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Seeking the Self in Pigment and Pixels: Postmodernism, Art, and the Subject

Selma Purac
University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Dr. Alison Lee
The University of Western Ontario

SEEKING THE SELF IN PIGMENT AND PIXELS:
POSTMODERNISM, ART, AND THE SUBJECT

(Spine title: Seeking the Self in Pigment and Pixels)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Selma A. Purac

Graduate Program in English

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION

Supervisor

_____
Dr. Alison Lee

Examiners

_____
Dr. Thomas Carmichael

_____
Dr. Thy Phu

_____
Dr. Romayne Smith-Fullerton

_____
Dr. Sylvia Söderlind

The thesis by

Selma A. Purac

entitled:

**Seeking the Self in Pigment and Pixels:
Postmodernism, Art, and the Subject**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examine how works of art become vehicles for the postmodern inquiry into the nature of subjectivity. My thesis narrows the focus to those characters who attempt to ground themselves in works of art, especially representational paintings. I argue that, to cope with what they see as the chaos of a decentered postmodern world, these figures try to anchor their confused identities in what they wrongfully interpret as stable and mimetic artworks. Nostalgic for an imagined past when representation was transparent and corresponded to reality, they believe that traditional figurative art offers the promise of cohesive meaning otherwise lacking under postmodernism. Their views of art, therefore, underwrite a desire and nostalgia for absolutes that are non-existent. In their failure to ground themselves in images, we see the fundamental instability of both the subject and of art.

The wayward individuals that I examine yearn for art objects to come to life in order to confirm their own selfhood. What they seek, then, is to transform art-objects into art-subjects; this Pygmalionesque project is grounded in the futile hope that the art-object can reciprocate their desires. We find literary examples of this trend in the characters I analyze in my first two chapters: notably the narrator(s) of John Banville's Frames Trilogy and the gay spies of the fictionalized Cambridge Five. In my final chapter, I look to the clones and androids of popular culture and explore the real life example of Japanese love-doll owners. In each of these instances, artworks are strategically positioned as sites of ontological anchorage, but this foundation can never be secure under postmodernism. Despite their fervent hopes, these characters have misplaced their trust in a form of representation that is no more stable than any other

aspect of the postmodern condition. I argue that Freddie, Victor, Tommy, and Tavo, among others, are particularly good examples of the vexed relationship between the image and the self.

KEYWORDS

Postmodernism, Subjectivity, Subjecthood, Identity, Art, Image, Painting, Pictures, Portraits, Paragone, Espionage, Spies, Cold War, Anthony Blunt, Human Simulations, Statues, Love-dolls, John Banville, Alan Bennett, Kazuo Ishiguro, Pygmalion, Blade Runner, Philip K. Dick, Clones, Androids

to the memory of my brother, Mirs

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Faculty, friends, and family have not only helped me with this project but also put up with me during its completion; I would like to express my gratitude to them for their varied and invaluable contributions.

My thanks go first and foremost to my supervisor, the incredible Alison Lee, for her patience, understanding, and insight. Without her support and encouragement, this dissertation would have been little more than a scatter of tea-stained papers on an entirely different (and far less interesting) topic. Both scholar and superwoman, Alison continues to be a tremendous resource, and her humor and friendship have helped me along immeasurably. Many thanks also to Tom Carmichael, who was generous with his time and his input. His perceptive reading of my work helped me refine and focus this study, for which I am grateful. To Alison and Tom: it has been my great pleasure to work so closely with both of you on this project. Thank you.

A special thanks to the infinitely patient Paul Meahan – a tireless editor, who is no doubt entirely sick of hearing about John Banville, and whose frankly strange eagerness to discuss love-dolls variously entertained and helped me. Thanksto Chris Lockett, for first introducing me to Banville (much to Paul's dismay), and toRussell Poole for his understanding during a difficult time. A warm thanks also toThy Phu, Romayne Smith-Fullerton, and Sylvia Soderlind, whose compelling questions and comments will help to push this projectforward.

To my comrades in UC 51, who made that room a happy refuge: Sean Henry, Robin Crozier, Jessica Schagerl, and Alison Hargreaves. To an army of friends and colleagues, whose conversation and critiques have kept me delighted and challenged over

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-PREFACE-

OF MONA LISAS AND MAD HATTERS:

An Object Lesson

To date, Dan Brown's 2003 thriller *The Da Vinci Code* is the best-selling English

language novel of the twenty-first century. At the height of its success, it seemed, at least

in North America, virtually impossible to escape the cultural industry of the novel – an

industry that spanned billboards and books, tourism and television specials. But the

success of *The Da Vinci Code* spoke to the resonant chord that it struck with its audience.

As its title suggests, the book is about cracking codes – codes that are, for the most part,

embedded in recognizable artworks. The novel revolves around art's deceptive potential;

for Brown, the symbolic nature of visual art allows it to hide secrets in plain sight. Thus,

his novel relies upon the idea that the image is notoriously difficult to read, particularly

without the guidance of words. On its own, a painting is mysterious, its meaning difficult

to locate. One need look no further than Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* for confirmation of the

image's inscrutability. Widely considered the most recognizable painting in the world,

the image presents itself to us openly; however, the lady's enigmatic smile is a source of

endless speculation. Without words to guide us, we can only guess at its meaning. The

painted lady represents that which is seeable yet unsayable, in that she lies just beyond

the reach of verbal definition. As the narrator of Forster's *A Room with a View* says, she

is a woman "whom we love not so much for herself as for the things she will not tell us"

(139). There is in her a reticence, a refusal to speak, and as a result she has become a

symbol of subjective interpretation. Thus, when T.S. Eliot calls *Hamlet* "the Mona Lisa

of literature" (99), he draws attention to the fact that the play, like the painting, is no

longer seen for what it is but has become a mirror for projected thoughts and theories. Consequently, she has been constructed as a vampire (Walter Pater), a sphinx (Théophile Gautier), and an incubus (Bernard Berensen).[1] The French historian Jules Michelet claimed that the painted lady "attracts me, revolts me, consumes me; I go to her in spite of myself, as the bird to the snake"(qtd. in Sassoon,*History* 128).

Such monstrous constructions are telling for a number of reasons. Not only do they point to the disquieting nature of the image's ambiguity, but they also exemplify the image's appropriation by language. As Stephen Scobie explains, "writers see in painting a lack – a lack of words – and they rush to fill up that lack" (10). Faced with the indeterminacy of *Mona Lisa*, Pater and the others attempt to fix her meaning through language. They narrativize the painting in such a way that its status as a threat becomes obvious. In each of the above instances, the painted lady is constructed as a mythological man-eater – further demonstrating that such verbal appropriation is quite often gendered. Male critics speak for the resolutely silent, yet threateningly ambiguous female portrait. It is precisely this ambiguity that Dan Brown proposes to solve. His official website invites readers to "discover the secret behind Mona Lisa's smile" – an invitation that was answered by millions. For Brown, the painting is not merely an art object, but a code to be deciphered. The novel, then, hinges on the notion that artworks are fundamentally esoteric – an idea that recalls Benjamin's construction of the artwork as a ritualized cult object mediated by the elite and appreciated at a distance. Nor is this an unorthodox formulation of art. In fact, the stereotype of the distinguished art critic suggests that only the truly cultured are equipped to understand visual works of art. Accordingly, in *The Da*

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[1] For a brief summary of historical responses to the painting, ranging from Vasari, Ruskin, and Pater to Houssaye, Clément, and Gautier, see Sassoon's "Mona Lisa" 10-12.

Vinci Code, we find a hyperbolic expression of the art expert in the smug and pedantic Sir Leigh Teabing – former British Royal Historian, descendent of the First Duke of Lancaster, and resident of a seventeenth-century French palace. Art, Brown suggests, is the province of a privileged few.

In keeping with this elitist construction of art, it is Teabing who asks us to reevaluate some of the world's best-known paintings. Leonardo's *The Last Supper*, he claims, contains numerous surprising details that most scholars simply fail to see. "Our preconceived notions of this scene are so powerful," he says, "that our mind blocks out the incongruity and overrides our eyes" (263). Encouraged by Teabing, Brown's characters look at the image with fresh eyes and are shocked to find a painting that does not accord with their expectations. At Teabing's request, Sophie Neveu reevaluates *The Last Supper*, focusing on the figures seated to Jesus's immediate right. Where she saw a man only moments ago, she now sees "flowing red hair, a delicate folded hand, and the hint of a bosom. It was, without a doubt…female" (263). When the art expert tells its observers what to see, the image transforms before their very eyes, revealing a truth that was only moments ago inaccessible. A surprised Sophie realizes that the truth behind "the greatest cover-up in human history" (270) was hidden in plain sight, clearly inscribed on the canvas all along. Moreover, in revealing the true nature of Christ's relationship with Mary Magdalene, *The Last Supper* also discloses the truth of Sophie's own heritage. She discovers that she is a descendent of Christ's union with Mary, allowing Sophie to finally settle the question of her own origin.

Teabing's revelation points to the underlying anxiety of the novel – to the uninitiated, images are epistemologically uncertain and can therefore be easily misread.

Of central importance here is Brown's construction of art. While the novel acknowledges the difficulty of interpreting and understanding art objects, it nonetheless suggests that art is ultimately a vessel of truth. Thus, in Teabing's formulation, *The Last Supper* both conceals and reveals the one absolute certainty that Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene "were a pair" (264). What we find here, then, is the painting as a transcendental signifier. Because the image's meaning is fixed, it is not an equivocal object; should it seem so, our inability to correctly read the picture is to blame. In *The Da Vinci Code*, the truth is palpably present in the image; one only requires the guidance of an expert to see it. It is in this desire for truth in painting that we can detect the novel's nostalgia for a more traditional aesthetic.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the artwork is absolute, its meaning totalized. Teabing can declare an aesthetic interpretation incorrect because, according to the novel, there is only one right way to read the image. This desire for certainty in art, which characterizes Brown's book, is distinctly at odds with the postmodern works I examine in my dissertation. Thus, while *The Da Vinci Code* introduces a number of ideas that inform my work, the novel is itself representative of what I see as a distinctly anti-postmodern aesthetic. The works of fiction I explore question the ideas of stability, self-sufficiency, and authenticity that painting is said to convey in Brown's book. Thus, where *The Da Vinci Code* is marked by the certainty of art, the works that I consider are marked by the subversion of any such certainties. Art's production of concrete meaning in *The Da Vinci Code* therefore stands in contrast to the view of art expressed in John Banville's distinctly postmodern work *The Untouchable*. Where Teabing highlights the coherency of art, Victor Maskell sneers at those critics

who spent their energy searching for the meaning of [Poussin's] work, for

those occult formulas upon which he was supposed to have built his

forms. The fact is, of course, there is no meaning. Significance, yes;

affects; authority; mystery – magic, if you wish – but no meaning…This is

the fundamental fact of artistic creation, the putting in place of something

where otherwise there would be nothing. (*Why did he paint it? – Because*

it was not there.). (Banville, *Untouchable* 312)

* * *

In this study, I will examine how works of art become vehicles for the postmodern

inquiry into the nature of subjectivity. My thesis notably narrows the focus to those

characters who search for their selves by attempting to ground their *ontos* and *ethos* in

particular works of art, especially paintings. I argue that, to cope with what they see as

the chaos of a decentered postmodern world, these figures try to anchor their confused

identities in what they see as stable artworks. These artworks are not abstract or non-

representational, as one might expect in postmodern works; rather, they are

representational and realistic. Consequently, these traditional images would seem to

convey a sense of stability through their supposedly mimetic relationship with the natural

world, allowing the figures to read them erroneously as fixed, transparent, and

predictable. These characters therefore express what George Steinercalls a "nostalgia for

the absolute."[2] Nostalgic for an imagined past when representation was transparent and

---

[2]This phrase is taken from the title of Steiner's 1974 CBC Massey Lecture where the critic argues that the
decline of religion in the west has given rise to a series of mythologies that have come to replace the role of

corresponded to reality, these figures believe that art offers the promise of cohesive meaning otherwise lacking under postmodernism. Their views of art, therefore, underwrite a desire and nostalgia for absolutes that are non-existent.

What is interesting to me is that the postmodern authors I examine – John Banville, Alan Bennett, and Kazuo Ishiguro, among others – create characters who cannot conceive of themselves without recourse to traditional art objects. These figures turn to art to substantiate the self; artworks are therefore repeatedly positioned as the means of coping with postmodernism's fragmentation of the subject. Thus, in these works, to reflect upon art is to reflect ultimately upon the nature of subjectivity. Of course, these characters fail in their attempt to anchor themselves in art; according to postmodernism, all art is representational and therefore cannot serve as a grounding for these wayward figures. Unlike the images of Brown's novel, the paintings of postmodern fiction – even when they are classical or representational – are framed as unstable, contingent, and vexed.   Though the figures I examine may reflect upon the kind of certainty in art that we find in *The Da Vinci Code*, they are ultimately denied it – a denial that speaks to postmodernism's reconfiguration of both the subject and of art.

An examination of postmodern fiction reveals a fascination with visual art. In part, my dissertation is informed by the idea that postmodern authors are almost obsessively drawn to a consideration of what is conventionally thought to be a rival mode of representation. Figures as varied as Leonardo da Vinci, G.E. Lessing, and W.J.T. Mitchell have framed the relationship between the culture of the word and the culture of the image in terms of contest, conflict, dispute, and difference. The relationship is, in

religion in our lives. Thus, our engagement with the theories of Marx, Freud, and Lévi-Strauss demonstrates our overriding desire for "absolutes" or structuring mythologies in our lives.

other words, figured as intensely *paragonal* – a struggle for mastery between competing forms of representation. I argue that postmodern authors use the language of this traditional dichotomy not to assert the authority of narrative, as one might perhaps expect, but rather to demonstrate the contingency of all representation. These authors therefore demonstrate the instability of the image without privileging the word; instead, they use the provisionality of visual art to foreground a narrative that is equally discontinuous. In typically postmodern fashion, these writers set up the classical dichotomy only to dismantle it by showing that all representation is problematic. As Linda Hutcheon points out, "There is no dialectic in the postmodern" (x); thus, by destabilizing representation, the works I examine highlight the epistemological uncertainty that is a distinguishing feature of postmodernism.

In my first chapter, I examine John Banville's Frames Trilogy – a series of novels concerned with what critic Elke D'Hoker calls "the problem of representation" (1). *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), and *Athena* (1995) offer a useful setup for the other works I discuss in this study because Banville's themes and preoccupations inform my dissertation as a whole: among them are the conflation of reality and representation, the confusion of postmodern selfhood, the gendering of the voyeur, and the fetishization of art objects. In the trilogy, we follow Freddie Montgomery's attempts to ground himself in traditional representational paintings – a practice necessitated by the unnerving fluidity of his identity. From mathematician to art connoisseur, from murderer to art historian, Freddie assumes and discards numerous identities over the course of the trilogy, and his preference for the world of art speaks to his desire to stabilize himself. In this respect, Freddie is an exemplar of the behavior I discuss; he consistently turns to art,

interpreting it as a steady site of fixed meaning. However, rather than stabilize him, art in fact distances Freddie from the world of external reality. Indeed, I argue that his obsessive engagement with art acts as both the impetus and mode of expected absolution for his crime. This redemptive construction of art is problematic, however, in that art cannot offer Freddie expiation. In fact, art offers the means of further splintering his identity in the trilogy. Moreover, I suggest that Freddie's attempted self-stabilization is grounded in the Pygmalionesque urge to create. His desire to enliven images gestures towards his effort to actively constitute himself as an artist capable of self-inscription. This consistently frustrated creative drive is, I argue, further substantiated by the confessional form of his narrative. By engaging in a narrative form whose focus is on the production of truth, Freddie inadvertently foregrounds the impossibility of constituting the subject through representations. In the trilogy, art is consistently linked to illusions, thereby emphasizing the impossibility of a nostalgic return to Freddie's longed for certainty. Painting is tied, through and through, to the hermeneutical instability of the postmodern world.

Chapter one ends with a consideration of what is one of the guiding concerns of this entire dissertation: the problematizing of authenticity – a topic that allows me to explore the question of the subject's status under postmodernism. Chapter two picks up on my first chapter's focus on the elusive concept of the authentic self by considering the figure of the homosexual spy – a figure that is doubly inflected by disguise in both his professional and personal lives. The necessity of forging and assuming varied disguises makes the gay spy a figure that represents the self as art; he therefore enacts Freddie's project of self-construction in The Frames Trilogy. However, as my chapter shows, the

task of artistically and actively creating the self is a fraught enterprise. I argue that the secret agent exemplifies the postmodern destabilization of meaning and of dislocated subjectivity. The fact that the spies I look at should nonetheless be drawn to supposedly stable art objects serves to underscore the compensatory function of art in these works and the characters' desire for an explicable structure of meaning. These are artworks that paradoxically suggest to the spy a stability he is lacking but to the reader, reflect the spy's impossibly uncertain status. Thus, it is through the homosexual spy, I argue, that the paradox of art is demonstrated: these texts enact the promise of cohesive meaning but also the fear of its impossibility. Alan Bennett's 1988 plays *"An Englishman Abroad"* and *"A Question of Attribution"*, as well as Banville's novel *The Untouchable*(1997), demonstrate the postmodern impossibility of stabilizing a fundamentally decentered self through representation. Moreover, my discussion of the confessional narrative of *The Untouchable* will bring me to consider once more the self as a discursive product. Maskell's narrative reveals a process of self-realization that is in fact undercut by the art objects that purportedly ground him.

In my final chapter, I complicate matters by looking beyond my focus on traditional two-dimensional representations, such as paintings and portraits, to consider three-dimensional human simulations. As created artefacts, clones, androids, and other such object-fetishes are, I argue, art objects that force us to question more closely the nature of our relationship with art. Such figures, I suggest, are distinctly postmodern in that they embody and extend the provisional subjectivity of the homosexual spy. Because they must perform humanity, these figures serve as the locus of the provisional postmodern identity.Indeed, as human simulations, they represent the body's failure to

act as the final recourse in a figuration of authenticity. Here, I examine representations of human simulations that attempt to both define and place themselves in the world through art. These art objects, therefore, attempt to transcend their object positions through the contemplation of artworks which they hope will allow them to achieve some measure of subjectivity. Such figures therefore problematize the question of the *subject's* relation to art. That these non-humans should turn to art as a stabilizing force, I argue, only serves to highlight the limitations of representation. In my exploration of the Other as art, I will examine how Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*(1968)and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) problematize art's supposed ability to tell us who we are. However, I also consider how these issues are articulated beyond the world of fiction by examining the culture of the love-doll in light of postmodern aesthetics. As figures that literalize Freddie's Pygmalionesque preference for art, love-dolls and their owners offer a real-world articulation of the desire to ground the self in art objects. Focusing on Marc de Guerre's documentary *A Perfect Fake* (2005), I argue that owners position their dolls as sites of ontological anchorage; like the fictional clones and androids I discuss in this chapter, dolls represent to their owners art objects in the process of becoming potential subjects. They are therefore strategically placed to confirm the subjecthood of their owners. Such figures, I claim, not only foreground the hope that art can serve as the final recourse in subjectivity but also demonstrate the ultimate restrictions of representation. Through the love-doll, then, we witness the very real intersection of aesthetics and subjectivity which informs this dissertation, but we also see the progressively more important role that art takes in a culture dominated by images.

INTRODUCTION

> ***Blunt**: But art has no goal. It evolves but it does not necessarily progress. Just as the history of politics isn't simply a progress towards parliamentary democracy, so the history of painting isn't simply a progress towards photographic realism. Different periods have different styles, different ways of seeing the world. And what about the Impressionists or Matisse or Picasso?*
>
> ***Chubb**: Oh, I think they could do it properly if they wanted to. They just got bored.*
>
> (Blunt is exasperated.)
>
> *That's the way art galleries are arranged. Crude beginnings, growing accomplishment, mastery of all the techniques...then to hell with the rules, let's kick it around a bit.*
>
> ***Blunt**: But why should a plausible illusion of nature be the standard? Do we say Giotto isn't a patch on Michelangelo because his figures are less lifelike?*
>
> ***Chubb**: Michelangelo? I don't think they are all that lifelike, frankly. The women aren't. They're just like men with tits, and the tits look as if they've been put on with an ice-cream scoop. Has nobody pointed that out?*
>
> ***Blunt**: Not in quite those terms.*
>
> *– A Question of Attribution*

I: Towards a Postmodern Art

In 1919, Marcel Duchamp scandalized the art world when he drew a moustache and goatee on a cheap reproduction of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* and presented it as an artwork. As though his subversive defacement of the beloved painting weren't enough, his chosen title, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, was a phonetic obscenity: when read in French, the sequence of letters sounds like the phrase, "Elle a chaud au cul," or "She has a hot ass." For hundreds of years, the painting had been an object of enthusiastic praise from the likes of Vasari to Pater: to speak of it in such common terms was unheard of. Consequently, *L.H.O.O.Q.* was met with a storm of indignation; Duchamp had attacked not only a cherished masterpiece, but also an icon of art.

In my epigraph, Chubb articulates the attitude of contemporary art in terms of its subversiveness: "to hell with the rules, let's kick it around a bit" – a phrase that one could easily imagine Duchamp himself speaking. Terry Eagleton similarly reads early-twentieth century avant-gardism in terms of the desire to strike "at the very structure and matrix of meaning" (372). Though it might seem that Duchamp's gesture was merely meant to shock and provoke, the work inherently questioned the conventions of art. Created in the tradition of his ready-mades – man-made objects that the artist would sign with his name – the work placed an everyday object within the contextual framework of art and thereby asked what exactly constitutes art. Perhaps the most famous ready-made was Duchamp's *Fountain* – a urinal which he submitted for exhibition in New York in 1917 and which was not placed on display. By contrast, *L.H.O.O.Q.* centered on the artist's appropriation of and assault on an already highly-regarded artwork. Remarkably, it little mattered that Duchamp had defaced a *reproduction* of the image; the original remained unscathed, but people reacted as though he had scribbled over Leonardo's brushwork. To sully the reproduction was to mar the prototype. Thus, *L.H.O.O.Q.* was received as a profane attack on a treasured artefact. According to Robert A. Baron, "it defaces (literally) that which is cherished and brings a famous work down to the level of vulgar vandalism and cheap reproduction" (qtd. in Liu).

By comparison, consider Andy Warhol's 1963 serigraph print *Thirty Are Better Than One*. The image depicts thirty black and white, low-quality reproductions of the *Mona Lisa* arranged in five rows of six images each. Because his reproductions are imperfect – many are unevenly transferred and therefore unclear – Warhol evokes the quick and cheap serial production techniques of mass culture. He therefore highlights not

only the image's potential for infinite repetition, but also its receding value in the mechanical process of duplication. Through mass production, Warhol challenges the artwork's privileged position as a unique and sacred artefact. The *Mona Lisa* is here appropriated by mass culture, emptied of meaning, cheaply copied, and commodified.

It is not difficult to see the resonance between Duchamp and Warhol in their treatment of Leonardo's masterpiece; indeed, Duchamp had set a clear precedent which Warhol then followed. Both artists raise questions concerning the status of the original artwork versus its reproduction, both transgress the boundary between high culture and low culture, and both attack the solemnity and pomposity of Art with a capital 'A'. However, what differs is how the artworks were received. Though Pop Art was denounced by some conservative critics as kitschy non-art due to its appropriation of images from advertising, popular culture, and high art, it met with fairly wide acceptance. Its goal – to rescue art from exclusivity and pretension – was largely realized through its mainstream status. Pop Art was not avant-garde; rather, it was *popular*. Its products did not shock the public, but delighted them. Thus, where Duchamp was denounced for his mistreatment of Leonardo's painting, Warhol was celebrated. Indeed, *Thirty Are Better Than One* was a highly collectable and coveted art object. What I mean to stress here is that how we look at images changes over time. As Blunt explains in my epigraph, "Different periods have different styles, different ways of seeing the world." Thus, just over forty years after the shock of *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Warhol's interpretation of the *Mona Lisa* was gladly greeted by the art world. Modernism's avant-garde had become, to a certain extent, postmodernism's mainstream. Three years after *Thirty Are Better Than One*, the art historian E. H. Gombrich wrote, "today the problem is rather that the shock has worn

off and that almost everything experimental seems acceptable to the press and the public"

(*Story* 475). Thus, he claims that postmodernism in visual art is distinguished not by a

new style of artistic rendering, but in "an altered mood" (*Story* 491).

In part, it is this altered mood towards art that informs my dissertation. I examine

the postmodern reconfiguration of the art object; however, I argue that this shift is

highlighted by characters who turn to a more traditional aesthetic – one that nostalgically

positions the artwork as a unique and valued artefact. Their privileging of art throws into

relief the art object's representational limitations under postmodernism. In light of this

construction of art, it is necessary to first consider more closely the discourse of the

image in late twentieth century culture. The dominance of image culture and the

anxieties that often underwrite this dominance are central to an understanding of

postmodernism's construction of art and its relationship to the subject.

II: The Pictorial Turn

Image is everything.
– Andre Agassi for 1990 Canon ad campaign

Together, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Mona Lisa* gesture towards the complexity of word-

image relations.[3] As I have already explained, each work reveals the painting's status as

a site of ambiguity and of anxiety – a perspective that is increasingly common in

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[3]For an insightful study of word-image relations, see Bal's*Reading Rembrandt*. Despite the work's focus
on its titular artist, Bal's interdisciplinary approach offers a helpful introduction to the nature of word-
image analysis in a more general manner. Similarly, in *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel*,
Torgovnick's exploration of ekphrasis in Modernist fiction looks at the complexity of word-image
relations. As Torgovnick points out, many studies of visual art in literature are "documentary" in nature
(4): the critic notes all references to works of art in literature and then traces their historical sources in the
visual arts. Such works as Meyer's *Painting and the Novel* and Praz's *Mnemosyne* fall into this category.
However, this method is particularly restrictive, for the influence of particular works of art is often less
significant than how writers conceived of and used theories of representation.

contemporary fiction. No doubt, this has at least something to do with the pictorial nature of the present age. Over fifteen years ago, Mitchell diagnosed "the pictorial turn" of contemporary culture (*Picture* 11). Building upon Richard Rorty's notion of "the linguistic turn," whereby Rorty characterized the preoccupations of philosophy and cultural studies in the second half of the twentieth-century as based on various models of "textuality," Mitchell identifies modern thought's reorientation towards visual paradigms.[4]Our world is variously characterized as an image-world (Sontag), a visual information culture (Schroeder), a society of spectacle (Debord), of surveillance (Foucault), of visual semblance and simulacra (Baudrillard), of reproductions (Benjamin), of the gaze (Mulvey), and of the machine eye (Haraway). In short, diverse critics have turned their attention towards questions of visuality, which would confirm that a pictorial turn has indeed taken place. "If traditional iconology repressed the image," writes Mitchell, "postmodern iconology represses language" (*Picture Theory* 28).

Because of the proliferation of television and digital media, visual images have become ubiquitous in Western society.[5]For many, this visual saturation leaves something

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[4]Of course, the emphasis on visuality was also a characteristic of Modernism. The emergence of cinematic innovations, of visual and medical technologies that allowed access to spaces normally inaccessible to the human eye, forced a radical reconsideration of vision itself. David Michael Levin's modernist "hegemony of vision" and Martin Jay's "scopic regime" (78) are articulations of this visual focus.

[5]As Gombrich notes in *Art and Illusion*, "never before has there been an age like ours when the visual image was so cheap in every sense of the word. We are surrounded and assailed by posters and advertisements, by comics and magazine illustrations. We see aspects of reality represented on the television screen and in the cinema, on postage stamps and on food packages. Painting is taught at school and practiced at home as therapy and as a pastime, and many a modest amateur has mastered tricks that would have looked like sheer magic to Giotto" (7). For Gombrich, the ubiquity of the visual in contemporary culture represents both "victory and vulgarization" (7) – his ambivalence is very much in keeping with the general tone of contemporary critics of visual culture. Mitchell demonstrates a similar attitude in *What Do Pictures Want?*, where he argues that "the double consciousness about images is a deep and abiding feature of human responses to representation" (8). In an age when images have become the

to be desired. In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay offers a book-length study on the denigration of vision in French thought, finding in the works of Georges Bataille, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Emmanuel Levinas, and Roland Barthes, among numerous others, a profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era. One of the most potent articulations of this hostility comes from Michel de Certeau who in 1984 wrote, "our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey" (qtd. in Jay 432). Here, de Certeau casts the pictorial turn as a social sickness requiring a cure – a thought that is echoed in the work of many modern thinkers who see the primacy of the visual as a parasitical force. As Johnathan E. Schroeder explains in *Visual Consumption*, "visual knowledge has often been cast as an inferior mode of knowing. Western civilization has long privileged the written and spoken word over the image" (11).

Schroeder draws our attention towards the rhetoric of contest and conflict that pervades Western criticism of the image-age. Images are often considered in opposition to words, an idea that goes as far back as the distinction Aristotle makes in *Poetics* between the rhythmic arts (dancing, music, and poetry) and the arts of rest (painting and sculpture). Indeed, the very notion of the pictorial turn posits that formerly prominent textual models of thought have passed their cultural crown over to newer visual paradigms. Interestingly, in the late twentieth-century, many critics articulated this shift based upon the idea that supposedly 'inferior' images would infect the culture of the word. Implicit here are the longstanding social distinctions associated with images and

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"dominant mode of expression" (Mitchell, *What* 1), this double consciousness becomes even more pronounced. Indeed, my study is very much informed by this paradoxical response to pictures.

words in traditional thinking. William Wordsworth's 1846 sonnet "Illustrated Books and Newspapers" offers a helpful summary of these associations:

> Discourse was deemed Man's noblest attribute
>
> And written words the glory of his hand;
>
> Then followed Printing with enlarged command
>
> For thought – dominion vast and absolute
>
> For spreading truth, and making love expand.
>
> New prose and verse sunk into disrepute
>
> Must lacquey a dumb Art that best can suit
>
> The taste of this once-intellectual Land.
>
> A backward movement surely we have here,
>
> From manhood – back to childhood; for the age –
>
> Back towards caverned life's first rude career.
>
> Avaunt this vile abuse of pictured page!
>
> Must eyes be all in all, the tongue and ear
>
> Nothing? Heaven keep us from a lower stage!

Here, the narrator's logocentric privileging of the word is based upon its supposed intellectual superiority. James A. W. Heffernan summarizes the poem well when he claims that it outlines "iconophobic assumptions about the childishness and primitivism of visual art" (94). Indeed, iconoclastic sentiments are often framed in terms of visual art's association with regressive qualities. In *The Power of Images*, for instance, David Freedberg writes of the stereotype that casts an association with "magical" images as a sign of one's "kinship with the unlettered, the coarse, the primitive, the undeveloped" (1),

and Mitchell similarly notes that traditionally, "the image is the medium of the subhuman, the savage, the 'dumb' animal, the child, the woman, the masses" (*Picture* 24). Though both critics stress that such image-based social divisions are artefacts of the past, they nonetheless note that traces of such thinking can be found in the late twentieth century. Mitchell, for instance, points out that it was fairly routine for opponents of mass culture to fallaciously link the prominence of images to a decline in literacy towards the end of the last century ("Showing" 173). Moreover, some critics, such as Benjamin Barber and Chris Hedges, have linked image-obsessions with mindless global consumption, claiming that contemporary culture's focus on visuality signals a society that is being primed by the corporate world to consume indiscriminately.[6]

What I mean to stress here is that by the late-twentieth century, the pictorial turn had become a source of image-anxiety, ranging from the suspicion of images to outright fear. Iconophobia, Mitchell claims, is central to any discussion of pictures in contemporary culture. Indeed, he identifies a fundamental paradox at the heart of the pictorial turn:

> On the one hand, it seems overwhelmingly obvious that the era of video
> and cybernetic technology, the age of electronic reproduction, has
> developed new forms of visual simulation and illusionism with
> unprecedented powers. On the other hand, the fear of the image, the
> anxiety that the 'power of images' may finally destroy even their creators

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[6]In *Consumed*, Barber argues that the emphasis on spectacle in developed countries is symptomatic of the "infantilist ethos" (3) that drives contemporary consumer culture. In his 2009 work *Empire of Illusion*, Hedges makes a similar claim, noting that the contemporary obsession with celebrity culture is contributing to patterns of literal and symbolic illiteracy and infantilism in the U.S. These polemical discussions of visual culture demonstrate that such anti-image rhetoric is by no means a relic of the past.

and manipulators, is as old as image-making itself. Idolatry, iconoclasm,

iconophilia, and fetishism are not uniquely 'postmodern' phenomena.

What is specific to our moment is exactly this paradox. (*Picture* 15)

Mitchell variously constructs the cultural reorientation towards visual paradigms as a

"threat" (*Picture* 9) and as a "problem" (*Picture* 2). Moreover, in *Iconology*, he admits

that the book, which began as a theory of images, "became a book about the *fear* of

images" (3): his rhetoric echoes the "crisis of representation" so widely discussed by

scholars and critics of postmodernism. But why should discussions of the image be

framed in terms of crisis, threat, and fear? Why do we fear images?

III: Pictures and Power: Iconophobia

He gazed and gazed and gazed and gazed,
Amazed, amazed, amazed, amazed.
 – Robert Browning

By way of an explanation, let us consider the titles of two books in the field of visual

studies, both of which hint at the reasons behind the common conception of the 'image-

as-threat.' The first book is James Elkins's *The Object Stares Back*; the second work is

Mitchell's *What Do Pictures Want?* Each of these titles conveys the image as a living

thing – the picture as an inanimate object that suddenly surprises us when it appears to

behave as though it were living: staring back at us and making demands. The fear of

images often springs from their apparently uncanny ability to thwart our image-

expectations, thereby rendering the familiar image uncomfortably strange. Pictures are

supposed to be passive recipients of the gaze, placing the gazer in a position of

voyeuristic authority. These two titles, however, express exactly what pictures are

*not*supposed to do: they are not to stare back, challenging the authority of their beholder, and they are most certainly not to make demands of any kind. After all, they are only pictures.

Despite the fact that the so-called 'living image' is conceptual, it is nonetheless deeply rooted in our ways of thinking about pictures: in literature, pictures are often figured as animate, art historians often discuss pictures as though they were conscious entities capable of feeling, and both advertising executives and propagandists have exploited the lifelike potential of pictures. Mitchell claims that

> pictures are things that have been marked with all the stigmata of
> personhood and animation: they exhibit both physical and virtual bodies;
> they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look
> back at us silently across a 'gulf unabridged by language.' They present
> not just a surface but a *face* that faces the beholder. (*What* 30)

He is careful to stress that though such responses are often associated with "ancient superstitions about images" (*What* 19), they are nonetheless powerfully present today. Such constructions, Mitchell argues, denote our "double-consciousness" towards pictures – we know, of course, that images are not actually alive; however, we insist on behaving as though they were, attributing to them desires and appetites, and the ability to influence, persuade, and seduce us (*What* 8). This vacillation between magical belief and critical skepticism, he claims, is an intrinsic feature of our responses to images.

Mitchell points out, however, that to ask 'what do pictures want?' is to consider what they *lack* – "what they do not possess, what cannot be attributed to them. To say, in other words, that pictures 'want' life or power does not necessarily imply that they

have life or power, or even that they are capable of wishing for it. It may simply be an admission that they lack something of this sort, that it is missing or (as we say) 'wanting'" (*What* 10). In other words, images ultimately depend upon the cooperation of those who behold them. Similarly, in *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins argues that images are sites of ideological projection. Indeed, far from being objective, the act of seeing is itself "entangled in the passions…and it is soaked in affect" (11); when we look at something, we cannot divorce the act of seeing from our subjective interpretations, from gender constructions and power relations that are all inherent to the act of looking. As Elkins explains, "looking immediately activates desire, possession, violence, displeasure, pain, force, ambition, power, obligation, gratitude, longing" (*Object* 31).[7] Thus, he claims, the sentence "the observer looks at the object" is a gross simplification of a process that proves far more complex (34). In his formulation, there is no fixed object and no fixed observer; rather, artworks should be thought of as "object-observers," in that they are objects altered by observation, and their beholders are "observer-objects," who are altered by the objects they see (*Object* 44). Images, then, are not passive recipients of our controlling gaze; instead, the act of seeing constitutes a reciprocal relationship between what sees and what is seen.[8]

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[7] In making such a claim, Elkins builds upon the work of John Berger, who, in his definitive study, *About Looking*, examines the complexities inherent to the act of looking. See also Susan Sontag's *On Photography*, which influenced Berger's work.

[8] We find an expression of such visual reciprocity in the work of Louis Pierre Althusser, who places the visual exchange at the center of subject formation with his notion of interpellation. In explaining this concept in his essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," he uses the example of being greeted on a street by a police officer. When the officer calls, "Hey, you there!," the individual, though he has done nothing wrong, responds by turning towards the officer, assuming that he is the one being addressed. In this simple response, the individual recognizes his status as a subject (85). Althusser writes, "the rituals of ideological recognition…guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (85). This formulation demonstrates the bilateral nature of vision and thereby stresses the importance of external sources in the recognition of one's selfhood.

It is in this respect that images become entangled in questions of identity. The dynamic of which Elkins writes positions the image as an object with the potential to confirm the subjecthood of its beholder. Where he identifies the beholder as an "observer-object," I would suggest that what we find is more like an observing *subject* who is actively constituted by the object he or she sees. In other words, the beholder conceives of him or herself through the substantiating presence of an observed art object. What is perhaps most interesting, however, is that this kind of substantiation is often constructed as a threat. The seemingly returned gaze of the portrait or statue is a convention that nineteenth century writers of horror and suspense often use to unsettle their readers. Thus, Nikolai Gogol's "The Portrait," Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait," and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* all exploit the uncanniness of represented eyes that seem to see. In fact, the same can be said of Disneyland's haunted mansion, demonstrating that the anxiety of the image's returned gaze persists. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich asks, "do we not all feel that certain portraits look at us? We are familiar with the guide in a castle or country house who shows the awe-struck visitors that one of the pictures on the wall will follow them with its eyes" (96). Consider, for instance, Vincenzo Peruggia's now infamous theft of *Mona Lisa* from The Louvre in 1911. He had simply lifted the panel from the wall, concealed it under his coat, and walked out into the street. In his account of the theft, "Peruggia claimed that at first he had set his sights on another painting, but on passing the *Mona Lisa* he had the strange sensation that she was smiling at him" (Leader 17). Here, we have an instance of interpellation. In "hailing" him, the painting constitutes Peruggia as a subject. He, in turn, confuses the signifier with the signified and perceives the painted lady as "she" – a

person. The apparent exchange of looks signals the beholder's complex response to the

image. We will see something similar happen in Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, which

I discuss in chapter one – Freddie Montgomery, like Peruggia, feels that he is being

looked at by a painted lady whom he subsequently 'kidnaps.'

Both instances exemplify the power of the image as its ability to accost its viewer.

Simon Schama begins *The Power of Art* by noting the "dreadful manners" of great art.

They are thugs: "merciless and wily, the greatest paintings grab you in a headlock, rough

up your composure and then proceed in short order to re-arrange your sense of reality"

(6). In other words, great works of art are confrontational; interestingly, such

confrontations are often articulated in terms of the image's ability to *arrest* its beholder.

As the art historian Michael Fried notes, a powerful painting can be characterized by its

capacity to "attract the beholder, then to arrest and finally to enthrall the beholder, that is

a painting had to call someone, bring him to a halt in front of itself and hold him there as

if spellbound and unable to move" (qtd. in Mitchell,*What* 36). Both Freddie and

Peruggia seem to experience such a response. Their expectations are suddenly violated

when the supposedly passive image challenges their gaze, and both respond by

reasserting their authority; they seek exclusive custody of the offending image by pulling

it from the wall and walking off with it.

In their discussion of the picture's power to paralyze its beholder, Mitchell,

Heffernan, Elkins, and even Jacques Lacan all invoke the myth of the serpent-headed

gorgon who, in the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley, "turns the gazer's spirit into stone"

(10).[9] Medusa represents the threatening power of the image to reverse the gaze of its

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[9]The line is taken from Shelley's manuscript poem "On the Medusa of Leonardo Da Vinci in the Florentine
Gallery" which appears in full on page 171 of Mitchell's *Picture Theory*. For an extended discussion of the

beholder and in doing so, fixate him or her. In other words, she does not passively

receive the gaze; she throws it back at her beholder with a force that is aggressive and

violent. In "Medusa's Head," Freud famously reads her as the phallic, castrating woman;

that she turns men to stone signifies her ability to steal away their power. In keeping with

this reading, Mitchell calls her "the perfect prototype for the image as a dangerous female

other who threatens to silence [the man] and fixate his observing eye" (*Picture* 172).

Thus, the Medusean model suggests not only the power struggle inherent in the act of

looking but also its gendering; because of its power to captivate and transfix, the returned

gaze constitutes a threat (and one that is often sexual in nature). Darian Leader writes,

"far from being picture-capturing devices, humans are perpetually being caught by

pictures. An image, or picture, is a human-capturing device" (25).[10]

What is crucial to note is that iconophobia and iconophilia go hand in hand; our

fear of images springs from our fascination with them.[11] Recall Mitchell's claim that

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ekphrastic anxieties underlying the poem, see Chapter Five, "Ekphrasis and the Other," of *Picture Theory*. In *Museum of Words*, Heffernan similarly examines the poem in terms of Romantic iconophobia (115-24).

[10]Arresting images are often perceived as dangerous and threatening. One need only consider the myth of Narcissus as an example: the youth sees his own reflection in a clear pool of water and mistakes it for the face of another. So enthralled is he by the beautiful image that he neglects the attentions of the nymph Echo. Ovid writes, "he saw/ An image in the pool, and fell in love/ With that unbodied hope, and found a substance/ In what was only shadow. He looks in wonder,/ Charmed by himself, spell-bound, and no more moving/ Than any marble statue…No thought of food, no thought of rest, can make him/ Forsake the place" (III. 419-39). Narcissus neglects the needs of his body for the sake of his enflamed desire; he is transfixed, gazing into the pool until he finally withers away. The myth offers a warning against the destructive potential of the visual narcotic whereby the youth's beautiful body is collateral damage.
    Mitchell cites Moses's denunciation of the golden calf as an early example of the image's dangerous capacity to captivate the onlooker "and steal the soul" (*Picture* 2). In the Biblical episode, the Israelites are punished when they come to adore the man-made golden substitute for a God they cannot see. Thus, the story demonstrates not only the connection between idolatry and iconoclasm but also the confusion of signifier and signified. For the Israelites, the material work of art stands in for and takes the place of an intangible god.

[11]It is important to stress that this fear – and adoration – is most often attached to representational artworks, or more specifically, realistic representations of the human form. Abstract art, conceptual art, and even landscape paintings are rarely victims of attacks; rather, as Freedberg notes, represented faces and bodies most often bear the brunt of iconoclastic panic. He writes, "It seems easier to understand the inclination to

postmodernism's conception of images is characterized by this very paradox: idolatry and

iconoclasm coexist under the pictorial turn. Consequently, what we find in the works I

examine is not a reductive reading of the image as an object of fear. Rather, we find a

discourse where art is inflected by ambivalence, and this ambivalence in turn reflects

upon the nature of postmodern subjecthood. The characters I consider in my study seek

to ground themselves in art as a means of compensating for the discomfort of postmodern

fragmentation. As a result, in these works, the conventional fear that the art object might

stare back is transformed into the hope that it will, for, in doing so, it can confirm the

beholder's selfhood. Thus, the object not only seems to look back at the observer, but "it

makes the observer by looking" (Elkins,*Object* 75). In this respect, the characters I

examine evoke, through art, the promise of the object turned subject. Indeed, in my final

chapter, I argue that it is precisely this promise that the love-doll represents, for in

supposedly returning the beholder's gaze, the doll seems to confirm the subject status of

her owner. The iconophilia of the figures I explore is, however, counterbalanced by a

larger framework of postmodern skepticism. Though these characters might conceive of

art's potential to affirm the subject, the works themselves deny this possibility by

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destroy the figurative, to assail something that appears to have life and that might be deprived of it" (418). Most attacks, he claims, are predicated "on the attribution of life to the figure represented, or on the related assumption that the sign is in fact the signified, that image is prototype, that the dishonor paid to the image…does not simply pass to its prototype, but actually damages the prototype" (415). In other words, represented bodies become stand-ins for living bodies, making the two interchangeable. The realism and immediacy of the artwork makes the depicted figure present. Here, we witness what Freedberg calls the dangerous fusion of image and prototype: "Imagine the consequence of fusion. The body in the image loses its status as representation; image is the body itself. Arousal ensues" (406). Such conflation and confusion can result in the fetishization of the representation, whereby we witness the power of the image over the human body. As Freedberg explains, "if the image is, in some sense, sufficiently alive to arouse desire (or, if not alive, then sufficiently provocative to do just that), then it is more than it seems, and its powers are not what we are willing to allow to dead representation; and so these powers have to be curbed, or what causes them eliminated" (xxiv). Images, then, can be objects of suspicion and fear; they can be perceived as dangerously seductive and potentially harmful. The fear of images is symptomatic of their power: their power to confuse and complicate, their power to make present what is absent, their power to seemingly stare back at us and make demands.

exposing the limitations of representation. Thus, I suggest that what we find in these works is postmodernism's reconfiguration of conventional image-anxiety. Rather than reduce the image to a site of fear, these works use art objects as a means through which to interrogate all representation. Artworks are therefore transformed into spaces of hermeneutical uncertainty.

There is a long tradition of literary works that suggest the picture's ability to convey some kind of truth as though images are intrinsically tied to the objects they represent. In the work of Jane Austen, for instance, portraits often act as substitutes for their absent subjects. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Lucy Steele's possession of a miniature of Edward Ferrars signifies her exclusive rights to him. And, of course, in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), portraits serve an epiphanic function. Only when Elizabeth lays eyes on Darcy's image does she begin to feel "a more gentle sensation towards the original" (191). The portrait reveals Darcy's true nature to Elizabeth – something she failed to see beyond the picture frame. Consider Robert Browning's *Fra Lippo Lippi* (1855) in this context: the painter is reproached by the church masters for the lack of idealism in his religious portraits. Where Lippo seeks to paint true to life, his subjects want him to forget about the flesh and focus instead on painting the soul. In part, their dismay stems from the desire to maintain their lofty reputations: a true portrait will reveal things the brothers wish to keep hidden. Paintings in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) fulfill a similar revelatory purpose. Dorian's debasement is magically inscribed upon his portrait while his physical form retains the semblance of youth and purity; thus, where the physical body conceals, the picture reveals. In James's novel, it isn't until the sickly Milly Theale

sees her own resemblance to Agnolo Bronzino's Mannerist painting *Lucrezia Panciatichi* that she realizes she is mortally ill.

Each of these instances implies a stable relationship between the representation and the represented object. The picture and its prototype are interchangeable, or the image is epiphanic, revealing what would otherwise remain concealed. In these older works, pictures are artefacts of authenticity, tied to the world of external reality. In the works I examine, however, such idealized notions are exposed as fictions, but the figures I explore nonetheless long for this artistic ideal. As such, they are drawn to representational images of the human body – more traditional, realistic images that would seem stable through their apparently mimetic relationship with the natural world. Thus, Freddie Montgomery, the anti-hero of Banville's Frames Trilogy, focuses his attention on the paintings of various Dutch masters – an artistic tradition so renowned for its realism that George Eliot compares her goal as a writer of realistic nineteenth-century fiction to the accomplishments of Dutch painting. In chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede*, the author famously breaks the fourth wall and declares that "dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity" (239), she takes as her narrative model traditional Dutch art, with its "rare, precious quality of truthfulness" (240). In his essay "The World as Object," Roland Barthes similarly comments upon seventeenth-century Dutch painting's concern with rendering "the thousand objects of everyday life" (3-4). This is a mode of representation known for its concern with realistic rendering. In the same way, Victor Maskell, from Banville's *The Untouchable*, turns to the classical style of art, with its precise depiction of the human form, and Freddie favours lifelike figurative paintings. In fact, so realistic are the images with which Freddie engages that he comes to model the external world on art

objects, transgressing the boundary between realistic representation and reality – a theme that I explore at length in my third chapter, where I frame the cultural phenomenon of the love-doll in terms of Dick's Pygmalionesque fantasy, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*.

Of course, the figures I discuss are all nostalgic for a nonexistent ideal. They imagine that a concrete relationship between reality and representation, between authenticity and art, is possible. Indeed, these characters attempt to ground themselves in artistic works, anchoring their identities in what appears to them to be a stable and transparent medium. However, as they all discover, appearances are misleading. What appears to be stable is in fact hermeneutically ambiguous; thus, their artistic ideals prove to be little more than illusions. That they idealize art as a means of capturing reality and defining themselves demonstrates their own failure to understand the limits of representation. What they seek is impossible under postmodernism.

It is important to note, however, that art itself has a longstanding relationship with deception, reaching as far back as Plato's *The Republic*, where the philosopher famously distinguishes the carpenter, who makes, from the painter, who imitates.[12] For Plato, the artist is but a creator of appearances, and, as artistic representations are twice removed from *eidos* (the pure idea or Platonic form), they pull away from the original while pretending to occupy its place. What art offers, then, is deceitful imitation rather than truth.In keeping with these claims, Marguerite A. Tassi points out that the word "painting" is itself historically tied to behaviors considered negative:

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[12]See Book X of *The Republic*, 321-33.

> Since the fourteenth century, painting had referred to coloring the face
>
> with cosmetics, a practice shared by women and stage-players, and
>
> censured by moralists. It had longstanding Platonic associations with
>
> deceit, counterfeiting, and artifice, not to mention flattery and disguise.
>
> Thus, the ontology of painting was understood in moral terms; if painting
>
> was in essence a false thing, it could only lead painters and those who
>
> gazed upon images to the false position of idolatry and, ultimately, to
>
> damnation. Therein lay the scandal of images – even secular images
>
> shared this moral taint. (26)[13]

Such accounts stand in contrast to idealistic depictions of art as stable, transparent, and

epiphanic. Despite this well established history of painting's deceptive capabilities, the

characters I examine in this study all search for stability in images. For them,

postmodernism does not offer freedom from constraints; rather, it offers an unnerving

uncertainty. Despite the fact that postmodernism's subversiveness has variously been

characterized as playful and liberating, consider for a moment some of the terms

commonly associated with its project: subversion, transgression, questioning,

interrogation, problematize, erasure, assault – these words suggest not only frenetic

activity, but also an exhausting tension and conflict.

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[13]In *Other Criteria*, Steinberg similarly notes that the word 'art' is "the guilty root from which derive 'artful,' 'arty,' and 'artificial'" (56).

IV: Iconoclash: The Postmodern Paragone

If you call painting 'dumb poetry,' then the painter may say of the poet that his art is 'blind painting.'
Consider then which is the more grievous affliction, to be blind or be dumb!
– Leonardo da Vinci

In *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them*, Elkins explores the anti-semiotic nature of images – their resistance to verbal containment. Pictures, he claims, are "stubbornly illegible, weirdly silent, 'meaningless' artefacts where our best attempts at understanding fall apart" (xii). In fact, for Elkins, the entire field of art history represents the struggle to find clear and distinct meaning in visual art. What picture, he asks, "is so orderly, so linguistically efficient, that it is not also about the failure of meaning?" (*Pictures* 272). Richard Leppert makes a similar point in *Art and the Committed Eye*, where he notes that "It is all too easy, and utterly false, to imply that paintings are simply nonverbal substitutes for what might otherwise be expressed or communicated in words – ironically, the vast body of writing *about* art confirms nothing more than that words often fail miserably to 'account for' the communicative and expressive power of images" (5-6).

What both Elkins and Leppert hint at here is the conventional conflict between words and images. They figure the image as an object that exists beyond verbal definition but is nonetheless consistently enfolded in words.[14] In part, both *The Da Vinci*

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[14] Of course, important to note here is the concept of ekphrasis. Defined by Heffernan in *Museum of Words* as "the verbal representation of a visual representation" (6), ekphrasis entails the attempt to imitate in words a work of visual art. Composed from the Greek words *ek* (out) and *phrazein* (to tell, declare, or pronounce), *ekphrasis* literally means "to tell in full"; thus, the practice, as Heffernan notes, inherently entails prosopopeia – the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object. What we often find, then, is the ekphasis is constructed as inherently *paragonal*: "it evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language," writes Heffernan (1). Thus, with ekphrasis, words seek to control and contain images that are simultaneously alluring and threatening. I briefly discuss this concept in my treatment of Banville's *Ghosts* (see page 88 ff. of this dissertation). In "The Poetics of Ekphrasis," John Hollander offers a brief and helpful summary of ekphrasis; however, for an extended exploration of the subject, see the chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" in Mitchell's *Picture Theory* and Murray Krieger's definitive work *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*.

Code and *Mona Lisa* demonstrate that the painting's status as a site of anxiety derives from the fact that it is voiceless. Divorced from words, pictures are suggestive rather than explicit. They cannot tell us what to think of them, and thus they provoke a sense of indeterminacy and uncertainty that is often perceived of as a threat. As Elkins notes, "It is hard just to look: it is much easier to read, or to tell stories, than to stare at the peculiarities of a stubbornly silent and senselessly wordless object" (*Pictures* 267).

In Bennett's play, *"A Question of Attribution"*, one of the characters articulates this anxiety in terms of the difference between museums, which inform, and art galleries, which display. "Better off sticking to museums," Chubb says. "Museums I know where I am. An art gallery, I always come out feeling restless and dissatisfied. Troubled…In a museum, I'm informed, instructed. But with art…I don't know…What am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to feel?" (317-18). Here, Chubb expresses the paranoia surrounding the unmediated image. Uncomfortable with the suggestive silence of visual art, he longs for the guidance of verbal mediation. Without words, he does not know how to respond to the painting. It is not difficult to understand, then, why the image might be construed as a site of misreading. Chubb's preference for words over images is based upon what he sees as painting's threatening indeterminacy: where paintings are uncertain, words are concrete. His formulation therefore places words and images in contrary positions. They are diametrically opposed here – a point of view that is prevalent in discussions of word-image relations. As Heffernan suggests, "to see how painting and sculpture have been represented by poets ranging from Homer's time to our own time is to see that the history of literature can be written as a history of its perennially conflicted response to visual art" (1-2).

Interestingly, this was not always the case. Since the ancients, the relative merits of the arts have been a topic of fierce debate, but as Jean Hagstrum points out in his notable study *The Sister Arts*, early formulations of word-image relations tended to stress the similarities between the two art forms. Though classical philosophers often acknowledged the differences between these mediums, they nonetheless emphasized the fundamental analogies between visual and verbal art forms. Poems and paintings were seen as parallel imitations of reality; as Mitchell puts it, "they both lay claim to the same territory (reference, representation, denotation, meaning)" (*Iconology* 47). Thus, though Aristotle differentiates between the arts of rhythm and the arts of rest, his focus is on the fact that these are both mimetic art forms. A more explicit analogy is perhaps Simonides's oft-quoted figuration of painting as mute poetry and poetry as a speaking picture; here, the two arts are equal, balanced, and complementary. This formulation therefore speaks to assumptions of sameness and transference between the art forms. Horace's famous dictum *ut pictura poesis* – "as a painting, so also a poem" – similarly stresses the kinship between the arts.[15]

It was Italian Renaissance painters who initiated what they called the *paragone*, or "comparison" – an intense rivalry between the culture of the image and the culture of the word. Where the chiasmic sentiment of Simonides expresses balance and order between the arts, his formulation was commonly used in the Renaissance to privilege one art over another. Thus, on the one hand, we have the argument that poetry, as a "speaking picture," is superior to painting, or "mute poetry," because language can animate what can only remain static in the visual arts. On the other hand, we have the assertion

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[15]For a detailed look at the *ut pictura poesis* tradition, see Amy Golahny's edited book *The Eye of the Poet*.

Leonardo makes in my epigraph: that if we consider painting "dumb poetry" and poetry "blind painting," then painting is clearly superior because blindness "is the more grievous affliction."

In a similar vein is G.E. Lessing's renowned eighteenth-century critique of the sister arts tradition. He begins his *Laocoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry* by criticizing Simonides, claiming that his formulation is but "a sudden fancy…not to be found in any textbook" and that it is an idea whose falsity is often overlooked for the sake of the truth which it seems to contain (4). Lessing argues that the result of this emphasis on artistic similarity is painting that is too literary and poetry that is too pictorial. Thus, he sees in poetry "a mania for description and in painting a mania for allegory" (5). What is needed, he claims, is a return to the purity of these art forms. They should be as "two equitable and friendly neighbors" who do not "take unbecoming liberties in the heart of the other's domain," but rather respectfully maintain the borders between them (91). Our experience of painting, he says, is instantaneous, while the effect of poetry is cumulative; as a temporal art, then, poetry should focus on action rather than on the creation of static images. Conversely, as a spatial art, painting should not strive for narrative, Lessing says. In this formulation, his privileging of poetry is clear, for where the painter is limited to the expression of a single moment, the poet can "take up each action at its origin and pursue it through all possible variations to its end" (Lessing 23-4). Of course, there are serious limitations to Lessing's rather simplified argument, but, however flawed, his *paragonal* comparison remains a highly influential theorization of word-image relations. As Mitchell points out in *Iconology*, many writers and critics after Lessing – even recent critics such as Nelson Goodman and Gombrich – continue in

the tradition of the *paragone* by focusing their attention on defining the boundaries between words and images. As Heffernan points out, his own work, as well as Mitchell's, falls under this category.

What is clear, then, is that such comparisons are often a means of discrimination and judgment; the verbal and visual arts are depicted as rival representational modes struggling for mastery. Thus, in differentiating poetry from painting, Lessing privileges what he sees as poetry's greater scope and imaginative appeal over painting. As with Renaissance articulations of word-image relations, Lessing's formulation of the arts implies the superiority of one art form over another. Indeed, Chubb performs a similar kind of privileging when he praises the ability of words to express exactly. This construction of word-image relations as antagonistic is fairly common. Perhaps unsurprisingly, what one often finds in this rivalry is that artists tend to champion their own media. Just as Leonardo argued for painting's superiority over poetry, a writer would likely favour the verbal medium over the visual. Take, for instance, Mark Twain, who in his *Life on the Mississippi*, famously comments on his preference for words over images in terms that resemble Chubb's. The passage is often quoted by critics as a way of introducing the topic of word-image relations. Thus, J. Hillis Miller in *Illustration*, Martin Heusser in *Word & Image Interactions*, and Peter Wagner in *Reading Iconotexts* use Twain's iconoclasm to demonstrate the indeterminacy of painting. Twain recounts having seen an oil painting representing Stonewall Jackson's final interview with General Lee. The painting, Everett B.D. Julio's 1869 *The Last Meeting of Lee and Jackson*, depicts both of the Confederate generals sitting atop their horses, seemingly in conversation. Twain writes,

But, like many another historical picture, it means nothing without its

label. And one label will fit it as well as another:

First Interview between Lee and Jackson.

Last Interview between Lee and Jackson.

Jackson Introducing Himself to Lee.

Jackson Accepting Lee's Invitation to Dinner.

Jackson Declining Lee's Invitation to Dinner – with Thanks.

Jackson Apologizing for a Heavy Defeat.

Jackson Reporting a Great Victory.

Jackson Asking Lee for a Match.

…A good legible label is usually worth, for information, a ton of

significant attitude and expression in a historical picture. In Rome, people

with fine sympathetic natures stand up and weep in front of the celebrated

'Beatrice Cenci the Day Before her Execution.' It shows what a label can

do. If they did not know the picture, they would inspect it unmoved, and

say, 'Young Girl with Hay Fever'; Young Girl with her Head in a Bag.'

(qtd. in Miller 62)

Here, Twain argues that paintings are dependent upon words for their meaning. The title

of Julio's image indicates both the identity of its subjects and the precise historical

moment that he has chosen to illustrate – elements that would otherwise remain obscure.

Without the guidance of words, the spectator cycles through a series of contrary readings,

all of which could apply to the image equally. By contextualizing the painting and

placing it within a distinct narrative, however, the title offers an answer to Chubb's

question, "What am I supposed to think?" However, where Chubb is intimidated by the silent power of painting, Twain, in his mocking tone, sees the picture's silence as a failing. As Miller summarizes, "in the polemic, or *paragone*, between show and tell, Twain comes down firmly on the side of tell" (62). Consequently, Twain's attitude is distinctly anti-postmodern.

The writers I examine in my dissertation rarely makesuch definitive claims about representational superiority. Instead, they interrogate and problematize categories of representation, working to challenge our preconceived notions about word-image relations. Rather than come down on the side of either show or tell, they tend to use the convention of *showing* in order to comment upon the complex nature of *telling*. In other words, paintings frequently serve a metafictional function in that they reflect upon the nature of narrative itself and thereby challenge the process of meaning-making. More often than not, contemporary writers express an ambivalence towards pictures; as I have already noted, their response is characterized by a mix of iconophilia and iconophobia.

Consider, for instance, Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989). In section two of the chapter "Shipwreck," the author, like Twain, contemplates an historical painting; here, the subject of the passage is Théodore Géricault's 1819 masterpiece *Scene of Shipwreck*, which is based upon the real-life shipwreck of *The Medusa* three years earlier. The image depicts the survivors of the wreckage as they attempt to signal a ship that appears on the distant horizon. What is significant about Barnes's treatment of this image is that, unlike Twain, he resists making any essentialized statements about representation. Rather, he uses the painting to foreground the complexity of word-image relations under postmodernism. At first, the narrator draws

our attention to the image's inability to convey concretely the true nature of its subject matter. Having to resort to words, he would seem to suggest the limitations of the visual medium; however, he proceeds to deconstruct the very words that would appear to guide the image's beholder. In Barnes's postmodern text, the words are just as uncertain as the images that they would seem to explain.

The narrator begins his consideration of the image by outlining what is *known* of it. Thus, he grounds his reading of the art object in facts, from the specifics of the historical event upon which the picture is based, to the history of the material object itself, noting when the canvas was purchased, stretched, and completed. His initial emphasis on objective facts counterbalances the ambiguity of the painting which he later stresses. The narrator poses a series of unanswerable questions about the painting; in the lower left-hand corner of the canvas, an old man sits with the dead body of younger man stretched across his lap. The narrator asks, "what is this 'Father' doing? a) lamenting the dead man (his son? his chum?) on his lap; b) realizing they will never be rescued; c) reflecting that even if they are rescued it doesn't matter a damn because of the death he holds in his arms?" (Barnes 132). Such interrogatives signal that the image remains beyond the reach of concrete verbal definition. Furthermore, when the narrator's attempt to systematically deduce what is happening in the image – whether it is dawn or dusk or whether the raft is moving towards or away from the ship on the horizon – fails, he checks the image against the written first-hand account of the shipwreck as told by two of its survivors, Jean Baptiste Henri Savigny and Alexandre Corréard. In other words, the narrator compares paint with print in order to decode the image; in resorting to words, he seems to draw our attention to the representational limitations of the visual medium.

This apparent critique of pictures continues when the narrator, much like Twain,

acknowledges that titles can often convey information that the painting alone might not.

Had Géricault chosen to depict *The Medusa*'s survivors casting the dead, the weak, and

the mutinous into the sea, an explanatory title would be necessary in order to make sense

of the image:

> Cartoonists having trouble explaining the background to their jokes often
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> give us newsvendors standing by billboards on which some convenient
>
> headline is inscribed. With painting, the equivalent information would
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> have to be given in the title: A GRIEVOUS SCENE ABOARD THE
>
> RAFT OF THE MEDUSA IN WHICH DESPERATE SURVIVORS,
>
> WRACKED BY CONSCIENCE, REALIZE THAT PROVISIONS ARE
>
> INSUFFICIENT AND TAKE THE TRAGIC BUT NECESSARY
>
> DECISION TO SACRIFICE THE WOUNDED IN ORDER THAT THEY
>
> THEMSELVES MIGHT HAVE A GREATER CHANCE OF
>
> SURVIVAL. That should just about do it. (Barnes 129)

However, where Twain claims that an historical painting means nothing without its title,

Barnes has his narrator point out that historiography is itself uncertain and speculative.

Far from privileging words over pictures as Twain does, Barnes problematizes language's

ability to represent 'historical reality.' After recounting an episode of Géricault's life that

"we all know," the narrator reveals his suspicion of historical accounts when he asks, "is

that what happened?" (Barnes 125).   Despite the fact that he defers to narrative in order

to make sense of the painting, the narrator finds that the written account of the shipwreck

fails to provide a coherent explanation of the image.   He warns, "we can only explain it

in words, yet we must also try to forget words" (Barnes 135). That Barnes begins the

"Shipwreck" section with a foldout copy of the painting means that readers need not

experience the image through words alone. Here, word-image relations are not

articulated in terms of conflict, but rather in terms of complement. And yet, what is

ultimately stressed is that even when readers have both images *and* words to guide them,

the 'truth' remains impossible to locate.

What is striking about Barnes's postmodern approach to painting is how

drastically it differs from Dan Brown's conception of images. Where *The Da Vinci Code*

suggests that there is a correct way to read a painting, Barnes favours ambivalence. Here,

the power of the image relies upon its ambiguity. Though *The Last Supper* provides

Brown's characters with access to historical truths, what is stressed in this work is the

representation's inability to stand as evidence. Thus, in his comparison of paint and print,

the narrator points out that Géricault consciously departed from documentary realism in

his painting. "The incident never took place as depicted," he explains. "The numbers are

inaccurate; the cannibalism is reduced to a literary reference; the Father and Son group

has the thinnest documentary justification, the barrel group none at all" (Barnes 135).

Questions of form and composition trump accuracy and evidence; in other words, "truth

to life, at the start, to be sure; yet once the process gets under way, truth to art is the

greater allegiance" (Barnes 135). Géricault's goal was never verisimilitude; the art object

cannot stand as a record of historical truth. In fact, as the painting's title shows, the artist

consciously sought ambiguity. Though now commonly mislabeled *The Raft of the*

Medusa, the painting was originally exhibited under the generic name *Scene of*

Shipwreck. Thus, when Salon critics complained that the image offered "no internal

evidence" of its historical subject matter (Barnes 138), they were missing the point of the painting. Ambiguity, the narrator suggests, is what makes the painting so powerful. The viewer's failure to determine definitely whether it is dawn or dusk, whether the raft is moving towards or away from the ship highlights the contradictory nature of the painting: it is simultaneously hopeful and hopeless. The narrator asks, "do we end up believing both versions? The eye can flick from one mood, and one interpretation, to the other: is that what was intended?" (Barnes 133). In this respect, the image defies concrete definition and herein lies its force, pulling the spectator "beyond mere pity and indignation," into "deeper, submarinous emotions…through currents of hope and despair, elation, panic and resignation" (Barnes 136-7). Thus, the viewer can experience something of what those on the raft felt, cycling between contrary emotions, as he or she struggles to interpret the work. The image's ambiguity, then, is not a failing, as Twain might suppose; rather, it is what elevates *Scene of Shipwreck* to the level of masterpiece and what transforms the painting into a comment on the human condition: "How hopelessly we signal; how dark the sky; how big the waves. We are all lost at sea, washed between hope and despair, hailing something that may never come to rescue us" (Barnes 137). Here, the indeterminacy of pictures is part of their power.

Like Twain, Barnes highlights the ambiguity of painting, but this ambiguity both troubles and delights in "Shipwreck." Consequently, what we find in this work is an articulation of a postmodern aesthetic whereby the artwork is not constructed as an object of fear, rather it becomes an equivocal site of uncertainty. Not only does "Shipwreck" demonstrate this postmodern reorientation of the image, but it also sheds light upon the nature of word-image relations under postmodernism. Though images might be obscure,

so too is language. Instead of stressing a polemical opposition between words and images, then, Barnes destabilizes both categories, thereby resisting any totalized vision of representation. In my first chapter, we will see Banville do something similar with his Frames Trilogy; however, what I mean to stress through my discussion of "Shipwreck" is that postmodernism has dismantled the traditional *paragone* – a fact that speaks to the movement's reconfiguration of the image. Because the notion of subjecthood is intrinsically tied to the contemplation of art objects in the works I examine, it is necessary to consider in more detail how this reconfiguration of the image under postmodernism affects the construction of the subject.

V: Aesthetics and the Postmodern Subject

In the postmodernist context the unique subject is a tenuous fiction. Reality, art, and people have become interchangeable tokens of each other, all flat and equally worthless in a world where mechanical repetition has replaced narrative becoming.
 – Wendy Steiner

Slavoj Žižek begins *The Ticklish Subject* with a rather entertaining paraphrase of Marx, claiming that "a spectre is haunting Western academia…the spectre of the Cartesian subject. All academic powers have entered into an unholy alliance to exorcise this spectre" (xviii). In drawing attention to the widespread academic disavowal of Cartesian subjectivity, Žižek voices one of the preoccupations of postmodern thought. As a movement characterized by an "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv), postmodernism demonstrates a marked shift away from models of stable subjecthood and towards provisional and contingent subjects.Jennifer Wicke points out that "the primary shibboleth of postmodern theory, without any doubt, is its depreciation of 'identity' in any form, whether conceptual or logical self-identity, referential identity, or the singular

identity of the subject" (11-12). Identities must be "dissolved," "unbound," "spliced," and "diced" (12); Wicke's word choice underscores the fundamental fragmentation of the traditional subject under the auspices of postmodernism. In the destabilized and fragmented communities of late capitalism, the stable *cogito* no longer seems viable.

In his conclusion to *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault famously declares that "man is an invention of recent date" (422). Brought into being by scientific discourses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the rational, sovereign subject is the product of a now discredited hegemonic discourse. Foucault's voice is only one among many who speak to the contingency of contemporary subjectivity. Various postmodern theorists have called for a radical reconsideration of subjectivity, replacing the autonomous subject of the past with gendered subjects, queer subjects, postcolonial subjects, and textual subjects, but to name a few. For instance, Frederic Jameson, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway all offer visions of selfhood that are distinctly at odds with the unified Cartesian cogito, articulating the subject as performative (Butler), as hybrid (Haraway), and as fragmented (Jameson). In their rejection of totalized models of subjectivity, these theorists recognize the subject as culturally constructed.

Butler, for example, argues that gender identity is performed in response to disciplinary social pressures. But because subjectivity is produced and performed, it is malleable and open to the possibility of agency. Haraway offers the cyborg as an appropriate model of late-twentieth-century selfhood in that its biotechnological fusion resists any centralized vision of identity. Though Jameson's tone differs from that of Butler and Haraway, both of whom recognize the liberating potential of these subversive selves, he nonetheless delineates a contemporary subject that is based upon similar

principles of dispersion. In its isolation, disconnection, and discontinuity, Jameson's

schizoid subject constitutes the erasure of stable, enduring subjecthood.

More important perhaps is that Jameson connects his vision of the postmodern

subject to the issue of aesthetic production. In "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of

Late Capitalism," he argues that the cultural productions of the fragmented subject reveal

an aesthetic that is no longer organically tied to a unique and private self. By way of

demonstrating that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity

production generally" (192), Jameson famously compares Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust*

Shoes to Vincent Van Gogh's *A Pair of Shoes*, a work which he argues is representative

of "high modernism in visual art" (193).   In some ways, his comparison recalls my

discussion of Duchamp and Warhol; however, where my emphasis was on audience

reception, Jameson focuses on the hermeneutic distinctions between the two works as a

way of demonstrating how postmodern aesthetic productions differ from those of the

past.   His treatment of the two works is insightful in that it explores some of the wider

issues that inform the changes in modernist and postmodernist art.

Van Gogh's painting, he suggests, reflects "the whole object world of agricultural

misery" (194). Jameson praises its immediacy; the pictured shoes "recreate about

themselves the whole missing object-world which was once their lived context" (194-5).

In other words, the viewer of the painting can find in the image traces of the "vaster

reality" (Jameson 195) that inspired its creation; one can reconstruct the historical context

of the work simply by looking at it. For Jameson, the image constitutes a "Utopian

gesture," translating the difficult reality of peasant life "into the most glorious

materialization of pure color in oil paint" (194). His privileging of the image's

hermeneutical value is clear, particularly since he places Van Gogh's work in contrast to *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a work that denies any such "hermeneutic gesture" (Jameson 195).

Warhol's image, he argues, is not evocative in the same manner of *A Pair of Shoes*; rather, its glossy surface is debased to the status of a depthless advertisement, a commodified product of late capitalism. Indeed, for Jameson, the image encapsulates a central feature of postmodernism: "the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (196) – a construction that echoes Wendy Steiner in my epigraph. For Steiner, mechanical repetition has allowed the categories of reality, art, and people to become interchangeable, "all flat and equally worthless." However, Jameson extends this idea when he locates this superficiality in the image's inability to offer its viewer a point of entry: "Nothing in this painting organizes even a minimal place for the viewer," he claims (195). As a hermeneutical exercise of sorts, Van Gogh's image calls upon the participation of its viewer; conversely, Warhol's image cuts itself off from its viewer. In fact, Jameson goes so far as to claim that the image does not speak to its viewer at all.

In the same vein, Jameson compares Warhol's representations of human subjects, such as Marilyn Monroe, to Edvard Munch's Expressionist masterpiece *The Scream*. In Munch's work, he finds a "canonical expression of the great modernist thematic of alienation, anomie, solitude, social fragmentation, and isolation," a work that captures "the very aesthetic of expression itself" (Jameson 197), which he compares to an image that evokes the endless reproducibility and commodification of the celebrity under late capitalism. For Jameson, the difference demonstrates the "waning of affect" in contemporary culture (196), for where *The Scream* revolves around a despairing subject

who externalizes his emotions, Warhol's figures are impersonal and devoid of feeling; they enact the disappearance of the subject in favour of depthless surfaces.

It is important to stress that Jameson does not exactly hold with the fashionable declaration of the subject's so-called death. In "Postmodernism," the subject is not dead; rather, the subject as it was once known – an individual source of unique meaning – is dead. His point here is that postmodernist cultural forms reflect a fragmented subject that is affectless, depthless, and drained of meaning. These works reflect his claim that in postmodernism, "the alienation of the subject is displaced by the fragmentation of the subject" (Jameson 199); the fragmented subject is a subject nonetheless. For Jameson, then, postmodern art ejects the traditional subject of High Modernism from the canvas; art enacts a radical reconfiguration of subjectivity. This movement away from the concepts that modernism privileged – purity, uniqueness, originality – underscores the notion that one can no longer read or define oneself in the art object.[16]

However it is informed, postmodern visual art signals a movement away from traditional aesthetics – a viewpoint encapsulated by the title of Hal Foster's book *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. It is essential to stress, however, that his

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[16]In *Remembering Postmodernism*, Mark Cheetham explains that much postmodern visual art concerns itself with subject-definition. Freud's theory of the unconscious mind and Marxism's notions of class domination have wiped out any possibility of an idealized, transparent subject. Consequently, postmodern artists turn their attention to the dynamic process of subject-construction. Indeed, Cheetham suggests that the "seemingly constant attempts by artists and viewers to fix provisionally a point of meaning suggests that there can, even must, be postmodern subjects" (41). Thus, it is not a question of the subject's demise, but rather of the desire to uncover the complex process of subject-formation. For Cheetham, this process is influenced by the ever-shifting and unstable landscape of our memories, which are always in the process of being revised. Thus, he claims, postmodern visual art encourages an open consciousness of those elements that inscribe and reinscribe the self. Moreover, he writes, "it is worth recalling that we never see our own faces – certainly one of the most potent signs of who we are as subjects – except as they are reflected optically by a polished surface or a reproductive means like a photograph or a painting, or as they are metaphorically reflected in the reactions other people have to us" (42-3). Cheetham draws our attention to the impossibility of attaining immediate access to signs of our subjecthood; our sense of self is always dispersed and mediated. Again, what he stresses is not the absence of the subject, but rather the absence of the traditional subject.

title does not denote a negation of art or of representation; rather, it refers to a reconsideration of these categories. Where modernism hoped to access a pure space that existed beyond the realm of representation, postmodern thinkers accept the fact that we are always already inside of representation. Thus, Foster means to articulate "a critique which destructures the order of representations in order to reinscribe them" (xvi). What is called into question, then, is "the idea that aesthetic experience exists apart, without 'purpose,' all but beyond history, or that art can now effect a world at once (inter)subjective, concrete, and universal – a symbolic totality" (Foster xvi).

In "On the Museum's Ruins," Douglas Crimp articulates postmodernism's break with modernist aesthetics through the rupturing of the former's demand for purity and separation between various media. In postmodernism, works of art are not privileged as they were in modernism; in place of the unique and symbolic, we find the contingent and provisional. Crimp cites, for instance, Foucault's project of replacing "those unities of humanist historical thought such as tradition, influence, development, evolution, source and origin with concepts like discontinuity, rupture, threshold, limit and transformation" (51), claiming that we notice a similar replacement in the field of art. In fact, in his discussion of postmodern art, Crimp offers an explanation that is strikingly similar to Jameson's notion of pastiche. The techniques of reproduction, he claims, have overthrown the techniques of production so that we are now experiencing the decay of the aura which Benjamin predicted. Art is heterogeneous, borrowing the principles of pastiche. He writes, "The fiction of the creating subject gives way to the frank confiscation, quotation, excerptation, accumulation and repetition of already existing images. Notions of originality, authenticity and presence, essential to the ordered

discourse of the museum, are undermined" (61). Where modernist art sought to represent

an authentic vision of the world, postmodern art undermines any such claims to authority.

Put simply, postmodern aesthetics shifted to accommodate and reflect the post-Cartesian

subject. The contemporary age required an art that reflected visions of subjectivity posed

by the likes of Butler, Haraway, and Jameson, rather than more traditional views of

subjectivity.

We do well to consider shifts in the focal point of paintings here, as they speak to

shifts in the conception of the subject. William V. Dunning, for instance, notes that

Descartes's seventeenth-century conception of the self was reflected in the perspective of

painting up until the middle of the nineteenth-century: these "self-centered paintings were

geometrically oriented to, and centered upon, that specific site outside the painting where

the painter is geometrically implied to have stood in order to view the scene" (332). In

other words, in keeping with Renaissance perspective, the painting implies a single

specific point of view. Because the image centres on the perspective of the individual

viewer, it plays a role in *placing* the subject. Dunning explains, "the unified, monolithic

system of Renaissance perspective implies or constructs Cartesian viewers who are

inclined to extend themselves visually into the pictorial space of a painting" (333).

The single, specific point of view is clearly in opposition to postmodernism's

emphasis on pluralism. Indeed, the monolithic viewpoint suggests a dominant discourse

of the sort that postmodernism naturally views with suspicion. According to Craig

Owens, "the representational systems of the West admit only one vision – that of the

constitutive male subject – or, rather, they posit the subject of representation as absolutely

centered, unitary, masculine." In contrast, "the postmodernist work attempts to upset the

reassuring stability of that mastering position" ("Discourse" 67). Consequently, we often find in postmodern painters the rejection of traditional perspective in favour of a reconfigured pluralist orientation. In a 1972 essay, Leo Steinberg famously dubbed this postmodern perspective "the flatbed picture plane" – a phrase that he borrows from the flatbed printing press which, as its name suggests, constitutes a horizontal printing surface.[17] Steinberg's model presupposes a perspective that breaks from the traditional, vertical picture plane – a perspective that implies the presence of a single Cartesian viewer.

From the Old Masters to Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, Steinberg argues, pictures represented a "worldspace" that corresponded to "the erect human posture." Artists favoured perspectives that were analogous to that of a standing person. For Steinberg, such artists are "nature painters" in that their images correspond to the human vision of the natural world. In the 1950s, however, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Dubuffet adopted a conspicuously new perspective – one that broke from the traditional vertical visual field and took as its model, not the human subject, but the horizontal surface upon which objects and information could be scattered. As such, these painters insisted "on a radically new orientation, in which the painted surface is no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but of operational processes" (Steinberg). Steinberg figures the flatbed picture plane as more than a mere surface distinction: this new perspective addresses a different order of experience and should be understood "as a change within painting that changed the relationship between artist and image, image and viewer."

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[17] "The Flatbed Picture Frame" is the title of the essay, which was first published in "Reflections on the State of Criticism," in *Artforum* in March 1972. It also appeared in *Other Criteria* later that same year.

This reorientation of perspective, then, carries over into considerations of subjectivity. Dunning explains that "a fragmented horizontal picture plane with a profusion of perspectives refuses to locate the viewer in any specific position or identity" (334). Postmodern paintings, in other words, do not centre on the individual's view of the world; the flatbed model denies the single, authoritative perspective of the image's beholder and frustrates any attempt to enter the pictorial space. Instead, we find a pluralist, and distinctly postmodern, perspective.

Take, for instance, the example of Rauschenberg. For many critics – Steinberg, Crimp, Owens, Dunning, and Rosalind Krauss to name but a few – Rauschenberg's work represents the postmodern project.[18] From his emphasis on the flatbed picture plane and his techniques of reproduction over production, to his appropriation of recognizable images and his use of multiple artistic mediums, Rauschenberg's art enacts many of the techniques associated with postmodern visual art. For Dunning, he is an artist whose fragmented images reflect the fragmented perceptions of contemporary viewers subject to the visual barrage of a media culture. For Crimp, his confiscation and duplication of known images speaks to not only the intentional emptying of aura in postmodern art, but also to the "proliferation of discourses" (61). Significantly, Owens argues that it is impossible to extract from Rauschenberg's work "a coherent, monological message. All attempts to decipher his works testify only to their own failure, for the fragmentary,

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[18]See Steinberg's definitive essay on the artist, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," which was the first published version of his 1972 essay "Other Criteria." Along with Rosalind Krauss's "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image" and "Perpetual Inventory," Steinberg's essay appears in Branden W. Joseph's *Robert Rauschenberg*. Crimp's "On the Museum's Ruins," where the critic discusses the artist's silkscreens as distinctly postmodern productions, appears in Hal Foster's *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Owens's "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" which appears in Brian Wallis's *Art After Modernism* and Dunning's "The Concept of Self and Postmodern Painting: Constructing a Post-Cartesian Viewer," published in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* both position the artist as representative of postmodern art.

piecemeal combination of images that initially impels reading is also what blocks it,

erects an impenetrable barrier to its course" ("Allegorical" 225). Though his comments

might seem to echo Jameson's earlier claim that *Diamond Dust Shoes* fails to speak to its

viewer, Owens points out that the indeterminacy of Rauschenberg's work intentionally

highlights the arbitrary nature of meaning in contemporary culture. In this respect, his

work is meant to be impersonal. Indeed, Foster points out that the artist's deconstruction

of objects results in the dislocation and decentering of the artwork's viewer. It is the

opacity of his fragmented images that denies the Cartesian perspective of a fixed subject.

What these considerations demonstrate is that the relationship between the subject

and aesthetics has undergone a radical change under postmodernism. Artworks no longer

substantiate subjecthood, as they seemingly did under the Cartesian model; instead, they

refuse to offer the viewer any confirmation of viewpoint or perspective. What interests

me is that the characters I examine in this study attempt to escape the postmodern

condition by reinscribing what they think is an historically stable relationship between a

vertically situated art object and its unified beholding subject. Freddie Montgomery,

Victor Maskell, and all the others I explore seem to subscribe to the mistaken belief that

their salvation lies in the traditional aesthetic of the stable artwork. They flee from the

uncertainty implicit in postmodern aesthetics by revisiting the Cartesian model, hoping to

affirm their own subjecthood through transparent representations of the human form.

However, postmodernism denies them the possibility of this return. Not only is the

idealized model of subjectivity and art flawed, it is, and always has been, false. These

works imply that there never was such a thing as a stable subject viewing a vertical art

object, for both the subject and the art object were always already unstable. Thus, the

works I examine would have their characters mistakenly place faith in a hopeless

enterprise. Postmodernism offers them cold comfort.

CHAPTER ONE: SELF AND ART

Reconfiguring the Image in Banville's Frames Trilogy

*But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original,
representation to reality, the appearance to the essence…illusion only is sacred, truth profane. Nay,
sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the
highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness.*
– Ludwig Feuerbach

*Consciousness, indeed, is quite inadequate to explain the contents of personality. It is Art, and Art only,
that reveals us to ourselves.*
– Oscar Wilde

"I am struck by the frequent appearance which paintings make in this case," declares the

narrator and sardonic antihero of John Banville's Frames Trilogy (*Evidence* 61). Thus,

Freddie Montgomery draws our attention towards one of the works' central concerns. In

these novels, art provides Banville with a platform from which to examine issues of

subjectivity and the complicated questions of authenticity and illusion in a postmodern

world.[1]Through Freddie's stubborn idealization of painting, the trilogy interrogates

traditional assumptions regarding the art object's ability to reveal and to comfort.

Freedberg's comment regarding the varied responses that people have to pictures is

relevant here: "They are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They

give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the

highest levels of empathy and fear" (1). Such are Freddie's expectations of images. For

him, pictures are powerful and edifying, and the trilogy traces his faith in art. To Freddie,

images are allied to truth, they are associated with spiritual ascent, and they can empower

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[1]Banville's work is often classified as postmodern. Such critics as Imhof, Burgstaller, Jackson, Zuntini de
Izarra, and Muller, have noted the varied postmodern characteristics of the novels, which range from the
self-conscious, metafictional, and intertextual design of the works, to their obvious engagement with
epistemological concerns – all of which are central devices in the Frames Trilogy.

their beholders. However, as I suggested in my introduction, and as I will continue to argue in this chapter, Banville installs such ideas only to subvert them. Freddie is nostalgic for the kind of transparent and unmediated images that never existed. Consequently, his engagement with paintings betrays his irrational and delusional urge to idealize and fetishize art objects that ultimately fail to comply with his hopelessly romanticized conception of them.

Paintings become the site of epistemological confusion in the trilogy; accordingly, Freddie's near-neurotic engagement with art signals his descent into a fatal world of illusions. His preference for aestheticized images of femininity over real women leads him to murder a young maid who interrupts his attempted theft of a beguiling seventeenth-century portrait. The first novel of the trilogy, *The Book of Evidence*, is Freddie's confessional account of his crime and capture, in which he contemplates how his devotion to a painted woman allowed him to murder a real one. *Ghosts* and *Athena* follow a post-prison Freddie and continue to examine how his fixation on visual images forces him to view the world through a distorting lens.

Section one of this chapter, which deals with the first novel of the trilogy, interrogates the traditional construction of painting as a mimetic and truthful medium. I argue that art is a tool of delusion in *The Book of Evidence* and that Freddie's pathological behaviour is inherently tied to his engagement with paintings. In its exploration of the deceptive power of art, this novel exemplifies the postmodern destabilization of the image as a fixed and transparent object. Section two moves more explicitly to the issue of Freddie's aesthetic expectations as they relate to his self-inscription in *Ghosts*. Here, I discuss the protagonist's faulty construction of art as a

means of achieving absolution and of reconstituting his guilty self. Finally, section three

expands upon the previous section by considering Freddie's attempt to achieve self

mastery through art. By engaging in Pygmalionesque acts of creation, he hopes to

stabilize himself and finally establish his authority as a seeing subject. I argue, however,

that the work forces the reader into an awareness of the limitations of representation,

whether they be verbal or visual. In this, the trilogy as a whole enacts the postmodern

destabilization of the *paragone* tradition, refusing to offer one discursive system in place

of another – preferring instead to dismantle both.

PART ONE: *The Book of Evidence*: Art as Escape

I: Artistic Vision as Distortion

It is a symbol of Irish art. The cracked lookingglass of a servant.
– Stephen Dedalus

In his article, "Ekphrasis and the Novel: The Presence of Paintings in John Banville's

Fiction," Joseph McMinn claims that while "Banville's fiction seems characteristically

postmodern in its self-conscious and intertextual design, its version of pictorial art seems

to be deeply influenced by a more traditional aesthetic, one which recalls classic

Modernism" (137). Thus, McMinn argues, the author's characters are nostalgically

drawn to the traditional humanistic aesthetic of art. In light of contemporary

epistemology's destabilization of the authentic, his characters long for a more "natural"

set of signs which are present in art; therefore, they find solace in the old masters.

Paintings, McMinn says, retain an "idealized aesthetic value throughout Banville, a kind

of enviable composure and self-sufficiency utterly lacking in the chaotic world of those

who gaze upon them" ("Ekphrasis" 138). He continues, art "seems to embody a kind of stability to which the frantic, hyperactive consciousness of Banville's narrators is deeply attracted…something has been preserved in these images which has been lost in those who contemplate them" (143). Thus, McMinn places the artifice of language in opposition to the "natural" signs of painting.

However, these signs are anything but natural. If Banville installs art as a stable and humanistic medium, it is only to subvert this assumption later. What we find then is not so much in keeping with McMinn's claims but is rather a reflection of Hutcheon's assertion in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: "the postmodernist rethinking of figurative painting in art…is always a critical reworking, never a nostalgic 'return'" (4). Thus, it is essential to stress that though Freddie's perception of art might be in keeping with the idealized aesthetic value that McMinn mentions above, Banville's is not. The trilogy consistently exposes Freddie's faith in art as an error. Indeed, part of the irony of *The Book of Evidence* and the trilogy as a whole lies in the fact that Freddie attempts to secure his search for selfhood in art, which is exposed as a precarious and hermeneutically unstable medium because its power relies upon illusion and deception. Mitchell calls this "illusionism": "the capacity of pictures to deceive, delight, astonish, amaze, or otherwise take power over a beholder" (*Picture* 325).[2]Images, in other words, actively work to deceive their perceivers. Set in contrast to realism, which Mitchell associates "with the capacity of pictures to show the truth about things" (*Picture* 325), illusionism revolves around the image's power to dominate and distort the observer's eye. The spectator is under the authority of the representation. Thus, illusionism "involves power over

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[2]For an extended discussion of illusionism, see Mitchell's chapter, "Illusion: Looking at Animals Looking" from *Picture Theory* (329-44).

subjects: it is an action directed at a free subject that has to be addressed, persuaded, entertained, deceived" (326). Freddie is dominated by such pictures, a fact that subsequently distorts and pollutes his perception of both the external world and of himself.

In its close relationship with illusion and deception, and by extension fakery and forgery, painting is an unstable medium in Banville's Frames Trilogy – not the composed, self-sufficient medium that McMinn proposes. Consequently, as an impassioned connoisseur and devotee of art, Freddie is entangled in artistic illusions. He is, as Rudiger Imhof claims, "caged by art" (174), and this imprisonment is literalized in the form of Freddie's incarceration as a prisoner on trial for murder. *The Book of Evidence* begins with the protagonist musing on his confinement: "I am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and fro in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars"(1). Here, Banville draws his reader's attention to the relationship between the spectacle and confinement – a connection that is central to the novel's conception of art. As a caged spectacle of exotic Otherness, Freddie is not unlike a picture in a frame – divided from the world though a part of it.

The caging to which Imhof refers has to do with this fundamental division. Freddie's vision is consistently filtered through artistic precedents. This *fix*ation hints at his inability to see beyond the world of painting, which is itself, as Gombrich explains in *Art and Illusion*, a constructed and artificial medium.[3]Art *is* representation; its

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[3]Gombrich is merely one in a long line of critics to argue that pictorial signs are fraught with convention. Nelson Goodman, for example, is known for his critique of representational realism. In *Languages of Art*,

conventions signal its illusory nature. That Freddie's perception is permeated by such a deceptive form gestures towards the distortion of his vision. When contemplating his island-hopping past in the southern climes of Europe, he openly admits, "That life, drifting from island to island, encouraged illusions…[It] leached the significance out of things, so that they lost their true weight" (*Evidence* 11). He articulates his past's dream-like quality by drawing parallels between it and the world of art. Thus, he recalls the "watercolor weather" (11) of the Mediterranean, "a Van Gogh chair" (18), and a silver-haired hidalgo with "El Greco hands" (23). Wally, the eternally disgruntled pub-owner, is likened to a "Beardsleyan queen" (32), and a group of youths with shaved heads bent over a billiards table appear "like something out of Hogarth, a group of wigless surgeons intent over the dissecting table" (163).

In the context of my claim that art contributes to Freddie's sense of non-reality, it is important to note that his memories are mediated by artists whose works are known for their properties of distortion, deformity, and exaggeration. The allusion to Van Gogh's chair, for example, is most likely a reference to the yellow chair depicted in both his *Bedroom in Arles* and in *Van Gogh's Chair with Pipe* – paintings which are distinguished by the artist's distorting, subjective perspective and post-impressionistic style. Similarly, El Greco's Mannerism, Beardsley's Aestheticism, and Hogarth's satirical and allegorical prints are all marked by their rejection of artistic objectivity and naturalism.[4] Not only

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Goodman claims that all representations are conventional in that they depend upon symbol systems and 'rules' that are not 'natural' but rather are constructed by people. In his terms, realism is simply the most conventional convention. For a more detailed treatment of this issue, see his first chapter, "Reality Remade" (3-44).

[4] Post-Impressionism arose as a reaction against the impressionistic objectivity of color and light. Similarly, Mannerism responded to the High Renaissance emphasis on objectivity and the use of natural subjects. El Greco, in particular, is noted for his extremely exaggerated, elongated human forms and his unrealistic, contorted spaces. Beardsley is known for his perverse grotesques and irregular designs, while Hogarth is

does Freddie see reality through the conventions of art, he sees it through pictorial works

that are characteristically distorted, thereby emphasizing the irregularity of his vision.

The problem is that Freddie reinvents reality through the distorted image, thereby

rendering his world unreal. Accustomed to contemplating the compositional nature of

paintings, he applies these same principles to the world beyond the two-dimensional

artwork, noting line, form, and colour as if commenting on a visual composition rather

than reality. Thus, he recalls the "tender, blue, watercolour weather" (11) of Europe, the

"gentle, paintbox colours" (67) of California,and a "sky piled high with bundles of

luminous Dutch clouds" (*Evidence* 100).[5]His descriptions indicate that he interprets the

exterior world as if it were a painting, adapting it to a predetermined pictorial structure.

Hans Lund calls this "iconic projection"—"the act of decoding a framed field of vision in

the exterior concrete world of objects as if it were a picture" (73). It is "reality as

picture" (Lund 89). "Projection" implies the active role of the observer, "a chosen

attitude, often a conscious prolongation of a rapid and uncontrollable association"

(73).[6]What one sees is therefore dependent upon encoded presuppositions, a combination

of both observation and expectation. One translates the landscape as art. As Lund puts it,

"expectations create preparedness for illusion" (72).Freddie, then, is an implied author of

his own perception, actively maneuvering through the empirical world of reality to

considered a pioneer of sequential cartoons. Each of these artists and movements distinctly represent art as an anti-objective medium.

[5]As Imhof suggests, the hues of Freddie's visual palette are equally suggestive: the prison light has an "acid, lemony cast" (4), a polished stone floor is "cardinal red" (56), Joanne's hair is a "vernal russet blaze" (56) and the sun is "coin-coloured" (67). Thus, Freddie's perception is affected by art not only in terms of grand composition but also in terms of small details.

[6]According to Lund, iconic projection presupposes a tension between empirical reality and reality experienced as a picture. See *Text as Picture*, where Lund discusses the aesthetic experience of iconic projection at greater length.

emphasize and favour visual motifs found in paintings. By anchoring his vision in art, Freddie sees little of reality. Figuratively chained in Plato's cave, he sees only shadow substitutes which block his access to the thing itself. Thus, the artistic caging to which Imhof refers above highlights Freddie's aesthetically delimiting perspective of the world. Throughout the trilogy, art continually mediates and restricts the way Freddie sees external reality. By comparison, recall *The Da Vinci Code*, where art is equated with revelation: on a personal level, painting tells Sophie her true identity, and on a global scale, painting exposes the truth behind the core beliefs of some of the world's major religions. Such confirmation is not permitted by representations under postmodernism – and certainly not through the indeterminate art object. *The Book of Evidence* consistently demonstrates art's failure to make meaning. Here, iconic projection limits Freddie's vision, preventing him from seeing things as they exist outside of the deceptive world of encoded visual precedents. Art therefore fosters Freddie's delusions.

II: Leaving the Tate

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors.
– Oscar Wilde

It is helpful to briefly consider Fleur Adcock's short poem "Leaving the Tate" here, as the work provides some insight into the complexity of iconic projection which we can then apply to *The Book of Evidence*. In the poem, an omniscient narrator contemplates the thoughts of an anonymous person who has just left the Tate gallery. She emerges from the Tate with "images packed into [her] head" (3) and looking across the river, sees "a new one" (5). Looking at the world, she sees pictures. Adcock captures perfectly the process of Lund's iconic projection – external reality is encoded as though it were a

picture. Thus, reality is filtered through representation and broken down according to its

compositional structure.

In this respect, the unnamed observer of the poem is like Freddie, whose personal

investment in the world of art translates into a perception that is consistently structured

around artistic precedent. What Freddiedoes is effectively superimpose artworks on

reality so that he sees reality only as it conforms to or suggests a painting. Just as Freddie

might see a natural cloudscape as a detail from a Dutch painting, Adcock's observer sees

a "madly pure Pre-Raphaelite sky" (9). Having left the Tate, the visitor's perception of

the exterior world is determined by the pictures she has just seen.[7]"Curious how/ these

outdoor pictures didn't exist/ before you'd looked at the indoor pictures,/ the ones on the

walls" (21-4), the narrator muses.

What we find here is an interesting articulation of Baudrillard's precession of

simulacra, whereby the copy comes to precede the original.[8] In the case of Adcock's

observer, the constructed paintings come before – and subsequently alter – her

understanding of reality. This mode of perceptual mediation, therefore, complicates our

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[7]The Tate has a rather substantial collection of Pre-Raphaelite art. According to the gallery's website, for instance, the present collection consists of 399 paintings classified as Pre-Raphaelite. Consequently, we are led to assume that the narrator's recent encounter with these images is what has prompted this specific mode of iconic projection.

[8]The claim, of course, comes from Baudrillard's central document of cultural studies, *Simulacra and Simulation*. "The Precession of Simulacra" is possibly his most quoted work and identifies ideas that have become an inextricable part of postmodern consciousness. In it, he considers the construction of reality in contemporary culture by tracing the evolution of the image's representational power. In the past, he claims, the image was a reflection of reality. There was, in other words, a tangible and concrete relationship of priority between reality and its representation such that the image was taken to be a secondary reflection of an original reality. In contrast, what we find now is that this seemingly stable relationship, as well as our conception of reality itself, has been dismantled. From this foundation emerges Baudrillard's most famous claim – that reality is replaced by its simulation. The simulation or representation does not reflect reality, but rather *precedes* it. Hence, in his work, the term *simulacra*, taken from the Latin *simulare*, meaning "to make like, to put on an appearance of," has come to designate a copy without an original. The simulacrum, then, negates the relationship of priority between the original and its representation by claiming that we cannot identify the real to begin with.

understanding of reality. When it is filtered through artistic precedents, can reality still

be considered 'real,' or is it yet another image – what Adcock calls an 'outdoor picture' –

constructed and manipulated according to the observer's whims? In her poem, Adcock

demonstrates art's potential to problematize the category of reality. Similarly, she traces

the influence that paintings have on perception. As Elkins would say, there is no such

thing as "just looking." Looking is not a passive action; rather, it is active and creative,

and often involves manipulation.

Perception, then, is a creative process provoked by visual anticipation. Gombrich

himself notes that expectation and observation are intimately linked.[9]Thus, the observer's

perception is not so much an accurate record of the visible world as a register of her

artistic experience at the Tate. In this respect, the title of the poem invites attention. In

'leaving the Tate,' the subject does not entirely leave the gallery behind; rather, she takes

the aesthetic experience with her – a notion that is reinforced by the opening lines of the

poem, whereby she emerges from the gallery with a "clutch of postcards/ in a Tate

gallery bag" (1-2). We are led to assume that she carries with her postcard reproductions

of original artworks. Art, as Adcock claims in the poem, "multiplies itself" (35). The

implications of such a claim are twofold: it speaks to the figure's ability to privately

'own' certain images beyond the publicly accessible space of the art gallery, thus

rendering art a personal artefact, and it parallels her psychological internalization of the

artworks. As she steps beyond the Tate's doors, she carries the images both in her bag

and her mind. Thus, Adcock draws the reader's attention to paintings as something more

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[9]See part three of Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, "The Beholder's Share," for more on this.

than material objects; rather, they are intimately tied to issues of perception, subjectivity, and commerce.

The perceptual process of iconic projection, as presented in the poem, is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, it denotes an aesthetic distance; to experience reality as though it were a painting on a gallery wall is to recognize one's distance from it. When we look at a painting, we see an object that is separated from us in that it is withdrawn from our world, existing in a separate representational plane. The best symbol of this is the picture frame, which naturally delimits one's field of vision. The frame marks the divisional line between our world and the one represented, and it therefore draws our attention towards the distance between the picture and its observer. In Adcock's poem, the frame is of particular importance as it is central to the practice of iconic projection.

Part of the observer's visual process is punctuated by the act of framing external reality. She delineates exactly what should be captured within the frame, presenting the reader with a series of visual instructions: "Cut to the lower right for a detail…Now swing to the left…Cut it off just there" (14-19). The photographic and cinematic quality of these directions contributes to the notion that her surroundings are a scene to be shaped and manipulated in accordance with her artistic expectations. In addition, the act of framing is clearly depicted as an exclusionary act here. The observer carefully draws the limits of the picture, deciding what is to be included and excluded, thus reducing reality to the status of a representation that is consciously constructed. "Art's whatever you choose to frame" (36), the narrator claims. What the poem's observer essentially does is look upon reality with a painter's discerning eye. As Lund notes, with iconic projection, "the observer emphasizes the same factors and favours the same categories of visual

motifs as pictorial artists do in their pictures" (67). Iconic projection, then, is twofold in nature: it relies upon one's subjective interpretation of one's surroundings, and it is essentially a creative act – which explains why the observer is likened to a painter, or creator of the image. She consciously constructs her reality. Thus, the narrator claims, "You're in charge/ of the hanging committee. Put what space/ you like around the ones you fix on,/ and gloat" (32-5). Adcock emphasizes the active role of the observer, who in perceiving the world creates it. Though the narrator may claim by the end of the poem that "No one made them,/ The light painted them" (31-2), it is already clear that it is in fact the observer's eye and mind that have "painted" the image that stands before her.

However, Adcock adds yet another dimension to the viewer's active role, for iconic projection is structured as a mechanical process in the poem. The observer's eye is likened to a "viewfinder" (26) – a camera attachment that miniaturizes the field of view. Similarly, the narrator indicates that visual details can be isolated by "holding your optic muscles still" (28), and the eyes of the poem have the ability to perform actions that parallel those of a camera, such as zooming, panning, and tilting. Consequently, the observer is transformed into a machine of sorts – an idea that is particularly interesting if we take into consideration Freddie for whom iconic projection has a similar result.

As a practice that paradoxically severs the observer from what is being observed, iconic projection is akin to blindness. In *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins notes that sight is complicit with blindness. Since what one sees is subjectively determined, vision is naturally biased and images are therefore sites of ideological projection, as Adcock's poem demonstrates. Seeing, Elkins writes, "is also inconstant seeing, partial seeing, poor seeing, and not seeing, or to put it as strongly as possible…seeing involves and entails

blindness; seeing is also blindness" (*Object* 95). Iconic projection thus becomes a distancing process, restricting one's perception and removing one from external reality. In a telling moment, Freddie expresses his feeling that the world around him has been replaced with a "substitute world" – "an exact replica, perfect in every detail, down to the last dust-mote" (*Evidence* 143). Here, the reader should once more recall Baudrillard, because what Freddie essentially experiences is a simulacrum; he substitutes "signs of the real for the real" (*Simulations* 4). What he is left with is the inability to properly distinguish between nature and artifice, leaving him detached from reality. Freddie's compulsively intense engagement with iconic projection heightens his pathological detachment. He variously describes himself as being "without moorings, a floating phantom" (*Evidence* 116), "a poor impersonation of [himself]" (162). Not only is he severed from his sense of self, Freddie is also segregated from the society that surrounds him. "The people among whom I moved were strange to me," he insists. "I felt I was no longer of their species" (162).His psychological alienation is a symptom of his chronic over-investment with art. In Freddie's world, art is pathological, at first manifesting behaviour that is maladaptive and compulsive, and later psychopathic.

According to McMinn, "Freddie prefers the ideal to the actual, the inhuman to the human; in effect, art to life" ("Ekphrasis" 139-40). More specifically, he prefers idealized illusions of femininity rather than creatures of flesh and blood. His aesthetic reinvention of the women in his life means that they are hardly more than visual motifs in a distinctly masculine mode of iconic projection. In this respect, his perception of women is predatory; it carries with it connotations of entrapment, illusion, and capture.

The Tate poem sheds some light on Freddie's engagement with women. As I have noted, Adcock's poem demonstrates art's relation to illusion rather than actuality. The poet presents iconic projection not only as a distancing process with the capacity to mechanize the observer, but also as a creative act that implies a certain degree of ownership over the perceived world. These themes inform Freddie's construction of women, which I explore in the next section, and as I will later argue, are central to his ability to commit murder.

III: A Gallery of Girls

For all are caged birds; the only difference lies in the size of the cage.
– Thomas Hardy

Most critics limit their exploration of women in the Frames Trilogy to Josie Bell (the woman Freddie murders) and the painted *Woman with Gloves*;[10] however, central to an understanding of how Freddie's iconic projection contributes to his crime is his engagement with those women closest to him: Dolly, his mother; Anna, his long-time friend; and Daphne, his wife. That Freddie extends his practice of aesthetic encoding to these women is telling in two respects. Firstly, it reveals the scope of his iconic projection: this is not a practice reserved for landscapes and fleeting encounters. Rather, even Freddie's most personal relationships are subject to his artistic presuppositions, demonstrating that this practice is a fundamental part of his perspective. Secondly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, we find that this practice is most often applied to women; in *The*

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[10] For instance, despite the fact that both D'Hoker and Muller focus their exploration of the Frames Trilogy on Banville's representation of women, they neglect to discuss the roles that Dolly, Daphne, and Anna play in the text.

Book of Evidence, iconic projection is a distinctly gendered exercise and it reveals Freddie's almost pathological detachment from women, which raises a number of questions regarding the gendered gaze and the issue of male mastery in the text. Iconic projection is, it would seem, Freddie's way of asserting authority over a world that seems to be slipping away from him. Thus, not only is he caged by art, as Imhof claims, but Freddie also cages the female Other in a similar fashion, and it is this act, I argue, that represents his attempt to master the external world.

Consider his perception of Dolly: Freddie variously sees his mother as an Ancient Roman "marble figure" (*Evidence* 41), one of "Lautrec's ruined doxies" (59), or a seventeenth-century Dutch portrait (51). At one point, he notes that "she sat with her face half-turned to the nickel light of evening from the window, rheum-eyed and old, showing the broad brow and high cheekbones of her Dutch forebears, King Billy's henchmen. You should have a ruff, ma, I said, and a lace cap" (51). Here, Freddie visually "frames" Dolly, suggesting alterations to reality that are in keeping with his artistic vision. He is distanced from her aesthetically – a fact that is further emphasized by his historically remote aesthetic models.

Such distancing is evident in Freddie's treatment of Anna as well. He likens her to "one of Klimt's gem-encrusted lovers" (85) and describes her as "distant" and "poised, silent, palely handsome" (62)—adjectives which, along with her nickname "the Ice Queen" (62), inscribe her as a static work of art. The confusion of woman and art object is further emphasized when Freddie, standing on a sidewalk, observes Anna in an art gallery: "she might have been a piece on show," he says, "standing there so still in that tall, shadowless light behind sun-reflecting glass" (62). Banville is careful to ally

aestheticization and distortion here. Freddie's vision of Anna is mediated by a shield of reflective glass.[11]Iconic projection, then, is a gendered process that both distances and distorts.

The conflation of woman and art object is perhaps best illustrated by his depiction of his wife, Daphne, who is perpetually aestheticized and mythologized. As a classical nymph, his "lady of the laurels" (*Evidence* 7), a fine sculpture, or a painted Madonna, she is experienced through art. Freddie wishes to caress her as he would "want to caress a piece of sculpture, hefting the curves in the hollow of [his] hand, running a thumb down the long smooth lines, feeling the coolness, the velvet texture of the stone" (8). Through visual fetishism, Freddie attempts to redefine women as cathected art objects. His libidinal energy is contingent upon his aestheticization of women. Thus, it is important to note that Freddie is not aroused by his wife; rather, it is the illusion of Daphne as *objet d'art* that excites him—further evidence of his dissociation from the women who surround him. The more he invests in a woman artistically, the less human she becomes. As Marina Warner notes in *Monuments and Maidens*, "woman, as the prime subject of art, participates in art's exaltation; but the condition also empties her of her humanity" (238) – a notion that is illustrated by Freddie's narrative reification of Daphne.

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[11]That the glass is a reflecting surface suggests a degree of narcissistic distortion here. In seeing Anna beyond the glass, Freddie likely sees himself as well – an indication of his solipsistic construction of women. We find something similar later in that Freddie sees in the Dutch portrait many of his own qualities and experiences. Directly before he sees the portrait for the first time, he is struck by the sensation of turning towards it: "I turned then, and saw myself turning as I turned" (*Evidence* 78) – a passage, which D'Hoker notes, directly parallels Freddie's telling of the woman's confrontation with her own image (*Visions* 154). According to Freddie, she is "taken by the mere sensation of stopping like this and turning" (*Evidence* 108). Thus, Freddie projects himself onto the image – from her dislike for her mother and her distance from God, to her contempt for the lower classes, the Dutch woman's beliefs reflect his own. As D'Hoker notes, he creates the woman as his mirror image: "By projecting his own thoughts and feelings on the painting, he reduces the woman to his own plans and purposes, effectively destroying her singularity and difference…Freddie has substituted the portrait of the woman for a mirror only ever reflecting himself" ("Portrait" 154). This early passage regarding Anna foreshadows his later involvement with the portrait.

From her "abstracted, mildly dissatisfied air" to her unfocused and often remote expression (*Evidence* 7), Daphne drifts through her husband's narrative like a vaguely-defined ghost. We have no sense of her except as she is mediated through art. Freddie even openly admits that his interest in his wife does not extend beyond the external layer of her appearance: "Will it seem strange, cold, perhaps even inhuman, if I say that I was only interested really in what she was on the surface? " (72). The extent of his detachment is signaled by his inability to stop speaking of his wife in the past tense despite the fact that she is very much alive. "It feels right somehow," (8) he claims, which is suitable since he consistently transforms his living wife into nothing more than a still, silent work of art. Metaphorically speaking, Freddie "kills" her into art.Perhaps most telling is the fact that he envisions Daphne as an "abstracted *maya*" (8) – *maya* being the Sanskrit word for "illusion." In the eyes of her husband, then, Daphne is nothing more than an abstracted illusion, a protean creature whose form shifts according to Freddie's compulsions. What I mean to stress here is that art serves to distance Freddie from what he observes. Rather than concretize reality through mimetic display, art contributes to his illusions which in turn promote an almost pathological detachment in Banville's protagonist.

This idea is particularly interesting if we consider it in light of Adcock's poem. In "Leaving the Tate," the aestheticization of external reality carries with it connotations of ownership. Iconic projection implies subjective construction; thus, the act of looking is creative, and by extension, the viewer is also a possessor of the projected image. Adcock reinforces this idea through her postcard reproductions; representing public works that

have been purchased and subsequently privatized, the postcards are commodified objects in the system of exchange.

Moreover, in *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins notes that looking and desiring are intimately connected. Eyes, for Elkins, are possessive, straining to capture and contain, to understand and objectify. Looking "is a form of the desire to possess or be possessed" (29), he writes. In Adcock's poem, the postcards reflect the narrator's desire to own the artworks themselves, but they also suggest the urge to domesticate and contain the ineffable image. Paintings are, as I have already argued, symbols of distance and detachment. The postcard reproduction can be read as an attempt to bridge this distance, to transform the unapproachable art object into an artefact that can be easily exchanged and subsequently possessed. Through iconic projection, Freddie similarly transforms Dolly, Anna, and Daphne into commodified personal artefacts, and I argue that it is ultimately this process of aesthetic objectification and ownership that allows Freddie to commit both theft and murder.

Banville's protagonist internalizes the world of images to such an extent that he comes to believe that artistic representations are truer than reality. These habitual distortions not only gesture towards Freddie's mental instability – they signal his distorted moral compass as well. His preference for a painted world leads him to, quite literally this time, murder a woman of flesh and blood when she interrupts his theft of a portrait depicting a mysterious woman with gloves. As he explains in the second novel of the trilogy, Freddie finds himself quite suddenly "surprised by love, not for a living woman – [he has] never been able to care much for the living – but for the figure of a

woman in…a painting" (*Ghosts* 83).[12] This conflation of real woman and representation speaks to art's deceptive potential and is worth considering here as it is central to the crime that comes to define Banville's wayward anti-hero. I have already discussed Freddie's application of aesthetic principles to real women; now, however, I will turn to his response to an actual painting. Freddie's beloved *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* is an example of a realistic and deceptive representation. As much as Freddie wants to read the truth in the image, postmodernism will not allow the picture to stand as a coherent representation of reality.

IV: Alluding to Illusions

Jackie Treehorn treats objects like women, man.
– Jeffrey Lebowski

Aesthetic deception has a long and rich history. Perhaps the most famous articulation of the theme is found in Pliny's *Natural History*, written in the first century. His tale of the artistic contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius is a notorious example of *trompe l'oeil* and has been cited by such scholars as Gombrich (*Art* 173), Mitchell (*Picture* 336), and Norman Bryson (34). According to the story, the two artists wish to determine who is the more skilled painter. Zeuxis produces an image so realistic that birds attempt to feed upon his painted grapes. However, when he attempts to draw back the curtain which conceals his rival's masterpiece, he discovers that the curtain itself is painted. The latter

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[12] In the novel, the painting, entitled *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves*, is the product of an anonymous seventeenth-century Dutch master. It depicts a woman, dressed in the style typical of a lady in the 1600s, standing with her hands folded in front of her. According to McMinn, the portrait is based upon an existing anonymous painting which hangs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest: *Portrait of a Woman*. He notes that Freddie's description of the work is taken, almost verbatim, from the museum's guidebook (*Supreme* 108).

painting wins the prize, for where Zeuxis managed to deceive the birds, Parrhasius deceived another artist. In keeping with Robert Burton's claim in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* that "A good picture is *falsa veritas* [fictional truth]" (233), the superior work is the more deceptive of the two.

Such thinking is in line with Leonardo's famed *Treatise on Painting*, where he argues for the superiority of painting over poetry in its ability to produce true representations of the world.[13] Painting, according to Leonardo, is a complex science based upon both mathematical principles and empirical observation. It accordingly produces the most accurate representations of nature. While poetry appeals to the ear, painting appeals to the noblest of the senses: the eye, which "deludes itself less than any of the other senses" (Leonardo *Treatise* 19). However, what becomes clear is that Leonardo paradoxically bases his argument on the fact that painting is better at telling lies. Thus, the truth in painting was determined by its ability to deceive one into thinking that what he or she looks upon is real rather than representation. In the words of Mitchell, painting's "very ability to present 'facts' makes it capable of presenting the most convincing illusions" (*Iconology* 120), so convincing, in fact, that it can deceive both animals and men. As Leonardo notes, "I have seen a picture that deceived a dog because of the likeness to its master" (20).Similarly, "men…fall in love with a painting that does not represent any living woman" (22). Yet, the most potent illusion of all, according to the *Treatise*, is the image's ability to provoke idolatry, for a painted deity will be revered above one merely described in words: "Bows and various prayers will continually be made to the painting. To it will throng many generations from many provinces and from

[13] Leonardo's argument is clearly in keeping with the tradition of the *paragone*, which, as I mention in my introduction, was a distinguishing mark of Renaissance thought.

over the eastern seas, and they will demand help from the painting and not from what is written" (22). The power of the image lies in its ability to inspire worship and love through illusion and deceit. As I have already noted in my introduction, Freedberg expresses similar sentiments. In part, he claims that the power of realistic art lies in its ability to confuse reality and representation, and our willingness to attribute life to what are only life-like images. The viewer is, as Mitchell claims, *taken in* by the image, perceiving it as the reality it is meant to represent (*Picture* 332).

Like Leonardo's idolaters, Freddie responds to the *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* with reverence and adoration. "There is something in the way the woman regards me, the querulous, mute insistence of her eyes, which I can neither escape nor assuage" (*Evidence* 105), he explains. Freddie feels that the painted woman "requires [of him] some great effort, some tremendous feat of scrutiny and attention…It is as if she were asking [him] to let her live" (105). He constructs the gloved lady as both living entity and active agent; thus, Freddie is *taken in*, or *enthralled*, by the grandest of all illusionistic images.[14]Unlike his deadening narrative treatment of Daphne, Freddie's dynamic and detailed ekphrastic portrayal of the painted woman humanizes her. "I try to make up a life for her" (105), he declares, duly devoting a full four pages to a fabricated biography of the woman's life, which includes a record of her intimate thoughts and feelings. He stages the project of what Mitchell calls *ekphrastic hope*: "the transformation of the dead,

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[14]Of relevance here is the fact that Mitchell explains the divide between spectator and spectacle, pictorial truth and illusion, as one that is grounded in the discourse of alterity and power relations. Leonardo's examples pit dogs against their masters and monkeys against men, but ultimately, these distinctions boil down to the difference between cultivated Venetians, who see the illusion as an illusion, and foreigners or social others, who are fooled by the image. Since illusionism "involves power over subjects" (Mitchell, *Picture* 326), it is clear that Freddie allows himself to be enslaved by the deceptive power of the image. Moreover, he internalizes this enthrallment and reapplies it to external reality, enslaving the world to his artistic deceptions.

passive image into a living creature" (*Picture* 167), or what is essentially a grand illusion that will lead him to murder.[15]

What strikes Freddie most about the painted woman is that "in her portrait she has presence, she is unignorably *there*, more real than the majority of her sisters out here in what we call real life" (Banville, *Ghosts* 84). Ironically, he goes on to claim that what he experiences in the conventional painting is "the thing itself, the pure, unmediated essence" (85). Thus, when he comes across the image for the first time, he is dumbfounded by the painted woman's unblinkingly intense black eyes, sensing that he is the one "being scrutinized, with careful, cold attention" (*Evidence* 79). The spectator suddenly becomes the spectacle, and this Lacanian exchange of glances authorizes the presence of both figures, thereby deceiving Freddie into thinking that the canvas has quickened to life.[16]

In contrast, notice Freddie's depiction of Josie Bell, the maid whom he murders to obtain the painting. Where Freddie's impassioned narrative portrayal of the painted woman allows her to step beyond the frame, he exiles Josie to the periphery of the text. His depiction of her is conspicuously hollow. "The maid was watching me," he says at one point; "She had the most extraordinary pale, violet eyes, they seemed transparent, when I looked into them I felt I was seeing clear through her head" (*Evidence* 111). Freddie registers an absence when he looks at Josie, highlighting his failure to *see* real women beyond the painted world of illusions. Realism, in Freddie's world, is a question

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[15]For more on Mitchell's theory of ekphrasis, see his chapter "Ekphrasis and the Other" in *Picture Theory*.

[16]Lacan describes the act of seeing as a reciprocal process. Our gaze is answered by what we see so that we adjust our sense of self by watching how others respond to us. This intersection of gazes is fundamental to the ongoing construction of one's identity. For a more detailed discussion of Lacan's theory of vision, see chapter two of Elkins's *The Object Stares Back*.

of artistic conventionality. In *The Book of Evidence*, art is not a mimetic mirror that reflects the truth to its beholder; rather, it is a distorting lens that, as Adcock's poem suggests, allows one to arrange external reality in accordance with artistic precedents.

Essential to note here is that iconic projection, and its constituent artistic detachment, extends into the apathetic attitude that allows Freddie to murder Josie. This is nowhere more apparent than during the brutal murder itself, where his aesthetic obsession is clearly linked to the loss of his humanity. Trapped in the confines of his car, the kidnapped witness of his crime pleads with her captor. For a brief moment, she begins to become something more than transparent to Freddie. Josie does not passively yield to his attack; rather, she fights back and speaks for the first time in the novel, voicing what Freddie would call her "thereness." "I was filled with a kind of wonder," he explains, "I had never felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time…She was quite ordinary, and yet, somehow, I don't know—somehow radiant" (*Evidence* 113).[17]Surprising even himself, Freddie begins to empathize with his formerly invisible victim. Had she not violently launched herself at him after this "moment of ineffable knowing" (*Ghosts* 86), he would have ended his attack then and there, he claims. Thus, one must ask, as Freddie does in *Ghosts*, "How, with such knowledge, could he have gone ahead and killed?" (86). The answer, I argue, lies in his relationship with art. Freddie is on the verge of apologizing for his behaviour

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[17]Recalling the murder in *Ghosts*, Freddie remembers "a kind of swooning wonderment the moments before he struck the first blow, when he looked into his victim's eyes and knew that he had never known another creature – not mother, wife, child, not anyone – so intimately, so invasively, to such indecent depths, as he did just then this woman whom he was about to bludgeon to death" (85-6). Here, he reflects on his crime as though it were a fictional third-person narrative, introducing the "hypothetical case" (*Ghosts* 83) of a man who steals a captivating portrait from a rich acquaintance and murders a maid. Freddie narrativizes his crime, distancing himself from his own actions.

when his perception is quite suddenly distorted by the intervention of art. His sympathy

for the maid is swept aside by an illusion that occurs at a critical point in the narrative.

Overwhelmed by his situation, a dizzy Freddie steps from the car and takes a

moment to contemplate his surroundings:

> Something seemed to have happened to the sunlight, everywhere I looked
>
> there was an underwater gloom…On one side a hill rose steeply, and on
>
> the other I could see over the tops of pine trees to far-off, rolling downs. It
>
> all looked distinctly improbable. It was like a hastily painted backdrop,
>
> especially that smudged, shimmering distance, and the road winding
>
> innocently away. (*Evidence* 114)

What we find in this instance is a postmodern inversion of the *trompe-l'oeil* tradition,

where the image does not approximate reality; rather, reality simulates art. Freddie's

"reality" is, in other words, unreal. The confusion between the natural and the artificial –

the convergence of spectacle and surveillance – that Freddie experiences here, leads him

to feel "a sense of strangeness" (*Evidence* 119), as though he is displaced and his

environment is illusory. By perceiving his surroundings as dreamlike and implausible,

indeed, as a painted image, Freddie can detach himself from his morbid situation and

therefore overlook his moral barometer.[18]

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[18] Freddie undergoes a similar experience the first time he encounters his beloved painting and resolves to steal it. As he stands in the room in which the portrait hangs, he is suddenly struck by the fact "that the perspective of the scene was wrong somehow. Things seemed not to recede as they should, but to be arrayed before [him]—the furniture, the open window, the lawn and river and far-off mountains—as if they were not being looked at but were themselves looking, intent upon a vanishing point here, inside the room" (*Evidence* 78). Freddie figures the landscape beyond the house as a spectator who gazes into the room. He therefore situates himself within an imaginary picture. Thus, the moment that sets his initial crime in motion is based upon a similar principle; Freddie experiences the world as unreal, and this is precisely what permits him to perform the crime. Such disengagement is, I argue, central to his experience of art in the trilogy.

Moreover, this sudden artistic intrusion reminds him that Josie, the plain and lowly maid, has no place in his world of elevated artistic visions. That he succeeds in detaching himself from reality is evident, for when he crawls back into the car, Josie no longer elicits his sympathy. Rather, she is but a "crumpled thing wedged behind the front seat" from which he averts his eyes (*Evidence* 115). Iconic projection becomes a device that manipulates the senses of the beholder, detaching him from reality and pulling him under the cloak of a painterly illusion. Here we find vision infiltrated and restructured by art, and it is this process of both distancing and defamiliarization that permits murder. Thus, Josie is demoted from a subject of pity to a damaged object that he refuses to see because it does not accord with his artistic conceptions. Freddie's cruel indifference coincides with his artistically-driven perception of the landscape.

We do well to recall Adcock's poem here. By subjectively viewing the world in terms of pictorial compositions, the narrator is mechanized. Adcock writes of the narrator's eyes in terms of cinematic and photographic conventions, and though her mechanization of the pictorial observer is quite different in tone from what we find in *The Book of Evidence*, it nonetheless suggests a link between aesthetic projection, perceptual mediation, and mechanization. Freddie's aesthetic obsession is related to the loss of his humanity; iconic projection allows him to distance himself from his brutal crime in a disturbingly mechanical and apathetic manner.

In the context of his confession, art serves as a justification of the murder. In fact, Freddie self-diagnoses his crime as a failure of the imagination: He says, "This is the worst, the essential sin, I think, the one for which there will be no forgiveness: that I never imagined [Josie] vividly enough, that I never made her be there sufficiently, that I

did not make her live" (*Evidence*, 215). "I killed her," he explains, "because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive" (215). Critics have quibbled over the possible meanings of this claim. Some accept Freddie's interpretation of his crime. For D'Hoker, Freddie can kill Josie because he "did not sufficiently see her, and as a consequence she did not exist for him" ("Portrait" 216). Similarly, Jackson takes this "failure of the imagination" at face value, claiming that "imagination, then, is that extra quality of understanding that can enable us to grasp the essential reality of another human being's unique aliveness" (521-2). In other words, Freddie fails to see Josie as a real individual, and this allows him to dispose of her. However, I argue that what the murderer suggests is something simpler and far more disturbing. In his aberrant mind, where art is truer than life, Josie is paradoxically not alive because she is not a work of art. Since he has not refashioned her into any artistic form, he is capable of killing her.

Though Freddie can imagine his wife as a painted nymph, his mother as a Lautrec, and Anna as a Klimtian lover, he never manages to figure Josie as anything but a mousy looking maid. She is untouched by his artistic idealism – by his unique and maladaptive version of feminine "reality." The reader recognizes the deadening effect of such aesthetic translations; however, in Freddie's eyes, such artistic conversions have the reverse effect – he supposedly breathes life into the woman when he transforms her into an art object. Yet, he finds himself incapable of transforming the plain-faced maid into an artwork. Thus, when Freddie claims that he never imagined Josie vividly enough, ironically what he is saying is that he did not reimagine the girl as an image.

Put simply, Freddie can kill Josie because she is not art.[19]His failure of the

imagination, then, is actually a failure of his perception, and he maintains his delusions to

the end. In this respect, the novel offers an example of art's distorting powers. Having

exposed one mode of representation, however, yet another remains – the power of the

image to deceive and distort compromises Freddie's ability to use words appropriately,

for his supposedly truthful account of his crime is colored by the visual fantasies that

afflict him. His confessional account is therefore unsuccessful, for, like Humbert

Humbert's unapologetic narration, Freddie's allocution does not exonerate him. As the

tool of his delusions, art allows Freddie to evade moral culpability, transforming his book

of evidence into a book of illusions.

V: The Fine Art of Narration

You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style.
–Humbert Humbert

As I have noted in my introduction, images and words have a long history of conflict. In

Museum of Words, Heffernan articulates ekphrasis as a powerfully gendered struggle for

mastery between the word and the image. Ekphrasis, he explains, often dramatizes a

"duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a

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[19]Only when women are aestheticized do they paradoxically come alive for Freddie. In death, Josie becomes available to Freddie's narrativizing impulse; she becomes another mute artistic figure whom he can manipulate. In prison, he pores over newspaper files so as to learn of Josie's "childhood, of her schooldays – pitifully brief – of her family and friends" (*Evidence* 215) – all those things he so easily imagined for the Dutch portrait. When the immediate presence of Josie Bell is replaced by a newspaper photograph of her – a portrait, so to speak – Freddie is able to begin imagining her into existence, declaring "my task now is to bring her back to life" (*Evidence* 215). Thus, he transforms Josie into a dead woman in a portrait who asks him to let her live. Far from atoning for his crime, Freddie merely recasts Josie as a duplicate of the woman with gloves – another figure whom he can narrativize into existence. It is perhaps for this reason that Freddie abandons his beloved painting after killing Josie. Finding that the portrait has quite suddenly lost its charm, he dumps it in a ditch.

female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative striving to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space" (1). He notes that in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is one of the most often cited ekphrastic poems, the sculpted image of the unravished bride of quietness declines to cooperate with the male narrative of desire and consummation (109). Similarly, in Browning's "My Last Duchess," the curatorial Duke seeks to control through rhetoric the meaning of a painting that refuses to obey his word (145). This sexual antagonism is present in Freddie's experience of the Dutch portrait. Indeed, his attempt to narrate a life for the painted figure can be read as an ekphrastic attempt to contain and thereby control the powerful female image.[20]

It might help to consider Heffernan's Medusean model of ekphrasis whereby "the conflict between word and image demonstrably becomes a conflict between male authority and the female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten it" (*Museum* 108). As Mitchell notes, "Medusa is the image that turns the tables on the spectator and turns the spectator into an image" (*Picture* 172). She is therefore often read as a "castrating, phallic woman" (175) who unmans her male beholder through the reversal of the ekphrastic gaze. When Freddie first encounters the portrait, he feels that he is caught in the firm grip of her gaze. He is quite literally trans*fixed* by the Medusean image, and he

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[20]Freddie constructs the circumstances surrounding the painting's conception as a rather formulaic "fantasy of mastery" (Muller 18): within his fictional biography, the painted woman's repeated attempts to assert herself over a male authority figure fail. Resistant to the idea of being painted, she nonetheless sits for the portrait to please her ageing father and is surprised by the male artist's growing sway over her. Though she does her best to defy him, the woman cannot help but be struck by the masculine power of the artist's gaze. "So this is what it is to be known!" she thinks as he lays his eyes upon her, "It is almost indecent" (107). Her metaphorical nakedness extends into a sexually suggestive account of the creative process. As she is painted, the model "seems to pass silently through some barrier," and the artist, as he works, "sighs and groans" (108): "It is the same, day after day, first there is agitation, then the breakthrough, then silence and a kind of softness, as if she were floating away, away, out of herself" (107). The patriarchal authority of the painter is rendered as a penetration of the female body which leaves the woman ecstatically altered. Looking at the finished painting, she sees someone "she does not recognise, and yet knows…She is happy. She feels numbed, hollowed, a walking shell" (108). The experience of being painted is portrayed as a female sexual awakening at the hands of a male 'master'.

responds by narrating the painted woman into existence, thereby using a verbal strategy to repress the visual representation. Freddie, as author and authority, reinscribes his role as the active seeing subject. By claiming that the painted woman compels him to "let her live," he can transform himself from castrated beholder to heroic subject and construct his theft as a mix of "knight errantry and rescue and reward" (*Evidence* 91).

The Book of Evidence, then, illustrates and incarnates the power struggle between words and images. However, where one might be tempted to read the novel as an ekphrastic duel that ends in favour of the word over illusionistic images, this is not the case. If images are unstable in the novel, so too are words. Freddie subverts the stability of his own first-person narrative throughout and, in doing so, questions the idea of "evidence" which the novel claims to uphold. For instance, he begins his text by inscribing the authority of the courtroom: "My Lord, when you ask me to tell the court in my own words, this is what I shall say" (*Evidence* 3). What follows is his written defence – ostensibly Freddie's book of evidence. However, he invokes the institutional authority of the legal system only to subvert it shortly thereafter, contaminating any truth claims that he may make. In response to the legal oath "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?," Freddie replies, "Don't make me laugh" (*Evidence* 7).

Such narrative subversion is woven throughout the text. Most often, Freddie draws the reader's attention to the constructed nature of his story. "For God's sake," he complains at one point, "how many of these grotesques am I expected to invent?" (92). His legal counsel, Maolseachlainn MacGiolla, and his interrogators, Barker and Kickham, seem like a pastiche of parody and stereotype rather than real figures, and Freddie himself claims that his testimony is little more than an "official fiction" (220).

Indeed, his final lines of the novel are a tacit admission of his account's ambiguous nature. When the Inspector asks Freddie how much of his written defence is true, Freddie coyly replies, "All of it. None of it. Only the shame" (220). Thus, the idea of "evidence" is both underlined and undermined in the novel. Freddie contests the status of any overarching narrative authority and, in doing so, engages in a semantic decentering of his written world. Indeed, the novel seems to suggest that we can only know "reality" as it is constructed or produced.

Though he may respond to the power of the image by reverting to narration, as he does with the Dutch portrait, Freddie implicitly questions the narrative's ability to function as a totalizing system of explanation, much as we saw in Barnes's text. Thus, while art is not the composed and self-sufficient medium that Freddie wants it to be, neither is narrative. Faced with the threat of the image, he reverts to the comfort of words; however, time and time again, the reader sees that words offer only further confusion. In *Ghosts,* Freddie contemplates the difficulty of expressing oneself through language:

> The most elementary bit of speech was a cacophony. To choose one word was to exclude countless others, they thronged out there in the darkness, heaving and humming. When I tried to mean one thing the buzz of a myriad other possible meanings mocked my efforts. Everything I said was out of context, necessarily, and every plunge I made into speech inevitably ended in a bellyflop. (27)

Language, he claims, is "a hopeless glossolalia" (27).

While Banville may highlight the contest between words and images, he ultimately emphasizes the discontinuity and disruption of meaning inherent to both mediums. Neither can offer a totalizing vision of the truth, and Freddie's sustained attempt to ground his search for selfhood in these unstable mediums results in an identity that is itself distorted and illusive – something that both *Ghosts* and *Athena* continue to explore. Remarkably, however, Freddie maintains his faith in pictures – a sure sign of his delusion. Though ready to admit to the limitations of language – in *Ghosts* he cries, "what a treacherously ambiguous medium our language can be" (79) – the murderer nonetheless holds on to his idealized version of visual art.

Indeed, in *Ghosts*, Freddie overtly experiments with his narrative power. In many ways, the book can be read as an exercise in the art of narrative mastery – but it is an exercise prompted by his narrative failure in the trilogy's first book. Thus, the narrative of *Ghosts*is inflected by Freddie's self-conscious awareness of his own narrative limitations. In response to this knowledge, Freddie clings all the more to what he sees as the stability of art in *Ghosts*. Here, art is his refuge from an unstable narrative world as well as from his guilt as a murderer. The second novel of the trilogy traces his hopeful attempt to achieve absolution through images. Pictures become a central part of Freddie's attempted rehabilitation; however, as *The Book of Evidence* has already demonstrated, images have the capacity to deceive their beholders. How, then, can Freddie fulfill his project through art?

PART TWO: *Ghosts*: Art as Absolution

I: Ghostly Identities and Unstable Representation

Shall I project a world?
– The Crying of Lot 49

In *Sartor Resartus*, Thomas Carlyle comments on Samuel Johnson's famed desire to see a ghost. So great was this wish that Johnson would himself haunt church-vaults and tap on coffins with the hope of satisfying the longed-for vision. "Foolish Doctor," Carlyle proclaims, "did he never so much as look into Himself?" (162). Carlyle suggests that Johnson needed only look in a mirror to discover a ghost, for "Are we not Spirits," he asks, "that are shaped into a body, into an Appearance; and that fade-away again into air and Invisibility? This is no metaphor, it is a simple scientific *fact*: we start out of Nothingness, take figure, and are Apparitions" (162). For Carlyle then, we are all ghosts. "There are nigh a thousand-million walking the Earth openly at noontide," he says (162). This construction of humanity as little more than dust and shadow is something that Banville appears to have borrowed from Carlyle, whether consciously or no. The insubstantiality of the postmodern subject is an idea that infuses his second novel of the Frames Trilogy, suitably entitled *Ghosts*.

Here, Banville once again turns his attention towards the epistemological uncertainty of art and identity; however, he engages with the topic more intensely here, introducing the issues of fakery and forgery, which are to be the focus of the final book of his trilogy, *Athena*. *Ghosts* is itself a puzzle of a novel. It has the quality of magic-realism but with a more subdued sense of the fantastical. Its emphasis on the imagination, dreams, and spectrality results in a human reality that is labyrinthine,

ambiguous, and oddly unreal. Consequently, it is often difficult to tell whether characters are awake or asleep and dreaming.

Numerous critics, such as Muller and Jackson, have commented upon the inability to distinguish what is real from what is imagined in the novel. Jackson claims, for instance, that "the crossover between painted and real is a central quality of the 'reality' of the world Banville has created" in *Ghosts*(524). This uncertainty is central to the author's exploration of authenticity and representation, as evidenced by the novel's equally ambiguous title. Since *Ghosts* traces Freddie's attempt to imagine into existence the woman he killed in *The Book of Evidence*, the title can refer to his project of resurrecting the dead Josie Bell. Suitably, her ghost lingers on the periphery of the novel, but to Freddie, she is "palpably present" (78), appearing in his nightmares of "flesh, burst bone, the slow, secret, blue-black ooze" (29), a dead soul "yearning to speak" (*Ghosts* 38). However, as the title of the book suggests, Josie is not the only ghost. Banville reaches beyond the conventional meaning of the term "ghost" to imply an alternate meaning – the ghost as "one who secretly does artistic or literary work for another person, taking the credit" (OED).

In *Ghosts*, we meet a post-prison Freddie, now an expert on seventeenth-century Dutch painting, having spent his decade-long jail term studying the field. Living on an island off the west coast of Ireland, he is an amanuensis to famed art historian Professor Silas Kreutznaer, whose magnum opus on the fictional painter Jean Vaublin has been taken over by Freddie. Thus, Freddie is himself one of the novel's literal ghosts, but Banville takes pains to emphasize his symbolic spectrality as well. In this, he is repeatedly allied to Josie, the preeminent and most obvious ghost of the novel. In *The*

Book of Evidence, Josie is the emblematic figure in the doorway, a servant who silently shadows the movements of her employers and their guests. In *Ghosts*, Freddie occupies this role: "I am only a half-figure, a figure half-seen, standing in the doorway," he says (40), and he has taken over the menial tasks of the home in which he lives. But his ghost-like presence is elsewhere made more apparent. For instance, when one of the novel's minor characters spies a ghost in the garden, she discovers that it is, of course, only Freddie. This association is substantiated by the fact that his name is never mentioned in the novel. His identity is dislocated; Freddie haunts the pages of the text, a shadow of his former self, and he accordingly describes himself as insubstantial, weightless, and transparent. "I seemed hardly to be here at all. This is how I imagine ghosts existing," he claims (37). But he is only one of many. The novel is peopled with elusive Carlylian identities, and in a world of symbolic ghosts, it becomes difficult to determine who is real and who is a product of Freddie's narrative imagination.

In this respect, we can consider the novel a meditation on the practice of narrative construction. Readers are forced to consider the 'authenticity' of the text they read. We know from *TheBook of Evidence*that Freddie is not the most reliable of narrators, particularly since he is given to distortion and ends the novel by undermining any truth claims that he may have made. This destabilizing of truth is very much in keeping with Banville's exploration of art in *Ghosts*. Here, both verbal and visual modes of representation are consistently undermined, forcing the reader to question the relationship between representation and mimesis. Filled with fictitious inventions and deceptive counterfeits of both a literary and visual kind, *Ghosts* highlights the unstable status of art.

The first section of the novel traces the arrival of seven shipwrecked pleasure-seekers to the island. Waiting for the tide to rise, they stay with Licht, the Professor's former assistant in whose home both the Professor and Freddie now reside. This section is clearly modeled on literary shipwreck narratives and therefore highlights the themes of displacement and disorientation. Such works as *The Odyssey*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and *Treasure Island* provide Banville with a wealth of allusions. Most important, however, is *The Tempest*, which parallels the dream-like quality of the novel's first section. Quite suitably, Shakespeare's text revolves around the restructuring of perception; the tempest is an illusion created to restore the social order by opening the eyes of individuals who are blinded by their bias. As Robert Langbaum writes in his introduction to the play, "recognized objects are transformed through the transformed eyes of the beholders" (xxxiii). In *The Tempest*, then, it is through illusion that characters come to understand reality.

That Banville should place particular focus on this intertext signals the importance of illusion, art, and reality in his novel, and the numerous parallels are telling. As Langbaum claims, in *The Tempest*, art is allied to the experience of enchantment:

> The speech in which Prospero breaks his magic wand is not so much Shakespeare's farewell to his art as it is his comment on the relation between art and life. For in breaking his wand and taking himself and the others back to Italy, Prospero seems to be saying that the enchanted island is no abiding place, but rather a place through which we pass in order to renew and strengthen our sense of reality. (xxxiii-iv)

Freddie's "penitential isle" functions in a similar manner (*Ghosts* 22). It is a transitional space meant to ease him back into the world beyond the prison walls, but in its isolation, it is also an enchanted space ideally suited to his study of painting. The island's barrenness presents itself to him like a blank canvas so that, like Prospero, Freddie can construct a life as illusory as a magically conjured masque.

Imhof claims, "If *The Book of Evidence* is, to a large extent, about the world as perceived by the artistic imagination, then *Ghosts* is about the world as *created* by the artistic imagination" (192). With this in mind, it comes as no surprise that Freddie should fashion himself after Prospero – the prime imaginative and creative force of Shakespeare's play. Just as Prospero conjures the transformative illusions of *The Tempest*, so Freddie, as the narrator, can summon characters into his text. The novel opens, for instance, by drawing the reader's attention directly to the constructed nature of the narrative. "A little world is coming into being," the narrator says as he begins to delineate for the reader this very world. "Who speaks?" he asks: "I do. Little god" (*Ghosts* 4). He is conscious of his creative power; the narrative acts as a god-like exercise of inscription, and Freddie possessively refers to the castaways as "my foundered creatures" (5) and proudly proclaims, "I can imagine anything" (31).[21]

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[21]In light of the creative power of the narrator, Imhof notes the importance of Banville's epilogue – a quote from Wallace Stevens's poem "Large Red Man Reading" – "There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases." The poem, Imhof claims, is about the poetic imagination. In it, an earthly giant reads a great tabulae – "the poem of life," "the outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law" – that traces the beautiful, banal, and even ugly features of life. Now cherishing these traces of life, happy to step "barefoot into reality," ghosts eagerly listen to the giant's words, for these words have the ability to vividly reconstitute for them the lost experiences of life.

The poem is in praise of poesis and its power to resurrect life. The effect of Banville's incorporation of Stevens's poem is multifold. Firstly, on its own the quotation suggests that the novel is a practice in Freddie's atonement. Thus, amongst the ghosts who return to earth is Josie, who will hear Freddie's attempted narrative repentance. In the context of the entire poem, what is implied is that Freddie can grant the ghost a life of sorts, for it is through poesis that life "took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are/ And spoke the feelings for them, which was what they had lacked." Thus, he can fulfill the goal of *The Book of Evidence*. However, this also confirms the power relations inherent to the

As a result, it is not entirely clear whether or not Freddie imagines into being the island castaways. This confusion is magnified by the fact that each figure corresponds to the characters of Vaublin's masterpiece, *Le monde d'or* – the central painting of the novel. Imhof was the first to recognize the painting as a fictional conflation of eighteenth century French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau's *L'embarquement pour Cythere* and *Gilles* (204). That Banville should model Vaublin on Watteau is fitting, for the artist's work is characterized by its dreamlike and theatrical quality, particularly his famed *fêtes galantes*, in which he presents a romantic and idealized vision "of life divorced from all hardship and triviality, a dream life," where costumed ladies and gentlemen merrymake in fanciful pastoral settings(Gombrich, *Story* 343). As such, Watteau provides Banville with the perfect opportunity to explore the boundary between reality and fiction, for as Imhof says, in the artist's paintings, "a transient dream masquerades as permanent reality…Everything is pure play, a product of fantasy and the imagination" (200). Banville, of course, extends this quality by transforming Watteau into a fictional creation of his own. What the author achieves in *Ghosts* is a narrative version of a *fête galante*, "drawing on the genre's mythical symbolism and its love of theatrical artifice" (McMinn,*Supreme* 118).

Freddie clearly fashions his narrative world on the principles of this tradition. The question, then, is whether or not the characters of his narrative are imaginary projections inspired by Watteau/Vaublin or real figures who are simply read through art. He describes them at one point as "real and yet mere fancy" (*Ghosts* 221), forcing the

first novel of the trilogy – Freddie wields narrative control; therefore, he is the one to grant the dead woman a life. Thus, he transforms himself into both a taker and giver of life. This is in keeping with his vision of god-like narrative power. But, Banville is not willing to concede control to his hapless killer. Freddie's goals are consistently thwarted by the novel itself.

reader to wonder whether the entire novel might be a highly complicated exercise in iconic projection. As D'Hoker summarizes, "either Freddie has reinterpreted his visitors along the lines of the painting, as it were caging them in art, or he has imaginatively read the figures in the painting into real life, following his imaginative reading of 'Portrait of a woman with gloves'" (*Visions* 161).

* * *

This ambiguity between what is real and painted accomplishes a heightened awareness that representation, in its many forms, is inherently unstable. *Ghosts* is very much a postmodern work in that it actively seeks to destabilize any certainties that the reader might have. Banville does not provide his readers with a homogenous or monolithic understanding of the narrative; rather, he substitutes a plurality of near-truths for the reassuring stability of the real or authentic. Freddie's labyrinthine narrative undermines any claims to truthfulness, and while this pattern is in keeping with *The Book of Evidence*, there is an interesting development of the theme in *Ghosts*. In the first novel, while Freddie often confused reality for painting and vice versa, the reader at least recognized this confusion as a symptom of his over-investment with art and was therefore aware of the boundary between reality and representation. *Ghosts*, however, eradicates this boundary and thus offers an experience that destabilizes the reader's own encounter with the narrative. In other words, the reader shares Freddie's confusion; thus, *Ghosts* presents a challenge to the reader's enterprise of distinguishing the real from the

hallucinatory. By forcinga reevaluation of the fictive world, Banville makes his readers relinquish epistemological certainty.

It is fitting that such a work should engage with the discourse of art, for Banville's deliberately ambiguous narrative is shaped by the evasions, deflections, and indeterminacies of visual art. In *Ghosts*, verbal and visual ambiguity are intertwined – a fact that is especially interesting if we recall Mitchell's claim that a "pictorial turn" has displaced the "linguistic turn" that had previously dominated cultural studies. Mitchell notes that this shift is often figured as a power struggle, with visuality threatening and endangering the position of the word. Heffernan makes a similar argument in *Museum of Words* where he articulates ekphrasis as a "contest between rival modes of representation" (6). Ekphrasis, then, is grounded on the antagonism between verbal and visual representation. Heffernan provides a series of illustrative examples, from the works of Homer, Virgil, and Dante, where we find that the image is largely dominated by the authority of the word, to instances in the works of Ovid, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, where the image overturns the preeminence of the word. In Banville, however, the verbal and the visual do not appear to be locked in a struggle for dominance; rather, they are exposed as mutually unstable and equally limited. *Ghosts* juxtaposes the verbal and the visual, not to demonstrate the superiority of one over the other, but rather to highlight the restrictions of both. Thus, Banville resists doing what many writers of the past have done: that is, praise the power of the image only to enfold it within the authority of the word. What *Ghosts* offers is a far more equalized vision of the two representational modes. In this, the novel can be considered a postmodern articulation of epistemological instability. Banville enacts a crisis of legitimation whereby it becomes impossible to

locate the truth in either medium. Everything is filtered through Freddie's mediating

consciousness, and thus everything is equally unstable.

II: Absolution by Stilling the World

Let me try to paint the scene, paint it as it was and not as it seemed.
– Freddie Montgomery

Freddie's tendency towards iconic projection meets with renewed strength and intensity

in *Ghosts*. In particular, Freddie's obsession with Vaublin consistently informs his iconic

projections in this novel. For instance, he likens the island to a Vaublin, "a background

to one of his celebrated *pélerinages* or a delicate *fête galante*" (30). Even the island light

is consistent with Vaublin's works – always on the brink of an encroaching darkness –

lending the island an unreal, even liminal quality. As Flora notes at one point, "The day

around her felt like night…a kind of luminous night" (50). Felix, similarly commenting

on the trembling light of dusk, says to the Professor, "I am reminded of my favourite

painter, do you know the one I mean?" (52). The island effectively becomes a painting.

In light of this fact, it is important to note that Freddie's descriptions of Vaublin's

work often focus on the static nature of the art object. Of *Le monde d'or*, he says, "what

happens does not matter; the moment is all," for its figures are "fixed forever in a

luminous, unending instant" (231). In particular, he notes the painting's

> stillness; though the scene moves there is no movement; in this twilit glade
>
> the helpless tumbling of things through time has come to a halt: what other
>
> painter before or after has managed to illustrate this fundamental paradox
>
> of art with such profound yet playful artistry?(*Ghosts* 95)

Freddie's narrative world is pervaded by a similar stillness – a stillness that is traditionally characteristic of art objects. Indeed, the static nature of his narrative lends it a painterly quality. Events appear to unfold not in real time, but as a series of snapshots placed in succession. Thus, Banville toys with the traditional distinction between what Lessing famously called the spatial and temporal arts. Recall Lessing's claim that painting is a temporally static medium that is limited to conveying but a single moment in time, where poetry is a narrative art capable of portraying a temporal unfolding of events. Clearly favoring poetry over painting, Lessing criticizes painting's inability to include what Wendy Steiner calls "temporally or logically distinct moments" (*Pictures* 7). For Lessing, these iconic limitations naturally suggest the superiority of the verbal medium, and thus painting and poetry are forever divided by their abilities to treat time and, subsequently, narrative.

Today, Lessing's intensely oppositional stance might seem grossly simplistic, for the line that demarcates the boundary between the verbal and visual medium is consistently under attack. In her first chapter of *Pictures of Romance*, for instance, Wendy Steiner explores the principle of pictorial narrative, noting that the image can indeed achieve narrativity through such techniques as the arrangement of events as stages along a path, which was quite common with medieval art, "symbolism, dramatic poses, allusions to literature, titles" (2). Though the Renaissance prohibition against multi-episodic narrative in painting "controlled Western high art until very recently" (26), Steiner notes that the exceptions, such as Poussin's *Israelites Gathering Manna in the*

Desert and Watteau's *Meeting in a Park*, proved that narrativity could in fact be pictorially attained, however uncommon the practice.[22]

What is of particular importance to me, however, is that Steiner not only explores the narrative potential of the visual medium, but also the verbal medium's ability to attain the stillness normally associated with pictorial art. In writing of the literary romance, for instance, Steiner notes that it

> perennially depicts love through stopped-action scenes: the suspension of the heroine either in prison or in the more literal states of immobility as in *Snow White*; the topos of love at first sight as a moment apart from time in which the two viewers are united by pure vision; or the moment of emotional or sexual transport treated as time outside time…These are romance commonplaces, as are lovers who ascend to the eternal poise of visual art. (*Pictures* 3)

That Banville achieves a similar quality in *Ghosts* is significant. The novel presents us with an atmosphere that is always on the verge of becoming stilled. Consequently, the reader encounters a series of what essentially amount to frozen images. The Professor's house, for instance, is haunted by a sense of stasis, as though time is arrested, waiting for something to happen. "Everything is stalled," Freddie explains, "as though one day long ago something had happened and the people living here had all at once dropped what they

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[22]One could perhaps include Marcel Duchamp's controversial 1912 painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* here as well. While the painting was a product of Duchamp's attempt to grapple with the problem of depicting three-dimensional movement, its stroboscopic effect resembles something of an experiment in narrativity, for what the observer sees is not a single frozen moment, but a series of moments placed in succession. Hence, Duchamp achieves both a sense of movement and of narration. In light of this, it is fitting that the work was modeled on Muybridge's early experiments in film – a medium noted for its pictorial narrativity. And what, of course, is film, but a series of still images placed in succession? It is in this medium that the static image achieves the illusion of life.

were doing and rushed outside, never to return. Still the room waits, poised to start up

again, like a stopped clock" (*Ghosts* 53). The room, then, is allied to a painting that is

waiting to come alive. This is Lessing's "pregnant moment" – what Wendy Steiner

explains as the mode of representing "temporal events as action stopped at its climactic

moment, or at a moment that implies but does not show what preceded and what follows

it" (*Pictures* 13). Freddie's thoughts are colored by a "sense of expectancy" – the sense

that "nothing happens, nothing will happen, yet everything is poised, waiting" (*Ghosts*

40). He has constructed reality in such a way so that he seems to live within a painting.

It is in this technique that I locate art's ability to offer Freddie his longed-for

salvation, for it presents him with a promising possibility: if he can still life into a

painting, then he can arrest time and consequently frustrate death. As Freddie asks, "is it

not possible that somewhere in this crystalline multiplicity of worlds, in this infinite

mirrored regression, there is a place where the dead have not died, and I am innocent?"

(*Ghosts* 173). Art, it seems, has the potential to offer him this world.Contemplating the

possibility of being forgiven, he at one point wonders, "What form would such atonement

take that would turn back time and bring the dead to life? None. None possible, not in

the real world" (68). Recognizing that he cannot achieve absolution in the real world, he

turns instead to the fantasy world of representation. Thus, we see here the ethical

imperative of Freddie's iconic projection. As I have already argued, in *The Book of*

Evidence iconic projection allows Freddie to murder Josie; in *Ghosts*, it is a practice that

potentially allows him to escape moral responsibility.

Wendy Steiner's comments regarding the stasis of external reality bear some

resemblance to the rhetoric surrounding the religious discourse of atonement. To still the

world into an image is to achieve the quiet contemplative atmosphere required of the penitent. After all, contrition requires meditation and reflection – the kind of stillness implied by the static art object. Freddie's attempt to still the world into art can therefore be read as a perverse instance of the penitent's image-assisted meditation. As Freedberg points out, "from the earliest Christian writing on meditation to the *Spiritual Exercises* of Saint Ignatius Loyola, the act of meditation is conceived of (and publicized) in terms of a specific parallel with actual image making. He who meditates must depict mental scenes in the same way the painter depicts real ones" (162). It would appear that Freddie extends this practice to the external world as a means of creating a space where absolution is possible.

The principal concern underwriting *Ghosts* is Freddie's desire for absolution. Here, he attempts "a repair job on what remains of [his] rotten soul" (100) by addressing his "unfinished business" (195). As he points out in *The Book of Evidence,* this business consists of reconstituting Josie Bell. He explains that "Prison, punishment, paying his debt to society, all that was nothing, was merely how he would pass the time while he got on with the real business of atonement, which was nothing less than the restitution of a life" (*Ghosts* 86) – a restitution that can only be achieved through art. Though he constructs his release from prison and his island exile as a baptismal rebirth, Freddie nonetheless recognizes the impossibility of achieving absolution in the real world. Dropping his former belongings into a river as a "ceremonial gesture" (153), Freddie claims that he feels "like a blessing had been bestowed on me here, in this moment by the river. Oh, not a real blessing, of course; the paraclete will never extend forgiving wings

above my bowed head. No, this was a benison from somewhere else" (*Ghosts* 155).

Believing salvation to be beyond him in the real world, he must resort to art.

What Freddie seeks to establish in real life is the comforting predictability of the

artwork. Much like the speaker of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he longs for

permanence in an ever-changing world. The 'world-as-art' offers a safe-zone isolated

from an uncertain and unforeseeable reality. On one level, fixing the world would allow

his aesthetic ideals to persist. While painted women do not change, real ones disappoint

over time. Human passions fade, leaving behind all but, as Keats puts it, "a burning

forehead, and a parching tongue" (30). Thus, Daphne abandons Freddie, Anna ages into

a wrinkled spinster with dyed hair (*Evidence* 86), and his mother, with "her bunions and

her big yellow toenails" (*Ghosts* 59), comes to disgust him. Images, on the other hand,

are decidedly unchanging; the depicted lover will forever love, and his maid will forever

be fair.

In *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert notices a similar quality in what might be termed the

'world-as-narrative,' for he articulates the comfort of conventional narrative patterns. In

reading a literary work, for instance, one knows that the narrative is fixed: "Y will never

commit murder. Under no circumstances can Z ever betray us" (*Lolita* 265). In *Ghosts*,

the 'world-as-art' offers a similar satisfaction, for it too is fixed and thus predictable. On

a deeper level, however, fixing the world allows Freddie to gain some semblance of

control over the categories of life and death. Freddie makes this connection clear when

he ascribes to Vaublin's painted figures a kind of immortality. They are "still and

speechless, not dead and yet not alive either, waiting perhaps to be brought to some kind

of life" (*Ghosts* 82). Later, he says of the depicted figures, "These creatures will not die,

even if they have never lived…It is the very stillness of their world that permits them to endure; if they stir they will die, will crumble into dust and leave nothing behind" (95).

As a murderer struggling to reconstitute the woman he killed, Freddie has a vested interest in stilling the world, for, in doing so, he creates a deathless realm where he is potentially innocent. Thus, he attempts to replicate in the real world what he calls the fundamental paradox of art: depicted figures are "animate yet frozen in immobility" (95); they are neither living nor dead. Rather, out of time, they occupy some medial state. In keeping with this notion, Freddie claims early on that he is not concerned with the dead or the living; instead, it is "something in between; some third thing" (29) that interests him. Indeed, the novel suggests that this third thing is the posthumous existence of ghosts. Thus, in a world populated by ghosts, he can imagine himself innocent – Josie is not dead, but a ghost, not unlike Freddie himself and all of the other transient and ephemeral beings of his narrative world.

It is essential to stress, then, that what Freddie seems to seek is not the standard absolution for his crime. Rather, he would like to wipe away the memory of his crime entirely. Thus, he seeks innocence rather than forgiveness. Freddie would like to think "that none of it had happened, that I am what I might have been, an innocent man…the dream persists, suppressed but always there, that somehow by some miraculous effort of the heart what was done could be undone" (*Ghosts* 68). Such innocence, of course, is unattainable in reality; however, he hopes that within the realm of representation, where he can assume the cloak of a god-like creator, Freddie can indeed be innocent. Thus, in his imaginings, he sees himself as a "cleansed new creature streaming up out of [himself] like a proselyte rising drenched from the baptismal river amid glad cries" (*Ghosts* 68-9).

III: Salvation Through the Woman as Art

Art is a lie to make us realize the truth.
– F is for Fake

In her work, Wendy Steiner identifies the intersection between the literary romance tradition and the transcendent art object. This connection carries interesting implications for *Ghosts*, for it suggests that Freddie's narrative might be approached through the romance tradition. I have already noted that Wendy Steiner associates the literary romance with "stopped-action scenes" and "the eternal poise of visual art" (*Pictures* 3). The genre, she says, often depicts conventional moments of stillness and suspension when time appears to stop and lovers are frozen in a moment of passionate transport. Reading Banville's novel through this idea, what we find is a satire of the traditional literary romance. Much like the "Nausicaa" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses*, *Ghosts* satirizes the sentimental romance convention of the male lover who observes and is enthralled by his beloved. In Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes," for instance, the hero Porphyro conceals himself in Madeline's room so that he may "gaze and worship all unseen" (80). In Joyce, however, we find a cruder variation of this theme. Bloom, ironically cast in the role of the dark romantic stranger, masturbates as Gerty MacDowell exposes herself to him on the strand. The disjunction between Gerty's sentimental musings and Bloom's purely physical response to her deflates the heroic ideals of the episode. Thus, Joyce invokes the sentimental tradition only to overthrow it. Banville does something comparable in *Ghosts*.

Like Bloom, Montgomery is a fallible figure, particularly when it comes to the opposite sex. However, like Gerty, he is also susceptible to the profound influence of images. As Suzette A. Henke argues in *Joyce's Moraculous Sindbook: A Study of*

"Ulysses," Gerty is reared on "sentimental journalese" (155); she is a product of "the fashion pages of the *Lady's Pictorial*, from the pulp fiction of the 'Princess novelette,' and from the advertising columns of the *Irish Times*" (153-4). Thus, Joyce's portrait of her "provides an incisive criticism of a media-controlled self-image" (Henke 155). As *The Book of Evidence* demonstrates, Montgomery is similarly reared on images, his perception of women having been informed by paintings of them. Gerty's compulsion to fictionalize her encounter with Bloom then, is much like Freddie's iconic projection. The truth is obfuscated by images, and while Henke claims that commercial art has the power to deceive, manipulate, and paralyze (156), the same can be said for Freddie's more austere and 'highbrow' images.

Wendy Steiner notes that in romances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the "opposition of stasis and flow becomes associated as well with the enthrallment versus the empowerment of the viewer" (*Pictures* 3). In *Ghosts*, Freddie wavers between these two states; he is variously an enthralled observer of Flora, one of the island castaways, and an empowered narrator who writes her into existence. Suitably, his description of her recalls those of Daphne and Anna in *The Book of Evidence*. She is "always poised" (*Ghosts* 94), and with her "remote stare" (93), Flora is more art object than fully fleshed character. Freddie fictionalizes her as a tragic figure of romance, his "songless Melisande" (94).[23] Indeed, Freddie confesses at one point to his desire to turn Flora into "*das Ewig-Weibliche*" (*Ghosts* 70) – the Eternal Feminine – so that he can re-enact his salvation through this symbolic woman. While McMinn claims that Flora

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[23] She is called so after the mysterious woodland creature of Debussy's opera. Freddie persists in romanticizing the women of his life; just as Daphne was his lady of the laurels in *The Book of Evidence*, now Flora occupies a similar position.

reminds Freddie of "his need to make what he terms '*proper restitution*', to find some way of reimagining Josie Bell" (*Supreme* 119), it is evident that Freddie simply reproduces the mistakes of *The Book of Evidence*. *Ghosts* traces his failed attempt to imagine yet another woman into existence.

For Freddie, Flora is "innocent, pure clay awaiting a grizzled Pygmalion to inspire it with life" (*Ghosts* 70). By invoking the classical myth of the sculptor who falls in love with a statue of his own making, Freddie positions Flora as a passive figure needing to be molded into existence by an expert male hand. She is a work-in-progress, for Freddie claims to be "assembling her gradually, with great care, starting at the extremities" (94). He creates her even as he looks at her. Indeed, as a figure of his narration, her life is circumscribed by his words. Accordingly, Freddie expresses the desire to "conjugate in her the verb of being" (70) – an act of creation that is extended into the symbol of gardening in the novel.

Having taken to working the soil so as to regain touch with some "authentic, fundamental things" (*Ghosts* 97), Freddie envisions gardening as evidence of his creative power, much like his narrative control. He entertains the solipsistic idea that the stunted runts cling to life due to his ministrations. "My presence gives them heart somehow, and makes them live," he explains (98). The parallel with his view of women is obvious. Flora (!) is little more than a bud in his garden – a flower that requires his nurturing hand to live. Thus, his claim that gardening offers him access to the authentic is quite typically undercut by his counterfeit construction of Flora.

For all of his narrative and horticultural control, Freddie is a fallible figure. Though he might boldly claim, "I am the pretext of things…Without me there would be

no moment, no separable event, only the brute, blind drift of things" (*Ghosts* 40), his

perceived power is not absolute. Much to his own shock, Freddie's narrative divinity

falters when the characters begin to take on lives of their own. Just as Josie Bell defiantly

asserts herself in *The Book of Evidence*, so too does Flora. Without warning, Freddie's

voiceless Melisande violates his expectations and authority by speaking. "It has changed

everything, has transfigured everything" (*Ghosts* 145), he laments, for the challenge to

his narrative authority crushes his idealized visions, and to a certain extent, his faith in

art's power to absolve him.

In *The Object Stares Back*, Elkins recalls Stendhal's *On Love*, the tale of a lover

who forms a misguided idea of the woman he loves. He builds her out of moments that

are mis-seen and misunderstood, and comes to worship and idolize this fabricated image

until the "insistent presence of the woman herself shatters the crystal and the love affair is

ruined" (Elkins,*Object* 30). The story effectively illustrates Stendhal's belief that a

heterosexual love affair consists of a triangle of relations between the man, the woman,

and the idealized version of the woman created by the man. *Ghosts* charts Freddie's

persistently flawed perception of the women he desires.

According to Freddie, when Flora begins to speak, he finally sees her as a unified

being. "She was simply there," he says, "an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of

adjectives but pure and present noun…No longer Our Lady of the Enigmas, but a girl,

just a girl" (*Ghosts* 147). Not only do his words denote his profane disappointment with

reality, they also gesture towards his narrative project. In becoming noun-like, Flora has

moved beyond the limitations of the merely qualifying adjective. She is more

substantive. Freddie claims that as she speaks, he feels things "detaching themselves

from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining" (*Ghosts* 147). McMinn concludes that Freddie sees Flora with an "intimacy and immediacy which were previously lacking in him…he sees and embraces the sensuous reality of a woman" (*Supreme*119-30). That Freddie *embraces* the reality of Flora is simply untrue. He is nothing if not reluctant. Exposed to the coarse trivialities of her conversation, he is overcome by nausea and a desire to yell "stop! You're ruining everything" (*Ghosts* 239). Thus, the reality of a mere girl who is greedy, dissatisfied, and scheming gives way to stubborn idealization. "That is not what I would let myself see," a desperate Freddie says, "*Melisande, Melisande!*" (239).Thus, what McMinn figures as a moment of revelation in the book of Freddie, is in fact a persistent denial, and in keeping with this, Freddie himself recognizes, "I have achieved nothing, nothing. I am what I always was" (*Ghosts* 236).[24]

Freddie's statement is, in fact, quite true, as his actions here simply reflect those of *The Book of Evidence*, where upon suddenly *seeing* Josie, Freddie kills her anyway. There, the moment of recognition is followed by a sentence brutal in its bluntness: "It's not easy to wield a hammer in a motor car," Freddie writes (*Evidence* 113). The parallels between the two books undercut McMinn's claims. In particular, Freddie responds to Flora's speech with a meditation on her physical vulnerability made all the more disturbing by his violent history: "I wanted now to take this girl in my arms, to lift her up

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[24]In light of a reality that threatens to collapse his idealism, he relapses into the comfortable containment of both narrative and art. Thus, Flora is transformed into a "damsel under lock and key" and Freddie is "the hero in a tale of chivalry commanded to perform a task of rescue and reconciliation" (240). This echoes his construction of his theft in *The Book of Evidence* as a knight's rescue mission, in which case the painting would occupy the position of distressed damsel – a telling parallel.

and hold her hotly to my heart, to feel the frail bones of her ankles and her wrists, to cup the delicate egg of her skull in my palm, to smell her blood and taste the silvery ichor of her sweat" (*Ghosts* 238). Even more unsettling is what follows: "This is what the poor giant in the old tales never gets to tell," he says, "that what is most precious to him in his victims is their fragility, the way they crack so tenderly between his teeth" (238). Freddie repeats his failures from *The Book of Evidence*, going so far as to frame this longed-for murder in terms of a harmless fairy-tale. This is not, as McMinn seems to suggest, a promising psychological breakthrough for Freddie; rather, it is once again evidence of his preference for a painted world. "I am told I should treasure life," he says, "but give me the realm of art anytime" (*Ghosts* 239).

IV: The Impossibility of Absolution Through Art

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?
–Briony Tallis

In his analysis of the novel, Imhof claims that "atonement is not possible in the real world; it can only be achieved in, and through, art" (193). Indeed, Freddie's decade-long prison sentence seems a pittance to pay for the life of a young woman. However, since *Ghosts* destabilizes the category of representation itself, this attempt to atone through art is exposed as a superficial project. If the space of atonement is unreal, then Freddie, still lingering in the realm of art, once again manages to escape culpability. Nonetheless, Imhof's claim sheds light on the possibilities that the 'world-as-art' presents to Freddie. He believes that he can attain things here that are otherwise unattainable in the real world: namely, innocence and control.

We find something similar, of course, in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, where the writer Briony Tallis attempts to atone for her lived sins through her fiction. Responsible for separating her sister Cecilia from her love Robbie, a remorseful Briony grants the couple in fiction the happiness that she denied them in reality. Thus, Briony attempts to make amends through art. Where McEwan's thoughtful protagonist seems to realize the inadequacy of her attempt, Freddie is under the impression that to make Josie live again through art is suitable recompense. Imhof claims that "*Ghosts* shows Freddie in an effort to observe the unavoidable imperative: here he is, by feat of the creative imagination, trying to bring the woman he killed back to life" (192); what we find, however, is that Freddie goes out of his way *not* to mention Josie in the second novel of the trilogy. She is conspicuously absent but for the occasional ambiguous suggestion of her presence. Thus, she has a brief cameo as an unnamed figure, "a maidservant, perhaps" (*Ghosts* 85), in Freddie's 'hypothetical' retelling of his crime, and his blood-riddled nightmares suggest her ghostly form; yet her name is never spoken.

Contrary to Imhof's claim then, art cannot, and does not, provide Freddie with his longed-for salvation. Riddled with uncertainty, art is likelier to confuse and mask. While McMinn might claim that Banville presents an "idealized version of painting" (*Supreme*138) in his works, art is in fact repeatedly depicted as an uncertain medium. Gazing upon Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*, Freddie muses, "I look at this picture, I cannot help it, in a spirit of shamefaced interrogation, asking, what does it mean, what are they doing, these enigmatic figures frozen forever on the point of departure, what is this atmosphere of portentousness without apparent portent?" His answer is intriguing: "There is no meaning, of course, only a profound and inexplicable significance" (*Ghosts*

95). Thus, the meaningless image provides no consolation, only questions whose answers are entirely open to interpretation.

This artistic uncertainty is reflected in Vaublin himself, a figure who is at once entirely mysterious and of central importance to *Ghosts*. It is therefore fitting that Freddie's narrative should share the enigmatical reticence of the artist's work, which is characterized by the feeling that "something is missing, something is deliberately not being said" (35). "We know so little of him," Freddie explains, "Even his name is uncertain: Faubelin, Vanhoblin, Van Hobellijn?" (35). That these pseudonyms are near-anagrams of Banville's name gestures towards the metafictional dimension of the entire novel and further emphasizes the constructed nature of the art object. In *Ghosts*, artworks are the product of a fictional painter invented by a playful writer. Thus, Banville showcases the absolute impossibility of locating the truth in art, both within the narrative and beyond it. Though modeled upon Watteau, Vaublin is a fictional figure who lingers on the periphery of Freddie's uncertain narrative. Indeed, Vaublin appears as one of the novel's many ghosts. Thus Banville highlights the artist's status as "a manufactured man" (35), not only in the metafictional sense, but also within the story world of *Ghosts*.

Freddie says of Vaublin that he "changed his name, his nationality, everything, covering his tracks" (35). Such behaviour naturally resonates with Freddie – a murderer cum scholar who attempts to suppress his identity and fictionalize his past. *Ghosts* traces Freddie's self-inscription. Like Vaublin, he too is a manufactured man, a man who, as McMinn says, invents "versions or copies of himself" (*Supreme*141). Freddie himself claims, "I was myself no unitary thing. I was like nothing so much as a pack of cards, shuffling into other and yet other versions of myself: here was the king, here the knave,

and here the ace of spades" (*Ghosts* 26-7). The transience of his identity is, as I have

already noted in my discussion of *The Book of Evidence*, a symptom of his over-

investment with art. Living in a world of images and illusions, Freddie himself becomes

nothing more than a series of carefully constructed masks.

This process is reflected in Vaublin, in whom artistic involvement is synonymous

with the fracturing of one's identity. The theatricality of his art lends to this parallel, for

the artist paints again and again the costumed actors of the *Comédie-Française*, actors

who are "all pose and surface brilliance" (*Ghosts* 127); however, more important in this

respect is the figure of Vaublin's double. Late in his life, the artist becomes convinced

that he is being shadowed by someone. Once again, the truth of the matter lies just

beyond the reader's reach – is the mysterious stalker real, as both Vaublin and Freddie

maintain, or is he merely a figment of the artist's aged and deluded mind, as art critics

seem to think? This question becomes particularly intriguing in light of Vaublin's claims

concerning the artistic productions of his double:

> There were *fêtes galantes* and *amusements champêtres*, and even theatre
>
> scenes, his speciality, the figures in which seemed to look at him with
>
> suppressed merriment, knowingly. They were executed in a style
>
> uncannily like his own, but in haste, with technical lapses and scant regard
>
> for quality of surface. This slapdash manner seemed a gibe aimed directly
>
> at him and his pretensions, mocking his lapses in concentration, the
>
> shortcuts and the technical flaws that he had thought no one would
>
> notice…Who was this prankster who could dash off imitation Vaublins
>
> with such assurance, who knew his secret flaws, who could imitate not

only his strengths but his weaknesses too, his evasions, his failures of taste

and technique? (127-8)

Banville seems to suggest that the double is Vaublin himself – an assertion supported by

the artist's claim that he sometimes feels the presence of an "invisible double" at his

canvas, and that when he raises his arm to paint, a "heavier arms seems to lift alongside

his. *I seem to hear mocking laughter*, he wrote*, and someone is always standing in the*

corner behind me, yet when I turn there is no one there" (128). This passage highlights

once again the link between artistic involvement and psychological dissociation – a link

that is evident in Freddie's behavior in *The Book of Evidence*. There, his pathological

sense of detachment is intimately tied to his tendency to encode the world artistically.

With Vaublin, something similar occurs. Drawn into the world of appearances and

painted surfaces, he becomes so severed from his sense of self that his own works appear

to be the productions of an uncanny stranger.[25]

Remarkably, in *Ghosts* each character with ties to the art world is depicted as not

only having a split self, but also as a figure seeking absolution. Thus, Freddie imagines

that Vaublin "wants to confess to something but cannot, something about a crime

committed long ago; something about a woman" (128). In keeping with this idea,

Freddie and the Professor engage in parallel projects of absolution as well.

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[25]That Freddie should in turn construct Vaublin as his own double is entirely in keeping with the
metanarrative tangle of *Ghosts*. In an instance that demonstrates the psychological splintering of his own
personality, Freddie imagines that Vaublin "wants to confess to something but cannot, something about a
crime committed long ago; something about a woman" (128). Being largely amorphous himself, Vaublin
becomes a convenient mirror for Freddie.

When Freddie first meets Kreutznaer, he is struck by "how plausible he appeared, how authentic" (*Ghosts* 208), and he is careful to outline the Professor's various accomplishments. He is, we are told,

> a legend in the world of art, foremost authority on Vaublin, frequent guest at I Tatti in the great days, co-author with the late Keeper of the Queen's Pictures of that controversial monograph on Poussin, consultant for the great galleries of the world and valued advisor to private collectors on however many continents there are. (208)

However, there are suggestions throughout the novel that the Professor is trying to atone for an unnamed sin. His self-imposed exile on the island is figured as an act of repentance: seeking absolution, the renowned scholar gives himself over to a life of quiet contemplation. Thus, Freddie's "penitential isle" is the Professor's as well (*Ghosts* 22). Indeed, Freddie speculates that Kreutznaer has handed his life's work over to him in a grand sacrificial gesture – "an act of expiation" meant to atone for his past sins (33). At the novel's end, his sin is revealed: Felix informs Freddie that *Le monde d'or* – the centerpiece of the Whitewater House Collection, and a painting that the Professor himself verified – is a fake. Having falsely attributed the painting in order to turn a profit, the eminent Professor turns out to be a fraud. Working within a field that values authenticity, Kreutznaer's deliberate deception is constructed as morally offensive – an act requiring contrition. And, as Felix reveals, this is not the first time that Kreutznaer has fraudulently passed off a fake as the genuine article.

Freddie says of the Professor, "we have both made killings, he in his way, I in mine; there is no comparison" (245). Despite his claim, Freddie himself draws the

comparison between his sins and Kreutznaer's here, placing the violation of art's sanctity on par with the murder of an innocent woman. However, where the Professor seeks atonement by abandoning art – shrinking from the art world and passing his life's work over to an amateur – Freddie seeks it through art. Early on, he admits, "I did not know what I was. How then was I to be expected to know what others are, to imagine them so vividly as to make them quicken into a sort of life? Others? Other: they are all one. The only one. Not to mention" (*Ghosts* 27). The unnameable other is, of course, Josie Bell. Here, Freddie acknowledges that he can only begin his project of reconstituting the dead woman by first grounding himself. Thus, he rather characteristically turns to art as the first step in achieving his sought-after absolution.

In light of this fact, we must consider his engagement with the central artwork of the novel: Vaublin's *Le monde d'or*. Section three of *Ghosts* consists of a seven-page ekphrastic meditation on the image. Here, readers encounter the painting as it is subjectively experienced by Freddie – a practice that will become increasingly important in the final book of the trilogy and that signals his attempt to ground himself through an art object. From the outset of the passage, it is clear that Freddie reads himself into Vaublin's painting – most especially in the figure of Pierrot, the tragic clown of *commedia dell'arte*. "He stands before us like our own reflection distorted in a mirror, known yet strange," Freddie begins (*Ghosts* 225). Indeed, he reads the image as an uncanny portrait of himself. Thus, he projects his own isolation and suffering on to the painted figure, imagining that he sees in him "a mournful apotheosis" (225). Rather suitably, Freddie sees Pierrot as trapped by invisible bonds, a man whose pinkish eyes belie both his weariness and his sorrow. Even Freddie's own sense of "weightlessness"

(214), the "floating sensation" (205) that he uses to describe his own insubstantiality

throughout the novel is applied to Pierrot, who seems to strangely "hover in mid-air"

despite his solid stance (227).   These details speak to the fact that Freddie attempts to

observe himself in the image – but as his description of *Le monde d'or* demonstrates, it is

distinctly a vision of the self as a tragic, mournful, long-suffering fool who is deserving

of forgiveness. Thus, the painting plays a central role in his desired expiation as it

supposedly mirrors his 'repentance' back to him. Vaublin's image represents a kind of

wish-fulfillment on Freddie's behalf. Of course, as a stock character of Italian

pantomime, Pierrot himself reminds us that this vision of selfhood is but the performance

of penance. Freddie admits that he pretends to be "the penitent pilgrim" (204).

Pierrot represents performance, and in the painting, he appears in his standard

costume: white trousers, an oversized white coat, a ruff of white lace, a skullcap, and a

wide-brimmed hat. His costume underwrites his status as a staged character. The figure

depicted in Vaublin's painting, then, is an actor playing the part of a fictional character,

and, as Freddie notes, "he has the look of having been bundled into his costume and

thrust unceremoniously out of the wings to stand up here all alone" (225). That Freddie

should attempt to read himself into this figure gestures towards the theatricality of his

contrition.

The image, of course, refuses Freddie the comfort he seeks. Though he attempts

to read his remorse and his absolution into the image, he nonetheless finds there

reminders of the crime he wishes to forget. Rather unexpectedly for Freddie, the painting

enacts what McMinn calls a "ghostly link between his narcissistic gaze and his violent

past" (*Supreme* 123). The material details of the image – Pierrot carries a club, and x-

rays reveal beneath his face that of a mysterious woman – forge a link between Freddie's

sordid history and the painting. Consequently, he ends up reading Pierrot, not as a

sorrowful man who has repented and been forgiven, but as a man who has done some

terrible deed. Freddie is unable to escape his crime in the canvas; thus, the pastoral scene

is transformed into an unsettling idyll, and the tragic clown becomes a malign, club-

clutching, mysteriously guilty figure – a figure "almost deformed – almost…a freak"

(*Ghosts* 228).

Because he cannot read his desired self in the painting, Freddie significantly

concludes that the self cannot be discerned in images at all. Contemplating the central

figure of the canvas, he asks,

> Above all, who is this Pierrot? He is presented to us upright in darkening
>
> air, like a figure from the tarot pack, lost inside his too-large costume,
>
> mute and solitary, sorrowful, laughable perhaps, and yet unavoidable,
>
> hardly present at all and at the same time profoundly, palpably *there*,
>
> possessed it seems of a secret knowledge, our victim and our ineluctable
>
> judge. Who is he? – we shall not know. What we seek are those
>
> evidences of origin, will and action that make up what we think of as
>
> identity. We shall not find them. This Pierrot, our Pierrot, comes from
>
> nowhere, from a place where no one else lives; nor is he on his way to
>
> anywhere. His sole purpose, it would appear, is to be painted; he is
>
> wholly pose… (228)

Pierrot is both palpably present and unknowably absent. The beholder approaches the

canvas looking for evidence of an identity, but he concludes that it cannot be found in the

picture at all. Though he comes to the image in what he calls "a spirit of shamefaced interrogation" (95), he finds that there is no "possible programme or hidden discourse" (227). This is an image that withholds its meaning, an image in which "the mystery of things is preserved" (231). Thus, Freddie appears to gain an awareness that he cannot anchor himself in art, but this brief moment of lucidity is but a defensive act prompted by the painting's failure to uphold his expectations.

Earlier, he asks, "Could I really expect to redeem something of my fouled soul by poring over the paintings – over the reproductions of the paintings – of a long-dead and not quite first rate master?" (35). The answer, of course, is no. In the postmodern world of the novel, salvation is not to be achieved through representations – or, in this case, reproductions of representations. Indeed, Banville compounds the difficulty of achieving absolution through art by problematizing the image itself. Freddie works from the reproduction of a fake painting, and the fake painting is itself modeled upon an image by an artist who was confounded by mysterious doubles of his own works. The effect is of an authenticity endlessly deflected. Within this labyrinthine construct, Banville demonstrates the impossibility of grounding the self in an unstable representational medium. If Freddie is to truly redeem himself, he will have to do so through a more concrete avenue. He cannot seek forgiveness through an unstable medium. In *Ghosts*, to turn to art is poor penance. Thus, the novel ends with the declaration of Freddie's failure to absolve himself: "No: no riddance" (245), he says. Having failed to expiate his guilt through art, Freddie is still haunted by the ghost of Josie Bell. His failure in *Ghosts* therefore motivates the final book of the trilogy, which represents Freddie's last attempt to compensate for his sins.

PART THREE: Art as Mastery in *Athena*

I: The Art of Uncertainty

It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident.
– Theodor Adorno

Athena offers its readers yet another hermeneutic puzzle. As McMinn points out,

"Everything about the plot of *Athena* is designed to juxtapose the real and the imaginary,

the historical and the fictional, the authentic and inauthentic in ways where it is hard, if

not impossible, to tell the difference between them" ("Ekphrasis" 141). In this respect,

Athena follows from the uncertainty of *Ghosts*. However, in the final work of the trilogy,

rather than move towards an understanding of both art and of himself, Freddie seems to

float further adrift from any such resolution. Thus, the work demonstrates the

impossibility of excavating the truth and of grounding the self in a world of

representations.

After his failure in *Ghosts*,Freddie here continues to reach towards his desired

absolution. In *Athena*, he figures art as a space of mastery. What Freddie attempts here

is, in fact, an extension of what he did in *Ghosts*. There, he tried to still the world into art

so that he could create for himself a redemptive space. Here, he attempts a

Pygmalionesque act of creation. Rather than still the world of external reality, he

enlivens a series of images and materializes a woman through whom he believes he can

enact his absolution. It is through art, then, that Freddie attempts to master his own guilt.

On the surface, the plot of the novel appears fairly straightforward: Freddie, who

now goes under the name Morrow, is hired by a gangster called "The Da" to authenticate

a stash of seventeenth-century Dutch paintings stolen from Whitewater House – the same

house from which Freddie stole his beloved portrait roughly twelve years earlier.[26] At the same time that he is pulled into The Da's scheme, Morrow meets a young woman with whom he carries on a passionate affair. He eventually discovers, however, that he has been the victim of an elaborate deception; all but one of the paintings he has been hired to authenticate are copies, and it seems that The Da and his young woman were in on the plot all along. She disappears, along with the paintings, leaving behind a note: "*Must go. Sorry. Write to me*." (*Athena* 215); thus, she proves to be the motivating force behind the narrative, for the novel ends with the line: "I have written" (233). *Athena* is ostensibly Morrow's extended love letter addressed to the mysterious woman we know only as "A.".

In practice, *Athena* is anything but straightforward. Not only is the novel Freddie's retrospective account of his relationship with A. and of his dealings with the criminal underground, but it is also his attempt to connect with an absent Other – an Other whom we can never be sure exists beyond the confines of Freddie's imagination. Thus, the very basis of the text is undermined by uncertainty.

In keeping with the previous two books, Freddie is once again our untrustworthy narrator. Consequently, our access to the events of the novel is once again limited by his problematic retrospective account. As in both *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts*, Freddie works within narrative conventions in order to subvert them, drawing the reader's attention to the subjective process of narrative construction and the impossibility of achieving an objective totalized account of the novel's events. Because the narrative is subject to Freddie's perception, his faulty memory, his limited knowledge, and his urge to

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[26] The novel is loosely based upon the 1986 robbery of Russborough House in County Wicklow, Ireland, organized by the gangster Martin Cahill. Nicknamed "The General," Cahill was notorious for hiding his face from the public so that during his lifetime only obscured images of him were published. In *Athena*, he appears as "The Da," a crime boss addicted to disguise.

invent, readers can be sure of nothing.   Moreover, here Freddie attempts to piece

together the events of the past from a position of recent enlightenment. Aware that he has

been deceived, he manipulates his account in order to highlight his role as a victim. "The

present modifies the past," he says, thereby stressing that history itself is not absolute but

provisional and subjective (*Athena* 28). What we have, then, is a novel fraught with

epistemological uncertainty; rather suitably, the structure of the work mirrors its themes.

Concerned with the difficulty of authenticating artworks, *Athena* deliberately

problematizes the categories of the real and the fake, creating the confusion for which the

novel is well known. Of all the books in the trilogy, it is the most challenging. The

spectral ambiguity of *Ghosts* is here translated into a deeper uncertainty, foregrounded

not only by Morrow's continual destabilization of the narrative but also by the book's

evasive, non-linear structure. Morrow himself admits of his account, "This is all

confused, I know, unfocused and confused and other near-anagrams indicating distress"

(*Athena* 220). In an interview, Banville remarked upon the work's unpopularity, noting

that the book is "largely ignored" and misunderstood by readers (Freiburg 38). Derek

Hand devotes but a few lines to *Athena* in his book-length study of Banville, dismissing

the work as "knotty" and "difficult" (157), a "challenging" and "to some extent

unsatisfying" book with a non-existent story-line (121). Muller's treatment of the novel

is punctuated by a series of questions which she leaves largely unanswered,

demonstrating the uncertainties at the heart of the novel.[27] I would argue, however, that

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[27]In "You Have Been Framed," Muller asks if*Athena* "at long last, present[s] something new –
Pygmalion's achievement, for instance – a full materialization of the female body? Or do the almost over-
obtrusive self-reflexive comments in this final part of the trilogy ironically mock the previous tours de force
as much as the present, equally failed endeavor?" (29). She continues, "If the real thing thus becomes
questionable in discussions of art, what about the woman who seems to be so alive in this last novel of the
trilogy? Is she at long last an independent creation, creating herself and thus controlling the narrator? Or is

these uncertainties and difficulties are intentional and are meant to bear on Banville's

exploration of fakery and forgery. The final novel of the trilogy explores the problematic

of authenticity in a world of representation. *Athena*, then, is deliberately meant to evoke

the difficulty, indeed the impossibility, of determining the meaning of an art that refuses

interpretation. In turn, the postmodern self is revealed as being equally beyond the grasp

of definition. Just as Freddie mistakes fake works of art for authentic ones, he similarly

confuses identity with identification; in part, he seems to believe that he can take on a

new identity simply by adopting new roles. Underwriting this idea is the notion that a

unifying sense of self can indeed be achieved. In Freddie's mind, it is only a matter of

settling on the right role. Of course, within the postmodern context, such an assumption

is established only to be subverted.

II: Personae and Performance

Ah, this plethora of metaphors! I am like everything except myself.
– Freddie Montgomery

As we have already seen, *The Book of Evidence* and *Ghosts* chart Banville's parallel

interrogation of art and of identity, categories that mutually inform and inflect one

another in the trilogy. If art is a category fraught with difficulty, so too is the self. The

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she yet another invention, the offspring of the narrator's experiment to represent her within new frames of transgressive gender roles (e.g. transgressive sexual practices)?" (31). These questions are but a brief sampling of the interrogatives that punctuate Muller's treatment of the text. Her conclusions are equally uncertain: in response to the question of whether Freddie is successful at the end of the trilogy, Muller writes, "Yes, if one conflates representation and object, reading A. as a powerful transgressive female character. No, if one holds the opinion that the narrator still has not managed to acknowledge the woman as subject, granting her a body and agency, but instead has given birth to a nice specimen of a signifier as it is cherished in postmodern and post-structuralist theory – ever floating, never to be arrested. Yet, maybe Pygmalion ought not to despair. Is there not a hopeful note in the novel when one painting, after all, The Birth of Athena, is the only one that is declared to be 'the real thing'? Does it indicate that A. also may be more than a pure signifier?" (32).

issues of art's authenticity, as I have already shown, reflect upon the uncertain status of selfhood in the postmodern text. Most interesting in this respect is that in his attempt to ground himself in art, Freddie finds that he must continuously reinvent himself. The trilogy challenges the traditional notions of art as a stable and fixed site of meaning in that art is consistently shown to be uncertain and hybrid – in Banville's fiction, it is terribly difficult to fix the meaning of any art object. If art is unstable, then any identity that seeks to be grounded in it must itself end up being unstable. In other words, what Freddie finds is that under postmodernism, art calls for identities that are in a state of constant flux rather than fixed, and his ever-shifting sense of self demonstrates this notion.

In *The Book of Evidence*, he appears as Freddie Montgomery – a scientist who has reinvented himself as a man of the arts and humanities. In *Ghosts*, he remains conspicuously unnamed – a sign that his identity is unfixed – and he adopts the role of Kreutznaer's surrogate, ghost-writing the Professor's final study for him. In *Athena*, Freddie has once more transformed himself; he has changed his name, he says, "along with everything else that was changeable" (*Athena* 5). Having reinvented himself as Mr. Morrow, an expert on seventeenth-century Dutch painting, Freddie draws our attention to the process of conscious self-creation through his careful selection of a pseudonym. He claims that he chose the name "for its faintly hopeful hint of futurity, and, of course, the Wellsian echo" (*Athena* 7). That his title should evoke Dr. Moreau – the maker of monstrous creatures – is telling, for Freddie sees himself as both an invention and an inventor, as the novel makes clear. Because he has constructed a false persona for himself, Morrow is a forgery of sorts. It should therefore come as no surprise that he has

trouble recognizing authenticity both in works of art and in the figures that surround him. McMinn summarizes the novel well when he writes, "*Athena* is a fiction about invented lives, not just the one adopted by Morrow, but a variety of staged performances in which everyone except Morrow seems to know the difference between fact and fiction, the real and the fake, the true and the false" (*Supreme* 129).

Freddie's self-invention in *Athena* reveals a fundamental irony at the heart of the trilogy. Morrow seeks to escape the provisional uncertainty of the postmodern world by grounding himself in the traditional aesthetic suggested by representational painting. He idealizes art as a mimetic form, a medium of "natural" signs that consequently offers him the illusion of stability. Thus, by grounding his sense of self in art, he believes that he can finally stabilize his identity. However, art is, as we have already seen, anything but stable, and in his attempt to ground himself in this medium, Freddie inadvertently ends up mirroring the fluidity of art through his shifting identities. His engagement with art, then, foregrounds the postmodern impossibility of attaining any unified and coherent sense of self. Fluid identities are inescapable in *Athena*.

Because art and self are inextricably intertwined in Banville, the trilogy about art culminates in a meditation on the problematics of self-construction. By its very nature, the shady underworld in which Morrow is entangled demands that one wear masks so as to conceal one's crimes. The Da, for instance, is a "master of disguise" (*Athena* 70), and he evades the police through a series of ridiculous and often elaborate costumes.[28] His

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[28]Consider for a moment The Da's title. Most obviously, his nickname recalls Morrow's absent father. In *Athena*, this surrogate father figure is the one responsible for Morrow's artistic humiliation. More important to the context of the novel, however, his title can be a reference to Dadaism – the art movement that challenges the traditional notion of the art object as culturally significant. Rather suitably, The Da undermines what Morrow believes to be the sacred quality of art by having the fakes created.

associates, Morden and Francie, seem similarly constructed. Morrow says of Francie, for instance, "He seemed made-up, a manufactured man...And this air of fakery that he carried with him infected even his surroundings" (59). Most notable in terms of self-invention, however, is Morrow's elderly Aunt Corky – who is actually his cousin. A woman dedicated to the "continuing reinvention of the self" (22), she is a representation of questionable origins not unlike the hoard of pictures Morrow has been hired to authenticate. Everything about Corky is uncertain. Morrow tells us that she claimed to be of either Dutch or Flemish descent, depending upon the occasion, and her "self-styled foreignness" includes her deliberately broken English, a series of manufactured tales about her European ancestors, and the foreign cigarettes of which she was fond (21). Morrow's admiration for the extent of her self-invention is plain, particularly after her death when he discovers her papers. "She had been no more Dutch than I am," he says, "What an actress! Such dedication!" (218). Unlike The Da, who is forced to adopt costumes to hide his identity, Corky's identity is her disguise.

Nonetheless, she is the most fleshed out character of the novel. McMinn, for instance, calls her "the novel's most fully realised invention," a "subversive foil to [Morrow's] dreamy pretensions" (*Supreme*137). Though Morrow characteristically tries to contain her within artistic precedents – variously figuring her in terms of Dürer's drawing of his mother, the Bride of Frankenstein, or a figure in a sentimental Victorian novel – Corky resists these aesthetic enclosures. Slowly dying and in the care of her cousin, her visceral physicality makes her a tangible and insuppressible presence in *Athena*. She is therefore a paradoxical figure: little about her is true, yet she seems to be the most 'authentic' of all the novel's characters, bursting out of Morrow's restrained

narrative. Indeed, as Morrow claims, she lied with such "simplicity and sincere conviction that really it was not lying at all" (22). It seems that Corky lives her false life authentically, having acknowledged that life is performance. Thus, where Morrow struggles with his uncertain identity, Corky embraces her provisional postmodern self, recognizing its liberating potential. She therefore stands in contrast to Morrow. If he is nostalgic for a vision of selfhood that does not exist, Corky is playfully aware of her decentered self.

Morrow fails to reinvent himself successfully because he seeks to create what cannot exist in a postmodern context: a unified and coherent sense of an innocent self. Rather than accept his own multiplicity, he wishes to suppress his past and adopt an entirely new self in its place. Of course, the novel traces his failure to do so. In part, the problem is that Morrow cannot escape his past. Thus, Inspector Hackett, Morden, and Francie are all aware that Morrow is in fact the murderer Montgomery, forcing Morrow to lament the inevitable return of the repressed:

> Always it comes back. I think of it as another story altogether but it is not. I delude myself that I have sloughed it all off and that I can walk on naked and unashamed into a new name, a new life, light and gladsome as a transmigrating soul, but no, it comes back dragging its boneless limbs through the muck and rears up at me grotesquely in the unlikeliest of shapes. (107)

He attempts to suppress his crime by remaking himself as an innocent and as an art expert, allowing him to claim mastery over both his guilt and the art that so confounded him in the first two books of the trilogy. It is here, however, that we can locate Morrow's

greatest failure; where Corky recognizes that the "dead do not forgive" (*Athena* 94), Morrow believes that he can obtain absolution through a project of aesthetically-defined self-invention. Morrow transforms himself into an art critic here – a position that represents his attempt to master the medium that has evaded him thus far. Having adopted this role, he performs a Pygmalionesque act of creation that is meant not only to confirm his artistic mastery but also to allow him to reconstitute Josie Bell and therefore achieve forgiveness for his crime.

III: The Failure of the Art Critic

We write books about art and leave ourselves out, as if we weren't involved…it seldom seems appropriate among the members of my profession to connect their own lives and loves to the pictures that they study.
– James Elkins

The trajectory of the trilogy would seem to suggest Freddie's progress towards a greater knowledge of and critical engagement with art. He moves from purely subjective artistic adoration to a more objective, academic assessment of images. However, in typical Banvillian fashion, this seeming progress is undercut by Freddie's repeated failure to understand both art and himself. In the first book, his love of art is equated to his inability to connect to the real world. In the second novel, his study of Vaublin is grounded in a lie. And finally, in the third work, he is an art attributor who misattributes art. Throughout the trilogy, paintings pose an unsolvable puzzle with which Freddie struggles.

In *Athena*, Morrow is hired by The Da based upon his artistic expertise. His specialization in seventeenth-century Dutch painting makes him an authority on the art objects The Da seeks to authenticate. As an expert, Morrow is ostensibly the one who

must speak for the silent images; he will decipher the otherwise unreadable canvas. Thus, his new role represents his attempted mastery over art. Morrow evaluates and carefully catalogues each work, noting not only its attribution and dimensions, but also his own critical appraisal of the art object, demonstrating his familiarity with various schools of artistic production, the artists themselves, their techniques, and their limitations. Thus, his entries suggest not only his intimate understanding of art objects but also his position of power as a critic who provides the final authoritative word on the status of the image. In order to bolster his authority, Morrow appeals to the conventions of academic writing, from his use of the objective critical voice to his inclusion of secondary sources. He thereby places his own voice in the context of well-known art experts such as Erich Auerbach and E.H. Gombrich, and he even encourages his readers to consult the works of Arthur E. Popham and John Wyndham Pope-Hennessy for more information on art theory. In doing so, Morrow establishes himself as an authority on par with these experts.

However, this authority is little more than an act, and Morrow plays the part with relish in an attempt to confirm his newly-adopted identity. He delights, for instance, in the tools of his craft: "the tweezers, scrapers, scalpels, the fine sable brushes, the magnifying glass and jeweller's monocle" (*Athena* 80). These are but the external markers of the connoisseur; though they would seem to validate Morrow's expertise, they are merely props in his performance. When lecturing Morden on issues of provenance, dating techniques, and the history of oil-based pigments, Morrow listens to himself with "mild surprise and admiration" (63), impressed by how convincing he sounds. Proud of his performance, he does his best to maintain his act, cultivating those qualities he

believes to be typical of the pedant: a "low monotone, the neutral gaze, the faint edge of impatience and, of course, the touch of condescension" (64). This attempt to transform himself into a stereotype of the scholar began in *Ghosts*. As Kreutznaer's amanuensis, Freddie admits that he is no scholar; rather, he is simply doing an "impression of a scholar," which he declares "a splendid part, the best it has ever been my privilege to play, and I have played many" (*Ghosts* 34). The act of ghostwriting the Professor's study affords him the pleasure of being "someone wholly other" (*Ghosts* 33) – a pleasure that he seeks to prolong through the illusion of expertise in *Athena*.

However, it is essential to stress Morrow's belief that an academic approach offers him a way of escaping his earlier uncertainty with regard to art objects. Despite the fact that Freddie appeals to images throughout the trilogy to concretize his experiences, art objects ultimately remain evasive and unstable, just beyond the reach of concrete definition. By approaching painting through an objective, academic perspective, however, he wonders if he can perhaps overcome the uncertainty of the art objects that obsess him.

Important to consider here are the implications of Morrow's role as an art expert. Elkins considers the role of the art historian in terms of the desire to lay claim to art objects that otherwise lie out of reach. He writes,

> we construct theories about how all seeing is fraught with gender
>
> constructions and power relations, but then we study works of art as if we
>
> were just trying to appreciate them – as if we had no desire to possess
>
> them by writing about them and reproducing them in our books, as if we

had no urge to capture and domesticate the odd things of the world.

(*Object* 31)

For Elkins, then, writing about images is a means of possessing them, of reclaiming them in words. Cataloguing therefore becomes a way of containing and controlling the ineffable image. Here, we should once more recall Heffernan's claim that ekphrasis "evokes the power of the silent image even as it subjects that power to the rival authority of language" (1). Thus, Morrow's ekphrastic accounts are calculated to provide him with a sense of rhetorical control over the hermeneutically unstable image, as his explanation of his cataloguing shows: "It is satisfying to set out things just so, the facts on one side, speculation on the other, the strategies, the alternatives, the possible routes toward a desired conclusion" (*Athena* 63). Ekphrasis offers him both the opportunity to manage the image and the possibility of hermeneutic closure.

Rather suitably, then, Morrow notes that what affects him most in an artwork is "the quality of its silence" (79) – not its color, form, or content, but the muteness which allows him to step in and assert his authority by imposing his own voice on a voiceless object. However, what becomes clear in the course of the novel is the failure of this authority. Morrow cannot maintain the connoisseur's detachment; his assumed objectivity falters beneath the weight of his iconic projections. His treatment of the images discloses his subjective involvement with them, and this in turn distorts his perception of the pictures. Morrow can therefore be said to exemplify Elkins's claim that "we imagine that seeing is entirely objective…our 'objective' descriptions are permeated, soaked, with our unspoken, unthought desires" (*Object* 33).

We should remember that our only access to the images is, of course, through Morrow's biased narrative account of them. Thus, the subjective narrative and the paintings are inescapably tied. We begin to notice that Morrow's catalogue entries, which are interspersed throughout the novel, form a parallel narrative upon which the text itself seems to be modeled. In other words, Morrow's ekphrastic treatment of an individual painting will be followed by an account of events that is loosely based upon the themes of the preceding painting. What we encounter, then, is the text as painting – a practice that parallels Morrow's attempt to still the external world in *Ghosts*. However, this exercise also underscores the fact that the art objects we encounter in the text are as unstable as the unreliable narrative itself.

Rather tellingly in this respect, the paintings depict scenes from classical mythology; all are variations on the themes of capture, containment, and transformation, as their titles suggest: *Pursuit of Daphne, The Rape of Proserpine, Pygmalion* (called *Pygmalion and Galatea), Syrinx Delivered, Capture of Ganymede, Revenge of Diana, Acis and Galatea*. Because these images inflect the narrative, readers are encouraged to see Morrow's own account as a manufactured invention of mythological proportions. Moreover, the order of the paintings suggests a clear narrative course that sheds light on the subjective nature of Morrow's text.

The first four images centre upon female figures who are placed at the mercy of male figures: a terrified Daphne is pursued by an enamoured Apollo; a captured Proserpine is whisked away by Pluto, awaiting the rape that will shortly take place; Galatea, "more victim than love-object" (*Athena* 76), awakens beneath Pygmalion's lustful touch; and Syrinx, whose transformation is already underway, is madly pursued by

a frenzied Pan. Each of these images handles the theme of male sexual possession and seems to reflect upon Morrow's engagement with female figures. As we have already seen, Freddie's aestheticization of women allows him to transform them into mute artistic objects that can be easily possessed. It should therefore come as no surprise that the above images coincide with his first encounters with the eponymous A. – the woman whom he fetishizes and attempts to possess in the course of the novel.

Conversely, the next three paintings in the series focus upon the victimization of male figures. Thus, we have an image depicting the Trojan hero Ganymede abducted by Zeus in the form of a feral eagle; in another, Actaeon accidentally spies the naked Diana, for which she will transform him into a stag that is later torn apart by his own dogs; and the final image shows Polyphemus jealously watching a sleeping Acis and Galatea, only moments before he will slaughter his rival. These are images of male pain, loss, and surrender, and therefore match Morrow's sense of self-pity as he discovers that he has been taken in by The Da and his gang. Abandoned by A., he sees himself in these mythological figures, afflicted by a mock-epic sense of loss. In other words, Morrow internalizes these art objects to the point that he cannot read his own experiences apart from the paintings. Art and narrative mutually inform one another in *Athena*.

These two image-groups therefore trace the primary narrative threads of the novel. On the one hand, we have Morrow's persistent desire to actively shape the women he encounters, and on the other, we have his sense of himself as a passive sufferer. However, framed in terms of mythological precedent, all of these narrated experiences take on a fictional quality; they are myths invented to explain and impose meaning upon the intangible and inexplicable workings of the world. Thus, the mythological paintings

both inform and subvert the narrative, imbuing the entire text with a mock-epic tone and undercutting any truth claims Morrow might make.

His personalized reading of the paintings is especially evident, however, in his individual catalogue entries which become progressively more subjective in the text and therefore signal the loss of his supposed academic control. Even early on, it would appear that he emphasizes those details in the paintings that speak to him personally. Thus, in the first image, *Pursuit of Daphne*, he focuses not on the titular woman, but on the disappointed god. As McMinn notes, Morrow seems to identify with the sorry figure of Apollo, "a male in his middle years, slack-limbed, thick-waisted, breathing hard, no longer fit for amorous pursuit" (*Athena* 18).[29] In his painted eyes, Morrow detects "the desperation and dawning anguish of one about to experience loss, not only of this ravishing girl who is the object of his desire but along with her an essential quality of selfhood" (18). The fusion of the subjective and objective is rather subtle here; Morrow manages to maintain control over his account despite the fact that the passage is inflected by his own loss of A. Over time, however, this control falters and the subjective voice becomes progressively more prominent, signaling his downward descent. The deeper Morrow's involvement with art, the more difficult it is for him to maintain his control.

Thus, by the end of his fourth catalogue entry, Morrow breaks from his descriptive third-person voice and addresses A. directly. By the sixth entry, his reading of the painted Diana is inextricably tied to A.: "she looks a little like you," he writes,

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[29]In *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville*, McMinn claims that "Morrow's self-identification" (135) with these images is apparent in the blending of the epic and of the everyday. Thus, Morrow "seizes upon details which seem to speak to his own condition and situation," reading *Pursuit of Daphne* as a "dark piece of epic voyeurism" in which the god is reduced to a middle-aged man, thereby deflating "the heroic pretensions of the image" (135).

"those odd-shaped breasts, that slender neck, the downturned mouth. But then, they all look like you; I paint you over them, like a boy scrawling his fantasies on the smirking model in an advertising hoarding" (168). Morrow undercuts his own authority here. Though he realizes his error and abruptly ends the passage mid-sentence, his final entry nonetheless demonstrates the failure of his performance of pedantry. He begins by writing, "How calmly the lovers…I can't. How calmly the lovers lie. (As you lied to me.)" (203). As his scholarly objectivity gives way to his splintered emotions, Morrow's powerlessness becomes obvious. Ultimately, he cannot regulate the image.

However, it is important to note that Morrow's failure extends beyond his inability to separate the painting from his subjective interpretation of it. It turns out that his supposedly expert eye is grossly fallible. What is most striking is the extent of Morrow's error. Not only does he fail to recognize The Da's paintings as fakes, but in doing so, he overlooks their glaringly obvious errors. To his credit, Morrow picks up on some of the works' flaws; he notes that some of the images use "vulgar effects" (19), "jumbled perspective and heavy-handed symbolism" (43), where others demonstrate modest skills and limited technique. But he uses this information to draw an incorrect conclusion. Morrow mistakenly declares that the paintings were not produced by artistic masters but rather by their students.

We find the deepest challenge to his artistic authority towards the end of the novel, when Inspector Hackett calls in another art expert to examine the paintings. Mr. Sharpe, who has the objective manner "of a medical man" (207), fulfills the stereotype according to which Morrow attempted to model himself. A tall, pale, elegant, tweed-wearing man who holds a handkerchief to his smirking face, Sharpe is the precursor of

Dan Brown's Sir Teabing. Without the assistance of Morrow's tools of the trade, Sharpe

takes a cursory glance at the images and declares them copies. In fact, he can tell that

they were copied from the rather muddy photographs in the Whitewater House catalogue.

Where Morrow contemplated the varied techniques of each of the individual artists,

Sharpe detects two hands at work over all seven of the paintings – and amateur hands, no

less. Finally, he smugly notes that "the pigments were supplied by the grand old firm of

Messrs Winsor and Newton" (209), one of the most common contemporary brands of oil

paint and a brand that did not come into being until 1832 – long after the works were

supposedly painted.

Indeed, an amazed Sharpe tells Morrow, "I cannot imagine how anyone could

have mistaken such daubs for the real thing" (209). The extent of Morrow's failure

becomes even clearer when Francie later tells him about the arrangement. The images, he

explains, were produced by two of their associates in the cellar of the house on Rue Street

in the course of a single week. These paintings were, in other words, much like rushed

assembly-line productions, rather than the thoughtful creations of practiced artists. "We

dried them under the lamps," Francie says, "they were still sticky when [Morden] showed

them to you and you never noticed" (217).

Clearly, Morrow's questionable attributions destabilize any claims of curatorial

authority. Thus, the novel performs a typically postmodern assault on elitist culture,

debunking Morrow's intellectual posturing. In fact, this cynical erasure of the authority

figure extends beyond Morrow. Even Sharpe does not live up to his name when he fails

to recognize one of the paintings as genuine. *Athena* systematically undercuts the

authoritative voice, questioning the possibility of making *any* definitive claims about art.

Paintings remain hermeneutically slippery, even for those who are not subjectively involved with them. More importantly, Morrow's mistaken attributions destabilize his newly-adopted identity. Having assumed the mantle of the art expert, he is exposed as a fake, much like the paintings themselves. Just as the images are poor copies, so too is Morrow, who fashions himself upon common cultural stereotypes. At one point, he wonders, "how could I allow myself to be so easily taken in?" His answer is telling: "because I wanted to be," he says (66). Desperate for a unitary sense of himself, Morrow adopts an illusion of authoritative selfhood that ultimately cannot be sustained.

What I would like to stress is that, through Morrow, Banville highlights the problems that beset vision. Once more, we should recall Elkins who asserts that "seeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious" (*Object* 11). Blindness and sight are complicit. "Each act of vision mingles seeing with not seeing," writes Elkins, "so that vision can become less a way of gathering information than avoiding it" (201). Morrow illustrates these ideas perfectly. In part, it seems that he is so preoccupied with A. that he fails to see what is directly before him. In many ways, the trilogy chronicles Freddie's failed sight and the many casualties of this failure. Looking at the cache of stolen paintings, he can only see what is already imprinted on his mind: "Perhaps when I peered into those pictures what I was looking for was always and only the prospect of you," he says of A. (*Athena* 81). So focused is he upon his own artistic creation that he fails to notice external reality. However, if the trilogy traces his failure to see, it likewise outlines the failure of art to live up to Freddie's impossible hopes, which brings us to a consideration of the work's titular A.

IV: Morrow's Imaginative Birthing of Athena

The imaginary is what tends to become real.
– André Breton

There is, of course, one final image in The Da's stolen hoard of paintings that we must

consider. Declared the only original amongst the copies, Jean Vaublin's *The Birth of*

Athena is also the only artwork for which Morrow does not prepare a catalogue entry.

The reader only ever encounters this image through a postcard reproduction with which

The Da teases Hackett after he has smuggled the painting out to a buyer. Because there is

no catalogue entry for *The Birth of Athena*, it is the only work not mediated by Morrow's

narrative and therefore not subject to his ventriloquism. If we see ekphrasis as an attempt

to dominate the visual Other through words, then the final, authentic image is permitted

to maintain its visual authority. Introduced in terms of its duplicate, the painting exists

beyond the confines of Morrow's uncertain narrative. The textual strategy is clear: we

are taken to the edge of a prospect but no further, denied the sight of an art object that is

purportedly real. What we see here is the refusal to violate the purity of the genuine

painting.

Morrow's narrative, as we already know, is fraught with uncertainty. That the

only genuine artwork should be permitted an existence beyond this narrative is therefore

telling. We find a parallel with the novel's eponymous A., or Athena, who, like the

painting, lingers just beyond the reach of narrative definition. Her title suggests that she

too is an artistic production, springing fully formed from the god-like creative

imagination of Morrow. The myth of Athena is, of course, a metaphor of male birth

prompted by violence: Hephaestus splits Zeus's head open with an axe, and Athena

springs fully-formed from the wound. As McMinn puts it, the mythological Athena is an

"incarnation of male fantasy, the imagination made flesh" ("Ekphrasis" 141). We do well

to remember that in *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie kills Josie by taking a hammer to her

head, and it is her murder that necessitates the birth of A. in the final novel of the trilogy.

A. therefore appears to be a metaphor for Morrow's creative project, his attempt to

compensate for Josie's death by imagining a woman into existence.[30]

There is much to suggest that A. is but a creature of the imagination rather than a

flesh and blood woman.   For instance, the novel consistently stresses the connection

between the young woman and the stolen paintings, as though she were an extension of

these representations. It is no coincidence that her first appearance in the text coincides

with Morrow's exposure to the images. Morrow revels in the intimacy of his

arrangement with The Da: never before has he been in such close proximity with

artworks, "allowed such freedoms…permitted to take such liberties" with them (*Athena*

83). Rather revealingly, he claims that the experience is akin to love – it is perhaps

unsurprising then that A., the imaginary woman with whom he fulfills his sexual

fantasies, appears to materialize from these adored images. A figment inflected by the

visual narratives of sexual violence from which she seems to spring, A. embodies the

thematics of the paintings. Morrow makes this plain when he writes about studying the

paintings: "I was like a lover who gazes in tongue-tied joy upon his darling and sees not

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[30]Morrow says of A., "I saw you. That was the point of it all. I saw you. (Or I saw someone.)" (*Athena* 120). *Seeing* her – or the more symbolic someone -- is the point of it all because A. *is* his project of reconstituting the dead Josie Bell. Through the act of seeing, Morrow attempts to correct his failure in *The Book of Evidence*. We do well to remember that during his initial struggle with Josie – before he disconnects from her through iconic projection – he suddenly *sees* her and contemplates ending his attack. He claims, "I have never felt another's presence so immediately and with such raw force. I saw her now, really saw her, for the first time" (*Evidence* 113). Through iconic projection, however, he manages to un-see her and therefore kills her. In *Athena*, Morrow attempts to return to the revelatory moment of seeing that would have allowed him to let Josie live.

her face but a dream of it. You were the pictures and they were you and I never noticed…until you became animate suddenly and stepped out of your frame" (83). A., I argue, is art made flesh. As Elkins explains, "sometimes the desire to possess what is seen is so intense that vision reaches outward and *creates* the objects themselves" (*Object* 29). Through A., Morrow engages in this precise kind of creation. What is A. if not the picture of his desire?

The blurring of reality and representation is clear in his telling of their first intimate encounter. Morrow is alone in the room with the images, poring over a catalogue of reproductions. He gets a headache, and looking out the window, notices that "a great chubby silver-white cloud by Magritte is standing upright in the window in front of me, opening its arms" (*Athena* 84). This instance of iconic projection signals the convergence of reality and art – a process that should recall the events leading up to his murder of Josie Bell. In *The Book of Evidence*, it is the dissociative nature of iconic projection that allows Freddie to murder the maid, as he perceives his world, and consequently his crime, as unreal. Iconic projection plays a similar role here in that it marks his inability to determine what is real from what is not. Indeed, in Morrow's account, it is as though he is being invited into the illusion by the cloud's metaphorically open arms. From this confusion, A. arises. Directly after remarking upon the Magritte cloud, he writes, "You appear out of silence…as if the silence in the room had somehow materialised you and given you form" (84). Of course, it is Morrow's artistic imagination that has given her form. A. represents his attempt to master art through a Pygmalionesque act of creation; by calling to life a woman, Morrow hopes that he can

compensate for the life he took and demonstrate his own creative mastery over the medium of visual art.

Like Daphne in *The Book of Evidence*, A. is artistically-defined in terms of her abstraction. Morrow writes, "Abstract: that is the word I always associate with her: abstract, abstracted, abstractedly, and then the variants, such as absently, and absent-minded, and now, of course, in this endless aftermath, with the clangour of a wholly new connotation, just: absent" (*Athena* 47). Here, however, we see just how much his perspective has shifted since the first novel. In *The Book of Evidence*, Freddie reads a real life woman in terms of abstract art objects. Here, however, he invents an abstract woman who becomes real for him. Suitably then, his narrative treatment of A. emphasizes her process of *becoming* and, by extension, Morrow's self-conscious process of creation. He envisions her as "unformed" and in a state of constant flux (*Athena* 159, 48). At one point, he describes her as "a pale glistening new creature I hardly recognized, as if she had just broken open the chrysalis and were resting a moment before the ordeal of unfolding herself into this new life I had given her. I? Yes: I. Who else was there to make her come alive?" (175). A. is much like an ekphrastic art object, narrated into being by a delusional Morrow. What we witness as readers is his attempted transformation of A. from an imagined, mythological creature to one that is fully realized in the external world.

Consequently, A. lacks the same kind of material presence that other characters in the novel have. Though Morrow suggests that she is indeed palpably present in his narrative world, going so far as to detail the nature of their sexual relationship, A. nonetheless exists on the periphery of the text. But for a brothel scene that smacks of an

invented sexual fantasy, she never interacts with anyone other than Morrow, and of course, the reader can only access her through Morrow's narrative. If anything, her presence is best described as being ghost-like: in her, both presence and absence unite. Thus, for Morrow, she is "my phantom" (61), and he recounts their "phantom dialogues" (81), their "flickering, phantom lives" (122), and the "fragile theatre of illusions" in which they played out their relationship (160). At one point, he tellingly claims that she is a "dolly" that he can dress as he pleases in his recollections (98), and she is "too real to be real, like one of those three-dimensional models that computers make" (161). In other words, Morrow sees her in terms of simulated human presences, giving rise to the question of her existence, or authenticity. A. is a fetish – an imagined receptacle for Morrow's desires, and much like the figures I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, she is symbolic of the female art object enlivened by its beholder. Further, A.'s pronounced exhibitionism sets her up as an object to be observed by the voyeuristic Morrow, who consistently frames her in the context of mirrors, windows, and even a spyglass. Thus, we are encouraged to see A. in terms of spectacle and simulation.

Most important, however, is A.'s relation to the absent Josie Bell of *The Book of Evidence*. At one point, A. claims to have had an identical twin sister who died; readers can assume that A. is indeed Josie's symbolic surrogate, and, rather suitably, Morrow's experience of A. clearly echoes his experience of Josie in the first novel of the trilogy. Recall, for instance, that Freddie constructs his crime as a failure of the imagination. He claims that he could kill Josie because, for him, she was not real. Iconic projection, as I have already shown, plays a central role in her unreality in that it allows Freddie to disconnect from his victim on the one hand, and on the other, it serves to highlight the

fact that the lowly maid does not comply with his aesthetic categorization of feminine 'reality.' For Freddie, art objects are more real than flesh and blood women, an idea that is epitomized in *Athena* where the imagined A. seems to take on a material life of her own.

It would seem that, through A., Morrow attempts to fulfill the impossible project that he sets out for himself after the murder: "my task now is to bring her back to life," he says of Josie (*Evidence* 215). In *Athena*, he says of A., "that was supposed to be my task: to give her life. Come live in me, I had said, and be my love. Intending, of course, whether I knew it or not, that I in turn would live in her" (223). Not only does Morrow here imply a continuation between Josie and A., but his perversion of Christopher Marlowe's "come live with me and be my love," suggests that A. is indeed a creature of his own making through whom he hopes to achieve some form of forgiveness. It is worth noting then that his invention of A. is the product of his guilt. Through her, he hopes to purge "the permanent, inexpungible, lifetime variety" of guilt from which he suffers (*Athena* 66). Thus, he thinks that art will provide him with the means of expunging the inexpungible. In this respect, A. represents the continuation of his failed project in *Ghosts*. Morrow explains that what he seeks is "Atonement. Redemption. That kind of thing. I was still in hell, you see, or purgatory at least, and you [A.] were one of the elect at whom I squinnied up yearningly as you paced the elysian fields in golden light" (*Athena* 67).

Because he failed to *see* Josie, in prison he tries to "imagine her from the start, from infancy" by piecing together the young girl's history from newspaper articles and photographs (*Evidence* 216). Because he is unsuccessful, in *Ghosts* he attempts to

resurrect the phantom Josie by refashioning Flora as her surrogate. This symbolic gesture of restitution, however, fails when Flora refuses to comply with Freddie's intent; thus, in *Athena*, rather than repeat his error and transpose Josie onto an already existent woman who will in all likelihood disappoint him, he attempts to imagine a new one into existence. A. *is* his project of reconstituting the dead Josie Bell; thus, Morrow's process of envisioning her constitutes a form of therapy.[31]

Rather suitably, then, A. allows him to perform a psychological return to the scene of his initial crime through their sadomasochistic relationship. At one point, Morrow claims that she asks him to re-enact the murder as a form of sexual play. "Hit me, hit me like you hit her," she says (*Athena* 171), and Morrow complies, claiming that "all the time something was falling away from me, the accretion of years, flakes of it shaking free and falling with each stylised blow that I struck" (175). Here, Morrow re-enacts his crime not as an event that is unfairly imposed upon a victim, but rather as an event actively desired by a willing participant; thus, he can shake off his guilt by refashioning Josie as a masochist. Rather than accept moral culpability, his twisted means of attaining his desired atonement requires that he artistically refigure his crime so as to downplay his responsibility.

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[31]Morrow's perverted attempt to have A. re-enact a more favourable interpretation of his crime is once again evidence of his continued attempt to distance himself from it. Thus, he variously attributes the crime to an anonymous figure: he claims that he once knew a man who killed a woman – or recalling it as though it were a fairy-tale, "like something out of the Brothers Grimm" (128) or a film. "The scene," he says, "is in black and white, scratched and jerky, as in an old newsreel. All is still for a moment, then the car rocks suddenly, violently, on its springs and a voice cries out in agony and anguish" (114). His cinematic aestheticization of his crime makes it less real to him, so that he is "always outside the car, never in it…for a second I was someone else, passing by and glancing in through the window of my self and recognizing nothing" (114). In his reconstruction of the murder as cinematic spectacle, he is a witness rather than a participant. Thus, his mediation of the event allows it to take on an air of unreality, so that he experiences once more the "dizzying sense of dislocation" (114) that was so central to his artistic experience of the murder in *The Book of Evidence*.

That he claims to tenderly kiss A.'s marks and bruises afterwards shows that he constructs his crime as a perverse form of affection – a fact that is emphasized by Morrow's equation of agony and ecstasy. Thus, when he strikes A., he says that she rolls her head back, "slack-mouthed in ecstasy like Bernini's St Theresa" (*Athena* 175). A Baroque sculptural masterpiece renowned for its depiction of the Saint's rapture as a "moment of orgasmic convulsion" (Schama 78), Gianlorenzo Bernini's *Ecstasy of St Theresa* famously mixes the mystical and the erotic.[32] Having just been penetrated by the angel's golden arrow, the Saint flings her head back in ecstatic transport. Her mouth is partially opened, her eyes are half-closed, and the folds of her habit suggest "her spasm of rapture" (Schama 125). Thus, in the sculpture we find both the sensual and the spiritual, a spectacle of pain and pleasure inexorably linked. By citing Bernini, Morrow links pain not only to desire but also to a transformative and transcendental religious experience suggestive of atonement and redemption.

He continues making this link when he points out that A. carries with her a photograph depicting a young man's execution by *lingchi*, or "death by a thousand cuts." From Morrow's detailed description of the image, we can assume that he refers to one of the photographs from Georges Bataille's *The Tears of Eros* – photos that Bataille says show the intersection of extreme pain and ecstatic transport. Like Bataille, Morrow is struck by the young man's expression:

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[32] St. Theresa is the sixteenth century Spanish nun and mystic who claimed to have especially aggressive religious visions and visitations, all of which she outlined in a book. In this work, "she tells of a moment of heavenly rapture, when an angel of the Lord pierced her heart with a golden flaming arrow, filling her with pain and yet with immeasurable bliss" (Gombrich, *Story* 333). Theresa describes this penetration as a moment of intense pain that nonetheless fills her with the sweetness of God's love. Of the artist, Gombrich writes, "He has deliberately cast aside all restraint, and carried us to a pitch of emotion which artists had so far shunned," depicting the Saint's face with an intensity which "until then was never attempted in art" (334).

His face was lifted and inclined a little to one side in an attitude at once

thoughtful and passionate, the eyes cast upward so that a line of white was

visible under the pupils; the tying of his hands had forced his shoulders

back and his knobbled, scrawny chest stuck out. He might have been

about to deliver himself of a stirring address or burst out in ecstatic song.

Yes, ecstasy, that's it, that's what his stancesuggested, the ecstasy of one

lost in contemplation of a transcendent reality far more real than the one in

which his sufferings were taking place. (*Athena* 176)

His account of the image echoes that of Bataille, who focuses on what he calls the

"ecstatic and voluptuous" expression on the face of the executed man (206). For Bataille,

the unexpected eroticism of the young man's expression exposes his suffering as a form

of transcendent bliss. The victim is transfigured by his extreme pain; pain is linked to

sacrifice, and sacrifice is in turn linked to exaltation. Thus, Bataille, like Morrow, sees in

this image of devastating pain the mingling of the mystical and the erotic.

Morrow's references to both Bernini and Bataille play an important role in his

project of atonement as they allow him to refashion his crime in terms of mystical

transcendence and desired erotic transport. Both examples demonstrate a symbolic

transcendence of the suffering physical body. This denial of the body means that Morrow

can articulate his crime as a perversion of artistic fashioning. Through murder, he has

allowed the lowly Josie Bell to achieve the transcendent artistic form of A., a woman who

is paradoxically more real to him than any flesh and blood creature. Morrow is, in other

words, the priest who has transformed the maid into a classical goddess, who is in turn

reflected in the paintings he studies. Thus, for Morrow, art is the means of mastery

through which he can force his own atonement.

V: Morrow's Project: Success or Failure?

Despite everything I know, despite all the things I have seen, and done, I persist in thinking of the world as essentially benign. I have no grounds for this conviction – I mean, look at the place – yet I cannot shake it off.
– Morrow

Morrow's project of reconstituting Josie Bell through A. ultimately fails, because, of

course, A. is herself imagined. Remarkably, however, many critics have resisted this

reading, suggesting that *Athena* ends with a strong sense of closure. Muller, for instance,

points to the "hopeful note" of the novel because the final image, *The Birth of Athena*, is

declared the "real thing" (32). Her claim is problematic in that it does not take into

consideration the narrative structure of the novel. It would seem that in place of a

catalogue description of the painting, we have *Athena* itself – a book outlining Morrow's

attempt to birth A. into existence through his imagination. Consequently, there is no way

of accessing the novel's only genuine painting. Furthermore, we have no guarantees that

The Birth of Athena is, in fact, genuine. Given the proliferation of questionable

attributions throughout the trilogy, how can anyone be sure of the image? In fact, the

entire trilogy has worked towards the revelation that there is no such thing as authenticity

in art. Consequently, the novel highlights not the hopeful possibility of art, but rather the

impossibility of grasping something real through the realm of representation. Imhof even

suggests that *The Birth of Athena* is subject to the same issues of fraudulence and fakery

as The Da's copies; at the conclusion of *Ghosts*, Felix reveals that Professor Kreutznaer

incorrectly verified the Vaublin of the Whitewater House collection as genuine – was he

referring to *Le monde d'or*, or could he have been referencing *The Birth of Athena*? Perhaps both paintings are part of Kreutznaer's legacy of deception. As Imhof points out, however, we have no way of verifying Felix's claim, but "it does not really matter. The point is that this little joke is part of the game" (233).

Thus, I would argue that Banville offers his reader's the *illusion* of closure as part of his own postmodern game. As I have already noted, Morrow writes what is ostensibly *Athena* in response to A.'s note, requesting that he write to her. That the novel loops back onto itself in this manner might seem to suggest that the hermeneutic circle of the narrative is closed. However, I would argue that in place of closure, we have only confusion and questions. Banville resists any such tidy resolution and interrogates the very possibility of closure within a world of representations. He resists providing his readers with a totalized vision of the text. For many critics, however, this is not the case. Muller, along with Moran and Imhof, for example, claims that Morrow has successfully imagined a woman in place of the one who was lost in *The Book of Evidence*. She writes, "A. eventually achieves the transformation of a female character from a statuesque or painterly representation into a fully-fledged, material, live body" (29). These critics, in fact, express the kind of hope that characterizes Morrow himself. However, ultimately, such closure is not in keeping with the narrative trajectory that Banville has already established in the course of the trilogy.[33]

D'Hoker similarly points out that at the end of the novel, Morrow distinguishes between the "she who is gone…lost to me forever" and "this other, who steps out of my

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[33]The novel therefore illustrates what Hutcheon calls postmodernism's "self-consciously multiple endings" or "resolutely arbitrary closure" (59). She explains that "The nineteenth-century structures of narrative closure (death, marriage, neat conclusions) are undermined by those postmodern epilogues that foreground how, as writers and readers, we *make* closure" (59). Banville's *Athena* functions in a similar manner.

head and goes hurrying off along the sunlit pavements to do I don't know what. To live"
(*Athena* 233). She takes this claim to mean that Morrow distinguishes between the real
A., who is beyond his grasp, and his fictional version of her, which has stepped beyond
his narrative reach by the end of the novel. Thus, Morrow acknowledges that he cannot
forever contain A. in his tale, but rather must let her go so that she can exist apart from
him. Consequently, for D'Hoker, "Freddie is probably right in pronouncing, in the last
paragraph of the novel, his birthing mission a success" (*Visions* 168). D'Hoker's
adverbial qualifier is telling in that it expresses some doubt as to the status of Morrow's
mission. John Kenny similarly notes that "*Athena* can be taken as success of a kind"
(162). Such qualifications signal a conclusion that is not entirely straight-forward.
Despite the fact that Morrow might *seem* to have finally achieved an understanding of the
boundary between art and life, I argue that he has not. Readers must remember that we
are privy to his perspective alone and that he has a vested interest in portraying himself a
particular way. What *Athena* shows instead is an even deeper confusion between reality
and artistic illusion than we found in *The Book of Evidence*.

Banville himself has suggested that A. is but a product of Morrow's imagination –
the narrator's attempt to recompense the stolen life of Josie Bell. In an interview, the
author says of Freddie that

> in*Ghosts* he was in hell…But he came out of that somehow in order to
> remake this creature in the world by the force of the imagination. He had
> killed the maid in *The Book of Evidence* because of a failure of the
> imagination, in *Athena* his job was to make a creature by the force of the
> imagination, by a triumph of the imagination. He fails, of course – you

can't make a human being. There's no way of replacing real life. The

moral predicament that he finds himself in is irredeemable – once you kill

a human being, there's no way of atoning for it, there's no redemption.

(Freiburg 37)

If *Athena* ends with a greater degree of certainty, it is only the certainty of uncertainty –

the certainty that Morrow's longed-for redemption is impossible through art. Thus,

McMinn summarizes the novel as Morrow's "humbled confession of his hopeless

susceptibility to the power of images" (*Supreme*131). Though Morrow might see himself

as successful, believing that art has provided him with a means of both absolution and

mastery, the careful reader recognizes that this is but an extension of the delusions he has

maintained throughout the trilogy. In fact, his failure is all the more poignant because he

does not see it for what it is, so strong is his conviction in art.

In the trilogy, we find art that is uncertain and ambiguous, art that clouds

Freddie's moral judgment and his perception of reality. Paintings are consistently called

into question, and through Freddie we witness the complexity of the encounter between

the conflicted postmodern self and the art object. Despite his repeated and misguided

attempts to ground his search for self in images, paintings represent a site of uncertainty

and therefore cannot comfort a hopeful Freddie.   Rather, they can only offer him the

deceptive illusion of comfort. That he cannot help but read the paintings of *Athena* in

terms of his own subjective experiences is a sign of his effort to ground himself in these

pictures; however, rather than stabilize him, these images come to represent his loss of

control. That Freddie engages in Pygmalionesque acts of creation through both his

narrative and his imagining of A. into existence is significant, for such acts represent his

attempt to transform himself into an artist who can in turn create and substantiate a stable self. That he fails is even more significant, for it means that we can read the trilogy as a failed *künstlerroman*. Here is a portrait of the failed artist and of an art that can offer neither the possibility of rehabilitation nor an avenue to selfhood.

Each of the books charts the failure of the identities Freddie has forged for himself through art. Because he longs for a sense of self that accords with traditional models, he is fated to fail. Postmodernism does not allow for the fantasy of a coherent and unified self. Instead, Freddie finds multiple selves in a state of constant flux – a model of identity that is mirrored in the unstable artworks he so admires. What the trilogy shows is that these are parallel projects: the search for the self and the desire to fixate art are inexorably tied for Freddie. Thus, both are subject to the difficulties of representation: the problematics of copies, forgeries, and fakes all come to bear on the category of identity, a fact that is central to my next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: I SPY

The Spy as Art

Spies, you are lights in state, but of base stuff,
Who, when you've burnt yourselves down to the snuff,
Stink and are thrown away. End fair enough.
 – Ben Jonson

Life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the
crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify.
 – Erving Goffman

Art history, as represented by Banville, is a field of study fraught by uncertainty. In his

Frames Trilogy, the author explores the difficulty of determining an artwork's

authenticity. Is *Le monde d'or* a misattributed fake? Is *The Birth of Athena* authentic?

That Banville deliberately avoids any definitive answers and undercuts any assertions of

expertise gestures towards the image's status as infinitely interpretable under

postmodernism. I would argue that the uncertainty of art, its status as an open signifier,

makes it a prime symbol of postmodernism's urge to dismantle any totalized systems of

meaning. In this chapter, I examine the spy as a figure that encapsulates these same

postmodern principles. Inflected by ambiguity, and by necessity multiple and

provisional, the spy is a distinctly postmodern figure, representing a world that has

destabilized long-held cultural 'certainties.' Underwriting the spy, then, is an

epistemological ambiguity: his success depends, in part, upon his ability to install

traditional assumptions regarding the categories of knowledge, truth, and allegiance,

while secretly subverting them. In this respect, the spy is much like the artworks that I

explore in this dissertation. Though the canvas and the secret agent might *seem* coherent

and transparent, they offer but the illusion of order. In this chapter, then, I examine the

spy *as* art and the significant role that visual representations play in the inscription of the spying self.

Under postmodernism, the same adjectives apply to art and the secret agent: both are hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, and uncertain. Forced to repeatedly reinvent himself, the spy's process of self-inscription means that he performs a fundamental decentering of the subject. Due to the masks and disguises he assumes, the self is continuously deferred. Thus, the spy represents a movement away from notions of origin and uniqueness; however, the secret agents I examine in this chapter attempt to counter this destabilization through art. Consequently, art objects become part of the drive to generate a system to order experience in an otherwise chaotic cloak-and-dagger world. Of course, the narratives themselves challenge such assumptions: the metaphor of art ironically serves as an expression of postmodernism's decentering rather than the drive to unify. Art, therefore, becomes a tool of subversion.

Central to the connection between the spy and the visual art object is the concept of misattribution, which I explore at length in this chapter. As we saw in The Frames Trilogy, artistic misattributions destabilize the art object by throwing its provenance and authenticity under question. In this regard, the misattributed artwork signifies the sometimes arbitrary practice of artistic interpretation – the image is an interpretable object, thereby in keeping with postmodernism's emphasis on the contingency of meaning.

Beyond the world of fiction, art history is itself inflected by stories of misattributions, of forgeries and fakes.[1] Famous forgers such as Han van Meegeren, Elmyr de Hory, John Myatt, Tom Keating, and Eric Hebborn managed to fool the art world for years on end, successfully presenting their own often mediocre paintings as the work of the great masters. As one might expect, some of these forgers were motivated by money; however, others were notably driven by the desire to denigrate the art world and embarrass supposed art experts. Most notorious among them is van Meegeren, who through his Vermeer forgeries sought to expose the arbitrary nature of the art world. After his exposure, his paintings, which had previously commanded enormous sums and museum crowds, were considered worthless. "The picture has not changed," van Meegeren said, "What has?" (qtd. in Dolnick 291). What the forger sought to demonstrate was that the value of the art object was not intrinsic but rather contingent – dependent upon the opinions of the experts who were themselves fundamentally flawed. As Edward Dolnick writes in *The Forger's Spell*, "It is a striking feature of the art world that experts have little choice but to put enormous faith in their own opinions" (239). While these are rather reductive readings of art, they nonetheless highlight the art object's status as hermeneutically unstable and the field of art history as one that is consequently problematized by uncertainties.

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[1]For an extended discussion of this theme, see Frank Arnau's aptly named 1961 study *Three Thousand Years of Deception in Art and Antiques*, where the critic examines art's long history of deception, focussing on the category of forgery and fakery.

Paradigmatic in this respect is the recent controversy surrounding *The Colossus*, long thought to be one of Francisco Goya's masterpieces.[2] In January of 2009, the Prado officially removed Goya's name from the painting, believing the image to be the product of the artist's assistant, Ascensio Julia. The contentious declassification of the painting sparked a rather heated debateregarding the value of the artwork.[3] On the one hand, some claimed that the issue of authorship mattered little, that the work did not cease to be a valuable and powerful image. In an article for *The Bloomberg News*, art critic Martin Gayford asked, "does it really matter who painted a picture?" On the other hand, many claimed that authorship is a central concern in art. In his article for *The Times*, Ben Macintyre asserted, for instance, that "It matters hugely who painted *The Colossus*." Because our beliefs regarding certain works are contextually constructed, claims Macintyre, the provenance of an artwork changes our experience of it. He explains, "A work of art does not cease to be beautiful because its authorship changes, but it ceases to be precious in the same way…Context matters above all." In *The Forger's Art,* Denis Dutton makes a similar claim: the value of an art object is significantly tied to its origins

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[2]The painting depicts a naked giant whose figure dominates the dark composition. Towering over a mountain range and covered by nothing but clouds, the giant appears to be striding off into the distance while figures in a nearby valley flee in panic.

[3]Many responded to the announcement with outrage. In her article "The Prado's Giant Leap to a Shaky Conclusion," art historian Barbara Rose, for instance, calls the decision "highly questionable" as well as "flawed and inadequate," and numerous other critics, from Fernando Checa, the former director of the Prado, to Nigel Glendinning, a Goya expert, have disputed the museum's claims. Nonetheless, questions about the painting's attribution have circulated for over a decade. In 1993, when the painting was cleaned, Manuela Mena, the chief curator of the Prado's 18th Century Painting collection, began to express doubts regarding the work's authorship. When the painting was removed from the lofty walls of the museum, the "poverty of the technique, of its light and color" (Tremlett) became obvious. Mena argued that the coarseness of the giant's musculature, the insecure brushstrokes of the artist, and his inferior materials indicated that this was not the work of the bold master. Furthermore, x-rays of the painting revealed what appeared to be the initials 'A.J.' in the lower left-hand corner. Though Glendinning maintains that this is in fact the number '18,' which corresponds to a work called "un gigante" in an inventory of Goya's possessions drawn up in 1812, others have taken the initials as evidence of Julia's authorship.

because this is what determines the work's place within the historical development of art.[4] Issues of authorship and attribution are therefore central to the context upon which the story of art depends. For Macintyre, such considerations are especially important in "an age of fakery, of unreal 'reality' television, anonymous web commentary and fraudulent 'news.'" Here, he figures the genuine art object as a symbol of authenticity and originality in a world otherwise riddled by inauthentic copies. In this respect, Macintyre's view is not entirely unlike Freddie's, whose nostalgia for a stable world is enacted through his engagement with art. And like the characters I examine in this chapter, Macintyre connects the issue of artistic authorship to morality.

It is the question of trust, he declares, that makes forgery "so pernicious," and he rather boldly asserts that "a society that ceases to care about authorship is in danger of losing its moral bearings." Of course, *The Colossus* is not a forgery – it is a painting that has been mistakenly attributed to one of the Old Masters; however, Macintyre's conflation of misattribution and forgery gestures towards the uncertain status of the art object and the moral dimensions underwriting this status.

The reevaluation of *The Colossus* demonstrates more than anything the often uncertain status of the artwork.[5] That we must renegotiate our relationship with it signals

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[4]Dutton argues that every work of art – whether a painting, a sculpture, a symphony, or a dance – involves "an element of performance" (175). Every work of art, he claims, "is an artifact, the product of human skills and techniques…As performances, works of art represent the ways in which artists solve problems, overcome obstacles, make do with available materials…the work of art has a human origin, and must be understood as such" (176). Thus, each art object is the product of its circumstances and must be considered in light of its conditions. Aesthetic appreciation is therefore in part dependent upon these circumstances, says Dutton. He cites John Dewey, who, in *Art as Experience*, notes that if we discover that a primitive artefact we have come to enjoy is in fact an "accidental natural product," this discovery changes our appreciation of the object, which is itself "inherently connected with the experience of making" (qtd. in Dutton 176).

[5]Moreover, the varied interpretations of the painting itself gesture towards the art object's instability. Long before the attribution was questioned, critics were debating what *exactly* the painting depicted. An article

its hermeneutic instability and its status as a work in flux. Art critic Adrian Searle notes,

"As the Colossus wades through the world, so historians and critics – and everyone else

who looks at the painting – have to make a way through its multiple meanings, its endless

mutability. The question of authorship has now compounded those questions."

Misattributed works speak to the hermeneutic instability of art objects and to their status

as open signifiers. The spy is grounded on a similar premise; indeed, his success is

dependent upon his being misread, and espionage narratives consequently hinge on the

discourse of misattribution and of exposure.

* * *

I begin this chapter by providing an historical framework for constructions of the spy in

section one. Here I argue that the queer spy, even more than the heterosexual secret

agent, is not a fixed individual subject, but a flurry of contextualized identities –

contextualized by issues of sexual preference, of class and social role, and of education

and nationality. In addition to exploring how the queer spy challenges the traditional

notion of the subject's unity, I discuss the real-life spy Anthony Blunt – art historian,

homosexual, and betrayer of his country's secrets. The subject of the fictional treatments

of the gay spy that I examine in the remainder of this chapter, Blunt offers an interesting

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in *The Art Tribune* captures the uncertainty that is typical of scholarship on the work: Powell and Ressort
ambiguously state that the painting represents "either Napoleon, Ferdinand VII, Godoy or war itself."
Mena and Glendenning nevertheless claim that the giant is Spain itself, but not everyone agrees. The
difficulty of knowing definitively on which side of the conflict the giant stands indicates the doubts
surrounding the work. Furthermore, Searle notes that the date of the painting is also unclear: "Is it 1808,
the year Napoleon's troops seized Barcelona in the east, and Pamplona in the north of Spain, the year King
Charles IV is forced to abdicate, and Napoleon takes the crown?...Or was it painted in 1812? That was the
year Goya's wife Josefa died, the French were defeated in Salamanca and Wellington entered Madrid,
where Goya painted him." Thus, the ambiguity of the work extends beyond the problem of its authorship.

line of inquiry into the relationship between art and espionage. With this in mind, my second section focuses on two plays by Alan Bennett, both of which address Cold War politics and the infamous Cambridge Five – the spy-ring of which Blunt was a part. Through the first of these plays, "An Englishman Abroad," I explore the performative dimensions of national identity and the spying self. The second play, however, allows me to examine more explicitly the connection between the secret agent and art. In Bennett's "A Question of Attribution," painting provides the metaphorical framework that foregrounds issues of interpretation and attribution as they apply to the secret agent. Here, the spy – Blunt himself – is analogous to the visual art object, and underwriting issues of aesthetic attribution is the process of political meaning-making. In the third and final section of this chapter, I examine how Banville takes up the metaphor of artistic attribution in Bennett's play and applies it to his thinly disguised fictional version of Blunt in *The Untouchable*. In the novel, Blunt becomes Victor Maskell, through whom readers are invited to see the spy through the lens of art. Here, the secret agent is a figure informed by the misattributions, forgeries, and fakes so common to the discourse of art history.

PART ONE: An Historical Context

I: Spooks: Spies and Subjectivity

Secret agent man, secret agent man,
They've given you a number and taken away your name.
– Johnny Rivers

The uncertainty of art finds its parallel in the uncertainty of the spy.[6] Thus, inBennett's

"A Question of Attribution" and in Banville's *The Untouchable*, the artwork is a

conflicted space that represents the epistemological uncertainty of the spy trade. Looking

at the issues of authorship and attribution through the distorting lens of espionage allows

these authors to foreground issues of representation and authenticity as they apply to both

the spy and the art object. The spy, then, becomes like the artwork: both are infinitely

interpretable representations of questionable provenance. The difficulty of locating the

art object's meaning finds its parallel in the problem of locating identity within the secret

agent's labyrinth of disguises.

Both art and espionage engage in a currency of signs; appearances are of the

utmost importance. The spy problematizes the nature of the referent and its relation to

the real thing, for he must be one thing and yet seem another.[7] Thus, the spy highlights

the arbitrary relation between being and seeming, and he demonstrates the difficulty of

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[6]Interesting to note here is that the British colloquialism for "spy" is "spook" – a designation that echoes the peripheral and haunting status of the uncertain subject in Banville's *Ghosts*. Like the unnamed narrator in that work, the spook is a figure that is constructed as insubstantial and diffuse. I therefore suggest that the models of subjectivity in these two works are parallel.

[7]I use the male pronoun throughout simply because my focus in this chapter is on the figure of the male spy.

reading appearances.[8]In art, we find a parallel problem, particularly in terms of the

misattributed art object. Consider *The Colossus* in this context: the painting's long

established status has come under question. In search of an answer, experts have

scrutinized the material object, from the nature of its brush strokes to the chemical

composition of the paint, yet the painting refuses to tell us definitively the story of its

origins. As one of the characters in "A Question of Attribution" says, "Paintings make no

claims…They do not purport to be anything other than paintings. It is we, the beholders,

who make claims for them, attribute a picture to this artist or that" (342-3). The Prado's

investigation has not silenced critics; rather, it has raised more questions.[9] Based upon its

appearance, then, we cannot know *for certain* whether the painting is by Goya or not.

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[8]Seeming one thing while being another, the spy's success depends upon his ability to uphold a convincing façade. We can therefore read the secret agent as a figure who represents a rupture in understanding. Central to this rupture, of course, are appearances, not only in that the spy must *seem* to be something he is not, but also in that his role is dependent upon the threatening power of the *look*. The spy, as his title indicates, is a thoughtful observer. A useful book by Brett F. Woods, *Neutral Ground: A Political History of Espionage Fiction* (2008), traces the history of espionage to Sun Tzu's 2000 year-old assertion that "Knowledge of the enemy's dispositions can only be obtained from other men" (qtd. in Woods 6). The original meaning of the Chinese character for 'spy' was 'a chink,' 'a crack' or 'crevice'; Woods explains that "From any of these meanings one can derive the sense of a peephole, so it would seem that the earliest Chinese conception of a spy is, very simply, one who peeps through a crack" (6). The spy's eyes are not only his instruments but also the weapons of espionage. Consider, for instance, Ian Fleming's description of James Bond's eyes: they are variously "cold," "sharp," and "penetrating" – all adjectives suggestive of danger. In "From a View to a Kill," Fleming writes of a rival spy that "A red spark burned behind the black, aimed muzzle of the eyes" (3) – here, the spy's eyes are depicted as firing pistols that are dissociated from the spy himself. Such constructions of the spying eye speak to Foucault's discourse of surveillance whereby the act of looking implies an authority on the part of the beholder.

[9]Unsurprisingly, the authenticity of many artworks is the subject of extensive discussions and debates within the art community, particularly when it comes to the Old Masters. Mena, for instance, claimed at a 2005 conference that during her time at the Prado she had "seen eight thousand works attributed to Goya and only five were authentic" ("Manuela"). Most famous in this regard, however, is Rembrandt. Consider the Rembrandt Research Project: in the 1970s, a team of esteemed Rembrandt experts were assembled to exhaustively examine each of the works attributed to the artist so as to determine their authenticity. This was a monumental task considering that at the beginning of the twentieth century, almost 1000 paintings had been attributed to the master – an astonishing output by any standards. Three volumes of research later, only 280 of the original works have been identified as genuine Rembrandts.   What the project shows is that the so-called static artwork can in fact change over time as its context is reconsidered and its status called into question.

Both what it is and what it seems to be are fraught with uncertainty. Like the spy, *The Colossus* continues to occupy a rather ambiguous position.

In both art and espionage, we find a fundamental problematizing of authenticity. Spies are often forced to adopt and discard identities; thus, they dramatize the common fantasy of temporarily escaping the constraints of the self. However, this tendency to slip in and out of identities unsettles the issue of subjectivity for the secret agent's selfhood is much like an artwork that is in the process of being produced. So as to go undetected, the spy must create convincing representations of him or herself. The spy, then, epitomizes the process of identity construction. In *The Art of Self-Invention*, Joanne Finkelstein argues that all public identities are consciously created and carefully styled. Deception and invention are, she claims, integral to the demands of social life. As such, one's identity is in a state of constant renegotiation and alteration. In asking us to consider the performative nature of identity, Finkelstein clearly echoes the discourse of performance theory, and she would likely agree with Judith Butler's claim in *Gender Trouble* that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25). In other words, action creates identity rather than represents it; the self is constituted in the act of performing selfhood.

Such ideas define the discourse of subjectivity for postmodern theorists. For instance, Hutcheon claims that postmodernism interrogates "the humanist assumption of a unified self and an integrated consciousness" (xii), putting in its place a subject who is disconcertingly multiple. Such a claim is especially true of the spy, for his very success depends upon the persuasiveness of the identities he constructs. But because the spy

must *live* the disguise, the boundary between the self and the façade is in danger of erasure.

It is helpful to recall Baudrillard's well-known distinction between dissimulation and simulation here. "To dissimulate is to pretend not to have what one has," he writes, where "To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have. One implies a presence, the other an absence" ("Precession"96). He offers a useful example: a person who dissimulates illness merely pretends to be sick; a person who simulates illness, however, produces the symptoms of sickness and thus "threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" ("Precession" 96). The spy occupies a similarly ambiguous position, and as such it becomes difficult to distinguish between identities that are produced versus those that are 'authentic' – a fact that can account for the common turn from secret agent to double agent. Forced to pretend to be something he is not, the spy's role ends up becoming the spy's reality – fake sympathies become real as the boundary between conflicting views is blurred. Thus, the spy's identity is always in the process of being renegotiated.

Hutcheon characterizes postmodernism as a reaction against the totalizing patterns of humanist thought. Postmodernism, she claims, favours the "ex-centric, the off-center" (60); therefore, margins replace centrality, and ruptures replace uniformity. As she explains, "the contradictory nature of postmodernism involves its offering of multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts" (60). Put simply, it is an enterprise that fundamentally challenges the categories of unity and order, forcing us "to rethink margins and borders" as we "move away from centralization with its associated

concerns of origin, oneness" (58). Consequently, she proposes that the motto for postmodernism be "Hail to the Edges!" (58).

In postmodern thought, this concern with 'ex-centricity' naturally extends into its formulation of subjecthood. What we find are contextualized identities and decentered subjects. The fixed, unitary humanist subject gives way to a sense of selfhood that is ineluctably multiple and provisional. Thus, the adjectives of the ex-centric that Hutcheon lists in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* – "hybrid, heterogeneous, discontinuous, antitotalizing, uncertain" (59) – all apply to the postmodern subject. Often, the traditional humanist subject is undermined by postmodern narratives that foreground ex-centric models of subjecthood. For Kazuo Ishiguro and John Fowles, postmodern subjectivity is encapsulated by the figure of the artist who self-consciously draws our attention to the provisional and constructed nature of the narrative. For Jeanette Winterson and Angela Carter, the circus performer embodies the hybrid and marginal postmodern identity, for as Hutcheon notes, "the multi-ringed circus" is itself a "pluralized and paradoxical metaphor for a decentered world where there is only ex-centricity" (61). Alice Walker and Toni Morrison depict African-American women who defy the centered structures of class, gender, and race. Their marginal status is a critique of monolithic discourses that seek to centralize identity. These are all varied responses to the condition of ex-centric postmodern subjectivity.[10]

Amid these myriad responses, discussions of the spy are conspicuously absent. In his insightful study of twentieth-century espionage narratives, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture*, Allan Hepburn explores the spy's importance "as a locus for cultural fantasies"

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[10]For an extended discussion of this model of postmodern subjecthood, see chapter four, "Decentering the Postmodern: The Ex-Centric" of Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*.

(xv). He notes that the secret agent's identity is historically contingent rather than essentialized; however, Hepburn stops short of placing the spy in the discourse of postmodernism – an oversight that weakens his exploration of John Barth's *Sabbatical* and Joan Didion's *Democracy*. I should like to propose the spy – and more specifically, the queer spy – as a particularly apt example of the postmodern condition. The successful spy must be postmodern in order to survive. By necessity plural and provisional, the queer spy is one of the most important and yet overlooked figures of postmodernism. Because he must every day perform an inauthentic personality, the spy is an apt locus of postmodernity.

What I mean to stress here is that the postmodern nature of the secret agent invites an inquiry into the nature of subjectivity. To locate the self in the clandestine world of espionage is a challenging project, and the spies I examine engage, to different degrees of success, in an archaeological excavation of what Bennett's spy calls the "secret self" ("Question" 340). We find a well-known articulation of this buried sense of self in Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne series. The first book, *The Bourne Identity*, opens with the damaged body of a nameless amnesiac afloat in the Mediterranean. The body belongs to a CIA agent who is forced to puzzle out his identity from a series of clues; this is a quest narrative in which the hero is driven by the need to discover who he is. As Hepburn points out, readers are invited to think of Ludlum's hero as Jason Bourne; however, this is the name of a man whom he has killed on a previous mission. By assuming the persona of a dead man, the agent claims a symbolically nonexistent identity – an action he is to repeat on numerous occasions and which renders him, quite literally, a spook. The code names and aliases of the multiple personae he has assumed contribute to

the "fundamental obscurity of identity" in the novel (Hepburn 4). As Hepburn explains, "His multiple names indicate that no single representation of a straightforward self exists" (4). The self remains inaccessible, classified, or unknown here. Moreover, as a narrative device, Bourne's memory loss amplifies the spy's conflicted subjectivity.

Especially telling is a scene in the film version of the novel, where the agent contemplates his mirror image in an attempt to discover and define his identity.   He asks it, "Do you know who I am? Then cut the goddamn bullshit and tell me." Here, the image is both 'you' and 'I,' signaling his inability to distinguish between self and other. This confusion is compounded by the fact that Bourne speaks these words in a foreign tongue. Language is normally considered a register of identity; but for the spy, of course, it is yet another dimension of disguise. According to Hepburn, "facility with language taps into a semiotics of duplicity: if the voice signifies authenticity, then the spy, speaking in a foreign tongue, is never just himself, but an unrecognizable alien lodged within a recognizable body" (13). Bourne looks into the mirror, hoping to identify himself; however, the jubilant moment of Lacanian recognition is denied to him. The mirror fails to provide any answers. Bourne paradoxically adopts a foreign 'mask' in the attempt to discover who he is. This moment signifies the spy's inability to escape the labyrinth of his own dissembling. Because his true identity is alien to him – both his image and his tongue fail to disclose his authentic self – Bourne is always already someone else.

Though *The Bourne Identity* offers an extreme version of the subjective uncertainty most spies experience, other works nonetheless encourage us to consider how, and if, identity can be anchored in the façades of the spy trade. The atmosphere of

tension and fear that is characteristic of espionage fiction inflects the paranoia of subjectivity often found in these works and in postmodernism itself; the spy's multiple personae denote the need to rethink conventional assumptions regarding subjectivity and authenticity. In this respect, espionage is a potent analogue for art. Like the artwork, the spy is problematically poised between truth and representation. Originals and their copies become confused, disrupting epistemological binaries.

II: The Spy Who Loved Me(n): The Queer Spy

In my opinion, based upon close observation, the majority of homosexuals have some slight characteristic that will betray their inclinations to an astute and experienced observer: an unusual inflection of the voice, a movement of the hands or shoulders, a characteristic walk.
– Donald Webster Corey, The Homosexual in America

Because he encapsulates the kind of destabilization so typical of postmodernism, the spy is a distinctly postmodern figure. He is a figure that highlights the disjunction between being and seeming, a figure that problematizes the question of authenticity and that is by definition ex-centric, a figure whose varied disguises render him hybrid and provisional rather than constant and concrete – these are all characteristics that underwrite the secret agent's postmodernity. And, these are all qualities that are doubly true of the homosexual spy, for his sexuality adds yet another dimension to the complicated questions of identity and subjectivity.

The gay spy takes refuge in what Hepburn calls "the double closets of sexuality and political affiliation" (188) – he is doubly inflected by disguise and therefore occupies a unique position, for his peripheral status allows him to cross both political and sexual barriers seamlessly. In his ability to pass for and perform in multiple roles, the homosexual spy is rendered invisible. Moreover, in the works I examine the homosexual

is often coded as the perfect candidate for espionage, for a life of sexual concealment has primed him for the furtive world of spying. Having to pass as heterosexual, he is always already a secret agent, performing a part that allows him to go undetected in society as a whole. That he should therefore make the transition into espionage is unsurprising. If anything, homosexuality garners the spy credibility.

In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers a helpful exploration of queerness. She defines 'queer' as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8). David Halperin similarly notes the fluidity of the queer identity when he writes in *Saint Foucault*that "Queer is by definition *whatever* is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers*. It is an identity without an essence" (62). In this respect, all spies can be considered at least a little queer; however, the gay spy in particular challenges normative categorization by performing various parts, some of which may appear to conflict with one another. What we find in the place of essentialist, heteronormative identities are evasive and unfixed notions of selfhood. In this respect, queer identity finds its parallel in performance theory.

Consider for instance Victor Maskell, the narrator and primary spy of Banville's *The Untouchable*, who consistently characterizes his life in terms of performance. Theatrical metaphors abound in the novel. Maskell makes parallels between his life and drawing room comedies (82), Hollywood film (116, 121, 184), melodrama (148, 184), and the music hall (190). He notes the "Sarah Bernhardt pose" (85) and operatic laugh (87) of a woman and the "theatrical intensity" (101) of a colleague. He continuously

points out the stagy posturing of his friends, and he sees himself as an actor on the stage, for not only does he play at political affiliation, he also plays the part of a heterosexual. Married to the sister of the man he secretly loves, Maskell must carry out his trysts surreptitiously. He depicts his nuclear family as a normative cover, noting his distance from his wife and children repeatedly. Thus, the appearance of heterosexuality is but another mask he adopts – for, as his name suggests, he has many. Interestingly, Maskell's references to his duplicity are rather vague; he rarely specifies whether he is referring to his closeted homosexuality or his status as a secret agent (or both). He complains at one point, "My life had become a kind of hectic play-acting in which I took all the parts" (286), and shortly thereafter he ambiguously notes "the theatricality and peril of the double life" (287). It is unclear to which of his double lives he refers, but for Maskell politics and sexuality are often interchangeable, for both necessitate a similar kind of secrecy. John Cawelti and Bruce Rosenberg articulate this idea in *The Spy Story*, where they claim that all clandestine behaviour is grounded in subversion. Thus, espionage is akin to "secret love" for they both require similar practices: "secret communications, hidden rendezvous, complicated alibis, and elaborate disguises" (13). Hepburn similarly notes that "Both require the performance of deeds, since identity and action do not inevitably reinforce each other" (215).

The slippage between Maskell's numerous roles and varied identities renders him queer in Halperin's sense. He transgresses normative social boundaries by resisting simple categorization and therefore invites us to consider the performative dimensions of selfhood. Thus, in Maskell, we find that espionage and queerness are analogous in that both challenge the concretization of identity. As Hepburn points out, however, what

Banville does here is reconfigure the role of homosexuality in narratives of intrigue, for historically the relationship between these two categories has been framed in terms of homophobic discourses.

In his discussion of the link between security and sexuality, Hepburn notes that traditional espionage fiction grounds duplicity in sexual behaviour. The heterosexual male spy is conventionally marked by his separation of work and sex. Though renowned for his sexual prowess, James Bond, for instance, approaches sex mechanistically, refusing to become emotionally involved so that he is less likely to betray his secrets. We never witness Bond lose sexual control to the point of forgetting himself; though women routinely betray him, he never betrays his secrets to them. Furthermore, Hepburn points out that Bond's sexual pleasure is always displaced onto his female partners; we are never privy to his emotions, rather we assume his satisfaction through his partners. In contrast, the gay spy "is forbidden to separate sex from politics," for he is "assumed to be *too* engrossed in sensual pleasures" (Hepburn 190). Thus, the queer spy is often figured as being "leaky" (188) – to use Hepburn's fairly colourful term – meaning that his supposedly perverse sexuality makes him prone to letting important information slip and also renders him more susceptible to blackmail.

Information leaks are central to the discourse of espionage; consequently, during the Second World War a particular emphasis was placed on the importance of silence. American propaganda from the period equated silence with security. Edward T. Grigware's posters implored the public to "Keep Mum," while Albert Dorne's "Somebody blabbed! Button your lip!" posters, which featured artfully drawn images of dead Allied soldiers, warned that talking was tantamount to murder. The house of

Seagram's "Loose lips sink ships" series furnished the US Office of War Information

with a now well-known slogan. Leon Helguera's famous 1943 poster featured Uncle

Sam himself holding a finger to his lips with the caption: "I'm counting on you! Don't

discuss: troop movements – ship sailings – war equipment." Quite suitably, one of the

poster's Soviet counterparts depicted a plain-clothes Russian civilian making the same

gesture with the caption "Don't talk too much!". Such images created an atmosphere of

paranoia; because the enemy was always listening, one could betray his or her country

without even realizing it. The loose lips, careless talk, and idle words of the civilian

could transform him or her into an unknowing agent of espionage. This fear of

information leakage became even more pronounced during the Cold War when secret

intelligence was the currency of both the West and the Soviet Bloc.

According to Hepburn, women were commonly figured as the precursors of the

leaky queer spy – indeed, many of the 'silence as security' posters feature women as the

consummate blabbers and intrigue narratives often depict the female body as a site of

paranoid transfer. Because she is willing to bed men of different ideological persuasions,

the woman functions as a conduit: the act of sexual exchange is tantamount to the

exchange of sensitive information. Hepburn cites the 1962 Profumo Affair as an

historical example of this sexual paranoia:

> British Secretary of State for War John Profumo slept with prostitute
>
> Christine Keeler, who also slept with the Soviet naval attaché, Yevgeny
>
> Ivanov…Allegations that information was transacted across, or through,
>
> the body of the prostitute flew about theHouse of Parliament and

eventually contributed to Prime Minster Harold Macmillan's resignation

in November 1963. (213)

The Profumo Affair dramatizes the fear that sexual behaviour can constitute a severe

threat to national security. In this instance, the body of the female prostitute acts as a

medium through which secrets, and sexual fluids, are leaked. Classified information

passes between two bodies like a sexually transmitted disease.[11] However, as Hepburn

points out, such representations of heterosexual leakage ended up being "foisted off onto

homosexuals" (213).

In this context, it is helpful to consider Robert Corber's work on the cultural and

sexual politics of the Cold War. In both *In the Name of National Security* and

Homosexuality in Cold War America, Corber points out that issues of gender and sexual

identity were directly tied to the discourse of national security. Put simply, during the

Cold War, the homosexual subject was constructed as a security risk. Thus, the various

medical experts who testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee

claimed that homosexuals "were susceptible to blackmail by Soviet agents because they

were emotionally unstable" (Corber,*Name* 8), and the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

emphasized the conspiratorial nature of Communism by comparing it to "the gay male

subculture": secretive party members could recognize one another through a unique

system of social and linguistic codes in the same way "alleged homosexuals made contact

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[11]This fear of the sexual body as a site of contagion was especially evident in American propaganda posters from the 1940s. Charles Casa's "Easy to get…" poster featured a prostitute leaning against a brick wall on a deserted street corner. Beneath her invitingly positioned figure are the words "syphilis and gonorrhea." Many posters of the period similarly featured heavily made-up women with cigarettes dangling from their lips as dangerous carriers of disease. Most famous perhaps, is the anonymous 1940 poster with the caption "She may look clean, but…". Unlike other images of the time, this poster featured the conservative girl next door as a possible site of contagion. Though the text warned against "pick-ups, 'good time' girls, prostitutes" as carriers of venereal disease, the image warned against the lure of the average girl. In the wartime climate of paranoia, the body of any sexual woman became the possible site of infection.

when looking for sex" (Corber,*Name* 19-20). Homosexual subjectivity was both pathologized and politicized; under the auspices of the Cold War, the American government placed the homosexual identity at odds with American patriotism. Moreover, Corber notes the pivotal role that Alfred Kinsey's 1948 study*Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* played in the politicization of homosexuality as a left-wing 'activity' during the 1950s. Kinsey's scientific claim that gay and straight men were indistinguishable from one another was used to justify the political threat that the homosexual supposedly posed. In his report, Kinsey argued that homosexuality was not limited to any age group, social strata, or geographic location, and he refuted stereotypes that relied upon clear social signifiers of homosexuality, such as the "upper crust accent, effeminate mannerisms, impeccable taste" that had distinguished gay men in film noir narratives (Corber,*War* 10). In rendering the homosexual invisible, however, Kinsey inadvertently contributed to the homophobic climate of the Cold War. His ideas were used to exploit fears of Communist infiltration and subversion. As Corber explains, "The possibility that gay men could escape detection by passing as straight linked them in the Cold War political imaginary to the Communists who were allegedly conspiring to overthrow the government" (*War* 11).

Sedgwick similarly notes that "metaphors of penetration and invasion [were used] to describe the danger of both communism and queerness" (*Novel* 331). In the wake of this misguided alignment, gays were barred from holding government positions lest they betray the nation's secrets. As Hepburn claims, homosexuality was considered by some to be "a species of treason" (193), and was indeed treated so during the HUAC trials, where queerness, like Communism, constituted an activity considered 'Un-American.'

After all, to be gay in the 1950s was to be always already "an illegal subject" (Hepburn 194).

In light of these concerns, what becomes clear is that, like the female body, which was relegated the role of both sexual and political conduit in conventional espionage fiction, the queer body became an overdetermined site of paranoia. As Hepburn explains,

> What underlies these Cold War fears seems to be the fear that men from different classes, professions, and nationalities *get along with each other* in a bar or a bordello. They chat; they mingle. By mingling, they transgress properties of who belongs with whom. They cross boundaries of race, class, region, and military rank. In effect, they *leak* across borders. (193)

Hepburn's notion of queer *leakage* situates the gay man as a direct threat to the logic of containment so central to Western policies during the Cold War. While the West was trying to reinstate ideological boundaries in order to secure itself against the penetrative force of Communism, the homosexual represented the dangerous blurring of these boundaries.

According to the logic of the Cold War, then, homosexuals posed a double threat. Predisposed to ex-centricity and inherently leaky, not only is the homosexual likelier to spill his country's secrets, but he is also likelier to do so effectively. Having to 'pass' as heterosexual, he is already living on the margins and well-practiced in the art of appearances. "The queer spy has the benefit of being always already double," writes Hepburn. "He conforms and rebels; he bears secrets and acts clean-cut; he pays his taxes and commits crimes" (215) – thus, he "exposes the limits of heterosexual maleness within

the plots and counterplots of espionage" (187). Rather than rendering him vulnerable, the

leakiness of the queer spy frees him from constraints. In espionage fiction of the past,

this fluidity has been a source of anxiety. The Cold War assumption that the gay spy is

morally bankrupt and therefore more susceptible to, and more skilled in, double-dealing

is grounded in the homophobic paranoia of the period. More contemporary works,

however, invite us to consider the queer spy as a figure that challenges epistemological

assumptions within the national discourse of espionage. As Hepburn explains,

"Sexuality, whether gay or straight, does not destabilize political commitments.

Sexuality merely amplifies instabilities already present within political commitments"

(190).

In the works I examine, homosexuality and espionage, in their state of

slipperiness, become a lens through which to consider artistic representations. Bennett

and Banville situate the discourse of doubled disguises in the world of art, where fakes

and misattributions threaten to disrupt what some see as the quiet certainty of art objects.

Thus, the conspiratorial air and distorting effects of espionage are deflected onto

artworks. In both, we discover the fear of deceptive appearances and the need to question

long held assumptions. Hybrid, heterogeneous, and evasive, the queer spy and the

uncertain art object seek to undermine traditional conceptions of identity, authenticity,

and epistemology. In doing so, they foreground the inescapable difficulty of determining

what is *real* in a culture of representation. The spy and the misattribution are therefore

parallel in their provisionality. As Macintyre notes in his article on *The Colossus*, "The

undetected fake and misattributed work are the spies of the art world, apparently

respectable, with good credentials and thoroughly vetted, but not what they claim to be.

To accept the imposter as genuine – or simply not to care one way or the other – is to collude in the sort of treachery that Sir Anthony Blunt understood so well."

III: The Man From C.O.U.R.T.A.U.L.D.: The Many Faces of Anthony Blunt

The atmosphere in Cambridge was so intense and the enthusiasm for any anti-fascist activity was so great that I made the biggest mistake of my life.
– Anthony Blunt's memoir

Who was the historical Anthony Blunt?

This deceptively simple question is a difficult one to answer, for Blunt has perplexed many. Because he occupies a central place in a controversial episode of British history, he has been the subject of numerous biographies and published accounts, yet for the most part he has remained resolutely mysterious – a subject of speculation and gossip. A homosexual, a renowned art historian, the keeper of the Queen's pictures, and the most notorious British spy of the twentieth century, Blunt embodies for many the deplorable doubleness for which the queer secret agent is known. Though he was the fourth member of the infamous Cambridge Five – a Soviet spy ring active during World War II – Blunt's betrayal was perhaps the most surprising because he was so firmly entrenched in the British establishment. Not only was he a distant relation of the Queen, who worked for the British counter-intelligence service, but he was also in the employ of the Royal Household, personally hired by the Sovereign to manage and maintain the extensive Royal Collection – a position he held for 27 years. In recognition of his service, Blunt was knighted in 1956. His exalted status made for a rather spectacular fall from grace. However, though he confessed to his role in the spy ring in 1964, he was granted

immunity in exchange for information, and his betrayal remained an official secret until

Margaret Thatcher publicly outed him in the House of Commons in 1979.

In the wake of his exposure, Blunt became the whipping boy of Britain. To the

British Right, he "was the apotheosis of a particular species of privileged, ungrateful,

over-educated, unpatriotic, left-wing intellectual – and homosexual to boot. He

embodied the hypocrisy of a liberal class which gave thanks to its inherited freedoms by

betraying them" (Carter xiv). Many nonfictional accounts of the man, such as John

Costello's homophobic *Mask of Treachery*, subtitled "Lies, Spies, Buggery, and

Betrayal," ungenerously depict him as a caricature of the privileged homosexual

academic – arrogant, elitist, and perverse. In her biography of Blunt, however, Miranda

Carter asks us to reassess these one-dimensional portrayals. She points out that public

outcry transformed him into "a man about whom anything could be said. He was

described as 'the spy with no shame.' He was 'an arrogant evil poseur.' He was a

'treacherous Communist poof'" (xiii). He became, in other words, asite of projection –

the subject of rumor onto whom any deplorable behavior could be grafted.[12] In part,

Carter attributes this to Blunt's "fundamental mysteriousness" (xvi) – she calls him a

"withdrawer from the world" (xvi), a fact that led many to characterize him as self-

possessed, cold, and distant. For Carter, he is representative of "a particular type of

Englishman in whom almost all emotional effort was diverted into the denial of feeling"

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[12]Carter begins her biography by outlining the many accusations made by the public against Blunt. From the claim that "He had been involved in devious conspiracies with Louis Mountbatten – possibly to put Mountbatten's relatives on the thrones of Europe after the Second World War" and the notion that he "had brought about the suicide of one of his students, Virginia Lee" to the belief that he was "a paedophile with links to the Kincora children's home scandal in Northern Ireland" and had "blackmailed the Establishment into granting him immunity from prosecution by threatening to reveal proof that the Duke of Windsor had been plotting with the Nazis during the Second World War," Blunt became the target of any condemnation one could think of at the time (xiii).

(xviii). Interestingly, the aloof Blunt is less like the stereotypically leaky and emotional gay spy and more like that paragon of discretion and self-control, James Bond, especially as he was depicted by Daniel Craig in the 2006 film*Casino Royale*, where we see a Bond who is, by the end of the narrative, altogether more detached and colder than his predecessors.

What has contributed to this mysteriousness is the conspicuous absence of Blunt's own voice in the myriad accounts of him. "Even in the face of total condemnation and loss of reputation," writes Carter, "he resisted the urge to explain" (xxvi). Our knowledge of him has therefore largely been restricted to second-hand accounts, hearsay, and biased speculation. Blunt did, however, write a personal memoir between the years of his exposure and his death in 1983. The unfinished manuscript, donated to the British Library shortly after his death, was withheld from public access for twenty-five years at the request of the donor, becoming available for study on July 23rd, 2009, in the Manuscripts Reading Room. The apologia provides us with access to the mind of a man who has otherwise maintained a willful silence on the subject of his betrayal. Here, he admits that spying for the Russians was "the biggest mistake of [his] life" (qtd. inLow) and that his political naïveté allowed him to commit himself to Communism. Though *The Times* has declared his memoir "frustratingly silent" (Low), it nonetheless allows us to see glimmers of regret that most other accounts have resolutely denied him.

However, in the twenty-five years preceding the public release of the memoir, Blunt's silence has proven rich fodder for writers who have envoiced the reticent spy. He appears in the fiction of his friend Louise MacNeice, he inspired the central character of Brigid Brophy's novel *The Finishing Touch* (Carter xviii), and he is the subject of works

by both Bennett and Banville. Shortly after Blunt's exposure, George Steiner wrote an essay for *TheNew Yorker*, "The Cleric of Treason," in which he considered the contradictions of Blunt's character. Though radically different from the above works in tone – Steiner famously ends the essay with a rather stern condemnation: "Damn the man" (204) – this essay nonetheless represents Steiner's attempt to make sense of an evasive man whose behavior seemed to him to be contrary and senseless.

In Blunt, we find a plurality of identities, as indicated by the title of Carter's biography of him: *Anthony Blunt: His Lives*. Her chapters are divided according to his varied roles: from "Don," "Art Historian," and "Soldier" to "Recruit," "Spy," and "Traitor," amongst many others. Carter sees him as a man whose life was grounded in opposition: "the true division in Blunt," she writes, "was between the spy and the teacher. On the one hand, secrecy, concealment, obfuscation; on the other clarification, illumination, explanation" (366). George Steiner is less tactful, openly critiquing Blunt's "seeming schizophrenia" ("Cleric" 197). He points out Blunt's eminence as a scholar, detailing the difficulties that the art expert faces, the level of expertise required to date, attribute, and catalogue paintings. "The business of attribution, description, dating demands complete integrity on the technical level," writes Steiner, "but in this domain there are also pressures of a moral and economic kind" (186). Because the value of art often depends upon expert attribution, many have yielded to the temptation to falsely attribute works for the sake of pricey commissions, such as the fictional Kreutznaer of Banville's *Ghosts*. However, "Blunt's austerity was above question. His scholarship, his teaching exemplify formidable standards of technical severity and intellectual and moral rigour," Steiner declares (186). As a teacher, Blunt stressed the importance of veracity

and integrity, and as Steiner points out, it is this reputation for intellectual integrity that is celebrated by a collection of the most distinguished art historians in the *Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art Presented to Anthony Blunt on his 60th Birthday*. Steiner, however, weighs these qualities against Blunt's treachery:

> I would like to think for a moment about a man who in the morning teaches his students that a false attribution of a Watteau drawing or an inaccurate transcription of a fourteenth-century epigraph is a sin against the spirit and in the afternoon or evening transmits to the agents of Soviet intelligence classified, perhaps vital information given to him in sworn trust by his countrymen and intimate colleagues. ("Cleric"191)

In Blunt, Steiner sees a fundamental paradox between his role as a truthful attributor who valued academic honesty above all else and as a betrayer and deceiver of his country. "What are the sources of such scission? How does the spirit mask itself?" Steiner asks (191). Interesting here is that Steiner allies art and morality. He is baffled that a man so deeply devoted to the truth in art should engage in political treachery because, for him, aesthetic truth and national betrayal are antithetical; thus, in Steiner we see the overly simplistic and traditional assumption that those cultured in the way of Western art are more ethical. This view is, of course, flawed. As The Frames Trilogy testifies, art does not teach morality. Rather, in Banville's work, it has quite the opposite effect. Moreover, history itself provides many examples of the fact that there is nothing inherently moral about art. One need only consider the famous examples of Adolf Hitler and Hermann Goering who managed, through looting and confiscation, to amass the largest private collections of art in Europe during the Holocaust. Art historian Birgit

Schwarz notes the general failure to acknowledge just how formative Hitler's life-long obsession with art was. She goes as far as to suggest that his "love of art led directly into the heart of evil" – a sentiment that to some extent echoes my own regarding Freddie Montgomery's behavior. Thus, where critics such as Steiner frame their outcry against Blunt in terms of his status as a protector of truth in art, I argue that Bennett and Banville offer a corrective to such assumptions. It is precisely *because* of his engagement with art that the spy is capable of betrayal.

Through his work as the director of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, Blunt was responsible for transforming art history into an academic discipline in Britain. He trained and influenced a generation of well-respected critics, historians, and curators, amongst them John White, Sir Alan Bowness, and Anita Brookner. Lauded art critic and a symbol of his country's accomplishments, he was also a betrayer of its secrets. Yet it is important to point out that even after his Cambridge comrades – Guy Burgess, Donald Mclean, and Kim Philby – defected to the Soviet Union, Blunt chose to remain in England and continued to work for the Queen, a fact that complicates his status as a betrayer of his country. In his memoir, he writes that he "would take any risk in this country, rather than go to Russia" (qtd. in Low). Thus, he appears to be a double patriot. This seemingly contradictory status is exploited in the 2003 BBC miniseries *Cambridge Spies*, which purports to tell the story of "Four very British traitors." We are encouraged to see in the spies the paradox of their quintessential Britishness and their foreign loyalties. For instance, Philby expresses an unfailing faith in the power of his British passport while helping Communists escape from Vienna. Confronted by a checkpoint guard, he mutters to himself, "I went to a very fine public school and Trinity College

Cambridge. My back is straight. My top lip stiff, and I have a British passport"
(*Cambridge*). Blunt is depicted as a stereotypically prim English aristocrat, taking tea
with the Queen and enjoying the gardens at Windsor Castle with George VI. From his
impeccably tailored suit to his finely crafted sentences, Blunt epitomizes English upper-
class decorum. Indeed, with his Royal connections, his impeccable high-born manners,
and his strong sense of social propriety, he is coded as being the most stereotypically
'English' of the four spies.

In *The Untouchable*, Banville has his Blunt figure explain that the popular image
"of us as smiling hypocrites boiling with secret hatred of our country and its people and
institutions is misconceived. I genuinely liked and admired HM…The fact is, I was both
a Marxist and a Royalist…I did not have to pretend to be loyal; I *was* loyal, in my
fashion" (174-5). Both of these representations serve to unsettle the subjectivity of the
spy. Here, the secret agent does not fall neatly into the typically dichotomized categories
of political affiliation. Moreover, his identity is not static and unified, but rather subject
to antithetical forces that complicate his notion of himself. As Banville's Blunt figure
says, "The successful spy must be able to live authentically in each of his multiple lives"
(174). In him, then, we find a distinctly postmodern figure – one who is inherently
heterogeneous and who subverts the expected margins of social, political, and sexual
conduct. The spy, as he is here figured, occupies numerous roles at once. Thus, a stage-
play offers a particularly apt rendition of an historical figure who acted many roles over
the course of his career. In Bennett's plays, the queer spy's performance is both literal
and rhetorical, and his engagement with art hints at his own status as a representation.

The play therefore offers a unique perspective into the intersection of art, espionage, and the postmodern subject.

PART TWO: Playing the Part of the Spy: Alan Bennett's Plays

I: Tinker, Tailor, Subject, Spy: Performing the Self in "An Englishman Abroad"

In manhood's glorious pride to rise,
I am an Englishman, behold me!
– H.M.S. Pinafore

In his critical introduction to Bennett, Joseph H. O'Mealy notes the importance of performance theory in the playwright's work, citing in particular the influence of Erving Goffman's classic study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Here, Goffman examines social behavior in light of a dramaturgical model, and while the notion that we perform our identities is by no means novel, Goffman systematically explores the principles that govern such performances, noting how our public personae shift in response to social circumstances. He suggests that we act according to scripts that help us manage and control social situations, thus envisioning performance as a social necessity. Furthermore, Goffman warns that "the impression of reality fostered by a performance is a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps" (qtd. in O'Mealy 87); because they are subject to processes beyond the self, all performances can be disrupted. By representing subjectivity as being in a state of constant flux, Goffman's conception of the self resonates with postmodern theory.

O'Mealy claims that this "imperative of performance, with its accompanying fragility" is central to the structure of Bennett's works (xix). In his 1991 play *The*

Madness of George III, for instance, Bennett explores the discrepancy between public

and private performances. When the King's behavior deviates from the social script

according to which he is expected to perform, he is declared insane. Conversely, he is

supposedly cured of his sickness once he has "remembered how to seem" (82), thus

acknowledging his performative role as an iconic public figure. Commenting on the final

moments of the play, Bennett says that

> the King urges his family to smile and wave and pretend to be happy,
>
> because that is their job. This scene would, I hope, have rung a bell with
>
> the late Erving Goffman, the American sociologist whose analysis of the
>
> presentation of the self and its breakdown in the twentieth century seems
>
> just as appropriate to this deranged monarch from the eighteenth century.
>
> (qtd. in O'Mealy xix)

It is no surprise that an author fascinated by characters who perform ideal versions of

themselves should turn his attention to the world of espionage as he does in "An

Englishman Abroad" and "A Question of Attribution." The figure of the spy allows

Bennett to explore the performative dimensions of identity and of social disguise.

It is helpful to briefly consider "An Englishman Abroad" here. In this play,

Bennett looks at Guy Burgess – one of the more colourful Cambridge spies. Known for

his flagrant homosexuality and heavy drinking, the British diplomat defected to the

Soviet Union with Donald Mclean in 1951; however, he did not take to his adopted

homeland well. The figure of the exiled traitor allows Bennett to consider questions of

national identity and the presentation of the self, yet he also manages to paint a fairly

poignant portrait of a conflicted man. As Bennett conceives of him, Burgess, with his

impeccable upper-class manners and his playful mischievousness, is a charming if not rakish figure. The writer dramatizes a real-life encounter between the spy and the Australian actress Coral Browne who toured *Hamlet* in Moscow for the Shakespeare Memorial Company in 1958. Living in Soviet squalor, a now shabby Burgess convinces Browne to take his measurements so as to order him a new suit from his Savile Row tailor, and he requests that she send him a proper hat and an Etonian tie. His request is clearly symbolic: Burgess wishes to don the costume of the country he betrayed. Content to be a stranger in a strange land, he resists assimilation, opting instead to maintain his Englishness through the visible signifiers of his class and country. As the title of the play suggests, he is little more than a displaced Englishman, and his thoughts are punctuated by a nostalgic longing for his native land. He even sings snatches of English showtunes that act as an ironic commentary on his national identity. For instance, Burgess's final lines in the play consist of lyrics from the song "For he is an Englishman" from Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Now smartly suited like an English gent thanks to Browne, he sings,

> For he might have been a Roosian,
>
> A French or Turk or Proosian,
>
> Or perhaps I-tal-ian,
>
> For in spite of all temptations
>
> To belong to other nations
>
> He remains an Englishman,
>
> He remains an Englishman. (299)

The irony, of course, is that despite his betrayal, Burgess cannot sever his ties to England. In fact, exiled in Moscow, his upper class Englishness is amplified, made more obvious by sheer contrast. Contemplating his past, Burgess muses, "So little, England. Little music.Little art.Timid, tasteful, nice. But one loves it. Loves it" (291). Bennett's traitor is a paradoxical figure; part of him longs to escape the puritanical talons of the Kremlin, for he remains, through and through, an Englishman. From his sordid living conditions to the young Russian boyfriend whom he speculates is actually a policeman, Burgess feels that Russia is a sad disappointment. When Browne asks him why he did what he did, Burgess's answer is evasive: "It seemed the right thing to do at the time" (293). He is not a villain hell-bent on betrayal, but a split subject – a double loyalist, as Maskell might say. This conflict signals an articulation of identity that is in keeping with postmodernism.

The play acts as a commentary on the complicated nature of national identity, presenting the subject as a site of contradictions. As a traitor, Burgess both inscribes and destabilizes his Englishness. Consequently, his identity is anything but unified. O'Mealy speculates that Bennett may be using Burgess to assert that "culture is stronger than ideology, that what's bred in the bone cannot be removed by geographical dislocation or intellectual conversion" (64). However, Bennett's emphasis on the performative dimensions of identity complicate this reading. Like the other Cambridge spies, Burgess's apparent investment in the status quo meant that he was trusted implicitly. As a member of the ruling class, he moved in circles that Communism sought to eliminate, playing the part of the English gentleman so convincingly that it was inconceivable to many – including the Russian intelligentsia – that he should be a Soviet spy. Carter notes

that for quite some time, the Soviet Union had suspicions about the loyalties of the Cambridge spies, believing that they had been planted by the British as disinformation agents. The impeccable pedigree of the spies – the fact that they seemed "too good to be true" (Carter 290) – was taken as evidence of a British conspiracy against the Soviets. Thus, the Cambridge spies were seemingly protected from British suspicion by their status and by class expectations – the very things that prompted the Russian distrust of them.

As Burgess explains in Bennett's play, "I made no bones about politics. My analyses of situations, the précis I had to submit at the Foreign Office, were always Marxist. Openly so. Impeccably so. Nobody minded. 'It's only Guy.' 'Dear old Guy.' Quite safe… 'How can he be a spy? He goes to my tailor'" ("Englishman" 291). In England, the assumption of shared class values was strong enough to eclipse any anti-establishment views. Hailing from a lineage which included ties to Eton, the Navy, Cambridge, the War Office, and the BBC, Burgess is so much a part of the system that any deviations are tritely dismissed, including his homosexuality. For instance, when Coral is refused service on Burgess's behalf from a shop that supplies the Royal Family, she indignantly replies, "You were quite happy to satisfy this client when he was one of the most notorious buggers in London and a drunkard into the bargain. Only then he was in the Foreign Office" (298). His high social status eclipses his sexual preferences, which were, of course, illegal at the time. "If I wore a mask it was to be exactly what I seemed," he says, ascribing to the rule that "If you don't wish to conform in one thing, you should conform in all the others" (291). O'Mealy writes, Burgess "has spent his life presenting himself to the world as he chooses, but because his world is steeped in the

expectations of class role and class behavior, he has been invisible in plain sight of everyone" (64). And Burgess himself admits, "I was a performer" (Bennett, "Englishman" 291), playing his part within the established order, maintaining the civilized veneer expected of a well-bred Englishman.

Both Browne and Burgess are actors, but they play on different stages. Even in his dingy Moscow apartment, Burgess performs his Englishness. He does *The Times* crossword, reads Trollope and Austen, quotes Browning, attends performances of Shakespeare, sings English hymns, and listens to Jack Buchanan records, thereby acting out a life of leisure as though he were living in the English countryside. Browne criticizes his exaggerated English politeness which allows him to pretend that his treason was little more than a "social misdemeanor" (292). And, of course, his performance calls for the proper costume. Burgess's Englishness is all spectacle and surface. As O'Mealy puts it, "Burgess is claiming that the performer's mask is ubiquitous, even when he attempts to be most himself" (64).

II: "A Question of Attribution": Spies and Art Objects

All art is concerned with coming into being.
– Aristotle

"An Englishman Abroad" introduces topics that are more fully fleshed out in "A Question of Attribution," a play that demonstrates not only the pervasiveness of everyday performance, regardless of social class or role but also the spy's status as a metaphorical art object. Here, Bennett offers a poignant meditation on the intersection of art and espionage – a parallel that foregrounds the manufactured and performative dimensions of selfhood. As he did in *The Madness of George III*, the playwright once again considers

the staged identity of the monarch, but he does so alongside the conscious constructions

of an interrogator and a spy. The three main characters of the play – Chubb, Anthony

Blunt, and the Queen (HMQ) – "are exceedingly sly and crafty players, all the more sly

and crafty for appearing so artless" (O'Mealy 66).

Like most police interrogators, Chubb carefully performs a part with the hope of

teasing information out of an unwilling and restrained Blunt. With his unpolished

manners and working-class status, Chubb presents himself as an unthreatening and naïve

student of art history, but his admiration for Blunt is clearly calculated to draw the spy

out. He tells Blunt that he enjoys their talks as though they were little more than leisurely

meetings between student and teacher; however, by appealing to him in his role as a

scholar, Chubb hopes that the spy will let his political guard down. Thus, though he may

play the part of the eager student, the interrogator is deferent only to a point. Quick to

assert his upper hand with the threat of public exposure when Blunt resists him, Chubb's

performance is motivated by the desire for sensitive information. His is therefore a

political performance not unlike that of the Queen.

Bennett envisions monarchy itself as public performance. Consequently, HMQ's

practiced demeanor is part of the ritual performance expected of one who holds such an

exalted title. When Chubb tells Blunt that his wife saw the Queen in Surrey, having

"secured an excellent vantage point" (313), he highlights her status as a theatrical icon

that is visually consumed by the public. As O'Mealy writes, "From birth HMQ has been

schooled in impression management. The cool and gracious person we see in her public

appearances is the product of years of training" (66). Blunt never answers Chubb's

question, "What is she really like?" (316) because he, along with the rest of us, does not

really know. As Goffman would suggest, everyone, from monarch to labourer, is prone

to performance, and the spy is certainly no exception. Though politically he stands

opposite the Queen and her interrogator, Blunt's performance parallels theirs.

Like Burgess in "An Englishman Abroad," he is never without his mask. His

interrogator declares that the spy leads "three lives" (316): in Britain, he is a celebrated

art historian in the employ of the Queen; in the Soviet Union, he is a comrade; and to the

few who are aware of his confession, he is a spy, traitor, and reluctant informer. Because

the play takes place just before Thatcher outs Blunt, we witness the man juggling these

varied roles. We see him working with an art restorer, scrutinizing the details of a

particularly puzzling painting; we see him as an academic, lecturing on artistic renditions

of suffering and the mysteriousness of pictures; we see him with his interrogator, Chubb,

who asks Blunt to identify undercover Soviet agents from various photographs of young

men; and we see him in the corridors of Buckingham Palace, speaking with the Queen

about art and forgery. He is a man simultaneously living on both sides of the system.

In her biography, Carter claims that while "the other Cambridge spies

subordinated their lives and careers to espionage, Blunt had a separate life as an art

historian quite as, if not more, important to him than his work for the Soviets" (xviii).

What Bennett emphasizes, however, is that these roles overlap inextricably. The play is

masterfully constructed: the varied parallels and analogies, the double meanings and

innuendos all contribute to the work's metaphorical richness. Each layer of Blunt's life

reflects upon and informs the others. Whether in the lecture hall, the interrogation room,

or the palace, Blunt is a consummate teacher, always contemplating the vagaries of

representation. We are encouraged to see his role as a spy through the lens of his work as

an art historian. Thus, the play moves seamlessly from his art lectures, when images of paintings are projected onto an overhead screen, to his interrogations, when these images are replaced with photos of suspected spies. The process of identification, contextualization, and attribution is parallel in each instance, and amidst these myriad representations, we have the difficult task of identifying the man himself. As O'Mealy writes, the "enigmatic nature of art and of human behavior, and their resistance to definitive interpretations, are the twin themes" of a play that allegorizes both identity and art (65). In fact, the question of art's provenance is ostensibly a question about Blunt's loyalties.

Bennett encourages his audience to think about the analogies between art and life. In other words, we are prompted to enter a mind frame that echoes that of Freddie Montgomery, finding correspondences between the constructed world of art and the external world of reality. Consider, for instance, Bennett's stage directions for the play's opening scene, which consists of an encounter between Blunt and an art restorer: "Their positions resemble those of saints or patrons on either side of an altarpiece and some effort should be made in the production to create stage pictures which echo in this way the composition and lighting of old masters" (309). This is life as art. Where Bennett stressed the idea of life as performance in "An Englishman Abroad," here he extends this parallel to include the provisionality of representation, framing Blunt's life in terms of painting. Throughout the play, paintings are the mysterious subjects of speculation and interpretation. Their origins, attributions, and meanings are all questioned by various characters, thereby highlighting the fact that these images resist definition. As representations, they force us to consider the difference between being and seeming – a

difference that applies quite readily to the figure of the traitorous spy. What Bennett touches upon here is the difficulty of determining Blunt's character. Like a representational art object, he is hard to read. Though we can guess at his motives and wonder what he is truly like, he ultimately remains beyond definition. Thus, here is an overt construction of the spy as art. Bennett recognizes the postmodern potential of this figure who represents the epistemological uncertainty and the infinite interpretability of the contemporary subject.

Moreover, Blunt's status as a postmodern subject is highlighted by the fact that he is positioned outside of the established order. In contrast, consider Chubb, who takes pains to legitimize himself as part of the traditional and accepted social order on both professional and personal levels. As a policeman, he is an intrinsic part of an established system that privileges unity and order, using the logic of politics and the law to order experience. In his personal life, he is a married man from suburban and conservative Purley, who engages in all of the mundane routines of working-class life. Blunt, however, marks a rupture with these traditions. He is Othered in terms of his social standing, his education, his class, his espionage, and of course his sexual preference. Thus, for Chubb, Blunt's homosexuality, like his elevated social status, is tied to his treachery, for both mark him as part of a minority group that is segregated from 'the common folk' who make up England. The interrogator tries to tease information out of the supposedly leaky gay agent by appealing to his sexual preferences. Flipping through the photos of prospective spies, Chubb inquires about their attractiveness and the nature of Blunt's relations with the men pictured. He includes images of Burgess's flirtatious escapades and a photo of a naked guardsman, as though to draw the spy out. For Chubb,

then, the spy's sexuality contributes to his status as an ex-centric figure. However, when Blunt fails to respond, Chubb resorts to an appeal based upon the spy's position as an art historian – a fact that foregrounds Bennett's construction of Blunt as a metaphorical representation.

The spy's status as an art object is emphasized towards the end of the play, when Chubb warns him of his impending exposure. "You will be the object of scrutiny," he says, "explanations sought after, your history gone into. You will be named. Attributed" (350). Here, the process of artistic attribution is depicted as invasive: meaning is imposed upon the 'art object' by an external source. Bennett makes a similar comment in an essay on painting for the *London Review of Books*, where he writes,

> Sometimes it's as if paintings were being doorstepped, art historians crowding in on them like reporters from the *Mirror* or the *Mail*…And maybe, hearing what is said about them, some paintings might shrug, saying, 'Well, if you say so.' The Mona Lisa's smile is the smile of art. (qtd. in O'Mealy 65).

Paintings, in other words, are mysterious objects that stand apart from the meanings forced upon them. The suggestion, of course, is that Blunt will similarly be the subject of imposed meanings and interpretations after his exposure. He laments that as a "fake" he will "excite more interest than the genuine article" (Bennett, "Question" 350), for the narratives of his artistic accomplishments will be replaced by new narratives of his betrayal in the press. Where art was once a refuge or "a safe house" for Blunt, it is "Not so safe now" (351), being a receptacle for second-rate theories and projected thoughts.

Just as Chubb naïvely fumbles through his misreadings of various paintings, so too will the public mishandle Blunt.

If we are meant to read Blunt as art here, then we must keep in mind the fact that art both reveals and conceals. The play invites an investigation into Blunt while resisting the process itself. Thus, paintings both mirror the spy's enigmatic nature and provide us with a possible avenue of insight into his character. Like Chubb, who wishes to learn about art, believing that it will allow him to better understand Blunt, we too glean something of the art historian through his engagement with masterworks. However, Bennett is careful not to reveal too much. Representations can only go so far when it comes to revealing the so-called truth; thus, what art shows is more how Blunt conceives of himself rather than how he actually might be.

In this respect, Blunt's lecture on the incongruity in Renaissance depictions of suffering is of central concern. He notes that painted saints of Renaissance representations "submit to their fate readily and without fuss, howling agonies gone through without a murmur" (311). "Flayed, dismembered, spitted, roasted," they endure their brutal punishments in "dignified silence" (311); Blunt finds this composure distinctly British. We are clearly meant to draw a parallel here. Though Blunt is known for his external *sang-froid* – Chubb even calls him a "cold fish" at one point (316) – Bennett hints at an internal torment. His sympathy for the condemned spy is obvious, noting as he does in his introduction to the play that "in the spy fever that followed the unmasking of Professor Blunt," he felt more compassion for "the hunted than the hunters" (ix). "I find it hard to drum up any patriotic indignation over either Burgess or Blunt," he continues; Blunt in particular seemed "to be condemned as much out of pique

and because he fooled the Establishment as for anything that he did" (x). Thus, the

images of suffering and martyrdom that are dispersed throughout the play encourage us to

see Blunt as a victim – a scapegoat for an embarrassed Establishment. As Chubb says,

Blunt is "the baby thrown out of the sleigh to slow down the wolves" (327). In fact, so

pronounced is this sympathy that during the play's initial run in London, conservative

critics took issue with what they saw as Bennett's radically empathic portrayal of the

traitor (McKechnie 98).

Blunt's sacrificial status is further emphasized in the play through his discussion

of Giovanni Bellini's *Agony in the Garden* – a Renaissance painting that depicts a

praying Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane, surrounded by his sleeping disciples.

Suspended above them is an angel who holds a cup and a paten – symbols of Christ's

impending sacrifice – while, in the background, Judas approaches accompanied by the

soldiers who will shortly arrest Jesus. The image prefigures the crucifixion; thus, the

agony of the title is Christ's as he struggles with his desire to be spared and his

willingness to sacrifice himself. In Blunt's interpretation of the painting, the indifference

of the sleeping disciples stands in contrast to Christ's quiet anguish – an anguish often

overlooked by "the budding art historian," "the social historian," and even the stranger

"who has just wandered into the gallery out of the rain" (311). Given his circumstances,

Blunt is especially primed to notice the vagaries of the image that would otherwise be

ignored. But he draws our attention to them here, imploring us to recognize that Christ's

external composure masks an internal turmoil, and by extension, he urges us to recognize

that they are parallel. That we are meant to read the seemingly unshakable Blunt in light

of a similar contrast is obvious, and reinforced by the remainder of his lecture. "Here is

crucifixion," he says, "which we do not do. Or do differently. Or do indifferently…the

present overlaps the future" (312). Blunt's imminent exposure is a metaphorical

modernization of the crucifixion whereby he is martyred by the government. Bennett

situates Blunt as a scapegoat, his own anguish unnoticed by those ready to condemn him

for his past. Blunt continues, "did the saint but turn his head he would see his own

martyrdom through the window" (312). Once again, Bennett's stage directions work to

reinforce the link between the painted picture and life. He instructs Blunt to turn his

head, thus mirroring the saint, and as he looks off to his right, a set of double doors open

to reveal the figure of his interrogator as Blunt speaks the word "Judas" (312).

Interestingly, Blunt's inversion of the first line of W.H. Auden's "Musée des

Beaux Arts" is also a poignant part of his self-inflected meditation on suffering which

provides us with a sense of how he reads himself through art. "About suffering they were

always wrong, the Old Masters," declares Blunt (311). In his poem, Auden refers to

Pieter Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, in which the youth's death goes

unnoticed by those around him. Rather than depicting Icarus's death as the primary

subject of the painting, Breughel assigns it a minor role; it occurs in the background of

the image while the foreground is occupied by a ploughman busily working on his field.

All we see of Icarus are his legs as the rest of his body disappears beneath the surface of

the sea. The speaker of the poem draws our attention to "how everything turns away/

Quite leisurely from the disaster" (14-15). The ploughman continues plowing, a passing

ship moves ever onward, while Icarus plummets to his death with what William Carlos

Williams calls in his poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" "a splash quite unnoticed"

(19). The juxtaposition of the boy's tragic end and the banal activities of day-to-day life

that continue without interruption highlights the personal nature of suffering. Auden's speaker suggests that Breughel has it right when he depicts the boy's agony as trivial in the wider context of things. Alluding to another unidentified painting, he goes on to claim that the Old Masters never forgot "That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course/ Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot/ Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse/ Scratches its innocent behind on a tree" (Auden 10-13). The indifference of the ploughman to Icarus and of the dogs to the martyr parallels that of Bellini's sleeping apostles. As Blunt claims, despite the suffering of others, we go about our lives "mechanically" (Bennett, "Question" 312). In Auden, as in Bennett, the martyrdom is inevitable. Blunt says that "Christ begs God in the garden to free him from a fate that is already happening higher up the hill" (312), and, quite similarly, his own exposure is already planned: he has no choice but to march up the hill to meet his fate.

By inverting Auden's assertion, however, Blunt seems to suggest that his own demise will not be met with the kind of indifference that Icarus and Auden's unnamed martyr encountered. Where their suffering was private and unseen, his will take place on a public stage and unfold beneath the flashing lights of the media. Here, like the speaker of the original poem, Blunt's subjective reading of the painting is clear. Heffernan, for instance, writes that "Auden's grand generalization about the Old Masters is at best idiosyncratic. We should read it not as a universal truth – which it certainly is not – but as a clue to the state of mind that Auden's *speaker* brings to the viewing of Breughel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*" (147). Blunt's inversion of Auden's generalization similarly reflects upon his own state of mind, as do his readings of Renaissance suffering. Bennett therefore positions painting as a lens through which we can begin to understand

Blunt. However, as I have already suggested, underwriting such assumptions is the problem of representation. If pictures are presented as analogues of the self, they also undercut any attempts to fully understand the subject. Thus, the playwright asserts and then subverts art's potential as a revelatory medium. Much like the artworks he contemplates, Blunt remains enigmatic. The question of his authenticity is deferred by the metaphorical forgeries and fakes inherent to the spy. Consequently, in place of a concrete and totalized reading of the spy, we have instead an unfixed and uncertain subject. Just as the world of art is infiltrated by pretenders that complicate our ability to determine real works from fake ones, so too is the political sphere infected, and Blunt therefore remains beyond reach.

III: Translating Titian: The Interpretability of Art in "A Question of Attribution"

There really is no such thing as Art. There are only artists…Art with a capital A has no existence. For Art with a capital A has come to be something of a bogey and a fetish.
– E.H. Gombrich

Because paintings are the core symbols of the play, we must consider more closely the two central images of "A Question of Attribution": Titian's *Allegory of Prudence* and a work that was formerly attributed to the artist, now called the *Triple Portrait* – both of which comment upon the complicated process of interpretation and meaning-making as it applies to the largely intangible art object.

That Bennett should focus on Titian in particular is telling, for the artist is widely regarded as a rule breaker. Known for his innovative subjects and his unconventional reinterpretations, the sixteenth century Venetian master "dared to upset the old-established rules of composition" (Gombrich,*Story* 252). Moreover, his greatest fame is

as a portrait painter. Gombrich, for instance, praises the artist's ability to make his

figures seem "mysteriously alive" (253), and even Chubb knows enough about art to

know that Titian "painted character" (Bennett, "Question" 324). The artist's opposition

to authority and his ability to represent personality so convincingly make him a suitable

figure for Bennett, for these two characteristics reflect upon Blunt's own status as a spy.

As I have already noted, throughout "A Question of Attribution," Bennett uses

artists and their artworks to comment upon the nature of the referent and its relation to the

real. Furthermore, the playwright examines the constructed nature of artistic

representations as it applies to subject formation. If we can only know 'reality' as it is

produced by representations, what might this suggest about the identity of a spy or, for

that matter, a queen? Bennett foregrounds the inescapable provisionality of knowledge in

his play. In a world of representations, disinformation, and secrets, the 'truth' is

constantly being deferred and renegotiated.

Context is central to considerations of knowledge and 'truth.' Blunt tells the

queen, for instance, that "A painting is a document, Ma'am. It has to be read in the

context of art history" (333). What he hopes, of course, is that his own behavior will also

be judged in light of its context. Rampant unemployment in Britain in the 1930s and the

government's apparent complacency made socialism a favorable option for many –

including Blunt. He was therefore only one of the many who constituted the Cambridge

Left in the thirties. Motivated in part by the guilt they felt due to their privileged

positions, many students and intellectuals believed that Marxism was the means of

achieving social and economic reform; in response to the menace of fascism in the 1930s,

conversion to Communism seemed the decent thing to do.[13] Thus, like Burgess in

"Englishman," Bennett has Blunt justify his loyalty to Marxism by claiming that it

seemed the right thing to do at the time. Chubb, however, finds this explanation

inadequate. "Giotto didn't have a grasp on perspective and neither do you," he says,

"The difference being, of course, that art has no consequences" ("Question" 320). He

therefore points out the weakness of Blunt's parallel: to frame his actions in light of

painting is to dismiss their weight. Not unlike Freddie Montgomery, Blunt attempts to

place his treachery in the aesthetic sphere, thereby stripping it of its moral implications,

but Chubb will not allow him such absolution. Where Blunt insists that images must be

grounded in their historical context if we are to understand them, Chubb dismantles this

rather simple assertion and exposes the naïveté of placing one's faith in pictures. In

Bennett's play, if a painting is a document, as Blunt insists, then it is palimpsestic, being

constantly rewritten, and historical context, as we see, can create just as many questions

as it may answer.[14]

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[13]Each of the Cambridge Five, along with almost all the key male figures of the Bloomsbury Group, were members of the Apostles, a decidedly Marxist debating society that brought together the university's most brilliant students. Thus, socialism was quite fashionable amongst the intellectual elite of Cambridge, and Blunt was certainly not alone in his leftist sympathies.

[14]van Meegeren's forgeries are of note here. Backed by forged documentation and the endorsement of a well-known art expert, his Vermeer forgeries caused a great deal of confusion when they first appeared in the 1930s. Contemporary art historians, however, acknowledge that the artist's skills were mediocre at best. As Dolnick claims, van Meegeren's success was highly dependent upon his ability to manipulate opinion and play upon the uncertainties of the field of art history.
   In the play, HMQ declares van Meegeren's forgeries "terrible daubs." "God knows," she says, "one is no expert on Vermeer, but if I could tell they were fakes why couldn't other people see it at the time?" (343). Blunt explains that every forger is a product of his time. Though he seeks to recreate exactly the style and detail of an earlier period, he is nonetheless a slave to his own time and must therefore imitate "in the fashion of his time, in a way that is contemporary, and with the passage of years it is this element that dates, begins to seem old-fashioned, and which eventually unmasks him" (344). Thus, "what has exposed [the paintings] as forgeries…is not any improvement in perception, but time" (344). The construction of the painting is therefore historically contingent; far from being a static object, the painting changes with time's passage. This claim is very much in keeping with Dutton's assertion that all artworks are human products and must therefore be considered in light of the conditions of their creation. The same,

The play dramatizes the difficulty of reading and interpreting aesthetic objects. We do well to recall that Elkins, in *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, comments on the anti-semiotic nature of images. Pictures, he claims, resist semiotic containment and therefore become objects of fear and apprehension for many. We see this in Chubb, for instance, who, as I mention at the outset of this study, admits to Blunt that he finds art galleries deeply troubling. Unlike museums, where he is "informed, instructed" (318), galleries offer little guidance. They do not tell him what to think of the works hanging on the walls or how he should respond to them, and to Chubb, who sees the world in terms of binary oppositions and clear-cut moral distinctions, this baffling ambiguity is a source of anxiety. Interestingly, Elkins claims that art history is a field that enacts the struggle to impose linguistic meaning onto visual art objects. How suitable then, that Chubb should turn to an art historian who is equipped to guide him through the obscure and often remote world of painting. In the course of the play, Chubb becomes Blunt's unlikely student, and his burgeoning interest in the field is a device that allows Bennett to outline the interpretive process of reading images, a process that invites us to consider not only how we read art, but also how we read the spy. These "studies in iconography" (Bennett, "Question" 325) therefore serve a dual purpose.

In effect, Chubb begins in a state of innocence. He assumes that the goal of art is photographic realism. Recall, then, the passage that appears in the epigraph to my introduction: early painters, says Chubb, hadn't "really got the hang of it," but in the Renaissance "the penny begins to drop and they start painting what is actually – you know – *there*" (318-19). Chubb sees art history as a straightforward progression, from

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of course, can be said of Blunt himself. When historically distanced from the widespread socialism of the 1930s, his behavior – though a product of its time – appears more treacherous.

the crude beginnings of early painters to a technical mastery signaled by the ability to

paint objectively and true-to-life. For the interrogator, whose work is largely dependent

upon the dichotomous distinction between right and wrong, truth and accuracy are the

hallmarks of image-making. Of course, Blunt, who as an art historian and spy

understands that truth and representation rarely go hand-in-hand, corrects his student's

rather naïve conjecture, pointing out that while art evolves over time, it does not progress

towards a specific goal, least of all realism. "Why should a plausible illusion of nature be

the standard?" he asks, "Do we say Giotto isn't a patch on Michelangelo because his

figures are less lifelike?" (319). As a novice, Chubb seeks to read the entirety of art

history in terms of a totalizing system, but Blunt points out again and again the

impossibility of any such fixed reading. To equate art with realism is a gross

simplification.

Central in this respect is Blunt's lesson on Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*, a

painting that Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl declare "provokingly enigmatic in respect of

its iconographical content" ("Late" 177). Through this art object, Bennett demonstrates

that the search for aesthetic meaning is tantamount to the process of problem solving.

The painting is here constructed as a riddle to be solved rather than a mimetic

representation. Painted late in the artist's life, the work is an anomaly in Titian's oeuvre.

It depicts the heads of six figures: three male heads, which dominate the composition, and

below each of these, a corresponding animal head. The central head portrays Titian's

middle-aged son, who looks straight out of the canvas. He is flanked by the profile of his

elderly father to his left, and the profile of Titian's adopted grandson to his right. Below

Titian's son is the head of a lion, to its left beneath Titian's face is that of a wolf and to its

right, below the grandson, is that of a dog. This is, Blunt explains, "an emblematic

painting, a puzzle picture. A visual paraphrase of the *Three Ages of Man*, obviously, but

something else besides.The clue is the animals" (325). Through Chubb's struggle to

understand the allegorical image, Bennett depicts the painting as an interpretive puzzle,

as Blunt himself suggests. Its meaning is not immediately apparent; rather, one must

slowly uncover its significance by considering its icons, symbols, and historical context.

This is precisely what Chubb attempts to do, but his efforts reveal the awkward errors of

an amateur and the difficulty of interpreting a resolutely 'silent' image.

At first, Chubb misidentifies one of the animals in the painting, assuming that the

wolf is a dog. After Blunt corrects him, he encourages Chubb to consider the symbolic

dimensions of the image, noting that "The dog is hardly a dog at all" (325). Chubb

proceeds with a reductionist reading of the iconography, noting that the dog is

traditionally a symbol of fidelity, the wolf of gluttony, and the lion of treachery. What he

seeks, in other words, is the comfort of an easy equation that will allow him to unpack the

codes of iconographic meaning embedded in the image. Blunt, however, points out the

painting's varied levels of significance, noting rather tersely that when these icons appear

together, "they are disparate parts of a three-headed beast which from classical times

onwards has been a symbol of prudence. Hence the title of the picture" (325). Here,

Blunt stresses the provisionality of reductive iconological interpretations. The imagery

cannot be pinned down as easily as Chubb would hope, for in the complicated world of

signs, meaning is disconcertingly multiple. When Chubb expresses his frustration, an

annoyed Blunt explains, "A wolf can mean gluttony, a dog fidelity, and treachery a cat.

But not always. Not automatically. Take the owl. It can be a bird of wisdom, but since

it is a bird of the night it can represent the opposite, ignorance and willful blindness. Hardest of all to accept, it can be just an owl" (326). Thus, Blunt highlights the uncertain terrain of the art object.

Blunt effectively guides Chubb through an analysis of the painting, demonstrating the stages that take us from a contemplation of the formal object to an interpretation of its meaning. Bennett borrows this model from Panofsky's essay "Titian's *Allegory of Prudence*" – a work that he cites in his introductory note on the paintings in the play. Here, Panofsky outlines his attempt to decipher the image according to the interpretive system he first sets out in his now classic work *Studies in Iconology*, where he identifies three primary levels of art historical understanding. The first and most basic level involves the identification of the image's Primary or Natural subject matter. In the instance of the *Allegory*, this consists of recognizing the six painted figures. When Chubb equates the wolf with gluttony, he considers the iconographic content of the image, which Panofsky calls its Secondary or Conventional subject matter. The last of these levels involves an examination of the picture's Intrinsic Meaning: one calls upon cultural history to consider the painting in its entirety such as when Blunt notes that the animals together are a symbol of prudence through which we are meant to consider the three ages of man. This iconological process of detection demonstrates Panofsky's insistence on the search for meaning in paintings – a process that Blunt at once installs and subverts, for he acknowledges the complex cultural history underlying certain icons but also claims that an owl can be just an owl. Thus, he teaches Chubb that, contrary to the "techniques of facile identification favoured in [the interrogator's] profession," aesthetic objects resist simple categorization (326). Where Blunt is meant to respond to

Chubb's projected slides of potential spies with a simple 'yes' or 'no,' Blunt's images

call for more arduous involvement. Ambiguity and equivocation are built into the very

tools we use to identify the meaning of images. "Appearances deceive," Blunt wryly

explains, "Art is seldom what it seems" (326).

That we are meant to read Blunt in a similar manner is obvious. Facile

identification simply will not do. Rather, as a representation not at all unlike Titian's

works, the spy is more difficult to understand. As with *The Colossus*, Bennett

demonstrates that the artwork is far from a static and unchanging object. Rather, it calls

for constant reconsideration. The paintings in this play give up their secrets slowly and

reluctantly, much like spies. One must tease information out of them; rather suitably,

then, the play juxtaposes the art historian's attempt to uncover the secrets of a painting

and the interrogator's attempt to learn of the spy's intrigues. This parallel is especially

evident in the second of the play's central paintings.

It is not difficult to see why Bennett would choose to include the *Triple Portrait*

in his play, for the painting, like the *Allegory*, is an epistemological puzzle; however, this

image is an even thornier puzzle of misattributions, copies, and unexpected revelations.

Furthermore, the real Anthony Blunt himself was familiar with the painting. Aware of

the image's historically shifting status, Blunt suggested that art expert St. John Gore write

a note on the picture's history, which was published as a short notice in 1958 called "Five

Portraits." Bennett acknowledges his debt to Gore's notice in the preface to his play,

using the work to demonstrate how a painting, and our perception of it, can change over

time.

In "A Question of Attribution," the fictional Blunt calls it a "problem picture" (337) – problematic in that its palimpsestic nature has presented numerous challenges to art historians. Originally attributed to Titian when it hung in the collection of Charles I, the painting's authorship went unquestioned for over three-hundred years. By the end of the nineteenth-century, however, doubts regarding the painting's origins emerged. Now part of the Queen's collection, the painting is considered an "ex-Titian" (Bennett, "Question" 309). Not only does this misattribution express the artwork as a site of uncertainty, but it once again offers a comment on Blunt's own status, for he too has been misattributed within the British establishment. The painting's unstable status is an extension of Blunt's; just as Blunt appears to be something he is not, so too does the painting, and, like Blunt, the image is in the Queen's service but of questionable provenance.

Bennett takes this analogy further, however. As the play opens, the *Triple Portrait* appears as it would have to Charles I: it shows *two* figures that are identified as Titian and a Venetian senator. The image of Titian, we learn, is "a copy of the Berlin self-portrait" (309); thus, the painting depicts a copy of a man in the company of a politician – an apt metaphor for the spy. However, over the course of the play, the image changes. A restorer discovers the presence of another figure in the painting. In a space that before appeared empty, beneath layers of dark paint, is the finely painted head of a young man – which accounts for the painting's current title denoting the presence of three rather than two men. As Gore points out, when the picture was cleaned in 1957, the existence of a third man on the right side of the canvas was discovered – a man who, though unknown, resembles one of the portraits that Titian was known to have

painted(351). As the restorer in Bennett's play notes, his sudden intrusion changes the balance of the composition entirely. The scale of Titian's portrait now seems wrong so that "he looks as if he belongs in a different picture" (321). He does, of course, being a displaced copy of another image, but it isn't until the discovery of this third man that Titian's likeness comes to appear so awkward. This unexpected finding alters the compositional context of the image so that what we find in place of a unified and authentic art object is a misattributed refraction of copies and questions, all of which force us to reconsider the image.

As Gore points out, a further x-ray excavation of the image revealed another two portraits embedded in the painting – one beneath the head of the senator, and one that was placed at a right angle to the composition as we now know it, "demonstrating that the canvas was first intended to be used in an upright form" (352). The title of Gore's notice therefore offers a provisional new name for the painting: *Five Portraits*.

In these revelations, Bennett saw an obvious metaphor for the Cambridge spies. As Daphne Turner summarizes, "Burgess, Philby and Maclean all escaped to Russia, but there were rumours of a fourth and fifth man, one of whom turns out to be Blunt" (106). The hidden figures of the ex-Titian therefore correspond to the spy ring's supposed accomplices. Significantly, Bennett has Blunt expose these concealed figures. He finds the third man when he has the image cleaned, and the other two are revealed through an x-ray examination. Blunt is therefore in the position to name these hidden men – a position that echoes his situation with Chubb. The interrogator believes that there must be a fifth accomplice. "There is someone else," he says, "Someone behind you all. All the evidence points to it" (350). "You've told us some names," he chides Blunt, but

"You've not told us the names behind the names" (327). The "overpopulated canvas"

reflects Chubb's fear that each known spy conceals the presence of nameless others

(348). Thus, the photographs that he shows Blunt throughout the play – all black and

white images of young men dating from the thirties – represent his belief that the spy is in

the position to expose them, much as he did with the mysterious canvas.

In response to Chubb's assertion that there must be a fifth man, Blunt cites the

allegory of Renaissance art specialist Bernard Berenson. Having come across a group of

paintings that he believed to be the work of an as yet unidentified master, Berenson

christened the artist Amico di Sandro ('the friend of Botticelli') due to similarities in their

style. This artist, however, was Berenson's creation. As Blunt explains, "There was no

Amico di Sandro. He had been invented to fit the evidence, but he did not exist" (350).

But Chubb draws him into a stalemate when he cites an instance in which one of

Berenson's constructed artists – the Maestro del Bambino Vispo ('the painter of the

wriggling baby') – did in fact exist. Once again, we find ourselves at an impasse. Is the

fifth man of the spy ring a false human artefact invented to fit the evidence, or is he real

and as yet unnamed, lingering somewhere behind Blunt? In his final words of the play,

the art historian contemplates this dizzying puzzle. "But who are they all?" he asks, "I

don't know that it matters. Behind them lurk other presences, other hands. A whole

gallery of possibilities.The real Titian an Allegory of Prudence. The false one anAllegory

of Supposition. It is never-ending" (351). As it turns out, the two primary paintings of

the play – one an authentic masterpiece and the other what Blunt calls "a hotchpotch"

(346), a studio exercise in multiple hands – are equally evasive according to Blunt.[15] The

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[15]Of the *Triple Portrait*, Gore concludes, "All that can be definitely said about the authorship of the
[image] is that more than one hand was engaged on it. The three heads which are now visible are by three

Triple Portrait, he suggests, is "a warning" that draws our attention to the fact that there

is no way of concretizing either art or the mystery of selfhood:

> This painting is a riddle, and this and similar riddles are quests one can
>
> pursue for years; their solution is one of the functions of the art historian.
>
> But it is only *one* of his functions. Art history is seldom thought of as a
>
> hazardous profession. But a life spent teasing out riddles of this kind
>
> carries its own risks…a barrenness of outlook, a pedantry that verges on
>
> the obsessive, and a farewell to common sense; the rule of the hobby
>
> horse. Because, though the solution might add to our appreciation of this
>
> painting, paintings, we must never forget, are not there primarily to be
>
> solved. A great painting will still elude us, as art will always elude
>
> exposition. (348)

If there were any doubts about the metaphorical role that art plays in "A Question of

Attribution," Bennett puts them to rest here. Painting is a riddle that ultimately eludes

explanation. Interpretations of aesthetic objects are fraught with speculation, regardless

of how skilled the art historian. Here, Blunt highlights the impossibility of knowing

definitively what an image means. However, it is also in his interests to promote such an

evasive reading of art, for in doing so, he hopes to evade culpability for his own

espionage. According to Blunt's construction, if art's meaning is evasive, so too are the

spy's actions. Thus, he hopes to highlight the impossibility of dismissing the spy as a

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different artists; the two further heads shown in the X-ray may again be by different hands" (352). Thus, Gore conjectures that the painting may have been intended as a studio exercise. Not only does the image's varied authorship point to its nature as a constructed object, but its parallels to Blunt invite us to reflect upon the plural nature of subjectivity. Blunt, like the canvas, is the product of multiple hands. To read him as a static figure is, as I have already suggested, a mistake, for Bennett stresses that the project of selfhood is susceptible to multiple inscriptions.

betrayer of his country. Such a simplified reading, Blunt suggests, is flawed. However, the one figure who poses the sternest challenge to this assertion is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Queen herself.

IV: Queens, Queers, and Spies

All those beautiful boys,
Kings and Queens
And criminal queers,
All those beautiful boys.
– Antony and the Johnsons

Blunt's equivocation stands in contrast to HMQ's certainty – a fact that is evident in their unexpected encounter in the play, a moment that is not only symbolically loaded but also one of the drama's central and most interesting episodes. Blunt decides to remove the *Triple Portrait* from Buckingham Palace for further inspection, temporarily replacing it with an image of the Annunciation, when the Queen quite suddenly comes upon him. It is worth noting that in his otherwise meticulous stage directions, Bennett never specifies which Annunciation painting is to be used. One can therefore assume that the details of the image are not as important as the general symbol of revelation inherent to the annunciation. Rather suitably, Blunt's own unholy betrayal is soon to be announced, and we are never entirely sure whether the Queen knows about his duplicity or not. Chubb warns him that he was promised immunity, not anonymity, but we never know exactly who is privy to Blunt's three lives. Many of the Queen's words seem loaded with accusation, and their conversation is coloured by double entendres regarding questions of representation and fakery, yet our doubt about just how much she knows is one of the play's delightful ambiguities. Remarking upon their exchange after the fact, Blunt says,

"I was talking about art. I'm not sure that she was" (346). But, of course, even Blunt's

discussion of art is a loosely disguised consideration of his treachery. What unfolds

between Blunt and the Queen is a carefully crafted verbal sparring match between a spy

and the figurehead of the nation he has betrayed. The symbolic dimensions of this

exchange are by no means lost on the audience. Bennett emphasizes the various

resonances between the teacher and the student, the spy and the body politic.

Blunt tells the Queen that he believes the *Triple Portrait* to be misattributed.

When she expresses surprise that the painting is a fake, he gently corrects her: "Because

something is not what it is said to be, Ma'am, does not mean it is a fake" (333). This

answer does not satisfy the Queen, however. "I like a fact," she says (336), and later

defiantly refers to the painting as "My fake Titian" (342). Bennett constructs a fairly

interesting contrast here: we have a confrontation between a Queen who adores facts

versus a spy who is enamored by mystery. As both an art historian and a spy, Blunt is

accustomed to reading ambiguity, and he recognizes the difficulty of uncovering any

concrete meaning in representations or aesthetic objects. His tendency towards

equivocation is contrasted to the Queen's preference for clear and sharp definitions. "I

like things to have a line round them," she says (338). In this respect, she is fascinated by

forgery. When she asks Blunt whether she has many fakes, he rather diplomatically

replies, "They are sometimes not what we think they are, but that's different. The

question doesn't pose itself in the form, 'Is this a fake?' so much as 'Who painted this

picture and why?'" (342). However, the Queen finds such explanations "rubbish" (343).

Their pointed exchange is worth quoting at length:

HMQ: I suppose too the context of the painting matters. Its history and provenance (is that the word?) confer on it a certain respectability. This can't be a forgery, it's in such and such a collection, its background and pedigree areimpeccable – besides, it has been vetted by the experts. Isn't that how the argument goes? So if one comes across a painting with the right background and pedigree, Sir Anthony, then it must be hard, I imagine – even inconceivable – to think that it is not what it claims to be. And even supposing someone in such circumstances did have suspicions, they would be chary about voicing them. Easier to leave things as they are in every department. Stick to the official attribution rather than let the cat out of the bag and say, 'Here we have a fake.'

Blunt: I still think the word 'fake' is inappropriate, Ma'am.

HMQ: If something is not what it is claimed to be, what is it?

Blunt: An enigma?

HMQ: That is, I think, the sophisticated answer. (344)

The passage is clearly meant to reflect upon Blunt himself; art and identity are intrinsically tied here. As a spy, he occupies a liminal space, straddling both sides of the proverbial fence. He is therefore hybrid, heterogeneous, and discontinuous. The Queen's inscription of coherence and continuity is set against his antitotalizing displacement. When she remarks upon the pedigree of paintings, we are invited to consider Blunt's own lineage, which kept him above suspicion. As Banville puts it, Blunt is the son of a bishop, an Old Malburian, and a Cambridge man (*Untouchable* 174), all of which make it hard to believe that he may be a traitor. But in the Queen's cut-and-dry categorization, a

fake is a fake, regardless of its pedigree, and a traitor is a traitor, whatever his

justifications. "Sophistication in *Question*," writes Peter Wolfe, "pales before simplicity,

especially in cases where simplicity stands on a bedrock of honesty" (155). Thus, the

passage outlines the tension between these two characters. Blunt makes aesthetic claims

that, when we consider the subtext of the play, seem to excuse him from responsibility for

his past actions. By claiming that the misattributed "something" of the above passage is

not a fake but an enigma, the spy attempts to hide his guilt behind the veil of elegant

rhetoric. As an enigma, the misattributed work is but a poorly understood and puzzling

object that is at the mercy of external interpretations; such categorization allows him to

elude the moral dimensions of fakery. In the one instance, the error of misattribution is

accidental; in the other, it is active. Blunt's reasoning here closely parallels his assertion

elsewhere that we are the ones who make claims for artworks – an assertion that allows

him to place the burden of responsibility on the beholders, and an assertion that is very

much in keeping with Banville's Victor Maskell.

The Queen, however refuses to accept his sophistry, pointing out that active

deceptions are common in both the art community and elsewhere. As O'Mealy writes,

"she succinctly turns the tables on Blunt by appropriating his insistence on context and

showing how one kind of context, a pedigree, can be used to conceal, not reveal, the real

nature of a reputed masterpiece, and, by extension, an upper-class traitor" (68). Thus,

Bennett resists a simplified reading of both the art object and the spy. In depicting the

spy *as* art, he foregrounds the secret agent's status as a signifier that is open to

interpretation.

PART THREE: Banville's *The Untouchable*

I: The Untouchable Blunt as Victor Maskell

Must not anyone who wants to move the crowd be an actor who impersonates himself?
– Friedrich Nietzsche

In "A Question of Attribution," we see that the world of espionage demands that the secret agent become an artist who creates lifelike representations and then inhabits his creations. Thus, the spy's identity is under constant construction as he repeatedly remakes himself in response to his intrigues. In *The Untouchable*, Banville depicts this process as one that endangers the spy's sense of self. Both secret agent and homosexual, Victor Maskell is a liminal figure that has been forced to occupy numerous roles. Now, having been publicly exposed as a traitor at the age of seventy-one, Maskell is forced to face the question of his loyalties and motives. In the wake of public outcry, he decides to tell his own side of the story and therefore writes what he calls "my last testament" (5), which is ostensibly the novel itself. The parallels to Freddie's 'book of evidence' are obvious. Once more, we find the retrospective confessional account of an unreliable aesthete, and once more the investigation of the self is grounded in a consideration of art. However, Maskell's espionage and homosexuality complicate the questions of subjectivity and authenticity that so intrigued Banville in his Frames Trilogy. *The Untouchable* therefore marks an interest with those issues that concerned Bennett in his plays; however, the first-person narrative structure of Banville's work would seem to provide readers with the promise of greater insight into the figure of the spy. Where Bennett's dramatic form naturally highlights the performance of the secret agent's identity, Banville's narrative format foregrounds the *production* of this performance.

Readers witness not only the performance itself, but the conscious process and the motivations behind it.

As Maskell sets about writing his memoir, he is acutely aware of his own metaphorical status as a representation. Contemplating his autobiographical task, he claims that he does not want to create for himself "yet another burnished mask" (9). In other words, Maskell seems to suggest that he hopes to represent himself faithfully here. Consequently, he provides his readers with access to his conscious self-constructions. For instance, in preparation for his meeting with the press, Maskell allows his audience the equivalent of backstage access as he carefully fashions himself into a traditional Englishman, not unlike Burgess in Bennett's play. Aware of the importance of one's costume, the retired spy dons an "old but good houndstooth jacket, Jermyn Street shirt and Charvet tie" and "socks the colour and texture of porridge," striving to look as though he might "have just come up from a weekend at Cliveden" (9). He draws the reader's attention to his calculated public performance, admitting that he "dressed the part to perfection" and proclaiming, "I am a great actor, that is the secret of my success" (9). The implication here is that in witnessing Victor assume one of his many masks, his readers will be privy to what lies beneath it. Indeed, as D'Hoker notes, this notion is one of the unwritten conditions of the autobiographical genre – a genre which stipulates "that the author should not merely reproduce his or her public image, but invite the reader behind the façade for a glimpse at the real person crouching behind" (*Visions* 202).[16] With Maskell, however, we are denied any such glimpse.

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[16]The role of the art historian, Maskell claims, is "to synthesise, to concentrate, to *fix* his subject" (312). Thus, Maskell claims that he has, in a sense, "invented Poussin" through his definitive monograph on the artist: "After me, Poussin is not, cannot be, what he was before me" (312). It would seem that our protagonist hopes to achieve something similar with his autobiographical account. *The Untouchable* is his

Banville uses the autobiographical form in order to problematize it. He foregrounds its conventions in order to challenge them. As Hutcheon points out, the "autobiographical memoir has a long history in fiction as a form of asserting the primacy of individual experience" (162); however, *The Untouchable* subverts Maskell's search for narrative and subjective unity. Because it is a postmodern work, the novel traces not Victor's successful self-inscription, but rather his contingency. The traditional humanist structure of the narrative is therefore denied here, for in place of the unified narrating subject, we find a spy – a figure that is multiple, radically split, and decentered. Thus, Maskell exploits and subverts the very autobiographical conventions within which he is working, for *The Untouchable* resists the totalizing power of the first-person narrative. Not only does Maskell's 'true face' remain beyond reach, but the novel questions whether any such face exists.

In the world of *The Untouchable*, it is impossible to get outside of representation. Far from mirroring reality, Maskell's autobiographical narrative is, by necessity, subjective, and as in The Frames Trilogy, readers face the dilemma of being unable to access any alternative accounts. Compounded by the compulsive secrecy of Maskell's profession and sexuality, the chronicle can offer little in the way of truth, prompting even the protagonist himself to later admit that this is a "fictional memoir" (367). Having hidden behind masks for so long, the subject is subverted within his own autobiography.

"Reading over these pages," says Maskell, "I am struck by how little I impinge on them. The personal pronoun is everywhere, of course, propping up the edifice I am erecting, but what is there to be seen behind this slender capital?" (44). The spy invokes

attempt to synthesise, concentrate, and ostensibly *fix* himself. However, as the novel unfolds, this project is revealed to be impossible under postmodernism.

the first-person pronoun of Cartesian subjectivity, but only to call it into question. His

memoir is therefore fundamentally problematic, for how can one narrate the self if one

cannot locate the self to begin with?   Thus, like Bennett's Blunt, he compares his project

of autobiography to that of the art historian who clarifies and illuminates the art object.

Maskell writes, "I realize that the metaphor is obvious: attribution, verification,

restoration. I shall strip away layer after layer of grime – the toffee-coloured varnish and

caked soot left by a lifetime of dissembling – until I come to the very thing itself and

know it for what it is. My soul. My self" (9). The metaphor is striking in that Maskell

envisions himself as an artwork and, echoing King Lear on the stormy heath, constructs

the project of self-restoration as one of authentication. More striking, however, is his

almost immediate subversion of these grand sentiments: "When I laugh out loud like this

the room seems to start back in surprise and dismay, with hand to lip" (9), he says. The

master dissembler is well aware of the impossibility of discovering "the thing itself," for

in his duplicitous world, the supposedly authentic self is subsumed by the disguises of

both the spy and the homosexual. "You must never stop acting," Maskell writes, "not for

an instant, even when you are alone, in a locked room, with the lights off and the blankets

over your head" (337).

     Maskell is ironically drawn to spying as a means of combating what he sees as his

own fundamental inauthenticity. By assuming a series of masks, he believes that he can

veil his own insubstantiality. As he explains,

> you are never required to *be yourself*; whatever you do, there is another,
>
> alternative you standing invisibly to one side, observing, evaluating,
>
> remembering. This is the secret power of the spy, different from the

> power that orders armies into battle; it is purely personal; it is the power to be and not be, to detach oneself from oneself, to be oneself and at the same time another. (131)

For Victor, detachment is central to espionage. He thinks that spying will allow him to sublimate his lack of authenticity – a lack that is fundamentally grounded in his lineage. Unlike his historical model, Victor is Irish-born, making him an ethnic outsider who assumes the guise of an English gentleman. Having racially reinvented himself, his life is defined by his daily performance of this adopted identity. As Kenny explains, Maskell "is a social interloper in London, a city he insists on calling his capital instead of Belfast" (82). Consequently, the protagonist is an ex-centric figure, finding "himself a simultaneous insider and outsider, a curious combination of Englishman and Irishman" (Kenny 82). Hand similarly points out that this departure from Blunt's biography "exaggerates [Maskell's] sense of homelessness and displacement," while at the same time highlighting "how fluid and non-essential racial identity actually is" (158).

Banville has his protagonist spring from a long line of dissemblers. Maskell's ancestors are "mysterious autochthons stepping out of the mists of the western seaboard, the mighty O Measceoils, warriors, pirates, fierce clansmen all, who just in time to avoid the ravages of the Famine had changed their religion and Anglicised the family name and turned themselves into Yeats's hard-riding country gentlemen" (72). This lineage of national betrayal – what he calls a "legacy of dispossession" (140) – not only prepares Maskell for a life of duplicity but also suggests that identity is a fundamentally protean rather than fixed category. It is this instability that propels him towards both espionage and art; Maskell turns to art as a remedy for "an essential poverty of the soul" (126). The

act of spying is similarly constructed as a corrective. Consequently, Maskell

demonstrates the kind of distorted logic so typical of Freddie Montgomery: he hopes that

as both an art historian and spy, he can finally achieve a sense of authenticity.

It is important to note here the other liberty that Banville takes with Blunt's

official history. Where Blunt recognized his sexuality from a young age, Maskell

becomes a husband and father before realizing that he is gay. His late recognition of his

sexuality therefore acts as what McMinn calls "a kind of personal betrayal" that

intensifies Maskell's sense of his own inauthenticity (*Supreme* 143). Having come to

'know himself' in his thirties, Victor is amazed by how little acquainted he was with his

own desires. The discovery makes him a double agent in both his professional and

personal life – he carries on with the marriage as a front, but he feels as though he is an

imposter. This alteration to Blunt's history therefore foregrounds Maskell's sense of

himself as divided, displaced, and dispossessed.

The allure of espionage is rooted in this unstable selfhood, for Maskell sees

spying as a way to ground himself in a cause that might allow him to feel "more serious,

more weighty, more authentic" (33). However, that he is devoted to an *ideal* is clear; it is

Nick Brevoort, Victor's brother-in-law, who first declares Maskell's Cambridge

Communism a romanticized ideal. According to Nick, this particular brand of

Communism offers its followers a cause in which to lose themselves, "a way to cancel

the ego" (57). Indeed, Maskell's construction of the secret agent as a neo-Gnostic would

seem to confirm Nick's claims; he sees spies as "keepers of a secret knowledge, for

whom the world of appearances was only a gross manifestation of any infinitely subtler,

more real reality known only to the chosen few" (45). Espionage, in other words, would

seem to promise Victor the authenticity that he lacks by allowing him to devote himself

to a concrete cause. He ironically seeks solidity by assuming masks. However, for

Maskell, Marxism is but an attractive theory; in practice, he finds it vulgar and

unbecoming. Hence, when his missions take him to the continent, his romanticized

expectations of Socialism are disappointed. Russia is a "horrible place" (113) and

Maskell finds that he has nothing but "contempt for the Iron Man" (98). He declares

Spain a "hateful country" (54) and prefers the Prado's images of revolution to the reality

on the streets. In fact, his fondness for the works of Francisco Zurbarans, "haunting in

their stillness, their transcendent mundanity" (54), over the more violent and vigorous

works of Goya and El Greco gestures towards his overall detachment from his own

political role.[17]

In keeping with the other works I have examined in this dissertation thus far, art

plays a central role in Maskell's aloofness from the world at large. Recall that in The

Frames Trilogy, Freddie's overinvestment in art desensitizes him to real-life horrors.

Here, Maskell's engagement with paintings marks his disconnection from the political

intrigues with which he is involved. When the fall of Barcelona is announced over the

wire, for instance, Victor feels that he cannot summon an emotional response. He

continues to calmly study a reproduction of Poussin's *The Capture of Jerusalem by Titus*

"as if the two events, the real and the depicted, were equally far off from [him] in

antiquity, the one as fixed and finished as the other, all frozen cry and rampant steed and

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[17]In *The Story of Art*, Gombrich notes the incredible force of both Goya's and El Greco's work. From Goya's nightmare visions of violence and oppression to El Greco's images of passionate rapture and transport, their works are characterized by their excitement and ability to startle. Where both artists turned their attention to the political upheaval of the time, Zurbarans focused on more restrained religious subjects. His removal from the political arena therefore reflects upon Maskell's detachment in the text.

stylised, gorgeous cruelty" (141-2). Should the reader not recognize the significance of this admission, Maskell adds, "You see…?" (142). He appears to offer a justification for his detachment. By reading the external world through the lens of a stylized and idealized art, he can sanitize reality and maintain his distance from it. Art and espionage are therefore parallel in terms of their ability to promote a fundamental detachment. Rather suitably, then, it is Maskell's idealization of art that enables his early idealization of Marxism.

Of course, the qualities that first attract Victor to espionage turn out to be more problematic than he suspected. The liberating quality of the spy's unstable identity ends up being equally terrifying when one realizes that there is no self behind the masks. Over time, Maskell comes to see what his audience already knows: that spying cannot offer him his desired authenticity. In fact, it has the opposite effect. Consider, for instance, the Soviet performance of Englishness in the novel. Guided by his belief in a "mythical version of John Bull," Iosif, Maskell's Russian contact in London, wears tweeds and brogues, insists on meeting in traditional pubs, and smokes Capstan cigarettes (137). The effect, we are told, "was of a diligently fashioned but hopelessly inaccurate imitation of a human being, something a scouting party from another world might send ahead to mingle with Earthlings and transmit back vital data" (137). Though Maskell criticizes Iosif's exaggerated performance, calling him a "ventriloquist's dummy" (140), he is nonetheless guilty of something similar. His initial meeting with the press forces him to re-enact his adopted Englishness, and he later admits to the absurdity of his sustained "play-acting" (286). Maskell sees himself, not as the tragic hero of the piece, but rather more like Pierrot – "one of the clowns, scampering in and out of the wings and desperately doing

quick-changes, putting on one mask only to whip it off immediately and replace it with

another" (287). As his desired authenticity dwindles into the comic confusion of a farce,

Victor becomes as absurd as Iosif and realizes that the "more simple, more authentic form

of living" he sought is "beyond [him]" (46).

Moreover, it turns out that Maskell's cause is as inauthentic as the spy's disguises.

Victor is stunned when news of the Hitler-Stalin pact breaks – an alliance that reveals the

world of politics to be one "which recognises no limit to deception or contradiction, no

end to delusion" (McMinn,*Supreme* 147). A betrayer betrayed, Maskell clings all the

more to art. I would argue that it is precisely his loss of political faith that forces him to

place a compensatory and renewed faith in art. Indeed, it seems that Maskell has

determined that art will be his panacea; he will counteract the prevailing inauthenticity of

his world by devoting himself to representational art, for "Art is supposed to teach us to

see the world in all its solidity and truth" (*Untouchable* 287). "I wanted something harsh

and studied," he declares, "the truly lifelike: Poussin, Cezanne, Picasso" (102). "In the

ever shifting, myriad worlds through which I moved," Maskell claims, "Poussin was the

singular, unchanging, wholly authentic thing" (312). Victor's belief that representational

art offers the only certainty in an otherwise chaotic world justifies his deeply held

iconophilia and places him alongside the other characters I have examined in this

dissertation. Like Banville's Freddie and Bennett's Blunt, Maskell sees art as the last

bastion of authenticity in a postmodern world that threatens to overturn any and all

absolutes. Thus, the destabilizing force of postmodernism that promised liberation from

the constraints of the past turns out to be a threat against which they must steel

themselves. Nostalgic for an imagined past that had unmediated access to reality, they turn to traditional representational art as one turns to the comfort of a lover.

Maskell is, we are told, "positively coital when contemplating a picture" (23), and he compares time spent among pictures to time spent with male lovers: both leave Maskell "light-headed and tottery" (116). Most telling, perhaps, is his reaction to Nicolas Poussin's *The Death of Seneca*, the painting at the center of *The Untouchable*. When he first spies the image as he flips through a stack of mediocre paintings in a gallery, Maskell is overcome: "whenever I look at a great picture for the first time I know why we still speak of the heart as the seat of the emotions. My breathing grew shallow and my palms were moist. It was as if I had stumbled on something indecent; this was how I used to feel as a schoolboy when someone would pass me a dirty picture under the desk" (40). His eroticised adoration of the painting signals the extent of Maskell's iconophilia.

More important, however, is that Maskell places his faith in the edifying and enlightening value of art. Paintings act as both his refuge from and antidote to the confusion of war. During the chaos of the Blitz, for instance, his only solace is in a volume of Poussin reproductions because "the classical stillness of the compositions was a calmative" (262). In a particularly telling passage, Maskell informs his reader that whenever he felt "swollen with guilt and dread," he would steal away to the basement of the Courtauld Institute and give himself up to the "serenity and orderliness," the "insistent silence" of the stored images (287). In such instances, he desires to 'bathe his senses' in art, as though seeking a ritual baptism via representation. What we find here is an example of Maskell's belief in the artwork as restorative, providing comfort for those in need of repair or redemption.

Remember, however, that Maskell's engagement with art desensitizes him, as in the example of the fall of Barcelona. It is, in other words, precisely this distancing effect that comforts him – a fact that will later reflect upon what becomes his most notable ethical position: Stoicism. However, art does not always comply with Maskell's wishes. When he first shows his *Death of Seneca* to a reporter, for instance, he is suddenly overcome by the disconcerting sensation that the image has shrunk, as though he "were viewing it through the wrong side of a lens" (26). The painting, he says, "seemed diminished not only in scale but in – how shall I say? – in substance, and I experienced a strange flicker of distress" (26). Clearly, the statement reflects upon Maskell's tendency to aggrandize and idealize paintings. Here, rather than comfort him, the image confounds him. Thus, we find the typically postmodern rhythm of installation and subsequent subversion in the text. It is hardly surprising that art should fail to live up to the observer's idealized expectations of it, for the promise of the image's cohesiveness and order is but a fiction.

II: Aesthetic Delusions: Stoicism, Seneca, and Diderot

If my life has taught me anything it is that in these matters there are no absolutes, of trust, or belief, or
anything else. And a good thing, too.
– Victor Maskell

The images at the Institute similarly refuse Victor his longed-for consolation; however, in doing so, these pictures also force him to reconsider his own subjective existence, demonstrating that his sense of himself is intrinsically tied to the images he contemplates. The paintings "looked back at me," he says, "resentful, somehow, stubbornly withholding that benison of tranquility and brief escape that I so earnestly desired of them" (289).

Here, the objects stare back and threaten the subject by challenging his image-expectations. "The dreadful thought comes to me that perhaps I do not understand art at all," he confesses, "that what I see in it and seek in it is not there, or, if it is, that I have put it there. Have I any authenticity at all? Or have I double dealt for so long that my true self has been forfeit?" (289). Confronted by actively gazing images, Maskell loses his status as a privileged, appropriating subject. The art that normally comforts him mirrors his own insubstantiality back to him; in other words, art ironically reminds him of what he sought to escape by placing his faith in art. The text consequently refuses any naïve and idealized reading of the art object that Victor wants to make. His longed-for return to the referent is undercut by its paradoxical inscription of his own uncertainty.

The exchange demonstrates the tension between the art object itself and Maskell's distorted perception of it. Central to his idealized aesthetic perspective is Diderot's theory of statues, which informs Victor's subjecthood. He explains,

> Diderot said that what we do is, we erect a statue in our own image inside
> ourselves – idealised, you know, but still recognisable – and then spend
> our lives engaged in the effort to make ourselves into its likeness. This is
> the moral imperative…I know that's how *I* feel. Only there are times
> when I can't tell which is the statue and which is me. (80)

In claiming that we fashion ourselves based upon images or "imaginary statues" which we ourselves create (165), Diderot highlights the intersection of identity and representation. His theory foregrounds the notion that in performing our identities, we emulate imagined representations. This is identity as the impersonation of an idealized and imaginary art object.

Interestingly, it is not so much an imaginary statue of himself that Maskell emulates as the painted subject of his beloved *Death of Seneca*. In Diderot's formulation, art is a trope; however, Maskell attempts to literalize the trope by importing Diderot's theory to a material painting. Consequently, he tries to stabilize himself in an art object that he calls "the touchstone and true source of my life's work" (26). In this respect, *The Death of Seneca* is central to Maskell's construction of selfhood. Painted by Poussin in the classical style, the image is an icon of the artist's interest in Stoic philosophy. The subject of the painting, Maskell explains,

> is the suicide of Seneca the Younger in the year A.D. 65. See his grieving
> friends and family about him as his life's blood drips into the golden
> bowl…Seneca fell foul of Claudius's successor, the aforementioned Nero,
> whose tutor he had been. He was accused of conspiracy, and was ordered
> to commit suicide, which he did with great fortitude and dignity. (26-7)

What strikes him most about the image is its composure, its "studied calm" and "tranquility" (27): "although the subject is tragic," he says, "the picture communicates a sense of serenity and simple grandeur that is deeply, deeply moving" (182). To Maskell, the painting is a symbol of Stoic virtue in the face of corruption – Seneca is wrongly accused by a petty ruler, but he nonetheless meets his end with admirable calm and bravery.[18] As McMinn summarizes, the image "tells of heroic sacrifice and service rewarded by disloyalty and ignorance" (*Supreme* 144). In other words, the image offers

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[18]By way of comparison, consider Jacques Louis David's 1773 depiction of the same subject. David's canvas is kinetic and the scene turbulent. The artist portrays, not a dignified and restrained Seneca, but an aged and emotional figure who reaches towards his distraught wife. David translates the calm of Poussin's canvas into a frenzied energy. Thus, one could argue that Poussin's painting captures more accurately the Stoic philosophy. Seneca greets death with the quiet fortitude and dignity of the true Stoic, and it is this image that Maskell takes as his model.

an allegory that becomes central not only to Maskell's discursive inscription of himself but also to his process of self-realization.

That Maskell consciously models himself upon this symbol of Stoic fortitude is clear in his behaviour. Victor seeks to internalize the qualities of the image, appearing "cool, dry, balanced, every inch the Stoic" (9). His resolve is perhaps most evident in his account of the Allied Army's retreat from Boulogne, which Maskell calls a "great revelatory moment" in his life (201). In their haste to escape the Germans, Victor and his men unknowingly board a demolitions ship. By the time they realize their mistake, they are already adrift on a "floating bomb" (199) and within range of German guns, so the men have no choice but to wait and hope that the danger will pass. Overcome by "sweaty, bladder-tightening terror" (200), Maskell is on the brink of losing his composure when the sudden recollection of his beloved Poussin reminds him to maintain his self-control. Emulating the aesthetic model of Stoic dignity in the face of certain death, Maskell puts on the appearance of being "ironical and insouciant" (201). He models his behaviour upon a material image, carving himself into a painted ideal, but in doing so, Maskell misinterprets Diderot's formulation.

Diderot's theory is clearly a Pygmalionesque model of self-improvement; the 'statue' is an idealized self-image representing a more perfect version of the self. When Maskell refers to the "moral imperative" of this theory (80), he draws our attention to the fact that Diderot constructs the imaginary statue as morally superior. Thus, in imitating the idealized statue, we seek to replicate in external reality its moral perfection. In Maskell's case, however, the symbolic statue is replaced with a tangible artwork, which means that he attempts to ground himself in a material *objet d'art*. As I have already

demonstrated in chapter one of this dissertation, any attempt to anchor oneself in art will

fail, for the constructed art object is itself fundamentally unstable. The spy's distorted

project of ethical improvement will not succeed, and what we find in place of satisfaction

is sublimation: rather than refine himself, the secret agent will instead divert his energy

into the purely representational realm of art.

It is rather significant that Banville should have Freddie Montgomery articulate a

similar interest in Diderot. In *Ghosts*, Freddie explains,

> Diderot developed a theory of ethics based on the idea of the statue; if we
>
> would be good, he said, we must become sculptors of the self. Virtue is
>
> not natural to us; we achieve it, if at all, through a kind of artistic striving,
>
> cutting and shaping the material of which we are made, the intransigent
>
> stone of selfhood, and erecting an idealized effigy of ourselves in our own
>
> minds and in the minds of those around us and living as best we can
>
> according to its sublime example. (196)

That the ethical dimensions of Diderot's imaginary statues should appeal to both a

murderer and a spy is rather telling. In both figures we find a misguided morality that is

fundamentally and erroneously based upon art. *The Death of Seneca* becomes Maskell's

moral touchstone, for in his deluded reading of Diderot, the spy's ethical imperative

involves following the model of Stoic resolve outlined in his favourite painting. Thus,

when the writer Serena Vandeleur asks him why he betrayed his country, Maskell

responds by showing her *The Death of Seneca*, as though the painting alone can offer a

sufficient answer. However, this grand, performative gesture only frustrates Serena, who

fails to make the not entirely logical leaps between Maskell's morality, his love of

Poussin, and his espousal of Stoic philosophy. The reader, on the other hand, recognizes just how fitting the gesture is for a delusional Victor. His moral register works on an aesthetic plane; in other words, Maskell measures his own morality according to his adherence to the artistic ideals conveyed in Poussin's painting. In effect, the painting *is* his ethical principle, and in keeping with his twisted logic, he believes that because he has maintained his faith in art, he has maintained his morality. Thus, he sees himself as a Seneca-figure: a brave philosopher sacrificed on the altar of a corrupt system. Of course, the reader sees that Maskell's moral compass is skewed, for it is based upon an unstable representation rather than upon any guidelines grounded in the real world. His aesthetic morality is a symptom of his self-delusion.

Maskell's misguided attempt to ground the self in the unstable medium of art is clearly destructive. Having failed to stabilize himself in art during his lifetime, Victor attempts to do so in death. His final act of the novel is a symbolic salute to the aesthetic ideals he refuses to abandon – ideals that the reader already recognizes as misguided. Maskell seeks to emulate the action of Poussin's *Death of Seneca* by committing suicide – a plot point that marks another fundamental departure from Blunt's biography. The historical Blunt died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-five, but in the narrative world of *The Untouchable*, Maskell's suicide is central to the demonstration of his delusion.

Early in the novel, Maskell cites Baudelaire's belief that Stoicism is a religion with one sacrament: suicide (27). With this in mind, Maskell's final act can be read as an act of faith in an art that has ironically already been undercut in the novel. With its "unearthly quality" and "paradisal radiance" (182), Poussin's canvas offers a highly romanticized vision of the philosopher's suicide. For Maskell, the calm and tranquility of

the painting, its clarity and balance, stand in contrast to a chaotic reality. Thus, *The Death of Seneca* becomes his solace, representing the soothing balm of aesthetic escape. Somewhat paradoxically however, Maskell sees the painting as the last vestige of authenticity in a destabilized world. To his mind, the image is both idealized and authentic, romanticized and real.

In the world of the painting, a dignified Seneca is seated on a couch beneath a window through which beholders can see "the vast, calm world beyond, where death awaits" (183). In the world of the narrative, having calmly set his affairs in order, Maskell sits beneath a window in "silent commune" with his Webley revolver (367). His final moments trace the delusional fusion of reality and representation as he seeks to replicate in reality the painted scene. Maskell imbues the world beyond the window with the qualities of his painted Poussin. Thus, the sky, with its "distant, stately" clouds, is "noble." "It is the kind of sky that Poussin loved to set above his lofty dramas of death and love and loss" (368), thinks Maskell. By picturing external reality in terms of Poussin's painted dramas, Victor seeks to recast reality in accordance to his beloved image. He therefore ennobles not only the clouds, but the entire scene that unfolds before him. In other words, Maskell's iconic projection signals his attempt to re-enact *The Death of Seneca* and, in doing so, inscribe upon himself the qualities of his painted hero. In a perfect example of his extreme literalization of Diderot, Maskell hopes to become the dignified Stoic who calmly accepts death. To his deluded mind, art is the final means of his redemption, for it allows him to recreate in himself the vision of selfhood that he lacks. However, Maskell can only transform himself into a simulacrum – not of Seneca,

but of his *image*. His engagement with art is therefore ironically marked by the consistent deferral of the self.

The implication is clear: in *The Untouchable*, the attempt to anchor oneself in art can only result in delusion and death. Though Victor may see himself as successful at the end of the novel – finally stabilizing himself via a constructed *objet d'art* – the reader sees that this is not the case, a fact that is foregrounded by *The Death of Seneca*'s questionable status. Within the narrative world, Maskell's treasured image is declared a fake when it is sent off for cleaning and valuation. This revelation not only highlights the artwork's instability but also Maskell's misguided faith in such representations.

In an especially poignant example of foreshadowing, Maskell is beset by worry when he sends his painting to the cleaners:

> What if the cleaners damage it, or in some other way deprive me of it, my last solace? The Irish say, when a child turns from its parents, that it is *making strange*; it comes from the belief that fairy folk, a jealous tribe, would steal a too-fair human babe and leave a changeling in its place. What if my picture comes back and I find that it is making strange? What if I look up from my desk some day and see a changeling before me? (181)

A substitute in the semblance of the original, a changeling is a simulacrum that takes the place of an authentic human child. The parallel is obvious: Maskell fears that his authentic Poussin will be returned to him radically altered, an imposter in the place of his treasured artwork. Of course, his fear is in fact realized when the image's legitimacy is questioned, and Maskell is deprived of his icon of authenticity.

Moreover, his discovery of the painting's falsity coincides with his discovery of Nick's betrayal. A heartbroken Maskell learns that the man he has secretly loved for almost fifty years has double-crossed him to protect himself. Rather suitably, Nick occupies a position that is analogous to *The Death of Seneca*. Maskell transforms his beloved into an idealized art object, "pale as ivory, his black hair standing on end, all eyes and angles, a figure out of Schiele" (33), and, as it turns out, both idealized art objects are duplicitous, having merely the semblance of authenticity. It is rather suitable, then, that Victor should bequeath the fake painting to the fake friend. "In the spy's world, as in dreams, the terrain is always uncertain," writes Maskell, "And there lay the fascination, and the fear – not of plots and pacts and royal shenanigans, but of the possibility that nothing, absolutely nothing, is as it seems" (131).

The Death of Seneca's questionable status destabilizes the supposedly secure art object and shakes Maskell's faith in his own authority as an art historian, for if the image is indeed a fake, he is the one responsible for misattributing it. Beyond the space of the narrative, Banville further emphasizes the art object's instability through its fictional status. *The Death of Seneca* does not exist in the external world of reality: it is a painting invented by Banville for the purposes of his novel. As both fake and fiction, the painting's disconnection from reality is doubly underlined, foregrounding further the extent of Maskell's error and the impossibility of stabilizing the self through art.

Victor is drawn to art to combat the instability of a world inflected by the disguises and secrecy of his espionage and of his sexuality. Recall Maskell's earlier assertion of his preference for art that is "harsh and studied, the truly lifelike" (102); Banville stresses his protagonist's view that representational art is a stable category.

According to the postmodern logic of *The Untouchable*, however, the fundamental instability of art dooms any attempt to anchor oneself in the medium. Thus, Maskell can only envision himself as successful through the lens of his delusion, and he experiences firsthand the fatal consequences of his misplaced faith in painting. As an unstable art object, *The Death of Seneca* cannot substantiate Maskell's subjecthood; it is, indeed, incompatible with the spy's nostalgic model of aesthetics. Postmodernism's refusal to offer him the comfort he seeks transforms Maskell's final gesture of Stoic grandeur into one of epic failure.

In the novel's final estimation, art is paradigmatic of the spy's consistent deferral of the self. Paintings mark not only Maskell's "happy hiding from the world" (6), but also the impossibility of attributing and verifying the self. That Banville's book should end with Maskell's death is therefore significant in that it marks the spy as ultimately untouchable. With Maskell gone, all that is left of him is his memoir – an archive as problematic as the questionable painting he leaves behind. Moreover, because readers are denied access to *The Death of Seneca* except through a narrator who is now deceased, the work foregrounds the image itself as an object eternally deferred and itself untouchable. Thus, in reading the spy *as* art, we must read this figure as being beyond the reach of attribution and of restoration. As I suggested at the outset of this chapter, the spy can be read as a significantly postmodern subject – a reading that is in fact bolstered by both "A Question of Attribution"and *The Untouchable* as both foreground the provisionality of the spy's history, narrative, and subjecthood. It is worth emphasizing that because of this contingency, the secret agent captures the complexity of representation under postmodernism and the impossibility of any totalizing gestures.

CHAPTER THREE: HUMAN SIMULATIONS

Art as Fetish

"That's sad. How plastic and artificial life has become. It gets harder and harder to find something…real." Nin interlocked his fingers, and stretched out his arms. "Real love, real friends, real body parts…"
 – Jess C. Scott

Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.
– Bertolt Brecht

In a 2000 article entitled "Malignant Sadness" published in *Adbusters*, Kalle Lasn and

Bruce Grierson claim that "Post-modernism is arguably the most depressing philosophy

ever to spring from the western mind…Like it or not, we humans are stuck in a

permanent crisis of meaning, a dark room from which we can never escape" (28). Such

nihilistic claims stand in sharp contrast to Hutcheon's construction of postmodernism as

playfully subversive, or Haraway's celebratory formulation of postmodernism's

liberating potential. Indeed, the characters I have examined thus far express sentiments

that are more in keeping with Lasn and Grierson. Freddie Montgomery, for instance, is a

figure who suffers the pain of consciousness; his awareness of postmodernism's

subversions forces him into a resolute denial. He, like the other characters I have

discussed, attempts to combat postmodern disruptions by turning to an older aesthetic

which he mistakenly sees as stable. Agonized by uncertainty and threatened by the

figurative dark room to which Lasn and Grierson refer, these figures hope that traditional

artistic representations will offer them refuge from a destabilized postmodern world. Of

course, the works I have examined highlight the impossibility of any such project. To

anchor oneself in art is to remain a drifting vessel, for art itself is just as unsteady and as

uncertain as the world in postmodernism's wake. Thus, Freddie's attempt to both

stabilize himself and to justify his crimes via art is destined to fail, and Maskell shows us that the only way one can be grounded in art is through delusion. In other words, under postmodernism, it is only within the deluded imagination that art can be seen as a stable mooring.

The works I have discussed explore the power of images to destabilize and misguide and thus raise important questions concerning the visual medium's ability to deceive and distort. Brecht's configuration of art not as a mirror of reality, but as a shaping hammer is apt here, for in this metaphor the writer manages to capture the startling violence with which art can affect one's perspective. We should remember that Schama makes a similar point when he notes art's dreadful manners – its ability to thuggishly rough you up and "rearrange your sense of reality" (6). As Mitchell puts it, "instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparence concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification" (*Iconology* 8). Art, in this respect, becomes the means of carrying out an assault on reality; as Banville and Bennett show us, art is a destabilizing force.

I have argued that it is the epistemological instability of paintings that allows for such confusion; however, the works I have examined carry interesting implications for the broader category of the image in contemporary culture. By interrogating the intersection of subjectivity and aesthetics, the works I have discussed invite us to contemplate the larger question of our relation to art. Why are we drawn to art? Why do we seek ourselves through art? Can it teach us anything about ourselves? The issues

that these works introduce therefore extend beyond the world of fiction.   Accordingly, in

my final chapter, I pull my focus outwards into a wider cultural consideration of

aesthetics and identity. Here, I move beyond my focus on traditional aesthetic

representations – the paintings and portraits to which I have limited myself thus far – to

explore how human simulations – clones, androids, love-bots, and love-dolls – force us to

reconsider the nature of our relationship with art.

Like the figure of the spy, such creatures can be considered distinctly postmodern,

as they embody the epistemological ambiguity of provisional postmodern identities. As

imitations of humanity, these hybrid figures confuse the boundaries of reality and

representation; they function on the basis of verisimilitude and resemblance, for they are

meant to *seem* human. Thus, in them, we can find a rather extreme expression of the

spy's performance of self. Consequently, such figures necessitate an exploration of

subjectivity. What interests me, however, is that through these human simulacra we can

examine what happens, not when the subject contemplates the self through art, but rather

what happens when the art object is itself perceived as a potential subject. In this chapter,

I examine human simulations that are in the process of transitioning from art-objects to

animate art-subjects and therefore complicate the question of subjectivity as it relates to

aesthetics.

What I argue, then, is that these human simulations are figurative images "come

alive"; they are extensions of Freddie's desire to enliven the Dutch portrait in *The Book of*

Evidence or Morrow's compulsion to imagine A. into existence in *Athena*. I read these

figures as materializations of the art objects discussed in my first two chapters. The

human simulation can therefore be considered an art form that foregrounds the

intersection of subjectivity and aesthetics which informs this dissertation. However, such

figures also represent the fetish as art; they are cathected art objects that transcend the

boundaries of art itself, emerging, like Athena, fully formed into the world. Having

moved beyond the realm of inanimate two-dimensional representation, these creatures

become a means through which to examine the more fundamental questions underlying

our contemporary obsession with art objects.

One such issue to consider is how human simulations foreground the

technological issues that are now so important in discussions of art. Digital technology

has challenged the value of the unique, original art object in light of its endless potential

for replication. In part, the value of Freddie's *Portrait of a Woman with Gloves* or

Maskell's *The Death of Seneca* lies in the painting's assumed status as an original artistic

production. As we have seen, forgeries, copies, and reproductions are works whose

value has been compromised through replication. Such issues carry interesting

implications for the human simulation whose own status as a copy forces us to reconsider

the paradigm of replication in our valuation of art. Figures such as clones and androids

threaten to collapse the boundary between reality and its simulation, and this collapse is

in turn central to the question of subjectivity.

* * *

In this chapter, I position the human simulation as an art-form. Though three-

dimensional and interactive, such figures nonetheless raise and extend issues that I have

already considered in my earlier discussions of two-dimensional representational art and

portraiture. I begin this chapter with a consideration of statues; emancipated from the flat surface of the canvas, statues are often considered art objects of "unparalleled evocativeness" (Freedberg 196), for they occupy the same space as our own very real bodies. These representational artworks, therefore, provide a framework for my discussion of the human simulation as an art object.

I then examine the myth of Pygmalion as the dominant myth of the statue. Representing the sculptor's creative dream of an art object so realistic that it becomes animated, this myth not only informs Freddie Montgomery's hopes in The Frames Trilogy, but it also speaks to the cultural construction of the human simulation. Through the figure of Galatea, Pygmalion's tale outlines the transformation of the art-object into the art-subject; this myth therefore compresses a number of key issues that I explore in the remainder of my chapter.

Where the classical story of Galatea ends with her sudden animation and therefore fails to consider the issue of her newly formed subjecthood, I argue that many narratives of contemporary culture consider this transition through the figure of the human simulation. The love-bot, or the technological creation intended for intimate relations, offers an interesting avenue of inquiry here. Much like Galatea, such creatures are grounded in the image's ability to arouse its beholders; however, because they are constructed as animated representations, or art objects, love-bots represent the complications inherent in the transition from art-object to art-subject. Thus, I examine Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and Ridley Scott's 1982 cinematic adaptation of this work, *Blade Runner*, in terms of the issues that the art-subject raises. I then extrapolate these issues to real-life instances of love-dolls, focusing on Marc de

Guerre's darkly fascinating 2005 documentary,*The Perfect Fake*. I argue that the love-

dolls of this film are constructed as interactive art objects and therefore represent a step

towards the technological visions of *Blade Runner*. Like A. in *Athena*, these are figures

that are animated only within the mind of their owners; they therefore express the

limitations of art's abilities. Just as art's redemptive potential exists in Maskell's deluded

mind alone, here the doll owners can only vivify the art-object through illusions.

Having established the human simulation *as* art in this chapter, in my coda, I will

explore the inherent complexities of human simulations that attempt to both define and

place themselves in the world *through* art. Like other characters I have discussed in this

dissertation, these figures perform their subjecthood by contemplating images. They are

therefore no more successful than either Freddie or Maskell; however, their interaction

with representations problematizes both the question of the subject's relation to art and

the status of art itself. In *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, painting provides a line

of inquiry into the status of the replicant; artistic representations both highlight and

complicate the android's position as a simulation of humanity. Similarly, Ishiguro's

Never Let Me Go problematizes the notion that art offers a means of anchoring the

uncertain clone. Rather than illustrate the hope tied to the art-subject, these human

simulations demonstrate the ultimate impossibility of defining the self via representation.

PART ONE: Human Simulations *as* Art

I: Three-Dimensional Female Art Objects

It is a woman's countenance divine
With everlasting beauty breathing there…
The fragment of an uncreated creature.
– Percy Bysshe Shelley

Literature has long been obsessed with representations of statues springing to life. In

Disenchanted Images: A Literary Iconology, Theodore Ziolkowski traces the prominence

of the 'living statue' motif as it appears in both cultural history and literary works. The

classical myth of Pygmalion and the medieval Spanish legend of Don Juan, who is

dragged into hell by the vengeful statue of the murdered commendatore, demonstrate that

the trope of the animated statue has a long history. However, as Ziolkowski points out, it

isn't until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that such figures experience a surge in

popularity, being treated by everyone from Jean-Jacques Rousseau and E.T.A. Hoffman

to Henry James and William Morris.[1] In his study, *The Dream of the Moving Statue*,

Kenneth Gross notes that our fascination with the fantasy of animated statues is grounded

in seeing figurative sculptures not as lifeless objects, but as once-living figures that are

merely arrested or asleep, waiting to be reborn or awakened. Such figures are often

constructed as liminal, straddling the categories of sleep and wakefulness, of life and

lifelessness. Thus, Gross notes the ancient Greek practice of fettering statues to their

pedestals or clipping their stone wings so that they would not abandon their cities in

times of trial; the need to fix these sculptures makes them "oddly mobile, always ready to

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[1]Interestingly, Ziolkowski points out that children's literature has provided a secular retreat for the living statue. Figures such as Pinocchio, Raggedy Ann, the Velveteen Rabbit, and Winnie the Pooh all continue the tradition of vivifying inanimate representations.

depart" (xiii). The sculpture therefore suggests the *potential* to suddenly stir. However, much like a painting, the silent statue also acts as a site of projection.

According to Gross, "thing and image at once, the statue's very lack of obvious meaning may be what attracts us to it" (31). In other words, we are drawn towards the 3D art object's epistemological instability. Gross draws a useful analogue: "we project onto unmoving statues those fantasies of perfect, private, inwardness derived from our observation of persons asleep, or in contemplation" (32). Quite obviously, this statement draws upon the living potential of the statue as a figure merely sleeping, but it also allows us to see a connection between the statue and painting. In his essay "Picasso's Sleepwatchers," Leo Steinberg reads the sleepwatcher as "a coded metaphor of the pictorial perceiver" (qtd. in W.Steiner,*Pictures* 3). Thus, to figure the statue as a sleeper is to figure it as a visual representation that the viewer – or symbolic sleepwatcher – actively interprets.[2] The statue can therefore be allied to the paintings that appear in the works of Banville and Bennett. With both painting and sculpture, we have art objects that are open both to the gaze and to narcissistic projection. What I mean to emphasize here is the similarity between two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional art objects. I read the statue as an extension of the painted figure; despite their obvious differences, both media share a number of characteristics that are fundamental to an understanding of the construction of the statue in the works I examine in this chapter.

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[2]Such well-known paintings as Giorgione's "Sleeping Venus," which pictures the nude goddess of the title, or Courbet's "The Sleepers," which features the intertwined bodies of two naked female sleepers, represent the recumbent body as open to the beholder's gaze. Because the depicted sleepers do not return the gaze of their observers, the pictorial perceiver is free to contemplate the female form unhindered. For Steinberg, such open contemplation characterizes the pictorial perceiver.

Both painted and sculpted figures make present what is absent. Just as Roland Barthes notes that photographs mark the absence of a thing through its material presence in the picture, statues similarly denote the lack of a physical human body through its material representation.[3] In this, like painted bodies, statues are mimetic representations of the human form and are thus freed from the dangers that real bodies face. As Gross puts it,

> Statues are bodies to which nothing can happen, bodies spared from pain
> or need, even in the face of their fragmentation, bodies in which *we* are
> spared from having to imagine need, the terrors (and pleasures) of touch or
> gaze. They are bodies happily resistant to our courtship, breakable but
> unwoundable, complete surfaces without the troubling depth or interiority
> of bodies, surfaces whose secretiveness is satisfyingly absolute, perfectly
> thoughtless. (17)

In each medium, the body is freed from feeling and internal complexity – like painted figures, statues "avoid the human body's scandalous interior life, its hidden spasms, desires, reflexes, motions, and noises" (Gross 32). What these similarities stress is the notion that such representations offer 'sanitized' versions of the human body: in that they are *representations* of the human form, painted and sculpted figures offer versions of the human body that are devoid of human concerns. In other words, their presence suggests

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[3] In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes argues that the photograph is a "certificate of presence" (87), but he is careful to note the temporal paradox that underlies photography. He explains, "by attesting that the object has been real [the certification of past-presence]," the photograph maintains a tangible "this-has-been" quality (79) which inevitably draws our attention to the temporality of the pictured subject's presence. Thus, Barthes reads photographs as signifiers of the ultimate absence: death. Photography, he writes "is a kind of primitive theatre, a kind of Tableau Vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead" (31-2).

not only the absence of a human body but also the absence of those characteristics that might otherwise distinguish living bodies such as the capacity to feel and think. Thus, as objects, both painted and sculpted bodies suggest the absence of a *subject*. In this respect, statues are images of the female form made three-dimensional;[4] because it is affected by the same kind of projection and narrative control that we have already seen with paintings, we can consider the statue an image that has stepped from the frame in response to male desire. What I mean to suggest is that these art-forms exist in a continuum, which in turn accounts for the similar responses they elicit.

Such a construction brings us full circle back to our consideration of Freddie Montgomery, with whose obsessive artistic engagement we began this study. Recall that his patriarchal impulses are evident in his vision of his wife Daphne as an abstract *maya* – a carefully constructed illusion that is motivated by the male perspective. In keeping with this notion, Freddie consistently allies her to a fixed statue. Thus, he perceives Daphne through the lens of her mythological namesake, constructing her as the nymph chased by an enflamed Apollo and then transformed into a laurel tree. The classical myth offers an allegory of the statue. As Ovid writes, "her limbs grew numb and heavy, her soft breasts/ Were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves,/ Her arms were branches, and her speedy feet/ Rooted and held, and her head became a tree top,/ Everything gone except her grace, her shining" (549-553). Fixed in this way, Daphne is not unlike a statue which the grieving Apollo embraces and kisses. For Freddie, it is only in this fixed form that his wife becomes sexually appealing. Thus, he expresses the desire to caress Daphne as he would the smooth cool lines of sculpture, to cup her curves as he would a perfectly

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[4]In this chapter, I focus on three-dimensional representations of the female body – hence, my gendering of the statue here.

carved statue. In *Ghosts*, he notes his partiality for women who are mute and unknowable, like a "bronze mummy" (79), and he expresses a preference for a "comfortably inanimate presence" (77), noting that the kind of woman he really wants is "a sort of statue, one of those big Mooreish pieces, all scooped-out hollows and cuppable curves, faceless and tightly swathed" (79). In other words, Freddie desires a statue in place of a real woman. He longs for the 'sanitized' female body – indeed, what he desires is an art object as opposed to a human subject. Though the statue suggests the external form of the human body, it ultimately represents the absence of its "scandalous interior life," as Gross puts it. In part, then, iconic projection represents Freddie's attempt to enact the transformation of female subject into female object – a transformation that is embodied by the figure of the statue.

Of course, as similar as painted and sculpted bodies might be, their obvious differences are of central importance. In noting the limitations of painting, for instance, Plato famously points out in Book X of *The Republic*that the painter can only represent a bed as it appears from one side. The sculptor's work, on the other hand, is not as limited by angle and perspective.[5] As Gross puts it, "unlike paintings, statues occupy the space of bodies, [and] compete with bodies for that space" (17). The allure of the statue, he continues, "would appear to depend on its being so resolutely external, so materially present in the world" (32). Since it occupies the same space as humans, a statue promises

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[5] In his exploration of the artist's role, Plato compares a bed that is made by a carpenter to a bed represented by a painter. He points out that where the carpenter can be considered "the manufacturer of a bed", the painter merely "represents the things" which the carpenter makes, thereby positioning the painter at a greater remove from "the essential nature of the thing" (327). Essential to the representational restrictions that the painter faces is the two-dimensionality of his products. Plato claims that the painter "grasps only a small part of any object, and that only an image" where one can observe the carpenter's bed "or any other object from straight in front or slantwise or at any angle" (328). The philosopher therefore figures the painter as an illusionist who, though he might be able to deceive a child or "a simple-minded person" (328), cannot engage in anything but semblances.

the fantasy of an unmediated communion between the object and its viewer – a kind of

connection that is beyond the reach of a framed painting. As Mitchell points out, the

"physical materiality and worldly presentness" of sculpture "forces the problem of 'word

and image' to veer into the relation of word and *object*, the relation between names and

things, labeling and looking" (*Picture* 210-11). It is, in other words, the insistent

materiality of figurative sculpture that makes identification with this art-form far easier,

for the statue is more *thing* than *image*. In his discussion of waxwork figures, Freedberg

makes a similar point. He explains,

> If we see an image that looks as if it were alive, then the appearance of
>
> suffering – say as a result of wounds, emaciation, or even tears – provokes
>
> empathy. It is for this reason that it is misleading to think that the images
>
> in wax museums provoke wholly dispassionate responses, of the kind that
>
> consist of admiration for manual skill, or amazement at the heights of such
>
> skill. The history of wax images does not culminate in responses that are
>
> based on aesthetic differentiation. (231)

Because such representations function on the basis of verisimilitude and resemblance,

they are likelier to elicit empathic responses from their observers. Similarly, in his

article"Male Phantasy and Modern Sculpture," Alex Potts claims that statues are "more

readily amenable to being hallucinated as living presence rather than mere image" (38).

The three-dimensional nature of the statue allows for a more extreme level of engagement

with the art object, a more resilient insistence on its animation, and a more explicit

representation of its sexual potential. However, Potts remarks upon the inherent tension

of our encounters with these sculptural objects as well:

It would seem to momentarily promise the spectator the experience of a

simple world of oneness, without conflict and division. At another level,

the sculptural object is so literally separate and alien, an obdurate thing

rather than amenable image or representation, that it cannot help but also

present the flip-side of the phantasy of oneness with the external world –

the experience of the latter as radically unassimilable to the self's desires,

as hostile threat or barrier to these. (46-7)

Statues, then, are artistic signs that denote a struggle between the signifier (the synthetic

material from which it is made) and the signified (the human form). They are objects that

simultaneously suggest living human bodies *and* inert material artefacts. Consequently,

in the very moment that we recognize a connection between ourselves and the sculpted

body, we are also acutely aware that the statue is a representation masquerading as a

reality. In this context, it is essential to consider the myth of Pygmalion in greater detail,

for this tale represents the transcendence of the tension which Potts notes above.

II: Statues and Sexual Subjects: The Myth of Pygmalion

It's alive!
– Frankenstein

As I have already demonstrated, the idea of an artwork suddenly imbued with life is a

literary commonplace. Romance literature is filled with statues that awaken and

paintings that are kissed into life, as Northrop Frye notes.[6] This uncanny transition from

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[6]See his essay "Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths" in *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*, where Frye
outlines the narrative patterns that are commonly found in Romance literature. Noting that this literary
genre is grounded upon "the wish-fulfillment dream" (186), he points out that we often find a

static art object to living being is perhaps best articulated by the classical myth of

Pygmalion, which itself points to the lengthy history of the theme.

In Ovid, Pygmalion is a sculptor whorejects real women in favour of his own

ideal creation. He carves a woman so beautiful that he falls in love with her flawless

perfection, but he finds the cold ivory unyielding beneath his fingers. Consumed by

passion, Pygmalion prays to Venus to enliven the sculpture, and then remarkably finds

the statue's ivory flesh quicken with life. This story marks a departure in Ovid's

Metamorphoses, for unlike the other tales collected in the work, this is a myth in which

something inanimate is enlivened rather than the other way around. The tale has been

called a "meta-artistic fable" (Stoichita 6), and is often interpreted as an instance of art's

power to create rather than merely portray and thus elevates the status of the artist to that

of one who rivals creation itself rather than one who merely imitates nature.[7] Leonardo

da Vinci expresses a similar sentiment when he declares, "If the painter wishes to see

beauties to fall in love with, it is in his power to bring them forth, and if he wants to see

monstrous things that frighten or are foolish or laughable or indeed to be pitied, he is their

Lord and God" (65). Accordingly, that Pygmalion should fall "in love/With his own

workmanship" (250-51) is indicative of his artistic abilities. However, his adoration of

the statue also underlines its autoerotic origins. The female statue is intrinsically tied to

the artist's libido; she is, in fact, an instrument of *eros* in the myth. For this reason, we

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"displacement of the Pygmalion myth" (138) which is sometimes manifest in literal or metaphoric scenes
of awakening.

[7]In keeping with this notion, Ziolkowski traces the origins of the 'living statue' to the animistic religious
beliefs of the Far East and to creation myths, including that of Genesis, where god forms man from dust
into which he breathes life. In this formulation, then, the artist is transformed into a god or demiurge;
having made an image that appears alive, he seems to emulate god through his creative powers. Like God,
"he can make dead substance alive" (Freedberg 204).

see once more that the idea of enlivening the artwork is a typically gendered construction. The association between painting, voyeurism, and love implies a gendered gaze. With Pygmalion, Leonardo, and even Freddie Montgomery, the passive female art object is imbued with life by an active and creative male force. The transformation itself is fueled by the male desire for the perfect woman who is, in these cases, a flawless and static art object. But as Wendy Steiner notes, the frozen subject implies a compressed power that links it to the religious context of idolatry. "Removed from the vicissitudes and contingencies of life, raised to a higher purity of being" (*Pictures* 48), such subjects speak to the dangerous power of the female image to arrest and attract its male viewer, elevating its status to a transcendent object of worship.

In this context, it is important to note that Pygmalion fashions his statue in response to the corruption of the real-life women who surround him. "[S]hocked at the vices" of their "shameful lives" (244) – vices that, we are told, "Nature has given the female disposition/ Only too often" (245-46) – Pygmalion chooses "to live alone,/To have no woman in his bed" (246-47). His statue is not only an icon of unparalleled female loveliness, but also of female purity. Ovid tells us that the "image seemed/That of a virgin" (251-52); the statue therefore stands in contrast to the whorish women of Paphos. Pygmalion desires a transcendent icon of chaste and incorruptible femininity. Galatea, as she is called, is a cathected art object that embodies the sculptor's projected desires. In effect, he – like Freddie in *Ghosts* – desires the 'sanitized' female body, a fact that is evident in his erotic response to the statue. Not only does Pygmalion kiss the ivory statue and "[take] her to bed" (273), but he also clothes it, compliments it, and brings it gifts "[s]uch as girls love" (264). What is clear is that Pygmalion falls in love

with the inanimate object by imagining her into existence, but as J. Hillis Miller points out, she is "created originally as a means of controlling life and as a means of compensating for the way real women escape male control" (*Pygmalion* 54).

"Men," Leonardo asserts, "fall in love with a painting that does not represent any living woman" (qtd. in Mitchell,*Picture* 332). Similarly, Pygmalion, like Freddie, first loves an art object and the beauty of her stillness – not the living woman she becomes. His passion is enflamed by the cold perfection of a female simulation. Thus, we find here a *precession* of simulacra in keeping with Baudrillard's assertion that reality has been replaced by its simulation so that the representation no longer reflects reality but rather *precedes* it.[8]In both the myth of Pygmalion and in Freddie's confession, the image comes before the woman – and the men notably lust after art objects before they transfer their affections to real women. The power of the silent image is such that it can inspire actual emotions in its observer, thus insisting upon a confusion of reality and illusion. This confusion, however, is elevated by the greater empathy one feels with three-dimensional representational images, as Potts has noted above. As Victor Stoichita notes in his book *The Pygmalion Effect,* "The myth of Pygmalion is not only a myth about the image (like that of Narcissus); it also deals with the image-work of art or, to be more precise, *its embodiment*" (5). Despite the fact that Pygmalion is the artist behind the statue, he is to some extent taken in by his own illusion, mistakenly seeing the statue as the reality that it is only meant to represent. For Ovid, "The best art, they say,/Is that which conceals art" (254-55), and that this artistry should be concealed from the artist himself hints at his

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[8]As noted in chapter one of this dissertation (60), this claim comes from Baudrillard's "The Precession of Simulacra."

skill. It seems to Pygmalion that Galatea must be a real girl. Thus, he projects his

passions onto an inanimate object. As Ovid writes of the sculptor, "His kisses,/ He

fancies, she returns; he speaks to her,/ Holds her, believes his fingers almost leave/ An

imprint on her limbs, and fears to bruise her" (259-62). Pygmalion must imagine Galatea

to life.   What we find here is sexual desire mediated by a simulation. The artist is

aroused by a self-created representation of his desires. Seeking a virginal ideal that he

believes does not exist in reality, Pygmalion can only access his fantasy via

representation.

The link to pornography, where explicitly sexual images are meant to arouse their

observer, is obvious. Having spurned real women, the abstinent Pygmalion turns to

Galatea as an avenue of sexual release. Consequently, she becomes the passive recipient

of his sexual advances. As beautiful as she is draped in dresses and jewelry, Ovid tells us

that "she seems/ Even more lovely naked" (270-71). Pygmalion's admiration of her

naked form is immediately followed by a bedroom declaration of his love: "he spreads/ A

crimson coverlet for her to lie on,/ Takes her to bed, puts a soft pillow under/ Her head, as

if she felt it, calls her *Darling*,/ *My darling love!*" (271-75). Thus, Galatea would seem to

illustrate what Freedberg calls "the inevitably seductive and ultimately corrupting effects

of beautiful form" (370). That men are the primary consumers of such sexual images is

in keeping with the literary tradition of men who gaze upon and desire passive female

images. Indeed, Leonardo's comment that men may be "excited to lust and sensuality"

by visual images of lewdness points to the long lineage of this tradition(qtd. in

Mitchell,*Picture* 332).

In the case of pornography, the status of the image as a device for arousal and as a sexual surrogate is highlighted – a fact that is evident in some of the common criticisms directed at pornography. More often than not, these critiques target the unrealistic nature of the fetishized image that threatens to decrease one's satisfaction with real-life sexual partners. With pornography dependence, one might become desensitized by engaging with representations of bodies, for the visual emphasis is placed upon the physical act itself rather than any kind of emotional or communicative exchange. The most pronounced fear regarding pornography, then, revolves around the connection between the voyeuristic consumption of staged sexual fantasies and dehumanization – a dehumanization that applies to both the pornographically depicted object and the subject who responds to the image.

Such anxieties have become more pronounced with the rise of internet cybersex and the digital revolution. Visual and technological mediations of sexuality are now ubiquitous; in a 2003 article for *New York Magazine*, Naomi Wolf declared that "the whole world, post-Internet, [has become] pornographized." Physical bodies are routinely replaced by screens and simulations, which represent, as Wolf puts it, the "cybervision of perfection, downloadable and extinguishable at will, who comes, so to speak, utterly submissive and tailored to the consumer's least specification." Pygmalion's creation of Galatea reflects a similar process. We find in the story what Gross calls a "complex doubling of sexual and artistic touch" (63). Pygmalion's creative act is sexually inflected by a fantasy of mastery. As Miller notes, "Insofar as Galatea is no more than the ivory simulacrum of a woman, manufactured by Pygmalion, he controls her wholly and she is a reflection of his power" (*Pygmalion* 126).

What I mean to suggest here is twofold: first, that we should view Pygmalion's engagement with the statue as pornographic. Galatea is, after all, a sexualized representation that seems to offer the artist some form of erotic satisfaction. Second, an intense engagement with pornographic depictions can distance one from real life. In the myth of Pygmalion, for instance, the artist detaches himself from society, refusing the company of flesh and blood women in favour of his fetishized representation of an ideal woman. In Ovid, we are told that Pygmalion lives alone and spends his time romancing his "ivory girl" (277). His emotional investment in his artistic representation therefore supplants his involvement in the world of external reality. Much like those who are dependent upon pornography, Pygmalion's immersion in the world of female representation desensitizes him to real women. Thus, while the myth outlines the increased empathy one might feel for a three-dimensional representation, it nonetheless demonstrates what Potts above calls the "flip-side of the phantasy of oneness with the external world" (47).

However, what is perhaps most interesting about the myth of Pygmalion is that the story ends rather abruptly once Galatea is animated. As the ivory softens beneath the warmth of Pygmalion's touch, Ovid tells us that "Venus blesses/ The marriage she has made. The crescent moon/ Fills to full orb, nine times, and wanes again,/ And then a daughter is born, a girl named Paphos,/ From whom the island later takes its name" (294-98). Galatea's remarkable transformation from art-object into art-subject is largely swept aside. We are merely told that in the moment of her metamorphosis, the ivory girl can feel Pygmalion's kisses, that she "blushes and responds" as her "eyes open/ At once on lover and heaven" (293-94). Her animation is therefore constructed as a sexual

awakening, but beyond this point Ovid does not go. Galatea's newly-formed subjecthood

is subsumed by her sexual and reproductive roles, which are themselves defined by her

interaction with Pygmalion. As Miller explains, this story "embodies a male fantasy

whereby a woman cannot be the object of sexual desire and cannot desire in return unless

she has been made so by male effort. The process is likened to the procedure whereby a

passive and formless raw material is given shape by man's productive power"

(*Pygmalion* 7).

Though the classical myth fails to consider Galatea's subjecthood in any detail,

contemporary culture has symbolically extended the myth of Pygmalion to examine the

role of the art-subject. A notable postmodern iteration of Galatea is the love-bot – the

life-like technological object manufactured for the express purpose of intimate relations.

Such a figure offers an extreme version of the arousal by realistic depictions of beautiful

women which I have discussed above; however, in their role as three-dimensional objects

of desire, love-bots should be considered extensions of the statuary I have already

examined.

III: Love-Bots and Replicants: Building a Better Statue

Gosh, you've really got some nice toys here.
– Blade Runner

The love-bot, I argue, symbolizes the statue 'animated.' As a fetishized interactive art

object, it is akin to the awakened Galatea; just as the newly animated statue is defined by

her sexual relationship with Pygmalion, the love-bot functions as a similar site of

projected male fantasy. Consider, for instance, the female love-bots that appear in the

work of Joss Whedon. Meant to fulfill the needs of the lonely young men who require

both social and sexual gratification, these creations quite literally embody male desire.[9]

Most notable is the Buffybot from Whedon's series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* – an

android replica of Buffy Summers herself, who functions as a sexual surrogate in a

relationship that the real Buffy refuses to enter. Her maker claims that she is "better than

the real thing" ("Intervention") because she is programmable, which allows for Buffy's

normally dominant characteristics to fold beneath the desiring will of her owner.

As a site of sexual projection, the Buffybot offers a form of gratification that is an

extension of the fantasy offered by pornographic images. The simulated Buffy is a

representation of the 'sanitized' female body. She is an instrument of her owner's libido,

emptied of that 'troubling depth or interiority' that threatens to interfere with her user's

desires. However, what Whedon makes clear is that the Buffybot is little more than an

approximation of the real Buffy, for though they are identical in appearance, the copy is

emptied of the original's aura.[10] Accordingly, the bot lacks the power that Whedon has

so carefully infused his heroine with. Where Buffy is an empowered feminist subject, her

reproduction is a servile, animated object. Because her thoughts are programmed

according to her owner's wishes, she cannot be considered a free-thinking subject. She

may be three-dimensional and animated, but she has *no* identity beyond that which her

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[9]The love-bot is a recurring motif in Whedon's television work. Indeed, each of his television series –
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003), *Angel* (1999-2004), *Firefly* (2002-2003), *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) –
have featured either literal or symbolic love-bots. Indeed, *Dollhouse* is a sustained meditation on the
theme. The "Dollhouse" is a facility that hires human bodies out to clients, usually to perform in either
sexual or high-risk scenarios. These 'bodies' have their memories wiped and are routinely programmed to
behave according to the whims of their employers. Thus, though the 'doll' is flesh-and-blood, it behaves
most like the love-bots that appear elsewhere in Whedon's body of work.

[10]This idea is, of course, in keeping with Walter Benjamin's well-known essay "The Work of Art in the
Age of Mechanical Reproduction."Benjamin's central thesis involves the diminution of the aura of
reproduced images. Though he bases his argument upon photography and film, these ideas apply just as
well to the figure of the love-bot.

owner projects upon her. In this respect, she is not unlike Ovid's Galatea who, even once animated, is only defined according to her sexual relationship with her creator. The Buffybot is similarly an animated pornographic representation that satisfies one's sexual needs. Though she represents the potential of the art-object turned art-subject, she never quite makes the transition into subjecthood.

The problematic transition from art-object to subjecthood is perhaps best articulated in Scott's cyberpunk classic, *Blade Runner*. The film is a detective narrative revolving around the need to identify artificial humans, or replicants, who have illegally infiltrated a human society. The replicants are genetically manufactured cyborg slaves who are visually identical to the humans who control and consume them. Motivated by a fierce desire to live, the replicants are perfect simulacra in that they internalize both the signs and symptoms of humanity. As their company's slogan suggests, they are, in many ways "More human than human," and therefore embody the confusion between the authentic and the artificial.

Blade Runner has received a good deal of critical attention since its release. Because it has been endlessly analyzed, the film has generated a massive body of work on the issues of identity, epistemology, and postmodernism, among other critical focuses. However, I would like to use *Blade Runner*, as well as the novel upon which the film is based, Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, as a vehicle through which to explore the reverberations of art's relationship to subjectivity.[11]This story, I argue,

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[11]Dick's novel provides the obvious foundation for Scott's retelling; however, in his reworking of Dick's material, Scott opens up the hermeneutic possibilities of the text. Critics have consequently focused their attention on the film as a potent meditation on the nature of representation. While both works explore the issues of authenticity and ontology, the film places a greater emphasis on issues of parentage and is therefore more distinctly Frankensteinian.

extends the myth of Pygmalion by picking up where Ovid ends. Here is the symbolic

story, not of Pygmalion, but of Galatea. Like the classical statue turned woman, the

female replicants are human simulations that are inflected as art-forms. As three-

dimensional art objects, these figures are fetishized accordingly. What is perhaps most

interesting, however, is how *Blade Runner*'s replicants draw our attention towards the

art-object's transition into what seems to be subjecthood. Thus, the seeming shift from

art-object to art-subject is central to the discourse of the replicant in whom issues of

identity and ontology crystallize. If we consider these creatures art-objects come alive,

then what might this suggest about their subject positions?   The replicant is a convenient

trope for my exploration of subjectivity as it relates to representation and ultimately

demonstrates the difficulty of grounding identity in art of any kind.

In keeping with my exploration of the female art-object as a site of projected male

fantasy, I focus on the female replicant as the symbolic sister of Galatea. Thus, just as

Ovid emphasizes the physical loveliness of the statue, the female replicant is distinctly

fetishized in both its cinematic and literary incarnations. In the novel, for instance,

Imgard Baty is likened to one of film's classic sex symbols: she is "lovely in the manner

of Greta Garbo, with blue eyes and yellow-blond hair" (134), and men are routinely

drawn to her. Dick also includes a lengthy narrative meditation on the charms of

Rachael's physical proportions – a loveliness that is repeated in Pris, who is of the same

make and model.

Rick Deckard, the blade runner who is hired to hunt down and exterminate

replicants, repeatedly objectifies these female imitations; they are erotic objects offered

up to the male gaze. Of Deckard, the narrator says, "Some female androids seemed to

him pretty; he had found himself physically attracted by several, and it was an odd

sensation, knowing intellectually that they were machines but emotionally reacting

anyhow" (84). Deckard's physical and emotional response is prompted by the external

signifiers of femaleness; aware that the replicants are not women, he is nonetheless drawn

to the external signs of femininity.

Of interest here is Baudrillard's claim that seduction always involves artifice

(*Seduction* 81). Indeed, he allies seduction to the artistic technique of *trompe l'oeil*, or

'trick of the eye' – a genre of art that is based in optical illusions – arguing that seduction

is itself grounded in "the sacred horizon of appearances" (153). To illustrate, he notes

that the transvestite is a figure in whom sexuality is consciously constructed through a

series of visual cues. Thus, the male transvestite simulates the "all-too-visible" signs of

femininity in a manner that is most often highly exaggerated and hypersexualized

("Ecstasy" 151). This figure offers, in other words, a series of false and overdetermined

visual signs which demonstrate that all seduction ultimately involves mastery

overappearances. What I mean to suggest here is that Deckard's very real sexual

response is grounded in a simulation. In this respect, his reaction recalls not only that of

Pygmalion, who is aroused by his inanimate ivory girl, but also that of consumers of

pornographic representations. This comparison invites us to consider the female

replicant's status as a representation. In Scott's world of manufactured human imitations,

female replicants are constructed as art objects enlivened by male sexual desire. They

therefore blur the line between art and pornography.

It is interesting to note that while Dick's text provides the obvious foundation for

Scott's retelling, the film intensifies the erotic charge of the replicant through the visual

medium itself. Thus, in his reworking of Dick's material, Scott borrows and further develops the replicant's status as an instrument of eros. In his version of the tale, Scott has the replicants offer more than the satisfaction of the male gaze. Where "android mistresses" are illegal in the novel and copulation with these imitations is considered "a violation of statute" (125, 208), Scott's female replicants are manufactured for the express purpose of sexual pleasure – a fact that is foregrounded by the camera's insistence on framing the erotic lures of this figure.[12] Thus, both Pris, "a basic pleasure model," and Zhora, a "sex worker and assassin" are erotic objects manufactured for the gratification of human sexual needs. As sexualized simulations of women, they are like living love-bots.

In the film, Pris, whose purpose is primarily for "leisure," represents the beautiful female form that is built to be consumed. In that she embodies male sexual fantasy, Pris is rather suitably likened to a living doll. Her status as a plaything and site of projection is most evident in her encounter with J.F. Sebastian, the reclusive genetic engineer responsible for designing replicant bodies. Deprived of social contact, Sebastian literally makes friends for himself, manufacturing animated dolls that keep him company. His home is filled with simulations – from life-like toys and wind-up figurines to walking and talking teddy bears – all of which are meant to combat his tragic loneliness. When Deckard comes looking for Pris, she disguises herself amongst Sebastian's collection of

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[12]Naturally, the necessity of the prohibition in the text means that the practice is common enough to warrant legal action, and even Deckard himself becomes sexually involved with Rachael. But it is important to note that the androids of the novel are not explicitly linked to the sex industry, nor are they, by default, erotic objects. In Dick's novel, for example, the sexually threatening Zhora is Luba Luft, a talented opera singer. By transforming female replicants into sexually exploited slaves, Scott's narrative fits more comfortably within the discourse of the male beholder and the erotic art object.

artificial friends. Hidden amidst these simulations, she is but another toy, a symbolic and distinctly sexualized plaything created and controlled by humans.

Zhora occupies a comparable position in Scott's version of the story. Though she is not a "pleasure model," she nonetheless works as an exotic dancer – an occupation that highlights her status as an objectified and consumed female form. This status is further underlined by the moment of her 'retirement': fleeing from Deckard, Zhora meets her end crashing through the glass of a fashion display. As she dies, she is surrounded by mannequins erected for the consumer's hungry gaze. The symbolism is clear: Zhora, like Pris, is a living doll, and in the moment of her death, she is reduced once again to the status of mere mannequin – an object to be visually consumed.[13]   What I mean to stress, then, is that both Pris and Zhora occupy the position of the female art object here – they are erotic idols subject to the will of male desire. Indeed, their involvement in the sex industry foregrounds their status as representations. Like the silent Dutch portrait upon which Freddie thrusts his narrative authority, these female representations draw our attention to the issue of aesthetic reception, particularly as it is gendered. In short, they *embody* Freddie's desires.

Like Galatea and the Buffybot, the objectified Pris and Zhora never quite seem to make the transition into subjecthood.   As such, it is important to consider the figure who most clearly blurs the boundaries between subject and object, real and simulation.

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[13]It is interesting to note that both Zhora and Pris are female imitations that are characterized by not only their sexuality, but also by their violence as they act out against the sexual constraints placed upon them. They represent the disturbingly violent potential of Pygmalion's power, of the image come to life. In this, they are not entirely unlike Frankenstein's creature – a monstrous dream transformed into a living being. Works as varied as Karel Čapek's *R.U.R.* (1921), Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), and Vincenzo Natali's *Splice* (2009) demonstrate the fear underlying Pygmalion's promise. Miller notes that even Ovid's idealistic "happily-ever-after" version of Pygmalion's tale is, by the nineteenth-century, transformed into a more sombre story (*Pygmalion* 10).

Rachael is a replicant who, unlike the other androids of the story, is programmed to believe that she is human. Consequently, in her, we find a disruption of the conventional replicant/human distinction so central to the story. Rachael therefore marks a confusion regarding the category of identity and ontology in *Blade Runner*.

Of all the replicants in the film, Rachael would seem to represent the successful transition from art-object to art-subject. Thus, when we first encounter her, we are led to believe, as she does, that she is human. Rachael's behavior suggests that of a free-thinking subject – she meets Deckard without hesitation and easily answers his questions, conveying her thoughts and feelings and recalling childhood memories that would seem to confirm her human status. In this, Rachael would seem to represent an autonomous Galatea – a created woman who has nonetheless taken on a life of her own. Indeed, her initial ignorance of her true status would seem to authorize Rachael's subjecthood. We eventually discover, however, that her memories have been implanted. Rachael's childhood recollections are not her own; rather, they belong to Tyrell's niece and are therefore a part of the replicant's corporate legacy. Those memories that at first seemed to confirm *her* subjectivity are representative of someone else's and therefore come to demonstrate what a fine simulacrum Rachael is. Indeed, she is the pinnacle of human semblance, but her programming naturally excludes her from subjecthood. She is, therefore, still an art-object. Even as she approaches subjecthood, it is ultimately denied to her. What Rachael represents, then, is the ultimate impossibility of transitioning from art-object to art-subject.

Central to Rachael's problematic status is a much-discussed scene from the film which, I argue, demonstrates the impossibility of the art object's symbolic metamorphosis

into subjecthood. When she finally discovers the truth about herself, Rachael rejects

Deckard's sexual advances, claiming that she does not know if her desire for him is the

result of her programming. What follows is the infamous moment of what Lisa Yaszek

calls the replicant's "seduction/reprogramming" (59). Deckard pins Rachael against a

wall, ordering her to say "kiss me." When she replies, "I don't know," he insists once

again. Rachael finally surrenders when he instructs her to emphasize the personal

pronoun: "kiss *me*." What Deckard seems to do is have Rachael assert her own

autonomy as a sexually desiring subject in her own right. He attempts to *reprogram* her

to behave like a real woman, so that she might ground her identity in her emotions rather

than in her genetically manufactured body. Of course, that he must reprogram her in this

way suggests that she is an object still. Thus, Deckard's actions find a parallel in the

figure of the love-bot and her owner who might insist that she simulate an active desire

for him in order to increase his own arousal. How are we to know if Rachael's desire is

real or not? As Yaszek notes, the seduction scene is presided over by a flashing neon

RCA sign beyond the window of the apartment – "a literal sign of technological

mediation" (60) – that forces us to question the nature of Rachael's desire. Thus, even in

the act of asserting her*self*, Rachael, it would seem, can only simulate selfhood according

to the sexual desires of her male companion. Her subjectivity is suggested only to be

denied here, thereby highlighting her object position. Rachael can be read as Freddie's

Dutch portrait brought to life; she is a reflection of the male will embedded in the

disguise of female desire, and like Freddie, Deckard projects his own desires onto the

'image.'

This reading is, in fact, confirmed by the novel which suggests that Rachael's erotic entanglement with Deckard is the result, not of her assertive selfhood, but of her programming. Rachael is instructed by the corporation that built her to bed bounty hunters, for in sleeping with her and in turn humanizing her, the hunters find themselves unable to continue killing replicants. Rachael, then, embodies the problem of realism in that she evokes the real thing, which is in this case a woman, to such an extent that she can force Deckard to accept a fiction of realistic mimesis. She herself tells Deckard, "*I'm not alive!* You're not going to bed with a woman" (170). Rather, she is, as another bounty hunter Resch notes, a "female type" in that she represents the visual signs of femininity (125). In fact, when Rachael admits that she is not a woman, she identifies herself quite literally as a sex object. She is an impassive sexual tool, mechanically performing her corporate duties – a fact made obvious in Dick's description of her interaction with Deckard: "Leaning forward an inch he kissed her dry lips. No reaction followed; Rachael remained impassive. As if unaffected. And yet he sensed otherwise. Or perhaps it was wishful thinking?" (165). Caught up in his own desire, Deckard imagines a response from the android, but this is merely a wish-fulfillment fantasy. In order to rationalize his desire, Deckard must imagine Rachael into life, much as Pygmalion does with Galatea prior to Venus's intervention. By perceiving the android as more than merely a sex object, he can justify his transgressive desire for her. Rachael is the imitation so life-like that it can persuade men into falling for an art object. She therefore demonstrates the impossibility of the metamorphosis from art-object to art-subject. Though she can be considered a living art object, she is ultimately limited by her representational status and consequently cannot transition into subjecthood. Rachael

therefore offers insight into the incompatibility of selfhood and representation under postmodernism.

It is important to note here that the film highlights the same problem of grounding the self in art that is so central to the other works I have examined. In the labyrinthine world of *Blade Runner*, humans define themselves according to the replicants; they are human precisely because they are not androids. In effect, they therefore define themselves against art. What we find in *Blade Runner* is an extension of what Freddie and Victor attempt to do elsewhere in this dissertation. In their quest for a solid sense of self, both men look to art, hoping that they can ground themselves in so-called stable representations. Art, they hope, will help define who they are. However, as we have already seen, art is anything but stable. Because it is a site of hermeneutical instability, it can only underline the impossibility of constituting the self via representation. In short, art cannot tell us who we are. The same idea lies at the heart of *Blade Runner*, for what does the film demonstrate but the impossibility of looking to art to define the self? We see this difficulty with the humans who attempt to define themselves in relation to the replicants. As perfect simulacra, the replicants only confuse rather than clarify these boundaries of self-definition. Rachael's uncertainty is indicative of this confusion, as is the ongoing controversy regarding the question of Deckard's own status – is he human or is he a replicant? What these figures show is the fundamental impossibility of defining oneself according to art objects. The category of identity, it turns out, is just as fraught as art; it is this same problem that plagues Freddie and Victor.

IV: Pygmalion Revisited: The Technological Divine and *A Perfect Fake*

When a lady, looking at one of [Matisse's] portraits, told him that the arm of the woman was too long, he replied: 'Madam, you are mistaken, this is not a woman, this is a picture.'
– E.H. Gombrich

At this point, it is essential to return once more to the story of Pygmalion. As I have already noted, the myth is often thought to signify the creative powers of the artist. As Ziolkowski puts it, for pre-Romantic thinkers such as Rousseau and Johann Herder, the tale was "an embodiment of the power of the titanic artist to enliven through his genius the dead materials of reality" (34). However, central to the classical myth is the fact that Pygmalion cannot effect the desired transformation from ivory to flesh on his own. Rather, a *deus ex machina* is required for a resolution. Though Pygmalion's sculpture is masterful, his skills alone cannot bring the statue to life; divine intervention is necessary to enact the impossible.

Having resorted to imaginary projection to 'enliven' the statue, a dissatisfied Pygmalion finally appeals to the gods. In Ovid, the artist goes to the temple of Venus on her annual feast day, makes an offering, and prays to the goddess: "If you can give/ All things, O gods, I pray my wife may be –/ (He almost said, *My ivory girl*, but dared not) –/ One like my ivory girl" (274-77).It is Venus's intervention, then, that completes the metamorphosis. Also important to note here is that Pygmalion, not daring to ask for his statue, requests a wife *like* it; however, Venus, we are told, "understood the prayer's intention" (278) and thus performs an act of transformation rather than one of substitution. Knowing that Pygmalion truly wants his statue, Venus animates it. Thus, not only does this scene illustrate the artist's preference for his art, but it also

demonstrates the necessity of divine intervention. Galatea's transformation is grounded in divine grace.

Consequently, one can read the myth of Pygmalion as a tale about the artist's *disappointment* in the limitations of his representational medium. Indeed, this idea is a common motif in the history of art; though the artist may strive to surpass the imitative nature of art by making his creations *live*, he is ultimately forced to recognize this goal as a dream that art cannot fulfill. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich provides us with a gallery of disappointed artists, beginning with Donatello, who while working on his *Zuccone* would suddenly implore it to "Speak, speak!" (81). Even Leonardo, despite his praise of art's transcendental power, admits that "Painters often fall into despair…when they see that their paintings lack the roundness and the liveliness which we find in objects seen in the mirror…but it is impossible for a painting to look as rounded as a mirror image…except if you look at both with one eye only" (qtd. in Gombrich, *Illusion* 83). More recently, renowned British artist Lucian Freud has echoed these sentiments; in 1954, the artist declared that

> a moment of complete happiness never occurs in the creation of a work of art. The promise of it is felt in the act of creation, but disappears towards the completion of the work. For it is then that the painter realizes that it is only a picture he is painting. Until then he had almost dared to hope that the picture might spring to life. (qtd. in Gombrich, *Illusion* 80)

For Freud, the creative process of the artist is driven by this "great insufficiency" (24). With each work, the artist hopes to fulfill the underlying promise of Pygmalion's myth, without which, Gombrich claims, "there might be no art as we know it" (*Illusion* 80).

Of course, as I have already noted, in the original myth, this promise is fueled by divine intervention. Working in the realm of representation, Pygmalion can only make his masterpiece *seem* animate. To make his statue *live*, Pygmalion requires Venus's services. In contemporary versions of the myth, however, we find a secularization of the story; the convention of the *deus ex machina* has been shoved aside and replaced with an intervention of our own making. Thus, technology has become the divine substitute. What is suggested, then, is that in a secular age, technology might prevail where artists have failed. It is precisely this notion that the love-bot illustrates: technology is the means of 'enlivening' the otherwise static three-dimensional art object. In *Blade Runner*, for instance, divinity is replaced by the technologically advanced Tyrell Corporation, which is responsible for the creation and construction of the replicants. The corporation functions as a secularized mechanism of artistic animation.

We find a similar movement in contemporary culture. New digital technologies allow us to transcend the artistic limitations that Lucien Freud laments. We are now closer than ever to that moment of creative happiness when the picture might indeed spring to life via mechanical intervention. Thanks to technological advancements, the prayer that Pygmalion whispered to Venus two thousand years ago is now within reach.

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Marc de Guerre's documentary, *A Perfect Fake*, demonstrates the role of what I call 'the technological divine' in contemporary culture. Technology, de Guerre suggests, has reawakened the age-old myth of Pygmalion by providing the means of enlivening images.

Our digital age has created a new demand for hyperrealistic simulations of women so that

the perfect woman is often figured as the perfect fake – an idealized simulacrum. Thus,

de Guerre's exploration of our engagement with virtual images raises similar questions to

those that I have already posed elsewhere in this dissertation, most especially those

pertaining to the intersection of aesthetics and subjectivity. Here, we find art-objects that

not only force us to reconsider the categories of the authentic versus the artificial but also

that push us to question the nature of our responses to art-objects. In this respect, the

technological art-objects of the film are not unlike the images that Freddie and Victor

contemplate. *A Perfect Fake*, however, is notable because we find these issues liberated

from the constraints of fiction. Here, de Guerre shows us how these concerns play out in

our culture and how they articulate our current anxieties regarding art's role in our

conception of humanity.

De Guerre includes a series of talking-head interviews to cover a range of varying

viewpoints including those of CG designers, computer scientists, virtual human software

developers, and professors of sociology and media theory, among others. What results is

a rich tapestry of expert opinion on the technological dream of creating a flawless female

form that can be manipulated and controlled. The first segment of the documentary

examines the digital quest for female perfection and its common applications to the

virtual reality of computer games. Such games offer their players access to complex

fantasy worlds peopled by alluring virtual vixens that signal the emphasis that digital

artistry places on female perfection. These digital images of women therefore function

much like the traditional representational paintings I have already examined in that both

forms reflect the project of mimesis.

From the "conquest of reality" in Renaissance art to the eighteenth century's demand for "supplying likenesses" (Gombrich,*Story* 350), for 300 years traditional painting was largely dominated by the desire to represent things faithfully and to provide convincing pictures of the visible world. However, technological developments in the eighteenth century initiated a slow shift in the world of painting. As Ziolkowski notes, "from the end of the eighteenth century there had been an increased demand for more effective mechanical means of visual reproduction – the physionotrace (1786), lithography (1796), heliography (1826)" paved the way for the daguerrotype in 1839 and the photograph shortly after. This technological evolution, he claims, "gratified a public that, especially in the United States, demanded absolute resemblance in portraits; at the same time it liberated painters, who had long chafed under what they regarded as 'the burden of portraiture'" (119). Thus, painters of the early nineteenth century slowly began to shift their focus from mimesis to more subjective explorations of their subject – a change that heralded the emergence of Art Nouveau in the 1890s and the more experimental art forms of the twentieth century.

What we find in the twenty-first century is that the emergence of digital art has forced a return to an attempted mastery of the original artistic ideal – that of representing something faithfully. In this relatively new visual medium, the goal is likeness. In fact, the growing popularity of gaming has prompted the desire for more life-like digital versions of human faces – known as the "holy grail of computer graphics" for its difficulty (*Perfect*). CG designers have been struggling with the problem of creating realistic digital faces for over 40 years, and what is particularly interesting to note is that the difficulties of this project are similar to those faced by representational artists and

portrait painters. In de Guerre's documentary, Rob Shields asks, since the quality of being alive is intangible, how can it be conveyed in an image? This question forms the cornerstone of portraiture and has now become a central issue for computer scientists, our modern technological artists. Just as Leonardo, in his *Treatise on Painting*, attempted to outline the steps one must take in rendering a realistic human representation, computer scientists are in the process of creating a mathematical guideline for the same. However, with these technological projects, the answer does not lie in the handling of paint, but of pixels. And as Mark Sagar, a CG designer for Sony Pictures Imageworks notes, we are close to achieving that most difficult of digital illusions: the digital human copy so lifelike that we might be "fooled" by it (*Perfect*).

The resonances between traditional mimetic painting and contemporary digital artistry mean that the problems these art forms pose are in fact rather similar. In each instance, we find the potential to confuse the boundaries of reality and representation. Digital art therefore returns us to the problem of Freddie's iconic projection: the difficulty of determining what is real over what is representational is depicted as a distancing process that ostensibly cuts the beholder off from external reality. In this respect, de Guerre frames the CG emphasis on verisimilitude as a digital crisis of reality. These games, he claims, are notable precisely because they seek to blur the boundary between reality and non-reality. Speaking to the power of onscreen images, Michael Kaufman notes that gaming produces in the player brain activity that is similar to that which occurs when one is under hypnosis. Gazing at the image and interacting with virtual characters, one experiences a confusion in terms of what constitutes reality.[14] Like Kaufman, de

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[14] As media theorist Kathleen Pirrie Adams claims, however, "the distinction between the real and the virtual is a bit of a false dichotomy, for how much more real are the celebrities we read about in

Guerre draws our attention towards how the technologies of virtual engagement

problematize the category of reality, particularly as it applies to female characters – a

question that becomes even more complicated when we consider that these virtual

women have the power to evoke very real emotions in their observers, much like the

painted Dutch girl that captivates Freddie or the ivory statue that enflames Pygmalion.

My discussion of art in previous chapters has necessitated an examination of

'reality' as it is understood in contemporary culture. The mimetic status of the artwork is,

as we have seen, consistently called into question by contemporary writers. If art is to be

considered a mirror, then what it presents to us are the distorting and disfiguring

reflections of the funhouse. Digital representations add yet another dimension to this

already complicated question, for they force us to reconsider the role that reality and

realism play in the world of representations. These ideas are perhaps best expressed by

Ollivier Dyens, one of the documentary's many talking heads. He claims that in human

civilization we have never before had to ask the question "is this alive or not?" (*Perfect*).

For Dyens, in the past there were clear distinctions between humans and even the most

life-like of representations. He claims, however, that we are now moving into a realm

where we will not be able to discern the difference between a real person and its

representation. Digital advancements threaten to dissolve this boundary.

Of central importance here is the question of how we respond to art. Not only do

such realistic representations distort the once clearer boundary between what is real and

what is not, but through this distortion, they threaten to distance one from external reality.

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magazines?" (*Perfect*). Adams is careful to draw our attention to the extent of mediation in contemporary
culture; for her, the engagement with virtual characters represents the extension of behaviours that are
perhaps more widely considered 'normal' in North America, such as the obsessive interest in and
involvement with celebrity culture and entertainment media.

We might engage with these realistic figurative art objects as though they were in fact real; in doing so, representations may take precedence over reality, as we found in the case of both Freddie and Maskell. Such issues are highlighted by more extreme forms of Japanese digital consumption, as outlined in *A Perfect Fake*. As de Guerre notes, in Japan we find the most developed market for computer generated imagery of the human body.

Virtual female characters are an enormous commercial industry in Japan, perhaps best exemplified by virtual pop-stars such as Kyoko Date, Yuki Ta-Rai, and Miku Hatsune who are million-dollar properties. The appeal of such virtual characters, I would like to suggest, lies in their seeming stability. Just as Freddie sought in his beloved portrait a refuge from a chaotic postmodern world, those who engage with virtual figures similarly seek a stable mooring. In keeping with this notion, Professor Shields proposes that such animated figures are more "dependable and trustworthy over time as one develops a pattern of repeated engagement" with them (*Perfect*). Likewise, Akihiko Katsuno, the CEO of Polygons Inc., claims that these characters are sources of comfort that "serve to cover and fill in the gaps in a world where communication is diminishing," for unlike real people, they are predictable and constant (*Perfect*). Such figures are therefore culturally constructed as coping mechanisms for modern alienation. *A Perfect Fake* foregrounds the problematic nature of this scenario: real people are turning to fake ones in order to satisfy their interpersonal needs. In other words, they seek confirmation of the self in representations. As we have seen elsewhere in this dissertation, the realm of representation can only offer cold comfort. Rather than provide a solution, these virtual characters further disrupt human communication for they offer an easy alternative and a

false satisfaction. What we find here, then, is a technological articulation of iconic

projection whereby an engagement in the virtual world of representation serves to

distance one from external reality. The problems underlying this process are perhaps

most obvious when we consider the erotic value of these virtual characters. As de Guerre

points out, more and more people are soliciting virtual figures to satisfy their sexual

needs. Naturally, this scenario enacts a Pygmalionesque premise. Recall that Pygmalion

spurns the very real "whores" of his city in favour of his pristine statue. Galatea therefore

functions as a *tabula rasa*; in her, we find the pure potentiality of the art object. It can

represent whatever its owner desires. The erotic appeal of virtual characters is

comparable, for, since they need not correspond to any physical signified and are thus

freed from the limitations of flesh and blood, they offer a world of boundless sexual

potential. Virtual pornography is, in this respect, a pure expression of fantasy.[15] While

the sexual motivation of traditional pornography is supplied by images of real people,

virtual pornography offers sexual images of simulated characters. Like Deckard's

attraction to the "female type" in *Blade Runner*, the consumer of virtual pornography is

drawn to the digitally produced signs of femaleness. These are, in other words, artificial

yet seductive images that are twice removed from reality.

Freed from the constraints of the external world, then, such virtual females

foreground the issue of male control. As representations lacking agency, these fictive

women become passive receptacles of projection, much like Galatea. Miller points out

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[15]Consequently, what we tend to find in these representations are the inflated visual signs of sexually
appealing femaleness: impossibly long legs, enormous breasts, and large eyes. The exaggerated forms of
these highly stylized virtual sex partners is therefore not unlike the anatomical impossibility of Barbie;
what we end up with is an artificial yet seductive image. The woman is reduced to external signs that
embody male desire and can be digitally reproduced.

that Galatea was "created originally as a means of controlling life and as a means of compensating for the way real women escape male control" (*Pygmalion* 54). The "whores" against whom Pygmalion reacts represent sexually autonomous women who threaten patriarchal control. Galatea, on the other hand, reinforces male power; not only is her figure the product of Pygmalion's hand, but before her transformation, so too is her imagined subjectivity. Yielding to the temptation of anthropomorphism, the artist engages in the "projection of a person and human intent where there is none" (Miller,*Pygmalion* 137). Similarly, virtual female figures open up the potential of what Miller calls "Pygmalion's error": "the projecting and then taking literally of a personification" (125). Of course, Venus rescues Pygmalion from the prospect of a more sustained delusion; however, consumers of virtual pornography cannot depend upon the intervention of a goddess. In consuming these images, they begin to take the sign of the thing as the thing itself. It is, as Baudrillard famously claims in "The Precession of Simulacra," "no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even of parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (96).

Such a substitution is important in that the signs of reality are more easily controlled. As de Guerre points out, the role of interactive interfacing in virtual technology is forcing us to reconsider the role of the visual consumer. Unlike traditional pornography, where the consumer is largely limited to his role as an observer, much virtual pornography is interactive and therefore centers more explicitly on the issue of control. The "realTime polygons" of 3D pornography offer their users interactive sexual scenarios that unfold in real time. 3DCG, in other words, allows your desires to be enacted onscreen by virtual characters that you control. And as Kathleen Pirrie Adams

asserts, "men do have a particular interest in seeing a world that is shaped according to their own desires" (*Perfect*). It is therefore no surprise that the primary creators and consumers of virtual pornography are men. Arthur Kroker, a researcher at the University of Victoria, notes that such technology allows every man to become "his own sexual mechanic" and therefore entails "the possession of the female body by the male mind" (*Perfect*).

Thus, de Guerre's experts raise one of the central issues of both the documentary and my dissertation: that of male control over the fetishized female object. Once again, the parallel with the myth of Pygmalion is evident, for, as I have already noted, the myth positions the male artist as the subject and creator of a female art object. It is useful, however, to consider the myth in slightly more detail here. In "Pygmalionesque Delusions and Illusions of Movement," Michelle Bloom emphasizes how important it is that the ivory statue yields to Pygmalion's touch just as wax does when, as Ovid puts it, it is "worked by men's fingers, is fashioned into many different shapes, and made fit for use by being used" (qtd. in Bloom 293). She cites Heinrich Dorrie, who argues that wax's

> capacity to be shaped and reshaped through sculpting and molding makes
> it the ideal material to emblematize metamorphosis. Further, the pliability
> and porosity of wax, along with its capacity for polychromic coloration,
> make it suggestive of human flesh, thus rendering wax particularly
> appropriate for the simulation of human beings. (293-4)

What Bloom does not note, however, is perhaps the most important point: in the transitional moment when the statue becomes a living woman, she is likened not to flesh, but to yet another artistic medium. As the hard ivory grows soft, we are told that

Pygmalion's "fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface, just as wax" (qtd. in

Bloom 293). Ovid's simile complicates the transformative moment of the statue through

the confusion of the living and the artificial. Despite being animated, Galatea is still

likened to an art object. In my earlier discussion of the myth, I noted that, after her

metamorphosis, Galatea is defined according to her sexual and reproductive roles; her

newly-formed identity is, in other words, entirely dependent upon Pygmalion. What we

find in the above discussion is a confirmation of this idea. Though Galatea is now alive,

she is not autonomous. Rather, she is still a figure to be fashioned and shaped by male

fingers. Thus, the myth of Pygmalion speaks to the creative power of the male artist both

before *and after* the actual act of creation.

This reading of the myth finds its parallel in *A Perfect Fake*, for de Guerre

similarly foregrounds the issue of male control over women both in the act of creating

female simulations and in the engagement with these figures. However, his expert panel

is careful to comment on the limitations of virtual pornography, for while artificial

women may appear realistic, they are still representations and thus cannot offer any real

kind of fulfillment. As Dyens notes, because these virtual figures are grounded in

computer language, they provide no actual link to the world (*Perfect*). Kaufman similarly

claims that a female simulation "can scratch an itch, but it can't satisfy the deeper desires

because those desires have to do with connection. They have to do with meeting the

capacities of our bodies to feel, to express sensuality and physicality, and an image can

never and will never be able to do that" (*Perfect*). The sexual engagement that online

virtual pornography assumes is always already mediated by the computer screen. In light

of these limitations, it is essential to consider a figure that represents the attempt to

remove the screen that acts as a barrier between the consumers of virtual pornography and the characters with whom they interact. As Kaufman notes, images cannot appeal to the physicality of our bodies, but what of statues?

Three-dimensional art objects naturally complicate matters. We have already seen that, because statues occupy the same space as our bodies, they are considered more materially present in the world than two-dimensional images. What they represent, then, is the possibility of unmediated communion. Both Freedberg and Potts have noted that the increased physicality of such art objects makes them more susceptible to empathic projection. In other words, we are likelier to read the statue as a living presence. I argue here that the love-doll, or the life-sized sexual surrogate, acts as a symbolic statue, offering a more direct mode of engagement than the two-dimensional figures of virtual pornography. As three-dimensional objects, love-dolls raise the issues that are inherent to a consideration of statues, love-bots, and replicants. I have already discussed these figures as embodied extensions of pornographic images: Galatea is a vessel that crystallizes Pygmalion's sexual desires, much like the love-bots of Whedon's work and the female replicants of Scott's *Blade Runner*. Each of these figures represents the projection of male desire onto a female art object; thus, they all illustrate the fantasy of the potential art-subject. Most important, however, is that each of these figures demonstrates the ultimate impossibility of this project. Love-dolls function in a similar manner. They are, I argue, three-dimensional art objects much like their predecessors, and through these inanimate figures, we see once more the persistent desire to enliven the artwork. The love-doll therefore represents the desire for the art-subject, and, as such, this figure foregrounds the issue of how we relate to our art objects.

V: Projecting Pygmalion: The Love-Doll

A doll in the doll-maker's house
Looks at the cradle and bawls:
'That is an insult to us.'
– W.B. Yeats

Though the figure of the love-doll finds its classical precursor in Pygmalion's ivory

statue, it was not until the 1990s that the dolls, made from material that simulates the look

and feel of human skin, were first manufactured.[16] In America, Abyss Creations gave

birth to the first Real Doll, and it should come as no surprise that she was the brainchild

of an artist. Like Pygmalion, Matt McMullen was a sculptor who worked on life-sized

statues. "I wanted to make sculpture that could interact with people," he claims, and

what resulted was an art object and fully-functional synthetic dream-girl (Roderick). It is

only relatively recently, however, that love-dolls have gained media attention. In 2001,

Time Magazine published an article on the phenomenon entitled "Well, Hello, Dolly."

Smaller articles followed, predominantly dealing with the growing Asian market for these

gynomorphic figures, from which de Guerre's own documentary grows, as well as

various television appearances, ranging from spots on the dramatic series *Nip/Tuck* to

HBO's documentary series *Real Sex.* 2007, however, proved to be a landslide year for

the love-doll. From the documentary film *Love Me, Love My Doll* (also known as *Guys*

and Dolls) to Craig Gillespie's quirky Canadian comedy *Lars and the Real Girl*, which

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[16]These life-sized dolls are made from materials that are meant to simulate the feel of human flesh. Most dolls are made of silicone, which manufacturers recommend their patrons 'heat up' prior to use for the most life-like effect; however, other companies, such as CybOrgasMatrix, for instance, are experimenting with materials such as elastometric gels which purportedly feel more like real flesh. The average silicone doll weighs roughly eighty pounds, and most of them have PVC or metal skeletons, meaning that their joints are flexible and they can therefore be variously positioned so as to suit the desires of their owners. The standard dolls listed on the RealDoll website begin at $5,999 US dollars (taxes not included), but advanced features, such as vibrating body parts and limited, pre-programmed vocabularies, can increase this cost to up to $10,000 US dollars.

itself generated a number of articles in high-profile newspapers and magazines, the love-doll was suddenly propelled into the spotlight. Since 2007, such figures have continued to fascinate, appearing on National Geographic's television series *Taboo* last year and forming the subject of David Hockey's soon-to-be-released Canadian documentary *All Dolled Up*.[17] In the quest for the perfect symbol of male sexual desire, the love-doll represents the idealized virtual girl made 'flesh.'

In many respects, then, the love-doll represents one very real step towards the female replicants of *Blade Runner*, whom I have already discussed as animated dolls. As Resch notes, the replicants are a "female type"; similarly, the love-doll embodies the visual signs of femininity which men may find attractive. The editor of the adult magazine *Idoloid*, which features non-human females, summarizes this phenomenon when he says, "We recognize Eros in anything shaped like a woman" (*Perfect*). It is upon this principle of fetishization that non-human forms of eroticism are based: the men are willing to take material objects as carriers of femaleness. Yantara Iraki, one of the most sophisticated producers of doll art in Japan, echoes Baudrillard's discussion of the transvestite when he claims, "There is something that makes men attracted to women, but it doesn't have to be a real woman…In fact, men are turned on by signs," and it is these signs that he pursues when he makes his dolls (*Perfect*).[18] The love-doll is therefore

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[17]Hockey's documentary offers a unique viewpoint in that it explores the phenomenon of the love-doll from the first-person perspective of the doll community. Hockey, a 57-year-old filmmaker from Nova Scotia, owns twelve dolls himself. In David Moye's recent article "Filmmaker Learns Joys of Life-Size Love Dolls as Alternative Soul Mates," Hockey says, "I really think the dolls need a new name. They're not sex dolls, not love dolls. Calling them one is like calling a Harley-Davidson a moped." The implications of his mechanical metaphor aside, Hockey here suggests that the dolls offer a good deal more than mere sexual gratification. Thus, he notes, that roughly only 48% of doll owners use their doll primarily for sex. Nonetheless, he points out, "if you want companionship, a dog is better."

[18]Love-dolls are in fact predominantly female. Japanese doll manufacturers, such as 4Woods, Honey Dolls, Level D, Lifedolls, Make Pure, Medidoll, Fantastic Doll, Candy Girls, Rubberskin JP Dolls, among others,

clearly tied not only to the figures of virtual pornography, but also to the fictional

replicants of *Blade Runner*. In fact, one might say that the real-life love-doll bridges the

gap between two-dimensional pornography and the projected future of Scott's film.

Indeed, Pris, Zhora, and Rachael are the next generation of sexual surrogates. Because

they are technologically animated, they represent a step up from the love-dolls of *A*

Perfect Fake, which can only be animated in the minds of their owners. Like Pygmalion

in his dealings with the static three-dimensional statue, these men imagine that their dolls

must be more than synthetic: they fancy that she returns their kisses; they pay her

compliments and bring her gifts; they clothe her and lie with her. These actions signify

the adamant desire to transform the art-object into an art-subject.

It is necessary to consider the issues that the figure of the doll raises. Of course,

one cannot discuss the doll without considering what is perhaps the central document of

doll studies: Sigmund Freud's well-known essay "The Uncanny." Here, the

psychoanalyst considers our reception of life-like representations. More often than not,

he notes, we respond to such figures anxiously. Freedberg noted something similar in his

discussion of life-size waxworks, a category of Western imagery unparalleled in its

ability to unsettle its beholder. Based upon the principle of verisimilitude, waxworks

evoke the raw power of representation by insisting upon the "living reality of the figure –

of the figure itself, and not merely the recollection of the figure it resembled" (Freedberg

201). Statues provoke perhaps less intense yet similar responses, however. Freedberg

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list no male dolls on their websites. The only high-quality realistic male silicone dolls I could find were those offered through the preeminent North American doll retailer, RealDoll. The initial male doll that the company offered, the "Charlie," is out of production. However, more recently, RealDoll has started to offer the 'Male RealDoll 2' – a male love-doll that can be personalized according to a number of options: there are two body types and three faces on offer. By comparison, the company's selection of female dolls is far more varied. Patrons can choose from over twelve bodies and thirty-one faces, and everything from the doll's eye-liner style and toenail color is customizable. While doll ownership is not exclusively male, the vast majority of patrons are men looking for female simulations.

points out that "we are arrested by these images at least partly out of fear that they might just come alive, just open their mouths, just begin to move" (231). The possibility, as the critic constructs it, is a fearful one. Gross similarly notes the underlying threat of the living statue whose awakening is often constructed as a fearful occasion that disrupts expected conceptual categories.

Dolls, like statues, are objects that simultaneously suggest living human bodies and inert material artefacts. As Freedberg suggests, our anxiety is a response to this very disjunction. Indeed, Freud's work on the uncanny centers on this notion: he famously defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (195). The uncanny, then, represents an epistemological disruption – the kind of which is evident in our reactions to statues and dolls. Freud's work provides insight into my examination of the doll for two primary reasons. First, his discussion of the doll centers on its unsettling ability to blur the boundary between reality and representation. Like the painted women and digital females I have already mentioned, the doll becomes a site of projection which ostensibly seems to animate her in the eyes of her male beholder. Thus, we can read the doll in terms of the female representations I have already explored in this dissertation. Second, Freud's theorization of the uncanny articulates the inherent problems underlying our engagement with representations. Because she would seem to offer the comfort and stability of a sanitized female image, the doll becomes part of a distancing process not unlike Freddie's iconic projection. In the contest between the artificial and the actual, the real woman is in danger of losing to her idealized counterpart.

In his work, Freud builds upon the study of the uncanny by Ernst Jentsch, who believed "that a particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one" (S. Freud, "Uncanny" 208). Jentsch therefore locates uncanniness in "wax-work figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata" (S. Freud, "Uncanny" 201), and he cites the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann as especially effective examples, for the author often leaves his reader to doubt whether an apparently animate figure is actually alive or simply an automaton.[19] Indeed, one can argue that this tension informs both Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* and Scott's *Blade Runner* where characters are continually forced to question not only the status of others, but also their own.

In their exploration of the uncanny, Jentsch and Freud pay especial attention to Hoffmann's "The Sandman" – a story that rather suitably revolves around a life-like doll. In Hoffmann's tale, the young poet Nathanael spies the beautiful Olympia through a window and falls madly in love with her at the expense of his fiancée Klara, whom he claims is, in comparison, a "damned, lifeless automaton" (154). Ironically, he discovers that his beloved Olympia is a doll run by a clockwork mechanism that allows her only the semblance of life. Thus, the story highlights the disjunction between artificial and actual

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[19]It is important to mention the "uncanny valley" here – the phrase, coined by the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori in 1970, refers to a phenomenon that has become increasingly problematic in contemporary 3D computer animation. Mori noted that the more human a robot looked and behaved, the more appealing it would be to a human being. However, there comes a point when the likeliness seems too strong, and our initially positive and empathic reaction becomes one of revulsion. Mori charted the phenomenon on a graph with the Y axis designating our response towards the robot and the X axis noting the extent of the robot's human similarity. The uncanny valley marks the sudden drop in our positive reaction to a robot that approaches human likeness. CGI renderings of human figures in recent films such as *The Polar Express* (2004), *Beowulf* (2007), and *Tron: Legacy* (2010) have been criticized for their 'eeriness.' These are films that present realistic simulations of human faces that are somehow slightly off and therefore unsettling for viewers. This phenomenon applies to the love-dolls I will shortly examine.

women. Because she occupies the same space as Nathanael, Olympia seems to be real.

As Freedberg writes of statues, "The spectator sees living beings…ones which are like

him, of (apparently) the same breath, blood, and flesh" (200).

In his analysis of the story, Sigmund Freud chooses not to focus on Olympia,

turning his attention instead to the nightmarish Sandman, a folktale figure who tears out

children's eyes and who haunts Nathanael's childhood memories only to reappear later in

his life. According to Freud, the figure of the Sandman offers a "more striking instance

of uncanniness" ("Uncanny" 205).   "I cannot think," he claims, "and I hope most readers

of the story will agree with me – that the theme of the doll Olympia, who is to all

appearances a living being, is by any means the only, or indeed the most important,

element that must be held responsible for the quite unparalleled atmosphere of

uncanniness evoked by the story" (202). Numerous scholars have, however, disagreed

with Freud on this point. Both Hélène Cixous in "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading

of Freud's *Das Unheimliche*" and Françoise Meltzer in "The Uncanny Rendered Canny:

Freud's Blind Spot in Reading Hoffmann's 'Sandman,'" famously argue that Freud

overlooks the importance of Olympia as an embodiment of uncanniness. Kitti Carriker,

in her book-length study on the miniature doll in literature, notes that other scholars, such

as Malcolm Jones, Elizabeth Wright, and Naomi Schor similarly question Freud's

marginalization of the doll. In questioning Freud's approach, these scholars highlight the

profound significance of the doll as an expression of uncanniness.

Carriker notes that Olympia is especially uncanny because she is not inanimate.

Rather, Olympia is an automated doll, a complex machine that can dance and interact

with humans. Thus, like love-bots and replicants, she more thoroughly conflates the

representational and the real. While Nathanael's adoration blinds him to what his friends identify as her mechanical soullessness, she is nonetheless more closely aligned with her human audience than a mannequin or statue. Part of her uncanniness, then, can be attributed to the question of what exactly quickens the clockwork doll. Carriker significantly suggests that she is "animated by Nathanael'sprojection as well as by the hidden internal mechanisms inserted by the clockmaker" (45). We have seen such subjective projection before: in Freddie's animation of the Dutch portrait in *Book of Evidence*, in Morrow's invention of A. in *Athena*, and in the consumers of virtual pornography who take beautiful female simulations to be alive.

In all of these instances, we find the same problem: an intense engagement with representation threatens to detach one from external reality. Thus, in turning towards Olympia, Nathanael turns away from his flesh-and-blood fiancée. In Freud's articulation of the tale, the uncanny threatens not only to disturb one through its epistemological disruption, but it also threatens to cut one off from the real world. We see something similar with love-doll owners. Like Olympia, the love-doll is a three-dimensional art object, and as we have already determined, the insistent materiality of such objects encourages us to read them as living figures. Thus, even after Nathanael realizes that Olympia is in fact a doll, "he simultaneously still sees her as the girl he loves" – as Meltzer asks, "Is not [this] the uncanny moment…?" (231).

What is suggested here, of course, is the Pygmalionesque desire for simulations over reality. As a doll, Olympia represents the promise inherent in projection: she can be whatever Nathanael wants, and she therefore encapsulates the Galatean appeal. In this respect, let us briefly consider Alex Potts's reading of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's version

of the Pygmalion myth – a version which foregrounds the importance of projection. Potts

approaches the tale through Freud: he sees the myth as an enactment of Freud's object

cathexis, or "possession of an object by a subject's libido" (38). Put simply, Pygmalion

identifies with the statue, internalizing it as an aspect of his own selfhood. The sculptor's

project is therefore narcissistic in nature, for he anticipates encountering himself in his

art. "I adore myself in what I have made," he says (qtd. in Potts 38). This scenario is

literally enacted when the statue comes to life: "Touching herself she says: 'This is me';

touching a block of marble, the alien matter that remains indifferent to the sculptor's self-

projection, she utters: 'This is not me.' Then, as she holds her hand to Pygmalion's

palpitating heart, she declares: 'Ah! Myself again'" (qtd. in Potts 38). What this version

of the myth demonstrates is that Galatea is very much an extension of Pygmalion himself.

The fantasy of transformation is depicted as a fantasy of projection. As Miller explains,

"Pygmalion has himself made Galatea. She is the mirror image of his desire. His

relation to her is not love for another, in an attachment always shadowed by the certain

death of the other. It is a reciprocity in which the same loves the same" (*Pygmalion* 4).

Similarly, in Hoffmann's story, female perfection is embodied by an uncanny

machine that lends itself to Nathanael's projections. In part, Hoffmann suggests that real

women are by their very nature imperfect; it is only the automaton, whose artificial body

signifies the absence of a real woman, who can approach female perfection. Thus, the

male fantasy of the ideal female can only be realized through the projective promise of a

material object. What I mean to suggest here is that a similar process is at work with the

love-doll. Like Nathanael, many love-doll owners see their dolls simultaneously as

beautiful material objects and complex loving subjects. Of course, as supposed subjects,

these figures are animated by the projected will of their owners. As Miller notes in a different context, "It is as if Narcissus' reflection in the pool had come alive and could return his love" (*Pygmalion* 5). Dolls are fundamentally reflections of their owners. Thus, they offer the attraction of complete control. According to one user, "with dolls, users will always have the power. Dolls will stay with the users forever" (*Perfect*). Where real women are dynamic and changeable, the doll is eternal. Suspended in time and untouched by human ailments such as age, illness, and death, the fixed doll – like the portrait or statue – is predictable and trustworthy. Her constancy and affection is guaranteed insofar as it is projected. Thus, like the Dutch figure of Freddie's painting, she acts as a prescription against the chaos of postmodernity. In a world where everything is destabilized, the doll comes to represent the comfort of an unchanging object.

However, as with iconic projection, such figures mark the segregation of self from reality. The confusion of the artificial and actual, paired with male projection, serves to separate the doll owner from reality in much the same way that a delusional Maskell can distance himself from the experience of war or Freddie can remove himself from the scene of his own crime. This distancing effect is most apparent in the two doll-owner case studies de Guerre includes in his documentary. The first is a sympathetic non-sexual portrait of a man who finds both comfort and company in his dolls. Conversely, the second is a more disturbing and explicitly sexualized portrait of a libido-driven collector. Thus, the director exposes us to the doll's role in the constitution of both the social and the sexual self. Both men seek to ground themselves in their relationships with their dolls, and they therefore commit the fatal error that both Freddie and Victor made.

Despite our persistent desire to imagine art objects as subjects that can tell us who we are, art does not have the capacity to do so. If anything, it can only distance us further from external reality, as de Guerre's case studies show.

The first doll owner of the documentary is an anonymous man in his mid-30s who speaks of "Tina" lovingly. A rather inconspicuous figure, he nonetheless represents those qualities one might imagine are typical of many doll-owners: he is lonely, shy, and socially awkward. Thus, he turns to Tina to satisfy his interpersonal needs.[20] Though her face is curiously inhuman – resembling an anime cartoon rather than a human face – Tina is personified by her owner, who ascribes to her an assertive personality. In this misdirected attempt to connect and communicate with an artificial being, we see what Shields designates the essential "humanness" of doll ownership – "It's not just a suspension of disbelief," he explains; underlying these relationships is a "very human desire to relate, to befriend." Doll love, he claims, "pushes the limit of what it is to relate in a human way" (*Perfect*). This owner can therefore be likened to *Blade Runner*'s J.F. Sebastian and his treasure trove of manufactured friends. Being reclusive and awkward, Sebastian turns to these simulated figures for social stimulation and comfort. His strange relationship to them is therefore motivated by a very human need. Similarly, Tina

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[20]Of note here is Freud's discussion of the doll's role in child-play. In psychological theory, the childhood desire to animate one's dolls is largely benign. Indeed, doll-play is interpreted as a means of enacting scenarios and challenges that can be rehearsed and conquered in play, thus preparing children for the difficulties of real life. The dolls of *A Perfect Fake* have a similar function: they provide men with an alternative field of engagement where nothing is at stake. Where children tend to develop beyond this stage of 'play,' the doll owners remain grounded in this stage, preferring the symbolic arena of fantasy and acting – in effect, of virtual experience – to the experiences of real life. As the doll-maker Iraki says, "People like dolls because they are lonely" (*Perfect*). He identifies himself as "a 38-year-old man who shuts himself up in a room alone making dolls instead of having a real child" (*Perfect*). Thus, the love-doll offers an alternative form of social stimulation in much the same way that a child's doll offers an avenue for psychological development. Interestingly, in his obsession with Olympia, Nathanael can be said to demonstrate "a thinly veiled infantile tendency in his attraction to an overgrown toy" (Kenneth Negus, qtd. in Carriker 42). Engagement with dolls is here associated with child's play; however, in *A Perfect Fake*, the mechanism that is meant to help one cope with real life threatens to replace it.

represents her owner's human need for social interaction to such an extent that he is willing to imagine it in its absence. He maintains the illusion of her reality by simulating communicative feedback on her part, and in doing so, attempts to enact the transformation of art-object into art-subject.[21] What is interesting to note, however, is that the tension between the signified and the signifier is still maintained. For example, in speaking of his activities with Tina, her owner alternates between the pronouns "I" and "we." With her, he is at once both alone and in the company of (an)other. He cannot sustain indefinitely the illusion of her subjecthood, but he nonetheless tries by ascribing to the inanimate object a series of thoughts and opinions. Thus, he claims, "she will often send me a signal saying, 'Let me go out.' I think she likes to go out" (*Perfect*). Incapable of speaking, the doll apparently resorts to an intangible non-verbal mode of communication, and he is left to guess (and thus create) her preferences, clearly indicating the limitations of her non-human nature. The doll is therefore a site of projection that disrupts the distinction between reality and representation.

What is perhaps most fascinating here is that the owner attempts to pursue his doll's humanness by making her the subject of non-sexual photographs. In photographing Tina, he employs one artistic medium to capture or copy another, but I argue that underlying this action is a desire to confirm the doll's status as an art-subject. Thus, the act of photographing his doll speaks to the owner's wish to make his doll live, placing him in line with the likes of Freddie Montgomery. The photographic replica of

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[21]What is interesting about this portion of the documentary is that the doll's role as an uncanny object is highlighted. As we saw with Hoffmann's tale, the uncanny is foregrounded in the moment that the real and the artificial collide: it is when Nathanael sees Olympia as simultaneously object and subject that he experiences that epistemological disjunction associated with the uncanny. It should come as no surprise then that when the doll-owner behaves as though his life-sized doll is real, the viewer experiences a sense of discomfort.

Tina privileges the original, thereby giving importance to the doll as the original subject upon whom the photo is modeled. In this scenario, the photograph is an art-object that ostensibly captures the image of the imagined art-subject. As her object status is deflected onto the photo, artistic replication would seem to transform Tina into a photographed subject. It is fitting, then, that her owner should use photography to document what he claims is her range of emotions: when pictured in a bright garden, Tina appears "excited"; while in the shadows of an abandoned building, she appears "lonely." These photos are a means of capturing traces of the doll's supposed subjectivity. What Tina demonstrates, then, is the doll-owner's fantasy that his doll can transcend the status of art-object. But of course, the doll can only ever transcend this status in the mind of its owner who projects upon it an identity. Tina's owner is therefore like a puppeteer, animating the puppet according to his own wishes. According to Kroker, the price to be paid for such simulated relationships is "the intensification of an isolated world of male fantasy" (*Perfect*) – a notion that is evident with the second of de Guerre's two case studies, which presents viewers with a more deeply sexualized instance of human-doll interaction.

Here, we follow Tavo, a business executive who has accumulated a doll collection so large (40+ dolls) that he has purchased a separate apartment for them.[22] Where de Guerre focuses upon the social stimulation with which Tina provides her owner, Tavo's dolls are depicted as being in line with the "basic pleasure models" of *Blade Runner*: they are simulations that are meant to be sexually consumed. Through his community of dolls, Tavo places himself as an important member of a larger collective; however,

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[22]Interestingly, the documentary encourages us to see Tavo's considerable doll collection as an extension of his corporate interests. In this respect, one can perhaps read Tavo in light of *Blade Runner*'s Tyrell Corporation.

because he appears to relate to his dolls in a predominantly sexual manner, his self-appointed position is that of a harem's male master. Tavo's vast network of dolls serves to confirm his status as a sexual subject. Thus, he spins around them narratives that affirm his erotic primacy: if he does not divide his attention among them equally, he claims, they become jealous. It is therefore his duty to ensure the sexual satisfaction of each of his dolls, lest they feel left out. Here, as in Pygmalion's tale, we find the collision of creative and sexual urges. Just as Pygmalion's artistry is intrinsically tied to his sexual desire for the perfect woman, Tavo's projections 'create' his dolls as perfect sexual partners. His dolls therefore allow him to enact a fantasy of mastery.[23]

What Tavo's dolls and Tina represent is the threat of simulation as replacement, whereby the illusion – diminutive, inorganic, and easily manipulated – comes to be preferred over reality. In the world of *A Perfect Fake*, simulated women are more

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[23] One of the underlying discourses of de Guerre's film involves what might be termed the "Lolita-complex." Rather than locating their attraction in the sexiness of the doll, many of the doll owners in *A Perfect Fake* praise their cuteness. As Tina's owner says, "because she is cute, I want to love her and take care of her" (*Perfect*). His statement is relevant in that it highlights cuteness as one of the doll's attractive qualities, a quality which is itself often allied with youth, and it identifies the doll as a dependent who is incapable of taking care of herself, much like a child. While de Guerre does not explicitly address the issue of child attraction, the issue hovers on the darker periphery of his documentary.

The love-dolls of his film tend to be visually coded as either hypersexual, with oversignified and disproportionate dimensions, or disturbingly young nymphets. De Guerre's camerawork insists on the unsettling obsession with youth in doll culture. For instance, towards the end of the film, we see Tina 'standing' next to her owner for the first time and are astonished to note her small size. Though her owner has already indicated that he often buys her clothing from the children's department, it is not until this moment that her childlike stature is visually apparent, and the effect is startling. Earlier, as one owner discusses the growing acceptability of love-doll culture in Japan, the camera frames him from a distance, slowly zooming in to a close up of his hands, in which he holds a plush teddy bear, presumably belonging to his doll. Thus, de Guerre forces us to question the hypothetical age of these simulated lovers, drawing our attention towards the fact that these dolls provide a means of acting upon taboos through what Humbert Humbert calls, "one-sided diminutive romances" (20).

Indeed, Humbert's sentiments regarding an early encounter with Lolita could easily pass for those of a doll owner for his doll: "What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful Lolita – perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness – indeed, no life of her own" (62). The doll acts as a substitute or surrogate for a taboo desire, and her owner must animate her with his own fancy if he is to satisfy that desire. In this respect, the doll is even more thoroughly inscribed as a figure of fantasy, encouraging these men to encounter the forbidden through mediation, interacting with fictional characters rather than real people.

attractive than their originals. The doll owners of de Guerre's documentary enact the same scenario we have seen in the works of fiction I have examined thus far. They interact with art objects to such an extent that the line between reality and representation is ostensibly blurred. The art object becomes a site of projection – a role that in itself reflects the beholder's desire to effect the transformation of art-object into art-subject. This entire process is itself motivated by the hope that one's identity can be grounded in art. When Tina's owner mentally 'animates' his doll, he simultaneously imagines that she has the ability to constitute him as a social subject. Similarly, in pretending his harem to life, Tavo allows his dolls to seemingly confirm his status as a sexual subject. Like Freddie and Victor, these men seek confirmation in art, but to do so, they must imagine that art is more than a mere object. Because the process underlying love-doll ownership is so similar to what we have found in the fictional works I have examined, it is no surprise that the doll-owners should experience the same problems as Freddie and Victor before them. Thus, we find once more that the artwork cannot transcend its object role. Such a transformation is only possible within the deluded mind – a fact that is most evident in the final sequence of *A Perfect Fake*.

The film ends with Tina's owner thoughtfully recounting a trip they took together. His voice-over narration is accompanied by images that trace his preparations for one of their photo excursions: we watch as he gently places a bag over Tina's head, and then proceeds to pop it from her neck; we watch as he puts shoes on the unyielding and immovable feet of the doll's now headless torso; and we listen as the sound of plastic feet rubbing against leather shoes is isolated and amplified. The disjunction between his narrative personification of Tina and the visual and aural emphasis on her artifice is

striking. What is underscored, of course, is that Tina is an object upon which animation is merely projected. As we have witnessed with the owner's fictional precursors, this kind of hopeful engagement with art objects serves to distance one from reality. Thus, in his preference for simulations, the doll-owner turns away from the external world and towards an intensified realm of male fantasy. Of course, underlying their engagement with these objects is a vision of art akin to what we have already seen in Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*: these men hope that art is tangible and concrete, and that it can convey meaning clearly. Thus, the affirmation that they seek through these objects is perhaps as delusional as Maskell at the conclusion of *The Untouchable*. Like the fiction of Banville, then, *A Perfect Fake* demonstrates the very real problem of turning to art to define ourselves.

While one might view the love-doll owner's Pygmalionesque enterprise as delusional, it is important to note that this delusion underlines our own engagement with art. In *A Perfect Fake*, we find a group on the fringe that participates in a delusion much more widely held. Thus, love-dolls merely offer a more visible and perhaps more shocking articulation of the kind of artistic engagement we all participate in, though perhaps to differing degrees. As the contemporary obsession with the artificial made 'real' shows, we often want our art to be more than just objects.

CODA: Art Contemplating Art

I: Replicants and Representation: *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*

All he'd wanted were the same answers the rest of us want. Where did I come from? Where am I going? How long have I got?
 – Blade Runner

In the course of this dissertation, I have examined a number of figures, both fictional and real, that seek to ground themselves in art. The persistence of this trope is itself a comment on the common desire to see images as stable sites of fixed meaning. Again and again, we witness the hopeful construction of art as a transcendental signifier, much like Brown's rendition of Leonardo's *The Last Supper*. This desire for certainty in art, I have argued, is rooted in the uncertain status of the beholders themselves. As postmodernism threatens to destabilize the world around them, these figures seek to anchor their identities in seemingly stable art objects. Of course, these artworks are themselves always already equivocal, and they therefore resolutely refuse to offer affirmation of any kind.

What is striking in these instances, however, is just how dogged the pursuit of artistic meaning is. Despite art's continual defiance, the characters I have considered persist in seeing it as a source of solace and comfort. Like the love-doll owners of de Guerre's documentary, they are determined to find meaning in representation and therefore continue to ground the self in it. This resolve is highlighted by the scenarios I consider in my coda. Here, I examine simulated humans – namely replicants and clones – that participate in the construction and interpretation of art, thereby allowing us to see the same problems refracted through a second layer of representation. The human

simulations of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*and Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* engage in behavior that is like that of Freddie, Maskell, Nathanael, and de Guerre's doll-owners: they pursue art as a confirmation of their supposed humanity. That the human simulation should engage in a behavior that has thus far characterized a very human response to art is itself intriguing. It speaks to the determination with which we all turn to art and the resolute insistence that it should make meaning. Their failure, however, allows us to see, by extension, the failure of the entire enterprise.

It is important to stress once more that human simulations are themselves figures that capture the instability of postmodern subjectivity. As imitations of humanity, these figures occupy a liminal space between reality and representation. They can therefore be likened to the spy, who is characterized, in part, by his incessant performance of selfhood; the human simulation magnifies this performativity. Consequently, we can read them as exemplars of postmodern subjecthood. Representing the ultimate unstable identity, the human simulation's recourse to art speaks to our own misplaced desire to stabilize ourselves via representation.

I have already noted that Dick's replicants foreground the question of art's involvement in ontological definitions. As Rachael demonstrates, replicants are figures that would, at first, seem to disrupt the art-object/art-subject boundary. Thus, early on, she is represented as the art-object that seems capable of making the transition into subjecthood. Yet, though she might approach this subject-status, it is ultimately denied to her; Rachael's failure to move beyond her object position is representative. What is most interesting, however, is that the replicants of the novel struggle towards this desired subjectivity through an engagement with art. As we have already seen, the humans of

Dick's world problematically attempt to define themselves according to art objects. That the androids should do the same demonstrates once more the problem of grounding the self in art; the attempt is equally misguided for non-human and human alike.

Consider in this respect the figure of Resch – Deckard's blade running colleague. In the novel, Resch begins to question his own ontology. Fearing that he might be a replicant that has been implanted with false memories, he turns to art for confirmation of the self. More specifically, Resch turns to Expressionist painting – a form of representation that values "not the imitation of nature but the expression of feelings" (Gombrich,*Story* 440). It is significant that he should engage with this particular form of art, for in Dick's world, humans can only be distinguished from androids by their empathy; Expressionist painting is therefore positioned as a potential symbol of humanity itself.

Resch is especially drawn to Edvard Munch's icon of nameless anxiety, *The Scream*. Famously considered a visual comment on existential angst, the image would seem to offer a direct link to the world of human emotion in which Resch seeks to ground himself:

> The painting showed a hairless, oppressed creature with a head like an inverted pear, its hands clapped in horror to its ears, its mouth open in a vast, soundless scream. Twisted ripples of the creature's torment, echoes of its cry, flooded out into the air surrounding it; the man or woman, whichever it was, had become contained by its own howl. It had covered its ears against its own sound. The creature stood on a bridge and no one

else was present; the creature screamed in isolation. Cut off by – or

despite – its outcry. (114)

What is particularly striking is the blade runner's reaction to the painting: looking at the

image, he muses, "I think that is how an andy must feel" (114). Rather than confirm his

humanity, the art object serves to further problematize the distinction between human and

android. The image therefore offers Resch not confirmation but further confusion. His

engagement with art demonstrates its refusal to comply with our demand that it should

tell us who we are.

The replicant Luba Luft similarly turns to art to combat her anxiety.[24] With a

bounty on her head, Luft heads to the museum to take in the Munch exhibit; faced with a

very real threat, then, she turns to the solace of art. When Deckard and Resch find her,

she is holding a printed catalogue, enthralled by Munch's *Puberty*, "a drawing of a young

girl, hands clasped together, seated on the edge of a bed, an expression of bewildered

wonder and new, groping awe imprinted on the face" (115). Importantly, the image is

inflected as being a distinctly human artefact: in keeping with the Expressionist tradition,

the young girl's naked vulnerability is meant to be emotionally evocative. Furthermore,

the drawing depicts not only an adolescent female's physical development but also an

emotional awakening, the kind of which the manufactured replicant can never experience.

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[24]In the film version of the novel, Luft, a talented opera singer, is rather radically transformed into the sex worker Zhora. Thus, where Scott emphasizes the sexual role of the replicant, Dick uses Luft to explore the replicant's engagement in the world of art. When Deckard first encounters the opera singer, she is singing the role of Pamina in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* – an interesting choice on Dick's part, given that one of the central narrative devices of the opera is a portrait of Pamina used to entice a man into pursuing her. He notes the irony of the fact that an android should be called upon to sing a role of such sentiment, but is "surprised at the quality of her voice; it rated with that of the best" (86). Here, the replicant is tied to the world of artistic expression, a fact that is further outlined through the incident at the museum, which I will discuss at greater length in this section of the dissertation.

Luft, on the verge of being exterminated by the blade runners, therefore seeks to anchor herself in an explicitly human production.

So determined is she to ground herself in the art object that, after her capture, Luft asks Deckard to buy her a reproduction of the image. She clings to the art object much like the narrator of Adcock's "On Leaving the Tate." Recall that the poem's subject leaves the gallery with a "clutch of postcards/ in a Tate gallery bag" (1-2). Thus, the publically-accessible museum paintings are transformed into privatized personal artefacts. Luft, like Adcock's narrator, seeks to possess the artwork. She refuses to part from the image, hoping in her final moments that it can perhaps confirm her subject status. Of course, art fails to offer Luft her desired salvation – a fact that is highlighted by the scene of her retirement. Resch fires a shot into her stomach, and in that moment, we are told, "she began to scream" (Dick 117). The narrator notes, "she lay crouched against the wall of the elevator, screaming. Like the picture, Rick thought to himself" (117). Far from being confirmed as a subject, Luft becomes the image here – she *is* Munch's *Scream*. Rather than affirm her humanity, then, art becomes the means of destabilizing the replicant's sought-after subjectivity.

Both Resch and Luft fail to ground themselves in images; thus, the human contemplating an original painting and the android absorbed by an image in a catalogue experience similar failures. In other words, whether the beholder is human or non-human and whether the image itself is refracted by replication or not matters little. Ultimately, art lacks the meaning we would ascribe to it. We find a comparable situation in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, where artistic creations are positioned as potentially instrumental in demonstrating the humanity of Hailsham's clones. Thus, we move from a

consideration of replicants to an examination of the clone – the simulation that is a copy

of a living human being. As such, the clone would seem to be more closely tied to the

subject on whom it is based; the possibility of transitioning into subjecthood might

therefore seem likelier. However, because these figures, like the others I have examined,

pursue their ontology through art, their efforts are equally fruitless.

II: The Simulation as Artist: *Never Let Me Go*

The function of Art is to disturb.
– Georges Braque

Ishiguro's novel depicts a dystopic world where human clones are systematically

harvested for their organs – a practice made permissible by the belief that the clones are

"less than human" (240). The text is centrally concerned with the question of their

humanity. Existing "only to supply medical science" (239) through their 'donations,' the

clones are widely considered unnatural scientific productions rather than free subjects. In

this respect, they are comparable to Dick's replicants, and are thus similarly relegated to

the social periphery where most are raised in deplorable conditions.[25] However,

Hailsham, the secluded boarding school upon which the novel focuses, is part of small

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[25]Hailsham's clones are copies of real people whom the students call their "possibles" (127). Their status as duplicates points to their depreciated social value, just as the traditional discourse of art values the original, authentic art object over its copies. The replicants of Dick's novel are similarly secondary figures; thus, the author draws parallels between his dystopic future and America's antebellum past. In Dick's novel, off-world emigration is encouraged through the promise of custom-built servants. As one advertisement proudly declares, the goal is to duplicate "the halcyon days of the pre-Civil War Southern states" (14). The custom-tailored humanoid is specifically designed to meet the unique needs of each emigrant, "either as body servants or tireless field hands" (14). Ishiguro's clones can likewise be considered "body servants" – socially inferior, they are engineered to meet the medical needs of the humanity upon which they are modeled. The enforced servitude of Dick's androids finds its echo in the medically determined path of Ishiguro's clones. As mimetic copies of human originals, both the replicants and the clones are depicted as slaves subject to their makers.

vocal movement intended to garner support for the clones. In effect, the school is a social experiment meant to alter public opinion and therefore challenge the way the donations programme is run. In contrast to other government sanctioned organ farms, Hailsham is "a shining beacon," an example of "a more humane and better way of doing things" (236). Here, clones are transformed into students who are supported by their human guardians and educated in art and literature. Thus, Hailsham is meant to show "the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being" (239).

Central to this demonstration is the role of art. The creative impulses of the Hailsham clones are systematically nurtured. As Kathy H., one of the clones and the narrator of the novel, explains,

> Four times a year – spring, summer, autumn, winter – we had a kind of big exhibition-cum-sale of all the things we'd been creating in the three months since the last Exchange. Paintings, drawings, pottery; all sorts of 'sculptures' made from whatever was the craze of the day – bashed-up cans, maybe, or bottle tops stuck onto cardboard. (14)

So much emphasis is placed on producing these varied art objects that it becomes the social currency of the students. Kathy points out that "how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at 'creating'" (15). Within the school, then, artistic production determines one's social value and defines the self. Thus, Hailsham's students attempt to place themselves in the world through art.

The school's headmistress, Miss Emily, explains that the most accomplished of the works are placed in special exhibitions: "we were organizing large events all around the country. There'd be cabinet ministers, bishops, all sorts of famous people coming to attend. There were speeches, large funds pledged. 'There, look!' we could say. 'Look at this art! How dare you claim that these children are anything less than fully human?'" (239). Because art is believed to bare "the soul of the artist" (232), these artistic productions are meant to be evidence of a human soul in the engineered clone. Thus, for Miss Emily and her supporters, art occupies a revelatory role; they hope that it can reveal the truth to a doubtful public. Tied to the need to authenticate, art is rather hopefully positioned as the means of altering the dehumanizing discourse that sees clones as "shadowy objects in test tubes" (239) rather than autonomous, creative subjects in their own right.

Underlying the discourse of art at Hailsham, then, is a perspective very much like the one we find in Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. In both instances, characters place a great deal of faith in art's ability to reveal the truth. For Brown, the image is a fixed conveyor of meaning; because he implies that there is a right way to read an image, art is depicted as absolute rather than open to interpretation. Thus, just as Teabing suggests that the truth of Christ's lineage is palpably present in *The Last Supper*, those who run Hailsham believe that the final recourse in the question of the clone's humanity lies in art. Unlike *The Da Vinci Code*, however, *Never Let Me Go* traces the failure of the attempt to find meaning in representation. Despite the fact that the attempt is itself systematized in Ishiguro – we find, not individual seekers, but rather entire organized movements devoted to a belief in art's validity – it is destined to disappoint. Hailsham's hope that art can act

as a transcendental signifier of the clone's humanity is slowly dismantled over the course

of the novel; the author at first teases his readers into thinking that art does in fact have a

revelatory role, but it turns out that representation only confuses rather than confirms.

Thus, the seeming alliance between art and truth that is suggested early on is ultimately

denied in the text. Ishiguro foregrounds the delusional persistence of our desire to make

art mean something. One of the problems of the novel is the question of how evidence

can be measured in a medium which is itself representational.

In this respect, let us consider the artistic productions of Tommy, one of

Hailsham's many clones. His drawings are especially interesting as they confuse the

purpose of art as proposed by those who run Hailsham. Where the school authorities

want art to act as a means of validating the clone's humanity, Tommy's art only

problematizes the human/clone distinction. His artworks therefore defy the comfortable

categorization desired by Hailsham, for they at once seem to suggest his status as a clone

as well as his humanity and therefore draw our attention to the impossibility of grounding

meaning in art.

Tommy's drawings consist of what he calls "imaginary animals" (163);

describing these images, Kathy says, "it took a moment to see that they were animals at

all. The first impression was like one you'd get if you took the back off a radio set: tiny

canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive

precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of

armadillo, say, or a bird" (171). These are images that would seem to be analogous to the

clone that produced them: both are representations that approximate living beings, and

like the clones, these imaginary animals are liminal figures, straddling the categories of

nature and the machine. Tommy's drawings depict creatures that are objectified to the point of internal transparency – the intensely detailed interior of the animal is externalized and compartmentalized so that one's eyes are first drawn to the particularities of the beast at the expense of the beast itself. Somewhat suitably, this objectification of the creature mechanizes it, as demonstrated by Kathy's focus on the image's "busy, metallic features" (172). Only after one's eyes pan out of this limiting focus can one recognize the animal itself. These drawings therefore depict the living being as metallic object, the kind that can be ransacked for spare parts.

Tommy would seem, then, to produce pictures that mirror his own condition as a clone. What is interesting, however, is that the text suggests that these drawings are indicative of the clone's subjecthood. Because Tommy's art reveals a degree of self-awareness, it implies that a conscious subject is behind its creation. His drawings signify innovation and originality; these imaginary animals are not pure copies of things existing in external reality; rather, they are thoughtful inventions that imply creativity springing from a free-thinking subject. Moreover, the novel links these images to Tommy's seemingly human capacity to feel compassion. There is "something sweet, even vulnerable about each" of the drawn animals, we are told, and in their creation, Tommy worries about the practical issues that will affect them, such as "how they'd protect themselves or be able to reach and fetch things" (172). Just as empathy is the defining human feature in Dick, here the compassion the clone expresses in his art seems to suggest his humanity.

However, Tommy's art notably shifts in the course of the novel. Where Miss Emily might read his early art as a sign of his soul, Kathy reads his later drawings as

indicative of his inauthenticity. An adult Tommy shows Kathy a series of his more recent

sketches depicting "a kind of frog – except with a long tail as though a part of it had

stayed a tadpole.At least that's what it looked like when you held it away from you.

Close up, each sketch was a mass of minute detail, much like"his earlier drawings

(220).[26] Despite their similarity to his older images, however, Kathy notices that there is

something different about these drawings. She says, "It came to me that Tommy's

drawings weren't as fresh now…something was definitely gone, and they looked

laboured, almost like they'd been copied" (221). These images come to confirm his

legacy as a copy. Kathy sees in the drawings Tommy's heritage of endless imitation and

performance. For her, the imaginary animals ironically demonstrate Tommy's status as a

clone.[27]

The importance of this scenario is twofold. Firstly, rather than solve the issue of

the clone's humanity, art is a trope that reinscribes the ontological problems of the text.

The conflicting interpretations of art objects in *Never Let Me Go*, demonstrate that art is

not a fixed site of meaning. To both Miss Emily and Tommy, the clones' artistic

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[26] The kind of frog that Tommy depicts here is notably interstitial: it occupies what is known as the "metamorphic" stage of the creature's development (being between the tadpole and the fully-fledged frog). In this respect, the image recalls Munch's *Puberty*, which Luft contemplates in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*. Munch paints a girl in the stage between childhood and adulthood. In both instances, then, we find that human simulations are drawn to depictions of symbolic *development* which they are themselves denied as constructed artefacts. These art objects therefore demonstrate their desire for an unattainable ontology.

[27] The clones become progressively more performative over the course of the novel. Segregated from human society, they are taught to approximate human behavior at Hailsham, but when they graduated to the Cottages, this practice becomes sustained. Here, severed from the guidance of their guardians and exposed to the outside world for the first time, the clones cling to the comfort of social scripts. Rather than mingle with humans, many of them choose to remain on the compound and therefore internalize the only models of humanness available to them: representations in books, films, and most especially television shows. Kathy, for instance, notices that their romantic behaviour duplicates those of television characters. Everything from the way the couples "gestured to each other, sat together on sofas, even the way they argued and stormed out of rooms" (110) is modeled upon the overwrought behaviour of sitcom characters. Thus, they ironically strive for authenticity through the performance of inauthentic representations.

productions offer evidence of human souls. In looking at these artworks, Kathy, on the

other hand, seems to find evidence of the clone's unnatural heritage. These contrary

readings foreground the problem of placing art as site of evidence. Where Brown

emphasizes the fixity of art, Ishiguro's focus is on the infinite interpretability of the art

object.

Miss Emily's faith in the revelatory power of art is shattered when the clones'

creations fail to achieve her intended goal. The general public finds no traces of the

human subject or soul in these art objects. Consequently, the pro-clone movement

dissipates, Hailsham is obliged to close, and the clones are moved "back in the shadows"

of cultural consciousness (242). But if art fails to prove their humanity, as Miss Emily

hopes, neither does it provide evidence of their scientific lineage, as Kathy suggests.

Tommy's pictures might be taken as a metaphor for the clone, but they do not prove

anything about his origins. Thus, Miss Emily's and Kathy's competing aesthetic

interpretations demonstrate the impossibility of reading both the art object and the clone

in terms of absolutes. Hailsham's students, like the works of art they produce, resist any

totalized or monolithic reading. Art, then, recasts in microcosm the larger issues of the

novel.

Secondly, Tommy's artistic productions demonstrate once more the insistent drive

to ground oneself in art. However, that Tommy is a clone who seeks to perform his

subjecthood through the creation and contemplation of art objects serves to emphasize the

importance of his failure. As a human simulation struggling for self-definition, he

epitomizes the instability of postmodern identities; in him, the issues surrounding the

spy's provisional and performative identity are magnified. Thus, the human imitation

encapsulates the ontological uncertainties of postmodern subjecthood. That the clone

should seek himself in art is therefore symbolic; his failure is a reflection of our own and

a reminder of the ultimate impossibility of such a project.

With this in mind, it is important to note that Tommy's later artworks are

motivated by his desire to authenticate himself. Believing that art reveals what one is like

on the inside, Tommy thinks that he can prove his love for another – and therefore defer

his donations – on the basis of his drawings. Like Miss Emily, he hopes that art can

provide a window into the clone's most deeply held feelings, thereby revealing one's

subjecthood. What is remarkable about this scenario is that Tommy's behavior recalls

that of Tina's owner, who, in *A Perfect Fake*, photographs his doll in order to confer

subjecthood upon her. Here, however, it is the human imitation – the symbolic doll –

who performs this action himself. He similarly attempts to read himself as a subject by

creating art that he believes will confirm his identity. Of course, in the postmodern world

of *Never Let Me Go*, this attempt does not work. What is foregrounded is the

impossibility of rooting one's ontology in an art that is fundamentally unstable and open

to interpretation. Humans, as we have seen in the course of this dissertation, have failed

at the same task, but that the clone should try to do so speaks to the dogged desire to

ascribe meaning to art. Yet, if it has no fixed meaning, how can it tell us who we are,

regardless of what we might be and how desperately we want it to speak to us?

CONCLUSION

If you were in a burning house and there was a cat and a Rembrandt, what would you save? The cat…you would save the cat, because the cat is alive. The art is dead. It's just paint on a canvas, ink on a page.
– Northern Exposure

The epithet for our times…is not the modernist saying, "things fall apart," but an even more ominous slogan: "things come alive." Artists…have always been united in the imitation of life, the production of images…that have, as we say, "lives of their own."
– W.J.T. Mitchell

The texts and artefacts that I have considered here engage with characters and people who come together through their common preoccupation with an incessant desire for certainty in art. Typically, this desire is represented as a means of coping with the chaos of a decentered postmodern world, or, more specifically, of dealing with the unnerving fluidity of subjectivity. Moreover, what these works make clear is that to reflect upon art is ultimately to reflect upon subjectivity. Again and again, fragmented subjects position art as the thing that can potentially allow them to revisit the Cartesian model of selfhood. By reinscribing what these figures see as a stable relationship between a transparent art object and a unified beholding subject, they can substantiate the self through art. Of course, what I have traced in my dissertation is the futility of this effort. In the works I have examined, art is epistemologically uncertain, and the longed-for promise of cohesive artistic meaning gives way in these postmodern texts to the contingent, the provisional, and the vexed. However, it is important to note that the issues that I have examined here are by no means limited to postmodernism. Admittedly, this concern regarding the intersection of aesthetics and subjectivity is a common question in much of Western history; my focus, however, is on creating a critical vocabulary for the issue as it is articulated through postmodernism. Moreover, as we move more deeply into our

owntechnological age, such questions continue to fascinate and trouble us. What we notice, then, is that the intersection of art and self is part of a far wider cultural preoccupation.

In the final pages of this dissertation, I would like to return to two figures that I discussed in my introduction: one, a painted lady, and the other, an artist. Together, *Mona Lisa* and Robert Rauschenberg would seem to encapsulate the poles of the art world; Leonardo's lady is often considered an exemplar of traditional realistic portraiture where Rauschenberg's work is characterized by his postmodern experimentation. Despite their marked differences, however, both *Mona Lisa* and Rauschenberg's work equally serve as stark reminders of the inability to make art mean one thing. We see evidence of this idea in Robert Hughes's 2008 award-winning polemical documentary, *The Mona Lisa Curse*. Here, an aging Hughes contemplates with disgust the increasing commercialization of the art world in the past fifty years. Now informed by market culture more than anything else, artworks have become investments subject to bidding wars and fetching multi-million dollar price tags. This unpalatable marriage of commerce and creation, Hughes claims, has inherently changed art itself, influencing its conception, production, consumption, sale, and exhibition. Within this shifting structure of the art world, *Mona Lisa* and Rauschenberg occupy spaces of symbolic importance.

For Hughes, the event that marked the beginning of this downward spiral was the 1963 exhibition of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* in America. Making her first trip abroad, the painted lady was packed into a first-class suite on an ocean-liner so that international audiences could line up in droves to catch a glimpse of her. Transformed into a celebrity, *Mona Lisa* did not attract viewers based upon their desire to appreciate Leonardo's

artistic merits. Hughes explains that "They did not come to look at the *Mona Lisa*. They came in order to have seen it" (*Mona*). As Sassoon puts it, "In just over six weeks 1,751,521 people had lined up to contemplate *La Joconde* for thirty seconds or so. (The *New Yorker* said it only took four seconds.)" ("Best-Known" 15).The Renaissance masterpiece, Hughes laments, was transformed into little more than an image in a magazine, "to be quickly scanned and then discarded" (*Mona*). Though *Mona Lisa* was already a wildly popular icon, Hughes argues that the level of mass image consumption at the exhibition marked a distinct change in the way we see art. The exhibit "created new expectations about art," he says; it heralded a belief in art as a commercial enterprise whereby market value replaces aesthetic value. Left in its wake was the world of Andy Warhol and his dry, repetitious productions. Warhol became a "dull celebrity businessman branded to the hairline," and though he had a considerable influence on the media, Hughes says, he did not have much to contribute to the art of painting. Recall that, in my introduction to this dissertation, Jameson attacks Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* in fairly similar terms. For Jameson, the image is representative of a depthless, commodified, and superficial art form, one that does not speak directly to its viewer. Despite his pointed critique of Warhol, Jameson's formulation of the concept of "depthlessness" does inadvertently frame the painter's work as typically/distinctly postmodern. In effect, although Jameson may prefer the work of Van Gogh, Warhol's art is somewhat more in keeping with the contemporary aesthetic. Still, Jameson may agree with Hughes' claims in *The Mona Lisa Curse* that Warhol "had nothing to say."

If *Mona Lisa*'s first overseas excursion marked the beginning of this downward slide, then, for Hughes, the event that threatened to turn the slide into a roaring flood was

the death of Robert Rauschenberg in 2008, which marked the end of an art born of experience rather than of market concerns. Hughes locates in Rauschenberg a figure who blew open the boundaries of form and content which post-war American artists had inherited from Europe. Rauschenberg demonstrated an intelligent response to mass culture, using silkscreens "to excavate a huge range of images from the world, to create a new kind of history painting on a panoramic scale" (*Mona*). For Hughes, this is art that deals with the questions "Why am I here? What am I doing here?" This is art that is not only unswayed by market considerations, but art that is dense with meaning and purpose.

It is worth noting here that in his discussion of Rauschenberg's work in my introduction, Craig Owens's approach differs somewhat from that of Hughes. Owens characterizes the artist's work according to its deliberate refusal to submit to meaning. These are works that undermine the principle of heterogeneity, offering in its place the impossibility of a reading. For Owens, "All attempts to decipher [Rauschenberg's] works testify only to their own failure, for the fragmentary, piecemeal combination of images that initially impels reading is also what blocks it, erects an impenetrable barrier to its course" ("Allegorical" 225).

What is clear here is that art is not a fixed site of meaning, and these contrary interpretations of Rauschenberg's work point to the impossibility of locating a fixed meaning in an art object. Where Owens sees in the artist's work the impossibility of meaning, Hughes reads a density of meaning. For the latter, Rauschenberg represents the last bastion of an art unpolluted by the market – an art that is purer and truer than what came after it. Despite the importance of these contradictory readings, what strikes me most about Hughes's construction of both Rauschenberg and art in general is this

insistence on art's meaning and purpose. Indeed, *The Mona Lisa Curse* is very much the

critic's lamentation for an art now lost, his nostalgia for a more traditional

representational mode. "Art," Hughes argues, "should make us feel more clearly and

more intelligently. It should give us coherent sensations which otherwise we would not

have had." For Hughes, it is this capacity to evoke feelings and sensations that is being

killed by market culture. The intense commercialization of art "has changed art's

relationship to the world and is drowning its sense of purpose." Of course, underlying

these claims is not only the belief that art should have purpose, but also the notion that it

once did. Hughes's closing condemnation takes matters further:

> If art can't tell us about the world we live in, then I don't believe there's
>
> much point in having it. And that is something we are going to have to
>
> face more and more as the years go on – that nasty question which never
>
> used to be asked because the assumption was always that it was answered
>
> long ago: what good is art? What use is art? What does it do? Is what it
>
> does actually worth doing? And an art which is completely monetized in
>
> the way that it's getting these days is going to have to answer these
>
> questions or it's going to die. (*Mona*)

What we find in Hughes is the pain of consciousness: looking at the world of

contemporary art, he sees representations that have no meaning or purpose. His nostalgia

for a more traditional construction of the art object is not unlike that of the characters I

have examined in this dissertation. Freddie and Maskell seek a similarly wistful mode of

representation; by condemning the commercialized products of the contemporary art

world, Hughes is privileging what he sees as an earlier artistic ideal: purer, truer, and

dense with meaning. His sentiments are in keeping with those expressed by many of the figures I have discussed in this dissertation. However, as we have already seen, this is nostalgia for an ideal that never actually existed.

As I hope to show through my inclusion of *The Mona Lisa Curse*, my study comes at a time when we continue to grapple with the question of art's role in our lives and the part it should play in the process of self-definition. The issues I examine in my dissertation are intrinsically tied to contemporary concerns; indeed, in an age of unparalleled image saturation and technological possibility, these issues are perhaps becoming increasingly important, for, amidst these changes, we continue to place ourselves through art. We turn to art to escape, as Freddie does; we turn to it for salvation, much like Maskell; we turn to it to fulfill and satisfy us, as love-doll owners do; and, as with Hughes, we turn to it in the hope that it will tell us something about ourselves. So prominent is this trope of turning to art that we find it in both fiction and in contemporary culture, and we see it applied to wildly different art forms: from high-brow two-dimensional paintings to low-brow three-dimensional dolls. And yet, ultimately, each of these instances is grounded in the same principle: we look to art to tell us who we are. Hughes's polemic serves as reminder of how entrenched such desires are. However, the art critic would do well to remember Blunt's claim in "A Question of Attribution": "Paintings make no claims…They do not purport to be anything other than paintings. It is we, the beholders, who make claims for them" (342-43).

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VITA

Name:	Selma A. Purac

Post-Secondary Education and Degrees:

The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2001-2006; 2011 Ph.D. Candidate (English)

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
1999-2000 M.A. (English)

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada
1995-1999 B.A. (English and Psychology)

Selected Honours and Awards:

Nominee, Award of Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching
Bank of Nova Scotia, UWO Alumni Association, and the
University Students' Council
2006, 2009, 2011

Nominee, FIMS Dean's Award for Excellence in
Undergraduate Teaching, UWO
2010

UWO SOGS Graduate Student Teaching Award
2002, 2003, 2004, 2005 Nominee
2004 Recipient

Special University Scholarship
The University of Western Ontario
2002-2005

Selected Work Experience:

MIT Department, Lecturer and Course Designer
The University of Western Ontario
2005-2011

Writing Program, Instructor
The University of Western Ontario
2005-2010

English Department, Teaching Assistant
The University of Western Ontario
2001-2005