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Alain Robbe-Grillet: Sex and Violence or the Destruction of the Traditional Novel

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Alain Robbe-Grillet's fiction can be characterized by its transgression against conventional narrative forms. To subvert the established novel, which is supposed to imitate nature and reality, Robbe-Grillet emphasizes the artificial character of his writings. He denies mimesis in order to destroy the dominant ideology so that it will lose the beautiful mask of innocence and of being natural.

Robbe-Grillet sets a trap for the typical reader of the conventional novel who is used to the classical plot, to a narrative of causality that results in a completed process. In *Projet pour une révolution à New York* and *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, for example, the reader waits in vain for the answer to many of the questions raised by the author who doesn't supply the solution, leaving the reader confused. In *Projet pour une révolution à New York* the end of the story of a young abducted bride, whose groom was brutally murdered, is not told; in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* a young girl, lightly dressed in a flesh-colored swimsuit, vanishes into the crowd of sexually excited young men, without any further information about her destiny, but the code of expectation enables the reader to finish an interrupted episode either in a traditional way, which would mean in these cases rape, torture, murder—and Robbe-Grillet manipulates the reader by encouraging him to think such endings—or in imitating Robbe-Grillet's text production by inventing new *thèmes générateurs* and developing unusual interrelations between textual elements. The author requires the reader to participate in creating the novel—and the competent reader is aware of his new freedom to deal with a literary text, and of its ludic character.

In *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, Robbe-Grillet demonstrates another productive form of reading. Held captive

with only a few detective novels available, Laura, the main female protagonist, re-reads the same novels—several at a time—which are scattered all over the room. She creates new texts by changing the context and combining episodes from different books. She rearranges and modifies the material but also loses pages and even skips important passages. As in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, where it doesn't matter if an event takes place in Greece, Sicily or Turkey, or if it happens seconds, hours or years later, or if a cubic cell is a room for games, exercise or reproduction, Laura invents new structures using permutation and different combinations of existing textual forms. The original plot is not important to her, the identification with the hero or the heroine is impossible because they are not real, they are metaphors of the body of the narrative with which she is playing. In Alain Robbe-Grillet's novels, especially in his later works, capture, sequestration, violence, homicide and the dehumanization of women by treating them as textual/sexual objects—as an effort to erase conventional novelistic images and forms—becomes the *élément générateur*. In order to subvert reality, the characters in Robbe-Grillet's novels no longer have the permanent coherence or continuity of a personality. In *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, the sexual sadist is linked to the voyeur, to the terrorist, to the omnipresent Dr. Morgan, to the narrator, and finally to the novelist himself. In *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, the narrator recognizes himself in one of the characters: "L'homme est seul, dans le silence, au milieu de la cellule. Et peu à peu, comme avec prudence, je constate que c'est moi, probablement..."¹—but then he has problems identifying his own image in a mirror: "Ce sont là mes traits, sans doute. Mais l'ensemble de la physionomie me paraît avoir perdu tout caractère, toute identité: c'est une tête standard, une forme anonyme..."² In *Projet pour une révolution à New York* Robbe-Grillet confuses the reader's sense of orientation by subverting his ability to distinguish between different characters: Laura is the name of at least three different young women.

The controlling male narrative voice in Robbe-Grillet's work, which sets up interior distances between the voyeuristic, sadistic content and the process of writing, plays games with the

reader, who is invited to participate in the textual game. Sex and violence, objects of taboo and control in most societies and cultures, allow one to push back the limits of traditional fictional structure, to question the established order and its moral behavior. To hook the reader, Robbe-Grillet takes advantage of sex and crime related themes to produce an ambivalent fascination with the young and beautiful female body and the desire to control and dominate or even to torture, sacrifice or murder the opposite sex. In his novels, violence is always combined with humiliation of the female body. The reader's pleasure in the descriptions of the beautiful female body and its sexual domination leads to the recognition of hidden fantasies and forbidden desires.

Many famous writers such as Lautréamont, Artaud, Genet or Bataille have projected their sexual phantasms into their narratives, but their obsessions and fascination for cruelty never exceeded the moral and cultural limits of Western civilization. Women are captured and tortured for the pleasure of the libertine, and, Robbe-Grillet would claim, for the freedom or liberation of their reader. But such liberation is based on the acceptance of cruelty, on the necessity for a victim that is always female, and on male domination. This promotion of criminals and murderers to the status of hero without the final consequence of punishment, death, or repentance appeared first in the writing of the Marquis de Sade. Sade's revolt against superstition and Christian condemnation of carnal desire reaches its climax through a philosophy based on crime and evil, not through the literary depiction of the liberating power of unbounded sexuality. If Sade can be judged either as a liberator from sexual and religious prejudice or as a dangerous advocate of perversion, torture and murder without guilt, then Robbe-Grillet, too, can be seen either under the sign of the aestheticized erotic or as a pornographic and sadistic author.

In an interview given in New Zealand in 1986,³ Robbe-Grillet admitted—when asked the reason for sado-erotic themes in his books, which are pervaded by scenes of aristocratic male hunting parties chasing a young girl, who is then served up for the hunt dinner, or long passages of rape and torture, where

women are dismembered and sometimes canned like fish—that these were his very own fantasies. The more visible they are, the more clearly they will be designated as fantasies, as stereotypes. Robbe-Grillet believes that hiding sexual desires and obsessions leads to crime. In his opinion, excess plays a liberating role. “Greek theater was excessive,” he said in that interview. “All the most horrible atrocities—parricide, infanticide, incest—were represented on the stage but with the actors wearing masks, by a *Verfremdungseffekt*, to prevent mimesis, to distance the action portrayed.”⁴ He assumes that mimesis is more likely to occur with books depicting Nazi crimes or documentaries on pornography than with the work of Sade with its constant play of distancing, alienating devices.

One of the reasons for the statement that Sade’s novels create distance is the arithmetical element in his texts. The precise numerical information given through measuring organs and counting sexual acts or victims, where the literary code tolerates no direct expression, leads to the reduction of sexual pleasure to a pleasure of numbers. In Sade’s narrative, calculation is a form of sexual excitement that leaves no opening for the reader to identify with the quantified characters.

In Robbe-Grillet’s novels we find a similar effect. His preference for measurement and numbers, however, also could have its origin in his fear of the inexplicable other, the woman. In his texts, women are seductive and associated with blood, or they are dolls, objects of consumption that threaten the male order. Arithmetical and geometrical relations in his texts could be seen as the attempt to dominate the incalculable and unpredictable female. This would explain his justification for his choice of sado-erotic themes and the depiction of cruelty and perversion in his novels as the use of sadism against fear.⁵

Like Sade, Robbe-Grillet gives frequent numerical information. In *Topologie d’une cité fantôme*, for example, he mentions

l’histoire des trois petites filles vivant au fond
d’un puits, l’histoire des sept adolescentes
épousées par Gilles de Retz, l’histoire des vingt-

quatre captives enfermées dans la prison souterraine de Vanadium, celle des cent vingt et une prostituées mineures de la Villa Bleue à Shangai, ou des neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix-neuf compagnes nocturnes du roi Salomon... ou encore ce serait l'histoire des onze mille vierges de Cologne.⁶

Women, men and objects appear in groups: quatre jeunes femmes, un groupe de cinq jeunes dames, quatre soldats identiques, quatre captives, trois adolescentes, trois cent trente-trois marches, trois mille fauteuils. Numerical information is also given by measuring, as in *Topologie*:⁷ "la tache rouge sur le sol a cessé de s'agrandir... à trente centimètres environ sous le genou gauche mollement ployé de la jeune victime dévêtue."⁸

In *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, the author refers to algebraic structures: "les équations à variables multiples,"⁹ or speaking of torture: "à résoudre l'équation."¹⁰ Additionally, Robbe-Grillet also uses geometrical terminology. In his texts the reader is confronted with rectangular tables, "la longue table rectangulaire sur laquelle vous avez placé votre victime,"¹¹ rectangular mirrors, "elle s'aperçoit toute nue dans la glace rectangulaire,"¹² and with rectangular doors, windows, sheets of paper, photographs, canvases, walls of prison cells, tiles.

Another frequent geometrical form in his novels is the triangle. Not only is the feminine sex symbolized by a triangle—Robbe-Grillet describes "une toison pubienne...finement bouclée, dessinée avec précision selon un triangle parfaitement équilatère,"¹³—triangles, equilateral or isosceles, play a role in describing gabled roofs, a public place in the center of a city or the position of tables: "sur une troisième table...qui formait avec les deux premières une sorte de triangle isocèle."¹⁴ The frequent use of the letter V in feminine names—Vanessa, Vanadé, Véronique, etc.¹⁵—can be seen as an incomplete triangle. In *Souvenir du triangle d'or*, the triangle appears already in the title, which underlines its importance. In this novel it is the symbol of a secret society, but the secret properties of the

triangle, a beautiful female student wrote in her manual, do not describe the characteristics of a mysterious organization but are exactly the mathematical properties of the equilateral triangle.

Circles appear when speaking of tables, holes, or to describe the scene of a crime: “Un cercle parfait s’est formé à trois mètres du corps étendu.”¹⁶

The variety of geometrical terms in Robbe-Grillet’s novels is exceptional: The iron bars in a prison cell, for example, are “verticaux, rectilignes, équidistants.” Robbe-Grillet also uses the diagonal: “Offert comme sur un autel, le corps est exposé obliquement (suivant une diagonale) en travers d’un divan...”¹⁷ or, another example: “l’instrument de torture ne se trouve en effet, par rapport à la position que j’occupe, ni dans l’une des directions diagonales...ni dans l’une des directions longitudinales.”¹⁸ Squares, parallelograms, ellipses—“une sorte de table chirurgicale en forme d’ellipse”¹⁹—or diameters—“un grand couteau de boucher dont la lame...est encore plus longue que le diamètre de la sphère [d’un pastèque]”²⁰—cubic forms, spheres, ellipsoïds, trapèzes, distances, parallèles, angles, secteurs etc. appear frequently in his novels.

Robbe-Grillet also refers explicitly to elementary geometry: “Contrairement à l’habitude des cours de géométrie élémentaire, le triangle se trouve ici placé la pointe en bas”²¹—or mentions “la théorie des ensembles variables.”²² He underlines at frequent places the symmetrical character of an object or a position: “symétriquement par rapport à l’axe du lit se dresse une troisième sorte de chevalet à tortures: une scie à main de bûcherons.”²³ For most of the cited objects, their form is evident. So why does Robbe-Grillet insist on the geometrical character? Why is it important that the photograph of a murdered woman in a newspaper is rectangular and that “le pubis à la fine toison rousse” is triangular?

In his novels such themes as the sexuality of a child, incest (taking place in public, in a theater), prostitution, capture, sequestration, and perversion should provoke repugnance, but the systematic use of mathematical terminology causes instead an absence of any emotion or reaction to the described cruelty. The use of numbers, order and mathematical elements to

structure and control sexual pleasure but also to control the description of rape, torture, mutilation, and murder—beyond moral limits or bourgeois imagination—makes identification impossible, destroys any chance of recognition, and plays a major role in the process of abstraction in Robbe-Grillet's novels.

The female victims of cruelty, of sadistic desire or repression, with little voice or character, are converted into aesthetic objects of violence. The author maintains an emotionless tone "by describing horrors with the exactitude of a technical manual,"²⁴ wrote John Clayton, relieving the torturer/narrator and the reader of any responsibility toward the violent themes involving the female. Robbe-Grillet uses mathematical language that "routinizes cruelty and defuses the torturer-narrator's pain and guilt."²⁵

Robbe-Grillet's texts do not call for empathy. Violence is reduced to a simple function applied to elements of a set, the set of beautiful young women. The reality of the text is the reality of numbers, sets or geometrical objects, reduced to rectangles, triangles, lines and circles. The absence of empathy with the thematic or textual forms in Robbe-Grillet's novels is due to his unreal presentation of violence and crime. In his work, as in Greek theater, murder, rape and torture are shown under a mask—the mask of mathematical language—and the reader needs this distancing effect to tolerate the depiction of the unspeakable acts. The subversion of plot, character and chronology in Robbe-Grillet's work, contradictory events, interchangeable names and disguises, the combination of fragments and the conspicuous use of mathematical terms lead to the creation of a new discourse. New forms of expression produce the freedom necessary for creativity not only of the novelist but also of the competent literary reader.



NOTES

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- ¹ *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, 41.
- ² *Ibid.* 42.
- ³ Ramsay, *Modernity*, 243-252. Reprint: *New Zealand Quarterly*, June 1986.
- ⁴ *Ib.* 252.
- ⁵ Cf. Dumur, Guy. "Le Sadisme contre la peur."
- ⁶ *Topologie*, 132.
- ⁷ Topology—one of the most unexpected developments in twentieth-century mathematics—is the study of those properties of geometrical objects which remain unchanged under continuous transformations of the object. We can assume that in his novel, Robbe-Grillet did not apply this definition to mathematical but to literary objects. The usual properties studied in Euclidean Geometry that we find constantly in Robbe-Grillet's novels such as straightness or being a triangle or a circle are not topological properties. A tortured beautiful young woman (the transformation is in the case the torture) remains young and beautiful. In *Topologie* what matters is only the beginning and the end, the topologist is not interested in what happens anywhere else.
- ⁸ *Topologie*, 159.
- ⁹ *Projet*, 71.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.* 182.
- ¹¹ *Souvenirs*, 67.
- ¹² *Topologie*, 139.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 110.
- ¹⁴ *Souvenirs*, 68.

¹⁵ These names are often used with adjectives, also beginning with the letter V: Vanadé Vaincue, Vanadé Voluptueuse, Vanadé Vampire, etc.

¹⁶ *Topologie*, 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 111.

¹⁸ *Projet*, 182.

¹⁹ *Topologie*, 65.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 60.

²¹ *Souvenirs*, 58.

²² *Topologie*, 127.

²³ *Projet*, 177. There are also examples in *Topologie*: “deux sentinelles...pétrifiés de façon parfaitement symétrique à droite et à gauche d’une porte” (48), and in *Souvenirs du triangle d’or*: “Je remarque aussitôt la première anomalie: le visage...est nettement dissymétrique” (43).

²⁴ Clayton, *Aesthetics*, 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.* Clayton has the exact description, but not especially mathematical language, in mind.

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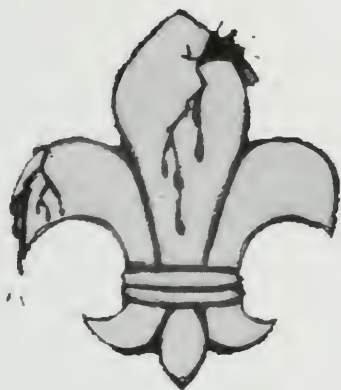
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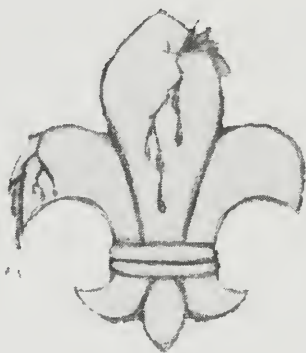
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*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais,
Le Quart Livre

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