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Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**BEYOND THE PERCEPTUAL MODEL:  
TOWARD A PROPRIOCEPTIVE POETICS**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

**Eireene Nealand**

June 2014

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## **ABSTRACT:**

In a 1965 manifesto called “Proprioception” Charles Olson, the poet often known as the father of the American avant-garde, suggests that poets wanting to implement their open verse poetics explore a physiological faculty associated with the way we experience motion, texture, and shifts. This dissertation attempts to do so.

Distinguishing between artworks associated with a perceptual model of the senses and those associated with a proprioceptive one, I show that a proprioceptive approach can be helpfully explored through a look at the work of Marcel Duchamp, who is best known for his anti-representational approach to art, one which includes the spectator as a part of the canvas. Using the example of spectator experience of a pointillist painting by Georges Seurat in which differently colored dots reach each of our eyes at different times, I show that juxtaposition-based art allows viewers to navigate the painting using proprioceptive coordinative mechanisms to apprehend texture, seeing colors that are neither on the canvas nor in our eyes.

The coordinative process, I show through a reading of the work of Jean Genet, involves not just textures associated with physical stimuli but also with memories and expectations. Here, I introduce the idea of modality showing how we can navigate multiple literary senses, developing a figural awareness of patterns across scenes using proprioception to apprehend narratives that do not depend on totalizing wholes. Like the court cases that I take as a model for Genet’s recursive narrative, I show we can in fact navigate contradictions using an adaptive approach to narrative based on homeostasis that allows our ideas to be co-created by the scenes we seek to understand.

In my third chapter I come back to the question of “projection” in Olson’s projective verse. A consideration of the development of new senses, figural patterns, and all of these artworks together points us to a poetics that is open in the sense that it is deliberately full of juxtapositions, and gaps and contradictions; rather than producing skepticism, however, these juxtapositions draw the audiences in and produce a flexible coherence dependent on balance and open relations.

I conclude by explaining why proprioceptive poetics offers a step beyond post-modernism, showing the particular type of coherence to be gained through its tension-based approach to poetics.

for Les  
who wrote this book with me

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## Introduction: Towards A Proprioceptive Poetics

“Better to be a bird...they kept moving  
their heads so nervously to stay alive, to  
keep alerted to what they were  
surrounded by.”

--Charles Olson

Introducing proprioception in conjunction with the “open poetics” that he ushered in along with the term postmodernism, Charles Olson, who some call the founder of American avant-garde poetics, wrote about a “sensibility within the organism” that works “by movement of its own tissues” using “organs [that] lie in the muscles, tendons, joints,” which “are stimulated by bodily tensions (--or relaxations of the same)” (*Collected* “Proprioception” 181).<sup>1</sup> At the time of his 1965 manifesto, few in literary communities had ever heard of proprioception, a coordinative perceptual faculty that allows humans to navigate textures, movements and shifts. Even now, nearly fifty years later, when scholars have increasingly begun to look to a ‘somatic,’ ‘haptic,’ or ‘kinesthetic’ body knowledge as an important source of understanding, mentioning the physiological faculty more readily calls up images of physical-therapy balance boards and drunk-driving tests than literature.

Olson’s claims about the aesthetic shift made possible by the physiological faculty, however, were sweeping. Writing at a time when poets focused on objective correlatives and strictly metered forms, he asserted in his 1950 manifesto “Projective Verse” that, by paying attention to tensions and releases, he could produce

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Olson did not invent the term “postmodern” but in poetics communities of his times, he was



a poetry that cohered without recourse to traditional rhyme schemes, meters, or inherited forms (*Collected* “Projective Verse” 239).<sup>2</sup> Through his proprioceptive method “the egotistical sublime” or lyric “I” upon which traditional poetry depended fell away, as did the lyric tradition’s understanding of poetry as gathering point for descriptions of disparate sensations tied together by the subject in brief epigrammatic epiphanies (*Collected* “Projective Verse” 239; Lindley 3). In place of traditional poetic practices for unifying discrete sensations, he claimed, proprioceptive poetry produces a form of coherence where the only thing holding the poem together is its existence as a field:

where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other...[since] every element in an open poem (the syllable, the line, as well as the image, the sound, the senses) must be...seen as creating the tensions of a poem... [and] treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside. (*Collected* “Projective Verse” 243)

His proprioceptive poetry, in other words, uses juxtapositions of syllables, lines, images and, famously, the back and forth motions of the breath, to produce coherences that, far from being imposed upon their contents, arose as the very tissues and muscles of which the sensations of the poem were made. All this Olson summed up in what are his most famous lines from “Projective Verse” where he enjoins poets to compose their poems through:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE  
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE (*Collected* 242)

In pointing especially to the breath he addresses both tensions and releases and a sense of intake and discharge in the action of the poem, which is meant to always be

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<sup>2</sup> I am here thinking of Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, and TS Elliot, all of whom dominated the poetry scene in terms of readings and prizes. Other poets, such as Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen and Gertrude Stein were also writing during Olson’s lifetime, however.

adapting to what is pulled in, or expelled.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike traditional poetry, Olson's open verse is transitive. That is, it is always opening out onto something else. As such, it does "not seek to describe, but to enact" (*Collected* "Human Universe" 61). In this, the poet and reader are unseated from their usual roles. As carriers of culture, they (and poems, themselves) are little more than an "intermediary, the intervening thing, the inter-ruptor, the resistor" through which cultural forces embedded in them were to be referred to one another through the dynamic rebalancing—of forces within and beyond the poem—that is induced by the poem's juxtapositional field (*Collected* "Human Universe" 61; *Collected* "Proprioception" 182).

### **Past Partial Implementations of Olson's Poetics**

These are large claims. Olson's manifesto calls for nothing less than a simultaneous reconfiguration of epistemological, ontological, subject, object, and identity configurations associated with traditional poetry. No surprise, then, that Olson would have presented his findings as a manifesto, indicating a discovery rather than a *fait accompli*. The idea of the "open field" verse was hugely influential. William Carlos Williams republished a portion of "Projective Verse," in his 1951 *Autobiography*, and Donald Allen used "Projective Verse" to open the poetics section of *The New American Poetry* (1960), which included writings from what many have

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<sup>3</sup> The association between poetry and inspiration, of course, is not new. However, in making the physiology of breathing a part of the poetic, Olson takes the idea of inspiration quite far.

called a “third generation” of modernist poets.<sup>4</sup> As a result, according to the literary historian Libbie Rifkin, “by 1960 [‘Projective Verse’s] call for ‘composition by field’...was generally considered the mantra of the ‘raw’ poets” (140).<sup>5</sup> Mouthing the mantra, of course, is not the same as implementing it, and although “Proprioception” continues to be read in conjunction with “Projective Verse,” most poets and critics read the physiological how-to of “Proprioception,” as a merely curious addendum. As such, Olson’s programme has been implemented only in part.

Even those closest to him were able to adopt it in full. Denise Levertov, who worked with Olson at the Black Mountain School, took to looping larger histories into her lyric, thereby moving beyond the tradition of limiting the lyric to a single epigrammatic instant. Robert Creeley, who studied under Olson and later corresponded with him, adopted juxtaposition in order to create sparse, haiku-like stanzas, using rapid jump cuts to move between lines whose stutters and gaps gave one the feeling that the poem, indeed, was an “inter-rupter” and “resistor.” Both Levertov and Creeley, however, remained tied to a lyric subjectivity: Levertov through her lyric speaker and Creeley through his adherence to an epigrammatic instant.

This was also the case with New York School poets, such as Frank O’Hara, who created sprawling lines using the juxtapositional rhythms of everyday speech. In that O’Hara and other blank verse poets of the times remained tied to an individualistic lyric “I”, they also continued to use a lyric expressive modality whereby the poem’s

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<sup>4</sup> Those represented were grouped into five categories, which roughly correspond to Black Mountain poets, two sets of Beat Poets, New York School poets, and those associated with the San Francisco Renaissance. Such classifications are fluid, but the fact that Olson’s manifesto was thought to speak to so many schools is a testament to the importance all placed on the problem of moving beyond traditional forms.

<sup>5</sup> These raw poets were, presumably the new American avant-garde. A fair sampling of these poets were represented in the anthology, *The New American Poetry*.

coherence depends on a stable subject capable of stringing together discrete observations in a manner that does not recognize the poet's (or language's) intervention in the external environment. As a result, it was not until Language Poets such as Lyn Hejinian, Rae Armantrout, and Michael Palmer allowed architectonics, such as grammar, to override the coherence associated with conscious comprehension that poetry began to approximate something like Olson's field.<sup>6</sup>

Lyn Hejinian's essay, "The Rejection of Closure," indeed, expresses a desire for something akin to Olson's open verse poetics. Calling for an "open text" with a "vertical intensity" and "horizontal extensivity" where "ideas cross the landscape and become the horizon and weather)," Hejinian, like Olson, proposes to replace the lyric subject with a field of forces (*Inquiry* 44). Like Olson, she mentions "complex forms of juxtaposition" associated with "di-verse, particular, and contradictory elements" (44). She also accounts for multi-directional pulls and attempts to account for motion (42). She even includes a similar discussion of coherence when she writes that her poetic might "prevent the work from disintegrating into its separate parts—scattering sentence-rubble haphazardly on the waste heap" (44). Finally, like Olson, she suggests that the "I" should not serve as the center of gravity, but that "psychology is generated" through the poem (49).

Hejinian and Olson, then, had similar stances. Yet Hejinian's manifesto is more "Projective Verse" than "Proprioception." In that she and other Language poets' poetics were tied to a play mainly with grammar and syntax on a literal level—through words laid out on pages—a transformational physiological address was not an explicit

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Palmer is often associated with Language Poetry, but he frequently differentiates himself from this movement by stating that he is less systematic (Poetry Foundation "Michael Palmer"). Among his other influences were Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley. He met both in the early sixties (Poetry Foundation "Michael Palmer").

part of the poetic.<sup>7</sup>

To my knowledge, only one poet of Olson's time managed to explicitly produce the full physiological effect Olson called for in "Proprioception." That poet is Robert Duncan, who in 1960 published *The Opening of the Field* (1960). The work's easy movement between pictures and words, its play with law, and mix of mythology and mysticism remakes the very sensorium of the reader enough to produce a flexible field.<sup>8</sup> Proclaiming that lines "may be tense or relaxed as the mind moves," and that an organically built poem would not depend on a prescribed scheme but would seek "release from such perfections [growing] as living forms do," Duncan appeared to adopt Olson's teachings completely, or at least to come to a position that added Olson's teachings to his own poetic research (*Open Universe* 145; *Coyote's* 13). As yet, however, neither Duncan's work nor Olson's have been discussed in physiological terms.

Caught up in analyzing poems for their meaning, discussing individual techniques used to create an effect, or tracing out biographies and processes that gave rise to individual works of art, analysts have focused on linking Duncan's work with Ezra Pound, or tracing the effects of Olson's interest in Alfred Lord North Whitehead or pointing out similarities between Olson's field theory and Albert Einstein's

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<sup>7</sup> There are, of course, some exceptions. Leslie Scalapino's numerous dance works, among them *Flow-Winged Crocodile* and *The Tango* might easily also be included. In addition, Carla Harryman performed multiple theatrical pieces, and doubtless there were others. Poet's theatre was also developed in part with help from the Language Poets.

<sup>8</sup> I am exaggerating a bit here. Arguably Beat poets, such as Allen Ginsberg, Diane Di Prima and Bob Kaufman, also produced poetic fields through their ritualistic performances of poems like Ginsberg's "Howl" and Di Prima's "Revolutionary Letter 14," or Kaufman's "Believe, Believe." Doubtless I could find others. However, Duncan's work is much more specifically associated with Olson's poetics in that it uses language from projective verse and appears to be directly derived from Olson's teachings. Further, these works, like Olson's and Duncan's, have also yet to be analyzed in physiological terms.

(Cooley 66; Maud 43).<sup>9</sup> As a result, Olson's and Duncan's disjunctive works are frequently said to cohere only by means of a vague, mystical religious made possible by the poet's authorial experiences (Aiken 26; Moebius 18; Cooley 66; Finkelstein 342). While Pound is doubtless an important source for Duncan, and Pound, Williams, Whitehead, and Einstein important for Olson, Olson's point in "Proprioception" is that in order to accomplish the full scale epistemological, ontological, eidetic and aesthetic shifts he proposes in his early manifesto poets will have to reconsider not only knowledge or objects, identities or meanings, but the very physiologies of which we are made.

This dissertation, in its own manifesto-like way, is an attempt to do so.

### **Proprioception as Understood by Physiologists**

At the time he wrote "Proprioception," Olson was likely to have been reading a 1906 scientific work, *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System*, by the physiologist Sir Charles Scott Sherrington who generated the term "proprioception" in order to point to a type of apprehension held in the opposed movements of paired muscles, in the stretching of tissues, and in the press of one organ upon another (130).<sup>10</sup> Sherrington literally studied reflexes, specifically, the scratch response in dogs. The etymology of his term for the faculty combines the Greek roots 'ception' (taking) and 'proprius' (one's own) in order to point to the reflexive nature of the

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<sup>9</sup> Both claims can be substantiated. Einstein lectured at the Black Mountain School Olson explicitly mentions Einstein's writing in his letters and Whitehead in both letters and lectures. As my dissertation will explain Olson added something important to the work done by both of these thinkers by exploring the physiological and poetic problems to be associated with the field of Einstein's field equations and movements of Whitehead's process philosophy.

<sup>10</sup> While there is no proof that Olson read this work and not some other, Sherrington's work was among the few available. Further, Sherrington's terminology is used in Olson's "Proprioception."

double-sourced pull that creates tension (OED “proprioception”). Further, as Sherrington noted, a dog’s movement in response to an itch stimulus is not one movement, but several. Between the application of the stimulus to the paw and the lifting of a leg in response is an adjusting of innards, a turning of the head and tucking of the tail. Interested in all that occurs in the delay between stimulus and response, Sherrington uses the idea of proprioception to address the many expansions and contractions of multiple muscles and tissues, pulling against one another according to various feedback loops and micro-adjustments needed in order to maintain the body’s balance (130).

Current-day physiologists have located actual proprioceptors in the joints, tendons, ligaments, tissues, and skin as well as in the fluid of the inner ear, the miniature hairs that line the muscles, the pineal gland, the spinal cord, and the subcortical neurons, packed beneath the folds of the brain. However, as Alain Berthoz explains in *The Brain’s Sense of Movement*, proprioception cannot be located in any one place (Montero 231; Berthoz 5; Damasio 5). Although Sherrington differentiated proprioceptive tensions from “exteroceptions,” apprehensions associated with the external senses (seeing, hearing, smelling etc.) and “intero-ceptions,” apprehensions derived from the states of one’s internal organs (hunger, kidney pains etc.), according to Berthoz, proprioception necessarily draws on information from the external and internal organs –albeit sometimes indirectly – and activates these organs as well (5).<sup>11</sup>

As such, proprioception is better thought of as a faculty for generating senses than as an organ-based sense in the manner of the five senses. Indeed, according to Berthoz, through proprioception we have not just five senses, but eight or nine, or

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<sup>11</sup> Sherrington casts the skin as a proprioceptor. Moreover, while today we list touch and taste as external senses, for Sherrington, both touch and taste are proprioceptive.

perhaps an infinite number, depending on the ways various organs are deployed and their signals coordinatively combined. Further, when the relative position of limbs and differential tensions produced from inside and outside the body cause proprioceptors to transfer tensions across tissues and muscles the many responses of different bodily systems become integrated. Through stretches and pulls, expansions and contractions the result is that the response is multidimensional with various parts of the body becoming able to distribute information from a single stimulus, or from multiple stimuli (5).

Because proprioception is difficult to define in terms of its location, it can be helpful to think about proprioception in terms of the functions for which it is invoked. After all, as Alva Noë notes in *Action in Perception*, proprioception is not descriptive, but enactive (100). According to Berthoz, it is to be associated with “locomotion, gaze, orientation, control of balance” as well as the apprehension of multi-event phenomena, such as speed, trajectory, volume, texture, distortion and shift. It is also, according to the literary scholar Reuven Tsur, associated with pattern-seeking behavior, especially that which is associated with poetry (4).<sup>12</sup> The philosopher Antonio Damasio, for his part, focuses on integrative tasks that combine senses “in concert across many levels of neuronal organization,” ones which include emotion and other departures from rationality (*Descartes* 6).

Further, in that proprioceptive apprehensions involve letting go of individualized subjectivities in favor of a more dispersed awareness they allow for senses to be produced not just within the body, but between different parts of the body and the environment. Thus, when we think about the development of new senses, we

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<sup>12</sup> Notably, Tsur and Olson disagree about whether proprioception is to be associated with traditional poetry.



should add to the more individual-oriented senses of balance, acceleration, and temperature capabilities associated with what Andy Clarke in *Being There* calls an “embodied embedded” circuit, whereby the body adapts to feedback from the external environment (105). Perhaps the best example of such a circuit is that to be found in Sanford Kwinter’s *Architectures of Time*, where different parts of the body become coordinated with different parts of the environment to create mountain climbers who:

flow up the mountain, flow or tack against the downward gradient of gravity – but also must become hypersensitive tamers and channelers of the gravitational sink, masters at storing it in their muscles or making it flow through certain parts of the pelvis, thighs, palms, and this only at certain times; they must know how to accelerate the flow into a quick transfer that could mean the difference between triumph and disaster, to mix and remix dynamic and static elements in endless variation – for it is not enough to prevail against gravity but rather to be able to make it stream continuously through one, and especially to be able to generalize this knowledge to every part of the body without allowing it to regroup at any time...as a spatialized figure in the head. (29–30)

Synchronization – a sense of timing – is an important part of creating of new senses. These senses, moreover, are not just created for the purpose of looking, but also for acting. Indeed, Vinciane Despret’s article “From Secret Agents to Interagency” provides a story about how new senses can be created through new “agencements,” or capabilities “induced, mobilized,...put in motion...[and] activated” by “a rapport of forces” produced not just with landscapes but also with other living creatures, who show us which questions we ought to ask and how we ought to ask them in order to afford them interesting responses (16, 41, 38).

Not that proprioception is to be associated with just any process or any art. In that it is primarily invoked through dynamic imbalances – that is, through juxtapositions – it is a sense especially designed to address heterogeneity and multi-

dimensionality, namely that which cannot be apprehended through closed structures, top-down conceptualizations, or totalizing meanings. As such, we can also imagine that proprioception might be implicated in Donna Haraway's project of developing new "respons-abilities" (89). Through the production of "practices and imaginative politics of the sort that rearticulates the relations of minds and bodies" the integrated action of the external senses, intellect, imagination, memory and desire are all called for by a proprioceptive response (89).

Indeed, as Berthoz explains, using the example of a ski champion who must coordinate many limbs and many degrees of freedom too quickly for all sensors to be checked at once, proprioception involves a great deal of simulative modeling (*Motion* 5). Instead of collecting full sensory information, we frequently draw upon past experiences or projective desires to make assumptions about what our sensory experiences are likely to be (*Simplicity* xi). Through our simulative projections we learn how and where to look. We also speed up the decision-making process, acting not just according to what is actually there, but also according to what we remember and desire. In its mixing of past experiences with present ones, moreover, proprioception is adaptive. It allows us to check generalizable ideas against information supplied by local conditions and to update our understandings as we go.

Further, in that it is addressed to gaps, as Nigel Thrift explains in *Non-Representational Theory*, proprioception allows us to apprehend invisible possibilities – ones held in differentials and derivatives – that are concretely apprehensible only through comparisons and projections (166). Moreover, it is important to say that the senses we develop are not passive or pictorial. As Sherrington could have told us, in the delay between the stimulus and response of the stimulus-response model, what is

required is not a representation. Rather, the tissues and muscles act directly, coordinating responses through integrative micro-movements that result in actions, not descriptions.

### **A Need For New Senses**

Because we invent coordinations productive of actions as we go, it's no surprise Berthoz, Noë and others suggest that the integrative work of proprioception is artistic (*Movement* 135; *Action* 176). Yet, outside of dance, where the opportunities for exploring a relationship with proprioception through physical tensions in tissues and muscles is most obvious, little has been done to explore art's potential role. This is true despite several recent works by literary and cultural critics that point to the need for humans to take a more active role in creating new senses. Take, for example, Fredric Jameson's call in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* to use changing social and economic conditions "as...an imperative to grow new organs, to expand our sensorium and our body to some new, as yet unimaginable, perhaps ultimately impossible, dimensions" (*Cultural Logic* 399). Vinciane Despret's pointing out of an ethical need to pay attention to "tact" – that is, touch – as a means to create "talented bodies [that] have the power to distribute...tension...to sustain it long enough to relax it at the right moment" (*Care* 114). Gilles Deleuze, likewise, in *The Fold*, calls for us to develop "new cerebral pathways, new ways of thinking, aren't explicable in terms of microsurgery" (5).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, early work connecting proprioception and dance

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<sup>13</sup> His argument for why we ought to take a physiological approach is worth looking at. The brain, he claims, "doesn't have the drawback, like...other... disciplines [specifically, he mentions psychoanalysis and linguistics] of drawing on ready-made concepts" (*Negotiations* 60). He says brain here, but he might just as easily said body, since what he was interested in was in what circuits could be traced out in what he saw as "a relatively undifferentiated mass" that he associated with physiology (*Fold* 5)

points to opportunities for creating exactly the kind of senses these theorists describe.

Within the field of dance critics are prone to use terms like “thick knowledge” and to write of what can be translated from one body to another using mirror neurons (Franco 4; Samudra 666). Further, what is apprehended is associated with “relinguaging” transferences said to occur “without necessarily encoding the meaning of one’s actions in words” (Franco 4; Samudra 666).<sup>14</sup> Olson, himself, wrote at least one dance piece and several plays.<sup>15</sup>

However, Olson’s manifesto suggests that work with language –specifically poetry – offers an access to multidimensionality that dance alone may not be able to provide. For him language is a sensory trigger that physically acts on bodies whose materialities include their imaginations and desires. In syllables and rhythms and words, there are also cultural phenomena – histories that circulate in language and through bodies, positioning and embedding them in ways that go beyond the physicality of dance. Indeed, multiple literary senses, which indicate multiple possible stances towards materialities are necessary to take full advantage of the proprioceptive poetic. Finally, as Olson seemed to recognize, language’s ability to depart from and even contradict the information we receive through our external senses, allows us to move beyond literal sensory presences in order to “see” far beyond what is actually present.

## **Chapter 1: Remaking the Perceptual Model: A Physiological Approach To Marcel Duchamp’s Conceptual Art**

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<sup>14</sup> Work has also been done in connecting proprioception and video games, and proprioception and with cinema (Beller 189-192).

<sup>15</sup> *The Fiery Hunt*, a danced dramatization of Moby Dick, was, according to George Buttering’s introduction, written in April and May of 1948 (xiii). It was not published until 1977, when it came out in conjunction with several other scripts for performances works.

While it may at first seem odd to begin a discussion of poetics in the discipline of art history, I do so in good part because art history has, traditionally, been a place where the connections between physiology, epistemology and ontology have been most explicitly examined. Specifically, I use a critique of a Renaissance aesthetic of realism to excavate assumptions lurking in the five senses (perceptual) model, upon which the idea of the lyric subject depends. Using Erwin Panofsky and Jonathan's Crary's historical work exploring the conditions of possibility for a physiological imaginary that describes the external senses as passive receptors of mimetic pictures, I show that such a model, associated with the camera obscura and Renaissance three-point perspective, depends on the fiction of a stationary observer. Further, in the case of vision, I show that such a model requires a construction of space as a homogenous container of objects, which are to be measured and related by means of a unified horizon and set vanishing point.

Herein, I believe lies the root of Olson's objection to traditional form, since such a spatial imaginary can be shown to cut the spectator off from the work of the imagination and memory, which had previously served to provide the connective tissues out of which earlier pictures were made. However, as the conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp would show, in drawing upon the works of the pointillist painter Georges Seurat, a proprioceptive approach to vision returns to the spectator many of the functions that had been taken over by the standardized Renaissance spatiality. Specifically, Seurat's pointillist technique uses juxtaposed dots in contrasting colors to create pictures that depend on the fact that different colors reach each of the spectator's eyes at slightly different times. As a result of the slight offset spectators

blur the colors, producing depth effects and experiences of color that exist neither on the canvas nor in the eye (Washburn 200-201).<sup>16</sup> Moreover, because seen colors and depths differ as the spectator moves about the painting, the experience of the picture tells the spectator as much about where she is in relation to the picture as about the picture itself. In this, the spectator becomes the canvas upon which the painting is made.<sup>17</sup> Further, unlike what was the case in the Renaissance, the spectator is understood as someone who moves about the picture navigating different possible views through the various coordinations she makes of the slightly different signals received by each of her eyes.<sup>18</sup>

Using the example of Seurat to produce an invented spatial concept called the “infra-thin,” that is, a “very, very, very thin,” difference, usefully described by at least one critic as an “infinitesimal difference...that you easily imagine but doesn’t exist,” Duchamp proposes that art’s function is to alert its audiences to perspective-based “elementary parallels” (SS 45; Obalk 1). As examples of these, he suggests the textured traits of the mother and father looked for in the face of a child, the smoke inside and outside of the mouth, and the two sides of the sound made by pant legs brushing against one another (SS 45). This texture-based approach to spatiality, added a play between sensory data and the imagination. Allowing a flexible spatiality to be created by viewers, who in texturing differently-sourced information created their own spatialities.

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<sup>16</sup> This technique is now widely used, for example, in the creation of pixelated screens. At the time, however, such a technique was seen as a nearly mystical invention. See Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger’s comments in *On Cubism* about Cezanne, who used a similar technique.

<sup>17</sup> Or in Olson’s terminology an “intermediary.”

<sup>18</sup> Duchamp was, of course, writing before the discovery of individual proprioceptors, distributed throughout the body, he associated these projective effects with the “grey matter” and the “the brain.” It’s for this reason that his work is called ‘conceptual.’ The coordinative and projective work carried out, however, is the same as that which physiologists now call proprioceptive.

Duchamp's explorations of spatiality, moreover, helped him invent an ontology based on "givens" and "possibilities" which were then combined by the viewer to set this or that detail in relief without help from a standardizing horizon line or vanishing point. Indeed, Duchamp eventually eliminated standardized backgrounds from his pictures altogether, sometimes by painting on transparent glass panes and sometimes by layering accenting details onto pictures. In his most famous picture, L.H.O.O.Q., an artwork in which of a mustache added to a postcard of Mona Lisa, Duchamp proclaimed, the mustache made Mona Lisa a man by drawing out the (always possible) masculine features of her face. With such maneuvers, he suggested the ease with which the picture could be transformed through various navigations of possibilities, none of which were inherent in objects. They were always a product of texturing details that drew out these possibilities. Herin was an early recognition of the importance of multi-dimensionality for seeing.

An equally important insight was to be found in Duchamp's work with language. Recognizing that the signals travelling up the optic nerves had to be processed, Duchamp made a further epistemological shift in casting these signals as providing information, but not necessarily information in a pictorial or mimetic form. Such an insight allowed him to place linguistically triggered visualizations on par with visual data. For example, in his famous "ready-made" sculpture, "Fresh Widow," viewers looking at a miniature sculpture of a darkened glass pane are prompted to imagine a number of possible erotically suggestive women as hidden from view. The play between the seen window and the imagined woman produces a friction between the external senses and the imagination that, itself, becomes the work of art. Through such a play with language, Duchamp produced a condition in which a near infinite

number of dimensions could be opened in sensory experience. Again, Olson would have likely approved.

Duchamp's works cannot, of course, be contained within the field of the visual arts. As is hinted at by Duchamp's *The Large Glass*, a sculpture in glass that depicts a series of "bachelor" machines who attempt to communicate with a "bride-cloud" the textured juxtapositions produced within the optical field are meant to produce a movement, not only in the body of a willing spectator, but also in the various not-quite-compatible types of experience the spectator is made to confront.

The role of art, in such a process, I suggest, is best exemplified by a strip-tease dance by Hannah Wilke around *The Large Glass*, where one has ample reason to see why Olson may have cast art as having the role of "inter-ruptor." After all, as Wilke strips on one side of the glass, moving about in her address to the various bachelor figures Duchamp has painted, audience members on the other side of the glass also shift about as they anxiously try to see Wilke in the nude. In this, the art work, no longer gazed at or even used as a clarifying spectacle, becomes an interruptive obstruction that cuts various parts of the environment off from one another and forces them into a reflexive dance.

Such a dance, as Duchamp would show in works like *Fountain*, a famous toilet that, in being placed in a museum, is said to have deconstructed the difference between high and low art, did not just involve physical movements, but also intellectual ones that disrupt the very the conceptual contexts in which the viewing was to occur. Nothing less than ontology, epistemology and the very physiologies of which we are made were shown to be at stake. If Olson said no less, it is my hope that the detour through optics will have demonstrated that his concerns were both visceral



and coordinative. Indeed, as Duchamp's eventual turn to chess-playing shows, a proprioceptive (or coordinative) mixing of signals received through the external senses according to flexibly projective contexts requires that viewers to see not just objects, but transformations and shifts composed of patterns that vary according both to physical and strategic movements. To discuss such a phenomenon, however, one must move beyond the visual arts and into the literary arts, where narratives – and temporal horizons – can be examined.

## **Chapter 2. Adapting To Unstable Horizons: Multidimensional Integration in Jean Genet's *The Maids***

It's narrative, indeed, that I turn to in my second chapter. Here, it may again seem that I am departing from poetry and poetics. However, as Olson's turn from lyric to epic poetry suggests, a proprioceptive poetics must of necessity address the links between the multiple perspectives produced by the mobile observer as she navigates transformations of her view. Duchamp's *Large Glass* and subsequent interest in chess indicates a navigation of something more than shifting pictures. A friction between juxtaposed elements generates a dynamic tension that, itself, produces a series of balancing transformations whose results are worth being traced.

It is not, however, the case that any narrative is able to address these transformations. After all, as Peter Brooks explains, traditional narratives as we know them through eighteenth century realist novels deploy language in a modality of description (326). Readers encountering described details are asked to look beyond these details, distinguishing between plot (*fabula*) and *syuzhet*, by abstracting from details in order to find the rules of each tale (*Plot* 326). Such a practice, as Brooks

notes in *Realist Vision*, is derived from an “empiricist tradition” that, according to Brooks, foregrounds primary qualities in such a way that the reader is thought to use only the external senses in apprehending her environment (87). As such language’s role in presenting details and offering multiple possible stances towards these details is minimized in such models of narrative.

As such, I look to an older form of narrative, associated with court trials, where, in fact, the term narrative has its origins. Court narratives, in contrast to realist narratives, recognize that multiple perspectives and multiple claims as valid (Mäkinen and Pihlajamäki 538). Further, through an implication-based approach to facts they involve a staging of sensory evidence. Through the staging of evidence, court audiences – jurors, judges, lawyers and witnesses among them – are cast as canvasses, whose immersion in a field of multiple testimonies opens a series of tensions between individual stories (Place 1). A series of micro movements and feedback loops are induced in the conditions of possibility for meaning. As the presentation of testimonies and evidence and schematics engage with one another on multiple levels, multiple lines of questioning stitch narratives together across dimensions, producing expansions and contractions in the contextual tissue of the case. Arguably, these expansions and contractions are the events to watch in a proprioceptive narrative. After all, the actions produced by courts occur almost against any one individual’s will. As I show by looking at several writings in legal theory the expansions and contractions of the underlying architectonic functions by expelling elements or drawing them in, thereby producing the transitivity of Olson’s open verse.

A new form of coherence is produced in the process. What governs the movement is not an application of the law to the crime, but rather a dynamic between

what legal scholars called the *actio* and the *exceptio* (Pennington 1). This interplay is designed to produce what the OED calls “the maintenance of a dynamically stable state...by means of an internal regulatory process,” as when as when we sweat or breathe more deeply in order to maintain a constant body temperature despite changes in the weather (OED “homeostasis”). In their efforts to restore a balance, bodies draw in and expel extraneous elements into our out of the surrounding environment. Moreover, in that homeostasis coordinates the actions of multiple systems of the body the manner in which it restores a balance is flexible. After all, a tension resolved in one system can easily irrupt in another, where it appears in a new form.

Using a 1946 play, *The Maids*, by Jean Genet, a French poet, novelist, and playwright who spent seven years in prison and wrote almost exclusively about topics of concern to outcasts and criminals, I show the importance of theatricality for understanding the mechanisms that must be used to approach a proprioceptive narrative. Importantly, the play uses a play-within-a-play to produce a doubled structure of performance, whereby two maids repeatedly dress up as their mistress and perform a ritualistic ceremony designed to produce a state in which they might (symbolically) kill her. The doubled structure, along with a series of what the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre calls a series of “whirligigs” or forced reconsiderations, prompt audience members to develop a multi-dimensional (poetical) interpretive stance by repeatedly forcing them to re-approach way they deploy their initial impressions of the opening scene (8).

In doing so, the characters make use of a construct called “modality” that specifies the grounds as well as the limits of the claims that can be made according to an individual approach. A link is produced between different dimensions of meaning

based on the particularities of the case at hand. For example, when an alarm clock rings, audience members realize that what they thought was a maid and a madame is actually two maids playing the roles. They contextualize their initial understanding, distinguishing between the literal roles of the maids and their theatrically performed roles in the play-within-the-play. As audience members learn to approach sensory data through a shifting set of stances, whereby multiple inferences can be drawn from sensory data, they also adapt their initial stereotypes, even going so far as to create new categories and dimensions of meaning in response to the particular movements of the play. In doing so, they develop new relations between sensory experiences, memories and conceptual understandings.

With both sensory information and conceptual understandings in flux, audience members must use “clues” not typically employed in mysteries to navigate their way through the scenes. That is, they do not just add up sensory cues according to a single logic. Rather, they must also their histories of experience with these sensory objects along with the questions produced by the different modalities associated with them.<sup>19</sup> As they do so they learn to pay attention to shifting configurations of meanings constructed by phrasal and gestural repetitions across scenes. In the multi-modular field of possibilities created through these repetitions each phrase, role, and gesture must be understood, metaphorically, suggestively, and instrumentally. Furthermore, since each new gesture serves as an inflection against several standing assemblages of meaning, “reading” the play invokes a multi-modular field of possibilities whose shape may expand or collapse based on the ways that

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<sup>19</sup> Arguably, any detective might do so, but the play makes the experience of coming to know explicitly historical.

accenting repetitions highlight and actualize particular possibilities or leave them fallow.

While such a stance might initially seem to result in an endless play of variations, Genet's play shows that one can track burgeoning actions by paying attention to homeostatic drives that are seeking to be met through the expansions and contractions induced to satisfy these drives. While it is difficult to predict causes and effects, directly, one can track tendencies and availabilities, keeping track of atmospheres and moods in order to sense whether the timing is right for any one body to be drawn in or discharged. As I show, what one tracks when one does so are adjustments in the architectonic structure that, in the delay induced between stimulus and response, produces the need for individual elements to be expelled in the drive's eventual discharge. Again, a poetical sensibility is needed in order to track this process. However, the poetry required is not traditional verse, but rather the poetry of an open field, since only an open field poetry allows for this experience of the remainder (whether in the form of an excess or lack) to be associated with this discharge.

### **Chapter 3. Creating New Senses: Prose after Cinema in Marguerite Duras' *Truck* and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair***

In my third chapter, as in the previous ones, I make a detour away from what we know as poetry. I do so by using two works, *Truck* and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*, by the French writer, Marguerite Duras, as an occasion to look into the history of prose and cinema. Both works are what Duras calls film-texts, a blend of cinema and prose that she associates with a projective running writing (*écriture courante*) and both

might be associated with what, for reasons I explain in my chapter, might best be called a sense of possibility.

I begin the chapter with a history of what cinema learns from prose and prose learns from cinema. As I explain, using the work of Wlad Godzich, Jeffrey Kittay, prose teaches cinema how to produce fictional points of view in the form of disembodied narrators that process information gathered from elsewhere, which they then make sense of by a series of grammatical rules. Readers and viewers, as I will show, access such material through the simulative capacities associated with proprioception. The process is most visible in prose writing, where the indeterminacy inherent in language draws on audience's memories to produce imaginative visualizations. Guided by grammar, these visualizations do not have to make sense according to the perspective that any one individual might have. Instead, grammatical phrases help readers slip in and out of various points of view through the coordination and manipulation of bits and pieces of sensation and memory.

Cinema, as I explain, borrows prose's capacity for compiling information and presenting it through a fictional narrator's point-of-view. With the help of a shot-based grammar, classical cinema allows its viewers to see things no actual human could see. It, however, replaces prose's visualizations with actual sensory experiences in the form of sound-tracks and images. In doing so it takes over for the work of the imagination and memory, producing a determinate experience of sensations that no actual human eye can see.

Duras' cinema is different however. Her movie, *Truck*, retains the indeterminacy and need for visualizations associated with prose. She does so by juxtaposing her films' narrated text against the visual images presented on screen.

Indeed, even as *Truck*'s audience members watch a truck move across the screen the film's text describes a woman who rides in its passenger seat. Because she is not present in the picture, viewers must visualize her and project her into the seat. With text and images each accessing her film's audiences in a different way, a relationship with the senses that is both active and passive develops. In the visualization procedure, the work of the imagination is enhanced by an opportunity to project images of characters into a sensory (and material) landscape. As such they seem more real and more determinate than images imagined only in the head. Further, in *Truck* Duras ups the vividness of these images by intermittently including sensory images to sample from by means of the external senses. These images, not directly related to the tale being told are of herself and a truck-driver-looking actor who sit not in the truck but in Duras' dining room, where they are shown reading the film's text aloud. As such, viewers must translate the sensory experience from one scene to another, using a combination of memory and afterimage to produce the images they project, whereby they mix their imaginations of the woman in the cab with their recent sensations of Duras, producing a picture that is both their own and almost as vivid as an actual sensory experience.

While the idea of partially projecting the movie one sees might seem impossible, I show that Duras is merely accessing the proprioceptive simulative capacity Berthoz described. Duras' use of this capacity in *Truck*, however, adds to the importance of this capacity's practical and political use. By engaging with proprioception to create a loop through memory and the imagination as a part of the work of the external senses, she allows her viewers to apprehend both materialities and concretely placed potentials.

Such a projective capacity, Duras shows in her later book, *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*, is not limited to cinema or to visual landscapes. While distinctions between prose and cinema previously classified the two signifying practices as being divided into determinate and indeterminate arts, in overcoming the distinction in cinema, Duras discovers that the simulative capacities associated with motion can also be used to create sensations of abstract phenomena, like interactions and coordinations. Through a series of short interruptive paragraphs that disturb any ability to consciously follow the book's slow-moving plot, she allows a series of obliquely-related details to cancel tensions about to be built up by other details, almost as if the individual paragraphs are waves in sea. The sea, indeed, is the most frequently mentioned image of book.

Readers experience the text's rhythm without being able to hold on to any images. Instead, they are left with acoustic impressions associated with shifting schematics caused by oblique openings created in each of the patterns they subconsciously apprehend. Oddly, they seem to hear the sea, as if in a seashell. This sound represents both the interactions of the patterns of the text and the audience's newly produced openness. "Touched" by the text, later audiences will be given to see how they and their own schematic understandings have been drawn in.

Together, Duras' works suggest that sensory experiences involve much more than a passive intake of data from something that impinges on the external senses. In her model of perception, sensory organs can be understood to be little more than the pathways that data takes in order to reach the brain and be distributed in the body in service of action. Moreover, if the purpose of the senses is to aid navigation, more than merely external environments may need to be navigated. By creating a



simulative perceptual faculty that engages with both internal and external environments and produces a condition in which they can be integrated. While such a capacity exceeds what Olson might have dreamed of, I believe that Duras' work is crucial for understanding the transformational powers of his poetics.

### **Conclusion: A Manifesto**

To show how Olson's poetics might be applied today, I, at last, return to a work that is, at least on the surface, poetry through a close reading of a poem, called "lakas sambayan 2003" from Barbara Jane Reyes' *Poeta en San Francisco*. Although the poems of the book are written in lines, they have little in common with traditional verse, or even with the blank verse or Language poems that first responded to Olson's "Projective Verse." The book *Poeta en San Francisco* consists of a series of walking poems, patterned after Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York (Poeta en Nueva York)*. It is multi-lingual in multiple senses, drawing upon English, Spanish, Tagalog and a 13<sup>th</sup> century script Baybayin, as well as street slang, mythological terminologies, and grammar derived from ritual and its attentiveness is neither to the senses nor to structures, but rather to translated configurations associated with joint processes, of "import," "invasion," and "immigration," that mark the displacements, translations and replacements of bodies, images, practices and products that represent a relationship between the Philippines, where she was born, to predominately Filipino community of Daly City and a few other neighborhoods in the San Francisco Bay Area community in which she was raised.

The book's divergence from the lyric can be best seen in her ekphrastic poem,

“lakas sambayan 2003,” which engages readers in a context-based excavation of a San Francisco mural depicting the 1986 revolution against the Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos (98). Images, however, are absent from Reyes’ poem. Within the poem, rapidly deployed lists of trigger-words, turned into puns by sentence fragments and jump cuts, refer readers to the pictures in the mural, but they do so via specific, legal, military, pop-culture styles of language that also reference sights, sounds, products, people, and images associated with a triangulated symbiosis among the multi-local processes, “import,” “invasion,” and “immigration” that provide the context for the mural’s specific placement—on a store wall in the Bernal Heights neighborhood just north of Daly City. The reader, whose subjectivity is projected across the roles of spectator, reader, historian, and tourist is encouraged to access the poem (and mural) in multiple ways: by staring at the surface of the mural, by walking through the neighborhood, and by looking up terms and phrases suggested by the poem via a “Google” tour of the neighborhoods local and global histories. As a result, the reader develops a reflexive apprehension of the multiple ways that Philippine people, products, and cultural artifacts, displaced by American invasions, exceed, penetrate, expand upon, and otherwise reflect upon the specific global/ local landscape referenced jointly by the poem, mural, and reading activity.

Olson, of course, could never have imagined a “Google”-based poetry. After all, he died in 1970, long before computer search engines were invented. Nor would he have imagined the citizen of his polis to be as multi-racial or multi-linguistic as Reyes’ poeta. Yet, in his project to become an archeologist of morning, and to develop a juxtaposition-based poetry whose words excite and incite readers to action, I believe that Reyes’ work represents something that draws upon proprioception in

ways that helpfully combines his two manifestos and shows how some of the techniques associated with the two manifestos can be used.

True, I am not certain whether the poetics I have described are postmodern. They might, better, be called post-post modern, or as I seem to have discovered in the course of writing, perhaps better termed medieval. After all, the proprioceptive poetics as I have described it seems to be overturning what have been a series of rationalizing motions designed to produce a set horizon and stable subject. Proprioception can be defined by a common set of stances and a common set of techniques. Among these, as I have noted, are (1) enacting a turn against a realist aesthetic by integrating the work of the external senses with the work of the memory, intellect, imagination, and desire; (2) addressing multidimensionality through an awareness of navigational balances that recognizes (3) a flexing in contextualizing architectonics, designed to coordinate contradictory movements through homeostatic dynamism that (4) is dynamically open and allows for integrations of information without the creation of abstractions or totalizing horizons.

Others working with the physiology will likely find other points of entry and describe the faculty differently. This is a good thing. My dissertation, like Olson's manifesto, is meant not just to be read, but also to be used. It will have been successful if it has set its readers in motion, not just any motion, but rather the motion of a restless reflexivity that, in turning back in on itself, produces a fruitful hollowness that erases and opens as much as it adds. Certainly, an aesthetic geared towards expansions and contractions of possibilities is to be associated with balance boards and drunkenness. Our attempts at balancing under such delightfully precarious conditions results in a decidedly poetic dance. To the extent that neither we nor the

boards upon which we balance are set, we are never in danger of falling or losing ourselves. Quite the contrary, we are always discovering ourselves in the itchy frictions co-created by us and the world as we move.

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## Chapter 1. Remaking the Perceptual Model: A Physiological Approach To Marcel Duchamp's Conceptual Art

“The constraints of space and time are not games but contracts made between the mind and its plastic expressions, and it's the body, the habitual, instituted, Neolithic body, as it represents itself to itself in terms of its supposed identity, that bears the brunt.”

–Jean-François Lyotard

“The world is what we see...nonetheless we must learn to see it...[to] say what we and what seeing are.”

–Maurice Merleau-Ponty

“One can see seeing.”

–Marcel Duchamp

### I. Introduction

Ask someone about conceptual art and they'll most likely refer you back to Duchamp's toilet. As Thierry de Duve, points out in *Kant After Duchamp*, the importance of the sculpture, called *Fountain [Fontaine]* (1917) lies not in its visual effects but in its being positioned as a limit condition that strategically transformed the context in which it was placed (143). Specifically, de Duve claims that the inclusion of the patently artless urinal in a museum exposed the fact that curators' claims to be exhibiting only “good” art were legitimately self-legitimizing, since the concepts that made the artwork's value are apparent only when the artwork was



marked worthy of being placed in a museum (54). Following Duchamp's scandalous success with *Fountain* any number of self-proclaimed conceptual artists have turned away from visuality, using Duchamp's repositioning technique to question unseen conceptual boundaries. The conceptualist aesthetic has even spread to literature, through Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* (2003), a retyping of the Friday, September 1, 2000 issue of the *New York Times* into an eight-hundred-forty page book that, according to at least one critic, challenges the newspaper's ephemerality by transferring its supposedly fleeting words and sentences into the durable frame of a book (Abramowitz 1). As Goldsmith notes, no one need ever read the book. After all, since Duchamp's famous quip that art should "get beyond the retina," the idea of the artwork is assumed to be sufficient for producing a conceptual artwork's effect (90).

Nothing may at first seem more far removed from the muscle-and-tissue based proprioceptive "body knowledge" I describe in my introduction. However, one important detail intervenes. Physiologically speaking, Duchamp was confused. He associated the coordinative processes upon which his art depends with the "grey matter" of the intellect ("Names" 2). Physiologists such as Berthoz and Noë, however, now know that the faculties associated with coordination are dispersed proprioceptors, of which the folded tissues of the brain are only one (*Movement* 26; *Action* 210).<sup>20</sup> Duchamp's error does not preclude him from contributing to the proprioceptive poetic, however. Because Duchamp had to simultaneously invent a new approach to

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<sup>20</sup> I will further describe these faculties in the body of my chapter. However, I can say in a short list that among these faculties are (1) stereoscopy – how the two slightly different pictures received by each of our eyes are coordinated; (2) sensory integration – the ability to coordinate the work of different senses, including visual and linguistic ones; and (3) kinesthesia – the ability to apprehend projective phenomena such as action and motion.

the senses and loosen the hold of a model that came before, he is especially well positioned to expose the assumptions upon which the poetic depends.

## II. From A Static To A Kinesthetic Model Of The Senses

In the “Sears Roebuck-like catalogue” of notes designed to advertise the insights to be ordered up from his penultimate sculpture *Delay in Large Glass*, Duchamp directed those seeking to understand his work to look back. Specifically, he suggested that analysts “read the *whole* section on perspective [in] the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève” [Voir Catalogue de Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève toute la rubrique Perspective] (*SS* 86 italics Duchamp’s/*DDS* 122). The library, where Duchamp worked from 1913 to 1914, served as a repository for historical documents dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Among these would have been Renaissance technical manuals associated with perspective drawing by men such as Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1476), Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), and Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) (*BSG* 1). As art historian Erwin Panofsky notes in *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, these treaties, associated with the Renaissance aesthetic of realism, generally discussed a problem about how scenes of a three-dimensional landscape could be mimetically projected onto the two-dimensional space of the canvas (36).

There was a physiological component to the Renaissance aesthetic. Its goal was to produce art for which any viewer looking at a canvas painted according to Renaissance techniques could see the very same scene as had been projected onto the back of the painter’s retina (81). As Jonathan Crary notes in *Techniques of the*

*Observer*, the understanding of physiology was based on other scientific developments. With the science of anatomy developing alongside of new projective techniques, visual artists such as Leonardo da Vinci had watched as surgeons cut into bodies and dissected eyeballs (17). Sometimes the artists even carried out these dissections themselves. As such, Renaissance painters felt confident that they understood at a mechanical level how vision worked (17).<sup>21</sup> Their work, then, was to mimic the process of refracted light as it moved through the pupil (iris) to land on a light-sensitive retina. This retina, understood to be flat tissue that functioned as a screen upon which the refracted light was projected, seemed easy to model by means of a canvas (17). While painters must have seen the nerves attached to the eyeballs, these nerves were not considered significant.

Physiologies, after all, are not made of material elements alone. As Crary notes, during the Renaissance, the primary model of the eye was the *camera obscura*, a dark box with a pinhole opening that allowed images of the box's surroundings to be projected onto the wall facing the pinhole (26). The technology, posited as a model for vision since the times of Aristotle, cast the retina as a tissue-like screen that passively received mimetic pictures from the external environment (27). While the *camera obscura* reflected movements in the external environment, a consideration of movement was not a part of the Renaissance model, perhaps because of the increasingly large size of the cameras. (39).

Indeed, as Brunelleschi's 1413 demonstration of painting's ability to match what were believed to be pictures on the back of the retina, the observer was imagined

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<sup>21</sup> However, as Panofsky explains, the Renaissance techniques contained several physiological omissions that physiologists, now, easily recognize as wrong (31). For one, the retina is curved. For another we look with two eyes, not one. Moreover, we frequently move our eyes when looking and walk about in the landscape as we do so (31).

as a stationary figure with a fixed gaze who held his head more or less in the same place, while standing at some distance from the viewed environment (Kubovy *Eye* 4). As per the projective model, Brunelleschi modeled the eye by setting up a mirror across from a Baptistery in Florence (5). He then copied the mirrored image onto a wooden tablet with a hole in it and asked observers to stand facing the Baptistery with the panel held up to one eye [Figure 1] (Kubovy *Brunelleschi* 1).



**Figure 1. Brunelleschi's realism**

By looking through the hole in the back of the panel, viewers were able to see the mirrored image of the painting with one eye and the actual Baptistery with the other (Kubovy *Eye* 5). Through a bit of maneuvering the two pictures could be seamlessly integrated, thereby proving the accuracy of the reproduction. This experiment served as a foundation for later Renaissance work with realism (*Eye* 5). What especially interested visual artists at the time was the fact that the three dimensional landscape could be depicted on a two-dimensional canvas through projective mechanisms

similar to those that allowed a flattened image to appear in a mirror, which presumably modeled the work of the retina (4).

However, while the match between the painting and view was stunning, it also set the viewer up to forget just how much had been controlled. After all, in order for the experiment to work, the viewer had to hold the wooden pallet between herself and the view and stand still, likely stabilizing her head by means of the panel (5). While both eyes were opened, their work was separated, somewhat obscuring stereoscopic depth effects. Further, the viewer's location had to be precisely mapped so that the size of the scaled picture would match that to be had through the eye (5).

Rather than decrying the artifice associated with Brunelleschi's experiment, Renaissance painters codified Brunelleschi's constraints, making them part of their projective technique. Using the example of the two-dimensional projections in the mirror, they celebrated the flatness of their canvases, understanding them to be that much more like the retinas screen (Panofsky 28). Using the distance between the horizon line and vanishing point to set the scale of their pictures, they locked in the 'realness' of their images by marking an 'x' on the floor where the viewer was to stand. Such a practice suggested that the spatial grid for measuring projections extended infinitely out into space. A further technology, a gridded screen called the "Dürer window," [Figure 2] literalized this assumption by allowing the rolling contours of three-dimensional landscapes to be traced almost mechanically across a series of squares.



**Figure 2. The Dürer window**

With help of such windows the artist could work without looking at the object as a whole. Instead, he could draw using what by the 1900's would come to be known as the 'paw' [patte] (Durer *Draughtsman*; Judovitz 97;).<sup>22</sup> The imagination, in other words, was not needed either to draw the picture or to look at it. Since the eye was passive in its reception of pictures the activities of drawing and viewing were also to be so.

Indeed, as Panofsky explains, the major physiological import of the Renaissance aesthetic was that the spatial grid took over work that had previously been done by the intellect and the imagination. Along with the mathematical codification of techniques for creating representations came the idea that everything in the landscape could be understood as contained within a single, homogeneous, spatiality mapped coordinate plane (70). Since the coordinate plane's number-line extended out into infinity, serving as a container for the visible world, all that there was could be measured according to a single unit (119). Through reference to this

<sup>22</sup> Animals during this period were associated with 'instinct,' which was cast as a mechanical drive that bypassed any of the expressiveness associated with the individual will (Judovitz 97; see also Duchamp *Dialogues* 106).

common unit, diverse objects could be measured and placed in a definite relation to one another. Such a relation was expressed in pictures in the form of the horizon line and vanishing point (119). Yet, as Crary notes, it was expressed in life as well. After the Renaissance a standardization of money and labor created objects with replaceable parts and replaceable factory workers became understood in terms of these common units (13). After all, once the spatiality had been homogenized, the work of seeing and thinking could be as well (66). Scientific objectivity – an empirical stance – would produce the idea of an objective observer standing at a measurable distance from all he observed (66).<sup>23</sup>

Out of this stance, according to Olson, artists also discover the “objective correlatives” of traditional closed-verse poetry for which, he notes quoting another critic, Smith “all form...must be shaped in rational patterns of discourse” (*Collected* 254). Dismissing these rational patterns as “the measure which has been,” he likens the method to the turning of the pearl into a measurable “400 grams” (254). As a part of his poetic, by contrast he lauds the “disordered” “disintegrated “random” and “discontinuous,” preparing a poetics based on variable units of measurement (254).

Alternatives to Renaissance spatiality, indeed, existed both before and after the Renaissance. Panofsky provides some help in imagining alternatives by looking back to medieval times. As he explains, before the Renaissance spatiality was represented via invented “objects” erupting onto canvases “affixed to each other in a kind of tectonic or plastic cluster” and held together by organic overlap rather than “space” (41). “Backgrounds” were rendered in equal detail with foregrounds, and they were not, strictly speaking, backgrounds at all. Made up of the materials into which

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<sup>23</sup> I’ll discuss empiricism more in my next chapter.

the paintings were set, the environments into which pictures were carved were not containers or windows. They were a part of the world in which the viewer as well as the picture was placed (41).

Vision, moreover, was not merely optical. For medieval perception was little more than a floating series of impressions (41). As such, paintings were cut up into multiple sections with each section frequently containing objects from multiple points of view – or at least from what we’d now call points of view. As theologian Vladimir Lossky and art historian Léonid Ouspensky note in *The Meaning of Icons*, the figures inscribed into the landscape were not necessarily representations of any one person’s vision so much as they were pictorial recordings of moral and cultural teachings that might be said to represent the point of view of God (32). In any case, one did not engage with these cultural teachings only with the eyes.<sup>24</sup> Only through reflective actions could the pictures be used to open oneself to one’s own sensory world and the invisible realms thought to exist beyond it (60). As such, the medieval pictures were understood as doorways – what we might now call interfaces – that as Lossky and Ouspensky note, were said to be sitting “on the boundary line between the Divine and the human” and providing a passageway through which “divine and human will and action [might] become blended” (60, 32). As such, one needed to meditate on the messages encoded in the images and subsequently engage in action, carrying out the moral deeds one had been reminded of by the pictures. While there is no evidence that Duchamp would have read Panofsky or that he knew of Panofsky’s writings on the medievals, Duchamp’s critique of the Renaissance aesthetic – in conjunction with the Cubists – remade spatiality in a manner that has much in common with them.

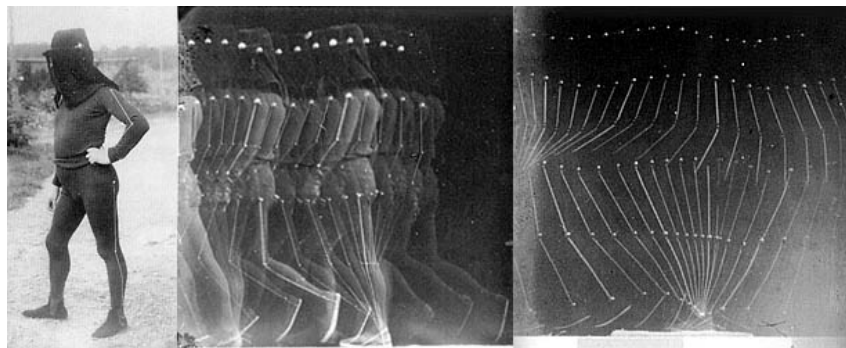
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<sup>24</sup> Indeed to engage with the pictures as representations would have been idolatry. After all, representations presume that one looks only with the eyes.



## A Cubist Fascination With Movement

During the early 1900's when Duchamp was entering the Paris art world, movement and speed were major topics of discussion. With machines allowing for a faster production in fields and factories and with airplanes, trains, and motorcars allowing viewers to speed across landscapes, all was suddenly a blur (Henderson 323).<sup>25</sup> Physiologists, among them Étienne Marey, began studying the body-in-motion to see how physical movements are articulated (*Marey Movement*). Figure 3 shows some of his early chronoscope photography. Marey's work eventually gave rise to cinema's "moving pictures" which were also just beginning to be explored (*Chronophotographie 1*).



**Figure 3. Marey's articulations of the body in motion**

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<sup>25</sup> Other technologies, including improvements in electricity as well as inventions, such as the X-ray were also important to the times. See Linda Henderson's discussion of this point in "The Large Glass Seen Anew." Bettyann Kevles' book *Naked To The Bone* is also helpful with respect to the larger context.

In addition to Marey’s research, this era saw Sherrington’s research on proprioception, Henri Bergson’s work with creative evolution, and Freud’s work with mirror neurons and the internal experience of feeling the body.<sup>26</sup>

Among visual artists two distinct approaches developed in response to the period’s fascination with motion. One group, the self-proclaimed Futurists centered primarily in Russia and Italy, addressed the new pace of life by painting humans and animals as akin to threshing machines, automobiles, bicycles, and propellers, all of which were painted as if seen in motion. In doing so, they moved from a depiction of objects to a depiction of forces [Figure 4] (Balla).

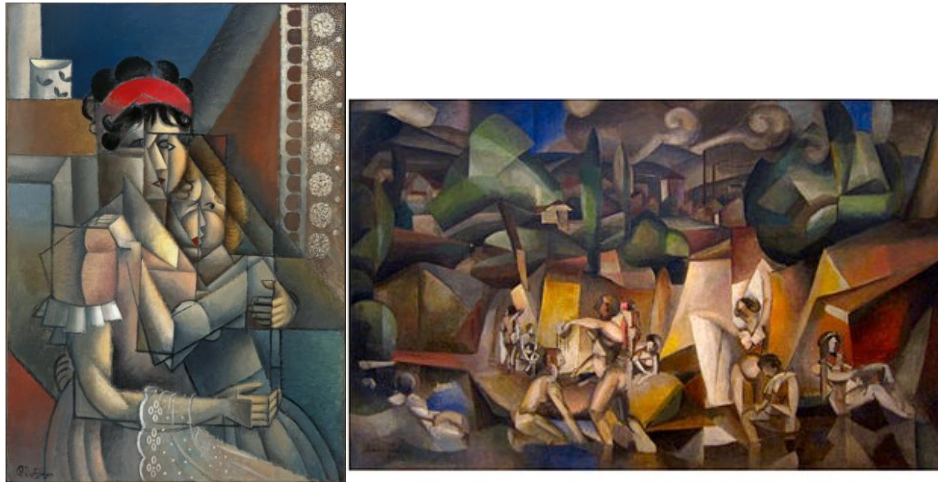


**Figure 4. Giacomo Balla’s Velocity of an Automobile 2 (1913)**

A second group, derisively called “Cubists” because they allowed the cubed units of space to protrude into their pictures, focused on the experience of spectators who moved (Brooke 26). Paintings like *Woman In The Window*, *Maternity* [*La femme à la fenêtre*, *Maternité*] (1911) by Jean Metzinger and *Les Baigneuses* [*The Bathers*] (c. 1908) by Albert Gleizes [Figure 5] are typical of the aesthetic.

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<sup>26</sup> As I noted in my introduction, Sherrington’s work published mainly in *The Integrative Action of the Nervous System* [1906]. Bergson’s is to be found both in *Matter and Memory* [1896] and in *Creative Evolution* [1907]. Freud’s is in, among other places, *The Ego and the Id* [1923].



**Figure 5. Cubist art's unruly spatiality**

It is the Cubists that Duchamp learned the most from. As Gleizes and Metzinger explain in a 1913 manifesto, *On 'Cubism,'* the mobile observer does not see according to a unified or homogeneous spatiality. Instead, “an object has...as many [forms] as there are planes in the region of perception” (*Cubism* 32). After all, for the mobile observer spatiality is not set in advance. As Henri Poincaré, the primary mathematician associated with the Cubists explains, for a mobile observer there are “as many dimensions as there are muscles” [“autant de dimensions que nous avons de muscles”] since the mobile observer composes what Poincaré terms “representational space” [l'espace représentatif] according to a series of coordinative associations derived from the direction and distance of looking, the muscles activated to do so, and the habits and ideas suggested by each movement (62).<sup>272829</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Poincaré is the founder of topology, a branch of mathematics in which points are defined in relation to one another rather than in relation to an overarching spatiality, He is also the founder of classical mechanics and the inventor of the “three body problem” wherein he proves that a combination of two elements with known patterns can give rise to an unpredictable pattern when a third (otherwise predictable) element is introduced. See Craig Adcock's book *Marcel Duchamp's Notes From The Large Glass : An N-Dimensional Analysis*.

<sup>28</sup> For Poincaré representational space was composed through a coordination of “motor space” [l'espace moteur] and “tactile space” [l'espace tactile] (62) Here, one can easily see why Poincaré

Decrying works for which the retina dominates, Gleizes and Metzinger suggest in a second manifesto, *Cubism*, that the painter ought to paint works that help viewers explore their sense of spatiality by leading them “little by little towards the fictitious depths in which the coordinative light resides” (Chipp 210). In that spatiality was a felt thing, however, their work was merely to be suggestive so that the spatiality was never in the canvas itself but always “implicit, so that the mind of the spectator is the chosen place of their concrete birth” (in Chipp 213). Herein, I believe, lies one of the most important sources of Duchamp’s art.

### **Duchamp’s Infra-thin: Textured Possibilities**

Duchamp arrived in Paris in 1912 expecting to join Gleizes and Metzinger in showing work at the Salon des Indépendants, an exhibition hall associated with the then largely Cubist Société des Artistes Indépendants (de Duve 132). He had good reason to believe he might do so. After all, his brother Jacques Villon was already a member and Duchamp’s early painting *Sonata* was soon to be included in the appendix to *On ‘Cubism,’* as an example of Cubist art. Indeed, he arrived in Paris with work to show in an upcoming exhibition that was to be put on by the Salon. However *Nude Descending a Staircase, No 2*. [*Nu descendant un escalier n° 2*] [Figure 6] was rejected from the show.

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would be of importance to a proprioceptive poetics. Berthoz, indeed, mentions him in *The Brain’s Sense of Movement* (37).

<sup>29</sup> In Poincaré’s work the assembly of such a space was not necessarily voluntary (62).



**Figure 6. Duchamp's early address to speed**

As the art historian Peter Brooke explains, the work fell on the wrong side of the debate between the Futurists and Cubists since it concentrated on a moving object rather than the point of view of a mobile spectator (Brooke 7).<sup>30</sup><sup>31</sup> <sup>32</sup> Of course, Duchamp would later exhibit his nude with other members of the Salon at the Paris Section D'Or, but his status as a Cubist would continue to be mixed and complicated. His work was not taken out of the manifesto *On 'Cubism'* which was published later that same year. Nor did anyone noticeably complain when *Nude Descending a*

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<sup>30</sup> According to Duchamp the work was both Cubist and Futurist. In a 1968 BBC interview he states "they [Gleizes and Metzinger] had already...decided to write a book...on Cubism, a sort of theoretical exposé of what Cubism should be...So when I came with my *Nude Descending the Staircase*, they didn't see that it applied to their theory... they thought it was too much neither Futurist, nor Cubism, and they condemned it" (Duchamp BBC 2:40-3:48).

<sup>31</sup> There was more to the rejection, moreover. According to the art historian T.J Demos, the rejection focused on Duchamp's play with nudity, with the young Duchamp being told something to the effect that "nudes do not walk down stairs" (96). Demos associates such a statement with the scandal of nudity which would have been associated with classical painting. I wonder if there is also something to be said for the fact that nudes do not move as fast as propellers.

<sup>32</sup> Actually, however, the rejection seemed more to do with a dispute about language. Gleizes was the primary objector to the work's inclusion and Duchamp, reportedly, would have been allowed to hang his work in the show if he had painted over the title, which was printed in block letters on the lower left hand side of the canvas. As I will explain in later sections of this chapter, Duchamp may have used the title to address some of the spatial concerns that Gleizes thought he had bypassed (Brooke 7).

*Staircase, No 2* was interpreted by Americans as a scandalous representative of Cubist art. True, Duchamp later recalled that he distanced himself from the group at the time (Duchamp in Tomkins 83).

That is not to say, however, that he never internalized Gleizes and Metzinger's teachings. In fact, the two principles now understood to be the foundations of conceptual art – an “anti-retinal” stance and the belief that the spectator is the canvas – are visibly present in *On 'Cubism'* (14, 42). Further, Duchamp's invented spatiality, the “infra-thin” [infra-mince] – a “very, very, very thin,” difference often described as an “infinitesimal difference...that you easily imagine but doesn't exist” – appears to have been developed through a study of one of the painters Gleizes and Metzinger describe as especially inspirational (SS 103/DDS 274; Obalk 1; *Cubism* 34).<sup>3334</sup> That painter is Georges Seurat, who as a part of his “pointillist” painting technique, juxtaposes colored dots in order to create a slight difference in the speed at which the elements of the picture reach each of the spectator's eyes.<sup>35</sup> As a result, spectators approaching paintings such as *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* *Un dimanche après-midi à l'Île de la Grande Jatte* (1886) [Figure 7] experience an effect of “seeing” a three-dimensional depth without making recourse to Renaissance perspective drawing's horizon line and vanishing point.

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<sup>33</sup> It's an art critic Hector Obalk who describes Duchamp's infra-thin as an “infinitesimal difference...that you easily imagine but doesn't exist” (Obalk 1). This sounds like a quote by Duchamp but it appears to have been developed by Obalk.

<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Duchamp would have had ample time for this study. Directly after receiving his rejection and travelling to New York, he retired to for two months to Munich, where he painted a few more Futurist-oriented paintings in the style of the nude (de Duve 160). Soon after, however, he told himself “Marcel, no more painting, go get a job,” and took the position as a librarian in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in 1913, where as I've noted, he had ample time to peruse traditional technical manuals about Renaissance perspective, as well as the work of Poincaré, an additional geometer Bernhard Riemann, who was championed by the Cubists, as well as an optician fascinated with anamorphosis, Jean François Nicéron (de Duve 149).

<sup>35</sup> The other painter lauded by Gleizes and Metzinger was Cezanne, who they liked for similar reasons. His minute brush strokes were said to create a “luminous” effect (*Cubism* 16, 36-7).





**Figure 7. Seurat's pointillism**

In other words, the imagined viewer of the painting is a mobile one who will expand and collapse perceived depths according to her position, making the spatiality of the picture plastic and flexible, something composed during the viewing experience. Spatiality is also reflexive in that the scene viewed tells the viewer as much about where she is as about the picture. Indeed, as physiologists have discovered about the stereoscopic work of coordinating views that differ from eye to eye, we cope by blurring and texturing colors in such a way that the ones we see can be located neither on the canvas nor in the mind (Washburn 201).

Plato, as early as *The Sophist*, spoke about the epistemological problems associated with such a double-sourced “effect.”<sup>36</sup> He uses perspective drawing as his

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<sup>36</sup> Plato's term for these not-quite-mimetic truths was “simulacrum-phantasm” but through my dissertation I will, following Gilles Deleuze use the term “effects” in order to distinguish double-sourced experiential truths from Jean Baudrillard's “simulacrum,” which describes something involving models and distorting copies, but incorrectly casts these copies as mimetic and fails to include the double-sourcing associated with the experience of the viewer (Logic of Sense 262). Foucault also uses this term in his essay about Deleuze's Logic of Sense in an essay called “Theatrum Philosophicum,” contained in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*.

example of a non-mimetic representation, which may seem paradoxical for the purpose of this chapter, However, Plato's point about the technique stands. In *The Sophist* he explains that perspective drawings distort the measurable proportions of a pillar, tapering the dimensions of it towards the top, in an attempt to be "true" to the experience of the viewer. For Plato such a truth, while valid, is epistemologically dangerous since it confounds information about the actual proportions of the pillar with information about the relative position of the viewer (279).

Where Plato develops a genealogy-based epistemology to cope with double-sourcing, Duchamp provides examples, including "the smoke of the cigarette having the same smell in your mouth and the air," "the sound made by two legs of corduroy pants brushing against each other," "the perception of a mother and father looked for in the face of a child," and "the possibility of several tubes of paint becoming a Seurat" (SS 45). Out of these examples, he develops an ontology of "givens" [donnés] and "possibles" [possibles] as a part of his "infra-thin" [infra-mince] spatiality (SS 49, 73, 103/DDS 73, 104, 274). In this ontology, the mobile viewer draws out possibilities produced by juxtapositions of "elementary parallels" [le parallélisme élémentaire] in order to create a provisional reality associated with whatever is lined up in the viewer's gaze (SS 85/DDS 121). Just how a viewer might do so can be seen in Duchamp's second-most famous sculpture, L.H.O.O.Q. (c.1919) [Figure 8] a modification of a postcard picture of da Vinci's, Mona Lisa [*La Giocanda*].





**Figure 8. Drawing out possibilities**

As is well known, Duchamp added a mustache to the iconic Renaissance picture, thereby transforming the gender of the depicted face. He called the work a “ready-made” (found art), emphasizing that the face of Mona Lisa had come to him as a “given” from which possibilities were to be drawn. As is well known, the title “L.H.O.O.Q.” is also important to the work. It provides a semi-visual, semi-audial suggestion of the English word LOOK, as well as an erotic suggestion in French for those willing to sound out the acronym. Doing so yields the suggestive phrase “Elle a chaud au cul” [She has a hot ass], and thereby provokes the viewer to imagine all sorts of things about what’s “behind” the picture. What is much less well remembered

is what is behind the picture, an odd miniaturized background of foggy mountains and curving streams.

Looking at the background, which Duchamp also added, however, yields an ontological insight, as does a backgroundless restaging of L.H.O.O.Q. taken by the artist Marvin Lazarus, for which Duchamp posed in 1961 with the mustache added by means of a detachable glass pane [Figure 9].



**Figure 9. The transversal gaze**

In the reconstruction of L.H.O.O.Q we can see the work being done by the viewer as she moves about, using her gaze to cut across planes. The reference is to spatiality – and a Cubist one at that. After all, a part of the Cubist aesthetic involved the tying together of spaces with different logics and from different perspectives in order to create an irrational (dynamic) rhythm by allowing these logics to suggestively grate against one another (*Cubism 20*). The miniaturized background in earlier L.H.O.O.Q produces this feeling of being in-between spatialities, and one can see in the

reconstruction how easily various gender possibilities are actualized or excluded according to the way the viewer lines up the various spatial planes in her gaze.

It's easy for this point to seem trivial. In some sense, the question at hand is little more than the problem of anamorphosis, whereby we don't know whether we are seeing a man or a woman (or a rabbit or a duck, a face or a vase) until we know which of the two parts of the picture are to be set in relief.<sup>37</sup> However as Duchamp's insistence that his L.H.O.O.Q. is a picture of a man and that he is a woman when he is dressed as one indicates there is something real for him in the drawing out of possibilities.



**Figure 10. Rose Selavy**

Neither Duchamp nor Mona Lisa is in drag because the reality in which possibilities and givens are being drawn out is in motion.

Indeed, directly after his retreat from Paris, during the time when he is full of the readings from the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Duchamp addresses the importance of motion in his “auto-erotic” artwork, *Delay in Large Glass* [*Grand*

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<sup>37</sup> One sees a face or a vase depending on the direction one's gaze moves across the picture.

*Verre*], also known as *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even* [*La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même*] (1915-1923).



**Figure 11. A Model of Desire**

The sculpture is painted on the back and front of two framed but transparent (backgroundless) windows that viewers look both at and through. The top half of the glass – according to the mathematical and linguistic notes collected in the *Green Box* – is a fourth-dimensional cloud of possibilities, associated with what is a decidedly non-representational “bride” [mariée] who is also called a pending-female [“pendu-femelle”] [hung female] or a gaseous “milky way” (SS 82/DDS 116). Separated from the bride by what Duchamp calls a double horizon are a series of “bachelor machines” painted so as to look three-dimensional. In the notes accompanying the sculpture, it

states that these bachelors are given the task of drawing out two givens – a waterfall and an illuminating gas –in order to exchange communications with the bride (28/43).

Just how the two halves are to communicate, however, is a problem since the two halves do not touch and there is no hole that will allow any passage from one to the other. In Duchamp's aesthetic the communication is produced by a texturing of "givens" and "possibilities" made with help from the viewer. Many stories have been told about how this is occurs, often with outlandish meanings attributed to each of its individual parts.<sup>38</sup> Ultimately, a 1976 filmed dance piece, *Through the Large Glass*, by Hannah Wilke provides the explanation that best helps me explain my point.

Literalizing the "striptease" suggested by the title, Wilke sets up a performance in which the audience is placed on one side of the glass and she on the other. By moving about in the room and varying her height as she strips, Wilke plays with the malleability of the three-dimensional bachelor projections, which sometimes seem to shrink and sometimes seem to loom above her from the point of view of the audience members. After all, they look three-dimensional but Duchamp, using a series of mathematical calculations that none have yet been able to reproduce, has created a projective effect that is not tied to a single horizon or vanishing point. As such, there is no organized background to coordinate the machines from the outside. Instead of receding into the distance the bachelor figures protrude out into the larger space of the room, drawing the eye through the picture and back into the contextual landscape in which the sculpture is viewed. As such, the relations between the machines shift according to the viewer's position with respect to the machines. What

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<sup>38</sup> An excellent second iteration of Duchamp's piece is Robert Matta's painting, "The Bachelors Twenty Years Later," which suggests that the sculpture is an early model for 3-D printers and shows the bride being actualized layer by layer out of the back and forth motions of the bachelor machines.

is unusual about Wilke's dance, moreover, is how readily her spectators learn to move.



**Figure 12. A Dance of Desire**

After all, the artwork is not really what audience members have come there to see. Blocked from grasping what they have been set up to desire – a glimpse of Wilke in the nude – they marry their movements to Wilke's in a dance that is not determined so much as it is sculpted by the artwork's intervention, which sometimes blocks and sometimes provides openings in the view.

Duchamp never saw the dance, but there are reasons to think he would have been pleased. After all, Wilke's dance provides viewers with a bodily experience of coordination around givens and possibilities. Through integrations of Duchamp's textured givens and possibilities, Wilke's piece illuminates that what Duchamp's artwork helps us to see is desire. In Duchamp's ontology desire – the texturing of givens and possibilities – is all there is. After all, in conditions where movement is taken into consideration, the present is merely a coordination of what one has from the past and hopes for in the future. Gleizes and Metzinger would have had an inkling

of this point. The idea of movement, after all, was implied in their casting of spatiality as rhythmic. Indeed, Gleizes would write in a 1922 pamphlet “The Painter and His Laws” [La Peinture et ses Lois] that “to paint is to give life to a flat surface; to give life to a flat surface is to turn its space into rhythm” [peindre c’est animer une surface plane; animer une surface plane, c’est en rythmer l’espace] (in Brooke 98). Gleizes will go on to address temporality in works such as *Autorité Spirituelle et Pouvoir Temporel* (1939) (Brooke 214). Yet, lacking a complex physiological projection, he will, by this time have broken with the very people who might have helped him address an intersection of space and time in concrete ways, namely the very poets and language-oriented Dada-ist artists that Duchamp had fallen in with after being rejected by the Cubists in 1912 (22, translation Brooke’s).

### **Language’s Reintroduction of Time**

It was a title, after all, that Gleizes most objected to in Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase No 2*, the one painted in block letters on the canvas that Duchamp refused to take off, despite the fact that doing so would have allowed his work to stay in the show. Likely, neither Duchamp nor Gleizes understood the importance of the title at the time. They could not have imagined that titles, like *Fountain*’s, would give rise to an aesthetic called conceptual art.

Indeed, Duchamp initially seems to have thought of his ready-mades as a mere rendez-vous of space and time. His first ready-mades, *Bicycle Wheel* [1913] and *Bottle Rack* [1914] did not have titles. As Duchamp’s early note in the *Green Box* explains, these ready-mades are objects that become art merely by the participation in

a rendez-vous that textures space and time. The artist will select each ready-made “by planning for a moment to come on such a day, such a date such a minute)” [“en projetant pour un moment proche à venir (tel jour, telle date telle minute)"] (Green Box in Obalk 1). In this, the artist is not to exercise any judgment because, as with the example of the Seurat, her task is that of coordination [horlogisme] and texturing; out of the coordination an occasion is to be produced, one that is located neither in space nor in time.<sup>39</sup> From the start, Duchamp intended to make small inscriptions on the objects, but these early inscriptions were merely of the date and the time (Obalk 1). As early as his third ready-made “*In Advance Of A Broken Arm*” (1915), however, he had introduce a joke about the simultaneity of the visual and the sequential temporality of language.

In part, he would have been influenced by Raymond Roussel. Indeed, just prior to having *Nude Descending A Staircase* rejected, he and Francis Picabia, a poet, artist, and typographer, whom Duchamp met in Paris through the Salon des Indépendants, would attend a performance of one of Roussel’s novels, *Impression d’Afrique*. In the play, and in Roussel’s more famous work, *Locus Solus* [1914], a machine is shown assembling a great masterpiece without help from any human hand (Demos 92).

As Roussel explains in *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, the play turns on what Duchamp would have called an “infra-thin” difference in language. The example Roussel provides is that of the French words “billard” and “pillard.” He uses the difference a single letter can make in the movement between the phrases, “the

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<sup>39</sup> As Duchamp explains, it is, instead “like a speech delivered on no matter what occasion but at such and such an hour. It’s a sort of rendez-vous” [“comme un discours prononcé à l’occasion de n’importe quoi mais à telle heure. C’est une sorte de rendez-vous”] (*Green Box* 1934 in Obalk 1).



white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table” [“les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard”] and “the white man’s letters on the hordes of the old plunderer [“les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard”] (Demos 93). The point was that letters and words take their meanings not just from the dictionary, but also from their surrounding contextual environs.<sup>40</sup>

For Duchamp the environs of language, however, were not just sentences. They also involved the work of the other senses. Indeed, in a 1920 ready-made *Fresh Widow*, Duchamp produced a sculpture that was visually sparse, although elaborately built and suggestively titled.<sup>41</sup><sup>42</sup> A realistic miniature of a window with darkened panes, it recalls and modifies – for those in on the joke – the Renaissance aesthetic’s metaphor of painting as a transparent window.<sup>43</sup>



**Figure 13. Sensory Givens and Imaginary Activities**

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<sup>40</sup> Looking back on this performance, Duchamp would later report that “Roussel showed him the way” to the direction he would take in his later artworks (“Limits” 151).

<sup>41</sup> As a part of the sculpture’s construction Duchamp again included a play with givens and possibilities. He drew up the plans for the window himself, but hired a carpenter to do the actual construction, thereby opening a question about whether it was the architectonic structure—the background--or the sensory data that was “given.”

<sup>42</sup> The title was originally in English.

<sup>43</sup> After all, despite being realistic, it is decidedly non-transparent.

Further, because the work is three-dimensional and different on each side, it requires a mobile observer who can make a thaumatrope-like play of its dual signatures.<sup>44</sup> One side the sculpture is signed with a man's name (Duchamp's) and on the other with a woman's name (Rose Selavy), thereby suggesting some of the gender play of L.H.O.O.Q. but with much less of guidance about what is being drawn out of what. After all, the drab sculpture of a window comes alive only at the impetus of its suggestive title which, combined with the blocked view, triggers the imagination, causing the viewer to "see" a number of possible women in various configurations in the mind's eye. As with most of Duchamp's works, the trick seems like a simple optical illusion.

Yet the physiological import of the setup is crucial. In placing a linguistic stimulus on par with a visual one, the sculpture casts internally and externally excited images on an equal footing. That is, they both are cast as information to be processed by the brain. Although in this sculpture the "mind's eye" is made to see pictures, it's understood that the imagination is composing these pictures, not merely having them projected as on the back of a retina. Or maybe it's the other way round. After all, the images seen aren't entirely voluntary. In a way they have been triggered by language as readily as the images received through the external senses. As with Wilke's dance with the *Large Glass*, the lines between activity and passivity are blurred.<sup>45</sup>

Considering the new stance towards language, we can see why something in Duchamp would have insisted on painting a title onto his early nude. We can also see

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<sup>44</sup> A thaumatrope is a paddle for which two parts of a picture are placed on opposite sides and made to run together when the paddle is spun. A common example is a paddle with a bird on one side and a cage on the other. When the paddle is spun, due to an after-image effect of vision, the bird is seen inside of the cage.

<sup>45</sup> Duchamp, after all, was just entering the age of advertising and experiencing the ways that advertisements could stimulate desires. See David Joselit's *Infinite Regress* for more on this point.

why the Cubists would have objected. With their focus on intellectual coordination as a means of producing what they still thought of as a spatial form, they continued to need containers and contents and remained tied to purely visual representations even when they turned to questions associated with temporality. Yet, in Duchamp's sculpture with the imagined experience of the unseen woman more sensual than the drab sensory experience of the window apprehended through the external senses, there is no way to separate the coordination from the contents. Actualities, for Duchamp, are nothing other than a mixing of givens and possibilities, and desire is more a drive towards continued movement than form.

### **Playing With Possibilities**

As Duchamp learns to leverage sense against sense, exploring the grammars of the conditions of possibility lurking in language, he also learns – in the manner of a traditional poet – how drawn out possibilities can inflect the importance of this or that rule. Although Duchamp does not use language to make poetry on the page, in the mid-1920's when he leaves the *Large Glass* behind in order to dedicate himself to chess full time, he proclaims in a toast made at a 1952 banquet for the New York State Association of Chess, that for him “the chess pieces are the block alphabet which shapes thoughts; and these thoughts, although making a visual design on the chessboard, express their beauty abstractly, like a poem” (in Damisch 68).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Olson by this time is already popular. He and Duchamp did not meet. However, John Cage, a student of Olson's admired Duchamp greatly and eventually got him to perform with him in a game of chess hooked up to wires that were to produce a musical composition by chance. (Lotringer 1)

In mentioning the alphabet, he references a then popular idea in poetry that individual letters in being infinitely combinable are full of potential until being determinately placed in words, sentences and thoughts, meanings and acts.<sup>4748</sup> The process whereby potential is drawn out of the individual letters is not a matter of mere arrangement, however. That would result in only gibberish. What Duchamp knows about chess by the 1950's is that the relation between pieces and rules must play itself out by means of strategies that access invisible schematics like grammar.

Chess after all, is a conversation. The patterns formed between players texture strategic patterns allowed by the rules, thereby sculpting the possibilities associated with the game. While in any one play, the rules and positions of pieces are “givens” the shifting strategies put forward by the two players in the game inflect the rules in this or that way, sculpting the conditions of possibility for the play. The poetry Duchamp is referring to, then, is one that spans visible “givens,” as represented by the position of pieces and the structuring conditions of possibility –the architectonics – that lie somewhere beyond them. Duchamp illustrates this point in a picture taken by Arnold Rosenberg in 1958.

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<sup>47</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé's “Un coup De Dés: Writing Turned Image” (A roll of the dice) was published in 1897. In its play with visual typography, it cast letters as a sensory stimulus.

<sup>48</sup> See J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words*.



**Figure 14. Chess pieces defying the laws of physics**

When one stands across from Duchamp – in the same plane – the chess pieces are solidly anchored on a glass tabletop. Yet, when the camera is moved under the table they're understood as floating in the air. Again, the point looks like a silly optical illusion. Yet in the apparent play with gravity is a reminder that even the laws of physics are there to be made something of.<sup>49</sup>

The turn to chess, then is an exploration of the ways possibilities can be sculpted and a further turn towards the imagination. Indeed, Duchamp eventually calls chess players “completely cloudy, completely blind...Madmen of a certain quality” as a means of saying that it's almost only the imagination that matters (Schwartz complete works 68). Master chess players, after all, can play blindfolded. The chess pieces are there, after all, merely to coordinate the two different imaginaries of the two players, who, each with her own strategy contributes to the texture of the game's field. Because what the mater player wants to see are these textures – the coordination

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<sup>49</sup> Poincaré agreed. This is a major point of his treatise on mechanics.

– much more than the marker, the sensory experience is accorded much less importance.

For most in the public, a sensory marker is needed as well as some help making a texture. Looking back at conceptual art, indeed, one finds that the role of art in the aesthetic is that of providing texture especially through a referral of one context to another. Doing so is not a matter of merely moving a marker, of course. Rather, as de Duve notes in his review of the narrative aspects of *Fountain's* becoming the marker that collapses good and bad art, the artist had to move between contexts in order to stitch together the horizon of meaning that would allow *Fountain* to produce an effect. None of Duchamp's early ready-mades had done so (Obalk 1). However, as de Duve's explains, the narrative that produced *Fountain* produced the conditions of possibility for all of the ready-mades to be revealed as significant.

In April 1917 the New York Society of Independent Artists, in following the model of the Société des Artistes Indépendants of Paris, declared its intention to produce a show with “no jury, no prizes” (97). Duchamp, among the founders of the society, was on the board of directors chairman of the hanging committee (101). However, as de Duve recounts, before the hanging had quite begun, the committee found a “urinal posed flat on its back, flagrantly signed and dated, and baptized *Fountain*,” a submission they took to be a rather offensive joke, perhaps referring to the fact that in comparison to the paintings of fountains by classical artists, their show had nothing to contribute but something ugly and mundane (410).

As de Duve tells us, somewhere in the muddle, the urinal was whisked away. However, with some prompting from Duchamp and his friends it received a second life, and provided a second message, when it appeared in the studio of Alfred

Stieglitz, a photographer, who at the time was, according to de Duve, known as “ the maker of the American avant-garde” (118).<sup>50</sup> With Stieglitz casting of *Fountain* as good art, the rejection of the work from the Society of Independents began to be scandalous.

However, it would take a written text to sew the Society’s show together with the avant-garde studio. Duchamp chose to Dada-ist magazine called *The Blind Man* in order to do so (104). The title, we can guess from Duchamp’s quote about chess players, is chosen in order to emphasize the importance of the imagination. Indeed, the article proclaiming the scandal of *Fountain*’s rejection was attributed to a blind man led through the Society of Independents’ exhibit by a seeing-eye dog (106). The choice is funny in part because *Fountain* was signed with the name R.Mutt (98). Yet there is also something more in the story. The dog, after all, likely attends an art show by sniffing at paint pigments, and then proceeding to use the urinal for what is it originally was for. The blind man uses another sense, a tactile one. He feels things out with his hands, by passing pictorial representations for dispersed textures, feeling globs of paint in order to sense their shape and imagine possible pictures that might be attached.

With the article in *The Blind Man* showing a photograph to be seen with the eyes, and providing a text to draw out the implications of the sensory experience, Duchamp is doing what he has been all along, namely using a play between “givens” and “possibilities” in order to draw out an orientation and a desire by means of proprioceptive texturing. In the play of image and text, a cloudy confusion arises, but this confusion does not remain in the clouds. Rather it becomes a communication, or

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<sup>50</sup> He had previously written about Pablo Picasso and exhibited works by Duchamp’s friend Francis Picaba.

perhaps a commutation. After all, pity for the blind man (or rather what the article proclaims is his superior experience) produces a feeling of indignation that is mysteriously transferred to the toilet, which simultaneously understood as being somehow beautiful, becomes a symbol of good-bad art.

What Duchamp is showing us, then, is not how to abolish sensory experiences, or move beyond the body. Rather, by bringing the spectator into the picture, he uses juxtaposition to allow the different parts of the body -including the parts that sense possibilities and feel out the context of objects that capture our gaze- and causes it to transverse space in a certain way. If we are too focused on a single point – a vanishing point, like the famous vagina in his late work *Étant Donnés* – we miss the landscape and the flickering possibilities that can make it shift underfoot. Moving between what we think we want to see and the possibilities that might be drawn out of the sensory experience if it becomes more than an endpoint of the gaze requires that we are not just stationary but that we allow our gazes to roam – both in space and time and in sensory possibilities and in language. With the idea of working with juxtapositions – on multiple levels and across multiple, heterogeneous dimensions – Duchamp, thus, provides the prospective proprioceptive poet not just with an art to look at, but also with a technique to use in beginning to excavate her own sculpting of possibilities and the senses with which they can, like a poem, be made.



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## Chapter 2. Adapting to Unstable Horizons: Multidimensional Integration in Jean Genet's *The Maids*

“Alchemy and the theater are...virtual arts, and do not carry their end or their reality within themselves.”

–Antonin Artaud

“In the sentry box of the Luxembourg Gardens, Duns Scotus places his head through the circular window; he is sporting an impressive mustache; it belongs to Nietzsche, disguised as Klossowski.”

–Michel Foucault

“Allegory is an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure.”

–Craig Owens

“It’s all there in the nerves, in the head, there are these nerves in the brain (devil take them!)...there are little sorts of tails, these nerves have little tails, well, and when they start trembling, these little tails...and when they tremble, an image appears, not at once, but in a moment, it takes a second, and then a certain moment appears, as it were, that is, not a moment—devil take the moment—*but an image, that is, an object or an event, well, devil take it*—and that’s why I contemplate and then think...because of the little tails, and not at all because I have a soul.”

–Fyodor

Dostoevsky

“I owe the discovery.... to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia.”

–Jorge Luis

Borges

## I. Introduction

When Jean Genet wrote *The Maids* [*Les Bonnes*] (1974) he likely did not have proprioception explicitly in mind. His play, the story of two maids who dress up like their boss and perform a ceremony in which they kill her, was based on a real-life murder trial, that of the Papin sisters, who in the spring of 1933 brutally dismembered their mistress and her daughter. They did so seemingly without provocation after having served peacefully for six years in the household. With the only distinguishing feature of the night being an electrical short caused by mistake, the extent of the violence and its timing were mysterious. After six years without incident, the two sisters did not just kill their victims, they gouged their eyes out, exposed their genitals and beat them with a pitcher, a hammer, and knife (House 11). The violence, moreover, seemed to have passed as quickly as it arose. After the killing the two maids washed the household implements, washed themselves, and retired to a shared bed, reportedly remarking, “That’s a clean job of it!” [“En voila du proper”] (Lacan “Motives” 1 / “Motifs” 25). Upon being discovered they seemed eager to aid the investigation in that they readily admitted their guilt and answered each question in minute detail (House 11). However, the two sisters frequently expressed confusion about which of the two of them had committed specific acts of violence, and which of the two women they harmed.<sup>51</sup> Neither sister was able to offer any motive for the

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<sup>51</sup> As Christine notes in her testimony: “I don’t know whether it was me who tore out the eyes of Mrs. Lancelin. I believe, rather, there were Miss Lancelin’s. I grabbed the one of the two I found myself behind in turning on the landing, myself and my sister...” [“Je ne sais pas si c’est moi qui ai arraché les yeux à Mme Lancelin, je crois plutôt que c’est à Mlle. J’ai saisi l’une des deux, derrière laquelle je me trouvais, en tournant sur le palier ma sœur et moi”] (Dupré 32, translation mine). She later continues: “Seeing that Mrs. Lancelin was going to throw herself on me, I jumped at her face and I tore out her

crime. Early discussions went something like this:

Prosecution: Have you anything with which to reproach your employers?

Christine: No, nothing.

Prosecution: Did you love your employers?

Lea: We waited on them, that's all. (Guillant 894)

As others rushed to provide explanations the maids could not, opinions about the case were split. The general public's verdict that the maids were willfully depraved was forcefully voiced in headlines like that of the local newspaper, *La Sarthe*: "Two angels? Non! Two monsters..." ["Deux anges? Non! Deux Monstres..."] (House 16, translation mine). Cultural elites, meanwhile, looked to structural factors. Their position was perhaps best expressed by Simone de Beauvoir who in "The Force of The Age" [*La force de l'âge*] cast the maids' act as an unconscious reflection of a larger bourgeois malaise whose violence could also be found in the pettiness of women that "deducted the cost of a broken plate from [a] maid's wages," and "put on white gloves to find forgotten specks of dust on the furniture" (107-8). Such a position was not entirely without evidence. In later questioning the maids independently made recourse to the same oddly-phrased proverb: "Better for me to have had my patrons' hides than they to have had mine," ["J'aime mieux avoir eu la peau de mes patronnes plutôt que ce soit elles qui aient eu la mienne."] thereby appearing to exhibit at least some awareness of a conflict (House 62, translation mine).

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eyes with my fingers. When I say that I jumped on Mrs. Lancelin, I'm mistaken, it's on Miss Lancelin Geneviève that I jumped and it's she in the end who I tore the eyes from. During this time, my sister Léa jumped on Mrs Lancelin and likewise tore her eyes out." ["Voyant que Mme Lancelin allait se jeter sur moi, je lui ai sauté à la figure et je lui ai arraché les yeux avec mes doigts. Quand je dis que j'ai sauté sur Mme Lancelin, je me trompe, c'est sur Mlle Lancelin Geneviève que j'ai sauté et c'est à cette dernière que j'ai arraché les yeux. Pendant ce temps, ma sœur Léa a sauté sur Mme Lancelin et lui a arraché également les yeux" (45 translation mine). Julia House in following Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage and doubles makes what is perhaps a little too much of these quotes. However, for the most part, my own analysis draws upon, parallels and is all around deeply indebted to hers.

Still, as analysts approached the case, additional factors, including a family history of abuse, concealed homosexuality, incest relations, and subaltern envy all showed up as equally plausible contenders for being the “true” cause of the crime. Among the complications in settling on a single explanation was the oddly interruptive nature of the sisters’ testimony. The two frequently broke off from telling about their childhoods to clarify a point about the murder, or to flash forward to a question the examining magistrate ought to have asked, but hadn’t (House 88). With the interruptions disrupting their ability to tell a complete tale, any analyst attempting to explain the murder according to a single explanation found themselves faced with gaps and extraneous details that called for additional sets of reasoning. Further, as Jacques Lacan would explain in “Motives of Paranoïd Crime,” [“Motifs du Crime Paranoïaque”] a multi-causal explanation was necessary since the real mystery was not that violence had irrupted, but that it had been delayed for so long (“Motifs” 25).

While at the time he analyzed the Papin sisters’ case, Lacan had not yet written his famous article about the mirror stage, or fully teased out his notions of real, the imaginary, and the symbolic, he had already begun to think the psyche as subject to cross-pressuring forces. All individuals, according to Lacan, are subject to drives. Normal individuals, however, are integrated into the social order when they are introduced into language by an authority figure who teaches them to use chains of signifiers according to a logically patterned set of grammatical rules (*Écrits* 96). Even as individuals use these rules, learning to say, ‘I,’ they also locate themselves in terms of the larger coordinates of a social order, coming to understand themselves as subjects who are to be linked to objects through the logical rules provided by



language. Moreover, each time they speak and string together chains of sentences, the articulations provided by grammar help them to distinguish between past, present, and future events. As a result, with the help of narratives, they are able to delay their responses to stimuli transforming them so they can be discharged in socially acceptable ways.

Such a process had been disrupted in the Papin sisters' case, Lacan claimed, by the odd conditions of silence in which the maids had served ("Motifs" 25). During the six years of service neither the master of the house nor his daughter, Mademoiselle Lancelin, spoke much to the maids. All messages—the family's reprimands and requests—were to be conveyed by Madame Lancelin, who generally communicated by means of notes left out on a series of trays (Lusty 38). In these conditions of silence, Lacan suggests, an ambiguity arose whereby the sisters were faced with not just one symbolic order, but several. After all, given the contextual sparseness of handwritten notes, the Papin sisters would have frequently been cast into conditions of interpretive ambiguity, whereby they would have had to always be navigating several possible contextual possibilities ("Motifs" 28).

In other words, they would have been like the spectators of Duchamp's L.H.O.O.Q in that they had to take each communication as a (sensory) given whose implications were to be drawn out only through a series of accenting details. The texturing would, itself, produce the projective context in which these details could be understood. However, unlike the spectators of L.H.O.O.Q, who were free to delight in the ease with which their navigations caused the picture to shift between showing a woman or man, the maids, being servants, were expected to respond to the billowing possibilities by shifting their bodies and subjectivities in order produce what they

understood to be the desired results. It's under such conditions that their temporal horizons would have begun to be proprioceptively textured. Lacking a stable contextual frame, the maids would have lost the ability to separate between one event and another. Instead, new detail would have caused a different set of memories and possibilities to be projected into their understanding of what it was their work entailed and what resources were on hand to carry it out. With one contextual shift after another changing the rules underfoot, even the best of intentions could easily have gone awry, with the result that a response developed for one object might easily have become mixed up with responses towards another, thereby producing what Lacan would eventually call the Real, an irrational irruption located somewhere between logics and produced out of the frictions associated with the uneasy movement of one logic upon another.

No surprise, then, that the sisters were unable to explain their actions. Nor would they have been lying when they said they had no motive for the crime. Among the possible events that may have occurred on the night of the murder, it seems likely that a multi-factor circuit was produced something that went something like this: although the maids were not responsible for the electrical shortage or the power outage that resulted from it, their feelings of guilt and shame about their inability to accomplish their tasks exacerbated feelings of self-hatred. These were made worse by Madame Lancelin's reprimand. In that Madame Lancelin, according to Lacan, reminded them of their mother, a woman with whom they had recently experienced a traumatic separation, they may have, in thinking about that separation, mixed their

feelings towards Madame Lancelin with those towards their mother (“Motifs” 28).<sup>52</sup> At the same time, with Madame Lancelin serving as an idealized figure of the women of leisure they’d like to have been, the two sisters may have felt confused about how to respond to the reprimand (28). Should they feel guilty or angry? True, they had been scolded before without any violent response. However, on this particular night, what with the reprimand occurring in the dark, the tensions and desires the maids felt towards themselves, and/or their mother figure(s) could have easily have become coordinated with aggressively defensive drives associated with their fears of their father, who although nowhere nearby suddenly arrived in their memories. Since had already abused their elder sister his presence even in memory could have provoked the violent response (26).

Thus, although the maids’ impulse towards violence was not necessarily aimed at Madame Lancelin it could have easily been blindly discharged in a moment of sudden surprise when, caught between the roles of obedient servant, angry daughter, and would-be victim, the maids became confused about who they were responding to and how they ought to respond. After all, the path from stimulus to violence did not follow just one logic, but several. As Lacan so helpfully points out, any discussion of the event would have to account for traumas and learned responses from different places and times and would have to include a discussion of the

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<sup>52</sup> Lacan’s discussion is much more complex than my own. For one, he posits that the maids were unable to progress beyond the mirror stage (a state of narcissism associated with a necessary fantasy of wholeness) because of their homosexuality. Lacan’s version of the events uses the idea of the mirror to develop a story about doubles, positing that the sisters took each other as doubles, yet, also sought to strike out at themselves by harming or eliminating their never quite satisfying ideal doubling others, in the form of Madame and Mademoiselle Lancelin. While I will not use Lacan’s theory to comment on homosexuality, I will later write more about the importance of mirroring doubles when I discuss Genet’s play.

intermediary activities – translations and transferences – through which stimulus and response came to be coordinated.

One reason that most analysts were not able to track all of these factors is that they were using traditional methods of interpretation, those that cast the analyst as a detective, who must produce a single, coherent story by abstracting from the many details presented in association with a crime. They were, in short, taking a realist approach to the problem of interpretation. As Peter Brooks explains, in *Realist Vision*:

the claim of “realism” in both painting and literature is in large part that our sense of sight is the most reliable guide to the world as it most immediately affects us. The claim clearly owes much to John Locke and the rise of empiricism as a dominant, widely shared kind of thinking about mind and environment...Realism tends to deal in “first impressions” of all sorts, and they are impressions on the retina first of all—the way things look...with the [task of the] the retina [being] to reproduce the world. (87)

Although I have already discussed this perceptual model in my previous chapter, it’s helpful to say what effects it has on the potential for approaching narratives. As Brooks notes, with narrators, readers, and characters thought to stand at a distance from signs, and signs understood primarily as taking on the role of descriptors – that is, transparent mechanisms that take their meaning from a world beyond them. The role of the plot in such narratives is to turn “sequence into consequence,” distinguishing between *fabula* (plot) and *syuzhet* by abstracting from details in order to find regular patterns –the rules of the tale. That is, the story’s logic (*Plot* 326).

Brooks associates such a practice with rationalists, like:

Jules Michelet and Thomas Carlyle, of Karl Marx and John Ruskin, of Charles Darwin and Hippolyte Taine: that is, an age where history takes on new importance, and learns to be more scientific, and where theories of history come to explain how we got to be how we are, and in particular how we evolved from earlier forms to the present. (*Vision* 202)

The practices of realism are thus tied up with the causes and effects of physics, where causes can be said to lead directly to effects, and where developments can be measured according to a regular set of relations.

However, as Brooks notes, there is another kind of narrative, which he associates with writers of the French Nouveau Roman, where “the reader is forced to engage in plotting, if not towards the creation of meaning, at least in exploration of the conditions of narrative meaning” (*Plot* 326). That is, the narrative depends on what can be triggered in the reader since, as Brooks explains, “the source of the codes [used for writing] is in what Barthes calls the *déjà-lu*, the already read (and the already written), in the writer’s and the reader’s experience of other literature, in a whole set of intertextual interlockings” and associative meanings that lie beyond the bounds of any one text (19). As a result, according to Brooks, “the text is seen as a texture or weaving of codes... which the reader organizes and sorts out in only provisional ways, since he can never master it completely, [and] indeed is himself in part “undone” in his effort to unravel the text” (19).

I mention this second kind of narrative, because, it is this odd texturing effect that I believe is the closest to the experience the Papin sisters would have had as they attempted to navigate their employers’ ambiguous notes, and because it is also just such a narrative with which proprioception is to be associated. In this chapter, however, I want to focus less on the contextual projections, which I have discussed in my chapter, than on the kinetic elements of proprioception that can be discussed through an examination of the role of proprioception in narrative. Certainly, as both Barthes’ and Lacan’s analyses show, the projective effects are still in place. What the

Papin sisters case highlights, however, is the oddity of the ways that actions are produced in conjunction with these effects.

After all, as household servants, the Papin sisters had no room for abstraction because they were continuously being called upon to act and respond. With no stable distance for dragging details away from their original grounds in order to re-arrange them according to an abstract meaningful plan, they, caught up in the flow of serving, had to be concerned with end points – the receiving of notes and the responding to them in order to appease whatever mood or crisis had arisen order to produce the next note. In this, whether they polished the silver or held up a tray as would-be princesses or the most abject of orphans, were merely intermediary details. Barthes, I believe, understood this quite well. However, what he missed – at least in Brooks’ account of the his work – is the extent of the violence – a sense of the Lacanian Real – that might be produced by the movements of the intermediary logics.

For this, we need to turn to Genet. A poet and novelist as well as a playwright who spent seven years in prison and was avowedly homosexual during a time when homosexuality was criminalized, his works initially frustrated literary scholars for many of the same reasons as the Papin sisters’ testimonies had. His work can be described in terms of three distinct qualities: (1) a tendency to rapidly and abruptly shift epistemological stances, as evidenced by alternations between autobiography, history, fantasy, and realistic description; (2) a poetic language, which, when combined with juxtaposed epistemological stances, produces an ambiguity about the referential contexts of individual words and phrases; (3) an unusual attitude toward completions and endings, whereby, mid-scene, Genet often declares that he has lost interest in a character or train of thought, and seems to simply abandon it.

For most analysts of Genet's works, these three qualities result in a sort of narrative indecency. Sartre, too, after exhaustively considering Genet's biography and corpus, concludes that Genet is little more than a skeptic, a writer, who refuses meaning, but can never create it (Sartre Saint Genet 338).<sup>53</sup> Michel Corvin, in "From Theatricality to Performance Theory," explains that Genet's works are "doomed to perpetual...incompletion," able to exist only as "fragmented piece of a puzzle that can never be put back together again" (Finburgh 26, 35). Further, he calls Genet's work a precursor of "the post-1968 years...when Derridean deconstruction spread, undermining the Cartesian sense that the thinking subject guaranteed its own ontological continuity," (36). He uses Genet's work to show that:

deconstruction broke with the relative optimism of Sartrean existentialism, grounded, as it had been, on the assumption that an authentic choice was at least possible for the individual, even if rarely achieved in practice. Instead the postmodern subject is aware that the only choices available are between different ideological masks. (36)

Concluding that Genet recommends a shrug of resignation, Corvin leaves off with no hint that a sudden or violent murder such as that carried out by the Papin sisters might be lurking in a work associated with multiple logics, poetic ambiguities or anti-climactic endings. Nor can such a premonition be found in the work of Ralph Yarrow, who likewise highlights the lack of meaning, writing "Genet's underlying intuition...is that the ambiguity he so deliberately cultivated in his personal life is the only possible strategy of resistance in a world in which fettered minds are revealed in the binaries of oppositional moral posturing" (Finburgh 226). While again, there is a hint of something going on in the idea of resistance, this resistance seems to be the

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<sup>53</sup> I am providing only a simplification of Sartre's analysis here. What I am thinking, however, is of his emphasis on negation.

kind of resistance achieved by standing back, rather than scrambling to respond, and thereby producing the sort of agitation that might allow a murder to arise in one.<sup>54</sup>

Nothing, of course, could be further from the result in the Papin sisters' case than a passive ambivalence. As Lacan might have explained, ambiguities do not hover, nor are they static. In sudden irruptions of the Real, they can kill. The active nature of ambiguity, however, because critics are addressing only narratives associated with abstractive logics. Genet's style shows that he, like the Papin sisters, was able to access another type of narrative, however. As I will show in my next section, the place where he likely learned about this narrative is in court, where, in fact the term narrative originated ("narrative" OED).

## **II. Court Narratives: An Action-Based Approach (To Multidimensional Integration)**

In the thirteenth century, when due process (*ordo iudiciarius*) was just

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<sup>54</sup> Genet, indeed, seems to aid critics in their interpretations. A letter to Roger Blin is often quoted. In it, Genet writes of his play *The Screens* [*Les Paravents*] "Ordinarily plays have a sense: not this one. It's a celebration for which the elements are disparate. It's a celebration of nothing" ["Les pièces, habituellement, dit-on, auraient un sens: pas celle-ci. C'est une fête dont les éléments sont disparates, elle n'est la célébration de rien"], they would do better to see in the mockery of meaning a turn towards action than any sort of passivity (Lettres à Roger Blin 223, translation mine). Genet, further, suggests that his address is to "an architecture that is verbal – that is, grammatical and ceremonial – which surreptitiously indicates a void that tears from itself an appearance, that shows the void." ["Une architecture verbale – c'est-à-dire grammaticale et cérémoniale- indiquant sournoisement que ce vide s'arrache une apparence qui montre le vide"] (Lettres à Roger Blin 233). While most critics focus on the terms "nothing" and "void" in these quotes as I will show in this chapter, they would do better to focus on "grammar" and "architecture."



beginning to replace trial by ordeal in courts associated with Roman law, narratives were often literally “accounts,” or balance-sheets, what the OED, in listing the court-based definition of narrative, calls “that part of a legal document which contains a statement of alleged or relevant facts closely connected with the matter or purpose of the document; spec. a statement of the parties to a deed and the cause of its granting” (OED “narrative”). Far from being used to present a coherent story, court accounts address what medieval historians Virpi Mäkinen and Heikki Pihlajamäki record as the fact that “several people could have power (potestas) over the same thing in different ways” (528).<sup>55</sup> As such, the task of the court is not to produce a description or explanation, but rather to induce an engagement between claims that would assist the state in producing an appropriate response.

At the time of its introduction, *ordo iudiciarius* was understood as inserting a delay between the *actio* (law) and the *exceptio* (crime) (Pennington 1).<sup>56</sup> In this space of delay, the engagement between various claims was to produce a series of adaptive distributions that would allow for the law and the crime to be referred to one another. Producing this referral was by no means straightforward. After all, as Aristotle notes in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the engagement between the law and the crime can never involve a direct confrontation since the law is necessarily “defective owing to its universality” (1). That is, the particular case will not neatly fit its terms without, according to Nietzsche, “arbitrarily discarding...individual differences and by

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<sup>55</sup> Mäkinen and Pihlajamäki’s statement is derived from work with the early legal theorist, Henry of Ghent, and his writings in *Quodlibet*. There, pondering the question of whether a condemned man had a right to try to escape the court, Henry of Ghent notes that the judge’s powers are those of capturing, holding and killing the condemned person, but the criminal has powers of moving his body and ought to be able to do so since during the times each man had a right to use the property of another as long as he did not cause any harm (528).

<sup>56</sup> Here, Hegel suggests that “ideally... the punishment is already contained in the crime, so that retribution signifies only the turning back of crime against itself...So it is the criminal’s own deed which judges itself” (*Right* 100).

forgetting the distinguishing aspects” of the particular (*Truth* 82).

However, Aristotle proposes that courts offer an alternative to a direct meeting between the general and the particular. They do so through a series of adaptive decrees that act, in his words, “like the leaden rule used in making the Lesbian moulding [where] the rule adapts itself to the shape of the stone” (*Ethics* 1). These decrees serve as a flexible tissue that mediates between the particular and the general. Just what these mediating tissues are composed of is not immediately obvious. After all, the tissues are located neither in the facts of the case, nor in the claims made, nor in the perceptions of juries and judges. As was the case with the Seurat, they are to be found somewhere in between all of these things – in what Lacan might suggest are a series of distributions made over the course of the case’s narrative.

In order to understand these distributions, it is helpful to returning to Sherrington’s understanding of reflexivity. In his work with the dog scratch response, he traced out coordinative process associated with the production of a balanced homeostasis, what the OED calls “the maintenance of a dynamically stable state...by means of an internal regulatory processes” (OED, “homeostasis”). The OED provides the example of blood temperature. In order to maintain a constant temperature despite changes in weather, the body draws in or expels resources by sweating and/or increasing the pulse and rate of breathing. Such a process does not occur all at once and as is indicated by the many possible responses, it involves not just one bodily system, but several, what biologists call “fluid matrix” of responses by various bodily systems (Carrier Jr. 666).

Indeed, Sherrington’s discovery of proprioception was spurred by the fact that dogs, in responding to an itch stimulus, did not just move their legs, but also their

heads and tails (130). Moreover, upon investigating further, Sherrington found the process to also involve a number of movements and counter-movements by organs and muscles that, by means of feedback loops and mini-adjustments, were shown to distribute the responsibility for restoring the balance across a number of organs and tissues, muscles and limbs (130). In a general sense, results were predictable. In Sherrington's model the stimulus was fixed into a measurably quantity of force applied at a single point and each dog he tested responded with some adaptive movement addressed to the itch. Even so, the force of the response, its style, the specific limbs activated were far from predetermined. Sometimes Sherrington's dogs increased the pressure of their scratching, and sometimes the speed. Sometimes the balance was created by means of a movement by the tail and sometimes by the head alone (130). Thus, Sherrington concludes, one has to pay as much attention to translations and transferences – the proprioceptive work of tissues and muscles – as one does to beginnings and endpoints.<sup>57</sup> The stimulus, in other words, does not predetermine the response.

Thus, although court cases are bound by set endpoints, the drama associated with individual court trials does not lie in the law, nor does it lie in the truths of the case. After all, the punishments to be meted out for specific crimes are set in advance and the work of detectives by and large has already been carried out. As in the case of the Papin sisters, frequently, someone has even confessed. Yet, as Sherrington's work helps us to see, the distribution of responsibilities remains to be determined. That such is the case is especially apparent in French courts, where a strict

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<sup>57</sup> Aristotle indeed had a name for this discursive balance. Associating it with Ethics he produced the idea of the Golden Mean, which requires that each action be carried out at the right time to the right extent with respect to the right objects with the right motive and in the right way (*Ethics* 1).

Napoleonic code is paired with a doctrine of attenuating circumstances, which allows for punishments to be mitigated even to the point of being dismissed if responsibilities can be distributed elsewhere, for example, to the society as a whole (Ferrari 45). Since, ultimately, these distributions – associated with translations of tensions and transferences among systems – are decided in the tissues and muscles that which is between the law and the crime a discussion is needed in order to determine how a specific defendant will respond in any one case.

As early canon lawyer Paucapalea is said to have joked, God, who is all knowing, did not have to ask Adam if he had eaten the apple (Pennington 1). The discussion between the two was necessary so that Adam's wife could be drawn in, along with the serpent (and by association God, himself). The mechanism whereby they were drawn in was an expansion of the context of the act, produced through a discussion that would not have been complete without the excuses, designed to qualify the nature of the crime. Further, even as Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, in order to restore a balance that would otherwise have been lost, an adaptation was being made in what it meant to be a man, one which was to have with implications for all future of mankind. All this was recorded in writing (in the bible). Indeed, the requirement that verdicts be written was among the earliest requirements of *ordo iudiciarius*. The adaptations produced in the coordinative tissues of language (for example in the definition of man) are as important a part of the process as anything else.

Of course, the distributive process that allows the verdict to be produced is not as straightforward as that of the case of Adam and Eve. To understand the process whereby verdicts are produced it can be helpful to look at the second requirement

associated with *ordo iudiciarius*, namely the fact that two eyewitnesses were needed in order to make an accusation (Pennington 1). While the need for more than one eyewitness is commonly associated with a need for a substantiation of the truth of testimonies, Sherrington's research points to another function carried out by the dual testimonies (Fraher 27, Mäkinen and Pihlajamäki 538). In conjunction with an inquisitorial approach to evidence, the dual-testimony requirements ensure that audience members in a court case – jurors, judges (or in the French case examining magistrates), lawyers, and witnesses among them – will be unseated from a univocal frame of reference. After all, even when two witnesses tell corroborating stories, each is bound to do so in a slightly different way with at least slight differences in the tale told. As a result, contradictions, redundancies and gaps are induced, requiring the testimonies to be somehow coordinated. One cannot do so by means of a hermeneutic process, since the each of the stories comes with a slightly different frame. Consequently, audience members, like the Papin sisters, are cast into conditions of ambiguity. Forced to respond, they do not interpret facts so much as they wait for the contexts in which such facts are to be produced to arise out of the play of presented details.

Through a series of parries and exchanges, assumptions and distractions, expansions and flexes, transferences of tensions are induced among the various testimonies and perspectives on the case. Agencies and intentions, of course, are not absent from the scene, nor is a relation to sensory evidence. Yet as individual lines of questioning cut across presentations of evidence in various ways, they produce billowing and shrinkings in contextual landscapes – that is the shape of the

architectonics that determine the implications to be drawn from this or piece of evidence.

Under such conditions, claims made about one piece of evidence may at one time imply that a defendant should be freed, and at another that she should be convicted of an incredibly serious crime. Evidence required in one context may be irrelevant in another. Sometimes two previously opposed testimonies can be made to have identical implications drawn from them. With the contextual landscape shifting underfoot, no facts are stable. Indeed, sensory evidence is better thought of as a coordinator of contexts than as a source of truth. With qualities and properties arising somewhere between the sensory evidence and the context used to draw its implications, no properties can be said to be intrinsic. Rather, the sensory evidence serves as an ambiguous coordinator of multiple contexts that have been associated with it.

Even when the evidence is fairly complete and case seemingly straightforward, one cannot predict the outcome of any one case in advance. One has to wait to see how the specific plays between contexts draw out the facts to be associated with the evidence and how the gap between the case and the law is to be navigated. The eventual verdict relies on facts produced somewhere between sensory evidence, the claims made about it, and the histories that court audience members bring to the table – since it's their stereotypes and histories of ideas that are adapted with each decision about how the case might be distributed with respect to the words set down in the codes of law (Rescher 2).

In sum, ambiguities – that is alternate possibilities – are everywhere, however ambiguity is never something that allows one to hover or rest in undecidability.

Taking sides a natural part of the court case, as are expressions of partisanship and desire. Moreover, with propositions and their would-be innocent descriptions eliminated from the scene, there is no way out of out of taking action – since action is all that there is. Implications, after all, are always for one side or another, always cast into a shifting set of possibilities which produced advantages for this or that strategy. Further, the homeostatic processes through which the law adapts is necessarily transitive. That is, it requires an object to work on, namely, the expelling or drawing in of a body. Thus, even though, justice is the homeostatic target, courts are there to act on particular bodies in particular ways. Cases are not discussed without consequences.

All this Genet understands quite well, as is evidenced both by his tendency to switch styles and viewpoints and his frequent interruptions and productions of gaps. In *Thief's Journal*, a book frequently described as autobiographical, he describes an intimate relationship with the investigating detective, who could “take a murder or rape from the records, swell up with it, feast on it [and...] draw to himself the most unexpected, most unhappy...[and] humiliating confessions,” by means of the contextual imaginings he brought to bear (*Thief's* 91).<sup>58</sup> Later in the tale he likewise delights in the way a tube of Vaseline confiscated by the police and left out on the table after an arrest force policemen to picture the very homosexual sex that they intended to suppress (*Thief's* 189).

As Genet notes, in *Our Lady of The Flowers*, a book frequently labeled as fictional, but which differs little from *Thief's Journal* in its mixing of

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<sup>58</sup> With respect to Genet's work, of course, it, of course, makes no sense to distinguish between things like autobiography and fiction. For him, all 'facts' involve implications, and these are produced by contexts and the ways contexts are coordinated with sensory evidence.

autobiographical data and fantastical imaginings, a successful defendant must always remain in motion, ready to out-manuever both himself and the others involved in producing the narrative of his case. (Here, we can recall the plight of the Papin sisters in their anxious shifting attempts to respond.) Speaking about one encounter with an examining magistrate who, in the case involving a petty crime, was to decide the case on his own, Genet through his persona recalls, “spontaneously I confess a little, the better to keep more serious things hidden” (*Lady* 197).<sup>59</sup> Describing the play of the discussion between himself and the official who is to judge him, he continues by explaining how the course of the discussion and the eventual decision slipped from anyone’s control:

I had only my own case to think about, but [the judge] had twenty. So he questioned me not about the things that he ought to have examined and would have had he been shrewder or had more time, and about which I had planned my answers, but about rather obvious details to which I hadn’t given a thought because it hadn’t occurred to me that a judge might think of them. (*Lady* 198)

The success of the defendant in the case, then, was not in the crafting of a plausible tale for which all of the details held together according to a single logical frame, or even in the production of a beautiful lie. Rather, it arose out of a coordinative disarray of expectations and mis-predictions in an unpredictably shifting contextual landscape, where both facts and strategies were being produced on the fly. Here, Genet writes:

The examining magistrate told my lawyer that if I was putting on an act, I was giving a great performance, but I didn’t put it on throughout the investigation. I multiplied errors of defense, and I was lucky I did. The court clerk looked as though he thought I was simulating ingeniousness, which is the mother of blunders. The judge seemed rather inclined to accept my sincerity. They were

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<sup>59</sup> I call this book fictional, and *Thief’s Journal*, autobiographical, or non-fictional, only because these are the labels that have been placed on the works when they appear in bookstores and libraries. As should be clear from my analysis, the lines between fiction and non-fiction are never clear under the conditions of fact-making (or fictioning) Genet describes.



both wrong. It is true that I drew attention to compromising details that they had been unaware of...but...it was [only] in the judge's chambers that it occurred to me to say that 'it was at night,' for there were things about that night that I had to keep hidden...—I don't know why—why I said mechanically: "at night," mechanically but insistently...[the judge] thought that a crafty delinquent would not have confessed this; [and that] I therefore must have been a novice. (*Lady* 197-8)

What mattered, then, was not truth so much as the rhythms whereby the truths produced as one strategy outpaced another.

What Genet seems to have learned from such an engagement is, however, unusual. He teaches everyone how to become a thief. That is, one who expects nothing to be given, but rather who looks for what can be taken from possibilities that can be opened and closed according to one's openness to one's surroundings.

Describing the thief's mindset (which always includes the readiness to physically move), he lauds "prudence, the whispering voice, the alert ear, the invisible, nervous presence of the accomplice and the understanding of his slightest sign," among other contingencies (*Thief's* 20). Focused in a generalized desire to take, the thief knows that the transfer of a property from another to himself is dependent on odds that are not in his favor. In order to take properties unto himself, he must break the law – becoming an exception – not by being different, but by paying attention to the ways generalities can be adapted to the specific condition in which an act is waiting to be carried out in the right way at the right time and with the right desire. The path to becoming an exception, moreover, is never quite direct. Only through an attention to dispersed (contextual) possibilities in the landscape will the thief manage to shift the balance needed in order to produce the desired discharge whereby an other's object or quality will become attached to him. All this he will attempt to explain in *The Maids*,

which is at once a story and a training ground for everyday engagements with the adaptive process.

### III. The Maids

Cast as a criminal whodunit, *The Maids* ends with a killing carried out in full view. Despite the fact that the death occurs before their very eyes, audience members have difficulty answering even the most basic questions about who's guilty, or what might have been the crime's cause. In fact, they can't even say in a straightforward manner who exactly has died. As they attempt to untangle ambiguities about whether the death was a murder, suicide, neither, or both they are forced to recognize that no single answer can be correct. After all, the killing has been produced by tendencies arising somewhere between interpretive frames. As such, in order to track the different events of different types and different forms of linkage between them, they must take a navigational stance towards sensory data, relying on "clues" not typically employed in mysteries, tracking tendencies across scenes with a particular attention to the shifting configurations of meanings constructed by phrasal and gestural repetitions. In this, they are like the Papin sisters, and like any audience in a court, where the inferences to be drawn from sensory data arise somewhere between logics and can only be apprehended according to a proprioceptive adaptation that will deploy known concepts, but produce a temporary understanding suited to particular the case alone.

In this, Genet is and isn't drawing upon the usual conventions of theater. As Samuel Weber notes in *Theatricality as Medium*, theatre calls for audiences to engage

with narratives in which they must be present with sensory data, using their external senses to apprehend each scene (758). Yet, as theatre critic Benjamin Bennett notes, the scenes presented by theater are never entirely mimetic since the sets and stages offer only a limited means for reproducing each scene. Instead of offering a full set of sensory details, thus, the theater asks audience members, “anticipate...objects’ (and human bodies’) semioticization” whereby audience members fill in for gaps in sensory data by drawing upon memories of similar scenes that they bring in from outside (Bennett 179).

In this lies an opportunity for what Genet’s predecessor, Antonin Artaud, in *Theater of the Double*, describes as an opportunity to produce a theater “as something else than a means of conducting human characters to their eternal ends, since theater is concerned only with the way feelings and passions conflict with one another, and man with man, in life” (72). Since stereotypes and habits of seeing are necessarily invoked by the filling-in process, there is a chance for theater to produce what Genet will eventually call “theatre riding on the back of theatre,” – an engagement not just of characters and props, but also of the ideas and emotions that accompany them by means of the audience’s work of filling in what they experience through the senses. Indeed, taking on just such a task appears to be what he is up to in *The Maids*. He declares his intent to force audiences to use their imagination with a plan to stage the play with young boys playing the role of the women (*Lady* 221). A placard calling attention to this fact was to be nailed to one side of the stage (221). As such audiences would have to use the young boys as a sensory fodder from which the women of the play were to be drawn.

Habits of seeing will, in fact, be repeatedly addressed by the play. Herin lies

an important different between Genet's theater and a theatre associated with a realist narrative. While most plays allow their audiences to settle into a single frame of reference, following easily definable characters through a series of events that eventually allow a whole to become visible, Genet's play disrupts such a possibility through what Sartre, in his introduction to *The Maids*, calls a series "whirligigs" (27).<sup>60</sup> That is, a series of forced reconsiderations that require audience members to loop back into memory and repeatedly shift their understandings of what they thought they'd known before. These forced reconsiderations, in conjunction with a doubled structure of performance set out in the opening scene, unseats audience members from a stable subject position. Shifting interpretive stances, they, like the Papin sisters, learn to attend to a multi-modular field of possibilities whereby they must track not just connections between sensory scenes and meanings but also connections between standing assemblages of multiple types of meaning that include the ways in which they approach sensory data, which is understood as having implications in a variety of ways and for a variety of tasks (metaphorically, suggestively, representationally, and instrumentally) associated with the repeated but re-inflected scenes, they must, as in a court case, watch not just sensory aspects of the data, but the ways in which the shape of the many possibilities has expanded or collapsed based on the ways that the accenting repetitions highlight and actualize particular possibilities, or leave them fallow.

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<sup>60</sup> In filling in as much as it does for audiences, the Christopher Miles film goes against Genet's intentions. However, since the psychic activity of filling in is difficult to describe, I will be using pictures from the film as an illustration of how the sensory scaffolding associated with Genet's desired staging was filled in by at least one person (Miles). Further, that the effects produced by Genet's play are produced even when a realist staging is presented to audiences through the more distanced mechanism of a film, only shows that the interpretive flexibility associated with our sensory experiences are even more prevalent than suspected since they are at work even when gaps in the sensory landscape are not explicit.

Moving between Genet's script and an aesthetically realist, 1974 Christopher Miles film version of *The Maids*, takes advantage of the implication-based stance associated with court trials. True, the Miles version of the play is antithetical to Genet's wishes since he seems to have wanted to put audience members in a position akin to that of the Papin sisters where only bare indications of the context are available. However, the fact that the effects Genet wishes to produce come off even when full sensory data is filled in only makes Genet's point about contextual adaptability even stronger. Indeed, as audience members follow the odd criminal whodunit through its various interruptive twists and turns, and experience the expansions and contractions in their habits of responding to sensory data, they are engaged in something like a court-trial in slow-motion. With clear separations between one strategy of approach and the next, the case being made about contextual adaptability is made more clearly than it is in a court case, or in conditions of service. However, audience members can only step back so far when it comes time for reflecting on the lessons. The play, after all, does not teach audiences by showing or telling. It acts directly upon its audience members, drawing them not just scenes but also stances, and teaching them how these stances are resolved by the movements of logics on a larger scale than their individual subjectivities. In a sense, they are merely vehicles for the ceremony's desire to reach its own own end.

#### **IV. Historicizing the Understanding Through Modal Coordinations**

Take, for example, the opening scene. In the Christopher Miles version of the play, that I will use to help explicate the audience's relationship with the suggestive

cues of the script, audience members are presented with fancy dresses, gilded bedsteads, and a half-dressed woman in an expensive robe.



**Figure 15. The Play Within The Play**

Absent previous experiences with the characters onstage, audience members immediately apply a stereotype, deciding that the woman wearing a fancy dress is a madame, while the character behind her is a maid. However, when an alarm clock rings and the two women reveal themselves to be two maids *playing* the roles of madame and maid, audience members are impelled to redescribe the *way* that they have understood the scene.



**Figure 16. Actually Two Maids**

Yes, they decide, we have seen a maid and a madame, but a maid and madame *in performance*. Classifying the opening scene as “theatrical” provides a context for the initial misunderstanding, and with misperception and correction assigned each to its own sphere, audiences are absolved of the need to reject the “false” for the “true.”

They do so by making use of a proprioception-related epistemological construct, called modality, which specifies the manner in which they track sensory data, the context of its interpretation, and the grounds upon which it may be applied. Realizing that the literal truth can be clarified by the theatrical expression, they accord their initial impression a truthfulness, but only in a way. Such a clarification may seem simple enough. However, audience members are no longer using their senses in exactly the way they had before.

Even as the maids rush to discard their costumes in order to prepare for “the real Madame’s” entrance, audience members, forgetting that they have previously marked the play-within-the-play as deceptive, re-approach the initial performance as a possibly “true” representation of the Madame who is to appear. Redeploying their

initial impression of the play-within-the-play in an instrumental modality, they prepare to witness the maids' suffering.

It's here that the effects of Sartre's "whirligig" are most apparent. Whereas the play-within-the-play had previously been marked as deceptive, it is now taken to be true, albeit with a different conception of truth than had been had before. After all, the validation of the opening scene now depends upon a coordinative prediction that is to authenticate the play-within-the-play's representation by matching it with a future scene.

Following a trajectory of upsets already established in the opening scene, when "the real Madame" arrives on the scene, she at first appears to be kind.<sup>61</sup>



**Figure 17. The Real Madame**

Audience members, returning to the opening scene, thus, bolster an early association they have previously made between the maids and deceptiveness. The maids, presumably have provided audience members with a false representation. However, by adjusting the assignments of true and false audience members manage to balance their understandings about the world thus far.

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<sup>61</sup> According to Deleuze's writings in *Difference and Repetition*, habit is a thread that moves along, providing a tendency that is adapted in changing circumstances and across differences (71).



If they think, their discounted impression is worthless, however, they are wrong. Even as Madame gives as gifts the dresses the maids have been illicitly borrowing, audience members detect a falsity in her seemingly humble speeches. After all, flowery lines like, “I’ve been trailing through corridors...seeing frozen men and stony faces...I’d follow [Monsieur] to Devil’s Island, to Siberia...it would be a joy to bear his cross,” have proved to be deceptive before (64). Trained by the trick played by the opening play-within-the-play, thus, they are well-prepared prepared for the changes in Madame, when mid-scene a telephone call informs Madame that Monsieur has been released and Madame throws off the mannerisms of a generous mistress, takes back the gifts she has given the maids, and issues harsh commands and proceeds to take on the role of a nervous lover.

Realizing that the “real Madame” too, has been putting on a performance, and perhaps more than one performance, audience members introduce a split into the literal real, projecting a new type of truth, a “real real,” or authentic, truth that lurks beneath the literal.



**Figure 18. The Authentically True Representation**

In doing so, they draw on proprioception to combine two modes of approach to sensory data – the literal and the theatrical – this time, placing the seat of truth not in sensory evidence but in a lurking essence expressible only through theatrical exaggeration. The performance, in revealing the authentic, is now more true (and more real) than sensory experience, which in its everyday deceptiveness is little more than a mask.

Here, it is appropriate to pause for a reflection. What the play has demonstrated, after all, are not just a series of tricks, but a new way for audience members to exercise their senses, memories, intellects, and desires. Freed from an epistemology dependent on passive truths received from sensory data, they are engaged in gathering knowledge as creatures that learn, expect, remember, and scan forward for new information created by questions that have arisen along the way.

What audience members are perceiving, moreover, are not objects with properties, but rather “effects,” arising somewhere between sensory data, expectations and links between modalities, characters, and scenes. Take, for example, the cruelty audience members come to find in a simple utterance Madame makes after she has learned her lover has been let out of jail. While waiting for the taxi that will take her to meet him, she suddenly asks Claire, “And the accounts? The day’s accounts? Show them to me.” [“Et le comptes? Les comptes de la journée...Montre-les-moi”] (73/71). In order to perceive the phrase’s cruelty audience members must recall that it is Solange, who keeps track of the day’s accounts, and that Claire, who thinks of herself as Madame’s favorite, will be hurt by Madame’s inability to distinguish between herself and Solange. Moreover, whether Madame consciously intends the cruelty or is consciously aware of the effect her phrase will have on Claire is almost beside the

point. The effect of “cruelty,” arises when Claire’s sensitivity meets and mixes with Madame’s utterance (in the audience members’ imaginations and in Claire’s consciousness or sub-consciousness).<sup>62</sup>



**Figure 19. Authentically Doubled**

In order to apprehend the effect, then, audience members must be able to coordinate data from the various scenes. Not that they need to be especially clever in order to do so. With various interruptions setting them up to develop new modes of apprehensions, and to revalue impressions, the effects are created almost on their own through the ways the various impressions are referred to one another across scenes and modalities.

Indeed, what they have apprehended by means of the various whirligigs are not kindness and cruelty *in general*, but rather qualified qualities representative of historically-produced dimensions of experience. Qualities like “apparent kindness,” and “effective cruelty,” have been produced on the fly and have been shaped to fit the particular history of the production of facts arising thus far in the play. Thus, when one attempts to explain what has been apprehended by means of supplements and

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<sup>62</sup> Many law associated with sexual harassment are based on effects.

tensions, the flexible pseudo-concepts (or ideations) developed through the juxtaposition-based histories, one is hard pressed to know how to do so.<sup>63</sup>

After all, it difficult to extrapolate from these insights in order to make any generalizable judgments. Based on their experiences audience members have to say that Madame is simultaneously kind *and* cruel, that Solange both loves her sister and wants to kill her, and that Claire, at once, hates Madame and wants to become her—in *a way*. If such ambiguities cause some—for example Brady and Yarrow—to associate complexity with a lack of action or partisanship, however, they need only to follow the many judgments made by audience members along the way. These judgments, while shiftable, were never neutral. They were always engaged with questions and stances towards the characters that cast them in a definite light.

## V. The Architectonics of Action

True, at the start of the play, the two maids are engaged in a ceremony that appears to be mainly symbolic. If Claire, dressed as Madame, can be shown to be inciting Solange, who plays Claire, to murder *The Maids* is set up to initially convince audience members that the play is only a play. While it reveals an imbalance between the maids and Madame, and between the two sisters, there is no hint when the alarm clock rings that anything will come of it. Certainly, it does not seem to be present in

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<sup>63</sup> In this, the audience members attempts at knowing become a medium in which thought comes to work on itself. While thought's working on itself is a reflexive activity, however, it is by no means passive. It's this type of complexity, I believe that Olson meant to address by saying that the coordinative work done by proprioception

produces experience of, 'depth' Viz  
SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM  
BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES

the mind of Claire, who will eventually take the lead in the plot to literally kill Madame.

The idea of literally murdering Madame, in fact, seems to slip quite unintentionally from her lips without even being a murder intention until it is transformed in discussions with Solange. For this reason critics frequently read the play as if Solange has manipulated Claire (and Christine Léa). Indeed the verdict of in the Papin sisters case where Christine receives a death sentence and Léa merely ten years, reflects such a belief. Genet's play, however, takes a step beyond intention, taking a step that might be said to go even beyond the adding of subconscious intentions to conscious ones, as a look at the discussions between the two sisters reveals.

While playing Madame, Claire makes an offhand comment about flowers as a part of larger utterance associated with the carrying off of her role: "You crush me with your attentions and your humbleness; you smother me with gladioli and mimosa...There are too many flowers...It's deadly" (37) ["Vous m'écraser sous vos prévenances, sous votre humilité, sous les glaïeuls et le réséda...Il y a trop de fleurs. C'est mortel"] (37 translation modified/18).<sup>64</sup> Audience members, concerned with the initial task of understanding the roles of the characters onstage, at first read the phrase mainly for its diction, using the flowery phrase to confirm that the woman speaking is "a madame."

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<sup>64</sup> The Frenchman translation has rendered "C'est mortel," as "it's impossible" (18). Such a translation, however, papers over a pun embedded in the phrase. A more literal translation would be 'It's deadly' (18). As the translation "it's impossible" does indicate, "C'est mortel," conveys horror and admiration at the same time. Thus, were it not out of place in the flowery diction of the performance, one might just as well translate the phrase through the American slang expression, "Killer!"

The theater's audience members are not the only ones to hear the phrase, however. Unbeknownst to audience members (that is, previous to the opening scene of the play) Solange attempted to smother Madame with a bedsheet. Thus, when she hears the phrase, she attends mainly to the violent parts of the utterance, and hears "c'est mortel!" as an accusation. Claire, indeed, could have used almost any phrase to cue in Madame's identity. With its seemingly unnecessary reference to death, the phrase appears to be poetically over-determined.

Of course, every phrase potentially is. Since the phrase's meaning lies not in itself, but in its coordination with other phrases, memories, contexts, bodies, and modes potential meanings flower out endlessly according to the contexts with which they are linked. Thus, if the tension produced by the invocation of Solange's memory is, at first, located mainly in Solange's psyche, it will not remain there long. Accusations, after all, require defenses. Whether Claire knows it or not, Solange has been called upon to respond.

As per the proprioceptive model associated with transference, however, Solange introduces the topic of murder into the conversation between herself and Claire only gradually, through a seemingly unrelated discussion of what Claire, playing Madame, ought to wear (18/38).<sup>65</sup> "Madame will wear the red robe," ["Madame mettra la robe rouge"] she says suddenly as a part of the play-acting ceremony. Claire, it seems, was set up to play Madame by wearing a white dress, thereby making a point in an ongoing debate between herself and Claire about the distinctions between the Madame and the maids -- and between the two sisters, as

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<sup>65</sup> While intention appears to be involved here, it's difficult say whether such an intention is conscious or not. Nor do such distinctions entirely matter, since it's the coordination of the floating quality with objects and its ability to attach to them that matters most.

well. (18/38). The color white, after all, highlights a quality of noble purity and cleanliness that Claire attributes to Madame, but not the maids who, she claims, are to be associated with a certain filthy obscurity, especially Solange. After all, by putting on the white dress, Claire, even while playing Madame, claims a certain quality of purity for herself.

True, the implications I am describing may seem too many to find riding on the back of a simple choice about dresses. However, as a return to the model of the court case shows, sensory data is never merely innocent. As Solange's turn from white to red suggests, as a point of transference whereby schemas are to be coordinated, it is always to be implicated in the production of the larger irrational violences that arise as a part of the Real. Indeed, although the terrain of the debate about the difference between Madame and the maids (and between Solange and Claire) is only a choice between dresses, Solange's command (or statement or prediction—the nature of the claim is not yet determined) strikes at the heart of the question on multiple levels. Ostensibly inserting itself into the debate as only a vague disagreement about the essence of what it means to be a Madame, the distinction at first seems to be of the sort that can be rationally discussed (38/18). "Eh why?" Claire, playing or perhaps not playing Madame, asks.

Since Claire is unaware of the memory her utterance has activated in Solange, the nature of the distinction Solange is trying to make is, at first unclear.

Indeed, even her answer is oblique. Seemingly out of nowhere she responds by suggesting a third choice, telling Claire, as if she is still playing Madame, "your widowhood really requires that you be entirely in black" (38). The choice, of course, is not really a choice since Claire, whose greatest wish is to differentiate herself from

her sister and the maids, would never play Madame in a black dress. Further, the suggestion isn't entirely out of nowhere, under cover of the discussion of dresses it continues to draw upon the schema associated with death that has been invoked in the phrase "c'est mortel!"

However, since it has not previously been established that Madame is a widow or that Monsieur is to be a part of the conversation, the utterance feels abrupt—and in a way it is. Through a faulty syllogism, Solange has snuck in an assertion that Claire is a murderess, since as the sisters will soon discuss, Claire, too, has acted against Madame by sending a letter to the police that has caused Monsieur to be jailed. True, Monsieur's purported crime is a white collar one – theft by forgery. Thus, even if he were to be convicted, he would not be executed – Solange's logic is off. Still, the faulty syllogism has its effect. Perhaps distracted by her fear of playing Madame in black, the color of the maids and a confirmation of harm done to Madame through Monsieur, Claire takes the red dress. Although she holds off on putting it on until the meaning of the dress can be clarified, audience members are provided with a visible sign in the transfer of the property of the transfer of the title of murderess from Solange to Claire.

The move, small on a literal level, is, thus large in terms of its action. However, as subsequent discussions between Solange and Claire show, the accomplishment of the transference of a title will still need to be translated into some literal implication in order for it to be made real. Indeed, in the subsequent discussion, where Claire attempts to clarify the meaning of the property she has received, Solange and Claire tarry in discussions about the what red implies as a symbol of love. Still caught up in the larger debate between Solange and Claire about whether the Madame



or maids is more noble, the discussion of love is, however, only an excuse to further discuss the essence of Madame and the maids.

For a time neither Claire nor Solange gains much headway in the debate. Solange, playing Claire, asserts her love for Madame, Claire, playing Madame, cautiously suggests, that the love of the maids is cheap, to be associated only with the meanest self-interest: love “as one loves a mistress” while hoping for an inheritance upon the mistress’ death (40). With the mention of death, however, an opening is made for Solange to continue her pursuit of the question of murder. Her answer is short and ambiguous: “I’d go through all in my power—” (40). Perhaps thinking of the foul smell the maids give off in their powerlessness and attempting to associate the maids with the devil, Claire sarcastically, asserts that the maids would “go through fire” for Madame, thereby countering her own claim about self interest, adding a hint of violence to the discussion, and simultaneously casting the maids as noble (associated with a royal red). Further, she has inserted a new definition of nobility into the discussion. Now it is to be associated not just with bloodright, but also with noble deeds. With all three schemas lined up, and the new definition suggested, she is caught. Consciously or subconsciously, Claire feels the defeat and puts on the red dress (40).

From this point on, all attempts to escape the identity of murderess only confirm her position. For example, in an attempt to counteract her tactical mistake in attributing red to the maids, she looks for the opposite of the brimstone in an image of herself and Solange kneeling in their attic bedroom beside a makeshift altar consisting of a vase of white paper flowers. This image, however, only feeds back into the

discussion between herself and Solange as a support of the nobility of the maids and a support for the idea that nobility is to be associated with sacrifice.

True, the discussions between Claire and her sister have not obliterated Claire's generalizable desire to become glamorous, like Madame. However, in the discussions that follow, the ideas and images that arise about how one might do so, reflect the shifted definition for which bloodright and sacrifice are collapsed into a qualified understanding of nobility, one which allows the quality of 'whiteness,' to be attributed to the maids. Indeed, even as Claire casts about for an idea about how to address Madame subsequent to the collapse, Claire calls upon only ideas that liken princesses to saints. As she tells Solange in laying out her plan:

We've read the story of Sister Holy Cross of the Blessed Valley who poisoned twenty-seven Arabs... We've read the story of Princess Albanarez who caused the death of her lover and her husband... In a book about the Marquise de Venosa, the one who poisoned her children, we're told that... (62)

Notably, the presented stories seem to have arisen out of a haphazard mix of religious readings, penny dreadfuls and *True Detective* magazine, a purportedly non-fiction, sensationalist publication, for which the difference between fiction and fact is minimal. With the rhetorical gathering of these repositories of ideas as resources to be called upon as necessarily as the teacups and sleeping pills that will eventually be used as murder weapons, Genet reminds readers that murders are not carried out by means of things alone. In drawing upon a larger social imaginary, and examining the conditions of possibility for deciding what is plausible, ethical and desirable, Claire shows just how much has been accomplished by the collapse of architectonics.

After all, the material conditions for carrying out the murder have been there all along. Given their work as domestics, it is easy for the maids to draw upon

household items, like teacups and phenobarbital and to transform these innocent household objects into weapons of vengeance.<sup>66</sup> After all, the rituals through which they might do so are already in place, since according to custom, the maids, daily wait on Madame and present her with tea. Still, the integrative stitching associated with expansions, contractions and unwitting revaluations is necessary in order to produce the ideas and distribute responsibilities, and shift balances of power in such a way that bodies, objects, and ideas together can be deployed in order to produce the eventual act – and to discharge the various floating energies so that all is coordinated for a discharge on a particular body through a particular set of practices at a particular time.

## **VI. The Drive's Discharge**

In the end, of course, Madame does not die. While the phenobarbital was dropped into the tea, and the teacup set out on the usual tray with the ritual associated with it invoked, the difficulty of producing a coordination across dimensions and schemas is highlighted by the number of details that were left out of place. The tea is too cold. Claire has left dust on the dresser. Makeup is still on her face. She bumbles with her answers about Monsieur. Solange returns too soon and Madame, simply, isn't in the mood. While each of these details seem like small flaws, audience members are reminded of that little mishaps can produce large shifts – after all in this integrative environment a lot is riding on the back of every small thing.

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<sup>66</sup> Phenobarbital is an anti-seizure sleeping pill—its potential for becoming a poison lies in the fact that in too high of a dose it (presumably) kills. However an ambiguity remains around this point. For one, audience members are never told or shown how much phenobarbital is put in the tea. Thus, they never know whether the drinker of it will actually die or merely fall asleep. As a result audience members can never quite know whether Claire is intending to murder Madame or merely putting on a show of doing so in order to save her.

However, the process is not infinite – at least not for the individuals involved – not do they leave all unchanged. Court cases, after all, are meant to end in verdicts, ones with potentially deadly consequences for the defendant. An adaptation (or at least a refreshing of the law) is meant to occur as well. If the adaptation in the case of the maids was already beginning to be seen in the redefinition of nobility as noble sacrifice, audience members will be given an opportunity to see this adaptation carried out even more fully in the final section of the play. After all, when Solange and Claire attempt to return to the ritual with which they began, they find they're not able to do so in quite the same way as they had before. Claire, empowered by taking the lead in the murder plot, insists on keeping the role of the Madame with the result that the two maids take up in the middle of the ceremony, almost as if there has been no interruption at all. In fact, with the re-invocation, the ceremony now appears to theatre audience members to be as an agent in its own right, one whose desire to reach a close seems to drive the sisters to their fates. Indeed, it's with an impression of the larger ceremony's –and the architectonics' – importance that Genet will ultimately leave his audiences.

The moral of the play – that the “architecture that is verbal – that is, grammatical and ceremonial” – matters is presented to audience members twice in the play's final section. The importance of the architectonic arises in a speech Solange gives towards the end of the play (91-94). Upon returning to the ceremony (after having failed to kill Madame) she claims that Claire has, at last, driven her into a proper state of rage, one that will at last allow her to complete the ceremony by symbolically killing Madame. Just as she is in the throes of doing so, by choking Claire with what in the play is a riding whip, but the movie is a curtain cord, Claire

breaks out of the ceremony, claiming to be ill. Solange helps her offstage, into the wings, and supposedly into the kitchen, where nothing more is heard for some time. Solange returns alone, proclaiming her triumph.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the theatre's audience members are led –by the concepts, habits, schemas and experiences that they've been building up all along – to suspect that she has literally killed Claire.

As is evidenced by her turning her back on the stage and stepping out on the balcony, it's not direct violence, but rather an adjustment of a series of architectonics that will “cause” the deed to be carried out. The tale she tells of a major revaluation whereby in becoming a criminal –the one who killed Claire—Solange also becomes a saint, presumably because she has sacrificed her greatest love (her sister) in order to save her from a terrible fate awaiting her at the hands of Madame. In the parade of symbolic representatives called forth in her speech at an imagined funereal-celebration with a rather forceful suggestion of the carnivalesque, audiences are told of “butlers...wearing their crowns,” “chambermaids wearing...colors,” and “flowers, streamers, banners” which allow religion and politics meet (93). What is most significant about these imagined creatures is the fact that, despite audience members never having seen them with their own eyes, they can “make sense” of what Solange is saying and easily picture the scene ---based on the histories of experience and the grammars and rules of combination that have been produced thus far. Indeed, audience members feel a bit like these images were even an almost necessary result of the adjustments in architectonics that have been already made.

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<sup>67</sup> What Solange means by “getting there,” is not however, that she's about to reach a state in which she will at last have a stable identity with properties that can be attributed to it. Now will her literal body shift its substance. Rather, she's about to undergo a transformation that will discharge her identity into the context that has been built up around her. There will, thus, be implications for all else to which she, as a symbol, represents.



**Figure 20. Addressing the Imaginary**

Indeed, through a series of shifts in subjectivity used during the speech, Solange presents herself both as the “monstrous soul of servanthood” and the eye of God, who can look out at the architectonic and see all of its connections. It’s such a position, Solange seems to claim that has allowed her to carry out the act on behalf of all of the maids and servants and even as a mechanism for distributing justice to Monsieur and Madame. After all, looking from the god’s eye viewpoint, she shows how various tensions were balanced by her act. With a single adjustment, indeed, a new set of values, a point of origin out of which a new world is to arise, since the organism will have adapted, with the removal of that one little part, which seems to have been the excess that kept the totality in tension and prevented it from becoming at rest. After all, Solange’s remove to the symbolic – the coordinative realm where connections are addressed – a certain sense of wholeness was produced, with the multiple schemas with which the tale had begun seeming to be definitively collapsed into a single, unified whole.

With the architectonic more or less set that the whole defined, all that remains is for the collapsed architectonic to make its discharge. The act Solange proclaims to have committed is, after all, none other than that of expelling of her sister from the scene – or at least the setting of her in relief through a production that casts her as absent in being dead. Yet, as Claire’s eventual reappearance, half visible in her white dress in the doorway that serves as a threshold between the kitchen and Madame’s bedroom shows, this act is not to be carried out by Solange alone. True, audience members readily erased Claire from their calculations, presuming her to be dead and perhaps even feeling some schematic relief at the fact. Yet it is as both as simple as that and not.

True, since the tale has cast her as dead, the white dress she wears is now a mark of her half-fantastical, state. Whether literally dead or not, she is now resurrected and ready to take her place in Solange’s tale. Yet the collapse in schemas that Solange claimed to have produced has to be set in motion through audience members’ step-by-step engagements with their memories and sensory experiences as well. The process, through which they will be led to do so is through a ceremony, this time a re-invocation of the tea ceremony with Claire, playing Madame, and Solange, playing Claire, which is to be overlaid onto the murder ceremony that has been repeatedly rehearsed all along. The final scenes, however, reveal the texturing work that needs to be done in order to set all in place. The importance of ceremonies, after all, is that objects are handed over with words and intentions being drawn in to the process in order to produce the transformation, whereby all those involved are also adapted and changed.

A look at the tea ceremony with which the play closes reveals the mechanics of the process. Take, for example, the importance of a specific memory of phrases needed in order to make sense of the final scene.

CLAIRE:  
[More firmly]:  
Madame will have her tea...  
SOLANGE:  
Madame will have her tea...  
CLAIRE:  
Because she must sleep...  
SOLANGE:  
Because she must sleep...  
CLAIRE:  
And I must stay awake.

The meaning of the utterance, “Madame will have her tea...” audience members will have to admit, does not lie in the words alone. Nor does it lie in the objects referred too. After all, when Claire speaks the words of the tea ceremony she is enacting a suicide, but when Solange says them, it’s a murder. The shift is small, but crucial, especially if one is Solange or Claire. After all, even though she purportedly tries to interrupt the ceremony, Solange is being produced as a murderess, thereby obtaining the very criminal-sainthood she predicted she’d obtain. Claire is being produced as a noble sacrifice, either by her hand or Solange’s.

I do not have to remind my readers with the ease with which revaluations and transformations occur in the play, but it’s illustrative to see how the mere extension of a sentence in the ceremony ultimately carries out the act.

CLAIRE:  
Claire, pour me a cup of tea.  
SOLANGE:  
But...  
CLAIRE:



I said a cup of tea.  
SOLANGE:  
We've got to stop. ...  
CLAIRE:  
Don't interrupt...I say, my tea. ...  
SOLANGE:  
But, Madame.  
CLAIRE:  
Good. Continue.  
SOLANGE:  
But, Madame, it's cold.

Solange's first "but" is an objection, but its continuance, "but, Madame," an assent that leads to the tea, prepared for Madame to this time address to a different body than the one for which it had been prepared.

Lurking in these final lines, moreover is a recognition that the gaps between various elements of the schemas have been closed to such an extent that interruptions are to be no more – at least until some larger interruption comes along. After all, with her turn to the symbolic and her telling of the whole tale, Solange, like a lawyer presenting the final speech – has closed off ambiguous places where she might have stopped the ceremony by shifting to another tale. Such a patching over is easy this time because so many schemas have already been collapsed and (alchemically) fused in such a way that Claire cannot find the desire to slip out. With the seemingly flippant phrase, "I'll drink it anyway," she is prepared to fill in the space where an interruption might arise.

After all, Madame is still being killed in a way, with the result that Claire's earlier plot is, in a way, carried off. Moreover, Claire's struggle for ascendancy over her sister, in a way, won. Never mind that the real Madame is not dead, or that Solange, in taking on the personality of the criminal-saint and promising to carry the

legacy of her sister with her, proclaims her own rise. The process has reached a full stop and through the various architectonic collapses induced by the murder/suicide, turned back satisfyingly on itself and fantasy and reality have been adapted – collapsed.<sup>68</sup>

True, audience members have not been able to answer the expected questions. Even as they allow the visual presentation to split their sensory experiences in such a way that it oscillates between two deaths – the literal and the symbolic – they find they cannot quite separate the two. After all, they have learned to approach the scene with more than just their eyes. True, audience members have not especially changed their prejudices about maids. In fact, the play used them with the result that the “lower classes” went away as dangerous as they were before. True, a nobility was accorded to the maids, but only the nobility of self-sacrifice, which most would begrudgingly accord them if asked. Yet, Genet’s purpose it seems was to produce a madness in the audience members – they were to have experienced the very same madness the Papin sisters had – and the play was to have been performed only once because the explosion of the paranoiac conditions was to have resulted in mass murders or other explosions where the audience members were to have perhaps even died.

This result did not occur. Yet, as Solange’s final speech suggests, audience members have learned to let their stereotypes expand and shrink and be populated with a host of unexpected creatures – these are the interaction effects that present themselves in whispers glimpsed only from the side. Thus, when Solange steps up to the front of the stage to speak her ‘last words,’ she speaks directly to the play’s audience, about the velour curtains that have been raised not just for the purpose of

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<sup>68</sup> In Genet’s original script, the real Madame, even was meant to have reappeared in the doorway and be watching from the doorway with an icy smile.

revealing the actors or even for allowing actors to look out (/167). Rather the conversation has been between generalities and details. Thus, in the final speech audiences are asked to listen to a gentle rustle as a particular, contextually positioned Madame, moves to the door way producing a small disturbance as “her furs brush against the green plants,” as Monsieur at her side sings a love song [“a la oureille, Monsieur lui chuchote des most d’amour”] and the maids disperse into a haunting perfume (99-100). What audience members are hearing and smelling in whispers of fine hairs and furs are the echoes of the thousand little interactions that have produced the state audiences eventually find themselves in.

These little whisperings, according to Genet, are what drives one mad. Far from being harmless, they are the whispers of violence gathering in the almost, but not quite imperceptible violence of the Real. Its out of such whisperings, after all, that integrations are produced, would-be wholes undone and redone. It’s in order to invoke them, arguably that a proprioceptive approach to knowledge/criticism or rather action is needed.

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**Chapter 3. Creating New Senses:  
Prose After Cinema  
in Marguerite Duras' *Truck* and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair***

“The imagination, dead, imagine”  
– Samuel Beckett

“A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction”  
– Gilles Deleuze

“Not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think, and forces us to think what is concealed from thought”  
– Gilles Deleuze

“Fiction...must no longer be a power that tirelessly produces images and makes them shine but, rather, a power that undoes them, that lessens their overload, that infuses them with an inner transparency that illuminates them little by little until they burst and scatter in the lightness of the unimaginable.”  
– Michel Foucault

“She says: It's there in front of us on the screen.  
That's what I think.  
He asks: What screen?  
She says: There, in front of us: the road.”  
– Marguerite Duras

When the Vietnamese-born French writer and movie director, Marguerite Duras (1914-1996), proclaimed that she had developed a “film-text-writing” (*écriture courante*, or “running writing”) that collapsed the distinction between prose and cinema, the announcement should not have come as a surprise (*Green Eyes* 69). Duras' prose works had long been called cinematic, and her movies literary. Cinema and prose, moreover, are signifying practices with histories and functionalities that

have frequently jostled, supplemented, displaced and borrowed from one another, so much so that narrative cinema has often been described as a replacement for prose (Bazin *Cinema 1* 40).

Yet Duras complaint about cinema was odd. She decried films for “beating the imagination to death” [“frappe de mort...l’imaginaire”] by fixing pictures “once and for all and forever” [“une fois pour toutes et pour toujours”] (*Camion* 75).<sup>6970</sup> In that the cinema showed the same movie every time it was played, it could not, she declared, replace prose (75). Texts, after all, according to Duras, are delightfully indeterminate [indéfini] (75). As Elaine Scarry notes in *Dreaming by the Book*, they provide “instructions for the production of actual sensory content,” but not the sensory content itself (6). Each reader is free to imagine the characters and settings in her own way.

Not that prose is inherently superior to cinema. Certainly, it cannot match the vividness of a movie, which bombards audiences with colors and sounds at a pace of 24 to 150 frames per second.<sup>71</sup> After all, as Scarry notes, of all signifying practices, prose is, on balance, the most divorced from its own sensory qualities, since we are taught to approach it as if “its visual features...consist of monotonous small black marks on a white page [that] it has *no* acoustical features [and that] its tactile features are limited to the weight of its pages” (5). Strictly speaking, it is not true, of course, that prose has no materiality with which to address the senses. However, as I will

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<sup>69</sup> The entire quote is worth reading: “That’s its virtue even: to close. To stop the imagination. That stop, that closure is called : film.” [“C’est là sa vertu même: de fermer. D’arrêter l’imaginaire. Cet arrêt, cette fermeture s’appelle : film. Bon ou mauvais, sublime ou exécrable, le film représente cet arrêt définitif. La fixation de la représentation une fois pour toutes et pour toujours”] (75).

<sup>70</sup> All translations of *Le Camion* are my own.

<sup>71</sup> Recent film theory especially that associated with haptic film theory explores film’s address to the “haptic” senses of the body. See Vivian Sobchek’s *What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh*.

explain in my section on history, prose as a signifying practice has the role of downplaying its materiality. In this, it is missing not just vividness, but useful contact with sensory experience that might allow it to refresh its schematic lines of text, freeing them from a moribund sameness of sitting inert on the page. It is true in that as we bring memories to words we refresh them with each reading. However, Duras proposes a prose that can touch bodies directly by providing a means for prose to address the external senses, thereby becoming a means of awakening readers out of their habitual use of them. It's only through this continual prodding of the senses in service of the creation of new senses that, in Duras' aesthetic, language is to be kept alive.

Duras running-writing, then, is to take the best of prose and cinema and combine their joint capacities. Indeed, with her 1977 film-text *Truck* [*Le Camion*] (1977) she produces a movie that causes audience members to project imagined images onto the screen. In 1985 and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* [*Les Yeux Bleus, Cheveux Noirs*] (1985) a book for which as Hélène Cixous notes in conversation with Michel Foucault, the imagining "gaze...gets interrupted by touch" which is apprehended as a hypnotic rhythm that, in directly addressing the reader, opens her in such a way that she is prompted to open herself to the sensory environment (*White Ink* 164). As such, cinema and prose both are understood as mechanisms for creating new senses, ones which refer different parts of the sensory apparatus to one another.

By sensory apparatus, of course, I do not mean the external senses alone, of course. In fact, what Duras is accessing as she produces a collapse in prose and cinema is a simulative capacity, which as Berthoz explains in *The Brain's Sense of Movement*, we use when we are in motion. Being in motion, after all, involves both an



intake of data, and a certain amount of projective modeling, since “each time...[the body] commits to an action it makes assumptions about the state of certain receptors as the action unfolds” but still has to check with the external environment in order to make sure those assumptions are true (5). Providing the example of a highly skilled skier, he notes:

The ski champion cannot consistently be checking the state of all his sensory receptors; he mentally simulates the course of his run down the slope, and it is only from time to time, intermittently, that his brain checks to see whether the state of certain sensory receptors is in accordance with its prediction of the angle of the knees, the distance from the ski poles, and so on. These groupings of receptors are called configurations, and it appears that the brain checks configurations of specific receptors as it plans movement (5).

Duras’ work shows a keen understanding of this simulative capacity. As someone who wrote over nineteen films, fourteen plays, and more than ninety prose works, moreover, she was in a position to know how prose and cinema each accessed a different aspect of this simulative capacity. Prose with its emphasis on guided visualizations is better at modeling. Yet, in that it is separated from the external senses, the sensory sampling associated with indeterminacy goes undone. Cinema, for its part, trains viewers in sampling from a sensory environment. Yet, because it leaves no room for visualization, the simulative capacity associated with motion is lost. Duras with her film-texts will restore to her reader-audiences this simulative capacity. Both arts in being narrative, after all, are engaged with motion and ought to have access to both projective modeling and sensory sampling. Yet, understanding how the two capabilities became separated and how they might be rejoined requires a look at the two signifying practices’ joint histories and the relationships with sensory experience and projection associated with them.

## The “Impossible Body”: Prose and Cinema’s Joint Histories

As Wlad Godzich and Jeffrey Kittay explain in the *Emergence Of Prose*, it is a part of prose’s history to efface its sensory features (xiii). Produced as an antidote to verse, prose arose as a supplement to performances told by travelling jongleurs, who travelled from town to town, reciting legends specifically in order to excite the external senses (21). With their gazing, stamping, pointing, singing, dancing, and shifts in voice and tempo, these jongleurs knew how to “draw the ground [associated with sensory experience] in, and change its identity,” thereby allowing it to be interpreted in terms set out by the past (23). The effect, as Walter J. Ong explains, in *Orality and Literacy*, was that of preserving the status quo. As he notes, because the “words [of ancient tales] acquire their meanings only from their always insistent actual habitat,” the jongleurs’ performances provide audience members with practice in mapping sensory experiences onto schemas that had been set in the past (57).

With the development of class fissures, consolidations within feudalism, and the emergence of bourgeois estates, however, trust in the schematizing tales of the jongleur broke down, often for good reason. For one, sensory experiences were simply changing too fast (xvi). For another, jongleurs were increasingly being hired to tell tales that glorified this or that house at the expense of other segments of the community (xvii). Blame was placed on the jongleur’s body, as well as on the sensory materiality of the rhythms and sounds of verse. Verse was seen as dangerously persuasive (xix). As a result, prose arose through a practice of “derhyiming” verses in order to strip them of their sensory ornaments. With artful body of the jongleur no longer available as a means of securing a tale’s authority, prose had to establish itself

as an official document, whose source was a remote bureaucratic “autorité” that was listened to because of its support by what was quickly becoming a nation-state (65)

In order to create a semblance of what had previously been communities with many shared experiences, bureaucratic functionaries that Godzich and Kittay call “derhumeurs” “compilers,” historians” and “scribes,” collected and compiled information from groups of people with different linguistic and social codes (65). The stories and histories they created out of these compilations necessarily involved a certain amount of fictionalizing, since the tales of different groups told in different languages and different narrative styles did not match up on their own.

In a tactic that foreshadowed what would eventually develop into the nation-state, a character that I here call a bureaucratic “narrateur-compileur” was added to manage the passageway between tales. Like the future nation-state, the “narrateur-compileur” subjected information from different communities to a single authority and a single logic. However, as Godzich and Kittay note, the “narrateur-compileur” was unlike any storyteller that had come before since it does not have eyes, ears a voice, or hear to its own, but instead is forced to slip in and out of bodies, borrowing from individual subjectivities and sometimes speaking through them (71). Its body, in other words, was fictional, based on a function not a person with a body that any one individual could have.

Indeed, since the “narrateur-compileur” was compiling scenes collected by means of what had been sensed by others, its made tales, according to Godzich and Kittay, no longer needed to be “inscribed in...the known laws of optics” (55). In that the bureaucratic functionary borrowed from others, and had no body of its own, it could pass through walls, flit across space and time, and move in and out of bodies,

using little more than the grammatical splice of a sentence to construct its scenes (34). As such, the prose scenes produced by the bureaucratic “narrateur-compilateur” had the “potential to escape perceptual requirements and to construct perspectival possibilities” associated with an “impossible body” that had a number of eyes (65).

In following the flitting and sliding of the disembodied “narrateur-compilateur” readers, too, flew away from their senses. Although less than 1% of the population could read, even prose performances asked listeners to compile scenes based on nothing a single human could see. Grammatical rules had replaced the performer’s body and the direct sensory experiences of the audience (34). Pronouns, which had once been an occasion for the jongleur’s pointing into the audience to borrow a body of a person, place, or thing, now functioned as text binders, whereby they took their meaning from their immediate precedents on the page (34). Conjunctions and subordinate clauses also took over for gestures (34). As a result, prose audiences too became compilers, but of memories, arranged according to the rules and tales provided by prose.

In this, prose develops visualizing faculties associated with simulation. Yet, visualizing faculties are not the same as those described by Berthoz. With the function of visualization being to take the place of sensory experiences, audiences of prose were being cut off from the aspect of simulation that would allow them to update their models. Further, since fiction and history, were formally identical, even bureaucratic “narrateur-compilateurs” no longer necessarily collected facts. Fiction, instead, was shown to be useful for projecting imagined communities and fictionally projected futures. With no map of sensory experiences to guide them readers had no way to decide whether these futures were good or bad ones.

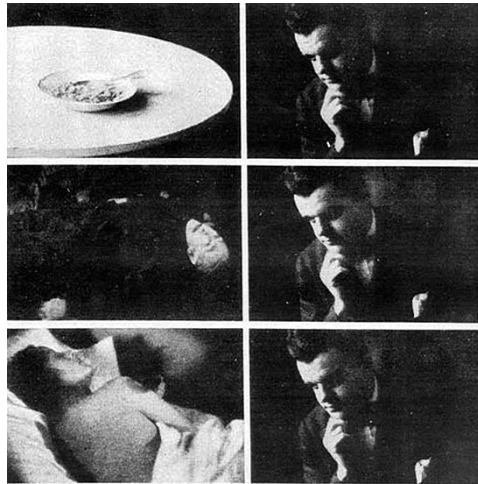
## Cinema's Narrative Turn

What a relief, then, to come upon early cinema. Cinema, after all, began as a visual art. It was a landscape photographer, Eadweard Muybridge, who took the rapid-sequence photographs of a running horse that came to be known as the first moving pictures. His purpose in doing so was to settle a factual question about whether horses lifted their hooves off the ground when galloping. When run together the sequential pictures produced something very much like the determinate images shown in photographs. As such, cinema began as an art defined mostly its realism. That is, it was thought to present a reproduction of what anyone might see projected onto the back of the retina. It was no surprise, then, that newsreels were a popular part of cinema's functioning right up into the seventies, when similar pictures were shown on television.

Muybridge, however, recognized that cinema's greatest benefit was in its ability to apprehend what could not be captured using perception alone (183). His sequential photographs captured a motion that, previously, had been too quick and too complicated to be captured by the human eye alone (184). By slowing down the images and capturing them in sequence, he helped scientists to see not just a reality but also something beyond the physical.

Indeed, it did not take long for cinema to define itself as a prosaic art, positioned to project much more than what could be seen by ordinary human eyes. By 1918 filmmakers had discovered montage, a juxtaposition-based syntactical unit, where, as cinema critic Andre Bazin notes in *Cinema 1* "the meaning is not in the

image,” but rather in “the shadow of the image projected by montage onto the field of consciousness of the spectator” (26). As one of montage’s most famous proponents, Sergeij Eisenstein reports, experiments by the Russian physiologist, Lev Kuleshov, showed the expression on a man’s face would be understood differently if it was placed next to a bowl of soup, an old woman, or a baby [Figure 1].



**Figure 21. Kuleshov’s Experiment**

In that the meaning was produced out of a relation between the two pictures, the idea that each picture took its meaning only from the objects it portrayed was refuted (37). As cinema developed, more and more attention was paid to the structure of relations between pictures. Like words in a prose sentence, moving pictures became broken up into “shots,” and strung together grammatically (37).

It’s this grammatical turn that made cinema prosaic. As Bazin proclaims, once cinema had mastered the activity of compiling scenes from shots, it was “no longer the competitor of the painter and the playwright, [but] at last the equal of the novelist” (40). What he means is that the shot-editor had begun to take on the function of the “narrateur-compileur” of prose. As Gilles Deleuze notes in *Cinema 2*, “the ability of the camera to take on different perspectives allows it to compose a body that is much

more complex than a substitution of the camera for an individual's vision" (191). Like the "narrateur-compileur" of prose it need not have own eyes, ears voice, or heart. Freed by grammar it can move in and out of bodies flitting across space and time, providing its audiences with "a view through the eyes of an impossible body" that sees what no actual human could ever see (191).

Movies, of course, constitute this body more effectively than prose since cinema provides viewers with actual sensations seen by inhuman eyes. Indeed, at their height, classical films, funded by Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin, and Hollywood used grammar's ability to show movie-goers worlds that were literally fabricated in studios. One need only to think of the *Triumph of the Will*, Hitler's idealized portrayal of the large crowds he imagined himself gathering, in order to see how easily such scenes could be confused with scenes "naturally" occurring in everyday life. Indeed, with help from expert actors, reinforcing sound-tracks, and fast-moving plots, the film's continuity editing literally swept viewers out of their senses, calling on them to engage in what might have been previously unimaginable acts of cruelty. Cinema wasn't the only factor in producing atrocities like the Holocaust, of course. However, the dazzling spectacles it provided, certainly had the effect of confusing viewers about what was and wasn't possible and real.

### **Neorealism: A Return To The Medieval Jongleur**

As a backlash against film's abstractive capacities, various movements arose to return filmmaking to the everyday external senses. The most prominent of these was Italian Neorealism, which served as a model for the *French New Wave* aesthetic within which Duras would later work. Shot in everyday settings, Neorealist films

avoided studio sets and all other forms of fabrication, including for the most part trained actors (Bazin *Cinema 2* xviii). In their place, simple, naturalistic movements of the camera proposed to return viewers to what could be seen in with actual human eyes. As such, long-takes and deep-focus filming produced a condition in which “the unit of cinematic narrative,” in Bazin’s words, was not the shot but “the fact” (37). That is, “a fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity” (37). As Neorealist filmmaker, Pier Pasolini explains, the aesthetic’s emphasis on long-takes and deep-focus shots attempted to provide viewers with a sensory experience that was “pre-grammatical and...pre morphological” (543). As little as possible was to be pre-compiled or projected by the film’s editing.

Such films, however, were not without an ideological bent. Like the travelling jongleur, Neorealists sought to deepen the audience’s sensory experiences, providing their viewers with structures for anchoring and organizing data gathered through the external senses. Specifically, as Bazin explains in *Cinema 2*, most Neorealist directors subscribed to a Marxist position of dialectical materialism (37). Their films were to excite within viewers an awareness of a gradual, dynamic unfolding produced by the subtle grating of dialectical forces (26).<sup>72</sup> In this, films were directly political. Art was now deploying materialities and providing categories that viewers were to use to see possibilities for action in their everyday lives.

### III. Marguerite Duras’ Film-Texts

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<sup>72</sup> What I mean by grating should be apparent from Chapter 2. The discordant movement of incompatible logics, in coming in contact, produce tensions that allow qualities attached to one thing to be loosened from an individual object and freed for an attachment to another.



Duras, an early Communist party member who was active in the French Resistance and directly affected by the German occupation was a fierce proponent of a political approach to filmmaking. *Truck*, indeed, appears to be a direct address to Neorealism both in its technique and in its Marxist subject matter. Pointedly filmed in long-takes, the film's opening image is of twittering birds and a rumbling truck [Figure 2].



**Figure 22. An emblem of materialism**

The camera work, moreover, is consciously artless. It alternates between images of a truck, images of an unbeautiful highway-side landscape, and the messy interior of Duras' house, where Duras and a popular French actor, Gérard Depardieu, read unrehearsed from a script [Figure 3].



**Figure 23. Two tasks for the senses**

Its Marxist stance, moreover, is made obvious at nearly every turn. For one, its most explicit subject, as is indicated by the title, is a large truck, whose most prominent feature is its rumbling motor. This truck, viewers are told, carries manufactured goods from a seaside town to a port where its packages will be transferred and shipped out for exchange. Moreover, the area the truck passes through is Yvelines, a semi-developed mix of suburban houses and industrial production, settled mainly by low-paid manufacturing workers and marginalized immigrants. The driver of the truck, one of two main characters in the film, is described as a card-carrying member of the French Communist Party. The hitchhiker he picks up is stateless. Much of the text of the film follows her rambling, which frequently involves speaking about the landscape in explicitly dialectical terms. Hills, for example, are recast as “a light swelling caused by internal pressures of water...lakes looking for exits...through which to emerge.” [“On ne peut pas dire que ce soit vraiment des collines, mais plutôt un bombement de la terre...comme un gonflement léger provoqué par des pressions internes...de l’eau, peut-être, des lacs...qui cherchent des issues... par ou émerger...sortir” (19). In addition, a recurrent refrain, the oft-repeated phrase “que le monde aille à sa perte” about the world being on its way to ruin, reminds viewers that

no epiphany is needed to arrive at a revolutionary moment, since, as per Neorealism's understanding that materialist forces are slow-moving, change is occurring all around all the time as a dialectical unfolding. What better marker of the revolution's inevitability than the image of a giant truck moving down a one-lane highway?

In Duras' metaphysic there are, however, a few forks in the road. By 1977, when *Le Camion* was made, Duras had long since left the official French Communist Party. In the face of the Algerian War and the events of May '68, Duras, along with many other writers and philosophers of the time were working out an open approach to materialism that would allow for flexible strategies and unexpected developments (Just 360). All too often, according to this perspective, Neorealism showed the revolution as arriving as inevitably as, in Bazin's words, "a small child recklessly inflating a rubber balloon to the point where it explodes in his face" (80). Its naturalism-based scientific Marxism cast dialectics as a mechanical process that could proceed in only one way.

Thus, while Duras—especially in interviews conducted around the time of *Truck*—continued to call herself a communist, and proclaimed that she'd remain one until she died, she would have to move beyond a strict Neorealist aesthetic in order to develop her political stance (Adler 170). As a close look at *Truck* shows, hers was a modified materialism that also left room for improvisation and play.

Both an affirmation of Marxism and a critique of its overly deterministic stance are evident in the epigram Duras has chosen for the script of *Truck*. Taken from a standard French schoolteacher's grammar textbook, *Le Bon Usage*, it reads:

It's through convention that the conditional is understood as a modality. Arguably, it's really a tense (a hypothetical future) of the indicative mode.

The conditional, properly speaking, expresses a possible or irreal fact, whose realization appears as a consequence of a supposition, a condition. (...) [It is also employed] to indicate a simple imagination that in some way transports events into the field of fiction (in particular, the pre-ludic conditional is used by children in their proposals of games).

C'est par tradition que l'on considère le conditionnel comme un mode. On peut estimer qu'il est en réalité un temps (un future hypothétique) du mode indicative.

Le conditionnel proprement dit exprime un fait éventuel ou irréal dont la réalisation est regardée comme la conséquence d'un fait supposé, d'une condition. (...)

[Il est employé aussi] pour indiquer une simple imagination transportant en quelque sort les événements dans le champ de la fiction (en particulier, un conditionnel pré-ludique employé par les enfants dans leurs propositions de jeu).

With the quote's emphasis on the future anterior tense, Duras is both reminding her interlocutors of her Marxist stance and suggesting a way beyond it. Specifically, she is pointing out that the future anterior, which Marxists such as Theodor Adorno frequently used to indicate that they looked from the perspective of the revolution to come, contained a projective fiction through which perceptions were to be built (*Moralia* 247).<sup>73</sup>

While few Marxists would deny that their critical stance was constructed, their understanding of perception, derived from science, was based on an idea that data about everyday materialities could be collected according to practices associated with empiricism. An empiricist approach to the senses, moreover, would allow traditional Marxists to organize the data they gathered according to scientifically calculable rules. Duras realized early on, however, that by anchoring the senses in a projective future one is already altering what it means to perceive. Moreover, inherent in the

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<sup>73</sup> According to the "standpoint of redemption," one could, for example, look from the future and understand the part that an individual worker will play as a member of the proletariat class, even before such a category is in use by the worker or actualized in the society of the time (*Moralia* 247).

Marxist goal of using scientific observation in association with political action was an opportunity to work not just with the world as it was, but also as a world with openings in materialities that allowed actors to draw in possibilities for becoming other than what they already were.

Thus, while a dogmatically materialist position would emphasize that the future unfolding is entirely contained in the initial conditions of determinate materialities, Duras' emphasis on play suggests that determinate materialities be understood as architectonic (structuring) structures around which room for free-play remains. Drawing upon the pre-prosaic tradition of the travelling jongleur, she uses the conditional as what linguists Frank Brisard and Adeline Patard call a "reality-switching device" (291). Referring to children's games to invoke the idea of play, she recounts, as soon as "children say: you, you would have been a pirate, you're a pirate, you, you'd be a truck, [the children playing the game] become the [pirate or a] truck" ["les enfants dissent: toi tu aurais été un pirate, toi tu es un pirate, toi tu serais un camion, ils deviennent le camion"] (89). Her approach to the future anterior, in other words, deploys real materialities, but also leaves room for improvisation in the manner in which the materialities and the projective schematic can be joined.

Duras begins her narration of *Truck*, by using the conditional tense to set out several elements that meet in her tale: the truck, its driver, the stateless woman, and the landscape. "It would have been on a road by the sea," she tells Depardieu and the film's viewers. "She would have crossed a great naked plane. And then a truck would have arrived" ["C'aurait été une route au bord de la mer. Elle aurait traversé un grand plateau nu. Et puis un camion serait arrivé"] (10). Each of these elements are understood as materialities, but it takes a prosaic conversation to coordinate them.

As if to emphasize the free play that prose allows, Duras' film script sometimes allows the text to break away from representational images. Indeed, when one watches *Truck*, odd disjunctions between what one sees and expects to see based on the text's narration produce a condition in which the viewer is receiving sensory data, but also projecting beyond it. For example, while audiences initially see an image of a truck and hear its rumbling, neither the driver nor the stateless hitchhiker is ever depicted. In fact, the only representation audience members ever have of the hitchhiker being picked up is an insufficient film-clip in which the truck is seen to be idling on the side of the road until a ratty-looking van pulls up behind it. No door slam is ever heard. Nor is the truck's door ever opened. When the van pulls up, the truck merely turns its lights on and drives off. Because the text goes on telling the story, however, viewers imagine that they have seen the hitchhiker get into the truck. Moreover, when images of the landscape appear on screen, they feel that they are looking through her eyes.

The film, moreover, provides some help in constructing the image of the woman. In the intercut living room segments, which the script associates with a camera obscura, Duras and Depardieu are shown reading unrehearsed from a script.



**Figure 24. Fodder for the external senses**

Duras' reason for showing these figures is not merely to emphasize that a narrator and listener are present. As per Duras' metaphor about pirates, also presents herself and Depardieu because she wants her film's viewers to steal sensory details from their onscreen presences. Looking at Depardieu's rough face and blunt features, it's no great leap, after all, for the film's viewers to imagine a truck driver with the same blunt chin or rough skin. Nor is Duras' worn face a far cry from that which might be found on a stateless hitchhiker. In presenting sensory data to be translated into the scene with the truck, Duras is, in fact, making her viewers into visualizers and writers. After all, as a prose-based "narrateur-compileur" might explain, borrowing sensory details from what's directly seen in the world provides fiction's projections with a vividness that can hardly be obtained through the imagination alone. While fiction's reader must usually do so in a manner that draws only on remote memories, Duras' presentation of not-quite representational images allows her film's viewers to mingle recent sensory impressions with memories, projecting an image of the hitchhiker and truck driver onto the determinate landscape provided by the images of the truck that quickly return to the screen.

In this, Duras seems to providing her film's viewer-visualizers with the best of both worlds. In that each viewer-visualizer samples from the sensory data, mixes it with memories and translates her projected imaginations onto the screen in her own way, she gains the freedom associated with prose's indeterminacy. Because the projective activity associated with prose has been combining with the external sensory data provided by the cinema's on-screen images, however, the film's viewer-visualizer is also be able to project her image into a determinate landscape shared

with the film's other viewers. Moreover, she is engaged with this landscape in a manner that complicates passive-active binaries.

In being paired with determinate images, the film's text supplements the materiality it is coordinated with, exposing its insufficiencies. By positing elements that are not actually present in the film's determinate landscape, however, the text simultaneously casts the film's insufficiencies as spaces of possibilities for the film's viewers to intervene. Duras makes the relation between materialities and open possibilities clear through the characters of the truck driver and hitchhiker. As a Communist-card carrying worker, the truck driver is aligned with the official Communist Party's stance that the dialectical unfolding of material forces is determinate – unfolding according to the laws of physics and bound to occur in only one way.<sup>74</sup> The hitchhiker, while being aware of materialities, is more imaginative. For much of the play, she rambles on about the landscape, but she also speaks about surprising technological developments and planets the truck driver cannot see with his eyes (22). The truck driver by and large ignores her. When he does respond, he calls his hitchhiker a “reactionary” and wonders if she's crazy (61). As a later image of the empty seats into which the film's viewers have been projecting their images emphasizes, however, however, the hitchhiker will have had her effect. Somewhere in the disjunction between the words and pictures a space has been made for the film's viewer-visualizers to use their senses to “see” open possibilities within the seemingly already determinate and pre-determined landscape.

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<sup>74</sup> See Adler 170 for a longer discussion of the official party's stance at the time.





**Figure 25. An Open Possibility**

Technically speaking, of course, the film's viewer-visualizers are not merely seeing. Because the projection lies somewhere between a linguistic prompting of the film's prosaic sound track and the insufficient images of the truck and Duras and Depardieu, its ontology is both linguistic and visual. Indeed, twice during the film, Duras pauses her story to explicitly ask Depardieu: "Do you see?" [Vous voyez?] (12). While both times he affirms "I see" [je vois] in neither case does his answer seem to be completely true (12). While speaking his first affirmation, he stares at the words of his script (12). The second time, Duras asks, "vous voyez?" she does so after a more conceptual point, thereby seeming to inquire whether Depardieu has "seen" her meaning by understanding it. Again, Depardieu affirms 'je vois.' Yet he does so without providing any signs of comprehension. In fact, as Duras shows in the prose work she develops as *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* the mixing of sensations and memories produce visions of things that are accessible beyond the strict logic associated with a deterministic materialism. They are drawn both from conscious perceptions and what has been drawn from subconscious memories. In this, the film's viewer visualizers are trained to access something that is both real and not-real.



**Figure 26. Smoky Figures**

Indeed, Duras closes the film with an image of herself and Depardieu smoking. The nearly, but not quite formless figure of smoke that wafts up from their cigarettes is an apt metaphor for the dream-like perceptions produced by the film. While the smoke is present, its shape is shiftable with an immateriality that might be associated with the memory or imagination. It is, however, real in that it occupies space and time and is somewhat accessible to the senses. So, too, the film-text of *Truck*. Even if it is so far removed from logic that it readily slips from the memory's grasp, it floats in the theatre, somewhere between the eyes, imagination, memory, and the sensory space-time of the film. This, indeed, is perhaps the greatest triumph of *Truck*. In collapsing prose in cinema, Duras creates viewers who are also writers.

### ***Blue Eyes, Black Hair: Creating New Senses***

If cinema has assumed the role not only of showing pictures, but also of guiding visualizations what, then, might be the function of prose? Books, not films,

after all, used to be the common meeting point for people who did not want to imagine alone. Duras, however, does not cease to write books. Instead, she declares that the best films are those that provide only blank screens (*Practicalities* 9). That is, they are to be texts that are read aloud in theaters. Comparing her new writing to “Stravinsky’s *Nocturnes and the Symphony of Psalms*,” she explains that her new prose does not need background images, like those provided by films, because as the comparison to the discordant choral work shows, members follow the harmonies and strains amongst patterns. They do so, she claims, according to a drama contained “within acoustic dimensions” of the patterns of words themselves (10). In place of images are figures. These are to be tracked, Duras explains, by metaphorically putting one’s ear to a seashell (*Green Eyes* 87).

By this she means that juxtaposed patterns of the text are meant to create a sense of open possibilities that, itself, forms a landscape, or what scholars of acoustics, Arns and Crawford, might call “a resonant cavity set in oscillation” (104). That is, sounds of the words, the rhythms of paragraphs and echoes of meaning are to reverberate within the shiftable architecture of the text itself. As was the case with the images projected onto the screen in *Truck*, Duras’ film-text, then is to draw upon what Deleuze in *Cinema 2* calls, “the capacity that cinema would have to give a body, that is, to make it, to bring about its birth and disappearance in a ceremony, in a liturgy” (197).

This is a tall order for prose. However, structurally, *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* is an odd book. Like *Truck* it opens in the conditional tense.

A summer evening, says the *acteur*, would be at the heart of the affair.

Not a breath of wind. And now, laid out before the town, windows and glass doors open, between the red darkness of the sunset and the twilight in the grounds, the lounge of the Hôtel des Roches.

Inside, women with children, talking about the evening.

...

Outside, on the terrace, the men.

...

Among those watching the scene in the lounge from the road behind the hotel is a man. He makes up his mind, crosses the road and goes towards an open window.

Just after he has crossed the road, no more than a few seconds, she, the woman in the story, enters the lounge. She has come in through the door opening onto the grounds. When the man reaches the window, she's already there. (1-2).<sup>75</sup>

Une soirée d'été, dit l'acteur, serait au cœur de l'histoire.

Pas un souffle de vent. Et déjà, étalé devant la ville, baies et vitres ouvertes, entre la nuit rouge du couchant et la pénombre du pare, le hall de l'hôtel des Roches.

A l'intérieur, des femmes avec des enfants, elles parlent de la soirée d'été.

...

À l'extérieur, sur la terrasse de l'hôtel, les hommes.

...

Parmi les gens qui regardent le spectacle du hall depuis la route derrière l'hôtel, un homme fait le pas. Il traverse le parc et s'approche d'une fenêtre ouverte.

C'est très peu de temps avant qu'il ne traverse la route, il s'agit de quelques seconds, qu'elle, la femme de l'histoire, arrive dans le hall. Elle est entrée par la porte qui donne sur le parc.

Lorsque l'homme attend la fenêtre, elle est déjà là (9-10).

At first the scene seems classically cinematic—that is, prosaic. The tale's disembodied storyteller moves seamlessly through walls, setting up a view first from the inside and then from the outside of the hotel. A man is seen approaching from behind the hotel and arriving at a window. Instead of following his gaze, however, the

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<sup>75</sup> The translations are those of Barbara Bray. I have modified only a single term. While Bray has translated "acteur" as "actor" I have retained the French term. I use "actor" only when Duras writes of a "comédienne." The reason, as I will discuss in this section is that I believe the intervention of the historical figure of the *acteur* is important as a part of Duras' storytelling practice.

‘film’ tracks back to capture the woman’s approach to the spot at which he looks. An encounter is being produced from a perspective that no single human can see. The scene is, moreover, full of sharp pictorial details that allow the reader of the text to visualize the scene in her own disembodied mind’s eye.

*Blue Eyes, Black Hair* is not just a prosaic text, however. Nine times, the prose is interrupted by stage directions indicating that a performance is also involved.<sup>76</sup> That is, the readers are also meant to be audiences, whose external senses are directly engaged. At first it’s not clear how, although, the initial stage scene reproduces the living room scene of *Truck* almost exactly. According to the *acteur*, readers are to see a “sparsely furnished...reception room...with...chairs, tables, a few armchairs” and a few symbolic accessories, like “lamps, cigarettes, ashtrays,” and “a vase containing two or three roses” (11). Unlike what is the case in the film, however, no readers or listeners are present in the chairs. As if to emphasize that prose leaves the identity of the reader-listener open, the scene includes multiple tables, each of which displays “several copies of the same book” along with multiple “carafes of water,” and multiple [water] “glasses” (11). As she notes about the initial scene of reading “it looks like a place that has just been deserted. Funeral” (11). With all of the emptiness recalling the open possibilities into which the audiences of *Truck* projected the homeless woman the truck driver, it seems that some sort of activity on the part of the audiences is called for. Just who is to be made to inhabit the room of reading, however, is unclear.

As one reads on, however, one finds that the encounter visualized in the opening scene is not just an encounter between two individuals as would be the case

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<sup>76</sup> Each staged scene of reading is introduced set off by indents or, in the English translation, by italics.

in classical cinema (or prose). When a mysterious scream cuts through the generally genial atmosphere of the evening, those familiar with Duras' earlier works experience a sort of déjà vu. The scream is from Duras' earlier movie, *India Song*, where the cries of a rejected would-be lover also interrupt a generally genial atmosphere: that of an embassy party, where not coincidentally, a sun is also present. The scream is also the scream of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*, Duras' first ever movie, where a temporarily mad woman repeatedly screams her German lover's name. Soon after the scream, moreover, a young foreigner that Duras' readers recognize as the missing sailor from *The Sailor of Gibraltar* enters the hotel scene of *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. In *The Sailor of Gibraltar*, his absent presence allowed a vaguely seeking man and woman to fall in love. *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* in other words, is not just a story, it's a compositional mash-up, an occasion for the various parts of Duras' corpus to encounter one another.

The encounter, however, is not prosaic. That is, it is not the sort of encounter that can be aided by a disembodied "narrateur-compileur," who sets out the rules for the encounter and dissolves all it collects into a fictionalized body. After all, each of the stories being referenced by the text has its own rules and codes and references. Indeed, unlike the state-authorized bureaucrat who subjects its compiled tales to rule by government force, the *acteur* mentioned briefly in Duras' first line is, like the wandering woman in *Truck*, is stateless. A historical figure who, as Godzich and Kittay can tell us, served as a "fatiste, conducteur, or maître de jeu" for staged tales in late thirteenth century France in between the times of the travelling jongleur and bureaucratic "narrateur-compileur" the *acteur* was understood as a source of the text, although more in the sense of a conductor who dreamed it, than as its creator of governor (64). As a director figure, moreover, the *acteur's* job is – like the jongleur –

that of animating audiences, although less with respect to his own body than with respect to the liturgical religious body being invoked by the passion plays of the times (67). Specifically, Godzich and Kittay write “he is a figure of authority ...but there is nothing in his person or demeanor that suggests the source of that authority...[since he has] no physical presence except for a referent demeanor...he is not armed. His body, in fact, is covered by a long robe and his head by a fur hood...this is the beginning of a faceless authority” (67). In sum, although the *acteur* can invoke an encounter, it has no way to force the un-matching codes it calls up into a rational whole.

As such, as Duras’ frequent references to “impossible writing” suggest, the *acteur* casts gathered tales into an abyss, orchestrating encounters between stories and codes and leaving audience member to directly experience the architecture produced by the different ways the invoked tales bolster, supplement, undercut and erase one another. It’s this directness that makes Duras’ writing haptic. Duras’ claim is that “the reading of the book will act as a theatre for the story” but the theater presents no physical bodies to the external senses. Instead, the bodies are to be figures (patterns of texts) (25). Perceptual faculties must be developed in order to apprehend these figures.

Duras provides a hint about what they might be like in the experience of déjà vu one has when one recognizes the references to earlier tales. She also does so in the description of “the almost imperceptible smell of fine sand” and the “cigarettes, ashtrays,” “incense” and “a vase containing two or three roses” (11). These wafting figures full of particles have appeared in many of Duras’ movies and books, but here, one begins to see that they represent dispersed particulate figures that audience

members are to become aware of as the stuff of the imagination that drifts between scenes, imperceptibly mixing in the cavities of the nose, which Duras, as a writer, must know very well is the external sensory organ most closely associated with emotion and memory.

As in *Truck* the plot of *Les Yeux* is slow-moving. A look at the history of the writing *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*, shows it to be based on a prose work, *The Malady of Death* [*La Maladie de La Mort*].<sup>77</sup> The plot of the prose work is simple: a gay man pays a straight woman to sleep naked in his room for a number of nights so that he can look at her and learn about heterosexual love. Over the course of the story the man and woman speak to each other only occasionally. Mostly the woman sleeps and the man weeps. Finally, however, the man becomes aroused. He penetrates the woman (51). Soon after, the contract is up. When the man visits the room, the woman is no longer there (51). She's never there again. The man goes to a bar and tries to speak about his experience (54). He finds that he can't. A narrator, then, interjects with a moral, telling the man, "you have managed to...love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened" (55).

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<sup>77</sup> The book, in fact was written after Duras failed to adapt the prose work for theater. She had been invited to perform the work by the German experimental theatre director, Luc Bondy (*Two* 10). The task ought to have been easy. With its sparse setting, limited time span and minimalist plot, such a story seems almost made for theatre. The story conforms to the performance's requirement of a unified space and time. Presenting a naked woman onstage, moreover, would have been, in the eighties, both satisfyingly risqué and acceptably avant-garde. Bondy, a former student of the French mime-artist Jacques Le Coq, was an expert in conveying emotions through minimal gestures. Duras, thus, could have easily, as in her first attempt to adapt the work, broken the book into "ten or twelve" scenes and converted most of the narration to dialogue (*Two* 10). Indeed, Catherine Breillat, an erotic filmmaker a generation younger than Duras, would do just this in her 2004 movie *The Anatomy of Hell* (Lee 1, Sylow 1). While neither Duras nor her estate consented to allowing Breillat the rights to the work, the plot of the film follows *The Malady of Death* precisely. According to critics it achieves some very Duras-like effects: seen so close, the woman's naked body is more blinding than erotic; disgust becomes mixed with desire (1, 1). Both are effects Duras could have easily been proud to include in her corpus. She, however, reports laboring all summer over the proposed adaptation and eventually, instead wrote *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* (*Two* 9). Her problem was the narration. She could not, she claims, write a book about the intimate encounter through a narrator (10). The text for three voices provided it with too unitary a form (10).



In terms of its plot, *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* follows this story almost exactly. It is also the story of a gay man and straight woman who meet and spend several nights in a room. One important difference intervenes however. *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* adds a mysterious, absent, faceless sailor to the tale. The absence of this man, whom both the man and the woman love, produces the conditions of possibility for the man and woman to be open to one another. In conversation, the juxtaposed givens and possibilities of their desires bump up against one another, allowing the details of the tales they tell one another to reflect upon and deepen one another.

Duras' style of the writing reflects such a formation. After the opening scene, the prose sections of the book are organized in short-epigrammatic blocs of paragraphs that make up the "nights" of the contract in which the woman is to sleep naked in the gay man's room. As in *Truck*, a rambling conversation forms most of the plot. Gaps in the coherence of the tale and gaps between the nights, along with gaps produced by sleep and abrupt interruptions interrupt the reader's ability to organize a coherent story. Since the man and the woman do not attempt to pursue any one subject, each topic projected into the conversation is allowed to rise to its climax and sink from memory, falling back into the generalizable mood in a rhythm that is reminiscent of the rising and falling of waves in the sea. The importance of the ocean-like pattern, moreover, is highlighted by frequent mentions of the sea which is said to be audible through the room's wall.

It's not the case, however, that nothing happens in the story. While the man and woman are there in the room, the police arrive to clean up a mythical beach, where, all kinds of people go to have sex, including it seems "children and dogs" (82, 85, 89, 103). Workers in factories, meanwhile, are being oppressed. The woman in

the room menstruates (36, 42). She discovers the man has been cutting his wrists (49). She takes up with a lover who beats her (57). The man roves about the town looking for the missing foreigner and, perhaps, finds a few lovers himself (67). He and the woman recognize, or nearly recognize, that they have loved the same man (66). The man and the woman have intercourse (110). The man sees a ship sail across the horizon and feels that the man has left (112). He and the woman claim to have experienced love for one another (114). The man sees an image of himself and the woman on the ship that is leaving (114). They realize that their contract is about to be up (114). Because these events occur within the rambling conversation with no explicit connections with one another, there's no drama attached to any of these events. The result is a series of loosely bound epigrammatic tales. Each seems to exist in a mythical temporality all its own.

Yet, gradually readers realize there has been some bleed. The bruises, proximally produced by the fists of the woman's lover, for example, echo the bruises caused by police nightsticks. The man's slit wrists call out to the blood of the woman's menstruation. The dogs of the beach seem at once real dogs, symbols of the wartime German occupation, whose tactics have been inherited by the French grenadines. It's also a stand in for the doggedness of human nature.

Not that these connections are made directly explicit in the tale. Readers must draw out the connections, becoming loosely aware of them at some subconscious level that does not necessarily presume the connections are rational or neat.

After all, it's not just characters, but also the codes and schemas of Duras' other stories that are put into contact by the tale. As they bump lightly against one another, each can be shown to have more openness than one might have thought. The

love story of *The Sailor of Gibraltar*, crafted for a straight man and a straight woman remains recognizable even when it is composed using details associated with a gay man and straight woman. The intense engagement between bodies in *The Malady of Death*, is open to a third lover. The seaside town that serves as the setting for *The Malady of Death*, becomes populated by characters from *Yaan Andrea Steiner*, whose rocky coast opens to allow room for a beach. Through the pressure one story places on another, the very schemas slowly change shape.

Because the openings exist not in the schemas but in juxtapositions of schemas, these openings could not have been predicted in advance. However, Duras is attempting to teach her reader-audiences to develop a sense that can track the subtle interactions whereby the openings arise. She does so, in part by the breaks in the tale that allow her reader-audiences to breathe. Yet, she also does so by producing flexible and not quite correct grammars in lines like, “late that night, after the beauty of the day has vanished as abruptly as a reverse of fortune, they meet” or “their eyes meet for a moment as brief as the shattering of a window into the sunlight of the room” (5, 82). In these just barely grammatical sentences, Duras draws upon habitual connections to activate the ideas and emotions associated with well-known tropes, like the abrupt reversal of fortune, and eyes being like windows. While both the sun and the roulette wheel rotate, turn, it’s much easier to think of the reversal of fortune and the reversal than what Duras is really staging, namely the reversal of time, which in the metaphor is a shattered moment. If Duras had merely introduced these ideas in a straightforward sentence before the experience of the text had, however, it would have been difficult to understand and “see” what she meant, but through the oddly

ungrammatical figural language we more or less feel that the sentence has made sense.

The reversal of time, after all, does not involve merely the rotary motion of a roulette wheel. It also involves the sinking and dispersing of thoughts and emotions into a generalizable mood, or memory, as well as the reflections of sun on glass.

Such a meaning, however, is not in what the sentence says, but in the floating of triggered schemas, ideas and symbols, that mix in the overall mood being produced by the sentence. Indeed, it's a mood that remembers about *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. Through the draftiness of mood old ideas and words and codes are being refurbished as they come together according to flexible grammars that allow them to be juxtaposed with things they don't otherwise have room for. Identities are being refurbished as well. For example, an oddly uncharacteristic speech the man for example gives himself over to state:

It was an unusually fine summer evening, not a breath of wind, everyone in the town was out of doors, talking about how warm the air was, as warm as in the colonies, like Egypt in the spring or the islands in the South Atlantic.

People were watching the sunset, the lounge was like a glass cage perched on the sea. (66)

The description is odd because the man is, impossibly, speaking the words of the narrator, who is supposed to be able to look through his eyes and borrow his subjectivity, but always from a position that is outside and behind him. As Duras tries to explain in odd images in which the *acteur* splits into multiple people, sometimes speaking the part of the man or gesturing as the missing foreigner, the *acteur-auteur* was an actor (comédienne) all along. That is, s/he was someone who gave herself over

to voicing things that, though they came from outside, she could also draw out of herself, given the proper schematic or role. Thus, the man can speak in the narrator's words, because in being the *acteur* as well as himself, he can have heard them just as easily as he has heard those on hotel terrace speaking about Egypt and a colonial history that he has never previously seemed to be aware of. The idea that the evening might be compared with that of Egypt or South America or that the colonies might need to be mentioned, after all, cannot be said to belong to the guests of the hotel either.

Likely, they have arisen out of the generalizable milieu in which the scream and setting from *India Song*, or the presence of the exotic *Sailor of Gibraltar* also float as some kind of collective unconscious that have caused the metaphorical comparison to Egypt and prescient mention of the colonies to stick in the memory. Like the glass cage he mentions, which in being "perched," has taken on characteristics of the bird it's supposed to contain, the man's subjectivity here is shown to be a mere inflectional voicing of the generalizable culture upon which it floats.

It's in order to address this generalizable background that Duras has returned to prose, or rather to a movie that consists only of a dark screen. In addressing the very background conditions out of which sense is made, Duras needs something even less visible than the background landscape *Truck*, namely silences. As Duras notes about her cast, "the *acteurs* should hang on every word, [they are reading] frozen, scarcely breathing, as if, in gradual stages, there was always more and more meaning to be extracted from the simplicity of the words" (25). The experience Duras provides with her final scene of reading, thus, ought not to come as a surprise. Nor should the

“expression of fear, distress, guilt [her characters express], at having always been the center of attention, both for the *acteurs* on the stage and for the audience” (116).

The characters were, after all, merely an excuse for the engagement of the larger codes in which they’ve been caught. As the codes give way to new openings, they, like the readers’ certainty about reading itself are “about to disappear from all human history” as they become open to being populated by something else (116). This history, represented by “a massive blue wall” that, readers are told, “was originally part of an abandoned German block-house,” but which has fallen off a cliff only to be “battered by the sea wind day and night” invokes ideas about the nation-state originating in a fascist past with which the grammar of neat continuity (117). Such a state, along with the determinate materiality of Marxism has passed its time.

Indeed in Duras’ closing image, thus the hard rock of the block-house, fallen off the cliff, while made of as solid materials as ever, is no longer so intimidating. With the passage of time, it has been put to another purpose, becoming a history that is a sounding board, whose wall – according to the acteur who again steps in to speak – was built “so that the sound of the sea, near or far might always be heard there” (117). “Surging through words” that are no less historical than the WWII wall, Duras claims, waves are also breaking (117). It’s these she wants her text’s audience to hear.

What’s oddest of all about her tale is that she doesn’t just claim that she wants them to. Through her tale she has used the regular rhythms of the text, its loosely compiled letters and sentences and paragraphs to physically touch readers in such a way that even as they use their eyes to scan the page, they are also listening for echoes of meaning and feeling for minute reflections against what can only be a

generalizable background of cultural possibilities, no more graspable than the waves of the sea.

Yet, like the sea, it's something that one can hear, as a mood, a chaotic white noise, representing the millions of tiny crossings and movements produced in this background. Sometimes the mood is stormy and sometimes it is calm, but if one opens oneself to the loose grammatical constructions that allow for the passageways of sailors, one can hear, as in a seashell, this mood.

### **Conclusion**

As such, she reveals that the legacies of prose and cinema need not contain only what we had previously thought. Prose, founded in order to impose a common sense on sounds, at first used the fiction of a disembodied narrator to downplay the direct connection between the sounds of the text on the reader-listener's ear. Instead, readers were to project pictures, which might then suggest sounds that were mere representations of what could be seen with the fictional eye. Cinema, in adopting prose's grammar and providing for the readers actual pictures and sounds seemed to outdo prose in this regard. However, it was also reconnecting readers with the direct sensations produced by the work of art. Because films were already providing representations the external senses were freed up for other tasks. Specifically, the proprioceptive mechanisms that coordinated data from the external senses could now limit the external sense to intermittent sampling, while simulations were being composed in preparation for an in-motion action. For this, as important as pictures were the rhythms produced by film. While high-speed action films allow little time

for memories and imaginations to enter into the simulative model and seemed to provide all the action, Duras' slow-moving film-texts showed just how powerful the simulative mechanism could be. Given a landscape, set of suggestions and a regular rhythm that might help these two elements to mix, the body could simulate sensation, itself, providing visions where there were none to be had with the eyes. Indeed, what would be "seen" –both possibilities and fictional projections—could not be sensed with the eye pathways between retinas and brain nerves that had been previously known. Duras' newly produced eyes would include a loop through memory, thereby producing an organ of sense that was to be projecting images from both the in and outside.

Prose, in learning from the experience of cinema, would also prove capable of constructing its own sense. Drawing upon cinema's reminder of the importance of the direct experience of rhythm—or rather rhythms composed across the film's multiple tracks—it would provide a structure of starts and stops in sounds that was designed to do much more than produce representational pictures of the subjects discussed in the story itself. The text was to also be working directly on the body, invoking the simulative capacities associated with proprioception. This time, what was to be sensed was not just sound but rather engagement, interaction, that which would not quite be a structure. While musical orchestrations had already provided a sense that such a sense might involve a loop through both memory and forgetting (producing a sense of duration) Duras would use her text to show the relationship that such a sense had to thinking. Using her newly developed acoustic sense to suggest that the images, ideas and emotions triggered by words could be orchestrated along with their triggering sounds, she would use her text to create a sense that would allow her readers to



engage with unheard of possibilities. In this, she would and would not have gone beyond the body in ways that the creators of the bureaucratic “narrateur-compileur” never dreamed.

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## Conclusion: A Manifesto

“And you with it speck of dust!”

–Nietzsche

Admittedly, my discussion of proprioception has taken me far from what even New American poets might call poetry. However, what I hope to have shown is that the poetic qualities of Olson’s open verse are not qualities to be found on the page alone. By highlighting the importance of physiology for poetics, Olson draws us beyond the page into logics, ideas, materialities and coherences that are held somewhere in between the page, poet and reader in proprioceptive tensions and textures. The proprioceptive sensibility, which Olson says is “wallowing around sort of outside” but “inside us’/ & at the same time,” makes “movement or action...home” (*Collected* “Proprioception” 182). Through multi-dimensional navigations that trigger stereotypes, set up expectations, and produce trajectories in the very cultures embedded in poet-readers become what Olson in *The Maximus poems* calls “at once subject and object, at once and always going in two directions” (32). The result is what Olson suggests is:

the data of depth sensibility/the ‘body’ of us as  
object which spontaneously of its own order  
produces experience of, “Depth,”  
viz. SENSIBILITY WITHIN THE ORGANISM

BY MOVEMENT OF ITS OWN TISSUES. (*Collected* “Proprioception” 181)

He wrote these lines about a polis, not just a poet. That is, he saw verse as a part of the changing world—a world which he hoped might learn to accept what have been called “pluralisms,” “ambiguities,” “equivocalisms,” “gaps,” “contradictions” and “ugly feelings that clash,” but which the proprioceptive poetics see as a fruitfully dense complexity (Ngai “Aesthetic” 1).

Indeed, the poetic I am describing is not quite postmodern or at least it is not recognizable as what I have always thought of as postmodern, namely, what Jameson in *The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* called a “rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers,” that cannot come together again (26). It is not even especially futuristic. Exposing the immobilized body associated with the Renaissance aesthetic of realism as limited, the proprioceptive poetic discovers the isolation of the external senses, which have been cut off from the faculties of the memory, intellect, imagination and desire. Looking back to a time before homogenous spatiality separated the senses from the imagination and before a rationalizing penchant for abstraction separated story from plot and made readers look through impossible bodies that were more rule than body, the proprioceptive poetic surprises itself with the discovery of the possibilities to be found in returning to something like a medieval aesthetic. After all, in the world of icons and liturgies, the senses and imagination were mixed. Seeking to coordinate their actions with forces beyond them medieval audiences of artworks, thus, expected to throw themselves into liturgies that allow them to reach states in which they are open to other worlds. If such a practice seems archaic, it is also what I will here venture to call post-post-modern. In looking back, after all, what the

proprioceptive poetic seeks to add to postmodernism is a way to sculpt possibilities for making sense of possibilities that do not seem to cohere on their own. As I have shown, such a coherence is to be found in movement, and in activity. Through the integrative work spurred by being motion juxtapositions, imbalances and gaps are made fruitful.

Notably, all of the works and authors I discuss in my dissertation are both inside and outside of their times. Dislocated in genre and in place they push beyond the limits of logic, discovering in multi-genre works polyvalent (multi-referent) juxtapositions that are also openings for navigation. Referring their audiences beyond the poem they produce a tension between the visual and the linguistic, and between the simultaneity associated with the visual and the linearity of narrative. Crossing horizons and times, givens and possibilities, they confuse us. However, they also activate us to mix and develop different ways of sensing and feeling.

It is fitting, then, that I close, not with Olson, but with a global-local story that Olson predicted but may or may not have recognized as his own. This story is the story of Barbara Jane Reyes, a Philippine-born American poet born in 1971 who immigrated to America with her extended family and grew up in a trilingual household (Reyes *Blog* 2010). In composing her work *Poeta en San Francisco*, Reyes looks back not to Olson, but to a political poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, who upon visiting New York noticed both skyscrapers and poverty, wrote *Poet en Nuevo York* in order to navigate both his love and disgust for the city. Reyes' poem takes a similar stance to the city of San Francisco.

Written in Tagalog, English, Spanish, and Baybayin, the Philippine's pre-colonial script, her ekphrastic long poem, the poem engages with questions of

translation by reading specific sites in San Francisco as what Reyes in the prologue to the poem calls colonial “contact zones” for body-product-image-stereotype and power-based entanglements (*Poeta* 11). Colonizers, Reyes notes, simultaneously spread their ideas and receive products, immigrants, linguistic terms and metaphors via their colonizing activities (11). As such, products, images, and identities can never be traced to a single event or source. Attempting to navigate these multiplicities, the walking poem splits itself into three sections, “orient,” “disorient,” and “re-orient.” Across these splits, it guides its tourists down a street called El Camino Real that passes through San Francisco and continues beyond it. In doing so, it points out the ways that history, myth, products and people have been translated between the San Francisco Bay Area and Reyes’ native Philippines through the joint processes of import, invasion, and immigration that connect the two cities.

Especially illustrative is Reyes’ ekphrastic poem, [lakas sambayan 2003], which directs those following the poem to look at (or perhaps just look up) a mural about the 1986 revolution against the Philippine dictator, Ferdinand Marcos [Figure 1] (*Poeta* 98-99).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> For reasons I do not know, the mural and poem have different spellings.



**Figure 27. Lakas Sambayanan Mural in Bernal Heights**

This mural, painted on a store wall in the Bernal Heights neighborhood just outside of San Francisco, cannot be understood only by tracking its visual landscape alone. Through the poem Reyes shows that, in order to understand either the 1986 revolution or the mural, one must also address the mural's placement: the Bernal Heights neighborhood of Daly City, where it is located has been settled by Filipino immigrants, many of whom came to the United States in order to escape the Marcos regime, which was, itself, at least partially supported by American colonialism.

Reyes is not merely interested in making an obvious political statement about the ways that Marcos' "inventoried war crimes [and] swiss bank accounts...copycat...[the] american way." Her translation of the images in lines like "remember generala silang brandishing bolo knife/riding bareback where confluence of fishmarket/freeways prefab housing" points beyond the revolution's history towards its effects: ones in which economic and military forces conflate property,



people, geography and culture via the literal migrations of people, practices, and cultures. If one reads the poem while referencing a Google map or while touring Bernal Heights, one can follow the trigger-word “fishmarkets” from the traditional Philippine agricultural practice depicted in the mural to the directly visible “fishmarket” created in part by fishermen displaced from the Philippines, to the figuratively described “fishmarket” under the freeway where women are riding “bareback” in a manner that is quite different from the Philippine’s first anti-colonial hero, Gabriela Silang. By invoking the three markets together, Reyes reminds us that immigrants, products, cultural practices, and stereotypes often migrate together as entangled configurations of economy, power, and culture. She also reminds us of the demand for all of the fishmarkets that has created a pull for the bodies present in the Bernal Heights neighborhood to be there.

I mention this example to stress the political nature of the proprioceptive poetic, which should not be understood as a merely formal technique to be added to a host of others. The proprioceptive poetic does its work partly by allowing language to access us directly.<sup>79</sup> Taking language seriously, Reyes’ text triggers in readers literal, symbolic, economic, and iconic connections that are a part of the depiction, production, and context of “pictures” that must be read on multiple levels. These entanglements are best traced through circuits of production and desire, such as those that have moved the gangsta “sean jean” clothing line’s fashion from streets to sweatshops to stores (and back again), or those involving overromanticizations of the colonized and the colonized romanticizations of colonizers. The mural’s pristine sunsets and peaceful demonstrations, for example, in Reyes’ poem invoke Bernal

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<sup>79</sup> Being accessed by language is, of course, only a start.

Heights' souped up "rice rockets," i.e. the cheap, Japanese imports that stereotypify the neighborhood's already stereotyped "rice eating," Filipino teenagers, who, themselves, have gaudily modified their imported cars in reflection of their television-based stereotypes about what it means to be American.

Enacting the problem through words that are so worn out they have become stereotypical icons, she produces rapid-jump cuts between words that are nothing but triggers, using their noisy sensory qualities to excite responses in the reader.

Predictably, the poem turns on the word "where," where:

bling bling knuckles  
lowering rice rockets scraping tha pavement  
vinta colors billow island monsoon sky  
street chrome exhaust pipes black smoke

do something that is never quite specified, although it is felt. The noisy clash of cheap words and "vinta colors" confuse the tourist's ability to see, confounding the mural's gaudily painted "rice rocket" with the beautiful, sentimental sunset. With these two items connected, it is no great leap for the intellect to draw an ecological connection between the "exhaust pipe's black smoke" and the darken monsoon sky. Of course, such a connection comes from outside of the poem, in the texturing made through a logic that sits in the reader, pressing on her according to the architectonic conditions of possibility that allow connections to be made. The rapid-fire trigger-words merely activate and help to coordinate what is already there.

Among the things being coordinated are the roles of the reader-tourist, whose subjectivity is eventually projected across the roles of spectator, historian, tourist and activist as she uses the poem to access the mural and open herself to her own

capabilities for being in the places she is. After all, the poem prompts the reader to begin by staring at the surface of the mural, but also asks her to quickly move on to walking through the neighborhood, and looking up terms and phrases. This looking up can be done by literally looking, via an exploration of the reader's cultural imaginaries, by walking and talking, or by taking a Google tour of the neighborhoods. In one way or another as a result of the engagement with the poem, the reader is to develop a reflexive apprehension of the multiple ways that Philippine people, products, and cultural artifacts, displaced by American invasions, exceed, penetrate, expand upon, and otherwise reflect upon the specific global-local landscape referenced jointly by the poem, mural, and reading activity. Though the modality of engagement is not completely determined, the rhythm of the words on the page and the knowing triggering by sensory pigments (or pixels) of the mural have enough directness to anchor the reader in a materiality, whose literalities might call one to act.

Indeed, a simple Goggle search I once carried out in looking for the mural reminds one both of the urgency of living in a time that is rapidly flowing past so quickly that even (or perhaps especially) what is stored on the internet can be lost.



**Figure 28. The Lakas Mural Under Erasure**

No longer findable on Google when I type the words of my search, the badly pixelated image saved to my desktop in 2010 shows a mural that is already being effaced by a new set of desires. Placed in relief by a desire to sell what I imagine to be gaudily covered shirts and dresses, the mural shows its ability to be lost as the ability to not just see, but also be sensitized to it erodes. Moving between the picture, the historically-inflected present it shows us with its sensory pigments and the grainy pixels I find on my screen, I think about how Reyes activated a desire to preserve the image, not just as a picture but also as a set of possible stances and practices that can be drawn from it.

Her poem, however, is not a lament. With its four languages, street bling, and poetic flourishes, it escapes the static qualities associated with stereotypes. Indeed, Reyes' long walking poem ends with a *puso*. That is, a song. In the closing poem [*puso*], she reminds her reader-tourists of Joey Ayala, a Filipino singer-songwriter,

who in the poem “sings 16 lovesongs” (108). These songs also sung in the reader who flows across the words, are Reyes reflection on the:

ugat.            [vein.]  
  
lupa.            [soil.]  
halik            [kiss.]  
sayaw. [ball.]  
dugo.            [blood.]  
ligtas.           [safe.]  
ulap.            [mist.]  
lipad.           [flight.]  
...  
[bituin]           [intestine.]  
...  
[awit.]           [anthem.]

that form her always shifting grounds for all that she feels for the city (109).<sup>80</sup>

Standing at the edge of San Francisco on “El Camino Real,” her sung declaration “dapat ganito ang pag-ibig” [“love’s got to be this way”] promises that the mythic journey she has taken her tourists on is addressed to something:

real

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<sup>80</sup> The English translations do not appear in the poem. The translations are by Sherwin Mendoza.

real

Indeed, between the real and the real is the poet, embodied and standing on a particular street in a particular city in a particular time and place that one can and cannot locate on a Google map. In order to address the Reyes' poet one needs to sing one's way through the materiality, tracing out, as Olson's archeologist of morning, the sands of time and seeds of space each with its various flowerings crossing in a spun hourglass full of whirligigging phantasmal possibilities.

If the lyric poet's body with its attention to the external senses turned out to be the body of a scientist which was the body of a romantic dreamer, the proprioceptive poet's body is that creature set in motion, who in taking her face out from beyond the mirror suddenly finds a world beset with contractions, transferences, redistributions, and revaluations that sweep the ground out from underfoot. With the certainty-seeing scientist cast into the abyss, the proprioceptive poet turns doubtful ambiguities into fruitful possibilities that suggest excesses that upset easy balances.

Watching couples like ugliness and beauty, violence and cooperation swirl before her bleary eyes, she jumps in amidst the always-switching partners and breathes in and out until she cannot distinguish violence-and-beauty from ugliness and co-optation. Yet, she does not need to. Foregoing knowledge in favor of action she is already in motion and full of questions. Moving through places and spaces that are no more logical than dreams. she, rapidly becoming a we with others, does her best to inflect the homeostatic balances that allow the larger body she is caught in to adapt. Embracing contradiction as a means of producing frictions between logics, she does what she can to help bodies, logics, histories and possibilities be pulled into and

pushed out of various co-ordinations with other bodies, logics, histories, and modalities in the right way and at the right time. At last feeling herself everywhere and nowhere, trembling in the face of what Nietzsche once called “every pain and every joy, every thought and sigh” she eventually opens herself to all this and finds herself ungrammatically breathing in and out all that was is isn’t won’t and will be ours.

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