PAINTING AND IDEOLOGY
A COMMENTARY ON A PAINTING BY CHARLES GLEYRE

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It is the task of the academic painter to obscure the contradiction between contemporary reality and the academic tradition. This tradition had placed academic painting at the head of a hierarchy and relegated all other genres—landscape, portrait, still-life—to a lower rung as mere imitations of reality, while ascribing to itself the sole right to reflect the real. It held its subject matter to be the generalised representation of universal truths given form by reference to a mythical past, which it alone had the ability to transmit to the present. However, this role was not one of simple conservation, protecting a mythical past from the uncertainties of the present. Academic painting's role in its heroic phase had been to actively participate in the rise to power of the bourgeoisie through a radical redefinition of the past which naturalised the existing social order and presented it as immutable. But from the moment this was achieved, revolution was transformed into reaction. From then on, although formally identical with its own radical past, its role was no longer to give form to progressive aspirations but on the contrary to subsume them into an idealised past to which the ruling class pretended to be the sole inheritor. This appropriation of naturalism is evident in the work of the 'orientalists' who presented a sweetened and deceitful view of the East suited to hiding the tensions then manifesting themselves in capitalist societies. Escapism is retrieved from irrelevance by the pictorial treatment. The apparent contradiction between a fanciful and mythifying subject and a style of painting which bases its claim to importance on the verity of its vision is resolved by the creation of an airless environment where the illusion may take on a substantive appearance and pretend to mirror reality. The presentation overrides the seeming irrelevance of the subject to permit a willing suspension of disbelief, allowing for the import—the visual ideology implicit in all representation—to penetrate the subconscious. In this way academic painting creates a world which is apparently irrefutable, the illusionism of the presentation impedes the examination of an ideology the contradictions of which are self-evident. The ostentatious naturalism of academic painting is self-referential; it is linked with the world beyond the parameters of the representation only in appearance, while all the time pretending to mirror a wider reality. It achieves this duplicity by assuming as universal, laws, pictorial and figurative conventions which are its own creation. This necessitated the outright opposition to any new artistic movement as being dangerous to the academic tradition. The eclecticism which manifested itself from the beginning of the nineteenth century with the rise of individualism, was just such a danger. Yet more insidiously and more damaging to the fabric of the tradition, the eclectic tendency grew from within the academic tradition itself as a direct result of the ideological inversion. When academic painting no longer participated as an agent of change, then the necessity for its existence was irrevocably lost. From that time forward the retention of its formal properties by mid-century classicism failed to arrest its slide into triviality and irrelevance.

Paul Duro

The opinions expressed in the translator's introduction are not necessarily shared by the author of 'Painting and Ideology'.

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In Gérard's The Battle of Austerlitz in the Versailles museum, we see General Rapp pointing out to Napoleon with a sweeping and victorious gesture, the captured Austrian standards. This heroic composition, fêted at the Salon and massively reproduced by engraving, at the time caught the French imagination. Now one day Thiers, going up the Champ-Élysées on horseback at the head of a military parade, at the height of the cheering had the notion of emulating Rapp's martial gesture to show off the troops to the crowd. Unhappily his horse, doubtless better trained for parades than for battles, took umbrage at this unwanted gesture and threw off his rider.

Perhaps chance chose this way to punish a specious inversion of the relationship between image and reality. But may we not presume that General Rapp had more or less consciously copied his magnificent gesture from a still older prototype, thus pushing back the problem of the antecedence of the real and the representational as far as that of the chicken and the egg? The incident illustrates in the manner of a lapsus a kind of mirror game specific to the 'spectator society', which antedates the intervention of the mass-circulation press, the cinema or television. There is a continuity of form between the 'history painting' of the second half of the nineteenth century and modern photographic journalism; both of them have presented themselves to their contemporaries as reflections of reality. But with its decline, history painting ended up by avowing its stratagem, which today gives rise to both a smile and to reflection, whereas present-day imagery unremittingly modernises its illusion-creating processes. Examination of the tell-tale decline which academic painting offers us will be useful in seeing it as the demonstrative variation of a general function of representation.

But first of all it would be useful to make a distinction between the Second Empire's academic 'blockbusters' (grandes machines) and the work of David who is, from a formal point of view, their source. The distinction rests precisely on their ideological function. David may be considered as

Charles Gleyre: 'Le Major Davel' 1851 (Musée des beaux-arts de Lausanne)
one of the creators of history, not only as a revolutionary Deputy in the Convention, but above all as a painter. Drawing inspiration from the heroic iconography of the Roman Republic, he gave the French revolution its emblems. He substituted for aristocratic models the image of a new man — virtuous, auster, active and generous. His historical paintings have maintained their heroic appearance only to have been alienated by the museums of great events, the parameters of which they accurately delimit. However theatrical these pictures may appear to modern eyes, we may say they were realistic by anticipation, since they are the source of profound modifications in perception, collective values, conventions, body-language, dress, etc.

Indeed, it is surprising that while acting upon contemporary history David at the same time bestowed upon it a shape which was apparently backward-looking and archaic. In fact he refers to antiquity not as a historically-determined period, but as a standard for conduct. He was only expressing a paradox particular to France in 1789: in forging the myth of the Roman Republic incarnating the abstract and intemporal values of good citizenship and virtue, he gave shape to the aspirations of his contemporaries and participated in the praxis of a class which professed the universality of its calling. But even if David’s productions mythify the past, one can still properly say that he practiced history painting — in meaning by that the history in the making to which his interpretations contributed. In the event, painting is as much the standard of reality as the reflection of reality, since both of them are mutually supporting, and it is one and the same thing to speak of realism and ‘style’.

From a formal point of view there is an uninterupted descent from David to academicism, but there is an ideological inversion attributable to the new power structure: from the moment the bourgeoisie affirmed its power, it turned against the oppressed classes with whom it had previously made a tactical alliance, while all the time perpetuating the illusion of serving the interests of universal man. Thereafter the bourgeoisie counted upon writers and artists who could naturalise the existing order and camouflage social relations under the myth of durable human nature. And if, in the visual arts, antiquity has remained the ultimate reference, from that time forward it has been used not to illuminate the present but to absorb it into an eternity which the established order pretends to incarnate.

Such is, under a specious formal similarity, the difference between the significatory link which Davidian painting on the one hand, and academic painting on the other, maintain with their object: the first, which participates in a praxis in so far as it inaugurates a new vision of man and the world, explicitly presents itself as rhetoric. It refers back to an exemplary past in order to project its values into a possible future. This presentation does not have objective but prescriptive intentions. Contrary to this, academic painting depends on an ideologi-cal application of social conservatism, pretending to find in reality values which, in fact, it helps to propagate. It feigns an analogical connection with its object. It is illusionist, in the sense that it conceals its rhetoric under an affectation of realism.

Academic painting’s adoption of an ideological function which it maintained until the end of the nineteenth century must not be underestimated. It is arguable that never before in history has painting played such an important role. It is only necessary to read those pages in Zola’s l’Oeuvre concerned with the opening of the Salon to see that the exhibition was of national importance. The work of art, from the time it received the consecration of the Salon reached, by means of engravings, a far wider public than the Paris art world. This popular imagery, which found its models in the print shops of the rue St-Jaques, and through them, in the large academic compositions of the Salon, was diffused by peddlars into the most isolated parts of the country in a period when the largely illiterate population began to transform into a politicized proletariat.

Consequently popular imagery represents a game played for high stakes. That is why, from the time of the Restoration, a veritable system of surveillance and control was established at every level. Academic interest had thrust painting into the limelight and crowned it as a demi-god; but from the time it assumed responsibility for the Salon, it matched homage with a rigorous control of the selection procedure and the diffusion of the works of art. As for the production of popular prints, Epinal finished up by holding the monop-oly over all the French speaking regions, while continually being the target for a succession of police measures aimed at limiting its influence.

In short, the domain of pictorial presentation was ‘squared up’, if one may use the expression. The museum and the Salon, the functions of which merged in the period to follow, represent the reference points in the system. We know with what determination they opposed innovatory artistic movements to the beginning of the twentieth century. They prefigure to a certain extent the mass media of the present day as purveyors of images, myths, values and modes of representation. For this reason they were the object of the same solicitude and vigilance on the part of the political powers as television today.

Photographic ‘objectivity’

As we have said, pictorial illusionism aims at reinforcing the credibility of that which is artificial by lending to it an air of objectivity. Are we then under an obligation only to investigate the ideological import of the staging of the subject, while considering the pictorial treatment proper as a straightforward rendition of reality, free from codes or syntax? It is true that some reproductions of minutely descriptive paintings may allow them to pass at first glance for photographs. Again it is necessary here to guard against an ambiguity in this respect. We talk of ‘photographic exactitude’ as
if the camera held the exclusive perogative of faithfully recording the real. But this proposition makes no sense. The correspondence between a two-dimensional surface modulated in black and white and that of a multi-coloured, inexhaustible, ungraspable reality, is necessarily far removed and strongly compromised. In fact the ‘fidelity’ of an image is measured by its readability, which itself is relative to an already determined figurai logic. The camera was devised precisely within these guidelines of readiness. Neither the curvature of the lens, nor the angle of vision, nor the rectangular cutting-off of the image are prescribed by the human eye, which is binocular, mobile and self-governing. These technical characteristics reinstate the principles of perspective, of planimetric projection and chiasura, principles which themselves spring from the pictorial tradition. We must be conscious of the canonical character of these rules in order to understand that, in societies other than our own, the ability to read a photograph requires an apprenticeship.

If the camera already operates, from a technical point of view, a kind of code of optical known quantities, this is all the more so when the use one makes of it constitutes to the system of determined values. One can never innocently manipulate an instrument the format of which is conceived in imitation of duplicating a reality already considered as objective. One only has to release the shutter for the event and the choice of subject to be once more dependent upon unquestioned conventions. To the eyes of the camera’s operator, the environment is from the first determined by the value index of photogenic or non-photogenic. Pierre Bourdieu has shown that nothing is more formalised, more subjegated to laws of perception than the practice of photography.

In spite of an appearance of veracity, photography in every case constitutes a transposition or elaboration of reality, and it is precisely from this that it draws its ideological strength. Also, should we consider the practice of photography as falling under the jurisdiction of what Roland Barthes has called the "general ethics of the sign", then photography would only be able to exculpate itself from the charge of realistic exactitude, in offering as its last defence, the acknowledgement of its own artifice, (the artifice by which one recognises the great photographers); for this reason it is not a question of a rhetorical label by which it designates itself as ‘art’ — another mystification... In fact, after an heroic period of joyful exploration of its own technical possibilities, it pretended to aristocratic painting’s titles in setting up in rivalry, the
heritage of which it now claimed as its birthright. Evidence for this is found in the remarkable legal action the official painter Yvon brought against his photographer Bisson during the Second Empire, whose photographs were considered by Yvon as the raw material of his painting. Bisson mass-produced a photograph of the Emperor Napoleon III with the general staff of the army which he sold without Yvon's consent, the same photograph from which Yvon had planned to execute a group portrait. From that moment, the painted version became superfluous. The commercial success of Bisson's photograph shows that the reinstatement of academic painting was in one way assured.

On this point, it would be useful to invert the meaning of one commonplace of the history of twentieth-century art, according to which photography could have relieved painting of its figurative subservience and permitted the ascension of modern art. In reality, the ideological function of canonical representation which the painter has delegated to photography allowed it, from that moment, to devote itself to a more penetrating and more inventive approach toward reality. In any case, it is begging the question to pretend to demonstrate the fidelity of traditional figuration by its conformity to a photographic image which itself is based on that figuration.

As far as photography is concerned, any reference to an ideal norm of objectivity, in other words to an image taken as being free from code or syntax, is absurd if one admits that there is no possibility in the perceptible world. “From the first, perception stylises” claimed Merleau-Ponty, and Marx “our senses are theoreticians”. There is a social element even in perception. It is true that the Impressionists, who were opposed to the principles of academic representation, claimed for themselves a more ‘truthful’ objectivity. But they had reference to the single expiatory system in the conceptual domain that was then available. Today we are better able to assess the extent of their innovations in pictorial practice: they made us aware of the intentionality, selectivity, and diacritical nature of perception, and this destroyed the myth of an absolute reality which could be captured mimetically: they made us see the picture as a visual production.

From then on, we may suspect any painting which pretends to imitation as tending in fact to personify its object and to naturalise the signification it contains. Such a painting can only properly be considered as ‘illusionist’. Nineteenth-century academicism is essentially characterised by this deception, which is not a simple tracing of appearances, but a structure accessible to analysis. The ideological message is by no means reduced to the presentation of the scene represented, it is above all inferred by the pictorial treatment. In other words, “the medium is the message”.

We are going to attempt a demonstration of this claim with the examination of a painting by Charles Gleyre: The Execution of Major Davel, the theme of which is not precisely reactionary in itself. However, although proposing a displacement of the pictorial ‘signified’ with the ‘signifier’, we will start with a brief commentary on the subject of the picture, a subject which allows us to enter without difficulty into the domain of representation. In fact the real circumstances of Major Davel’s execution, because of their theatricality, curiously anticipate the version which, a century later, the painter was going to give us.

The double execution of Major Davel

Before becoming a Swiss canton in the eighteenth century, the Vaud fell under the jurisdiction of the canton of Bern. In 1723, Major Davel, at the head of several companies of soldiers, attempted an insurrection, which appeared at first to have the support of the Vaud authorities. However, Davel was arrested by troops loyal to Berne. Although his first reaction had been to exclaim: ‘I see well enough I will be the victim in this affair’, Davel later denied, against all probability, of having had accomplices, and alone took responsibility for the uprising— at least according to the official records of the interrogation and in-camera trial conducted by the Vaud authorities at Bern’s request. Under these conditions it is remarkable that the examination and interrogation were halted before a complete confession had been elicited, and even more remarkable that the verdict was so moderate: although it was customary to hang, draw and quarter insurgents, Davel was condemned to be simply beheaded. Furthermore, he was permitted to make a speech to the assembled crowd at his execution, on the condition that he did not further incite rebellion.

The accused’s silence about his complicity and the mildness of the authorities can only be explained, it seems, by a consensus, if not an arrangement, with the guilty man. In the end, no party had any interest in bringing the truth to light: neither the Bern authorities, who preferred to pass off Davel as a loner or a visionary, nor the authorities, all members of whom were probably compromised in the affair, nor the accused, who was not a traitor. Above all, each party had understood, albeit vaguely, that for want of the power to effect the contagious memory of Davel, it would be just as effective to mythify him—that is, to substitute for the rebel or the tortured freedom-fighter the image of the virtuous patriot, and to create in this way in the popular mind not sentiments of solidarity but of reverential piety tinged with the guilt that Sartre has described in The Flies.

Davel appeared to be willing to adopt this disguise. On the execution platform he gave a resounding and moralising speech, while adopting a suitable pose, as if already the scene had taken on a commemorative character. Indeed, one of the pastors charged with assisting Davel made a speech eulogising him—without, however, attracting an accusation of sedition.

Therefore we may compare, without punning, Davel’s execution by the executioner with the execution the Vaud government commissioned.
from a painter one hundred years later: Davel's life in his last moments already conformed to an ideology of representation long before being submitted to a pictorial process. We will analyse Charles Gleyre's composition from a formal point of view in order to reveal the specific contribution the painter made to the ideological displacement we have spoken about (we may note in passing that, after making allowances for the necessary transposition of this method of pictorial representation to that of the 'cinema screen', the 'poster art' of the new martyrs of the revolution has fundamentally the same signification.)

Space and presentation

Demonstrably, Gleyre has applied the rules of linear perspective. The basis of this way of seeing postulates a variable and concomitant relationship between the appearance of the represented object and the position of the spectator. As a way of seeing it is clearly incomplete, but is connected with all other potential perspectives, as to its correlative variants, to a global spatiality in which the spectator is able to move. Put another way, linear perspective postulates a homogeneity between the imaginary space and the spectator's space.

But in Gleyre's painting the positioning of planes receding into depth is overdetermined by an hierarchical order with regard to the content which prevents the potentially mobile operation of perspective. It is only necessary to describe the scene: in the foreground, Major Davel, adopting an heroic pose, offers his life to God and his country. On both sides, but slightly to the rear, the officiating priests and executioners, their respective functions strongly characterised by their costume, attitudes and attitude, make a show of their feelings. Then in the middle distance, the crowd — immobile, deeply-moved and deferential. Finally, as a backdrop, Lake Geneva and the Savoy mountains. The arrangement of the actors from the centre to the periphery, as well as their distribution into the background, corresponds to a hierarchical order. After all, this order encompasses that of the hierarchy of genres proper to academic painting: the crossing of axes designates the cardinal function of the heroic gesture, the protagonists mitigating their function in generalising their action to the degree by which they have been distanced and removed from the focus of interest, allows us to pass from history painting to genre scene; the subsidiary elements in the picture of still life and landscape fill the outer zones of the canvas in paraphrasing the action; lastly, the frame encloses the imaginary space.

Certainly, the two soldiers in the immediate foreground appear to detract from the hierarchy by their advanced position on the very first plane of the picture. Have they the function of suggesting a spatial continuity between the imaginary and the real, in imitation those objects which in some still-lifes, appear to project out from the picture and offer themselves to our touch? But we have said that the space precisely does not present itself as a continuum from the pictorial horizon to our eye but is segregated into planes. Thus the soldiers add only a final superimposition to this ranking into depth. They are not there to link the two spaces, but on the contrary to intensify the break in continuity. They function a little like an antique chorus, in prescribing to the spectators their attitude toward the representation of the plot. The painter would not have proceeded otherwise, if he had wanted to show, in place of a military guard, the museum attendents in front of the actual picture. The elements of the composition are not integrated into a global or homogeneous space, but are arranged into a strongly differentiated space which is connected only by an exteriorised relationship, like the successively receding backdrops on a theatre stage.

This comparison may be taken further. Gleyre has arranged his protagonists as if they were actors on a stage in an order which tends to focus the action in the centre of the canvas, giving us privileged and exclusive view of the proceedings. Such a space does not open up to exploration, but presents itself frontally to the 'outsider' spectator to whom has been ascribed the privileged point of view. The spectator has been placed outside the perspectival arrangement and in front of a space which is neither continuous or reversible.

Consequently the arrangement of pictorial elements proceeds from a 'theatrical' presentation which escapes the normal demands of perspective, and thus takes on a symbolic value. The reciprocal localisations, which no longer contribute to a perspective which is potentially mobile and elusive, acquire by this fact an expressive character with regard to the content of the representation. For example, the symmetrical disposition takes on the value of antithesis. The soldiers in the foreground share the job of expressing the divided loyalty of the army: they participate in the execution in the name of discipline (soldier on the left), but they are mortified in the name of patriotism (soldier on the right). On the execution platform on either side of Davel, the pastors and the executioners play out the allegory of Charity and Justice.

Articulating this symmetrical arrangement, the vertical axis quite naturally supports the major pictorial elements. The peaks of the Jura mountains, to the soldiers rifle in the foreground, seem to mimetically imitate Davel's erect bare head offered up to the executioners through the open neck of his shirt. However, this general upward movement is to some extent barred by a horizontal crossing in the composition level with the heads of the platform party. Davel's head alone is raised above the rest, a head which is precisely soon to be chopped off. It would be difficult not to attribute a psychoanalytic meaning to this bloody axial cut. The horizontal and the vertical oppose each other like Law and Desire. The anguished faces with one accord present the sentiments of the Mother-country, whereas the implacable silhouette of the executioner, half concealing the (cruciform) instrument of decapitation, prepares...
to apply the legal and paternal sanction. Curiously, the real oppressors, the authorities of Bern, are absent. Although the actors in the drama ostensibly generate the hero and share his convictions, nevertheless, all of them participate in the punishment, starting from the condemned man himself, who invites it with his gesture. The punishment is not in the least suffered as a physical constraint but on the contrary is spontaneously applied in the name of a law of nature. Here official painting fully assumes its function which is to interiorise political violence and to present it as freed from physical and ideological constraints.

It is therefore an allegory of Castration which the Vaud authorities are offering to popular devotion. And for this they found themselves an expert. Charles Gleyre had made a name for himself at the Salon fo 1843 with Lost Illusions (Louvre), in which he represented the Muses mocking the impotent poet. His other major works, Roman Bandits, (which shows the rape of a traveller in front of her bound husband), The Romans submitting to the Yoke of Slavery, the Maenads pursuing Pentheus, the Return of the Prodigal Son, Hercules at Omphale’s Feet, all represent variations on the theme of failure. The evolution of his painting, from the colourful and animated romanticism of his youth to the stiff allegories of his last years, is evidence of a progressive retraction which had already been observed in the man: his correspondence, his personal writings and the testimonies of his friends reveal a long-standing nervous debility and even long periods when he took to his bed. Gleyre had neither wife nor mistress, and constantly professed a rabid misogyny (still more apparent when the regression reverted to the depiction of ample nudes in his archaising or orientalised canvases). Although the possessor of an advantageous physiognomy, Gleyre was obsessed by his nose which he judged too long and would like to have had reduced⁸. To be clear about this, we should insist on such clues, which have an annoyingly ‘psychocritical’ appearance, only to the extent to which they reveal what Sartre has called the ‘collective neurosis’ which puts the artist in tune with history and places him in a position to echo and amplify in his work symptoms which go beyond the personal.

In any case it is remarkable that castration and its interiorisation under the form of moral law is as evident in the formal and axial organisation of the pictorial elements as in the signification of the event depicted. It is true that — to return to the spatial considerations — one could cite innumerable examples in the history of painting where the distribution of formal elements conceals a hierarchical or significative order (Egyptian, Etruscan, Paleochristian, Byzantine, Roman). But here it is always a question of religious art where the space is expressly characterised as being of a different kind to that of the spectator. This sacred space is not subject to the optical laws of the profane world. As a space it is deployed only to make intelligible the transcendental world by an arrangement which has no pretentions to illusionism but
only to a semantic value.

On the contrary the value-system of the academic painter is a deceitful system which hides itself under spatial determinants. The painter insidiously exploits the power of perspective to put the imaginary space in continuity with that of the spectator to give a reality to the order which he ascribes to his subject. In painting a picture, he plays a double game: once by the objectivity to which he pretends, once by the values which he employs. Illusionism is precisely the art of confusing the two and of presenting a truthful image in which takes shape — by means of the spatial arrangement — an imperceptible and omnipresent order which lends significance to each element.

The representation of time and the denial of history

In every figurative work, time and space are tangible and may be disassociated only by abstraction. In this way, a sacred or mythical subject avoids any system as temporal as perspective. As Yves Bonnefoy has remarked:

"in the language of all aesthetic systems, frontality signifies the eternal, as opposed to depth, through which temporality is reintroduced; while the plane expresses being or essence, in short, the intemporal".9

At the other extreme, naturalist painting fuses together a single point of view with a moment of time appropriated from a linear continuum.

In the painting under discussion, can we trust the pseudo-instantaneity which is the temporal corollary of the pseudo-perspectival treatment of space? Apparently, Gleyre had only to choose a significant moment in Davel’s destiny. However, we have seen that the composition, formed around a central axis, has been arranged in such a way as to allow for the presentation of a narrative. The protagonists are placed in space in an order not only hierarchical but chronological, as if to recapitulate, then anticipate, the story. The two soldiers in the foreground recall by their attitude the army’s spur-of-the-moment reaction followed by their indifference; the two pastors evoke the ambiguous wait-and-see loyalty of the authorities; the executioners act out the punishment; the emotionally-moved yet passive crowd has already the air of commemorating a dead man; lastly, the alpine peaks assure a celestial permanence behind the disorder of life. It should be noted on this point that the landscape in no way attempts a spatial integration, whatever its importance may be, but that it has assigned itself a place in the scale of ideogrammes as a significant backdrop. The majesty of the summits corresponds to an image which at that time was being created in the Salon by the annual submissions of ‘mountain painters’ (Toepffer, Diday, Calame etc.).

This scenographic segregation is further reinforced by the disparity of Gleyre’s technique. For the landscape the painter has allowed himself a scale of values, clear and luminous, of a pre-impressionist palette. On the other hand he has placed the principal actors of the drama under the white and neutral light of the studio, abstracted from
any indication of time, place, season or atmosphere. Such a light, prescribed by the academic canon, falls unavailing from an angle of 90 degrees, as if to signify the incidence or instance of universal laws operating in the profane world. It tears away from events their historical implications and their physical situation in order to present them "sub specie aeternitatis" as petrified nature. It accentuates the effect of relief, it gives to flesh a marmoreal grace, it turns figures into stone, it Hellenises — meaning by that of course that it is a question of a mythical antiquity having achieved a fundamental harmony of which history is only an imitation.

Davel's person operates in the first instance as a synchronic condensation. His clothing functions as his biography: the boots and the tunic recall his military career, the absence of insignia his degradation, while his collarless shirt exposing his neck announces his decapitation. His stance also sums up his actions, from his right hand still held in the people's grasp, whose aspirations he had crystallised, to his left hand which indicates the final abnegation. In short he is overloaded with a semophoric function, as if he had had to bring about through his person alone a nullification of the events depicted and by these means alleviate any necessity for the spectator's involvement. The heroic action concentrates entirely on the glorious moment, without exceeding the limit of the representation. It entirely fulfils itself in the manifestation of virtue which has no practical application and which carries in itself its own transcendence. The political context is only indirectly evoked as if it were merely an occasion to allow Davel to cut a fine figure. In the end the event is only a momentary upset; a squall, as it were, which disturbs the long spell of fine weather only to make it even finer afterwards.

The theatricalisation of action which is specific to 'history painting', is in fact tantamount to a denial of history under an accumulation of circumstantial details. It only evokes a temporality the better to prove the immutability of things, and only arranges space in such a way as to signify universality. In the last resort, history painting does not link itself with the past, but with a "generalised present" in imitation of the physical laws of the universe.

The recurrence of literary and figurative codes

Thus the skills of the illusionist painter consist in attributing to the events he depicts the idea that they are a fragment of reality deemed to have an existence beyond the parameters of the frame and as such represent a captured moment in the trajectory of an action. Thus it seems to be a representation of a metonymic kind, which operates by displacement in spatial continuity and in the temporal sequence. It is precisely in this that the artifice resides: the metonymic cut in the continuum presupposes a contextual prolongation of the scene on which it confers an exterior character. The focal concentration and the photo-
graphic representation lend to the ideological motive a realist alibi, in the form of a supposed connection with the totality of the real world; that is to say, illusionist painting naturalises.

We have seen that this metonym is no more than a decoy: the composition is organised in accordance with a centralised hierarchic order and with a decompression of action toward the edges of the canvas or toward the horizon. The theatricalisation of space and the amplification of the moment are such that the scope of the picture goes beyond the spatio-temporal boundaries of the representation. Consequently, the object of this representation is so well concentrated and focalised that it takes on the transparent, universal and discontinuous character of a sign. In other words, the metonym tends to get lost in the process, allowing us to pass without noticing to another order of signification: the metaphorical.

This reveals itself, before we arrive at the pictorial treatment proper, by Davel's pose, which on a first level of meaning constitutes a picture in itself. It is not a gesture, a posture, a recalled action, an artefact which has a significant function in the production. Rather it proceeds, as we have seen, by fusing together the spatial disposition and the logical relation of pictorial elements, so that, for example, the juxtaposition or symmetry of two objects favours the content. Illusionism consists precisely in making innocent this significant arrangement and in giving an objective appearance to a clandestine allegory.

It is interesting to note that this metaphorical understudy of elements, apparently conceived in a metonymic chain, is characteristic of the workings of the subconscious. Guy Rosolato has remarked that, in the primary process, condensation and displacement are connected in such a way as to allow them to operate in opposing directions. On this point he talks of a "metaphoro-metonymic oscillation". We should not be surprised that such a structural analogy has entered the realm of ideological figure: it is to be found in the study of the dream or the imagination. It is this which doubtless explains the fascination that academic painting held for the Surrealists, who took up again its procedures, not of, of course, to create new mirages, but in order to dismantle its mechanisms and to reveal the purpose behind its secret aim.

Thus the academic painter represents not an unpolished reality grasped in its revolutionary change, but a meaning-laden image which is, as it were, already 'articulated'. Today we describe such a painting disparagingly as 'literary'. Certainly, it lends itself so well to commentary and interpretation only because it is the depiction of a discourse. The verbal commentary only takes back from the painting what the painting had borrowed. But may we not show that the inverse is just as true? The ideological discourse of the nineteenth century itself referred to a rhetoric, or rather to a theatricalisation, which found its models in 'great painting'. This was the point Roland Barthes was making about Balzac's Sarazine: realist literature's code of reference is always pictorial. The novelist does not describe the object but a pictorial copy of the object; in a way he paints pictures in words. These obligingly drawn 'portraits', the picturesque descriptions 'in the Dutch style' have no other source but the works of art in the Salon or museum. The references literature makes to pictorial vision has the effect of ossifying history in a chiaroscuro of intemporality, and at a deeper level, of bringing to events a timeless mythology which operates on the level of the subconscious. The narration thus allows us to pass from the verbal sign, an indirect report which determines the object relative to an unconcealed totality, to the pictorial sign, a mirror image, the parameters of which end up by being inseparable in the mirror of the vision. In this respect the ideological discourse of the nineteenth century inaugurated the methods perfected by modern advertisers under the name of 'studies in motivation'. If it is true that the dream is the guardian of sleep, it is a question here of preserving the social slumber by submitting the "cognitive relations" to a "regressive transmutation of sensory images", (these terms by which Freud described the "work of the dream" apply just as much to the mechanism under discussion of the ideological shift from the verbal to the figurative). If it is therefore true that in painting to be found a sedimented verbal language, in the last resort it has no other meaning beyond a figurative pictorial representation. Such is the mirror game which characterises illusionism: the plastic and literary expressions reflect from one to the other an ever-retreating objectivity. The tautological circularity of verbal paintings and pictorial novels is a norm of realist representation since there is a mutual supposition that each is the referent of the other. Just as a luminous point turned in a rapid circular motion ends up by producing the illusion of an immobile circle, so a figure given shape in the fake-perspective that painting and literature pretend to, creates an illusion of tangibility which Roland Barthes has called the 'real effect'. Moreover this recurrence of figurative and linguistic codes can be demonstrated in the picture under discussion. Gleyre's biographer reports that the painter found his composition in an historical account by Juste Olivier which reconstructed the scene of the execution. Now this in no way means that in this case we may reduce the pictorial to the literary. In fact, from a reading of the text, we see that Juste Olivier, when he describes the execution, suspended the course of his account and brought in a detailed description which must have brought that of an eyewitness. It is in any case only a pretext to pass from the narrative to description and thus to introduce into the text a kind of painting or 'documentary photograph' which anticipates Gleyre's depiction.

Perhaps Lessing had already felt the ideological character of the recurrent claim to reality which

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literature and the plastic arts had mutually appropriated. One must in any case recognise his thesis in the Laocoon goes beyond the particular problem of the specificity of genres. Lessing envisaged the case where the poet describes a scene not directly, but from a figuration that an artist has already given it:

> When one says that the artist imitates the poet or vice versa, that can mean one of two things: either the one takes in reality the work of the other for the object of his imitation, or that both of them have the same object to imitate and the one borrows from the other his methods and procedures.

When Virgil described Aeneas's shield, he imitated, in the primary sense of the word, the artist who made it. It is the work of art itself, and not the thing it represents, which constitutes the object of imitation, and although he describes the picture on the shield, he only describes it as an integral part of the shield and not as an object in itself. If, on the contrary, Virgil had modelled himself on the Laocoon, it would have been an imitation of the second kind. Because he would not have imitated the Laocoon but the thing it stood for, he would have borrowed from the sculpture only those traits by which it copies the model.

In the first case, the poet invents, in the latter, he repeats. The first process is a particular form of imitation which constitutes the essence of his art, and the poet acts as creator, whether the subject is the product of another or that of nature. In the second case, on the contrary he stoops below his position; in place of imitating the thing itself, he imitates the imitation and gives us, in place of the spontaneity of his own genius, the cold reminiscences of another's genius.14

Lessing's conclusion is paradoxical: under the circumstances the poet could only 'act as creator' if he explicitly brought out the second character of his text and withdrew from the objective referent. On the contrary, to hide the plastic mediation and by pretending a direct restitution of the object itself, he betrays his own language. Whatever Lessing's frame of reference may be on the theory of imitation — a frame of reference quite understandable for the period — and in spite of the contradictions which they entail, it is not going too far to catch a glimpse here of the premonition of a theory of 'textual production'.

What Lessing could not foresee was that the heterogeneity between literature and the plastic arts could not be resolved by the rigorous delimitation that he sactioned, but on the contrary that it would evolve toward the amalgamation or mirror image we have spoken about. From then on, painting and discursive thought would mutually complement each other in renewing the unadorned image of the object. They set out to create a closed system, a common stock in which neither partner has controlling interest, a dual connection which corresponds to the imaginary as defined by Lacan. This tautological reverberation from code to code closes the operation of the signifier in on itself in a static vortex which contributes in a precise way to the realist mirage.

The ambiguity of the 'real effect' and 'style'

Gleyre detested 'chic' — the facile methods, the studio recipes. He asked that the model should be studied objectively and with exactitude.

> "He liked us to spend a long time over the preparatory drawing, and to start painting only later, believing that drawing formed the basis of all art . . . He didn't like the use of the isolated brush-stroke. He said that such a style came after the classic age, that it was a mannered preoccupation with execution to place colour on the canvas in such a way where the painter's procedures were revealed at the expense of the thing depicted, that the modelling of the Masters was built up by tones based on those found in nature . . . He seemed to be indifferent to the choice of subject, the most banal suited him just as much as the classic subjects. Happily for him, he who was so poetic in his handling of the subject, would say: everything is the subject-matter of painting, it is only necessary to know how to present it."

15 These precepts appear to contradict the oft-cited advice that Gleyre gave to another of his pupils, Claude Monet:

> "Remember, young man, that when one paints a figure one must always think of the antique. Nature my friend, is all very well for studies, but it offers no interest. Style, there is only style."

16 What did Gleyre mean by wanting at the same time both 'nature' and 'style'? In this respect, he was not unique; all painters since David, in an attempt to reconcile the attentive study of the model with reference at the same time to the antique. It was with Ingres that this contradiction is most evident and revealing. We will try to show that this contradiction is superficial and that, in point of fact, 'style' is at once the condition and the result of the 'real effect'.

For an illusionist painter, expression is at its height when the image's material support, that is the paint spread over the canvas, ceases to be perceived for itself and becomes re-absorbed in the imaginary spectacle it maintains. Painting must effect itself as a language and blend its brush-strokes into a glaze across the surface of the canvas as glossy as a mirror. But it can reach this pitch of translucency, only if, as a corollary, it invests its object with an absolute and captivating presence. The derealisation of the pictorial substance and the essence of the object create a common cause. This transfer of reality implicates a rigorous heterogeneity between the plastic and the iconically signified. The least interference would dispel the illusion.

This is a paradox if we think that, after all, painting finds its materials in the reality it pretends to represent, and that it would be able to support the aims of illusionism with this substantial
alogy. Now when Courbet tried to restore the tangible presence of earth and foliage through the intrinsic energy of the paint, when the Impressionists neglected the canonical rules of depiction and avoided all objective meaning in order to more directly express the visual shock through the use of pure colour, they dismantled the mechanisms of the illusion. Better still, with collage (Braque, Picasso, but above all Grosz and Dix), which consists in bringing to the picture a fragment of reality (pieces of cloth, newspaper clippings or bus tickets) in no way represents, as one may think, the supreme stage of illusionism, but on the contrary its overthrow: the collage no longer imitates, that is to say it no longer infers the authority of the thing 'imitated'. On the contrary it challenges this 'complementary original' (Derrida) that painting had ascribed to itself up to then, and it reinserts its object in the symbolic order.

To repeat what Merleau-Ponty has said: there is no positivity in the tangible world. The object cannot exist from the first as a pure entity, as a self-sufficient manifestation. It takes shape only in the demarkation of its parameters. It is imbued through and through with the never-ending game of differentiation. It indefinitely exceeds all designations, except for the case where, by the 'real effect', the representation neutralises the sense process, puts a limit on the anaphoric extension of time and space, removes the object from its collateral relations and fixes it in a separated presence. The illusionist painter proceeds by inducing a fallacious completeness in the object which, by itself, would not succeed in taking shape. It represents things in their absence, but, in this operation, it obliterates everything which they have to communicate, it presents them to us in the form of an accomplished entity, but as a completeness which will be lost from the moment we explore them. Such a painting proceeds from the imaginative register as Lacan has defined it, in order that it may drive the consciousness into the impasse of absolute reality.

This imputation of reality implies that the painter is on his guard against any interference of the imaginary objects with the pictorial material which forms the substratum, in other words that he avoids these "junction points" (Lacan) where the plastic signifier and the iconic signified would be inseparable. Now the thing which guarantees the iconic signified is its insertion into a second level system which we have described as the recurrence of figurative and literary codes. It is in a similar manner that phonemes define themselves by internal differentiation from a system which must itself be guaranteed by the conceptual nature of the discoursé — without which the phonemes would loose their discontinuity and be reabsorbed into their vocal support. Thus the pictorial forms must be saturated — as in a message — by a second level conceptual signification which exhausts them in such a way as to maintain the illusionist distance from the pictorial substance.

This is why one will not find in Gleyre's painting...
a single element which is not sustained by an intentional, explicit and unequivocal significance. Each object is purified to attain a quasi-conceptual state of generality. Each figure, the flesh neutralised by chiaroscuro, is subjected to a posture and to a locale which is meaning-laden. 'Style', such as the academic painters mean by the term, consists precisely in purifying the forms of any element refractive to signification and susceptible to revealing the pictorial meaning.

It is more precisely a question of purifying the image of what Roland Barthes has called the "obtuse sense". Analysing some stills from an S.M. Eisenstein film, he claims that the images, however well-prepared, are never entirely amenable to the informative and symbolic signification which the author wanted to give them. There always exists a third sense, "erratic and unpredictable", a "signifier without signified" which goes beyond the intended message and even threatens to thwart it. It is just this dangerous extension that the academic painter must eliminate, and, in this sense, it is the same thing to say he aspires to the real effect as to 'style': for him it is a question of juggling away the object in itself, which always exceeds visual control and to replace it with his trademark of the most exaggerated presentation of appearances.

Perhaps it is for this reason that photography has never really succeeded in coming to the rescue of ideological representation, which was, as we have said, its early ambition. Whatever are the tricks of focusing, centring the image, retouching, the photographic lens alone would not be able to totally eliminate the obtuse sense. Perhaps the photographer has ambitions to so prepare the subject to anticipate all possible distraction of the senses, the meaning-laden intentions which immediately arise to prejudice the real effect. Baudelaire's sarcasms on this subject are well-known in Photography and the Modern Public: Strange abominations are produced. In mixing with the rogues and the rascals, rigged out like butchers or washerwomen for the carnival, in begging these heroes to please continue, for as long as the operation takes, to hold their grimace put on for the occasion, we pride ourselves in presenting tragic or glorious scenes from antique history. Some democratic writer must have seen there the means, at little expense, of propagating the taste for history and for painting among the populace, thus committing a double sacrilege and insulting at the same time divine painting and the sublime art of the actor.

Painting on the contrary, conserves the double power of eliminating the obtuse sense while improving on the semblance of the real. The object, hidden behind a mask of discourse, is presented as the limit of a contemplative relation, in such a way that the spectator, obliged to pass in front of the range of literary and pictorial signifiers, is led to assimilate and to swallow in passing-by these codes all the ideological meanings there inferred.

NOTES
1. This was the perspective Francois Mathey took in bringing together in the Equivoques exhibition some 150 paintings significant for an understanding of nineteenth century official art (Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris, March-May 1973). His purpose was quite misunderstood by the critics, although it was clearly stated in the first lines of the preface: "The purpose of this exhibition is derivative in that it seeks to mock a seriousness found in these pictures. The purpose of this exhibition is serious to the extent that it seeks to reveal a hidden discourse."
3. The exhibition Cinq siècles d'imagerie française, (Musée national des arts et des traditions populaires; February-March 1973) demonstrated that popular imagery had always had an ideologically conservative function, above all in the nineteenth century (piety, racialism, misogyny, the virtue of industry etc., are the prevalent themes), and that in formal terms they transpose compositions emanating more or less directly from "great painting" — in this respect their genealogy is analogous to that of popular modes of dress.
6. Charles Gleyre, born at Chevilly, Switzerland in 1806. Attended the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, Paris, travelled in Italy and the Orient. Received a medal at the Salon of 1843 for Lost Illusions. Took over Dalaroche's studio and could count among his students Monet, Sisley, Renoir and Bazille, who were, however, soon to leave for open-air painting and the conquest of colour. The Vaud government commissioned from him a painting celebrating a hero of the canton's history, Major Davel. This work, installed with great pomp in Lausanne museum in 1850, found immense popular success and was massively reproduced by engraving. Gleyre died in Paris in 1874.
8. "If I could have again all my inheritance I would give it to you to see my nose diminished by half, because I have to tell you that it has developed in a most prodigious manner. Imagine to yourself the lost noses, add it to another of the same dimension; even then you would have only the faintest idea of mine, and this is one of the reasons why I don't much want to return to France" (Letter from Gleyre to his brother, cited in Charles Clément, Gleyre, Geneva and Neuchâtel, n.d. p.49).
13. Charles Clément and Juste Olivier, in works cited above.