the discord of their parents, who were soon to divorce, had posed side by side, alone, under the palms of the Winter Garden (it was the house where my mother was born, in Chennevieres-sur-Marne) (Barthes 68-69).

Through this description, a certain image of the photograph surely becomes visible to the reader. We see some physical properties, such as the “blunted” corners and the faded print, in addition to what Barthes’ terms the *studium* of an image, the discernible societal and historical significations, in this case, the representation of two siblings posing in a Winter Garden at the turn of the last century. However, what about the “wound” of the photograph that Barthes claims is unrepresentable? Is this visible in any way?

I enter this question through the following detail included by Barthes, “the brother and sister, united, as I knew, by the discord of their parents, who were soon to divorce” (69). With this detail, Barthes begins to present and express the peculiarity of the image that he all along had been claiming was unrepresentable. I think it is clear that the reader of *Camera Lucida* is invited into an interiority of the photograph that exceeds the limits of the *studium*. Through Barthes’ description, we can imagine a particular place in the psyche of Barthes’ mother as a child, which opens up qualities of the photograph that move beyond the basic anonymity and generality of two children posing for a photographer at the turn of the last century. Contrary to Rancière’s assertion that Barthes completely “dispels” the possible affectual and discursive mediations of the effect of the *punctum*, one can view a process of defiguration in Barthes’ text which nonetheless attempts to – in Rancière’s own terms – experience, express, and name that which is unrepresentable (*The Future of the Image* 15). Through his use of description and by

playing on the “discrepancy of what is seen and what is not seen” (83), Barthes is able to alter and make visible the supposed non-visibility of the Winter Garden Photograph for the viewer.

Nowhere is this process of defiguration made more explicit than in the following passage, where Barthes attempts to describe the photograph by telling us how for him it is in fact indescribable. He writes:

This Winter Garden Photograph was for me like the last music Schumann wrote before collapsing, that first *Gesang der Frühe* which accords with both my mother’s being and my grief at her death; I could not express this accord except by an infinite series of adjectives, which I omit, convinced however that this photograph collected all the possible predicates from which my mother’s being was constituted (Barthes 70).

Barthes compares the *punctum* of the photograph to Robert Schumann’s *Gesang der Frühe* (1853), a slow but powerful piano sonata. In doing so, a certain effort is made to name the *punctum*’s effects, which Barthes in the same lines claims cannot be expressed. Even though he repeatedly states that the ultimate effect of the photograph is unrepresentable, he nonetheless provides an image of the photograph for the viewer. Or rather, as in the concept of negative space in visual art, he describes the characteristics surrounding the image at its periphery until the photograph of Barthes’ mother as a child develops before our eyes.¹²⁷

However, instead of blocks of paint and pictorial matter, Barthes creates a sense of absence by literally describing his decision to “omit” the “infinite series of adjectives” that could express the *punctum* of the Winter Garden Photograph. Not only does he omit these adjectives, but he also informs us that this is exactly what he is doing. As a result of this explicit omission, the “wound” of the photograph becomes visible on the page. The unrepresentable event of the *punctum* is still open to being discursively mediated through language. Or, as Rancière would put it, the “visibility of the ‘immediacies’ of presence is still configured through the mediation of words” (*The Future of the Image* 79). Again this is because the specific mediation and “double-poetics” of the image, the interdependent relationship between its visible and discursive elements, lends expression to an affect that was initially assumed to be beyond representation.

¹²⁷ In art theory, negative space refers to the area surrounding a painting’s subject. It can also refer to the space in between two separate subjects of a painting.

Photograph of the Valley from the Country Road

The example from *Camera Lucida* reveals that an encounter with pure presence is never completely un-mediated. Moreover, it is never pure. In much the same way that Barthes' "wound" is expressible, so too is Mahmut's experience with the minor moment on the country road. As with the Winter Garden Photograph which eventually becomes visible to the reader, I now argue that through a process of defiguration, the moment that arrests Mahmut on the country road – which he also decides not to physically reproduce with his camera – is in the end expressed to the viewer. Borrowing Rancière's terms, I would like to argue that this is achieved through a specific use of description, which plays on the "discrepancy between what is seen and what is not seen in order to establish a new status of the visible" (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 83). More importantly, the medium of cinema lends itself to such an expression by negotiating a discursive space for Mahmut's unrepresentable moment which lies somewhere between art and life, and between photography and the world. In this sense, cinema becomes a form of *writing*, which through its own style of description (both visual and textual), helps to experience, express, and name the moment on the country road in a new configuration for the viewer. In doing so, it creates an ongoing life for Mahmut's arresting moment, which removes it from an "epiphany of the present" (82). Also as an image, I would like to argue that the moment can now appear in various art-forms across numerous temporalities.

According to Rancière, "*cinema*, like *painting* and *literature*, is not just the name of an art whose processes can be deduced from the specificity of its material and technical apparatuses," but rather functions as a form of writing that can mediate in productive ways both an image's raw material presence and its discursive properties as language (*Film Fables* 4). Again, what this means is that the relationship and mediation between an image's non-signifying presence (its *punctum*) and its signifying cultural codes (its *studium*) opens up a discursive space for defiguration to take place. If we return to the moment in *Distant* once again, we may explore how such defiguration – as a process of cinematic writing – describes to the viewer the photograph that Mahmut decides not to take.

First, as we return to the scene, what remains completely isolated for Mahmut is an overwhelming sense of stillness and distance that he experiences as he gazes through the window towards the elusive image of the valley. Once again, for Mahmut, the experience becomes an

original moment, and a precise point or *punctum* in time, marking presence (see Figure below). In this sense, Mahmut's decision not to photograph the valley can also be interpreted as an act that attempts to absolutely separate the *punctum* from the *studium*, and by doing so does not allow for any mediation between the two elements. In other words, as with Rancière's criticism of Barthes, for Mahmut, the immediacy of the moment is an experience that is thought to be forever isolated from any possible signification.

However, looking more closely at the sequence now, one can argue that in opposition to the *punctum*, the *studium* of the scene is in fact articulated through both Mahmut's recognition of the representational figures in the valley, the lake and the sunset, and his own discourse on how he would potentially represent the experience with photography. More specifically, this is the moment when he tells Yousef that it would be best to shoot the scene from the top of the hill with the "sheep in front and the lake behind" (See Figure below).



(Figure 16: "The *Punctum*" *Distant* (2002) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan)



(Fig. 17: “Recognition of the *Stadium*” *Distant* (2002) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan)

These cultural details of the *studium* become a subsequent duration of moments for Mahmut which forever taint the purity of his initial encounter, the *punctum*. In a linear model of time then, they temporally carry him away from his experience of presence. However, as I would like to make clear, it is also precisely the mediation between these two aspects of the image that effectively produces new visibilities for the viewer by altering the surface on which they become legible. Moreover, this same act of description and mediation of the material and discursive qualities of the sequence produces a photograph of the valley for the viewer. However, this potential mediation of the moment is eventually what Mahmut fails to acknowledge when, after a long pause, he says “fuck it, why bother,” and then “forget it” as he starts his car and drives away (see Figure below). What I want to make especially clear is that the sense of stillness that Mahmut experiences is a direct result of his separation of the moment from time, but also from description.

As something that is presumed to be absolute for Mahmut, returning to Lyotard's argument, the moment escapes time and will always be experienced as an event that is "not yet or no longer present" (Lyotard 59).



(Figure 18: "Forget it'..." *Distant* (2002) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan)

The sense of distance that Mahmut experiences then, is less the result of an event taking place in a present that will soon become past, than the prick of an image that is a break from time altogether. This precisely is possible because Mahmut's sense of distance and immobility results from the atemporality of the event, a moment that one can argue is outside of time. Similar to the myth great events, as outlined above, it is the atemporality of such myths that ultimately make them especially limiting.

However, as I argue above, as overwhelming and arresting as the moment may initially seem for Mahmut, its effects are still mediated in various ways through language. As Rancière reminds us, there still exists the possibility to name and express the effects of such an experience through writing (Rancière, *The Future of the Image* 15). Therefore, precisely the complex movement of writing provides a "life" and a temporal dimension to the atemporality of the

seemingly unrepresentable moment. This takes place through an ongoing process of mediation. But more importantly for my argument, the potential to transform the stillness and distance of the scene from *Distant* is already present in the film. As I would like to make clear, as a form of writing, the film mediates in productive ways both the scene's raw material presence and its discursive properties as language, and as a result, a new image of Mahmut's photograph is produced for the viewer. Let's turn once again to the scene to demonstrate how a form of cinematic "writing" in Ceylan's film, and the tensions between absence and presence, can produce a photograph of the valley for the viewer.

Writing the Image

During the country road sequence, we can argue that the viewer is invited to participate in the development of a photograph of Mahmut's moment in the valley. This is achieved through a form of cinematic writing, which both visually and discursively expresses the image's features to the viewer. Specifically, sharing aspects with Barthes' descriptions of the Winter Garden in *Camera Lucida*, this image is dependent on the interaction of a reader who can re-write the sequence in new ways. I now would like to demonstrate how the filmic properties of the scene discursively create an image of the minor moment that Mahmut himself decides not to photograph.

The first example of the scene's defigurative description can be found if we return to the moment when Mahmut experiences the *punctum* through his car-door- window (see Figure 4 above). In the shot, one will notice that the valley is only partially visible to the viewer. With a static medium-close-up shot looking into the vehicle, we see the two men sitting in the car, and the reflection from the sunlight on Mahmut's face. However, Mahmut's actual point of view of the valley is outside of the shot's frame, and as a result, it is omitted from the viewer. Not having direct access to what Mahmut is viewing, its impression must read simultaneously from his face. In this sense the shot is reminiscent of still life photography. Janet Harbord interprets this quality as relevant throughout *Distant*, because the pace of the film is especially slow and because there is an abundance of static shots. In more detail, the characteristics of still-life photography are reinforced during the *punctum*-like moment when Mahmut is virtually motionless in the car, and

as viewers we are “forced to ‘read his mind’ ...[and]...fill in the gaps in the void of explanation” (Harbord 167). Moreover, in the shot we must attempt to see what Mahmut is seeing; to form some kind of presence from what on the surface is a mysterious absence, an elusive image that is out of sight and out of reach.

I would like to argue that during the moment, we also have to imagine what the valley must look like from Mahmut’s perspective. Since at no point does he turn his head away from the landscape, one might say his view is dominated by a sunset that is just soft enough to stare into without straining the eyes; a sunset whose orange rays are reflected in broad lines across the silver lake, leading to the green hill where his car is parked. Additionally, assuming there are more houses to the left of the frame, we can argue that Mahmut is also focusing on the sun’s reflection off one of the rooftops that we cannot see; the rooftop of a house that is just below the hill, which grabs his attention. In addition to such details, the scene also demands that one imagines what he is thinking and feeling. As his friend mentions that at one time he would have hiked to the top of a mountain to get a better shot of a landscape, perhaps now he is feeling the same inspiration that used to touch his senses? Whatever we speculate about his state, what is clear is that there is a detail in the moment that pricks him emotionally but remains elusive. A detail that – as with the film’s viewer – he may not fully recognize, but that creates a demand, and that leaves him momentarily speechless and physically frozen in time.

Although we cannot definitively answer any of these questions or prove the representational accuracy of those descriptions, we nevertheless add a temporal dimension to the visual stasis of the scene and lend meaning to Mahmut’s experience through writing. This is an important temporal feature of writing which is first brought to our attention by Lessing, in his *Laocoon*.

Although Lessing’s division of media sets up rigid boundaries and highlights the ontological purity of individual art forms, his general assertion that poetry is a “temporal” art is still an important observation for our discussion.¹²⁸ In more detail, in his essay, Lessing states that poetry can describe things in their duration and thus may highlight a temporal dimension to visual descriptions (Lessing 96). In other words, there is a particular movement associated with writing that provides temporality to the description of images. His example comes from Homer’s

¹²⁸ Art critics such as Clement Greenberg used Lessing’s theories in the “Laocoon” essay to champion the essential nature and autonomy of individual art forms. See for example, Greenberg’s “Towards a Newer Laocoon” (1940).

Illiad. Lessing views the passage where Homer describes in detail the scepter given to Odysseus by Agamemnon as being exemplary of writing's ability to capture movement in time (Lessing 96). Analyzing the passage more closely, Lessing writes:

Instead of a copy, he [Homer] gives us the history of the scepter. First we see it in the workshop of Vulcan; then it shines in the hands of Jupiter; now it betokens the dignity of Mercury; now it is the baton of warlike Pelops; and again the shepherd's staff of peace-loving Atreus (96).

Lessing argues that because of Homer's description, he now knows the scepter "better than if a painter should put it before [his] eyes, or a second Vulcan give it into [his] hands" (97). A unique temporal description of the staff is illuminated through Homer's poetic writings, as they capture its movement across time as duration.

If we agree with Rancière that film is in fact a "fable" that has both technical and literary features, constantly mediating one another through what he calls a "double-poetics" (each feature "thwarting" the other to produce artistic effects), then we also see how writing can provide movement to the static image (*Film Fables* 11). Also, in much the same way that writing produces a temporal dimension to the sequence on the country road, there is necessarily a second defigurative description in the scene, associated with the purely visible qualities of the image. This results from the technical and filmic movement in the sequence that functions through cinematographic techniques. The second way in which cinema can add a temporal dimension and hence, life to the elusiveness of the moment, is through the movement of the camera.

The Image in Motion

After another medium close-up shot of the men in the car, the film returns us to the outside setting on the country road. Once here, a medium shot remarkably pans left one-hundred-and-eighty degrees following the movement of Mahmut's car as he drives away from the *punctum*-inducing moment. Following the car, we see a few more houses and again the lake as the car and camera move together along a winding dirt road. However, the movement of the camera is too

fast for the viewer to take in the landscape that she is witnessing. Thus, acting as a form of *trompe d'oeil* in sharp contrast to the stillness of the previous shots, the camera and the forward momentum of the film – its narrative advancement – pull us away from the visible characteristics of the landscape that we so desperately want to see. In doing so, the shot challenges the representational certainty of what we are witnessing. As a result, a tension is created: we have to ask ourselves if we have indeed seen what Mahmut has just momentarily experienced so vividly from the window of his parked car. The one-hundred-and-eighty degree pan on the country road also only provides the spectator with a *partial* view of what Mahmut is viewing. By playing on the discrepancy between what is seen and what is not seen, as viewers we must fill in the gaps to attempt to see the *punctum*-like effect that Mahmut just moments before had experienced.

One final way that the viewer can fill in the gaps of what is seen and what is not seen and in the process produce a form of expression of the elusive moment, is through the use of extra-cinematic technologies such as DVD/Blu-ray players, laptop computers, or streaming platforms. With these technologies, viewers may find alternative ways to capture a description or a new expression of the photograph of the valley that Mahmut decides not to take. This can be achieved through the technique of pausing or stopping the projected motion of the film, either with a remote control or with the click of a button. In *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (2006), Laura Mulvey describes this specific agency of the cinema viewer which she argues is enacted by such techniques. She writes:

Once upon a time, most people could only watch a movie in the cinema where it was projected at the correct pace for the illusion of movement and according to a given narrative sequence. Now, cinema's stillness, a projected film's best kept secret, can be easily revealed at the simple touch of a button, carrying with it not only the suggestion of the still frame, but also of the stillness of photography (Mulvey 21-22).

When frozen by the spectator, the stillness of the cinematic image, “a projected film's best kept secret” promotes the interaction and engagement of the viewer, and creates the potential for her to experience the effects of what I like to term, with an unintended pun, a “touching” detail in the image that stands outside of common codes.

In the sequence from *Distant*, if we pause the film right at the moment when Mahmut stops his car on the road, an image is revealed to us that would have otherwise remained insignificant in its passing in the regular pace of the film. In the normal flow of the film we do not have enough time to take in the moment. Therefore, due to this moment's sequential order in the film's narrative structure – this moment arrives before we are even aware that Mahmut has stopped his car to look at the valley – the significance of the image is also downplayed. However, through the technique of pausing which Mulvey describes, one can actually freeze the shot that we see just moments before Mahmut experiences his *punctum* from within the car. As a result, one can read new figures onto the scene's visible surface (see Figure below).



(Figure 19: “Sheep in Front and the Lake Behind.” *Distant* (2002) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan)

Although it is not exactly the view that Mahmut experiences from the car, the shot that we see moments before from the top of the hill in some ways is an attempt to describe and express the elusive image that will become of such great importance in the following moments. As Harbord argues when commenting on the scene, “the medium of film does not escape the question of purpose presented most squarely in relation to photography, a dilemma posed in terms of its ability to affect” (Harbord 168). In other words, Mahmut's earlier declaration that “photography

is dead” and his decision during the sequence not to photograph the landscape become part of an important theme to be taken up by Ceylan, who is a photographer himself. Although it chronologically precedes Mahmut’s event and presents the viewer with an alternative perspective, the image provided by Ceylan of the image of the valley is an attempt to express what is unrepresentable for his character.

Ceylan’s image of the valley from the hill as it is presented in the film is technically not an actual photograph. Although the camera from which he shoots the scene is statically perched on top of the hill (after it pans to the left following the car), there are still four seconds of motion in the take before the film cuts to the next shot of Mahmut in the car. There is only a virtual form of stasis in the shot. As a result, I contend that the projected movement of Ceylan’s shot provides a further temporal dimension to the stillness of the subsequent scene. It adds yet another form of description and expression to the moment.

Here, together with all of the other temporal forms of cinematic description mentioned above, an image of Mahmut’s *punctum* is produced for the viewer. Paradoxically, a process of defiguration and textual and visual mediation transforms Mahmut’s sense of stillness and death when confronting the moment, into a form of movement and life.

Thus, as I have been trying to demonstrate, the main question that confronts Mahmut in the film *Distant* is how to give life to a moment that otherwise would pass on to oblivion? What I have been arguing is that although there is an elusiveness that can accompany one’s experience of such moments, the supposed purity of the moment is never completely un-mediated. In other words, as an image, the immediate presence of the moment (its *punctum*) is still always mediated through language and discourse (its *studium*). In the following passage, Rancière affirms once again how this mediation takes place across various art forms through a particular form of movement, which for him is the intricate workings of an image’s double-nature, its “double-poetics”:

The visual production of iconic pure presence, claimed by the filmmaker’s discourse, is itself only possible by virtue of the work of its opposite: the Schlegelian poetics of the witticism that invents between fragments of films, news strips, photos, reproductions of paintings and other combinations, distances or approximations capable of eliciting new forms and meanings (*The Future of the Image* 30).

Again, Rancière suggests that intermedial combinations are always dependent on the actual engagement of a viewer and/or artist who can form such equivalences through artistic practices such as literature, painting, filmmaking, and criticism. This aesthetic engagement is the productive *movement* necessary to travel beyond one's encounter with a founding sense of distance.

Finally, in his writings on art, Richard Shusterman also argues that the notion of absence should be understood as having both productive and positive qualities. He relates absence to distance, and claims that distance "denotes a gap to be bridged by movement" (Shusterman 109). Through my own analysis of concepts such as stillness, presence, and the unrepresentable, I have been arguing that one should see the initial distance from one's encounter with a minor moment, not as some black hole of "holy terror," but rather, as a "gap to be bridged by movement;" a movement that belongs to all of the arts; a movement that carries on through the act of writing. Ultimately, through such forms of writing, a photograph of the moment is produced for viewers of Ceylan's film.

Conclusion

Minor Moments, Modern Literatures, Fragile Films

He sank down on his knees and remained inert... He would end by telling someone – if not today, then tomorrow. He might as well put off his escape...

– Kobo Abe, *The Woman in the Dunes* (1962)

If we recall, at the beginning of this study, I began by introducing what I term, “the myth of great events” in western literature and aesthetics. In doing so, I first tried to show how a hierarchy of representation that favors great events has been passed down to us throughout literary and aesthetic history. I also attempted to demonstrate how the concept of the “event” has been both foundational to narrative and literary forms, and to a collective myth whose dominant influence reaches most works of literature and cinema through to the present day.

Once again, as I outlined through an examination of the literary theories of Hegel, Georg Lukács, Roland Barthes, and Mikhail Bakhtin; great events in literature have perpetuated a series of dominant values in literary history, that appear timeless; not only for their sense of permanence and inevitability, but also, for their persistence in forming cultural narratives that largely overshadow the more personal experiences of everyday life. Again, while for Hegel and Lukács, such events represent an ideal past, full of great heroes and dramatic actions that provide a clear sense of purpose in life (i.e., as a “totality” of meaning). We also saw alternatively, how for Barthes and Bakhtin, these same events have become a collection of outdated myths and values, that now only stifle works of modern literature and cinema, and the more intimate moments of our lives.

With these points in mind, one of the main aims of the present study has been to rethink and to reframe our understanding of the “modern” in literature and cinema, as precisely that which resists great events and actions, and the dominant values that they represent. Again, an important argument that I have been making, is that in addition to a gradual shift towards everyday themes and settings that clearly accompanies the emergence of the novel in literary history (a central argument in Eric Auerbach’s and Ian Watt’s famous studies); what also marks

a work of literature and cinema as particularly “modern,” is in fact its resistance to grand events and dramatic scenes, and by extension, its openness to minor forms and moments. To be clear, as I have been arguing, this aesthetic of the minor moment appears in various works of modern literature and cinema that specifically highlight these more subtle and alternative qualities.

If we remember, an early example that we first turned to, to demonstrate these minor characteristics was Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma*, where we saw specifically how older epic values of heroism and the nation were directly put into question by the novel’s representation of war. As I argued, the novel presents a clear contrast with other nineteenth-century works, such as Balzac’s *Old Goriot*, whose “realist” themes and settings were explored in close detail (an emerging trend at the time); but whose narrative also remained largely tied to older aesthetic values, such as archetypal characters, grand events, and dramatic scenes. By contrast, and as we demonstrated, Stendhal’s novel focuses largely on the absence of such qualities, and when they do occasionally appear, it is only to undermine their dominant influence. For example, to highlight the point again, we need only to remember Stendhal’s concluding lines from the Battle of Waterloo section in the novel, where he questions whether his hero, Fabrizio, had in fact gone to war: “Was what he had seen a real battle? And, if so, was that battle Waterloo?” (Stendhal 88). As such lines remind us, for Stendhal, the epic values of the past no longer provide an adequate meaning for his hero’s or the reader’s modern world. Rather, as we argued, they reveal only their fundamental ambiguity.

Though, as I have tried to make clear, no where do we find such an initial and direct challenge to the dominance of great events in literature, than as we do in Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. If we remember, through specific scenes in the novel, such as Charles’ boring routines, and Emma and Leon’s secret carriage-ride sequence in Rouen; we saw in detail how Flaubert’s work expresses a series of moments that appear by themselves as subjects worthy of our full attention and exploration. As I’ve tried to demonstrate, these moments are accompanied by what can best be described as a new form of writing in literary history, that began to move beyond realism in its expression of everyday life. Once again, in dialogue with the novelists and theorists, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Roland Barthes, and Milan Kundera, we saw how both this detailed focus on the minor moment, and the introduction of a new type of literary language, became clear precursors to later works of literature, that for these very reasons, we can now distinctly describe as “modern.”

Minor Histories

Additionally, what is also important to highlight from above, is that by building upon this literary history, and by following Flaubert and the emergence of the modern novel in more detail, I have identified two key characteristics that stand out especially in modern novels that focus on minor moments. If we recall, the first of these qualities is what I describe as a clear turning away from dominant representations of history. Again, this quality relates closely to what Auerbach terms a “transfer of confidence” in literary history, where the central focus in these modern novels could easily be selected from a random detail, or an insignificant object, that is further removed from the major historical events in the narrative (Auerbach 547). As I attempted to demonstrate through close readings of Eileen Chang’s *Love in a Fallen City*, Dino Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe*, and later, through my case-study on Milan Kundera’s *Ignorance*; such novels present a clear reversal of what is presumed to be the most significant in both literature and in life. In other words, as we established above through an analysis of these works, a minor moment in the life of a novel’s character, can now be equal to, or if not greater than a major historical event.

For example, if we return briefly to these novels, we will remember that in Chang’s novella, we encounter such a reversal of history that directly challenges the dominant influence of historical events. If we recall, the moment takes place at the end of the narrative, when Liusu and Liuyuan finally arrive in Hong Kong, and are able to pursue their relationship together. But as we outlined above, the moment also occurs the same day that the city falls to the Japanese forces through a catastrophic bombing raid, killing thousands of civilians. Paradoxically in that instant, as we highlighted through a memorable passage in the novel, “Hong Kong’s defeat had brought Liusu victory...[and] Liusu didn’t feel there was anything subtle about her place in history” (Chang 167). In short, as we concluded above, and as dreadful as the fall of Hong Kong was for those around her, it was no match for this intimate moment in Liusu’s life.

Subsequently, as we also tried to demonstrate through our analysis of Kundera’s *Ignorance*, even if only momentarily, Josef and Irena encounter similar experiences that challenge the dominant influence of world events. Again, for Irena, this reversal of history takes place towards the novel’s conclusion, when she is walking behind Prague’s castle through some leafy streets and the same quiet neighborhood where she grew up. If we remember, in that unexpected moment, the unbearable weight of history, with all of its imposed dates and

collective memories (the German occupation of 1938, the Stalinist putsch of 1948, the Soviet invasion of 1968, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989); all give way to a flood of personal reminiscences and images. Once again, in that moment, Irena remembers her father's favorite music from the thirties; the novels of Hrabal and Škvorecký that marked her adolescence; the small theatres and cabarets of the sixties; and ultimately, a series of memories that for these same reasons, are all tied to her unique image of the city: what Kundera describes as her "secret side" of Prague (Kundera 135).

As we demonstrated further, through the novel's focus on Josef, similar moments appear throughout the narrative that challenge this same grand view of history, and that force him to question his sense of self within it. If we remember, in addition to when Josef first notices his favorite painting hanging on his brother's wall (a scene that we examined in close detail above); we can also return once again to a moment that appears on the novel's final page, when he is on his departing flight to Copenhagen, and he remembers a specific image of his house and backyard in the city. Again, as Kundera details in the scene, "through the porthole he saw, far off in the sky, a low wooden fence and a brick house with a slender fir tree like a lifted arm before it" (195). If we remember, this is the same tree that Josef had planted with his now deceased wife many years ago. But most importantly as we also concluded above, in this particular moment, and now weighted against the events of history; the image provides Josef with an even greater sense of "home." In short, he feels untethered to his past, and to all that it represents, including an identity that had only been imposed upon him by others: the image of the Eastern-European émigré, and the one who had to flee his homeland and the grand events of history.

In summary, as I've tried to outline through my analysis of these works, and as we find consistently through the experiences of their characters, the great events and turning-points of the twentieth century, that had so scarred the countries and cities of Irena, Josef, and Liusu, become in these moments only secondary to the more intimate details of their lives. Once again, as I demonstrated through such scenes in the novels, there is a clear turning away from a dominant view of history and the imposing values that it represents (i.e., collective values of the "nation," of a "homeland," and of a shared "myth of origins," as outlined above). But as I've also tried to make clear, in doing so, these modern novels do not reject history completely. Rather, they expand the possibilities of what we might consider to be "historical," including all of the intimate

stories and experiences, the personal memories, and above all, those private moments that mostly make up our lives.

Minor Literatures

Now if we also remember, in addition to a reversal of history that marks the above works; a second key characteristic that I have identified in modern novels that focus on minor moments, is an experimentation with language that clearly challenges the “event” as the most dominant feature of literary and narrative forms. Once again, as I have been arguing throughout my study, there is a specific type of writing found in modern literature, and especially following Flaubert, which both through its focus on the minor moment, and on literature as an aesthetic object, moves beyond realism in its expression of everyday life. Again, as we outlined above in novels such as Kafka’s *Amerika* and *The Castle*, Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe*, Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, Onetti’s *The Pit* and *No Man’s Land*; and also as we highlighted through our case-study on Borges’ “The Secret Miracle,” these works demonstrate a clear omission of dramatic events and actions, and by turn, express a strange destabilization of everyday life through their experimentations with language.

If we return to these examples, we will remember in particular that in Sarraute’s *Tropisms*, typical everyday moments are made almost unrecognizable through a type of writing that produces an uncanny sense of the familiar. Again, this is what Alain Robbe-Grillet describes as the modern novel’s ability to bring to light that “little detail that rings *false*” (Robbe-Grillet 163). If we recall, through the establishing scene in Sarraute’s novel, we are presented with such details, and in particular, a series of abstract shapes and forms that only later, are revealed to be a group of mothers shopping with their children. And as we argued, what would have typically been represented through a realist description in a nineteenth-century novel, is in Sarraute’s work, transformed into an unfamiliar experience. Moreover, as we highlighted above, following Deleuze and Guattari’s writings on Kafka, and their notion of “deterritorialization,” these moments clearly destabilize our experience of everyday life; but also, and most critically, they disrupt our traditional understanding of literature, and through the process, our sense of self. In short, as I have been arguing, such works pull their characters and readers further into

experiences of ambiguity and estrangement, and in so doing, also further away from a model of literary realism that had predominantly favored great events and dramatic scenes, and a clear certainty of narrative purpose and meaning.

Similarly, if we recall, through our analysis of Onetti's *The Pit* and *No Man's Land*, we also saw further how such experimentations with language extended to the characters of these works, who unlike in epic literature, or in the dramatic scenes of the nineteenth-century novel, are unable to produce events and actions that can drive the narrative forward. If we remember, Onetti's protagonists, such as Linacero and Aránzuru, mostly stay alone in their apartments, and rarely engage with the outside world. Once again, unlike the great heroes promoted by Hegel and Lukács above, these characters have no motivations, no goals, and they produce no events that can change the outcome of their lives, let alone history, or the wider world. Rather, as we have been arguing, they occupy a strange aesthetic space, similar to what Deleuze describes above as an "any-space-whatever" (Deleuze *Cinema 1* 109). In such spaces, as we demonstrated, the characters appear in nondescript settings, and only as witnesses to their own lack of motivation and characterization. And as we also argued, these characters suffer clearly from the alienating effects of the modern cities around them. In short, by focusing on such eventless spaces in Onetti's novels, not only have we outlined the critical significance of an independence of objects and literary language in modern literature; but also, as we've tried to make clear, a further breaking away from older narrative models of writing and representation.

Lastly, as we demonstrated through our analysis of Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe*, and Borges' "The Secret Miracle," there is similarly a clear destabilization of time through the minor moments in such modern works. As we outlined, we find this especially in Buzzati's novel, where not only are there no historical references to place the setting in which the narrative unfolds; but also, time itself is so abstracted through the many years of Drogo's state of waiting at the desert fort, that it begins to lose all meaning. Again, as Buzzati describes in the novel, Drogo, "...felt as if the flight of time had stopped, as though a spell had been broken" (Buzzati 195). And once again, as Buzzati writes, in these moments of endless waiting, "...time was slipping past, beating life out silently" (163). In short, the novel presents an experience so alien to our conventional understandings of both time and history, that it forces us to question whether such phenomena even exist to begin with.

Similarly, as we argued through our analysis of “The Secret Miracle,” Borges also abstracts our understanding of temporality, but in ways that are closer to Onetti’s *The Pit* and *No Man’s Land*, than to Buzzati’s novel. As we demonstrated above, this is clearly evident in such works, because there is an added meta-fictional quality, where the act of writing itself is woven into such temporal abstractions through the central characters’ own literary experimentations in these novels. If we recall, in Borges’ story, the moment when Hladik finishes writing his play before the firing squad in Prague, only comprises a single minute in the objective time of history and the unfolding of the war. But crucially as we highlighted above, the moment also takes up an entire year in both Hladik’s imagination, and in the fictional time of Borges’ narrative. Most importantly, as we concluded, this paradox of time opens up a literary space that is potentially endless in its possibilities for both Borges’ character, and for his readers.

Ultimately, as I have been arguing, the above works help to demonstrate only further how specific moments in modern literature can diverge from a traditional view of great events. And through their opposition to older narrative models, such as the epic and the nineteenth-century novel, these works have also helped to pave the way for an alternative set of forms in literary history that explores the subtle values of the minor.

Minor Films

Now if we also recall, another central argument of this study is that the “myth of great events” is clearly present in film history, and that along with its origins at the end of the nineteenth-century, it fully develops into a dominant aesthetic by the Classical Hollywood era. Again, with films such as Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, Hawks’ *Land of the Pharaohs*, and De Mille’s *The Ten Commandments*, in similar ways to the epic in literature, these large-scale productions perpetuate a series of great events and actions that have come to define the most dominant model of narrative cinema through to the present day. In more detail, as we argued, and following what Deleuze describes as the “action-image” in cinema, these films reinforce collective epic values of a national past, a shared myth of origins, and a sense of individual heroism that serve to uphold these larger myths. We also demonstrated how in similar ways to the epic literary values outlined above by Hegel and Lukács, these films represent the actions of great heroes that can drive both

the narrative and the course of history forward toward a state of inevitable completion; or what Deleuze describes again as a, "...strong and coherent conception of universal history" (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 151). Most importantly, as we argued, regardless of whether such films are set in the United States or in ancient Egypt, they reinforce the dominant values of grand events, and reaffirm the model of Classical Hollywood as the most popular aesthetic in film history with the widest form of influence.

Additionally, in much the same way that the "myth of great events" became naturalized in nineteenth-century literature, we also argued that in film history, it became especially omnipresent through what Bordwell and Thompson term the "continuity system" of narrative filmmaking. Again, through a series of common cinematic techniques, such as editing, cinematography, and mise-en-scène, Classical Hollywood cinema emphasized narrative continuity above all in its films, and established the predominance of dramatic events and actions as seemingly "natural" to its viewers. In other words, as Deleuze reminds us above, Classical Hollywood is not only a cinematic aesthetic, but also, and quite importantly, a mode of perception that spectators learn to adopt through their viewing habits, and through what he terms, the "sensory-motor-schema" of its films. In this way, as we argued, the myth of great events is typically accepted in film history, not only because it is ubiquitous, but also because it has become normalized and seamless to our viewing experiences. In short, such naturalization takes place because, as Barthes reminds us again, like all cultural myths, we simply accept it, "...without wondering where it comes from" (Barthes 152).

But as I tried to make clear through my analysis of modern cinema above, another central argument of this study is that there is similarly a minor aesthetic in film history that also breaks free from great events and dramatic scenes as the main defining features of its films. Once again, as we argued, in similar ways that Stendhal and Flaubert began to challenge the dominance of grand events in nineteenth-century literature; we also outlined how a parallel movement takes place in film history following the Second World War, that similarly puts into question this traditional narrative model of cinema. In particular, as we highlighted with Italian Neorealism, and with films such as Visconti's *La terra trema*, De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves*, and *Umberto D*, there is a focused examination of everyday life through the marginal themes and settings in its narratives. Crucially in such films, as we demonstrated, there is also an initial move away from dramatic events and actions, and a clear loosening of cinematic form through a closer attention to

minor moments and details. In particular, as we argued above, films such as *Umberto D* share important similarities with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, in the ways in which they explore boring scenes and routines, and through their expression of what Bazin describes again, as life's most "banal incidents" (Bazin 50). Ultimately, as we argued, these films demonstrate a clear rejection of great events and actions by establishing what Bazin terms, an "ontological equality" between such events and moments, and the minor details of our lives.

Though as we tried to make clear, for Deleuze it is not only that such modern films reveal this equality between moments and events, but also, and most critically, that in doing so, they begin to move beyond realism in their examination of everyday life. Once again, as outlined above, we find this cinematic aesthetic within a particular group of films that in similar ways to the modern novels analyzed above, begins to challenge our deepest expectations about what cinema is and can be as a narrative art form. Importantly, the main reason for this shift in film history is because, as Deleuze reminds us, with such modern films, "...what tends to collapse, or at least to lose its position, is the sensory-motor schema which constituted the action-image of the old cinema" (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* xii). In other words, rather than "continuity," which had defined Classical Hollywood and our most common expectations of narrative events, as outlined above; the films that appear for the first time after the war, begin to express an aesthetic of discontinuity to their viewers that undoes the dominant forms and values of that older cinematic model. Thus, as I have been arguing, this particular shift in film history led simultaneously to a more intimate form of cinema that we can describe as distinctly "modern," precisely for its moments and scenes of introspection, and for its clear break from dramatic narratives and events.

For instance, if we briefly recall our analysis of modern cinema above, including Antonioni's *L'avventura*, and our case study on Ceylan's *Distant*; we argued that by breaking away from Classical Hollywood, such works reject the forms and values of great events by exploring unfamiliar images and experiences. That is, much like the writings of Kafka, Onetti, and Sarraute, these works also defamiliarize their characters, settings, and narratives to the point where they seem strangely "false" to us viewers. Once again, as we demonstrated above, similar to K's exhausted wanderings along the road beneath the castle in Kafka's *The Castle* (which initially seem to take him nowhere), Sandro and Claudia also become narratively displaced in Antonioni's *L'avventura*, as they gradually abandon their search for Ana midway through the

film. If we remember specifically, from that moment on in Antonioni's film, both the characters and the plot of events seize to move forward toward any logical end.

Likewise, in much the same way that Linacero and Aránzuru mostly fail to leave their apartments in Onetti's *The Pit* and *No Man's Land*, we encounter a similar experience with Mahmut in Ceylan's *Distant*, who is unable to communicate with others (including his cousin and his ex-wife), and who is also incapable of taking action in his own life. For these reasons, as we argued, Mahmut is similarly trapped in a state of narrative and existential discontinuity. Most importantly, as I have been trying to make clear, and as we find explicitly in our analysis of modern literature above, this quality of discontinuity is not only an aesthetic characteristic in the above works, but it also reveals new ways of thinking and engaging with the world. That is to say, through slowed-down scenes, barren settings, and broken and indecisive characters, these films open up broader spaces of thought and reflection for their viewers. In short, as Barthes reminds us again, it is ultimately the fragility of such works that allows for an openness of form, and that by turn, comes to define our most critical understanding of the modern, "...not just at the level of grand History...but of the little History of which each of us is individually the measure" (Barthes, "Dear Antonioni" 63).

Other Directions

Having now revisited some of the main arguments and themes above, it is also important to remember that at the beginning of this study, I explained that I would not be carrying out a complete "history" of minor moments. Rather, as I have been trying to make clear, my aim has been to follow a distinct set of works in modern literature and cinema that outlines the broad presence of a minor aesthetic and its corresponding values. Though while this study is not fully exhaustive in the above sense, it should be noted that beyond the limits of my analyses, there are still additional directions that could have been taken, aesthetic paths that could have been explored in more detail, and works that could have been examined that relate closely to my overall argument.

For example, although I have focused primarily on the works above, if we look further throughout literary history, we can also find other examples of novels that initially began to

challenge the epic values of the past, and in particular, the myth of great events. For instance, it is well established that Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605-1612) had already brought into question the growing anachronisms between the epic values of ancient and medieval literature, and the emerging literary qualities of everyday life, that the author himself had identified long before Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*. More specifically, as readers of Cervantes' expansive novel will recall, throughout Don Quixote's adventures, there is a sustained examination of personal and prosaic themes in early seventeenth century Spain, but also within a new literary genre that had yet to be named. In fact, the subtitle of Cervantes' work, "an epic in prose," makes this distinction especially clear, in that it juxtaposes the traditional literary values of the past (the epic), including the conquests of great heroes and grand events; with a more intimate expression of everyday life that aligns much more closely with the ambiguities, complexities, and often disappointments of our lives, and that ultimately, as I outline above, will come to define the modern novel.

Similarly, in addition to *Don Quixote*, we could also include earlier novels to our list of works that were left out of this study, such as the anonymously published *Lazaro de Tormes* (1554), as well as Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji* (1009). As with *Don Quixote*, these early novels do not necessarily follow any wider literary movements or trends in literary history, but rather stand out specifically for their remarkable singularity, as both literary and historical anomalies. Admittedly, there are very interesting connections to be made between these works and the novels and films in my study. However, a closer examination between them would also necessarily go beyond the methodological scope of my analysis. Once again, the decision to limit the focus of this dissertation to the past two hundred years (which is already quite an expansive historical period), has been a conscious attempt to highlight a line of works that, whether explicitly or not, influences one another, and when grouped together, forms the basis for what I have been terming, a "modern aesthetic of minor moments" in modern literature and film.

Continuing on the subject of literary history, another possible direction (or limitation) that deserves mentioning, and that hopefully my study avoids, is the unintended "flattening" of national literatures, languages, and cultures through an overly broad approach to literary analysis. As David Damrosch warns us in his study *How to Read World Literature* (2009), "...if we read a foreign text in ignorance of its author's assumptions and values, we risk reducing it to a pallid version of some literary form we already know" (Damrosch 1). Importantly, to avoid this

outcome, as Damrosch advises, "...we need to become aware of different literary assumptions made in different cultures, including assumptions as to what literature [in fact] is...its modes of creation and reading, its social setting and effects" (4). These are critical points to remember, and ones that I fully agree with. But paradoxically, and somewhat problematically, Damrosch also argues in the same study that, "...a work of world literature has an exceptional ability to transcend the boundaries of the culture that produces it" (2). In other words, for theorists writing about world literature and literary history, there is a clear tension between the desire to highlight a literary work's broad accessibility beyond "the boundaries of the culture that produces it," as Damrosch claims; while on the other hand, there is a simultaneous desire to take into account those particular aspects of culture, time, and place, including the distinct voice of a work's author, that should never be overlooked or omitted when doing so.

In some cases this double-desire of the theorist, produces unfortunate and unintended consequences. For example, if we remain within Damrosch's study for a moment, we will see that he includes a poem by the famous Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik, but mistakenly refers to her as a "Chilean poet" (9). He does so when analyzing Pizarnik's poem "Naming You" (1965), and when comparing it to an anonymous sixteenth-century lyric (9). Pizarnik was of course Argentinian, and famously from Buenos Aires, and her biographical connection to the city is not only important to note correctly, but it is also central to interpretations of her poetry, where the city so fully shapes the author's literary voice and identity, including as well, her deep struggles and sometimes rejections of both. Thus, following Damrosch's earlier warnings about the dangers of reading world literature "beyond the boundaries of the culture that produces it," or trans-historically, trans-culturally, and trans- geographically; it is clear that even if unintentionally, he highlights the precise risks in carrying out such analyses through his own example.¹²⁹

While attempting to navigate these tensions in my own project, I have tried to be careful when dealing with such a diverse range of literary and cinematic works, even when not always working with certain texts in their original languages. As I've also tried to make clear above, by emphasizing the importance of close reading throughout my analysis, my main aim has been to

¹²⁹ My point is not to diminish Damrosch's contribution to the field of world literature. Rather, I wish to highlight Damrosch's own warnings about the very risks in conducting such analyses. It should also be noted that the biographical error about Pizarnik is corrected in the second edition of Damrosch's study, published in 2018.

focus on a distinct set of literary qualities and themes, while also attempting to analyze a specific set of modern novels and films from the past two hundred years. While again, this is admittedly quite a broad historical period to examine, the grouping of these works is less the mark of a particular “movement,” and more the result of unifying set of characteristics and values that as I have been arguing, for all of the above reasons, are uniquely “minor” and “modern.”

Now more specifically, addressing the role of cinema in my project, another direction that could have been taken is a discussion of what is broadly referred to as the “Slow Cinema” movement in contemporary film studies. As the director Paul Schrader explains in his study, *Transcendental Cinema: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer* (1972), ““Slow Cinema” is a fairly recent term used to designate a branch of art cinema which features minimal narrative, little action or camera movement and long running times” (Schrader 42). Recent works such as Ira Jaffe’s *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action* (2014), and Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge’s edited anthology, *Slow Cinema* (2015), have also addressed the increasing acceptance of experimentally slow films in contemporary world cinema, and especially at international film festivals. For example, the films highlighted in these studies, include those by directors such as Béla Tarr, Lav Diaz, Kelly Reichardt, Tsai Ming-liang, and Carlos Reygadas.¹³⁰ However, in much the same way that I have tried to avoid the term “minimalism” throughout the present study, as explained in the Introduction above; I have also been reluctant to describe the films in my analysis within the context of “slow cinema.” Although some of the films analyzed above are admittedly slow, and in some cases, they have been included on lists of the slow cinema movement (the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan in particular stand out); they nevertheless avoid what I would like to describe as a type of “performative slowness,” or “slowness for slowness’ sake,” that we find with some contemporary examples. In other words, while the films of Antonioni and Ceylan often deploy techniques such as deep focus and the long take which are typical in the slow cinema movement today, I would like to argue that they are not slow for their own sake, and should not be reduced only to their slowness in order to be understood. In short, their films and those analyzed above share minor qualities and values, and for such reasons, they are distinctly “modern,” and serve as better examples of what I have been terming, “minor cinema.”

¹³⁰ See for example, Béla Tarr’s *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000), Lav Diaz’ *Norte, the End of History* (2013), Kelly Reichardt’s *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010), Tsai Ming-liang’s *Stray Dogs* (2013), and Carlos Reygadas’ *Post Tenebras Lux* (2012).

Ultimately, as I have been trying to make clear, whether we are discussing the “fragility” of modern cinema that Barthes observes in Antonioni’s films, or the “time-images” that Deleuze celebrates throughout the latter half of the twentieth century; throughout my study I have tried to articulate the presence of an aesthetic space in modern films, that allows for a critical openness, and that is also tied directly to a work’s most minor and intimate moments.

Minor Moments Today

Arriving closer now towards the end of my study, I can admit without a doubt, that there are still many contemporary examples that could have been included. Perhaps in future writings, I will try to bring these works together. But for now, I would like to simply mention them in passing, to highlight their clear relevance in relation to my own arguments. Also, and perhaps most importantly, the following examples have all moved me greatly over the past years, and while they have often resisted my efforts to interpret them, they have nevertheless pulled me in closer through their minor themes and aesthetics. Allow me to now briefly provide an overview of some of these works, while also highlighting their key relevance in relation to my main conclusions and arguments.¹³¹

First, as with many of the novels and films examined throughout this study, an initial group of more recent works to mention are those that similarly stand out for their resistance to a grand view of history. Again, as with the works above, these recent films and novels are clearly opposed to great events and actions, and also to the values that they traditionally correspond to, including, as I have been arguing, a shared myth of origins, a myth of universal progress, and a sense of individual heroism that serve to uphold these larger myths.

For example, one recent film to highlight is Pawel Pawlikowski’s *Cold War* (2018), where we can see how the intimate moments between its two protagonists are given an unusual precedence over the world-changing events being shaped around them. In particular, while the larger forces of history during the Cold War clearly stand in the characters’ way (quite literally,

¹³¹ Additional works to add to this list, include the novels, *The Museum of Innocence* (2008) by Orhan Pamuk, *One Man’s Bible* (1999) by Gao Xingjian, and *An Unnecessary Woman* (2014) by Rabih Alameddine; and the films, *Azor* (2021) by Andreas Fontana, and *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018) by Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

as their movements are tightly controlled between the borders of Krakow, Berlin, Paris, and Ljubljana), Pawlikowski's film instead chooses to prioritize the couple's complex relationship through minor gestures and moments (i.e., a mutual stare in a dance hall, a secret closet rendezvous, or simply walking hand-in-hand through Paris' dark and winding streets). More specifically, through its black and white cinematography, and through mostly close-up and medium close-up shots throughout its narrative, the film focuses mainly on these minor gestures and expressions, as the two lovers attempt to find pockets of solace amidst the political upheaval all around them. In short, as with Kundera's *Ignorance*, and Chang's *Love in a Fallen City*, Pawlikowski's *Cold War* presents a subtle reversal of a grand view of history, away from the expected dramatic scenes and events of the broader political conflict.

Another recent work that stands out similarly for its reversal of history, is the novel *Ways of Going Home* (2011), by the Chilean novelist Alejandro Zambra. As with Pawlikowski's film, Zambra's work also inverts the usual foreground and background of a typical historical narrative. It follows the life of its narrator, and initially, his childhood during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship in 1980s Chile. But by recounting this historical period through the perspective of a child, the most egregious violations of the regime are kept at a distance from the reader, and only eluded to indirectly through subtle signs and conversations. Thus, as in *Cold War*, Zambra's novel focuses instead on minor moments and scenes, such as his protagonist's first preoccupations with love and literature (i.e., saving his allowance to buy classic novels at a local bookstore, and meeting his first "crush" in secret after school).

But similar to Borges' "The Secret Miracle," and Kundera's *Ignorance*, I would also like to point out that there is an important redemptive quality to the novel's focus on such minor moments. In other words, as with these other works, Zambra is aware of the fact that he is not writing an historical epic, and rather chooses to embrace the "anti-epic" qualities of his own novel. This is especially evident when we read the title to the first part of the novel: "Secondary Characters," which announces this last point very explicitly to the reader (Zambra, *Ways of Going Home* 2). We also encounter this redemptive quality in a memorable scene between the protagonist and the same childhood "crush," now as adults who are trying to make sense of their similar memories from the past. In such moments, Zambra writes, "... we are united by a desire to regain the scenes of secondary characters... unnecessary scenes that were reasonably discarded, and which nonetheless we collect obsessively" (Zambra 99). In other words, as with

the works above, there are no heroes or grand events in *Ways of Going Home*. There is only the desire to follow the unique lives and moments of a middle-class family in Chile at the margins of history, through the protagonist's everyday memories.

A final recent example to mention that highlights another type of historical reversal, is Lucrecia Martel's *Zama* (2017), based on the 1956 novel by Antonio di Benedetto. In Martel's film, we encounter a protagonist, Don Diego de Zama, who is a Magistrate for the Spanish Crown, and who has been sent to a remote outpost in an unnamed South-American city during the final years of the eighteenth-century.¹³² However, perhaps closer to Buzzati's *The Tartar Steppe* than to the previous two examples, Martel's film deliberately distorts our sense of time, as Don Diego endlessly awaits a transfer to Buenos Aires, where he expects to be reunited with his wife and children. And much like Drogo in Buzzati's novel, Don Diego slowly loses all hope of ever escaping, as one disappointment follows another, and he is trapped in a similar state of forever waiting.

Once again, the main point is not that these works reject history completely. But rather, as I have been arguing, that they expand the possibilities for what we consider to be "historical," by shifting our attention towards intimate stories and experiences, and above all, by highlighting those private moments that mostly fill our lives.

Now in addition to a reversal of history, there is also a second group of more recent works that I would like to mention, that also stands out similarly for its minor themes and aesthetic. Again, as with the modern films and novels above, these recent works also challenge the "event" as the most dominant characteristic of literary and narrative forms, and its powerful influence over literary and cinematic history.

A first example to highlight is the film *Happy Hour* (2015), by Ryusuke Hamaguchi. As with Hamaguchi's other feature films, such as *Asako I and II* (2018), *Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy* (2021), and the most well-known, *Drive My Car* (2021),¹³³ *Happy Hour* clearly resists dramatic events and actions in favor of a more intimate cinematic experience. Moreover, much like the modern films analyzed by Antonioni and Ceylan above, Hamaguchi's film challenges our most traditional assumptions about what cinema is and can be as a modern art form. To be clear, although the film does not dwell in long takes, or use overly experimental cinematography,

¹³² In di Benedetto's novel, the city is named as Asunción, in Paraguay.

¹³³ Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* is based on the short story of the same title by Haruki Murakami, from his collection, *Men Without Women* (2014).

it nevertheless creates an intimate series of scenes by following the lives of a group of young Japanese women throughout its five hours of running time. In one such scene, a young writer reads an intimate short story to an audience, and then answers a series of questions during a “Q&A” session. As if commenting specifically on Hamaguchi’s film itself, and speaking directly into the camera, the writer attempts to explain the particular aesthetic of her story to the audience. While addressing the uneventful quality of the work, she explains: “What occurs is so minor, you can’t call them events” (*Happy Hour*). Strangely, it is through such scenes that *Happy Hour* best challenges a traditional model of cinema, and also through the process, opens up spaces of cinematic and narrative ambiguity that are incredibly liberating, both for its characters and for its viewers. In other words, through the film’s ambiguity, we are pulled in even closer towards its intimacy.

A final recent work that I would like to highlight that confronts such ambiguous moments and spaces is Pedro Mairal’s novel *The Woman from Uruguay* (2016). In ways that are similar to the above scene in *Happy Hour*, Mairal’s novel openly challenges the myth of great events, and also plays with our most traditional narrative assumptions about action and dramatic scenes in literature. The novel follows a day in the life of a novelist who travels from Buenos Aires to Montevideo to meet a potential lover, and explores similar forms of intimacy through narrative ambiguity. For example, as in the above scene in *Happy Hour*, Mairal includes many passages that directly address the novel’s own aesthetic construction to the reader. In one such passage, his narrator (and protagonist) makes it clear that he is attempting to write a novel through the very telling (and writing) of the novel that we as readers are reading. He writes:

This was going to be my great novel. I could sense it. A guy who leaves his wife and kids and disappears in Brazil, transforms into somebody else. It was going to have moments in Portuñol, lots of wordplay, lots of verbal gunpowder, I was going to explode Spanish and then branch it out like a tree in every direction, a thousand things were going to happen, on the beach, in Brasilia, in the Amazon, lots of sex, and boats down huge rivers and contraband, drugs, shamans, shooting, wild parties, stories inside stories, it was going to be my *Ulysses*, my *Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, my *total novel* (Mairal 51-52, emphasis added).

Though the irony is that the novel we are reading is anything but an epic. The protagonist is overly self-conscious and self-loathing, and mostly examines the monotony of his daily life in minute detail, and with an overwhelming sense of failure. He shares banal moments and routines with the reader, including his idiosyncrasies and disappointments: picking his son up from school, waiting in line at a bank, or taking the bus from Colonia to Montevideo. What is important to highlight then, is that *The Woman from Uruguay* exposes the myth of great events also as an aesthetic and literary myth, that is: “the myth of the modern epic,” or as Mairal describes it, the myth of a “total novel.”

In other words, not only do modern works resist grand history, great events, and dramatic scenes, as I have been arguing; but modern writers should also resist the myth of writing the greatest work, or the “total novel” that they think will bring them the most success, or be seen as the greatest accomplishment. Rather as we find in *The Woman from Uruguay*, writers should embrace their failures as writers, as Mairal reveals, and let go of great literary and artistic ambitions. Only after exposing such myths, as I would also like to argue, will we hopefully uncover that there is no longer room for epic knights and heroes in modern literature. Nor, are there expectations for another *Ulysses*, or *Moby Dick*, or another *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In short, the aim of modern works should be simple: to merely bask in the endless beauty and ambiguity of the ordinary.

Ultimately, by focusing on the peculiarities of life, and by resisting hierarchies of representation, grand narratives, and collective myths of the past, through the works above, I have tried to demonstrate how modern literature and cinema should be defined less for the aesthetic categories that they have become, and more for what they elude, and for what they escape. As I have also been arguing, it is precisely in this latter sense that a minor aesthetic in modern literature and cinema reveals itself through the irreducible uniqueness of its forms, and through the strangeness of its moments: those intimate details that quietly resist us.

A Final Note on Method

Finally, as with the novels and films above, one might propose that the present study could also be described as a series of “minor moments.” Admittedly, this is because the chapters and

arguments may at times appear minor themselves. Or in some moments, they may seem more associative than analytical. Or perhaps, certain passages may also appear momentarily loose, and may go on for too long in a particular direction before arriving at their intended conclusion. But what I would like to argue, is that as with the works above, we should also understand that these qualities are present in such works precisely because of the minor aesthetic within them. In other words, the novels, stories, and films above critically elude their readers and viewers, and to follow their movements, can be both transformative, as I have been arguing, but also incredibly challenging. For these reasons, as I would like to make clear, the experience of writing the present study has often mimicked the aesthetic effects of the works within it.

On this final point, I am reminded of a helpful passage by Mieke Bal in her study *On Storytelling: Essays in Narratology* (1991). In the passage, Bal describes her own attempts to analyze the novel *The Vice Counsel* (1965), by Marguerite Duras. Bal claims that before she first encountered the novel, she had a clear plan on how to carry out her analysis, including a prior inclination about what to expect from the text. But as soon she began writing, the novel began to surprise her by slowly resisting these preconceived notions. As Bal describes the situation, her own planned method of analyzing the text “failed” (Bal 171). But importantly, as she also explains, this apparent “failure” brought with it fascinating results: meaning, it forced her to reread the novel anew, and to see what could not have been seen or predicted beforehand. Thus, from this unexpected outcome, as Bal concludes, sometimes the “failure of a method can...be its strength” (Bal 171).

As I describe above, I encountered similar experiences with the works in my own study. For example, although most of Borges’s short stories are only several pages long, they have nevertheless kept me perplexed and preoccupied for many years, while I similarly struggle to find meaning with each new reading. Likewise, the novels of Kundera, and especially his later works, present a complete openness of form that is both uniquely liberating, but also dangerously endless in its possibilities. And the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan, which are strangely under-theorized in academic studies, still seem to resist many of my own interpretations whenever I view them. Importantly, as outlined above, we find similar qualities of resistance within the novels of Juan Carlos Onetti, Natalie Sarraute, and Franz Kafka; and the films of Vittorio De Sica, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Lucrecia Martel, among the many other works analyzed above.

Ultimately, as I am trying to make clear, due to their resistance, there is a specific inexhaustibility to the works in my study that is also a key feature of the minor moments within them. But strangely, and also because of this inexhaustibility, it is difficult to claim that I possess any true “mastery” over them. That is to say, although my close readings and analyses above have all brought me much closer to understanding these works, I am nevertheless still searching for new meanings and connections between them. I also suspect that this will be my struggle, but also my pleasure for many years to come: endlessly searching, endlessly waiting, while also, coming closer to new forms of understanding.

As Gilles Deleuze reminds us in a helpful passage, “...we write only at the frontiers of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance, and transforms the one into the other” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* xx).

I hope that the present study has helped you to confront this border with me, and that also, through the strangeness of its forms, and the fragility of its moments, it has slowly and patiently opened new paths of discovery.

Summary

Minor Moments in Modern Literature and Film

The present study, *Minor Moments in Modern Literature and Film*, follows a unique set of works in modern literature and cinema that moves beyond the grand events and dramatic scenes of traditional narratives. Throughout its chapters, I locate the beginning of this aesthetic development in the nineteenth-century novel, with the writings of Stendhal and Flaubert, but also in a line of twentieth and twenty-first-century works, including the stories and novels of Franz Kafka, Natalie Sarraute, Jorge Luis Borges, and Milan Kundera; along with the films of Michelangelo Antonioni, Lucrecia Martel, Pawel Pawlikowski, and Nuri Bilge Ceylan, among others. By examining a series of specific scenes in these literary and cinematic works, the main aim of my study is to rethink and reframe our understanding of the “modern” as precisely that which resists great events and actions, as well as the dominant values that they represent, which I characterize as the “myth of great events.”

The first chapter, “Minor Forms and Minor Values: A Sketch of the Past,” provides the theoretical background of my analysis and opens by rethinking the value of the event in literary and cinematic history. Here, I first introduce the concept of the “myth of great events” and examine its role as a dominant aesthetic in the establishment of collective cultural myths and narratives. Drawing on the writings of Roland Barthes, François Jullien, Georg Lukács, and Mikhail Bakhtin, I demonstrate the epic ideal that favors great events in literary and cinematic history, which continues to influence works to the present day. Additionally, I show how there exists an alternative group of works in modern literature and film that instead prioritizes everyday scenes and encounters, and the importance of minor moments in general. Through close readings of novels and films by Nathalie Sarraute, Juan Carlos Onetti, Eileen Chang, Dino Buzzati, and Michelangelo Antonioni, I highlight a set of common themes, characteristics, and values that, each in their respective way, helps to illuminate an understanding of the minor moment as a critical aesthetic in modern literature and cinema.

In the second chapter of my study, “Forgetting Monuments: Kundera’s *Ignorance*,” I turn to minor moments in Milan Kundera’s novel *Ignorance* (2000), a late and arguably “minor” work in the author’s oeuvre. *Ignorance* recounts the travels of two Czech émigrés who return to

Prague following the Velvet Revolution. Upon their return to the city, they both experience a profound sense of displacement as they feel detached from the country and the history that they had fled since the 1968 Soviet Occupation. The aim of this chapter is to juxtapose the monumental historical images in *Ignorance* with contrasting minor moments and scenes, emphasizing both the dominance and ambiguity of the historical memories that shape one's identity. Specific moments from the past, in the form of affects and sensations, can effectively change the way that we think about our place in history, regardless of how insignificant they may initially appear. Throughout my study, I describe this aesthetic quality of the minor in modern literature and film as a "reversal of history." In short, through my analysis of Kundera's novel, I examine how *Ignorance* reverses a dominant view of history by emphasizing the crucial importance of minor moments in the lives of its characters.

The third chapter of my study, titled "A Secret Demand: Borges' Courtyard Miracle," looks further at minor moments in a critical scene in Jorge Luis Borges' short story, "The Secret Miracle" (1943). A relatively under-theorized work in Borges' oeuvre, the story challenges conventional conceptions about time and history, including the values that we associate with grand events from the past. In my reading of Borges' story as both a minor moment and a minor work, I argue that individuals may overcome the constraints of history through acts of aesthetic creation. While facing a firing squad at the outset of the Second World War, the protagonist reaches for a degree of autonomy over his situation by performing a literary gesture, which becomes a means of both resistance and survival. Through experimenting with one's understanding of history and time, Borges' story affirms a sense of life and pleasure that becomes accessible both to the character and reader. Through this minor and ambiguous mode of writing, the moment is transformed from an initial experience of insignificance to an act of possibility and difference.

My fourth and final chapter, "The Indecisive Moment: Ceylan's *Distant*," analyzes the effects of minor moments in modern cinema, specifically in a seemingly unremarkable scene in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Distant* (2002). Through a close reading of the film, I demonstrate how minor forms in cinema help to challenge a series of dominant hierarchies of representation in aesthetics and alter our experience of modern cinema. By engaging with Roland Barthes' writings on photography in *Camera Lucida* (1981), I also attempt to show how the passing

moment can be viewed not only as a site of mourning and melancholia but also as a renewed site of possibility.

Finally, whether attending to the historical reversals and literary ambiguities of modern novels or the fragility of modern films, I attempt to outline the presence of an aesthetic space that allows for a critical openness that is tied to a work's minor and intimate moments. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how certain moments in modern novels and films can inform a mode of criticism that helps us to rethink the value of the minor in a contemporary culture that favors great events.

Samenvatting

Kleine momenten in moderne literatuur en film

De huidige studie, *Kleine momenten in moderne literatuur en film*, onderzoekt een bijzondere reeks van werken uit de moderne literatuur en film die voorbijgaan aan de grote gebeurtenissen en dramatische scènes uit traditionele verhalen. In verschillende hoofdstukken situeer ik het begin van deze kunstzinnige ontwikkeling in de negentiende-eeuwse roman, met name in de werken van Stendhal en Flaubert, maar ook in een reeks twintigste- en eenentwintigste-eeuwse teksten, waaronder de verhalen en romans van Franz Kafka, Natalie Sarraute, Jorge Luis Borges en Milan Kundera; samen met onder andere de films van Michelangelo Antonioni, Lucrecia Martel, Pawel Pawlikowski en Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Het onderzoeken van een verzameling relevante scènes uit deze literaire en filmische werken heeft voor mij als belangrijkste doel om ons begrip van het ‘moderne’ te heroverwegen als precies datgene wat weerstand biedt aan grootse daden en gebeurtenissen, inclusief de dominante waarden die ze vertegenwoordigen, die ik karakteriseer als de ‘mythe van grote gebeurtenissen’.

Mijn eerste hoofdstuk, “Minor Forms and Minor Values: A Sketch of The Past”, biedt de theoretische achtergrond van mijn analyses en begint met het heroverwegen van het belang van de gebeurtenis in de literaire en filmgeschiedenis. Hier introduceer ik het concept van de ‘mythe van grote gebeurtenissen’ en onderzoek ik de rol ervan als een dominante esthetiek in collectieve culturele mythen en verhalen. Aan de hand van werk van Roland Barthes, François Jullien, Georg Lukács en Mikhail Bakhtin belicht ik het epische ideaal in de literaire en filmgeschiedenis dat grote gebeurtenissen centreert, en dat tot op de dag van vandaag kunstwerken is blijven beïnvloeden. Daarnaast laat ik zien dat er een alternatieve groep van werken bestaat in de moderne literatuur en film die in plaats daarvan prioriteit geeft aan alledaagse scènes en ontmoetingen, en aan het belang van kleine momenten in het algemeen. Door middel van close readings van romans en films van Nathalie Sarraute, Juan Carlos Onetti, Eileen Chang, Dino Buzzati en Michelangelo Antonioni belicht ik een reeks gemeenschappelijke thema’s, kenmerken en waarden die — elk op hun eigen manier — bijdragen aan het begrip van het kleine moment als een kritische esthetiek in moderne literatuur en film.

In het tweede hoofdstuk van mijn studie, “Forgetting Monuments: Kundera’s *Ignorance*”, richt ik me op kleine momenten in Milan Kundera’s roman *Ignorance* (2000), een laat en ‘klein’ werk in het oeuvre van de auteur. *Ignorance* vertelt over de reizen van twee Tsjechische emigranten die naar Praag terugkeren na de Fluwelen Revolutie. Bij hun terugkeer naar de stad ervaren ze allebei een diep gevoel van ontheemding, omdat ze zich gedistantieerd voelen van het land en de geschiedenis die ze sinds de Sovjetbezetting van 1968 waren ontvlucht. Het doel van dit hoofdstuk is om de monumentale historische beelden in *Ignorance* te vergelijken met contrasterende kleine momenten en scènes, waarbij zowel de dominantie als de ambiguïteit van de historische herinneringen die iemands identiteit vormen, worden benadrukt. Specifieke momenten uit het verleden, in de vorm van effecten en sensaties, kunnen de manier waarop we denken over onze plek in de geschiedenis veranderen, ongeacht hoe onbeduidend ze in eerste instantie mogen lijken. In mijn studie beschrijf ik de esthetische kwaliteit van het kleine in moderne literatuur en film als een ‘omkering van de geschiedenis’. Kortom, in mijn analyse van Kundera’s roman onderzoek ik hoe *Ignorance* de dominante kijk op geschiedenis omkeert door het cruciale belang van kleine momenten in het leven van de personages te benadrukken.

Het derde hoofdstuk van mijn studie, getiteld “A Secret Demand: Borges’ Courtyard Miracle”, gaat verder in op kleine momenten in een cruciale scène in een kort verhaal van Jorge Luis Borges, “The Secret Miracle” (1943). Het verhaal, een relatief ondergetheoretiseerd werk in het oeuvre van Borges, daagt conventionele opvattingen over tijd en geschiedenis uit, inclusief het belang dat we hechten aan grote gebeurtenissen uit het verleden. In mijn lezing van Borges’ verhaal als zowel een klein moment als een klein werk betoog ik dat individuen de beperkingen van hun geschiedenis kunnen overwinnen door daden van esthetische schepping. Terwijl de hoofdpersoon aan het begin van de Tweede Wereldoorlog voor een vuurpeloton staat, bereikt hij een zekere mate van autonomie over zijn situatie door een literair gebaar te maken dat een middel wordt van overleving en verzet. Door te experimenteren met ons begrip van geschiedenis en tijd, bevestigt Borges’ verhaal, wordt een besef van levendigheid en plezier toegankelijk voor zowel het personage als de lezer. Door een kleine en dubbelzinnige manier van schrijven verandert een ervaring van onbeduidendheid naar een daad van mogelijkheid en verschil.

Mijn vierde en laatste hoofdstuk, “The Indecisive Moment: Ceylan’s *Distant*”, analyseert de effecten van kleine momenten in moderne film, in het bijzonder in een schijnbaar onopvallende scène in Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s *Distant* (2002). Door een close reading van de film

laat ik zien hoe kleine vormen dominante hiërarchieën van representatie in de esthetiek uitdagen en ons begrip van moderne cinema veranderen. In dialoog met Roland Barthes' werk over fotografie in *Camera Lucida* (1981) probeer ik ook te laten zien hoe het voorbijgaande moment niet alleen kan worden gezien als een plek van rouw en melancholie, maar ook als een plek van nieuwe mogelijkheden.

Ten slotte, of het nu gaat om de historische omkeringen en literaire dubbelzinnigheden in moderne romans of de kwetsbaarheid van moderne films, ik probeer steeds de aanwezigheid van een esthetische ruimte te schetsen die een kritische openheid mogelijk maakt die verbonden is met de kleine en intieme momenten in een werk. Uiteindelijk wil ik laten zien hoe deze momenten in moderne romans en films een kritiek mogelijk maken die ons helpt om de waarde van het kleine te heroverwegen in een hedendaagse cultuur die grote gebeurtenissen centraal stelt.

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