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*Mutatis Mutandis: Reverse Mimesis and Modernist Literature*

by

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For my grandparents: Wilson, Camilo, and Esmeralda, who have inspired me.

For my grandmother Mildred, who supported me through it all.
ABSTRACT

_Mutatis Mutandis: Reversed Mimesis in Modernist Literature_ traces the emergence of an aesthetic practice of “reverse mimesis” in both Anglo-American and Continental European traditions of modernist literature and visual arts. Analyzing works by H. G. Wells, Sophie Treadwell, and Alfred Hitchcock, as well as Avant-Garde pieces by Alfred Jarry, Raoul Hausmann, Fernand Léger, and Roger Caillois, this dissertation is concerned with the forms of ironic reversals that fuse and/or confuse the categories of humans, animals, and machines. The playful reversal of mimesis happens concomitantly with the increasing influence of mimetic machines in the social fabric of modernity. Within the avant-garde scene, these media machines became a way to reflect on the character of language and the process of linguistic production. These works inscribe within their diegesis representations of photographic and filmic cameras, typewriters, phonographs and other apparatuses designed to capture, store, and reproduce data. However, instead of using these machines for the sole purpose of producing meaning or of representing some purported reality, these texts actually engage in representing the apparatus itself. Reverse mimesis explores the work of representation and questions the role these media machines had in the construction of the categories of animals, machines, and the human. In the playful reversal of looking inward, these works evoke the figure of mimesis to question the notion that language, the ultimate medium, offers an unimpeded access to some deeper reality. They explore the abyss of what lies in between reality and representation, and of the small, seemingly unimportant changes that constitute the _mutatis mutandis_. Finally, by understanding the role of media apparatuses in the construction of humanity, these works take one last step and rebuild the world to their liking. The instances of
reverse mimesis creatively reinvent ways of looking at the world; these moments ingeniously reconfigure how humans interpret the so-called “natural world” and, expanding the realm of possibilities, offer new ways of interpreting, organizing, and rendering this world.
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Introduction

The Planet of the Aping

The end of Franz Kafka’s short story “A Report to an Academy” displays an existential realization by the ape narrator, Red Peter. More terrifying than Gregor Samsa’s transformation into a giant bug, the ape Red Peter desolately recognizes that he has become human.¹ As he narrates the feat to an academic audience in a respected German university, Red Peter reveals the main process of becoming human is a mimetic process: “there was no attraction in me in imitating human beings; I imitated them because I needed a way out, and for no other reason” (83). By emulating human beings on the ship, and later through the careful tutelage of a teacher, Red Peter found his way

out of the cage and became a part of human society. In aping the human, the ape became human. At the very beginning of his speech, he acknowledges his distance from the world of men: “your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot farther be removed from you than mine is from me” (81). The transition into human comes to a conclusion when he stands in front of an audience of scholarly men and delivers a speech—he is more human than most humans, certainly more human than the men in the ship, from whom he learned to be human.

On one level, Kafka’s text alludes to the process of becoming human through mimesis, a process earlier noted by Nietzsche and Freud, and later developed by several modern thinkers.² For Nietzsche, in the figure of the mimetic unconscious, and later for Freud, in the process of identification, human subjectivity was dependent on the ability to imitate others in the process of becoming. In the early stages of formation, humans imitate their elders as they learn the way of the world. As Jacques Lacan noted in his famous essay on the mirror stage, imitation not only helps a child learn to act in the

² For Friedrich Nietzsche’s position on imitation as formation of character, see Nidesh Lawtoo, The Phantom of the Ego (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2013). As Lawtoo outlines, for Nietzsche, mimesis is the basis of ego-formation as “an unconscious process of psychic ‘communication’ that spreads contagiously from self to others” (2).
world, but it has a key role in helping the subject realize, in front of a mirror, that it is a subject.³

Furthermore, the mimetic faculty can be a way to approach the Other. As the act of imitation necessarily implies a copy of someone else, the subject must acknowledge otherness to imitate it. Australian anthropologist, Michael Taussig, interprets this necessary step in subjectivity as a potential for coping with and understanding alterity. In his *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993), Taussig follows Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in tracing the mimetic function as “an instrument for dominating nature” (46-7), suggesting that human society emerged from its animal substratum via the mimetic process.⁴ Taussig further argues that in Kafka’s “A Report to an Academy,” a mimetic faculty actually haunts the subject—mimetic faculty is what Red Peter complains is chasing him at his heels. In the story, the ape-turned-human shows signs of fear that his animal nature will re-emerge and disrupt his performance of humanity. For Taussig, the mimetic enacts a doubled action of both separating the one from the Other, and uniting them, making the one always dependent on this Other.

However, yet another level of mimesis plays out in Kafka’s text. The story itself, the prose fiction, enacts a form of aping of its own: it mimics academic discourse by using the report as its genre. In juxtaposing both forms of mimesis, the socio-psychological process of becoming with the aesthetic imitation of style, Kafka’s work

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further explores a conflict between these two forms of imitation. On one level, Red Peter imitates with the goal of being free (“there was no attraction in me in imitating humans”). On another, the story itself imitates a style with the professed intent of curtailing aesthetic ambition, for the ape ends his lecture by admitting “I have only made a report” (259). Ultimately, this mimetic *mise-en-abîme* produces an ironic reversal wherein the ape describing his laborious process of becoming human reveals that his terminal humanity is a performance, “Nearly every evening I give a performance” (258-9). In this story, the human is literally a domesticated animal, which in its reversal transforms humanity as inextricably dependent on animality.

*Mutatis Mutandis: Reversed Mimesis in Modernist Literature* analyzes the emergence of a new aesthetic practice of “reverse mimesis” in both Anglo-American and Continental European traditions of modernist literature and visual arts. Following such authors and film directors as Franz Kafka, Alfred Jarry, H. G. Wells, Sophie Treadwell, and Alfred Hitchcock into Modernism’s quizzical pataphysical menagerie, this dissertation is concerned with the forms of ironic reversals that fuse or confuse the categories of humans, animals, and machines. Whereas “A Report to an Academy” features an ape almost literally becoming a human, Alfred Jarry’s pataphysical speculations, “The Shuttlecock” (1901) and “Cynegetics of the Omnibus” (1902), respectively analyze a badminton birdie as a bird and an omnibus as a pachyderm, using the representational apparatus of the natural sciences to dissect an unnatural object. In H.G. Wells’ “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” (1894), the eponymous scientist recounts his accomplishments inventing animals by the practice of fake taxidermy. In the story, the invented animals produce the very world the taxidermist claims to be imitating. Sophie
Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928) portrays a world where every character acts like a machine, with the tragic-heroic protagonist unable to fit into the social dynamics of the play because she demonstrates too many human feelings. Finally, in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Dial M for Murder* (1954), a vindictive husband plans to kill his wife, using the telephone as an essential part of his murder plot. In the film, the mechanical aspects of the telephonic apparatus stand as a synecdoche for the systematic silencing of the woman in the mid-twentieth century economy, equating the patriarchal core of capitalism with a mechanical system. In the works analyzed here, the neat categories of humans, animals, and machines collapse, leaving behind distorted systems of representation that challenge the conception that art imitates life.

The playful reversal of mimesis happens concomitantly with the increasing influence of mimetic machines in the social fabric of modernity. Within the avant-garde scene, these media machines became a way to reflect on the character of language and the process of linguistic production. The works here inscribe within their diegesis representations of photographic and filmic cameras, typewriters, phonographs and other apparatuses designed to capture, store, and reproduce data. However, instead of using these machines for the sole purpose of producing meaning, or of representing some purported reality, they actually engage in representing the apparatus itself. For instance, Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique* (1928) depicts the machines of modern life moving to the pace of a whimsical ballet and framing human beings within that pace of life. Furthermore, in the middle of these representations, a brief refrain repeatedly shows the moving camera reflected on the metal of a pendulum. Not only can viewers see the subjects framed within the filmic apparatus, they can also see the apparatus itself and the
process through which it constructs its meaning. Whereas mimesis points outwardly to the object, reverse mimesis turns inward. Reverse mimesis explores the work of representation and questions the role these media machines had in the construction of the categories of animals, machines, and the human.

Like a broken interface, the avant-gardist use of the media did not obscure the apparatus, but rather exposed it. In the playful reversal of looking inward, these works evoke the figure of mimesis to short-circuit the notion that language, the ultimate medium, offers an unimpeded access to some deeper reality. They explore the abyss of what lies in between reality and representation, and of the small, seemingly unimportant changes that constitute the *mutatis mutandis*. They open the black-box of representation and explore what the linguistic apparatus obscures through the interfaces of its multiple media.

Finally, by understanding the role of media apparatuses in the construction of humanity, these works take one last step and rebuild the world to their liking. The instances of reverse mimesis creatively reinvent ways of looking at the world; these moments ingeniously reconfigure how humans interpret the so-called “natural world” and, expanding the realm of possibilities, offer new ways of interpreting, organizing, and rendering this world.

**Monkey See, Monkey Do**

In the field of aesthetics, under the shadow of Erich Auerbach, mimesis refers to representation with a close tie to the appearance of extant objects. His analyses of mimesis conflate imitation with representation and assume that mimicry in art functions
as a simple form of copying, where the resulting work of art presents again a world existing outside the realm of the work of art. In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1945), Auerbach analyzes this struggle in great detail and argues that it suffers a drastic change in continental Europe around the beginning of the nineteenth century. During that time, literary representation is emancipated from classicist doctrines and emerges in what he calls a “modern realism, which has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life” (554).⁵ At first, this “realism” manifests itself in the forms of literary realism of French naturalism, and the German and Russian realisms that would later engender socialist realism. These forms of representation not only use literary techniques, but they tergiversate between “literary study and social inquiry” (496). They invoke scientific language (especially with the words étude and enquête) so they “can also lay claim to the rights and freedoms of science” (496). But further, their status as scientific observation changes at the beginning of the 20th century. In Virginia Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse* (1927), Auerbach finds a narration invoking different points of view and delving into the consciousness of several different characters. Without using the term, the German critic exiled in Turkey casts Woolf’s text as a form of “Cubism” that attempts to investigate, on the one hand, different positions from which a subject perceives the world and, on the other, a bending of temporal perspective.

Auerbach oversees the modernist dissatisfaction with realism in his analysis of

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“modern realism” and Virginia Woolf. His analysis astutely depicts some changes in narrative forms—namely, the dubious position of the narrator vis-à-vis the story, and the shifting conceptualization of time during a period when the pace of modern life had changed drastically—a change increased by the explosion of media technologies that represent perception in the nineteenth century, such as film and photographic cameras, gramophone, X-ray machines, etc. His massive tome endeavors the Herculean task of tracing these movements of realism, but only in the end, in the form of an epilogue, does it conclude that Western literature, from the ancients to the modern, and barring their specific differences, featured “realistic subjects [that] were treated seriously, problematically, or tragically” (556).

And herein lies the the general problem of Auerbach’s Mimesis, particularly critical to his analysis of modernism: the assumption that these texts—or more problematic, these authors—are committed to representing a form of consciousness realistically. His occasional surrender to the intentional fallacy ("the objective information which Virginia Woolf possesses regarding these objects of her creative imagination" [534]; “Proust aims at objectivity” [542]) reveals a certain type of ontological obsession in this work—one that, read in parallel with the epigraph quote by Andrew Marvell, would reveal the finitude of the project: “Had we but world enough and time…” we could then trace and catalogue the entirety of how the world is manifest in language. In Walter Benjamin’s words about history, these literary techniques would
“become[] citable in all [their] moments.” But such representation would only be finite if we had a stable and representable world—and a language that would operate mimesis as a form of total equivalence; the finite totality of the world represented in the finite totality of language.

Auerbach is not alone in his treatment of mimesis and realism. Several thinkers have delved into the mimetic to understand the social, psychological, and political implications of (re)presenting the world. From Plato and Diogenes to Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard, philosophers have questioned the problem of mimesis in the representation of truth, questioning what is at stake in the process of rendering the complexity of the world as an image. Literary theorists from G. E. Lessing to the Frankfurt School have outlined the literary techniques of mimetic representation and their relation to other media. And such thinkers as Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan have described the importance of the mimetic faculty to the constitution of the subject in relation to the world. However, save for Freud and Lacan—where mimesis has a self-fashioning or autopoietic function—most descriptions of the mimetic hinge on the same equivalence that Auerbach stages: art works present again an already existing reality. The works analyzed in *Mutatis Mutandis* show a different story—not only do they question the conflation of mimesis and representation by alluding to the act of mimicry in insects (mimicry as a form of effacement of the subject and not representation of the world), but these works also question the very capability of language to “reflect” by questioning

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whether reflections are not already contingent to the shape of the mirror.

In Auerbach’s narrative of the representation of reality, the pre-modern period associated representation with allegory, or the mystic, theological, worshiping of a God (or gods). Art was a vehicle for transcendence. The modern turn frees art from the grasp of religion and ties it to realism, or the mimetic representation of the world itself, free from the intervention of a god (or gods). The baroque worshiped the Gods and their representation in kings, queens, and the high clerics; the modern focus on showing the reality of the world as it is. With the rise of the novel, realism became a style in itself, but also something beyond that—realism became the style, a direct claim to truth. The works analyzed in *Mutatis Mutandis* expose how this turn to realism as a democratic liberation from the grasps of religion is an illusion. While presenting the “facts” in a claim to truth, realist novels performed a trick: they displaced the figure of a God into a seemingly uncontaminated systemic order. The modernist reversal of the mimetic faculty exposes this trick as trick and reveals the ontological (and thus theological) basis of the urge to represent reality.

In “Double-Session,” Jacques Derrida identifies this ontology as the temporal displacement of representation. As he notes, “the relation of the mime to the mimed, of the reproducer to the reproduced, is always a relation to a past present” (190). First, there is a world; second, representation—a one-way street from the ontological to the epistemological through which the essence of a being transcends and perseveres.

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Analyzing Plato’s mention of *mimēsis* in the Republic, Derrida suggests that the mimetic works in a doubled function. On the one hand, the process of representation is able to reveal the world through images, enabling visualization. Meanwhile, on the other hand, *mimēsis* is that which stands between the thing itself and the subject. While attempting to reveal, it actually conceals. In the play of language and the chains of signification, mimesis sets a veil between the subject and the thing itself. And, when in Mallarmé’s text *Mimique* a mimic stages a play showing the process of representation, the mimetic division repeats “*ad infinitum*, since its movement feeds its own proliferation” (191). To represent, mimesis doubles itself, represents itself, and creates a doubled figure that proliferates endlessly. A mime mimics mimesis. Derrida, thus, speaks of mimesis as the effect *trompe-l’oeil*: a technique employed to create the illusion of an existence beyond the scope of a work of art.

**Through the Looking Glass**

If mimesis is a process, it can be reversed. French playwright and inventor of ’pataphysics, Alfred Jarry, used the term “reverse mimesis” (*mimétisme inverse*) to analyze the characters of French symbolist Henri de Régnier. Jarry noted that, unlike Naturalist novels where the characters adapt to their environment, the characters of the

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French symbolist actually project their exuberant personalities onto their environment, changing nature to suit their personae. As his prime example, Jarry uses the bottle-maker, Mr. Hangsdorff, one of the most curious characters in Regnier’s *Le Mariage du Minuit* (1903). In the city of Venice, this character obsesses so much about glass that he ends up resembling a bottle and, as time elapses, projects his obsession onto the city of Venice, which becomes a large bottle filled with water. Later, he even indulges in an ice cream, described as small shards of glass. The entire environment surrounding this character becomes his professional world.9

Whereas Jarry used the term in the specific case of Henri de Régnier, this dissertation borrows the notion of “reverse mimesis” to interpret this strand of modernist works that emerge in the spirit of ’pataphysics and to analyze the trope of deliberate confusion of species and machines that plays with the very process of representation. In Régnier’s works, characters project their exuberant personalities onto their environment making everything around them mimic them. Works of reverse mimesis use the deliberate confusion in representation to force the discursive apparatus to adapt to their own vision of the world. Ultimately, these works reveal the process of mimesis—the process of representation—to be always already reversed: while traditionally we believe that the discourse of realism transparently imitates the world, the avant-garde shows that realism constructs the truths it seeks to find.

Ultimately, these works of reverse mimesis also invoke the long discussion about representation in science imbedded in the term *mimesis*. In biology, the term refers to the

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animal process of blending into the environment to become camouflage, or the practice of imitating a stronger animal to scare away predators. As Surrealist Roger Caillois notes in his essay on the praying mantis, these interpretations of mimesis as pure camouflage read too much into the animal practice and assume that these animals have no will of their own—they act like mechanical organisms executing a pre-established program.10 As chapter 2 will demonstrate, Caillois’ reading of the act of mimicry reveals the bias that mimesis just happens, without the process of representation behind it. As mimesis appears in nature, it is simply natural, uncontaminated by craft. This notion creates a direct equivalence between the original and the imitation.

For Jarry, the use of mimicry, especially in its connection to the biological world, calls attention to process. As he describes in the beginning of his essay on Regnier’s characters, “one butterfly, in order not to be recognized as a butterfly, imitates a dead leaf” (91). Much as Caillois would do years later, Jarry focuses on what the process of mimesis obscures. In imitating a dead leaf, a butterfly itself remains invisible, like a medium that disappears behind its interface. Whereas the role of the medium in mimicry is to remain invisible and the objective of representation is to become something else, in reverse mimesis the goal of imitation is to become extremely visible as such: as imitation, as a medium.

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An apparatus is an apparatus is an apparatus

The emergence of a playful misrepresentation is contingent on the acute self-reflexivity of texts from the latter part of the 19th and first third of the 20th centuries. Concomitantly, many of these texts re-inscribe apparatuses (or media machines) within their fictional worlds. With the increasing popularization and invention of technologies of communication at the end of the nineteenth century, this literature uses these technologies either as framing devices or representations within their fictions. Alfred Jarry’s speculative journalism brings to light the processes of the press; H. G. Wells’s science fictions are usually told by a first person narrator who goes through lengths to (unsuccessfully) convince his readers of the veracity of his claims. What are these moves if not reflections on the ways the written word legitimizes itself? These re-inscriptions don’t stop there: Ballet Mechanique shows a camera reflected (distorted) on a metal pendulum; Machinal features a stenographer as the main character; and the Dada machines are usually conflated with newspaper clippings and other representations of the press.

While these visual and sound technologies work as integral parts of narratives, they also get in the way of representation. If the “ideal” process of biological mimesis is to mimic the environment so as to remain invisible as an organism, these media machines completely fail the test: they remain entirely visible in the realm of representation and actually re-create their environment about them. In that sense, these apparatuses not only work as extensions of themselves but also work as “extensions of man,” as Marshall McLuhan theorized, extending the human sensorium, as they call attention to their
presence and to the necessity of some sort of apparatus in the meaning-making process. In that sense, they become self-reflexive.

This re-articulation of the human body vis-à-vis the apparatuses that frame it as a media machine has been addressed in Jonathan Sterne’s *The Audible Past* (2003),11 David Wills’s *Dorsality* (2008),12 and Dominic Pettman’s *Human Error* (2011).13 In his analysis of the evolution of sound production, Sterne suggests that the definition of sound as a natural phenomenon is very anthropocentric because “sound is a very particular perception of vibrations” (11), one that depends on a set of sensitive organs to interpret those vibrations and render them within a system of representation. In other words, the existence of sound as we know it is conditional on a set of technologies that constitute our body, a realization that Wills comes to: that we depend on “a technology that is us and that we are through and through” (17). Nevertheless, in modernist scholarship the intersection of media and the body is mostly addressed in works that understand technology as prosthetic to the body and ultimately as a form of helping the disembodied spirit transcend its physical form. For instance, in *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (1998), Tim Armstrong argues that while modern technology models developments on the human body itself, it uses such developments to stage an intervention that attempts to


“fix” the disabled body. In *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (2002), Sara Danius unites body and technology in what she calls a modernist “technologically mediated crisis of the senses” (1)—where modern technology has reached the point when the body cannot experience the world by itself anymore. However, her assessment of long modern novels of Proust, Joyce, and Mann proposes that they provide an “immediacy of lived experience” (23)—they express a modernist attempt at reaching a freshness and irreducible experience of the world. Both of these interpretations of technology as prosthetic understand that human experience transcends its body through the technology that overcomes the disabilities of the modern subject. But whose experience can bypass human embodiment if not the experience of a spirit—a Cartesian ghost?

Thus, modernism acknowledges the paradoxical role of the media as both displaying something and interfering with the material. Karen Jacobs’s *The Eye’s Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (2001) and Julian Murphet’s *Multimedia Modernism* (2009) both pay attention to the mediated aspects of modernism, understanding technology as always already inherent to the process of experiencing the world. Jacobs investigates the increasing discredit of the Cartesian perspectivalism in modernist novels by a focus on the visual apparatus: a discredit of the “monocular,

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disembodied, objective, and ahistorical vision” (7). Modernist fiction features a displacement of this kind of vision, supplanting it with a narrative of “compromised transparency” (7) and narrators who, in presenting only partial views of the story, reaffirm the embodied limited point of view inherent to any form of narration. Through a Marxist reading of modernist aesthetics, Julian Murphet interprets body and technology in modernism as a play of images inherent to capitalism. For him, modernism begins with the “realization that the ‘human subject’ is already a technological entity through and through, hooked up to the system of media in which it is historically situated” (3-4). Thus, instead of attempting an introspection of the character of identity, modernist texts stage a “raising of the matter of literature to a surface of touch and conversion with other media” (4)—a celebration of the mediated aspect of art and an attempt to understand art through its media or, as Murphet suggests, “a becoming-media of the arts” (5).

For the French apparatus theorist, Jean-Louis Baudry, the medium does not merely obscure something underneath, but actually works as a symptom of something deeper. As he notes in the essay “The Apparatus” (1975), in Plato’s retelling of the myth of the cave in the Book VII of the Republic, when Socrates sets up the apparatus of the cave, he describes humans as tied facing a wall where shadows are projected by marionette players, the shadows of puppets: “all sorts of vessels, and statues and figures


of animals made of wood and stone and various materials” (105). The theory goes that shadows on the wall stand in for the real—except that, as Baudry notes, the real is the real of puppets, wood and stone, in themselves already a stand-in for animals and humans. “Here is the strangest thing about the whole apparatus,” Baudry begins, “Instead of projecting images of natural-real objects, of living people, etc. … Plato feels the need, by creating a kind of conversion in the reference to reality, to show the prisoners not direct images and shadows of reality but, even at this point, a simulacrum of it” (109). And when they finally escape the cave, if they ever do, they can look at the reflection of the sun on a lake—another distorted reflection of a real. But the entanglement does not stop there, for Baudry notes that the whole myth itself is already an apparatus. As he wonders, “isn’t it curious that Plato, in order to … reveal, and make understood what sort of illusion underlies our direct contact with the real, would imagine or resort to an apparatus…” (107).

Baudry focuses on the displacement of meaning in the myth. Through his comparison of Plato to Freud’s “mental apparatus” in The Interpretation of Dreams, he notes how the cave functions as an illusion, or a symptom, “of what is happening somewhere else” (107). Where does meaning happen, then? In the cave, it begins in the sun; the only problem is that when you actually look at the sun directly, you burn your eyes. For Baudry, the very apparatus of cinema—and the way it is perceived—is symptomatic of a desire: for reality and for origin.

Baudry’s analysis of the apparatus calls attention to the distance between representation and the represented. In his essay on what he calls “technical images,” or images produced with the assistance of an apparatus, Vilém Flusser contends that the relationship between humans and their environment through the media has always been one of distancing—progressively increasing as more technologies are developed.19 First there were images—cave images that represented in a straight and first order the world around. These images became texts—they turned into concepts, words that defined them. These images and text are supposed to give us access to the world but, instead, they “come between the world and human beings. They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings’ lives finally become a function of the images they create” (10). With the development of photography, there seems to be a misapprehension that pictures represent a form of truth—that they bring us closer to the world. A photograph is a faithful picture of the world. However, for Flusser that is not entirely true. Photographs, or what he calls “technical images”—images that are created by an apparatus—actually take us one step further from the world: “they abstract from texts which abstract from traditional images which themselves abstract from the concrete world” (14). The endless play of representation.

This image of coexistence anticipates what Dominic Pettman, in Human Error (2011), suggests as our current state: “In an interlinked biosphere and mediasphere, the

task of locating a species that is increasingly hybrid—even parasitic—is both a challenge and an opportunity” (7). However, for Pettman the current state of the media network just makes evident an older problem—namely, that the concept of “humanity” is constructed through a fluid set of arbitrary characteristics that always defines the human in opposition to an “other” (animal or machine). And more so, that this concept is usually employed in creating a hierarchy that sets the properly “human” above its others. As he questions, “One need only ask the sick, the insane, the criminal, the child, the woman, the slave, the Jew, the homosexual, the primitive, the heathen, or the barbarian … to see just how mobile the borderline between human and its Others has been” (7). Pettman describes the relationship of the human vis-à-vis its other using the term “cybernetic triangle,” or “the unholy trinity of human, animal, and machine, including the various ways in which they have been figured, and reconfigured, conceptually over time” (6). If the human can only define itself through a differentiation from the animal and the mechanical, then both animal and mechanical can only be defined in opposition to this human; as a never-ending feedback loop.

Considering the mediasphere of the early twentieth century to be an acknowledgement of the “compromised transparency” of media, as Jacobs suggests, and as the becoming media of the arts, for Murphet, Mutatis Mutandis focuses on the moments where reverse mimesis recognizes art as a medium and exposes its traits. Such interrelation between subject and technology also means that subject and apparatus depend on each other for the production of meaning. In Into the Universe of Technical Images (2011), Flusser analyzes a very similar relationship in how a person makes sense of the world via a media apparatus. He uses the example of a photographer who produces
photographs only through an intricate symbiosis with a camera. For him, “The apparatus does as the photographer desires, but the photographer can only desire what the apparatus can do” (20). While Flusser attests the supremacy of the subject who can control the apparatus at will, he also emphasizes such supremacy to be partly illusory, depending on a set of conditions that actually undermine any independence.

Furthermore, if the media obscure symptoms of something deeper, as Baudry notes, then, even more deeply than the obsession with reality and origin, these works expose the human discomfort with being human. These works reaffirm certain arguments made by the recent fields of in-, anti-, and post-, humanisms—namely, that what we consider to be human was never more than an Enlightened fantasy, an unreal goal that was never possible to be achieved. The works of reverse mimesis were particularly dissatisfied with the neat categorization of the human as opposite an Other, instead trying to reconfigure the world in ways that challenge the Cartesian fantasy as the goal of humanity. They explore how the limits of the human are stipulated by vexing parameters, usually determined by those who most have to benefit from that very stipulation (and as chapter 3 will show, these are the ones who usually control the way media apparatuses are distributed and made accessible to larger audiences).

Reverse mimesis thus tries to offer an alternative. These works operate much as Vilém Flusser suggests modern photography operates: functioning as a counter-vision of the world. Because the world of images is actually a “vision,” Flusser calls for the creation a counter-vision: not a vision that goes against the established vision, but rather a “vision of vision” (1). Instead of looking at objects in the world, the counter-vision turns its gaze toward the camera; it looks at the apparatus we invented for creating vision to
turn the camera inside out like a glove revealing its inside. By looking at the way an apparatus produces images, the counter-vision analyzes the process of image production, the “symbolisation of vision” (2), and discovers the “various meanings which vision gives the world, and thus, by implication, [] discover[s] other possible meanings to give the world” (2). Whereas mimesis tries construct unobstructed visions of the world, reverse mimesis looks backward into the process of building vision, questioning the possibility of alternative worlds.

In keeping with the pervasive presence of apparatuses in modern life, Mutatis Mutandis will consider “apparatus” to mean both the specific media machine used to record, store, and reproduce sensitive data and the set of social and institutional apparatuses that determine the organization of power within a society. Uniting both definitions of apparatus, Mutatis Mutandis will also look at the apparatus as the system of artistic production that engenders objects of art. For instance, for a novel these include the typewriter, ink and paper, as well as the publishing industry and the material culture surrounding it. For cinema, these could include the camera as well as the studio system that determines how a movie should be shot and edited.

**Beneath the Planet of the Aping**

Hybrid figures of humans, animals, and machines have always populated our literary imaginaries. From the Minotaur, Centaurs, Mermaids, and Sirens of Greek mythology, to fantastic bestiaries in the Renaissance, to our own Hollywood obsession with werewolves, vampires, and extra-terrestrial humanoids, human subjectivity seems to define itself in opposition to its nonhuman others.
The mechanical serves a similar purpose. The Greeks invented mechanisms to mimic human action, automata that to this day continue to capture our imagination as Artificial Intelligence. Mechanical humans both pose a threat to our human stability in the cautionary tales of sci-fi, and reveal our obsession with enlightened ideals when the metaphor “works like a machine” populates our vocabulary about sports figures who excel.

The literary imaginariunm of the early twentieth century also confuses the categories of humans, animals, and machines. Gregor Samsa terrifyingly metamorphoses into a giant bug; more terrifyingly, Red Peter becomes a human. In Wells’s Island of Dr. Moreau several animals are turned into humans through vivisection. The same surgical process turns the dog-faced baboon Bosse-De-Nage into a proto-human in Jarry’s Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll. In collaboration with Robert Desnos in Starfish (1928), Man Ray chooses the starfish as a recurrent figure, an animal that embodies the symmetry and geometry of a star while at the same time being fluid and organic—it too dances a mechanical ballet. Desnos’s own La Géométrie de Daniel (1939) features several poems playing with the geometrical and organic; “The Circle and the Star” [Le rond et l’étoile] and “The Moebius Strip” [L’Anneau de Moebius] are two examples of the interplay of angles and circles. Humans are constantly posed in an uncanny resemblance and displacement vis-à-vis nonhuman animals and machines.

From the wealth of confusion in these cybernetic categories it seems, as Dominc Pettman suggests, that the human is a case of “mistaken identity,” and in our neurosis

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20 Pettman, Human Error, 213.
we drift between fear of and fascination with the nonhuman. Although we tergiversate between phobia and philia toward the improperly human, these crossovers usually focus more on the ontological changes each creature presents than on how we code our subjectivity through an arbitrary and binary process of differentiation. The terms usually associated with transformations indicate such materialist obsession: metamorphosis, mutation, prosthesis, becoming, simulation. These terms are borrowed from biology, medicine, and philosophy to give “empirical” legitimacy to such changes.

The works of reverse mimesis radically differ from other works that blur the boundaries of humanity. In these fictions, the crossover between humans, animals, and machines happens in the realm of representation. Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928) uses the mechanical as trope for representing a woman forced to submit to a society of mechanical men; Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mechanique* has machines dancing like human figures. The Berlin and Zurich Dadas used figures of machinery filling in for human parts—a process of mechanical remediation. These stories, poems, plays, and films are not necessarily concerned with mutation, but with mixing levels of interpretation and representation. Characters, animals, and machines are never represented for what they are, but always as a stand in for something else. We are talking not only about the transformation of humans into nonhuman beings, but the epistemic move of presenting and *representing* one qua the other. What is at stake at misrepresenting these figures in such radical ways? More importantly, how do these crossovers change notions of human subjectivity when they evoke the uncanny, the creepy, and ultimately, the sexual?

Reverse mimesis questions the established narratives about science and art inherited from the Enlightenment, and exposes the repressed “urges” Enlightenment
thought tries to contain. In “Report to an Academy” we hear the ape-turned-human describe how he keeps many of his instincts repressed, including the mimetic impulse. Once he has become human, Red Peter needs to repress his urges during performances and “takes comfort” from a “half-trained little chimpanzee.” The story thus equates the sexual with the primitive and the mimetic. Because Red Peter’s performance needs to appear natural, the process of becoming human remains hidden with his animal urges. In *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer describe the impulse to imitate as pertaining to the primitive principle of *mana*, or “the echo of the real preponderance of nature in the weak psyches of primitive people” (10-1). Because imitation meant the primitive bringing together of subject and object, Enlightenment thought (dating back as far as the Greeks) sought to repress mimesis (even in Plato’s *Republic*, simple imitation is banned). Instead of imitation, the Enlightenment brought about a system of thought and “The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought” (10).

The secularization of science during Enlightenment relies on the act of repressing both the mimetic impulse and the urge to explore the human sensorium beyond the field of vision. Summarizing Adorno’s view of mimesis, Fredric Jameson notes that the age of reason and modern science has for centuries masked the mimetic impulse. In *Late Marxism* (1989), he suggests that

the turn of so-called Western science will now be seen as a result of the anti-mimetic taboo and of anti-mimetic regression – that is to say, the passage from a perceptual ‘science’ based on the senses and on quality to notations and analysis based on geometry and on mathematics. (105)
To illustrate its point, the complex notation systems of geometry and calculus turn reason into a visual diagram with no perceptible relation to the world. The drawings of geometry play within the system itself, whereas X, Y, Z, Sine, Cosine, Pi, and other notations are forms of intentionally deflecting reality into an abstract system of thought—they are not representative of any specific reality, but of the larger abstract system itself.

Adorno and Horkheimer saw these enlightenment moves as necessary repressions of smell, touch, taste so as to privilege the field of vision, which was more apt for the representation of reason. Even the field of music turned into a play on vision, with the modern development of the musical notation system, which translates nuances in the auditory realm into visual cues. The secularization of science, and the development of an enlightenment humanism focused primarily on the repression and domestication of the senses into unilateral reason. Thus, the move from a religious repression of the body and mind in the figure of a religious follower into the secularized repression of reason constitutes, for Adorno and Horkheimer, another version of the same process. As Jameson notes, this repression enables the “continuity between science and ritual - as forms of domination – to remain intact” (105). Red Peter attests to the violent repression in his narrative. Not only do the beatings he receives while still an ape symbolize an enlightened education, but the constant performance Red Peter puts on daily attests to the continued effort to keep the Other at bay.

In the playful misrepresentations of reverse mimesis, what lies beneath the planet of the aping emerges and questions the established discourse about humanity. Chapter 1 discusses reverse mimesis as a form that borders on satire and parody to challenge the discourse of reason in the scientific community at the end of the nineteenth century.
Alfred Jarry’s speculations mimic scientific and journalistic styles of the time only to depict outrageously inappropriate subjects. His essays produce a reflection on the status of method in scientific writing acting both as an art and a science.

Chapter 2 explores the British scientific communities in the figure of HG Wells’ taxidermist, who appropriates the method of mimetic representation only to twist it into reinventions of reality. Deploying the structures of both Realism (in the form of Naturalism) and Positivism (in the figure of Natural History), the story ridicules the fantasy that a specific use of language (as the style of realism) would give us an unimpeded access to an outside reality. Along with two essays Surrealist artist Roger Caillois wrote on mimicry in the animal world, Wells’ story shows how the process of imitation can easily be reversed while still maintaining the scientific method that for so long has been a key to discourses of Truth. Wells’, Caillois’, and Jarry’s works enact a critical distance from the subject analyzed. Instead of passing for objects of science, these works remain incredibly visible as art forms and as such invite a look into the apparatus of constructing knowledge. The form of reverse mimesis analyzed in Chapters 1 and 2 appropriate the dominant discourse of science and journalism only to challenge them.

Chapter 3 and 4, on the other hand, have little to do with appropriation of the dominant discourse and, instead, promote reverse mimesis as forms of counter-representation—forms that fight the established narrative without appropriating it. Both chapters analyze a similar plotline in Sophie Treadwell’s play, *Machinal* (1928), and Alfred Hitchcock’s film, *Dial M for Murder* (1954): a woman defies social norms by having an affair and suffers the wrath of her husband. Both works feature competing forms of representation as their women protagonists push against traditional depictions of
women in drama and film. Chapter 3 examines the protagonist in *Machinal*. Within the play, the masculine world of business forces everyone to act as if in a mechanical ballet, perfectly synchronizing their lines and movements to the fast-paced tone of the market. While the characters mimic the automated world around them, the protagonist breaks from her domesticated role and reverses representation to recreate ways women function in the mid-twentieth-century economy. In her struggle, she kills her husband and receives a death penalty. As a threat to the modern life, the woman is put to death in a sacrificial move that keeps the masculine business world functioning.

Even though a male figure saves the protagonist of *Dial M for Murder*, Chapter 4 argues that this ending is not so optimistic. In *Dial M*, the woman appears to be trapped in the greater machinery of modern life, represented by the telephonic apparatus, the murderous plot, the economic situation in which they live, and, ultimately, the romance plot her lover invents to save her. The film thus performs a reverse mimesis by depicting how representations of women in Hollywood could never successfully deviate from the masculine logic of the studio system. Although the film does not offer a solution to Hollywood’s masculinity, it does make the problem visible and exposes what Luce Irigaray would later call the “onto-theo-logic,” or the tendency to reduce discourse to a (masculine) logic of the Same.\footnote{Luce Irigaray, “The Power of Discourse,” in *The Sex Which is not One*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP), p. 78.} *Dial M* thus enacts a reverse mimesis in which the masculine discourse behind Hollywood becomes evident.
*Mutatis Mutandis* ends with a Coda, which discusses the relationship between photography, realism, and the animal world. Analyzing Catalán photographer Joan Fontcuberta’s photographic exhibit *Fauna* (1987), the coda challenges the conception of photography as a way to access reality. Instead, *Fauna* uses photography as a way to invent and study imaginary animals: Fontcuberta’s exhibit displays photographs of several bizarre, non-existent animals. Displaying a pataphysical form of mimesis, in which the scientist invents their objects of study, Fontcuberta’s *Fauna* radically recreates the natural world through traditional means of scientific investigation, producing a humorous discourse that exposes the artificial and often violent ways humans categorize and catalogue animals.
Chapter One

Quizzical, Pataphysical: Alfred Jarry’s Modernist Method of Discourse

The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were fertile for creativity in science. James Clerk Maxwell’s demons helped rethink the second law of thermodynamics, while Albert Einstein’s *annus mirabilis* papers speculated on the plausibility of Brownian motion. Poetic thought became a form of discourse in Nietzsche’s *Gay Science* and Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*. Francis Picabia creatively engineered purposeless machines, while Marcel Duchamp designed original mechanical devices. Whether in the hands of science, philosophy, or art, these creative reinterpretations of scientific investigation questioned the very method of science and brought the process of producing scientific claims into public view at the turn of the century. However, no form of inquiry placed science in as close scrutiny as literary
endeavors. With the backdrop of technological advances, H. G. Wells and Jules Verne created science fiction, which used biological speculation, technological extrapolation, and the figure of the tenacious scientist to question the tendencies in science at the time.

Reversing the role of science fiction, avant-gardist playwright and artist Alfred Jarry invented the fictional science of ’pataphysics, the infamous science of imaginary solutions. As the narrator of Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll outlines, Dr. Faustroll practiced “the science of that which is superinduced on metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter’s limitations.”22 ’Pataphysics does to metaphysics what metaphysics has done to physics: namely, question the very basis of metaphysical interrogation by appropriating, exaggerating, and reversing its own method. In a series of essays published in such literary magazines as La Plume and La Revue Blanche, Jarry played with a new methodology for thinking about scientific discourse on the one hand, and artistic representation on the other. His essays ranged from commentary on political events, to philosophical reflections on the nature of life, to analyses of natural phenomena, among other themes. These brief pieces had in common the playfulness of what Jarry would later call ’pataphysics; they embodied the pataphysical method.

The science of imaginary solutions delved into the very abyss between words and the ideas that words represent. The term ’pataphysics comes from a contraction of “epi (meta ta physica) and the actual orthography ’pataphysics, preceded by an apostrophe so

as to avoid a simple pun.\textsuperscript{23} Along with the etymological play, an apostrophe helps avoid (as well as imply) a simple pun: the homophonic play of \textit{pas ta physique} (not your physics) and \textit{patte à physique} (physical paw), which both sound like ‘\textit{pataphysique} in French. Hence, Jarry’s endeavor in the imaginary science focuses on how the linguistic apparatus, which presumably brings humans closer to the world—or helps them “grasp” the world—actually interferes between the world and representation, as ideas get lost in the infinite play of language. The pun with \textit{patte à physique} (physical paw) evokes the animalizing effect of science, as humans suddenly fail to grasp the world and their hands become like paws.

Some of Jarry’s ‘\textit{pataphysical} essays selected highly specific scientific themes and, in a twisted representation, turned these topics into an alternative reality. For instance, “Anthropophagy” suggests that anthropology needs to begin cannibalizing other cultures effectively and literally if it sincerely desires to learn about the Other. Several essays selected seemingly irrelevant and mundane objects and reinterpreted them using a non-orthodox discursive apparatus to transform them within a different context. In particular, a series of essays Jarry termed “On Pests” represented everyday things as if they were animals: a shuttlecock as a bird and an omnibus as a pachyderm.\textsuperscript{24} These two


brief essays transform the representational apparatus of science and produce a humorous analysis of their object of study. In the molds of a journalistic piece on biological phenomena, “The Shuttlecock” and “Cynegetics of the Omnibus” adapt the scientific method to analyze objects that are not biological phenomena per se, forcing the world of representation to mold to the particularity of these “animals.” Whereas positivistic science traditionally uses the stages of the “scientific method” to analyze and impose their truths onto different subjects, Jarry’s pataphysical speculations adapt each methodology to suit the object of study, proposing a reversal in representation.

The radically improper framing of an omnibus as a pachyderm, or a shuttlecock as a bird inevitably results in humor. In the introduction to the translations of Jarry’s speculations, Paul Edwards casts these essays as “humorous journalism (indeed this parasitic genre is as old as journalism itself)” (221). Even though both essays play more with scientific style than with the journalistic, they stage a parody of the type of science popularized by journalistic publications in the late nineteenth century, such as the French magazine *La Nature* or the American *Popular Science*. In French, the term “popular science” translates as *vulgarisation scientifique*, which literally means “scientific vulgarization.” These venues buried the nuances of the scientific method behind its review process and presented only the results of experiments as self-evident truths, unaffected by the specificity of the scientific method. Jarry’s speculations participated in the same process: they produced surface effects while hiding their (reversed) “scientific method.”

While on the one hand ‘pataphysics appropriated technical discourse and the molds of a scholastic academy with the *College de ’Pataphysique*, on the other, it
developed primarily within the artistic community (in literary magazines, novels, and art galleries). Even though the narrator of *Exploits and Opinions*, Panmuphle, ends the novel with a claim that 'pataphysics is not merely a science, but “the science,” a poetic basis steers its method of inquiry, namely the obsessive attention to language and linguistic play. In this sense, 'pataphysics parodies scientific thought to call attention to its language and linguistic moves necessary for discourse to proceed. Edward’s assertion that humor is a “parasitic genre” accurately defines 'pataphysics as an endeavor that runs parallel to science, using it to challenge it. Nevertheless, Jarry’s avant-gardist focus on language makes this genre not only metaphorically parasitic as in the animal symbiosis between a parasite and its host, but, as the polysemy of the word *parasite* in French suggests, as the static signal that comes through a radio or television device and disrupts the main message. In *Parasite* (2007 [1982]), Michel Serres outlines the inherent relationships of parasitism in communication where every system receives the interference of a parasite that refuses to keep quiet.\(^{25}\) Just like the relation between parasite and animal, the static signal disrupts the main message with confusing information, predating on the main channel. As Serres defines it, the interruption comes from a “parasite, physical, acoustic, informational, belonging to order and disorder, a new voice, an important one, in the contrapuntal matrix” (6). Despite being suppressed by the main message, the parasite interrupts the signal with another signal, bringing about a different voice.

\(^{25}\) Michel Serres. *Parasite*. Translated by Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007 [1982]).
While any subject attempts to establish itself through discourse, another form of subjectivity lurks in the background disrupting its supremacy. In *The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1898), the first-person narrator, Panmuphle, relates the pataphysical adventures of a scientist, Dr. Faustroll, who represents the *cogito* of scientific thought. Together the two men of science travel through the city of Paris on a boat accompanied by Bosse-de-Nage, a hydrocephalic baboon who can only say the human words “Ha ha!” Whereas Faustroll acts as the main subject of science, the Doctor who leads the pataphysical experiments, the hydrocephalic baboon lurks in the background as the animal who cannot communicate, except for his limited laugh. However, as Faustroll seeks the A-ha moments in his experiments, Bosse-de-Nage offers the most insightful commentary with a laughter that reveals the banality of experience. After every instance Faustroll offers a pataphysical explanation, Bosse-de-Nage rebuts with his staple laughter. For example, when the travelers visit the isle of Her, they see the Cyclops lord wearing a mirrored necklace. Panmuphle notes that “Faustroll calculated that the double mirror was exactly $1.5 \times 10^{-5}$ centimeters thick” and reflected toward them “the eight-rayed stone of the heraldic serpent.” Immediately after Faustroll offered such detailed and scientific analysis, “Bosse-de-Nage expressed succinctly the general stupefaction: ‘Ha ha!’ he said.”

An animal subversive laughter succeeds every act of rational analysis.

Through the humor and parody of journalism and scientific discourse, ‘pataphysics reverses the revelation of science. In “Cynegetics of the Omnibus,” Jarry

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outlines two main types of pachyderms roaming the streets of Paris: “those who cover up their footprints; … those who leave a visible track behind them.” The analysis outrageously places omnibuses that ride on tracks or that ride on the roads into two categories that resemble a biological taxonomy. This brief analysis does not reveal much about omnibuses nor pachyderms, but rather about the process of categorization inherent in the scientific method. Instead of Aha-moments, in which the text motions toward extra-diegetic knowledge, the pataphysical essays produce only Haha-moments, without any deeper knowledge aside from the realization that knowledge itself is constructed.

The figure of the animal as parasite in the pataphysical world further suggests that human autonomy (the voice of science, of logocentrism) can only exist when it ignores its animal origins and further when it uses the Aha-moment as a way to justify its own superiority to other animals. Bosse-de-Nage appears as a human/animal hybrid; the playful speculations analyze objects as if they were animals. Dr. Faustrol or the narrative voice of the speculations represent a form of writing about animal life, or a discourse of science performing a sacrificial silencing of the animal, speaking about it, for it, as it. Conversely, Bosse-de-Nage’s laughter, and the Haha-moment of the speculations, demystify the subject—the human/animal laughter ridicules the knowledge produce by the scientific method as contingent on the very human perspective. These essays expose the human element behind scientific claims.

The humor also opens the apparatus of scientific investigations for evaluation as the parasitic questioning of laughter permeates the writing, always raising questions

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about the supremacy of scientific knowledge. The pataphysical laughter of reverse mimesis makes the mimetic apparatus of science visible by showing the tricks, technologies, and subjects involved in the process of representation. More specifically, “The Shuttlecock” and “Cynegetic of the Omnibus” explore the creationist narrative underlying certain proponents of Darwin’s theories of evolution, the reappearance of materialist philosophy at the time, the use of mechanical metaphors to describe natural phenomena, and the use of theories of synergy to describe social organization.

**Creative Revolution**

In the short essay “The Shuttlecock” (1902), part of the series “On Pests,” Jarry presents a co-evolution between an animal and the technology in its environment. The essay follows a progressive and almost mathematical analysis of the evolutionary process that turned a wood-pigeon into a shuttlecock. It opens with an introduction, featuring a general analysis of the animal, giving the reason for this animal’s fame, and briefly summarizing the overall topic of the essay. The analysis focuses on the irony that nets, the technology designed to trap and destroy the bird, in fact produced a change in the Shuttlecock, which helped it persevere. The animal and its technology are now inseparable: “The one may no longer do without the other, and what should have been the cause of its demise preserved it from destruction.”28 After this brief summary, the essay reverts to a time before the shuttlecock existed, when it was simply a wooden-pigeon and, from there, chronologically traces each step of the evolutionary process. Through logical

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methodological reasoning, “The Shuttlecock” traces the animal’s development in conjunction with the technology surrounding it until it achieves the current form.

In the essay, the animal and its environment evolve in a symbiotic process:

The wood-pigeon has always been caught using nets strung vertically between trees or poles… The shuttlecock has bumped its head against the nets for so many centuries that the nets are now strung more tightly in order to withstand this battering, while its head has progressively atrophied, hardened and been driven right back to the root of its tail. (252)

First, the encounter between the animal and technology results in changes in the apparatus (“nets are now strung more tightly”); second, the organism suffers a change (“its head has progressively atrophied…”). This description casts the apparatus and the organism in a never-ending feedback loop where the changes in the organism influence the apparatus that in turn changes itself only to influence the organism. The shuttlecock develops with the mutual evolution of the nets, “the mechanism of its capture.” The essay further suggests, “as a natural consequence, the large net, the palombière, has shrunk and adapted itself to the dimensions of a single shuttlecock” (252). In the end, the hunt for wood-pigeons evolved into the dynamic of Badminton, where one shuttlecock bounces around from one small net to another, or vice versa.

The process of the evolution of the shuttlecock challenged established views on evolution and adaptation. For many of Darwin’s followers, the process of natural selection involved an organized process that forced beings into progressing toward an increasingly higher ground: from simple organisms to complex higher species, of which human is the apex. As Steffan Müller-Wille suggests, such notions were misguided by
religious bias and ignored the fact that Darwin himself had described evolution partly as chaotic and random because “the antagonistic forces from which the struggle for life results are themselves of a non-adaptive and essentially disruptive nature.”\footnote{Steffan Müller-Wille, “The Dark Side of Evolution: Caprice, Deceit, Redundancy,” \textit{(History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences} 31.2, 2009), p. 185.} For Darwin, not all evolutionary traits represented an improvement for the animal, and neither did these traits progress in an isolated form, adapting only to the environment around them. The Shuttlecock explores the very phenomena ignored by nineteenth century naturalists: technological coevolution. Not only do animals evolve to adapt to their environment, but they also inhabit environments to which they are adapted, and ultimately develop in a common symbiosis with the world around them (including other species and technology).

But “The Shuttlecock” also parodies scientific discourse through the appropriation and comic retooling of scientific language. The implied reference to the game of badminton further emphasizes the coevolution of shuttlecock and nets as play and the relationship between wood-pigeon and palombière as part of a larger game—both literally, in badminton, and metaphorically, linguistically. Animal and technology have no real value outside the game, or outside play. Instead, they take on a different value within a very definite system of meaning: the game, or the environment, which constricts meaning for both. In parallel, the play of language defines “the animal” through binary oppositions to “the human,” on the one hand, and to “the machine” on the other. Thus, definitions of animal and technology do not depend on some outside truth, but rather on an always shifting system of values interrelationally dependent on each other. The game
within the essay mimics the game of the essay, the language game always at play in representation for, as Serres notes, “A semantic field is not a concept but a fuzzy set, a playing field for what amounts to, sometimes, only a play on words. Meaning, inevitably; play, obviously” (9). Whereas scientific discourse uses terminology to make claims to an external truth, Jarry’s essays suggest that whenever a term is deployed, it only takes on meaning within a very defined linguistic system. Scientific truths in this case are but terms that coherently relate to others that only function within the system of science. The playfulness of *’pataphysics proposes that scientific truths are verisimilitudes.

The narrator of Jarry’s speculation does not falter. He opens the essay with a simple indicative statement, “The Shuttlecock is a bird,” and follows his analysis of this bird with other simple, indicative clauses that seemingly avoid misunderstandings and mimic the precision of scientific language. He speaks as if he knows the perfect set of words to present his subject matter, even though the word of choice, “shuttlecock,” already presents an ambiguity. When speaking in the past tense, the narrative voice relies heavily on the French *passé composé*—avoiding the formalities of the *passé simple*. He says of the Shuttlecock: “on a chassé” [they have been caught], “le volant a perdue” [the shuttlecock has lost], and “on disparu” [they have disappeared]. Even though all of these instances refer to the convoluted evolutionary processes that engendered the shuttlecock, the use of such verb tense makes the experience of reading undemanding. This prosaic form cannot be confused with simplicity in thought because complex, subordinate clauses append each simple sentence, creating a style of seeming clarity and definition. For example, the very opening sentence sets the tone to the piece: “The shuttlecock is a bird, noteworthy for the white, sometimes striated feathers of its truncato-conic tail” (252). In
one move, the narrator introduces the bird as the main object of analysis, and informs the reader the color of its feathers (as well as the color variation), and uses specific scientific language to describe the shape of the tail. Following a scientific obsession with mimesis, the narrator crafts sentences in clear, direct, and objective style.

While within the essay the clarity of language might look like scientific statements, within the context of early-twentieth century culture, they become purely play. The reader realizes the comic element of an essay about a shuttlecock (volant) as if it were a bird because of a linguistic proximity between the shuttlecock and a rooster (in English—or le volant and the act of flying, voler, in French), as well as the physical semblance of a shuttlecock and a little bird. Much of the linguistic playfulness that marks Jarry’s pataphysical thought occurs through wordplay, puns, and other humorous takes on etymological proximity between ideas. Very much like later avant-garde endeavors such as Dada and Surrealism, ’pataphysics explores the parasitic nature of language, of how one term always carries with it a score of related ideas. The very word “parasite” gives itself to such play. Serres emphasizes the suffix “para”: “We always calculate the too much. The too much and the para. Parabola, parable, parasite. The parasite pays in parables” (31). Parasite etymologically means to “eat next to,” and para- means besides. Parable means a comparison between two ideas next to each other and the very etymology of the word “word” in French, parole, points to the para- characteristic of language—as that which stands next to an idea. Thus, in our western linguistic tradition, words stand next to ideas, never fully substituting them—and always separate, next to.

The way Jarry’s essay structures its presentation of the shuttlecock compares the essay’s form with a mechanical, quasi-mathematical formula. Through humor, the
Shuttlecock strips the subject matter and promotes a reflection on the status of representation, and of how mimetic representation works. Jarry’s parodic form appropriates the structure, but reverses it, functioning the same way Serres suggests satire functions: “Or the non-zero sum of two things with opposite signs but the same value” (16). If scientific discourse presents a point (+1), a pataphysical exploit presents the same point in reverse (-1); if scientific discourse mimetically represents the world, ’pataphysics reverses the mimetic and forces the world to confine to its own twisted representations. ’Pataphysics appropriates the same value but with a reversed valence—its own negative dialectics.

The humor of this text comes from the intrinsic comparison of scientific language—the discourse of zoological description and behavior—with evocations of the mechanical in what would seem to be the perfect illustration of Henri Bergson’s theory of laughter. For the French philosopher, the force of comedy comes from “something mechanical encrusted on the living.”30 Laughter arises when the human body becomes mechanical in the face of technologies and the person becomes a thing. In fact, Bergson addresses the humor of inversion, or what he calls “topsy-turvydom,” when a comic represents one thing for another, or when a villain becomes a victim, a teacher becomes a student, etc. Such instances provoke laughter because they focus on a reversal of structure and thus expose the mechanicity of life that, in representation, fits within structural models. For Bergson, comedy works as an exploration of structure and, as such, evinces a moral aspect underlying humor. As he suggests, “the humorist is a

moralist” because comedy plays on the division between the soul, which is always organic and never mechanical, and the human body that has become mechanized. In that sense, laughter signals a loss of morality in a world increasingly dividing soul and body.

In Jarry’s essays as well as in the Wells’s taxidermist’s exploits, comedy also appears through the exploration of structure. Jarry’s essays focus on poking fun of the scientific method and positivistic form; they both expose the hubris inherent in structure. Wells’ taxidermist invents his own animals to use scientific knowledge and push nature beyond its limits. Jarry turns mechanical objects into animals through his twisted analyses. These playful reminders of the creativity at the turn of the twentieth century show a modern problem with scientific certainty and the trust on the scientific method. The comedic in reverse mimesis conceptualizes methodologies, not focusing on the object of study, but rather on how the method approaches such object.

However, at the same time, Jarry’s shuttlecock disputes Bergson’s claim that comedy plays on the mechanization of life. In these essays, the mechanical becomes living. In Jarry’s reverse mimesis, we see something living encrusted in the mechanical. And it still works as comedy because humor is not tied to a division of body and soul where the mechanized body becomes a lesser moral character, but rather it works in so far as reverse mimesis exposes the Cartesian subject (who loses its soul in modernity for Bergson) as a fantasy and reveals the tricks on which scientific positivistic discourse relies. Jarry’s texts present Cartesian subjectivity as an artifice that pretends that knowledge simply exists without relying on the human body and point of view that are

31 Ibid. p. 128.
undeniably present.

As Jarry admired Anglo-American literature and translated extensively from it, he opens the essay with a mention of Mark Twain’s short story “How I Edited an Agricultural Paper” (1875) about an editor who worked on an issue of an agricultural journal without having any knowledge of the subject. The quote, “The guano is a fine specimen of a bird” (252), reminds us of the biggest mistake the editor performs: confusing bat excrement with an animal. The editor wrote extensively about other issues he didn’t understand and caused an uproar in the field of agriculture. However, ironically, when he wrote about the “guano,” the agricultural journal reached its largest readership yet, because people were taken aback by his ignorance. In re-inscribing this story as an epigraph to his, Jarry reveals the ’pataphysical nature of his essay: mimicking the editor of Twain’s story, he will also use the scientific journal genre to reflect on nonexistent beings.

In employing the language of evolutionary biology to analyze the process of creation of the imagined bird, the essay reflects on the status of mimetic representation in scientific writing. Jarry’s own text becomes a form of reversed mimesis as it overtly represents one as the other (an object as an animal) to show how one can manipulate the scientific apparatus. Instead of adapting the discursive apparatus to mimic the world, Jarry’s essay forces the world to turn into an object of study that fits the desired discursive apparatus of his version of the life sciences. As a parody of scientific discourse and the problem of mimesis, “The Shuttlecock” proposes that a subject can imitate the natural world through a set of apparatuses, but this subject can only perform such representation by obeying a set of conditions that actually limit the scope of
representation. Thus, the mimetic does not function as a free, uncompromised stand-in for the world, but rather as a representation that obeys the rules of the apparatus of science and the will of the scientist much more than language appropriate to the subject qua subject. Objectivity depends on an intricate set of mediators that, while they seem to represent approximately the thing in itself, they actually distance it even further from itself. Thus, mimesis can only function as a distancing device that turns into its own world as it attempts to present another.

Jarry’s parody of a creative evolution does not necessarily work as a biological theory of evolution, but it does force a reflection on the methodological politics of mimetic representation. Then the question shifts from the Shuttlecock to the scientific apparatus involved in producing the knowledge of the bird. While questioning the status of scientific discourse at the turn of the twentieth century, Jarry expands the realm of possibilities for describing nature. His reversed mimesis revises the positivistic methodology and expands the realm of representation; it breaks the signal only to reshape it. That is because Jarry’s ‘pataphysical parody parasitizes the system and, as such, “is responsible for the growth of the system’s complexity, such a parasite stops it.”^32 Jarry’s speculations both challenge scientific discourse and expand it. They take over the signal only to reframe it in creative ways.

Reverse mimesis plays on the non-literal aspect of language. As humor, irony, and parody, it uses certain words to mean their exact opposite, to ridicule and expose the fantasy behind representation. It thus explores the world of parasites, the world of those

who are attached to the signal but are not seen. As in the work of taxidermy, Cartesian positivistic discourse always needs to silence its other (animal) to remain a master of its own domain (and to remain human). Jarry shows us that, in fact, this fantasy of Cartesian mastery happens through the process of mimesis that, when representing the world, produces such a world and, consequently, produces itself. For example, the essay on “The Shuttlecock” creates a world in which shuttlecocks evolved from pigeons and, in employing scientific language, produces its own analyses of this animal within its world. The essay radically (and humorously) invents its object of study not with the goal of having the audience believe in this evolutionary narrative but rather to expose the ease of manipulating scientific discourse.

In a straightforward analysis of a non-existent animal and the parody of scientific discourse, Jarry’s essays ultimately raise questions about narrative and its relationship to mimesis. Scientific discourse presents itself as pure mimicry of so-called “natural phenomena,” usually pretending to be detached from narrative. The mimetic just simply imitates, reproduces what is already there—it evades discussions of the human interference with time, events, characters, plot, and point of view. The mimetic, thus, seemingly escapes human intervention and appears as natural. However, in “The Shuttlecock,” the mimetic is inherently related to narrative, as the essay actually reveals the master-narratives at the basis of scientific representation.

The essay concludes with an overt reference to scientific naturalism and an implicit reference to naturalist atomic philosophy in a way that ultimately exposes how a creationist narrative underlies the scientific renderings of the world at that time: “However, what ought to quicken the interest of the naturalist are the occasional,
unexpected deflections taken by the winged creature—spontaneous without the shadow of a doubt—in order to escape the net…” (252-53). On the one hand, the reference names naturalism and, by extension, the intended audience. The reference places the essay within the tradition of naturalist writers and the avid readers of nature pieces and naturalist magazines. On the other hand, however, the essay very specifically refers to a line of naturalist philosophical thought prevalent in Europe in the end of the nineteenth century. “Unexpected deflections” refers to Titus Lucretius Cratus’s atomic theory in *De Rerum Natura* (c. 100bc), where the world exists because of an unexplainable force inherent to atoms that makes them swerve (*clinamen* in Latin) randomly and collide with each other, thus creating matter and the development of a world out of chaos.

This clinamen also works as an inherent will of matter, or a fateful desire of the world to develop. This form of Lucretian creationist philosophy heavily influenced physics and modern philosophical thought, and found a particular home in Henri Bergson’s philosophical account of the world, which was a heavy hodge-podge of philosophy, physics, and natural sciences. In Jarry’s time, Henri Bergson was one of the leading philosophers to use the theory of the *clinamen* and was Jarry’s teacher at the *Lycée Henri IV*. In Bergson’s works, Lucretian atomic materialism develops into a philosophy that supplants the dualist notion of a divorced body and spirit with a structure

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of continuation, where both body and spirit are but the becoming of matter—both the same. This theory of creation and re-creation from chaos underlies Bergson’s theory of Creative Evolution (1907), which posits that different beings developed from their own will to evolve—some evolved more (like animals, especially humans) and some less (like rocks and plants). In Lucretian materialism, creation comes from the primal movement of the atom to swerve from a straight line. The “clinamen,” as Lucretius called it, represents this basic will of everything to exist—a will more powerful in some entities than others.

Lucretian atomic theory also influenced several modernist artists and writers who played with the concept in ways similar ways to Bergson’s philosophical writings. Cézanne reportedly read De Rerum Natura and commented on Lucretian philosophy. The impressionist painter also borrowed his interest in atomism from Émile Zola, who traces the origins of the world to two atoms colliding.34 Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway features Lucrezia, the Italian wife of Septimus Warren Smith, who through the narrative “collides” with other characters in the novel. Joyce’s Finnegans Wake can also be considered a play on the development of the world out of chaos, especially because of the wordplay involved in the narrative.35 In Jarry’s work, the clinamen appears as a beast in


35 C. f. Sean Braune (2010). Braune suggests that Joyce’s wordplay in Finnegans Wake resembles the Oulipo, who were heavily influence by Jarry’s interpretation of the clinamen in Lucretius. According to Braune, “Joyce has contributed to the revival of interest in Lucretian atomism by creating his own etymism and has assisted in revealing
The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll. According to the narrator, “the unforeseen beast Clinamen ejaculated onto the walls of its universe” (89).

But, in “The Shuttlecock,” the reference to the swerve (in the deflections of the winged creature) parodies Bergson’s evolutionary theory as well as clinamen. The essay also attests to the narrative substratum of scientific writing, which, to appear natural, always tries to eschew, ignore, and disavow craft. “The Shuttlecock” suggests that the naturalist impulse to represent the world mimaetically needs a type of creation story to set up its claims. In the end, the essay finally concludes with: “there is certainly an atavistic reviviscence going on there, perhaps a throw-back to its savage state” (253). This final sentence suggests that the entire co-evolutionary process works because of the inherent will of the shuttlecock. Thus, the theory here becomes unavoidably subjected to whether the reader (whom the narrator calls a “naturalist”) subscribes to the naturalist narrative of recreation out of chaos, and from an inherent will of matter that underpins materialist philosophy. In a trompe l’œil, “The Shuttlecock” creates a riddle where the reader is supposed to engage, but on the other hand, it reveals that the reader must subscribe to a certain view of evolution in order to accept the argument. In exposing the will of the reader, the essay makes the narrative substratum of evolutionary theory visible. Art questioned how science at the turn of the twentieth century faced the paradox that while scientific discourse claimed to speak only the truth, without the religious bias of pre-

Italian Renaissance, it relied on creation narratives that, albeit secular, still required a form of religious belief.

**Take the Omnibus**

Jarry’s own form of reverse mimesis plays on the parasitic aspect of representation and lays the apparatus open for investigation. In “The Shuttlecock,” the focus of the investigation is the narrative substratum of evolutionary biology which becomes evident, especially in the case of Bergson’s creative evolution where humans become the apex of the flow of life because of our inherent power to think and reason. While trying to embrace a biological theory to focus on a humanistic explanation of natural phenomena, this interpretation of evolution, in fact, reassures the theological determinism underlying the humanism of such endeavor. Jarry’s essay makes such creation-oriented claims in Bergson glaring. Not only “The Shuttlecock,” but also other of Jarry’s short essays play on the scientific apparatus, revealing such underlying assumptions. “Cynergetics of the Omnibus” focuses on re-reading the transport system of Paris in light of animal organizations as Jarry interprets the Omnibus as a pachyderm and analyzes its taxonomical aspects. This essay reveals how scientific knowledge about animals always relies on mechanical metaphors that reveal a mechanistic orientation in nineteenth century interpretation of nonhuman animals.

“Cynegetics of the Omnibus” situates the different kinds of public transport in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century as animals and analyzes their lives with the methodology of a biological treatise. The opening short paragraph sets the tone of the essay: “Among the different species of wild beasts and pachyderms that are not yet
extinct and which roam the districts of Paris, there is without a doubt none that promises more thrills and surprises to the trapper than the omnibus.” First, the essay introduces the serious undertaking of a scientific analysis by using the word “pachyderms” and evoking extinction. It then targets its audience by mentioning “trappers” and the thrills of the hunt. Finally, it undermines the seriousness of scientific speculation by introducing the “omnibus” as the main object of the essay—at the end of the paragraph, as if a punchline. This doubled tone of serious humor, or engaged disengagement, maintains the general methodology of Jarry’s speculations.

“Cynegetics” constantly uses metaphors and similes to set up the humorous comparisons between the omnibus and the analysis of pachyderms. Its tracks are “as if they had been produced by reptation” (245); its cry “can only be compared to that of the duck, or the ornithorhynchus” (246); a wooden handle protects their tails, “much as the adipose tail of certain Tibetan sheep”; they “feed on men, after attracting them like a serpent fascinating its prey” (246). The essay compares every aspect of the animal it analyzes with other animals, using the already established scientific discourse to support its claims. A double entendre permeates this piece, as the reader is at all times aware of the absurdity of an Omnibus represented as animal. Nevertheless, as if a pure analysis without recourse to other analyses were not possible, the essay also reminds us of the scientific dependence on interdiscursivity and analogy.

As we move through the essay, its tone of scientific attention and scrutiny remains, breaking these animals down into categories and investigating specific aspects of their anatomy and habits. The narrator notes that, although omnibuses have different colors of skin, to understand their function in the Parisian scene, we need “a more
scientific division into two varieties… those who cover up their footprints; … those who leave a visible track behind them” (245). The latter evades its hunters by always making “its new tracks coincide with its old ones,” as in the moment of danger “it turns its tail and goes back the way it came” (246). The proposed new division evokes the problem of taxonomy, of how scientific discourse can break down these animals and make them fit within a discursive classification, or how we can separate animals and place them in different categories.

However, to classify the different types of omnibuses, “Cynegetics” constantly speaks of each omnibus in terms of its parts, function, and purpose. The analysis of its environment and camouflage follows an examination of its feeding habits. “A complicated adaptation of their digestive apparatus means that their victims are excreted alive, but only after as many particles of copper as possible have been extracted from them in the process” (246). The process described here resembles smelting, the metallurgical process to extract a metal from its ore. Thus, the essay resorts to a manufacturing metaphor to explain the eating habits of the animal. In fact, as the narrator notes, their feeding is always preceded by a “joyous metallic string of loud farts” (247), which emphasize the mechanical aspect of this process. “Cynegetics” sets up a series of paradoxical images: an essay explaining the life of mechanical beings (omnibus) as if it were an animal (pachyderm) but inevitably resorting to mechanical metaphors to explain such animal behavior in terms of function and purpose. At the same time, the essay sustains the absurdity of the analysis, as the audience is always aware of the playfulness. The coexistence of animal and mechanical seems inseparable in this discursive apparatus—as much as the shuttlecock and the nets are inseparable.
Commenting on the inseparability between animal and technological in his lecture “Machine and Organism” (1952), Georges Canguilhem famously criticized nineteenth century vitalism for interpreting organic structures exactly via comparisons to the mechanical, a move that Jarry does facetiously. As he suggests, “relations between machine and organism have generally been studied only in one direction: almost always, the attempt has been to explain the structure and function of the organism on the basis of the structure and function of an already-constructed machine” (76). For nineteenth century biological thought, organisms functioned very similarly to machines, almost as if the organisms mimicked the mechanical. Canguilhem’s point emphasizes the inversion that the organic needs an artificial structure to be explained. Only through recourse to an already artificial structure can biology explain the natural world. Notably, Canguilhem’s word choice “structure and function” already point to an underlying narrative about how biology saw the nonhuman world: as mechanisms serving a certain purpose. Evolutionary biology focused the “survival of the fittest” on the grounds of mechanical efficiency since only the organism that functions better will persevere.37


37 This position echoes works in the nineteenth century that thought of technology as extensions of human function. See Ernst Kapp, Elements of a Philosophy of Technology: On the Evolutionary History of Culture, edited by Jeffrey West Kirkwood and Leif Weatherby, translated by Lauren K Wolfe (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2018).
In the early twentieth century, Jarry had already noticed biology’s recourse to mechanical metaphors to explain animal life. His essays reverse this very habit by forcing the mechanical to conform to the organic apparatus—making the shuttlecock, the omnibus, the flag, and other “artificial” things into naturally-occurring organic beings. For Jarry, culture becomes a product of nature, but culture also constructs nature. The natural world presented in the nineteenth century biological imaginary conforms to several pre-established conventions that ultimately reframe nature and thus become just as artificial as the invented gadgets of everyday life. Since Jarry’s text lays the apparatus open, it reminds us of how the scientific process works: comparing animals and machines, it reveals how we always think of one in terms of the other.

Because we need the machine to think about the animal, in “Cynegetics,” just as in “The Shuttlecock,” machine and animal coexist. The narrator notes that “Some of them live in a strange commensalism with the horse, though it seems to be a dangerous parasite” (247). The horse attaches itself to otherwise healthy specimens of omnibuses and slows them down, as a parasite that needs this other animal to survive. Their parasitic relationship suggests an interrelatedness to this modern world, where a multiplicity of animals and humans interact in what seems to be a system of relations. Such allusion thus discloses a second meaning to the title “Cynegetics of the omnibus,” invoking the French quasi-homophone to cynégétique, synergétique—or synergetics. Usually associated with social sciences and physics, this term refers to the organization of individual elements

Siegfried Zielinski’s afterword maps Kapp’s contribution to the ideas about machine and organism in the late nineteenth century.
and when the collective amounts to more than the sum of its individual parts.

At the turn of the twentieth century, with the shadow of Darwin lingering in the background, many different sciences became preoccupied with overarching explanations of existence and coming into being. Drawing from theories of natural science such as Democritus’s atomism and Leibniz’s monadology, philosophers, scientists, and artists seemed to be in search of a creation narrative. Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, Einstein’s papers on Brownian motion, and Vorticism’s attention to vortex theory exemplify the existential implications of these descriptions of nature. The field of synergetics broke the scene in the late nineteenth century, offering yet another justification for social organization and development.38

Responding to the philosophy behind evolutionary biology, French symbolist Henri Mazel tackled the productive force of synergetics. In his *La Synergie Sociale* [Social Synergetics] (1896), the French artist used the concept of synergy to push back against the underlying narratives of evolutionary biology, especially the suggestion by followers of Darwin that natural selection works as an involuntary action, where the individual has no agency. For Mazel, love [*amour*] was the binding force that kept society together and gave the collective something more than the mere union of each individual part. In the opening remarks about social synergy, he remarks: social synergy,

38 The field of synergetics would later develop into a more nuanced analysis of physics, led especially by Buckminster Fuller, but in the late nineteenth century the term was still in early development and with little traction in the scientific community.
“this harmony of active love for each other, implies consciousness and reasoning.”

Unlike the involuntary, natural selection of Darwin’s evolution, Mazel’s theory enabled agency and personal will.

Within the Parisian artistic scene of the turn of the twentieth century, Mazel made a big impression on Jarry’s contemporaries. Mazel founded the artistic journal L’Ermitage, which, along with other leading avant-garde art journals such as La Revue Blanche and La Plume, published contributions from André Gide, Francis Jammes, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Oscar Wilde among other famous artists. Alfred Jarry published works in both La Plume and La Revue Blanche, but his work never appeared in L’Ermitage. Nevertheless, he was certainly aware of Henri Mazel’s influence in the avant-garde scene of the time—and how his Social Synergy affected artists in the Parisian scene. In opposition to Mazel’s Synergetics, Jarry’s own “Cynegetics” proposed a very different form of social relation, where animals, humans, and machines inadvertently accrue to a system of relation without any form of agency. For Jarry, society doesn’t operate in a function of love but rather as a symbiotic system, where one takes advantage of the other to survive—the logic of the parasite. Thus, synergétique becomes cynégétique—hunting, killing, and silencing are the rule.

Thus, synergy in “Cynegetics” appears in the social system created through the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and machines. First, the idea of synergy appears in the title both in the form of the homophone and the figure of the omnibus, which in

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“cette harmonie des amours actifs d’un chacun, implique conscience et raisonnement.”
itself functions as a collective of humans. The very word *omnibus* comes from the Latin meaning “for everyone”; omnibus is synergetic, it is more than just the sum of individuals, but rather an extended metaphor for the entire system of transportation that ties the city together and allows for the moving parts to exist. “Cynegetics” thus enlarges the representation of one individual animal (or machine) into a play on the collective interrelations of these “animals” with the surrounding environment around—an environment populated by other animals (horses) and humans. The focused dissection of the shuttlecock as a specific variety of bird/badminton toy gives way to the larger sociological interpretation of the omnibus within the environment of the late nineteenth-century urban scene.

For such interpretations to work, “Cynegetics” resorts to evolutionary biology to analyze the omnibus and thus reflect on how the apparatus of science interprets evolutionary traits. In describing the different colors of each omnibus, the essay notes “the cause for this lies simply in the animal’s periodic migrations” (245). Each omnibus adapts to its habitat and gains a different color. Again, putting a finger on the problem Canguilhem will later raise, the essay suggests that such evolutionary trait happens only as a functional adaptation, that is, an adaptation in terms of function and efficiency, which are mechanical metaphors. “Cynegetics” plays with a mechanical metaphor inherent to biological analysis of a mechanical being—Jarry turns the omnibus into an animal only to be analyzed, in the biological discourse, in terms of its mechanical qualities. Mimesis chases its tail.

Thus, ultimately, the essay suggests another aspect of mimetic representation at play in descriptions of social organization when it pairs a system as complex as
metropolitan transportation to animal behavior. In representing the mechanical of the omnibus as animal, “Cynegetics” suggests that representations of social organization always rely on organic metaphors. Historically, analyses of social organizations as organic bodies have always been around. Thomas Hobbes popularized the metaphor of the body politic in *Leviathan* (1651), where parts of the human body serve as stand-ins for governmental posts. But in the nineteenth century, the emergence of the idea of a “social organism,” coined by Herbet Spencer, brought together the organismic metaphor with Darwinian and Lamarckian theories of evolution, suggesting that societies evolved from simpler, rudimentary structures to more evolved social organizations, in the same way that protozoa evolved into complex multi-cellular organisms. The metaphor for Spencer holds “in primitive tribes, as in the simplest animals.” Later, in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893), Émile Durkheim would build on this idea of the social organism, claiming that societies developed from what he called “mechanical solidarity” to “organic solidarity.” For the French sociologist, capitalism forced a shift from what he saw as a simplistic mechanical relationship between people, where everyone shares the same values and functions more systematically, to a more complex set of organic relations, where the increasingly complex, constantly mutating, and highly specialized relationships between people fostered society that evolved and changed like an organism.

Jarry’s playful re-description of society as an alternation between the mechanical and organic challenges Durkheim’s views and certainly turned Spencer’s metaphors

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upside down. In “Cynegetics” the mechanical turns into the organic and, in its organic form, can only be analyzed via mechanical metaphors. Both social organism or mechanical society work as metaphors. And more importantly, the essay further implies that such use of animal behavior and mechanical metaphors to explain social constructions inherently contaminate and reshape how we see society and how we structure it. In a reversed way, while humans distance themselves from their animal or mechanical others to reaffirm their supremacy as humans, they also draw closer to such nonhuman figures to justify their modes of existence. Mimicry goes the other way when, as a society, we imitate animal and mechanical worlds to organize and structure ourselves. Jarry’s reverse mimesis forces us to understand the mimetic substratum of our social constructions. Mimicry is the basis for social constructions. Jarry’s reverse mimesis makes the function of mimicry itself appear.

_Haha-Erlebnis: The Realization of Laughter and the Poetics of Humor_

These revelations about mimicry and scientific representation come through laughter as the pataphysician realizes what René Daumal suggested about knowledge: that “every form is absurd once taken seriously.”[^41] Every time someone makes a statement, language plays a game and creates a blind spot. Any statement made seriously will always fail to acknowledge its own blind spot and thus be absurd. The only way to escape such double-bind is through laughter—the ironic parody, or the statement that both says something but means its opposite; that makes a statement and acknowledges its

own blind spots. Pataphysical laughter is thus a second-order observation as it observes itself as a process. The revelatory aspect of pataphysical laughter makes the apparatus visible for what it is: an apparatus. In line with what has been called the “modernist self-awareness,” Jarry’s essay acknowledges its work as a linguistic apparatus and as a mimetic structuring of a reality.

Like Mark Twain’s “How I Edited an Agricultural Paper,” which Jarry uses as an epigraph to his essay, “Cynegetics” functions as a parody of scientific discourse, exaggerating its hubris and playing with the methodology of scientific knowledge. Yet, when Jarry’s essay interrupts the flow of science with ’pataphysical musings, it becomes a system in itself—the parasite becomes the message. For Serres, such reversal of roles can take place because, “In the system, noise and message exchange roles according to the position of the observer and the action of the actor, but they are transformed into one another as well as a function of time and of the system” (66). Within the scientific community, articles about objects treated as animals might seem like mere noise, but, once they find a place within the parodic discourse of the time, they become a message that criticizes the dominant positivistic methodology of traditional science.

In the several essays on animals and machines that compose Jarry’s ‘pataphysical menagerie, the organic and the technological always interplay and coevolve. While the technology of the nets determines how the bird will develop, the animal itself determines how the technology will change, until the division between organic and technological becomes a fuzzy line. The very first move of this essay (and the larger ’pataphysical project) questions the divisions of animal and machines and, metonymically, challenges the dialectics of nature and technology. The nets become part of nature when the narrator
notes that they developed “as a natural consequence” from the influence of the animal, whereas, in a reversed fashion, the shuttlecock, an artificial object becomes an animal. Traditionally, nature evolves on its own terms while the technological necessarily needs human action, but in this essay the technological evolves naturally while the natural depends on the technological. In a playful reversal, Jarry’s essay forces the natural to mimic the artificial and suggests that the process of representing evolution and the so-called natural development are part of a larger narrative always constructed by human action.

However, if these pataphysical exploits interrupt scientific discourse and offer a reflection about the status of mimetic representation, they also pose a question about the function of discursivity and of the scientific system. As Serres interrogates the relationship between the parasite and the system, “Who will ever know if parasitism is an obstacle to its proper functioning or if it is its very dynamics?” Does the pataphysical play with language and the system of science disrupt the development of scientific knowledge or, instead, is the play with language the very dynamic that keeps the scientific system functioning? When “The Shuttlecock” lays open the apparatus of science when it exposes the teleology of evolutionary theory, does it not take over the role of signal and thus attempt to silence any other parasite? The parody essay can only criticize its original by becoming it, and thus becoming the very problems it tries to avoid.

42 Ibid. 27.
The parasite begs a double-bind question: how to disrupt the system while becoming it? The Zurich dada posed a similar conundrum with Tristan Tzara. In his Dada manifesto of 1918, he affirmed: “In principle I am against manifestoes, as I am also against principles.”\(^\text{43}\) How can you criticize the avant-garde tendency to write manifestoes without writing a manifesto? Tzara’s play, a pataphysical play of sorts, interrupts the system while reaffirming it. Does the play interrupt the system or is it the very mechanism that enables the system to perpetuate? The answer to this double bind for Tzara is that “people can perform contrary actions together while taking one fresh gulp of air.” For Jarry’s reverse mimesis, the radical modernist play with mimetic representation, the parodic appropriation of form disrupts the system and enlarges its realm of possibilities. And, in doing so, enables the system of science to observe itself and understand its position.

In his pataphysical writings, René Daumal defined the ultimate *Haha-Erlebnis* to come out of *'pataphysics*. For him, when humans affirm their subjectivity, they say: “I am a man!” but he soon wonders, “Why not say, ‘I am Alphonse,’ or ‘I am a wholesaler,’ or ‘a crook,’ or ‘a mammal,’ or ‘a philosopher,’ or ‘a proud animal’?”\(^\text{44}\) Humanity becomes aware of its situation as a proud animal, and as always already masculine. When he repeats to himself “I am a man!” he realizes the complete self-fashioning aspect of language, which defines his own humanity as an opposition to the animal other, and as an affirmation of masculinity—both fantasies that *'pataphysics* disputes. The question of the

\(^{43}\) Tristan Tzara, Tristan. “Dada Manifesto.” 1918.

\(^{44}\) Daumal, *Pataphysical Essays*, pp. 11-2.
animal has surrounded ’pataphysics from its origins in the figure of a dog-faced, hydrocephalic baboon who can only say one human word and yet knows more than the human himself.
Chapter Two

The Poetics of Postmortemism: Natural History, Positivism, and Taxidermy in H. G. Wells

As taxidermy became prominent within the scientific community of the nineteenth century, taxidermists gained respect for their works. The wealth of instruction manuals and guide books on how to trap, clean, and mount an animal specimen delineate how respectful the practice was, especially for gentlemen scientists in Great Britain. As Captain Thomas Brown notes in one of the foundational texts of taxidermy in England, “if this art is pursued in the manner here recommended, artists may be produced who will fulfil the objects of their profession with honour to themselves and advantage to their country” (3-4). The act of mounting animal skins within the museum scenario had become a matter of national pride. Looking for that kind of success, the eponymous
protagonist of H. G. Wells’ “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” (1894) recounts to his friend, Bellows, the many achievements he has accomplished as a taxidermist. Even though he has “stuffed human beings” (220), his most prized triumph is creating nonexistent birds: “New birds. Improvements. Like no birds that were ever seen before” (222). These invented creatures help “Enrich the universe; rath-er” (222).

Drawing on the discourse of Natural History, the short story plays with the process of producing taxidermy and the social affluence it provided scientists. Over a round of drinks, the unnamed taxidermist reveals to Bellows, his friend and the narrator, the greatest secrets of taxidermy, which included mounting an African man as a hat-rack, forging extinct species of animals, and inventing completely new species. By the fire in a room next to the taxidermist’s studio, the two men of science discuss each of the taxidermist’s accomplishments, providing technical details about how he gamed the system and produced faux taxidermy. Whereas his obsession with his own accomplishments criticizes the hubris of the scientific community in England, his commentary on the method of producing fakes and on the results of his creations takes the story beyond a historical critique of the British scientific community and into a questioning of the very methodology of science prevalent at the turn of the twentieth century.

When describing his accomplishments, the proud taxidermist implies that traditional science was “merely imitating Nature. I have done more than that in my time.

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I have—beaten her” (222). In the word “imitation,” the protagonist raises the question of *mimesis* and the role of representation in art. At first, his snarky comment relegates traditional taxidermy to a less-prestigious form of science, which simply imitates Nature. Later, his own taxidermy goes beyond imitation and, as such, becomes “pure joy … to a real artist in the art” (223). Positioning imitation as both a form of art and as a science sets up a dialectic of representation in these two fields. His invented animals function as objects of art for him, but as objects of science for the people who buy them. In this dialectic, “Triumphs” evokes a modernist problem with how preceding styles of Victorian social realism and French Naturalism, as well as Natural History and its scientific positivist basis, relate to a writing that never denies, in fact deploys, what seems to be a matter-of-fact mimetic strategy.

Instead of employing the traditional mimetic practices of Natural History, the taxidermist invents a new method to create faux taxidermy. His anti-positivistic method does not process animal skins into a taxonomical order but rather creates a special taxonomy that he then imposes onto the animal material, actually inventing the data he analyzes. He thus reverses the process of imitation, forcing the environment to imitate his own visions. Through pure stuffing to hold together an assembly of different skins, he turns his imaginary vision into a reality within a system of science, privy to every benefit and prestige of traditional taxidermy. Thus, in the discussions between the taxidermist and Bellows, “Triumphs” opens mimetic representation into a visible process, in which each step of the scientific method can be criticized as manipulations. Natural History, which usually appears as unmediated access to the natural world, here appears as a style of representation, relying on linguistic choices and visual techniques that perform a
*trompe l’oeil* to mask a subjective point of view and pass it as a universal, uncontaminated observation of the Cartesian subject.

With the figure of imitation, and more specifically visual deceit, “Triumphs” makes a statement about the interrelated dynamics of Natural History, with its scientific method, and realism, as an aesthetic imperative underlying social realist novels in England and Naturalist novels in France.\(^46\) The story evokes the ordinary-life characteristic of Victorian realism as well as the scientific aspirations of French naturalism to represent two high-class characters discussing how to use the medium of taxidermy to falsify a scientific method. In the concomitant assumptions about language and science, “Triumphs” suggests that, to craft scientific arguments, positivism uses the linguistic imperative of realism, or the assumption that deploying a specific style of language can bring one closer to reality. In turn, this specific style of realism uses the detached observation of positivism to craft a narrative that claims to observe the world as self-evident, hiding the character-narrator behind impersonal linguistic moves and stylistic techniques. Through this ouroboric structure, positivism and realism give each other credence and the status of truth—a status that the taxidermist shows to be a fantasy.

\(^{46}\) Realism here does not refer to the specific artistic and literary movements in nineteenth-century France, but rather to the aesthetic imperative that believes certain uses of language have the ability to more clearly refer to a reality outside the text. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach traces this imperative from ancient thinkers as Homer and Plato to modern authors such as Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust.
To challenge realism’s assumption that language can give a glimpse into the world, the story deploys a narrator who *tries* to use language like one of the masters of French realism: Gustave Flaubert. Bellows constantly and desperately searches for the *mot juste* both to describe his interactions with the taxidermist and prove to the audience that his story is true. The reference to the creator of *Madame Bovary* further challenges the assumptions about language because Flaubert himself did not naively interpret realism as a direct representation of reality, but rather as a struggle for linguistic perfectionism and a celebration of style. For Flaubert, realism was more about style and the illusion of language rather than some outside reality. Unlike Flaubert, Bellows’ search for the perfect word aims to prove the truth value of his own story, but it fails. In search of the *mot juste*, Bellows trips over his own words, repeats himself, and acts out a frustration with the inherently improper (*injuste*) character of language. At the end, we are left with a narrator who constantly undermines his own narrative, revealing his own craft and his presence at the scene.

While Bellows’ narrative fails the realist test, the Taxidermist’s counterfeit creations of skin succeed as objective observations in Natural History because they deceive in the realm of the visual and hide the artist’s craft underneath layers of skin and porcelain. Thus, the perfect mimesis disguises and camouflages the subject—the hand of the artist, or the position of the scientist cannot be seen in the final product. In two essays on the surrealist journal *Minotaure* (1934-35), Roger Caillois articulated how mimicry
relates to subjectivity in the animal world. Analogous to the Freudian death drive, Cailllois’ reading of mimicry in insects (particularly the praying mantis and the butterflies) envisions the act of imitation as a process of self-erasure. When a butterfly imitates the patterns of a plant to become one with the plant, it exercises a desire to disappear and regress to a moment of non-existence. The act of mimicry further complicates the subject by erasing the subjective position within the field of meaning. Cailllois uses the psychiatric term psychastenia to define the problem with mimesis. In psychastenia, subjects cannot reckon their surroundings, confusing themselves as part of their environment, and failing to recognize their own contingent view of the world.

Cailllois’ essays suggest that, in trying to pass for an undisciplined, general view of the world, Cartesian scientific discourse performs a writing that deploys a traditional mimetic strategy that uses writing in the place of facts, remaining invisible as manipulated writing. For Cailllois, and for Wells as well, positivistic science used language with the goal of masking itself, and with a semantical trick that uses references to the world as a way to obscure the position of the writing self. Scientific language disguises itself behind impersonal constructions, passive voice, and jargon that present truths as self-evident. With the language of realism, positivistic natural history found a way to use language as a camouflage, to disguise the contingencies of the subjective

scientist behind a façade of the so-called Cartesian perspective—a psychastenic form of discourse that claims to speak about the world from the general, unmediated, and uncontaminated—and generally invisible objective perspective. By creating an imitation that becomes extremely visible, Caillois’ essays and Wells’ Taxidermist reverse the progression of mimesis, forcing objects to imitate the scientist’s own vision of the world. If mimicry is the process of effacing the self and becoming camouflage, reverse mimesis does the exact opposite, and makes the object of art into a visible entity. When these works of art become visible, they expose the apparatuses involved in the production of knowledge.

The postmortem lives of the taxidermist’s animals reverse the process of mimesis because they are created works and worldviews that force the scientific apparatus to adapt to them. Wells’ story and Caillois’ essays perform a radically self-involved form of mimesis where the final products become extremely visible as constructions. We hear about the methodologies of taxidermy; we observe the process of interpretation in analyses of mimesis. Ultimately, these works show us the process of knowledge production and make clear that science projects onto the world the truths it seeks to find only to later mask them as empirical, natural data, untouched by human interpretation. Wells’ and Caillois’ overtly radical push toward a reversed form of mimesis elucidates how traditional mimesis, from the beginning happens through an ouroboric self-referential method. Even though the animal remains in taxidermy build an illusion of an ever occurring postmortem life, these lives are contingent on the poetic reinterpretation of taxidermists and museum curators.
The Stuffing that Dreams Are Made Of

Wells’ story evokes the work of gentlemen scientists in the nineteenth century in the figure of the taxidermist who were part of the naturalist movement in the sciences and saw the work of classifying and organizing the animal world as the most important part of the Natural System—or the taxonomic laws that enable nature to speak for itself. According to historian of science, Peter Dear, even Charles Darwin, with all of his avant-garde ideas about the organization of species, still “seems to have assumed that competent naturalists largely reproduced the natural order in their responses to it: taxonomy was not a matter of mere convention.” For naturalists who influenced and were influenced by Darwin, such as Antoine Laurent de Jussieu (1748-1836), Georges Cuvier (1769-1832), John Gould (1804-1881), and Richard Owen (1804-1892), among others, taxonomy served the purpose of revealing nature, of bringing forth the natural system, and of making a natural order visible. Thus, natural history displays, textbooks, and manuals served as visual reproductions of nature. In most instances, a wealth of visual works aided in this work of revelation. John Gould and his colleagues relied on the drawings of his wife, Elizabeth, to supplement their taxonomic outlines. In the American context, John James Audubon provided naturalist drawings to accompany his analyses of The Birds of America (1827-1838). These visual aids used a Romantic style, with sharp lines, rich in detail, and mostly in woodcut etchings, a medium beneficial both for its level of detail and the low cost of mass-production.

Whereas drawings could help disseminate the naturalist ideal with ease, naturalists still saw it as a distanced form of representation, alienating nature to the pages of a book. In that case, despite its status as a difficult battle against time and organic decay, despite the labor-intensive and high cost associated with the practice, taxidermy emerged as a step closer to the natural world, as a hybrid between the instructional drawings on paper and the live-action of a zoo. In one of the most influential texts on taxidermy, *The Taxidermist’s Manual* (1853), Captain Thomas Brown acknowledges the power of taxidermy over other forms of representation of natural history. As he notes, drawings are excellent sources of information on the natural world, but they are not perfect “for by them we cannot be made acquainted with the texture of the skin, nor the structure of the hair or feathers.” With the development by Thomas Dufresne of arsenic soap in the late-eighteenth century, taxidermy rose to more prominence in the world of natural history specifically because of its ability to give a three-dimensional view of the animal and to offer a notion of texture in the displayed animals.

In the three-dimensional aspect of mounted animals and in the recreation of skins, taxidermy attained a special place in the apparatus of Natural History. It created the illusion that its displays brought the viewers closer to nature, because now they could see the animals with their own eyes. Such belief was part of a great taxidermist illusion that relied upon the primacy of the visual as the basis of both positivistic science and realist

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narrative, especially in the nineteenth century. As Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison argue, in the late-nineteenth century, objectivity suffered a dramatic change with the rise of novel ways to produce images. In fact, as they suggest, the proliferation of atlases in that period demonstrated that visuals, or the so-called “illustrations,” were not secondary to writing, they didn’t merely “illustrate,” but rather were “the alpha and omega of the genre.”\textsuperscript{50} Positivistic in nature, the scientific method relied on these visual empirical data, which, for naturalists, were the center of observation. The visual thus became the ultimate basis of empirical analysis and, by extension, of positivism and Natural History.

Wells’ “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” plays with Natural History in its literary form. The story does not follow a traditional plot structure of conflict and resolution, with events that change as the story progresses. Instead, the plot works as a simple diorama: over a round of drinks, the eponymous taxidermist reveals his greatest triumph to his friend Bellows, the narrator of the story. We see the Taxidermist in his natural habitat, by his workshop, drinking and interacting with Bellows, who quietly listens to the tales. The story introduces no plot twists, no major events, but paints the static picture of the two characters having a conversation. Within the diorama is yet another diorama, the animals the Taxidermist stuffs and displays. The parallel between the stuffed animals, on one level, and Bellows and the Taxidermist, on another, instantiates the relationship between the process of telling a story and the realist impulse of natural history in the nineteenth

The story as a diorama stages the interactions between Bellows and the taxidermist as if the readers witnessed a scene in nature of two characters in their habitat. The story thus stands in for a diorama, which, in turn, Donna Haraway suggests, “is eminently a story, a part of natural history. The story is told in the pages of nature, read by the naked eye.”\textsuperscript{51} Within the apparatus of Natural History, taxidermy served a double purpose: on the one hand, it performed a role in the narrative of Nature, illustrating the historical and teleological aspect of the life sciences. On the other hand, because it displayed animal remains, the act of stuffing played into the illusion of animal presence and of unmediated nature. Disguising the hands of scientists and the story-telling behind evolutionary biology, this illusion of being in Nature’s presence masked the artificial qualities of narrative and transformed a story into History, which as Hayden White has argued, is already a narrative.\textsuperscript{52} Haraway notes the importance of taxidermy in this realist plight,

Taxidermy became the art most suited to the epistemological and aesthetic stance of realism. The power of this stance is in the magical effects: what is so painfully constructed appears effortlessly, spontaneously found, discovered, simply there if one will only look. Realism doesn’t appear to be a point of view, but appears as a ‘peephole into the jungle’ where peace may be witnessed. Epiphany comes as a


\textsuperscript{52} Hayden White, \textit{Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe} (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1975).
gift, not as the fruit of merit and toil, soiled by the hand of man. Realistic art at its most deeply magical issues in revelation. This art repays labor with transcendence. (38)

The presence of the animal and the absence of the hand of the artist produces an object that looks as if it could be found in nature. Dioramas transcend into pure wilderness harnessed within the controlled environment of the museum.

However, in “Triumphs of a Taxidermist,” the protagonist never presents Bellows with the final product. He mentions the names of his birds, narrates the background story of his accomplishments, but the actual animals stay hidden away in the room next-door, “separated by a bead curtain” (220). Instead, the story presents the process of creating these “realistic” animals—it describes the glass-eyes on the mantel piece, discusses the process of assembly, and reveals how experts evaluate the quality of taxidermy. As a movement of reversed mimesis, the story focuses on the exact background toil of which Haraway speaks, opening the representational apparatus and revealing the very hand of man that is supposed to be hidden. In that sense, we see that dioramas are in fact not stories in themselves as Haraway suggests, but static scenes with the narrative content added to them by other elements of the display (sequence of dioramas, textual explanations, audio narration, and others). As a diorama of a diorama, this scene between taxidermist and Bellows makes evident the entire apparatus of taxidermy and its relation to realism. The taxidermist in toil crafts his animals, creates nature at the hands of science, creates science as he furthers nature.

Thus, “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” evokes the relationship between realism, nature, and revelation only to question it. Bellows begins the narrative as if revealing a
magician’s tricks: “Here are some of the secrets of taxidermy” (220). And he continues to focus primarily on the techniques the taxidermist employs to game the system of science and sell his artifice as truth. The diorama of “Triumphs” offers the revelation that the truth of taxidermy is actually a trick. In relation to this story, Haraway’s use of “magical” applies to natural history only if by “magical” she means the work of a magician, who uses illusion to create a spectacle. The transcendence of the individual animals into a history of evolution happens only through a special effect of the narrative of a museum coupled with the illusion of presence in the animal skin.

The taxidermist’s account of the creative process (either of new birds, or the forged extinct ones) then focuses on the materiality of his art, on the medium of taxidermy. He makes the great auks with “grebes’ feathers and the like,” and the eggs out of “fine porcelain” (221). For the Moa, he uses “singed bits of ostrich plumes” (222). And, for the completely invented bird, the Anomalopteryx Jejuna, “skeletons of a stork and a toucan and a job lot of feathers” (223). As an emphasis on his own accomplishments, the taxidermist narrates his merit and toil. What appears effortlessly in the final product here emerges as painfully constructed through a wealth of techniques.

The focus on the medium of taxidermy ultimately calls attention to the animal remains necessary to its process and the illusion they provide of postmortem life. In “The Matter and Meaning of Museum Taxidermy” (2008), Rachel Poliquin notes that even though traditional taxidermy evokes a social, political, and functional role within

nineteenth-century visual culture, it also relies heavily on its material substratum. For her, animal skins have a material power that imposes on the imaginary, for “the eyes may be glass, but the animals stare back” (129). Poliquin’s suggestion of a material insistence relates to recent conversations on taxidermy, where animal skins are seen as representing an animal ontology. For example, Helen Gregory and Anthony Purdy use Peircean semiotics to place taxidermy alongside photography, because “in taxidermy as in photography, indexicality not only precedes iconicity from the point of view of production, it also carries more weight in its reception” (70). “Indexicality” means that the object of study, the thing in itself, has a direct or “metonymical” contact with the representing sign. Smoke signals are indices of fire because they result from their direct contact with fire. In the case of analog photography, the light-waves that bounce off an existing physical object and hit the film emulsion point to the existence of an object being photographed, while in taxidermy the dead skins point to the presence of the animal—like a smoke points to fire. For Gregory and Purdy, only when object and medium establish an indexical relationship, can the iconic connection develop. In the Peircean theory of the sign, after light creates an imprint on gelatin, or after a taxidermist mounts


55 As André Bazin has argued, the photographic apparatus creates an illusion of automaticity: that photographs are untouched by the human hand. This illusion is, of course, just an illusion. See André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” translated by Hugh Gray (Film Quarterly 13.4, 1960), pp. 4-9.
animal skins, the material remainders transcend into the imaginary ideas of animals. The use of animal skins, or the photographic capture of light, somehow brings the real to bear in the final product.

The iconic representation of animals must in turn “do justice” to this indexical basis and imitate the action of animals in their environment. As Gregory and Purdy observe, “The tradition of realist taxidermy is predicated, in part, on a principle of iconicity, from the faithful reproduction of the landscape in a diorama to the depiction of aliveness in the taxidermic mounts” (79). The indexical character of the material basis of photography and taxidermy, the hands of the artist/scientist to imitate what nature has already presented and to offer a purely mimetic re-presentation. As Poliquin summarizes, traditional taxidermy functioned as a mimetic stand-in for nature, focusing on the “mimetic value of the animals” (126). For Gregory and Purdy, as well as Poliquin, even though the process itself was rigged with human interference, the presence of the remains activated a realist mode of representation, which necessarily implied a proximity to the real.

In their use of a Peircean semiotics, Gregory and Purdy retain Poliquin’s belief in the ontological value of animal skin and their power for transcendence. As they suggest, the skins offer a “contact with the real, inscribed as an inalienable feature of the works themselves” (71). Triumphs of a Taxidermist” challenges these views of taxidermy and exposes the Peircean indexicality of taxidermy as always already iconic. The Taxidermist seems to know that his creations of skin work through the illusion that the animal remainders are ontological connectors to “real” nature, and that if he can manipulate that illusion, he can recreate the “real.” In Lacanian terms, the Taxidermist shows that the
Real in taxidermic *realism* is always imaginary, derivative of an arbitrary matter of style. As the pretentious taxidermist notes, replicating auk’s eggs “is very fine work, and afterwards you have to get them dusty, for no one who owns one of these precious eggs has ever the temerity to clean the thing” (221). Dust and dirt mimic the aging process and thus fool collectors into believing the indexicality of the eggs. For the Taxidermist, “that’s the beauty of the business” (221). “Beauty,” a term used to evaluate works of art, here gauges the quality of mimetic representation, or the potential to turn the iconic into indexical. Through the reversed process of production, the taxidermist’s completely fake mounts can do what Poliquin ascribes to real taxidermy, to “unravel[] the various cultural, political, and ideological forces which have shaped how nature has been used and interpreted within museums” (125).

For the Taxidermist, the potential to turn the iconic into indexical functions more as a process than as a product. He later admits that the birds he invented are “very beautiful little things, but some of them were very rum” (222). He also associates their beauty and oddity with the imitation of various animals: “It has all the silly clumsiness of your pelican, all the solemn want of dignity of your parrot, all the gaunt ungainliness of a flamingo, with all the extravagant chromatic conflict of a mandarin duck” (223). Instead of imitating one specific bird and achieving a result, instead of choosing to replicate an original, this process accentuates the process of replication and not the replica itself nor its original. The process attests to the interwoven relation between the original birds, the taxidermied representation, and their invented counterparts within the mimetic process. Taxidermy becomes all about process and, as a process, it is “just pure joy, Bellows, to a real artist in the art” (223).
Wells’ Taxidermist takes pleasure on the nitty-gritty of his work, in the very process and method, and reminds us that traditional taxidermy works by trickery, specifically effacing the stuffing and calling attention to the imaginary significance of the skin. They create what Ron Broglio calls “surface encounters,” because “the skin of the animal functions as a surface of contact and resistance.” For Broglio, taxidermy strips the animal, turning it into a flat surface that will later be remerged into “an object of natural history—a figure for science and education as well as for trophies and displays of power” (73). The materiality of the skin, which Poliquin claims steers the realistic in taxidermy, for Broglio becomes manipulated as “an object made vertical to match the metaphysical uprightness of the human transcendence outside the world of animals into the world of nature and rational thought” (73). Taxidermy removes animals from their world and reconfigures them within the imaginary “world of nature” that albeit standing in for the animals themselves are actually human creations. The “metaphysical uprightness of the human” appears in “Triumphs” as a cocky, half-drunk gentleman, and the “transcendence” of an individual animal into knowledge about a species, from the ontological world into the metaphysical realm of nature, is nothing but a surface effect—a trick on the eyes.

In the hands of the Taxidermist, the materiality of the skin functions only as an illusion cunningly manipulated by a mimetic method. In so doing, he brings attention to the very material animal substratum but acknowledges that it only functions in a

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symbolic realm. Traditional taxidermy showcases the skin as the ultimate animal remainder only to mask the emptiness within. In contrast, the triumphal Taxidermist showcases the empty process of stuffing to call attention to the unattainable material. This *trompe-l’œil* passes by unnoticed for Purdy and Gregory: that if photography were indeed a truly indexical sign, it would always refer, by extension, to animality because of the animal remains necessary for the production of a photo, namely gelatin.

Instead, the material substratum of both photography and taxidermy does not refer back to the dead animals, but obscures them, playing into the visual illusion of a *postmortem* poetics. Wells’s Taxidermist brags about how he used singed plumes from one bird to mimic another, how porcelain can imitate the look of an egg, and how a skeleton can structure a new piece. He focuses on the craft and the media he uses, and his pieces succeed in the system of science. The invented animals defy traditional practices to create new visions of the world. Wells’ taxidermist anticipates the success of recent visual artists who practice what Steve Baker defined as *botched taxidermy*, or when something “…appears to have gone wrong with the animal, as it were, but where it still holds together.”57 In certain works of late-twentieth-century animal-themed art, artists patch together an animal using what traditional taxidermy would consider the “wrong” materials, creating a bizarre yet understandable whole. For example, Mark Dion assembled a polar bear using goat skin.58 While it may look odd to the trained eye, for a

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non-specialized viewer, the bear passes as a polar bear. For Baker, these practices promote a temporary form of knowledge. As he proposes, “…these works are perhaps most usefully regarded as improvised knowledge, inexpert knowledges of the animal” (73). But while they break down the barrier of expertise in taxidermy, these untraditional assemblages also call attention to the medium (animal skin and stuffing) and its potential for visual deceit.

The animals of the Taxidermist—as the “postmodern animals” Baker sees in contemporary art—go beyond a presentation of the animal and further question the very process of knowledge-making by natural history. Whereas traditional taxidermy creates animals that blend into their environments, whereas it makes animal skin invisible in the final product, the Taxidermist’s invented animals do what Baker would later acknowledge as “rendering the animal ‘abrasively visible.’”59 Traditional mimesis attempts to render the medium invisible that is only present as a transcendent final product; the reverse mimesis of Wells’s taxidermist does exactly the opposite. His animals force the process of mimetic representation to become visible, to appear as a production, as the result of a careful manipulation of the visual field and the representational apparatus (i.e. dioramas and taxidermy, but also the wealth of textuality involved in Natural History).

In opening the apparatus of scientific representation, Wells’ protagonist suggests that the sleight of hand in taxidermy that renders the iconic as the indexical, that confuses the medium for the message, also passes the dead for alive. The move of transcendence

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that Haraway and Broglio cite, and in which Poliquin, and Gregory and Purdy believe, appears in the story as a postmortem illusion, or a poetic after-life. The stuffed animals create life-likeness and, on an imaginary level, annul the power of death. For Haraway, “Scientific knowledge cancelled death; only death before knowledge was final, an abortive act in the natural history of progress” (34). When taxidermists turned animals into exhibits, they turned a brief life into eternal knowledge. As Jane Desmond argues, this process takes on a very ironic structure in so far as “death is the absolute and always prerequisite to the process of creating lifelikeness” (354).60 Natural History can only represent a live animal through its previous death and restaging. Poliquin notices that, in the process, “as a representative of the species, the specimen’s individual history is typically ignored” (128). The transcendence of taxidermy sacrifices the singular existence of the animal for a broader knowledge about the species. This biopolitical trick further evinces the actual reversal of Poliquin’s earlier argument: instead of the skins dictating the organization of the museum, the symbolic real of taxonomy and the biopolitical world-view imposes a structure onto the skins of dead animals, leaving nothing unfiltered.

Traditional taxidermy relates closely to the organization of scientific knowledge by serving as examples of live species, even the term “taxi-dermy” implies such organization. Jane Desmond suggests that, “in biology, taxis refers to the movement of an organism in a particular direction, and in surgery, it refers to manipulation without

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cutting” (356). In that sense, taxidermy inherits the meaning of cutting (of killing an animal) and the need to put it to death to recreate its life. But taxidermy also comes from an assemblage of the Greek terms “taxi” and “dermy”: which signify arrangements of skin. Thus, the word shares the “taxis” root with another relevant term in biology: taxonomy. While taxidermy arranges skins, taxonomy arranges names. The figure of taxidermy and the act of naming a bird joins the violence of taxidermy (killing animals) with a broader violence of the natural sciences in rendering the natural world into a hierarchical organizational system.

For a field that defined itself in opposition to religious dogma, Natural History’s logic through which individual animals were killed for the larger benefit of knowledge closely resembles Christian theology, wherein a sacrifice turns bodily existence into a resurrected spirit. Wells’ taxidermist subtly makes this point by comparing objects of taxidermy to religious relics. As he reveals, “My dear fellow, half the great auks in the world are about as genuine as the handkerchief of Saint Veronica, as the Holy Coat of Treves” (23). The comparison shows how the words “transcendence” and “revelation” (which, as Haraway notes, defined taxidermy and Realism in the nineteenth century) take on a Christian connotation, and the process of killing becomes a sacrificial move—the killing of an animal in nature and staging its rebirth into History. However, the logic of sacrifice only functions with a masking that keeps the process of representation disguised.

61 According to the OED, the term “taxidermy” means “the art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals with lifelike effect” and comes from the Greek combinations of “taxi-” (arrangement) and “-dermy” (skin): arrangement of skins
and invisible. Like a magic trick, taxidermy effaces the icons of death in the final product. Exhibitions cleverly place the wounds that brought the animal to die outside the field of vision of visitors. Dioramas never show stab or bullet wounds, and they try to hide the necessary cuts to the animal skins.

“Triumphs of a Taxidermist” further explores the ironic relationship between life and death by suggesting that this process can be used not only for animals, but for human beings on a very personal and individual level. As he brags about his accomplishments, the taxidermist mentions a first ambitious project: “I have stuffed human beings—chiefly amateur ornithologists. But I stuffed a nigger once” (220). When the narrator is startled at this admission, the Taxidermist responds: “I made him with all his fingers out, and used him as a hat-rack…” (221). In this case, the work of taxidermy transforms the dead into a functional object for the household and approximates taxidermy to the preparation of bodies for funerals with embalming, styling, and dressing. Taxidermy here also emphasizes the reverse mimesis, as the human becomes a hat-rack. The Taxidermist finally suggests, “Seems to me taxidermy is a promising third course to burial or cremation… you might have them fitted up with clockwork to do things” (221). The human body has the potential of performing in the afterlife functional tasks. Through the evacuation of a body and the reintroduction of stuffing (or even clockwork) to its inside, the act of taxidermy creates a spectacle of life.

As taxidermy, which evacuates death to produce an effect of life, traditional mimetic depictions also evacuate thought in representation and turn art into an empty, uncreative, and mechanical reproduction. In fact, for this very reason, Socrates proposes
to ban mimetic poetry from the *Republic*. Matthew Potolsky notes that, in reproducing only the appearance of another object (and we can say here reproducing the surface effect), mimetic representations “merely mirror the work of others, and have no knowledge of what they represent” (25). This kind of mimetic art promotes thoughtless repetition and, even though in taxidermy it defies death and promotes life, it does so only in the form of an illusion. The African man in death exerts the empty function of a hat-rack in death.

The figure of the African body further evokes the master-slave narrative and ties it to the hubris of nineteenth-century scientific discourse. Akin to an automaton who performs a task, the mounted African body serves a simple purpose in the afterlife: holding hats. In death, he continues the function he had in life: to serve his master. Through this metonymic relation, a reversal becomes apparent: the purpose of the servant in life was the same that he can perform in death. In that sense, he was already dead while alive. Thus, even alive the African body was not considered life; he was just an inferior being with no rights and no existence beyond the menial tasks he was assigned. The parallel of this man and the stuffed animals creates a suggestion that this Other was already animal in life. Finally, science can only impose its so-called “objective view” of the world by turning this African body into an object of analysis.

However, the taxidermist offers another facet to stuffing human beings: the act of mounting the dead so the living can keep sharing their lives with them. The taxidermist

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sees great future in this practice: “you could talk to them without interruption. Even aunts. There is a great future before taxidermy…” (221). If in life these subjects interrupt conversations, in death they never interject and let the living have long conversations. The figure of the mute interlocutor implies another aspect to the logic of sacrifice: by silencing the voices of the African man and of women (aunts), the taxidermist’s voice can go on speaking uninterrupted. In fact, even Bellows remains silent in the face of the protagonist who goes on and on retelling his triumphs in a quasi-monologue, intersected interrupted only by the narrator’s extra-diegetic remarks.

As the exchange between Bellows and the taxidermist pertains to the realm of science, the story proposes a political dynamic of speech within scientific discourse. After silencing the African subject, the animals, and women, the taxidermist’s own voice becomes the supreme voice of truth and knowledge. As Haraway notices, the trick of taxidermy hides the hand of the artist and presents nature “not as the fruit of merit and toil.” “Triumphs” explores this very illusion: the protagonist hides his own body (the hand of the artist) behind the mounted displays and turns his specific point of view into a generalized peek into the natural world. He then masks his own subjectivity behind silenced individuals and presents his situated truth as a disembodied point of view, which allows him to go on talking uninterrupted. The sacrificial silencing of otherness preserves the supremacy of a disembodied observation.

**Only Seeing is Believing: The Faith of Natural History**

If for Christian faith one does not need to see to believe, the positivistic oedipal denial of this principle is that only seeing is believing. Exacerbated in the late-nineteenth
century by the emergence of photography as a promise to capture and reproduce a visual “reality,” such belief in the uncontaminated characteristic of the human eye and the power of observation constituted an unexamined assumption of Naturalism. In “Triumphs,” the taxidermist emphasizes the unquestioned status of the visual as proof of scientific claims. Bellows questions his will to stuff human beings and the smug scientist responds: “Unpleasant? I don’t see it” (221, italics mine). The taxidermist himself will only believe what he can see. He designed his biggest accomplishments so the natural world “looked all the livelier and better for it” (220, italics mine). And finally, he understands that for his work to pass the muster of the scientific community, he has to focus on its visual excellence, because “they can only discover the fraud with a microscope” (24). His trick of passing invented animals for real ones explores the naturalist’s unchecked belief in the visual as reality—or as a prima facie proof.

The different forms of realism in the nineteenth century and the development of naturalist sciences with a positivistic basis challenged the religious (and mostly Christian) influence over science and art after the Italian Renaissance. For instance, French realist painters such as Millet or Coubert depicted lower-class subjects, usually working the fields, dissociating painting from the nobility and their ecclesiastical function. Naturalist novels of Zola portrayed a different form of “human nature,” exploring sexuality and social problems. In turn, the natural sciences challenged creationist narratives and, especially in the realm of biology, proposed a new view of man as just another animal, not a special category made to in the image of god. But Wells’ stories and novels suggest that even though these lines of realism and natural science tried to dispel the shadows of
the renaissance, in the end they used the same method of religious belief: relying on the sense of vision.

In an earlier story, “The Moth” (1895), Wells explores the Manichaean relationship between religion and science. The story begins with the death of a Dr. Pawkins, who studied insects. The entomologist started a feud with Dr. Hapley over the classification of a genus of moths until Hapley turned to a “murderous argument” (2), which led to “the rejoinder of Pawkins … to catch influenza and die” (2). Without his lifelong enemy, Hapley started seeing a never-before-seen genus of moth flying about—a genus that only he could see. Wondering about the theological implications of the moth as the ghost of Pawkins, Hapley seeks the help of a vicar. “‘Look at that moth!’ said Hapley, suddenly, pointing to the edge of the table” (5). But like all others in the story, the vicar could not see anything, to which Hapley responded: “The eye of faith is no better than the eye of science” (5). The role-reversal of religious dogma and scientific determination becomes clear as the scientist asks the vicar to believe him without the visual proof scientific determinism needs.

Wells’ fictions seem to suggest that although the realist and positivistic rebuttal of religious dogma challenges the Christian prerogative of “believing without seeing,” it still plays the same game of privileging the sense of vision over everything else. Throughout the story, Hapley’s relationship with the moth revolves around problems with the act of seeing and attaining visual proof. As he walks around the park, Hapley sees the moth “with its wings flattened out, upon the old stone wall” only to find out that it actually was “two lumps of grey and yellow lichens” (4). Hapley’s reputation as a scientist hinges on his ability to observe natural phenomena and classify them. When this ability falters, his
work as a scientist has no worth and he ends “spending his days in a padded room” (7). He finally claims the moth to be “the ghost of Pawkins” (7). His fateful end and the interpretation of the moth as the spirit of a scientist suggest another parallel between the discourse of madness as religious deviation, on the one hand, and deviation from scientific reason, on the other. In spite of the glaring differences between religious dogma and naturalist positivism, “The Moth” suggests that deviation from both will lead to the same fall.

Both religious dogma and positivism rely heavily on visual proof and can be challenged through the figure of mimesis, which occurs primarily on the visual field. Hapley’s struggles with visual deceit when seeing the lichens on the wall becomes, for him, a problem of mimicry. “‘This,’ said Hapley, ‘is the reverse of mimicry. Instead of a butterfly looking like a stone, here is a stone looking like a butterfly!’” (4-5). As a scientist, his observation skills dupe him into seeing what he wants to see. Thus reversing the act of mimicry by animals, Hapley’s eyes force the environment to imitate his vision of the world. Mimicry appears in the story as a key process challenging scientific objectivity because of how much the act of imitation in the animal world focuses on visual deceit. If for scientists seeing is believing, then when animals game the visual field, observation can become unreliable.

Hapley’s projection of the moth onto his visual plane suggests that observation is never as detached as positivism declares. Donna Haraway’s assertion about taxidermy presenting itself as a “peephole into the jungle” illustrates even more the problems behind the assumption that visual reproductions give viewers an unrestricted access to the world of nature. “Peephole” implies a barrier between viewer and the environment (either a
door or a wall), which limits vision and transforms the dynamic of seeing and being seen into a one-way street: through the peephole, images emanate from the scene and into the scientist’s eyes. The observer has a very passive role in traditional views of taxidermy. In “The Moth” as well as in “Triumphs,” observers have a much more active role, manipulating the scope of their viewing. Hapley frames lichens into the shape of a moth, whereas the taxidermist reshapes and reinvents his animals.

“Peephole” also insinuates a voyeuristic dynamic between the peeping-Tom Naturalist and untouched, virgin nature. This sexual connotation actually comes from the idea that the visual has a better chance of reaching our inner selves, defying the rational barriers that control our instincts. As Frederic Jameson famously puts it, “the visual is essentially pornographic, which is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination” (1).64 So-called unmediated nature seemingly bypasses thinking and reaches the inner depths of the human psyche. Because images escape language, we tend to mistakenly believe they are not linguistic and, as non-linguistic entities, cannot be manipulated; they just are. Photographs in textbooks, movement in cinema, and mounted animal skins in the museum dupe viewers into thinking that they are not thinking, into believing the visual stands for unmediated experience that reaches into their experience without the filter of words. After all, a picture is worth a thousand words—visual images create a perception of the ineffable. The scientific apparatus of Natural History thus focuses on reproducing this pre-linguistic experience and what better format than a medium that primarily targets the eye?

In several of his other works, Wells repeatedly plays with the problem of observation in literature and science. In *Invisible Man* (1897), the scientist protagonist has found a concoction that makes him literally disappear; he becomes the ideal Cartesian perspective, present yet invisible. *War of the Worlds* (1897) opens with a reference to the possibility that Martians were watching humans on earth keenly and closely “as a man with a microscope might scrutinise” creatures in a drop of water. Several of Wells’ short stories dissect the narrator’s perspective. All of the action of “In the Avu Observatory” (1894) happens when the lights go off and the narrator cannot see (and therefore cannot narrate) what actually happened, thus creating an irony that the story takes place in an observatory. “The Stolen Bacillus” (1894) opens with two bacteriologists peering into a microscope to observe the type of bacteria they have before them. In all of these instances, Wells’ appropriation of scientific narrative problematizes the notion of observation, as if the stories themselves were observations of observations.

Wells’ circumscription of scientific observation within fiction participates in a larger modernist trend to question the supremacy of the visual at a time when technologies for vision became were becoming profusely popular in Europe. With the popularization of photography in the middle of the nineteenth century as well as with the later inventions of cinema and x-rays, the process of seeing could be questioned and critiqued, especially because these technologies imitated the human eye and human vision. In *The Eye’s Mind* (2001), Karen Jacobs suggests that modernism eschews idea of a Cartesian disembodied observer in view of the increasing prevalence of a “visual

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culture” at the turn of the century. In that sense, Bellows’ references to visual proof evoke the ghost of Cartesian objectivity. However, according to Jacobs, this form of objectivity can only happen with a total disavowal of the body. In order to see objectively, the subject needs to ignore the presence of a seeing eye, and all of the implications the point-of-view of this eye will have on the observed object. Furthermore, this disavowal can only happen by “the production of a reviled corporeality of the Other” (1-2). The process resembles the same illusion of taxidermy, which spotlights the animal remains only to hide the hand of science behind it. For the Cartesian subject to remain invisible, it must create something visible in the place of the Other (the woman, the African, the Asian, etc.) which can only function as an object of study while the white, male, logocentric eye remains the subject.

The visible has a recurrent value in “Triumphs of a Taxidermist.” As the story opens, Bellows joins the taxidermist in his study, “separated by a bead curtain, so far as the sense of sight [goes], from the noisome den where he plied his trade” (220). Even though the story revolves around images of animals, we do not see them, nor do we have any visual access to the Taxidermist’s craft. Instead, we are left with this third-hand narrative from a narrator who heard it from the Taxidermist. The descriptive detail of the bead curtain evokes the positivistic obsession with visual proof, or conclusions from visual observation, where only seeing is believing. Whereas positivistic sight usually

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gives credence to experiments, here, ultimately, the visual undermines objectivity and reveals the positivistic view to be subjective and contingent.

“Triumphs” further challenges the empire of vision by noticing the dynamics of seeing in scientific objectivity. Bellows observes that the taxidermist’s “spectacles were always askew, the left eye glaring nakedly at you, small and penetrating; the right, seen through a glass darkly, magnified and mild” (220). This scene sets up two contradictory forms of seeing the world: the naked-eye and the mediated. The former evokes the leftist view of a social realism and the hard-boiled penetrating look of French Naturalism, while the right eye represents a highly-mediated scientific observation, dependent on technological apparatuses (such as microscope, telescope, x-ray) that, while magnifying the object of study, also obscure it (“darkly”). Even though both forms of seeing the world have different methodologies, vision appears as the common denominator between the two.

**Flipping the Bird’s-Eye View: Contingency in the Scopic Basis of Naturalism**

While they sit there chatting, Bellows notices the taxidermist resting his feet “upon the mantelpiece, among the glass eyes” (220). The mention of glass eyes further questions objectivity, especially in the process of mimesis. Glass eyes stand in as a purely visual mimesis—they *look* like real eyes, they imitate the appearance of an original, but not its function. They look like eyes, but they don’t look, like eyes. The glass eyes further enact in the art of taxidermy a similar effect of mimicry in the animal world. Insects such as the Owl butterfly or the Polyphemus moth mimic the very figure of eyes, adding a layer of irony to the fact that the act of deceiving vision imitates a vision that cannot see.
In presenting the figure of a scientist using mimicry to create an illusion of a seeing eye only to mask his own handiwork, the story suggests that when scientific discourse produces a bird’s-eye view of an object—when it offers a general view of a subject—it only does so by masking its extremely contingent perspective.

Scientific discourse thus performs a form of mimesis of its own. In representing its environment, acting like an observation of so-called nature, scientific observation disguises the subject. Surrealist artist Roger Caillois investigates the use of mimicry in science in two essays discussed published in the surrealist journal Minotaure. In his first essay, “The Praying Mantis: From Biology to Psychoanalysis” (1934), Caillois notices that certain animals were “endowed with a high degree of lyrical force because their form and content is especially significant” (69). In the case of the praying mantis, at different times, biologists have interpreted it as a guide for lost children, pointing its finger to the right direction (1634), as an “‘Italian woman’ or ‘specter’ and at times, less explicity, ‘strawberry’ or ‘madeleine,’” as a sacred creature who honors god (1906), or symmetrically inversed, honors the devil (1883). As they resemble human forms, praying mantises “are so well-designed to disturb human beings that scientists for once, to their credit, have abandoned their professional dryness” (78). For the Surrealist artist

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68 Ibid. 70-1.
and sociologist, these animals, like the skins in taxidermy, stir certain feelings in the viewers, forcing their classification and analyses to comply with these feelings.

Despite claiming the unique characteristic of mantises, Caillois does not engage in either a materialist or an ontological argument. He doesn’t propose that the mantises’ “lyrical force” is an inherent quality. Instead, his treatment focuses on how the resemblance to human forms results from the scientist’s eye. He notices that analyses of how the female praying mantis devours the head of its male counterpart during sex tend to cast the insect as an automaton, as if both male and female had no thinking and just acted as pieces of a larger machine. As Caillois reflects about Léon Binet’s analysis,

Indeed, it strikes me that likening the mantis to an automaton (to a female android, given the latter’s anthropomorphism) reflects the same emotional theme, if (as I have every reason to believe) the notion of an artificial, mechanical, inanimate, and unconscious machine-woman—incommensurate with man and all other living creatures—does stem in some way from a specific view of the relations between love and death and, in particular, from an ambivalent premonition of encountering one within the other. (78-9)

The representation within scientific discourse reflects a pre-existing emotional theme that sees the dominant personality of a female as a result of generalized automation (because such attitudes are “incommensurate with man”) rather than the possibility of a superior and dominant female sexuality. Furthermore, such views of machines and animals come from the disturbing realization by the scientist that, in the world of praying mantises (and perhaps in the human world as well), death, nutrition, and sex are closely interrelated, for the female mantis kills and devours the male in search for nutrition during procreation.
The mantis brings forth in the scientist a very masculine fear of being devoured by the female. Caillois sees such fear manifested in art as well, when Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Breton, Eluard, and Dalí, among others, use the figure of cannibalism to ground masculine views of women. In an analysis of the interpretation, Caillois sees in the mantis itself an explanation for why arts and sciences obsess over this trope. As he suggests, the fascination of naturalists with the praying mantis stems from “the development of most castration complexes, which commonly originate in the fear of the toothed vagina” (76). Naturalists (most of which are men) retain a residual animal unconscious “fear of being devoured by the female” (81). Caillois’ interpretation reveals two main consequences of this masculine fear for scientific discourse: first, the castration anxiety present in most biological studies suggests that scientific discourse itself is primarily a masculine endeavor, channeling male anxieties. Second, the anxiety stems from a fear of the realization that this seemingly objective, unmediated position (the bird’s eye view of science) is actually extremely contingent. Thus, the fascination and anxiety about being devoured by the female present in biological writing represents an anxiety about castration, and the masculine fear of loss of the master-signified in science: namely the so-called “objective observation” of the Cartesian subject. When scientific discourse imitates nature and privileges a system of representation that goes to lengths to obscure its contingent nature, it also hides its masculine biases and passes it for natural, unmediated truth. It thus creates the illusion of the natural aspect of masculine discourse.

Caillois’ playful analyses thus present research on mimicry in the animal world as performing the same type of mimicry they analyze: they imitate the “natural” world. In his second essay, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychastenia” (1935), Caillois proposes that
the act of imitation, instead of producing the subject, enacts an attempt at disappearing as a subject. He begins by reframing the problem of mimesis in terms of a relationship between an organism and its environment. For him, the distinction between an organism and its environment marks a decisive moment for the coming-into-being of any subject. Anticipating systems theory, Caillois sees the act of imitation as a way organisms found to reverse the process of becoming. Because the goal of mimicry is to “become assimilated into the environment” (98), he asserts, it “is thus a veritable lure of space” (99). Reframing the problem of mimesis in terms of geography, Caillois suggests that organisms who perform mimicry lose the perception of a position within space—they don’t recognize where they are. When an animal blends into the environment, it effaces its own personality and dissolves into space, becoming the space around it and peeling away its contingent markers. The differentiation of an organism and its environment disappears and, with it, the animal’s own sense of place.

Because this act of deceit happens mostly in the visual field, Caillois’ analysis also suggests that subjectivity has a strong bond with the visible. Following Caillois’ analyses, Jacques Lacan used the concept of mimicry to suggest that subjectivity always constitutes itself in relation to a perceived outside gaze. Our own sense of self depends on this perceived gaze of the Other that is always watching us. In his famed Seminar XI, the French psychoanalyst suggests “The gaze is presented to us only in the form of a strange contingency, symbolic of what we find on the horizon, as the thrust of our experience,
namely, the lack that constitutes castration anxiety.” (72-3).69 The gaze appears to us as our sense of being seen, as our own perception of the symbolic realm, which both enacts the lack and promotes castration. When it comes to scientific discourse, the speaker subject has to grapple with the anxiety that the symbolic order, or the rules of the scientific method, may at any time expose the speaker’s lack of the ability to speak as a subject from an objective point of view. In other words, the speaker fears the possibility of being exposed as a situated subject with contingent knowledge.

For Lacan, an animal can deceive the gaze and remain invisible through the act of mimicry. This primarily happens in one of two ways, either as a simple visual deceit (an animal looks like another) or as an imitation of vision itself (the ocelli in certain species of butterflies).70 In the case of the former, Lacan suggests that “it is not a question of harmonizing with the background but, against a mottled background, of becoming mottled” (99). The animal in question does not want to reconfigure itself into a clear image of something else, but specifically to not become an image—to become noise and chaos. In the case of the latter, following Caillois’ examples, Lacan suggests that these animals do represent something, but only in the form of a trick, of representing one thing

70 Lacan refers to ocelli as the instances where an animal imitates another animal’s eyes. In these cases, the imitation cannot itself see, but gives itself to be seen. The imitation materializes the act of seeing (and reminds whoever comes closer of the act of being seen).
to remain invisible as another. In the case of the *ocelli* the act of mimicry carries a certain irony: they imitate eyes so they are not seen. Lacan uses the case of the *Caprella acanthifera* as an example of this form of trickery. This small crustacean imitates a stain created by another animal, the brozoa, and in such a way it “becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture” (99). The act of becoming a stain, becoming a picture, exercises the function that Lacan calls the screen: when we look at a screen we never see the screen itself, but only the projections on it. Similarly, here we never see the being itself, but just a projection or an imaginary equivalent.

The subjectivity present in scientific discourse, such as the voice of the scientist, who plans and executes each experiment, produces mimicry. Caillois’ essays suggest that in using a traditional mimetic approach to representing animals, scientific analyses efface the speaking subject and pass a contingent point of view as a universal truth. This desire to efface the subject reveals a complacency as well as an anxiety with the positivist need to erase the subject in the form of discourse. As he argues, mimicry for mantises “illustrates, sometimes hauntingly, the human desire to recover its original insensate condition, a desire comparable to the pantheistic idea of becoming one with nature, which is itself the common literary and philosophical translation of returning to prenatal unconsciousness” (79). The death-drive nature of this form of mimicry represents the will of positivistic science to make the subject and all of its specificities disappear into an environment of a Cartesian point of view, where individuals are invisible. Instead of a bird’s eye view of the world, Caillois sees natural history effacing the subject to privilege the system of representation.
When analyzing mimicry in animals, Lacan observes that it “is no doubt the equivalent of the function which, in man, is exercised in painting” (109). The framed painting works as a *screen* or a stain because as we stand in front of it, we lay down the gaze, we are not the focal point anymore and, instead, become another spectator gazing at the painting. The dynamic worked more for Realist paintings and, as Lacan notes, Modern painting (impressionism, more specifically) defied this ability by playing with the very act of seeing and being seen. Similarly, traditional scientific analyses played the same trick, mimicking an “outside” nature to create a visual effect that laid down the gaze. Like Modern painting, Caillois’ essays instead play with the visibility of the speaking subject, with a narrator who reflects on the process of writing and breaks with the illusion of external reference.

Caillois’ essays perform an impressionistic version of scientific discourse, where the act of observation can be observed. Both essays themselves enact a form of mimicry in reverse, with exaggeration and critical distance. At first, the essays pass for a biological study, analyzing the literature on mimicry and the praying mantis. The essays appeared in *Minotaure* but following the format of traditional scientific review, citing outside sources, and presenting photographs that corroborate their observations. The writing style further explores the format of a scientific review, using passive voice and indirect speech to present facts as if they had appeared *in natura*, unmediated by the scientific eye. But Caillois’ works appear in a surrealist journal, signaling aesthetic preoccupations as foremost in the piece. Furthermore, especially in the “Legendary Psychastenia” piece, the voice of the speaking subject increasingly takes central stage through the excessive use of footnotes. The notes appear as moments when the artist-
turned-scientist steps away from the objective scientific method and reflects on his own subjective role in the study. If the body of the essay is the signal, these notes are noise that take on a tangential role. Or vice versa. However, in this liminal space of footnotes we find the speaking subject who, in the first person, reflects on his own process of research. The essay ends in a footnote: “nature is everywhere the same.40” Which reads “In this rapid survey, I have had to omit certain related questions…” (103). The liminal takes central stage. And in this final note the artist appears from behind the curtain, sheds his mask, and presents himself as the craftsman he is. This reversal of mimesis briefly inverts the dynamic of the disguise; it embraces the gaze of the Other and offers itself to be seen.

Wells’ Taxidermist displays an analogous attitude in relation to the gaze: while his animals disguise the hand of the taxidermist and appear as in natura, his overall project of creating weird animals makes him incredibly visible as an artist-scientist. His works “fetch—one fetched £300 only the other day. … It’s such brittle capital at the best” (23). With the money he gets fame and becomes well known in the scientific community. Instead of privileging the system of representation, the taxidermist’s (un)natural history exalts him and his successes in gaming the system, which, as he proudly admits, happens primarily through visual deceit. With great and carefully designed details, his creations pass for real because the scientific community “can only discover the fraud with a microscope, and they will hardly care to pull a nice specimen to bits for that” (24). Verification hinges on visual proof; when the taxidermist carefully manipulates the visual realm, his creations pass the muster of research.
Even though the story recurrently uses visual proof as a focal point, “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” simultaneously critiques the overreliance on the visual by incorporating in the narrative a series of paradoxes about the relationship between the realms of images and sounds. Whereas the story repeatedly suggests that visual proof functions as the lynchpin of objectivity, Bellows actually has very little visual access to the Taxidermist’s triumphs. They sit in the library separated by a bead curtain, which obfuscates any view of the triumphs. Later, when talking about the plumes of a “Moa,” the taxidermist reveals he makes them by “dodging up singed bits of ostrich plumes.” And, he adds, “Yes, that is the new smell you noticed” (24, italics mine). Bellows can only smell the proof, but not really see it, thus relying heavily on non-Cartesian proof.

The fact that “Triumphs of a Taxidermist” constantly refers to the visual—and holds visual mimicry as the basis for any representational triumph—while the bulk of the story happens through dialogue further attests to the problem of objective observation: it can only happen by a trickery that turns a seemingly elusive and unreliable verbal realm into images. Even though Bellows presents his story through a verbal narrative, he focuses on descriptions of visual details around the room: the eyes on the mantel, a bead curtain separating both rooms, the graces inscribed on the pipe, etc. This trick suggests that scientific objectivism refers to visual proof only to suppress the linguistic issues that have haunted scientific and philosophical writing since the Enlightenment and the creation of a Cartesian subject. The taxidermist uses the medium of taxidermy with such success precisely because it creates the illusion of unmediated nature, which, in turn, happens through the equally deceptive illusion that visual presentation escapes narrative and sets the animals free from the verbal realm. The same dynamic appears in
mathematical models and scientific representations that rely heavily on positivistic visual cues as if they eradicated elusive language. Formulas, Greek letters, charts, and tables, as well as photographs, videos, taxidermy, and other primarily visual forms of representation suggest that truth can be self-evident, if only one would see it.

**The I of the Beholder: Autopoiesis of Natural History**

When the taxidermist successfully passes his creatures through the scrutiny of the scientific community, he reveals the tautological nature of scientific claims. As Jane Desmond notes, taxidermy dioramas “also appear to present scientific ‘truth’ in that their posings, postures, and relationships are underwritten by the authority of the museum, its scientific staff, and prevailing beliefs about the organization of human and animal typologies” (351). The “truth” of mimetic representation in taxidermy needs the legitimacy of institutional approval—a certificate of realness. Scientific institutions establish that if a certain work of taxidermy fulfills specific guidelines for representation, it can be deemed true and real. The frame narrative in “Triumphs” exposes the multiple legitimization practices necessary for the realistic effect in taxidermy and, in showing how the Taxidermist duped his clients by manipulating visual proof, the story also illuminates how the scientific apparatus can produce its own truths in the process of presenting them. The taxidermist singes ostrich plumes, wires together different types of bones, applies dust to create the illusion of age, and even gives his creature a scientific name: *Anomalopteryx jejuna*. These actions reframe scientific production of knowledge as a process—and also make each stage evident to the reader.
The act of naming emerges as one of the most important means of transforming the taxidermist’s imaginary creations into “real.” The Adamic move reiterates the position of the Taxidermist as a creator figure and reminds us of the theological underpinnings of his scientific endeavors. Like God, the Taxidermist creates, but like Adam he names the animals. He gives his imaginary bird the name *Anomalopteryx jejuna*, a creative assemblage of Latin and Greek roots. *Anomalo-* means “unusual” or “abnormal,” while *-pteryx*, which comes from *pteron*, means “wings” in Greek. *Jejuna*, or the participle of the Latin verb *jejunus*, means “empty.” Thus, the bird is actually called “abnormally-winged emptiness.” As the Taxidermist himself notes: “*Jejunus-*a-*um*—empty—so called because there was really nothing in it; a thoroughly empty bird—except for stuffing” (222). The animal here represents nothingness in terms of content, it works only as form.

The act of naming has a twofold function in “Triumphs” as it both gives the taxidermist power over his creatures while maintaining the supremacy of the natural history system. In naming and designating animals into specific categories, Natural History creates and reinforces the very concept of humanity that subtends its categorizations. In *The Order of Things* (1966), Michel Foucault notes that “Natural History was nothing more than the nomination of the visible” (132), whereby the scientist filters and limits empirical observation of nature by breaking animals and plants down into structures that can then be compared to the structures of other living beings. As passive as it may seem, the filtering process does not so much grant the natural world entry into the realm of history, but rather transforms every piece of information, delineating the natural world. And thus, even though this process seems to give the
subject matter a place in the realm of ideas, it actually produces the very subject matter in the process. Furthermore, as it produces the object of study it also produces the very observing subject. For Foucault, the emergence of natural history coincides with the emergence of the modern man for “He is a quite recent creature, which the demiurge of knowledge fabricated with its own hands” (308).

In “Triumphs of a Taxidermist,” the process of imagining, naming, and certifying invented animals not only produces the creatures themselves but also fashions the persona of the Taxidermist. He establishes his fame through the animals he has placed on the market. Here, Donna Haraway’s prediction about taxidermy is true: it “fulfills the fatal desire to represent, to be whole; it is a politics of reproduction” (30). The taxidermist creates his animals and thus creates himself. However, as a synecdoche, his creative task also represents the entire scientific process that fashions itself while producing an object of study. The story proposes that scientific knowledge and mimesis are both self-fashioning in that they create the object of representation simultaneously with creating the representing subjectivity. In what French discourse analyst Michel Pêcheux calls a Munchausen Effect, the subject emerges by itself, as if pulling itself up into existence by its own bootstraps.\footnote{When the Baron Munchausen was stuck in a swamp with his horse, he escaped the situation by grabbing his own hair and pulling himself and his horse up out of the swamp. Pêcheux uses this fantastical tale to describe how subjectivity comes into being within the ideological apparatus. For him, in the Althusserian model, a subject becomes a subject of}
Allegories to English gentlemen of science, the two men who sit by the fire and sip whiskey, Bellows and the taxidermist, represent the demiurge of scientific positivism in Natural History. Their tautological conversations about emergence of imaginary animals denote the ouroboric structure at the heart of Natural History: the very method and system that evaluate the epistemological claims of positive science create these very claims. Foucault observes the same process at play in humanism, which, throughout its different appearances since the Enlightenment, has relied on a tautological definition of humanity. As he points out, “Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is after all obliged to take recourse.”72 In defining animals as separate and in distant categories from humans, natural science can thus function as a human description of the world, but relies on such descriptions to uphold the very notion of humanity at its core. In a feedback loop, the concept of humanity is grounded on a difference between animal and human that is created in the very act of naming. And, as Derrida points out, humans create such difference, a difference “between what calls itself man and what he calls the animal.”73 The figure of two gentlemen scientists sipping whisky and bragging about work in a nineteenth century version of the man-cave signals discourse through the process of interpellation, but for the process of interpellation to happen a subject already needs to exist.

72 Foucault, Michel. “What is Enlightenment?”

the blatant masculine nature of the process of naming: the “conceptions of man” exclude women from participating as active agents in the system of science.

Reverse mimesis employs a similar ouroboric process. Wells’ taxidermist finds the apparatus of legitimization of Natural History and games it by using his reversed form of mimicry as a form of deceit. First, he focuses on the visual aspects of his animals to explore the close affinity between visual proof and the scientific method of positivistic science. Later, he uses the very apparatus of the scientific review to insert his animals into the realm of scientific knowledge: “How did I come to make it?” the Taxidermist asks Bellows, “Simple enough, as all great inventions are. One of those young genii who write us Scientific Notes in the papers got hold of a German pamphlet about the birds in New Zealand, and translated some of it by means of a dictionary and his mother-wit … and he got mixed between the living apteryx and the extinct anomalopteryx” (223). In his trickery, the taxidermist uses this blunder about an extinct bird to produce his own version of the bird and eventually to produce his own invented creatures. Through visual deceit and by exploring the scientific method, the taxidermist exposes Natural History as a networked system, whose truths emerge from a multi-layered set of texts rather than an ontological origin. After successfully gaming this system, the taxidermist comments on the results of his endeavor with irony: “Here was a bird-collector swearing he would have a specimen of a bird that did not exist, that never had existed, and which for the very shame of its own profane ungainliness, probably would not exist now if it could help itself. And he got it. He got it” (223). Success in reversing the mimetic process shows that, to some extent, mimesis in science is always already reversed. Mimesis works in reversing itself in two main ways: first, as a process implicated in the apparatus of the
system that influences as much the object represented as the representing being. And second, the reverse mimesis reveals the mimetic process to be a *process*.

**Le Mot Injuste: Self-reference and Narrative Voice**

Throughout the story, the first-person narrator, Bellows, maintains the ideal of a Realist style: short, direct, and active sentences when describing the action, and very minimal descriptions between dialogue. For large part of the story, the dialogue between Bellows and the taxidermist becomes a monologue by the taxidermist, who echoes Bellows’ reaction within his own monologue. After describing the process of stuffing human beings, the taxidermist continues: “Unpleasant? I don’t see it” (23). In this case, the text only shows Bellows’ reaction to taxidermy within the taxidermist’s lines. Despite coming from the taxidermist, “unpleasant” is Bellows’ reaction. Through this mostly one-sided dialogue where the taxidermist seems to speak for himself, Bellows performs a similar sleight of hand as scientific discourse. He erases himself from the narrative process and builds the illusion that the scene unfolding is a product of nature.

To maintain the illusion of unmediated knowledge, scientific texts require a series of legitimizing mechanisms. When art tries to make claims to knowledge and truth, it uses the same legitimizing performative acts to create the fictional text as reality. “Triumphs” focuses on this visual aspect of art at the turn of the century by creating the pervasive structure of the “frame story.” The story opens and closes with Bellows setting up the taxidermist’s triumphs: “Here are some of the secrets of taxidermy,” he opens. And then closes with the mention of proof that supports the taxidermist’s accomplishments. On one level, Bellows narrates his encounter with the taxidermist and,
on another level, the taxidermist narrates his triumphs and the stories behind them. The two levels of narration set up a frame-within-a-frame structure, where the outer-most narrative voice works as a commentary on the story within.

Like many of his contemporaries, H. G. Wells used the frame-within-a-frame technique as a way to play with the style of Victorian realism, which used techniques to test the (im)possibility of external reference. Henry James used the strategy in his famous *Turn of the Screw* (1898), in which a group of friends listen to a story one of them reads from a found manuscript. Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) similarly introduces Marlow, a narrator who offers a first-hand account of his odyssey in Africa. In Wells’s own *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1898), a character, Charles Edward Prendick, finds a manuscript penned by his uncle, Edward Prendick, which recounts his experiences in the eponymous island with the Beast Folk. The function of the frame-narrative in these instances is twofold: on the one hand it gives the story an air of Realism, masking aesthetics and presenting the textual material as pristine evidence, untouched by the

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74 Modernist scholars usually depict Wells in a prickly relationship to his contemporaries. Nicholas Delbanco’s *Group Portrait* (1982), Laura Dryden’s *Joseph Conrad and H. G. Wells: Fin-de-Siècle Literary Scene* (2015), and Leon Edel and Gordon Ray’s *H. G. Wells and Henry James* (1979) provide great examples of Wells’ disputes with Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Joseph Conrad, and Stephen Crane. Nevertheless, in aesthetic terms, Wells’ project more aligned with these other Edwardian authors than differed, especially as responses to Flaubert’s “*mot juste*” and in using obsessive self-referencing narration.
hands of the narrator (the ghost story manuscript, the first-hand testimony, and the travel journal). On the other hand, conversely, it breaks with the illusion of realism by re-inscribing a narrator within the fiction and calling attention to the process of storytelling.

Wells’s recourse to the frame-narrative also hints at a traditional tension between the rise of the novel and realism in the English-speaking world. The first English novels to mark the genre appeared as found manuscripts—usually with no mention of the actual author’s name. Henry Neville’s *The Island of Pines* (1668), Daniel Defoe’s *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719), and Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver Travels* (1726) had no authorial attribution in the first editions and all presented themselves as found travel journals published verbatim. Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), his later *Clarissa* (1748), and John Cleland’s *Memoires of a Woman of Pleasure* (1749) featured the epistolary genre, also evoking the specters of archival material, and thus passing for a historical document. The frame narratives in these works further the realist illusion of presenting the text, a constructed fictional artefact, as a truth that exists beyond its own limits, as untouched by the manipulative hands of a writer.

Besides creating an observation of observations, the frame structure also gives the story an ekphrastic quality, raising questions about the relationship of verb and image. Already a visual object, the invented taxidermy animals appear within the frame of the story as if they were assembled by the taxidermist but further painted by Bellows. In *The Optical Unconscious* (1993), Rosalind Krauss analyzes modernist paintings that use images of windows to create the same en abyme effect that the multiple levels of narrative voice create in “Triumphs”: 
The frame-within-a-frame is a way of entering the figure into the pictorial field and simultaneously negating it, since it is inside the space only as an image of its outside, its limits, its frame. The figure loses its logical status as that object in a continuous field which perception happens to pick out and thereby to frame; and the frame is no longer conceived as something like the boundary of the natural or empirical limits of the perceptual field.\textsuperscript{75}

The frame functions as a way to place the story itself, and the objects within the story, in a form of self-reflexive evidence. For Krauss, the images within the windows of modernist paintings cannot function as references to an exterior reality because by showing their frame they can only work as a reminder of their own limits as paintings. A naturalist landscape depicting mountains and a river tricks viewers into believing the “unmediated” character of the landscape, as if they were staring into the thing itself. A depiction of a window framing the same landscape breaks the spell of painting and reminds the viewers that they see this landscape only as a contained, contingent point of view. As Krauss reminds us, “whatever is \textit{in} the field is there because it is already contained \textit{by} the field” (17). As Wells’ fiction turns in on itself, it becomes a commentary on the function of observation in narrative and the paradox of realist art in attempting to represent a \textit{universal} truth from a situated perspective.

In “Triumphs,” as well as in other works by Wells and his contemporaries, instead of imparting an illusion of veracity to the tale told, the frame-narrative actually raises questions about the value of found material. Bellows’ narration plays with the Realist

impulse to give the text the legitimacy of archival material and, instead, exposes these performative acts as tautological moves that produce their own truths within the verisimilitude of the text—and never in relation to an outside. Bellows’ playful narration challenges the mimetic tradition of realism by employing an objective, scientific style woven with irony and dubious claims. The very opening line, “Here are the secrets of taxidermy,” suggests a confession from the part of the narrator, a revelation of truth. But, Bellows immediately contradicts this claim to veracity and notes that the secrets “were told me by the taxidermist in a mood of elation” (220), undermining the value of the truths. The irony of this opening builds a tension between realism, scientific observation, and the epistemological claims of the style: Bellows offers a first-hand account, a peek into the never-before-seen world of taxidermy, but as told to him by a drunk.76

Bellows sets off to represent the taxidermist in a traditional mimetic form, using strategies from realism. He tries to find the most suitable words, he tries to erase himself from the text, and he privileges the visual realm for proof of his assertions. But in the end of the story, his attempt to convince the readers that his story relates a truth beyond the text actually exposes the process of building knowledge as a manipulation of linguistic

76 The technique of narrating under the influence appears in Wells’s “The Queer Story of Mr. Brownlow’s Newspaper” (1932). The narrator recounts that Mr. Brownlow had received a newspaper from the future and was able to foresee what would happen to the world forty years ahead. Sadly, an unwitting housemaid burns the newspaper before Brownlow can share the news and leaves us only with his testimony—which he acquired also in a mood of elation.
material. The final paragraph sets up two paradoxes about visual proof within the realist style. Bellows concludes the narrative in an attempt to prove the veracity of his own tale by referring to proof that he has seen:

The reader unacquainted with the dark ways of the collector may perhaps be inclined to doubt my taxidermist, but so far as the great auks’ eggs, and the bogus stuffed birds are concerned, I find that he has the confirmation of distinguished ornithological writers. And the note about the New Zealand bird certainly appeared in a morning paper of unblemished reputation, for the Taxidermist keeps a copy and has shown it to me. (25-6)

First, the story concludes in an irony that Bellows has proof of the existence of auks’ eggs and bogus stuffed birds. In other words, he wants to prove the authenticity of a fake. By a reversal, the irony here undoes the value of proof: if even fakes can be legitimated by visual cues, then the visual is not a reliable form of differentiating between real and fakes.

The second paradox emerges when Bellows so desperately tries to prove the truth value of his story. When he mentions the “confirmation of distinguished ornithological writers” and the note in “a morning paper of unblemished reputation,” he actually faces an awareness of his own position as a narrator who mediates these events through a verbally constructed narrative. Therefore, the very act of trying to endow the narrative with a truth content points to the unreliability of his narrative that cannot pass along such proof without relying on a verbal (and by Positivism and Realism’s own standards, unreliable) form of representation. Thus, the ultimate Cartesian proof within the story actually just makes the reader doubt the story even more. His attempt to build a “realist”
story that points to a truth outside the text ends up revealing that the only truth he can claim is the verisimilitude of his own story.
Chapter Three

Text-Machines: The Ghost of Patriarchy in the Logic of Capitalism

By the late nineteenth century, as women were breaking new ground and gaining a voice in politics, their position within the postindustrial economy shifted considerably. Gradually, and intensifying after World War I, women gained more and more access to the world of business and economics. The entry into the new space of the office was chaperoned by a change in the perceived relationship between women and machines, particularly with the invention and proliferation of the typewriter, which engendered the predominantly female profession of typists. These changes in numbers of women in the workforce came with a caveat: they could work in the office so long as they fulfilled the tasks of machines and, as such, became machines. As media theorist Friedrich Kittler
notes, “the convergence of a profession, a machine, and a sex speaks the truth.” The convergence of women typists and the apparatus thrust the word “typewriter” into polysemy. A series of advertisement campaigns sought to equate women with office machines in a deliberate attempt to assign a gender to the machine. For instance, Remington’s early typewriters were advertised with photographs of women typists. Such representations of women as machines served to domesticate the feminine within the early-twentieth-century economy and to diffuse the battle of the sexes and its explosive consequences.

In Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928), the struggle between man and woman appears as a constant dialectic between the mechanical world of business and the fluid world of romance. The play presents a literal battle of the sexes, where a Young Woman (“an ordinary young woman, any woman,” as the stage directions describe), so miserable in her almost abusive relationship with her husband (whom she meets in the office as her boss), finds solace in a love affair, the only event in her life that makes her feel alive. Feeling trapped and unfulfilled in her marriage, the Young Woman kills her husband, is arrested, and sentenced to death. Through this journey from before she is married until her death, *Machinal* portrays each stage in the life of a woman in the twentieth century: work, marriage, motherhood, and death. In all of these stages, the play highlights the

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profusion of machines in the life of a woman. She first works as a stenographer who tries and fails to use the typewriter; in her home, the radio punctuates her and her mother’s life; in the hospital the machines dictate the early stages of motherhood; and, finally, she dies in the electric chair. In this fast-paced corporate world, machines pervade everyone’s lives (and sometimes deaths).

Through an aesthetic influenced by Italian Futurism and German expressionism, Machinal depicts the world of the workplace as a world of machines, equating capitalism with machinery. Karl Marx had noted in The Capital that under capitalism worker and machine became one, because “The machine, which is the starting point of the industrial revolution, replaces the worker, who handles a single tool.”79 Ironically, even though the substitution of human for machine frees the hand of the worker, the process actually trapped even more subjects in the workforce. Because machines took strength out of the attributes of the common worker, women and children could now become active participants in the economy. The system focused on the machines, making them the center of the entire process, using human labor as auxiliary tools—as cogs in the machine.

Even though most representations of women and machines in the early twentieth century equated the two, Machinal reverses the order of representation and portrays a woman who simply cannot comply with this capitalist logic. In portraying the entire world in a mechanical aesthetic while the female protagonist deviates from this norm, the

play uses a reversed form of mimesis through which the Young Woman carves out her own life, challenges the dominant logic of the workplace, but ultimately dies at the hands of the law. The play depicts characters as if in a mechanical world, functioning as gears in the well-oiled machinery of the workplace and systematically following directions and repeating lines. The protagonist reverses this aesthetic by never functioning properly and interrupting the flow of information. By focalizing on the Young Woman’s disruptions to the system, and by highlighting the media apparatuses ubiquitous to early-twentieth century life, *Machinal* makes visible the process of representing women in the workforce at the time and the processes through which they created a concept of humanity and enforce such concept onto its subjects.

Most scholarship on the expressionist play introduces Treadwell’s work as a historical commentary on the death sentence of Ruth Snyder, who had killed her husband and was executed the year before the play was released.80 With assertions such as “based on the true story of Ruth Snyder,” criticism on *Machinal* frames the play as an imitation of a supposed reality. The reversed mimesis in the aesthetics of *Machinal* puts such claims in doubt by exposing how much media apparatuses influence the production of

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meaning. In fact, drawing on Expressionist theatrical techniques, the play presents itself as a manipulation of effects, focusing on how meaning can be distorted in representation. Stage directions ask for Mechanical offstage and onstage noise of steel riveting, telegraph instruments, office machines that create an atmosphere of mechanical life (typewriter, telephones, filing cabinets, stenotypes, etc.). With such omnipresent images of mechanization, _Machinal_ suggests that mechanical technologies don’t work merely as extensions of the human, but rather as that which _produces_ and maintains the very idea of humanity that is pertinent for the dominant logic.

_Machinal_ thus presents technology not as prosthetic to the human body, but as a constituent part of what the society at the beginning of the twentieth century considered to be the human. The play opens with an office scenario where humans inherently connect to the machines they use daily: an adding clerk, a filing clerk, stenographer, and telephone girl all operate as a function of their tools. On the one hand, these technologies appear to be what Marshall McLuhan calls “extensions of man” because they increase the speed and intensity of the human ability to count, read, write, and talk. But, on the other hand, the lines of dialogue involving these characters are short outbursts of information related to their machines. The Adding Clerk only talks in numbers, the Telephone Girl repeats salutations, the Filing Clerk follows an alphabetical sequence. The aesthetic of the play emphasizes how much their use of language depends on their economic function and the machines they employ. By displaying the highly technological world of media permeating the seemingly natural realm of language, which then matches the technological medium in use, _Machinal_ links language to non-human technologies,
suggesting that the purely human is always already an apparatus permeated by a technological language.

In the figure of the woman with fluid sexual desires vis-à-vis the masculine and technocratic world of capital, the play disrupts the dichotomy natural/artificial in the center of discussions about technology. In the play, the machines are not in themselves alienating to the subject—they just heighten the already artificial aspect of human communication, which is always mediated by language. However, in the fast-paced world of business, machines alienate subjects because a hidden force behind the logic of capitalism manipulates them. This ghost in the machines makes the subjugation of humans to the mechanical seem natural, and the subaltern position of women in the socio-political life at the beginning of the century inevitable.

The dehumanizing logic of capital works primarily by targeting human language, simplifying speech, and ultimately trying to reduce the complexity of language into a code—mechanical and empty of emotion. This problem of communication appears as a recurring theme of modernism’s reckoning with the proliferation of technologies of perception at the end of the nineteenth century. In The Senses of Modernism (2002), Sara Danius argues that “high-modernist aesthetics is inseparable from a historically specific crisis of the senses” (3), because the prevalence of media machines in the modernist milieu makes visible the ways human perception receives and processes information—and how these perceptions are then filtered through language. Such artistic movements as Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism dissected the visual, while novels, such 1920s novels as Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway and Claude McKay’s Banjo played with the perception of sound. While the end of the nineteenth century was preoccupied with the
fragmentation of the human body and the isolation of each sense, *Machinal* invokes this
crisis to question the very divisions of the sensorium, particularly of sight and sound. At
times, the play introduces visual and audio disruptions to underline the inevitable
connection between the two and to investigate how the human sensorium impinges on the
process of communication.

*Machinal* thus participates in a modernist concern for how media technologies
and language shape their milieu, especially the collective sense of the subject. The
mechanical models of the early Zurich and Berlin Dadas, as well as the Futurist and
Vorticist obsessions with modern means of transportation, center on how speed and
movement overwhelmed the senses and created a peculiar view of the world. Particularly,
Berlin Dadaist Raoul Haussman’s photomontages “Tatlin lebtz zu Hause” (Tatlin at
Home - 1921), and “ABCD, Self-Portrait” (circa 1923), and Fernand Léger’s Cubo-
Futurist film *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) invoke media machines and the problem of
perception while questioning the driving force behind these apparatuses and their position
in the economy of the time. Haussmann’s collages blended elements of photography and
drawing, as well as cutouts from maps and newspapers, to portray human figures buried
under layers of prosthetic technology. A gyroscopic disc covers an eye, while printed
types cover part of the mouth, and a series of probing mechanisms stand in for the brain.
The collages pair these technologies with older communication prosthetics such as maps,
money bills, ticket stubs, and anatomical models. Haussmann’s work thus connects old
and new technologies to show how humans are technological entities through and
through.
Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mécanique*, in collaboration with Dudley Murphy and Man Ray, stages the problem of technology and the human body through a constant dialectic between triangles and circles. In this avant-garde movie, triangular and spherical pieces of machinery dance a mystical ballet, underscored by industrial aesthetics and the tempo of a factory. Caught in the dynamic of triangle and circle, of natural and artificial, the body of a woman appears before the screen in great detail. Likewise, a moving camera reflects on the metal detail of a pendulum. The overlap between the woman and the camera produces a dynamic in which the apparatus appears in a dance with the female body, constantly framing it. With the tempo of the factory and the mechanical as its central aesthetics, *Ballet Mécanique* shows the dance of machines to be a dance of capitalism: repetitive, automated, systematic.

*Machinal, Ballet Mécanique*, and Haussmann’s collages all playfully reverse the topical assumptions about representation by creating mechanical beings and worlds that impose their view of humanity as subordinate to the movement of capitalism. The mechanical and automated aesthetics of these works introduce a figure of the compliant woman that brings into question the role of media apparatuses in perpetuating a patriarchal logic. Thus, these works all have in common a concern with both the dehumanizing aspect of the proliferation of industry, and a particular attention to the role of women within this economic and representational order. These works turn inwardly and expose the processes of representation of women in film, literature, and art.

In *Machinal*, the mechanical system finds a way to control the woman by imposing its dynamics onto her and putting her to death whenever she poses a threat to the rule of law. The Young Woman receives the death penalty for attempting to break
free from the dominant order by killing her husband. The patriarchal program has erected and commands apparatuses such as the telephone, the typewriter, and the camera within an economy of the time. Accordingly, these machines *produce* a conception of humanity, dictating the properly human and the appropriate conduct for men and women. Because the patriarchal system steers these machines, the image of humanity they produce will necessarily take the masculine as an ideal. Furthermore, these media apparatuses produce such images by a logic of sacrifice: systematically dominating the woman and her reproductive power, imposing a language onto her, and ultimately killing her to maintain the system.

**The Ghost in the Machinal**

Aside from the Young Woman protagonist, most characters in *Machinal* represent a specific function, usually associated with a media apparatus. In the opening scene, at the office, characters don’t have names beyond their mechanical function: Stenographer, Filing Clerk, Adding Clerk, and Telephone Girl. As the scene takes place in the office environment, the play proposes that the comingled relationship between individual and machines occurs within the larger machinery of capitalism, and thus, plays on a tradition of criticism about the influence of capitalism over the human body after the English industrial revolution. The nineteenth century saw the exacerbation of technological advances as dehumanizing and harmful to the natural order.81 In *The Capital*, Karl Marx sees the emergence of machinery in industry as a turning point that enabled women and

children to become active participants in the factories.\footnote{Marx, Karl. *The Capital* Volume 1 (1867), transl. by Ben Fowkes, (London: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 492-639.} This move finally incorporated all members of the family into the machine, for “machinery is misused in order to transform the worker, from his very childhood, into a part of a specialized machine” (547). As a cog, the worker now suffers the dehumanizing forces of the factory that increase physical work while decreasing intellectual development. The inclusion of children in the economy secures their alienation from school: the worker becomes labor without thought—pure automation. The fear that this is the case appears in early twentieth-century art and literature in the famous figures of the mechanical woman in *Metropolis* or the berserk factory worker in Charlie Chaplin’s modern times. They all work relentlessly for the machine that never stops.

This fear of factory machines as destructive of humanity interprets technology as a human prosthetic—as an imposition onto the human body that violates human nature. As the machines of the industrial revolution made their way out of the factories and into modern daily life through gadgets and household appliances, the fear increased that such changes would disrupt the subject’s relationship to nature and deteriorate the human spirit. Martin Heidegger’s 1942-43 lecture *Parmenides* (and the later essay “The Question Regarding Technology” [1954]) summarizes this longstanding view of the duality between the “natural” human body permeated by “artificial” technologies. Heidegger finds in the typewriter a symptom of modernity and the fall of the human spirit. Because typewriters use standard font and spacing, they conceal the identity of the
writer, who otherwise would leave his individual mark in the nuance of handwriting. In Heidegger’s romantic view of humanity, the machine releases writing from the realm of the hand and transforms it into an impersonal form of communication. Writing loses its artistic and human elements and becomes a simple code because the machine turns “the word” into a mechanical repetition and “degrades the word to a means of communication” (81). Effectively, the typewriter “makes everyone look the same” (81).

The fear of standardization created by the typewriter stems from its technical aspects that enable the use of only one set of types and standard spacing. German media theorist Friedrich Kittler follows Heidegger’s analysis and suggests that the typewriter enforced a pattern to writing. Kittler associates the emergence of the typewriter to an imposition of mechanized writing onto the subject, because the new writing instrument composes its texts from a pre-established and limited assortment of types from which writers cannot deviate. As he states in *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter* (1986), “in contrast to the flow of handwriting, we now have discreet elements separated by spaces” (16). This technology was already present in the printing press, but the typewriter brought it into the home and the everyday work of writers. The block letters and their automated spacing impose the rules of writing onto the writing subjects who cannot freely move their hands.

Heidegger and later Kittler represent the importance of the typewriter as a metaphorical unit for the relationship between technology and art in modernism. In *Machinal*, technology indeed permeates the human world, causing the quality of life to decrease in the office environment as well as in the hospital and at home. *Machinal* further shows how these technologies promote the status quo. First, they fragment the
human body, separating and alienating the senses. Second, they promote the complete evacuation of thought by fostering automation. Finally, they simplify language and thought into a simple code. In the opening scene, the specialized functions of each office worker allegorizes the fractured human body. The adding clerk only calls out numbers, the filing clerk calls out words alphabetically, the stenographer uses stock phrases, and the telephone operator only greets other people:

**ADDING CLERK** *(in the monotonous voice of his monotonous thoughts; at his adding machine)*. 2490, 28, 76, 123, 36842, 1, ¼, 37, 804, 23 ½, 982.


**STENOGRAPHER** *(in the same way - left)*. Dear sir – in regarding – your letter – recent date – will state –

**TELEPHONE GIRL**: Hello – Hello – George H Jones Company good morning – hello hello – George H Jones Company good morning – hello

**FILING CLERK**. Market – M. Notes – N. Output – O. Profits – P! …

The stage directions list “each character and their machines” and mentions “sounds of machines going” before the curtain. Everyone involved in the convoluted office environment has a very specialized function, as if the human ability to communicate had been broken down into specific units of speech. The adding clerk represents our ability to count and to exert quantitative reasoning, whereas the filing clerk alludes to alphabetic knowledge and argument—that their notation systems are as opposed as the Arabic numerals and the Roman types only emphasize the fragmented human body.
The fragmentation occurs as a result of the proliferation of media machines in the nineteenth century. As Friedrich Kittler notes, at that time, coupled with the already available technology to reproduce writing, media machines such as photography and the gramophone made it possible to reproduce visual and auditory data. Whereas the hand could already reproduce writing, new technologies broadened the possibilities of imitation and “the fabrication of so-called Man became possible.”83 The telephone and gramophone exemplify this process of imitation: they emerged from Bell and Blake’s model of the phonautograph to imitate the human hearing apparatus and to supplant the malfunctioning ears of deaf children—and at first the phonautograph was actually built from human parts.84

From the ability to capture, store, and reproduce some human senses, these media machines fed into the fantasy of automata, reviving the dream of creating new human beings in the nineteenth century. As the stage directions note, the characters are inseparable from their machines, suggesting that highly specialized functions are consequence of the media environment of late nineteenth century and anticipating Marshall McLuhan’s proposition in his foundational tractatus on media, “all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed.”85

83 Kittler, Friedrich. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, p. 16.

84 For a further history of the telephone, see Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, p. 32.

we see the increase in power and speed for the office space by the fragmentation of the senses. Each different person focuses on a small task and does it quickly and repeatedly, but each task explores one human ability to its extreme. This dynamic follows a late-nineteenth century logic of specialization, which simultaneously created the ability to separate data from each sense into a specific recording and reproducing apparatus. Speaking of sound technologies in *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (2003), Jonathan Sterne suggests that “the history of sound reproduction is the history of the transformation of the human body as object of knowledge and practice” (41). While the technological innovations in communication enabled vision to be stored (photographs) on one medium at the same that sound was stored in a different medium (discs), these innovations also produced a specialized knowledge base that analyzed each sense (and their respective human organ) in a different disciplinary field. The perennial interests of the sciences, otology, laryngology, and optometry did not emerge as subfields of modern medicine until the late-nineteenth century. The simultaneous emergence of medical fields concerned with communication pathologies and the media apparatuses to remediate and amplify the senses implies the comingled development of media and our knowledge base about the body.

With fragmentation comes alienation. The title of the play adds another layer of difference to this mechanical society: *Machinal*, a French term for “mechanical.” For *Le Petit Robert*, *machinal* is “that which is done or said in an instinctive or automatic manner without paying attention.” Whereas in English the term mechanical encompasses two different yet related meanings of mechanical, French breaks these meanings into *machinal* and *méchanique*. The latter stands for what in English the OED defines as “of
or relating to machinery or tools,” whereas the former means exclusively “done as if by machine: seemingly uninfluenced by the mind or emotions—automatic.” The use of French, thus, only reinforces the automated nature of the mechanical world. The play defines the modern, apparatus-driven world as uninfluenced by the mind or emotions, a world without thinking or feeling.

Even when the characters want to talk about issues not related to work, they do so in clockwork rotation. When the boss, Mr. Jones, arrives, the clockwork motions perpetuate:

JONES. Good morning, everybody.

TELEPHONE GIRL. Good morning.

FILING CLERK. Good morning.

ADDING CLERK. Good morning.

STENOGRAPHER. Good morning, Mr. J.

JONES. Miss A. isn’t in yet?

TELEPHONE GIRL. Not yet, Mr. J.

FILING CLERK. Not yet.

ADDING CLERK. Not yet.

STENOGRAPHER. She’s late.

When Jones leaves and Young Woman comes in:

STENOGRAPHER. You’re late!

FILING CLERK. You’re late!
ADDING CLERK. You’re late!

STENOGRAPHER. And yesterday!

FILING CLERK. The day before.

ADDING CLERK. And the day before.

The characters repeat each other’s lines in order, creating a pattern that mimics a machine at full speed. Everyone around the office become part of an echo game, where each line does not convey any form of information but rather reaffirms the already functional aspect of the system. Communication in this sense is not the exchange of semantic material, but just a confirmation of the function of language. Each person’s lines only serve the purpose of what Roman Jakobson termed the “phatic function of language”: language tests the channel (the medium) making sure it works properly. Everyone in the office works perfectly as outlined in Jakobson’s model, exchanging information when needed and always guaranteeing the functionality of the system. This industrial world of business lacks all the detail and relief of a naturalist style, for instance, and instead explores the expressionist origins of the play, reducing representation to the bare “essential,” just as language within this work environment appears reduced to a simple code.

Against this dynamic, the Young Woman cannot find her way in because, ironically, she is actually trying to have a conversation with her office mates. Her lines rarely repeat what others say and instead disrupt the workings of the office. Not only is she late, but her machine doesn’t work. When it finally gets fixed, she can’t focus:

YOUNG WOMAN. *(starts to get to her feet but doesn’t)* I can’t – I’m not ready – in a minute *(sits staring ahead of her).*
Instead she moves back and forth and struggles with her machine. The final line is her saying her thoughts out loud, reflecting on the proposal George H Jones has made to marry her.

YOUNG WOMAN. Marry me – wants to marry me – George H Jones – George H Jones and Company – Mrs. George H Jones – Dear Madam – marry – do you take this man to be your wedded husband – I do – to love honor and to love – kisses – no – I can’t -- …

In transforming tasks into mechanized automation, the apparatuses of modern life have also transformed humans into automata. The Young Woman defies automation by actually reflecting on her life. Her inability to fit into the system suggests that she resists being reduced to a minimalist function and, by extension, fights the systemic reduction of language to code. Instead, her performance in the office (and later in her adulterous marriage) challenges the functional role of women in the workforce, just like the play itself, Machinal, pushes against the representation of women as submissive cogs in the machinery of capitalism.

Several other modernist works have challenged the view of technology as inherently destructive of humanity, particularly of the resistance to use a typewriter because of its dehumanizing aspects.\(^6\) For instance, in Calligrammes, Guillaume

\(^6\) Cf. Barrie Tullett, Typewriter Art: A Modern Anthology (London: Laurence King, 2014). The term “typewriter art” exemplifies the urge of modern artists in using the machine in a way that defies its standard normative use. This anthology compiles visual arts that use the typewriter both as an inspiration and as a medium.
Apollinaire used both hand and machine writing to create image-poems that transcend the standard Roman writing tradition. Instead of following traditional verse, orientation and line breaks, Apollinaire’s *calligrammes* depict from seemingly natural events like the rain to the technological marvel of the Eiffel Tower. In the Anglophone tradition, e e cummings also used the highly technological form of machine writing to push against the boundaries of form. In his most famous poem, “l(a,” the types form the movement of the falling leaf, while the unorthodox line breaks and jumbled punctuation produce polysemy. These works show that there is nothing essentially dehumanizing about the typewriter (or other technological apparatuses), but rather the way corporations employ these machines may evacuate the subject from any form of agency.

The title of *Machinal* in French reveals yet another particularity of this iteration of the apparatus. As it appears in the title, *machinal* is a masculine term—as opposed to the feminine *machinale*. The play represents the mechanical, automatic, thoughtless world that controls the Young Woman as masculine. Moreover, the “e” that marks the feminine in French is silent so that *machinal* and *machinale* sound the same. In the title of the play, sexual difference appears only in the written form, absent in the aural realm. The masculine force that controls this world is imperceptible in the realm of sound—only visible in a written trace. Consequently, the play suggests that the sexual tension and the battle of the sexes manifests more strongly in the written realm than the aural. As Kittler notes, “The ‘writing-machine,’ in that sense, only brought to light the rules regulating discourses during the age of Goethe: authority and authorship, handwriting and rereading, the narcissism of creation and reader obedience. The device for ‘everybody’ forgot
women.” The invention of the typewriter (a key apparatus for *Machinal*) made evident the divide in authority over writing in the early twentieth century. While the machine seems to democratize writing by bringing women into the workforce, it simultaneously revealed how the power dynamics turned women into machines who replicated, without any room for deviation, the always male-dominated field of writing.

Kittler notices the semantic overlap of typewriter (both the writing machine and woman typist) as symptomatic of a larger modern logic where women stood in for a mechanical function. In this discursive system of writing, where men were the ones defining discourse and dictating the material, women were supposed to be typing it down, mechanically reproducing masculine discourse. As Kittler remarks, “being able to read was not the same as being allowed to write.” The phallocentric dynamic that enabled men to pursue creative endeavors predicated women’s work on the material basis of literature. This dynamic is not new to the twentieth century. In “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids,” Melville portrayed a similar situation: while men talk about philosophy and politics in the bar-scenario of the paradise, women labor in the paper-mill producing the paper to be used in “sermons, lawyers’ briefs, physicians’ prescriptions, love letters, marriage certificates, bills of divorce, registers of births, death-warrants and so on.” The narrator of Tartarus of Maids also notes a curious detail in the

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87 Kittler. 188.

88 184.

paper mill where the maids toil: the maids labored by silently serving the machinery “mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan.”

Like the semantic duality of the typewriter, the Young Woman must find a function in the office environment. At the end of the first scene of Machinal —and the end of her first day in the office—the Young Woman realizes she cannot work like the machines around her, so she finds an alternative function in the work environment: the boss’s love interest. In the following scene at home, she ponders whether marrying her boss, George H. Jones, would help her make sense of her life, or whether it would just be playing along. The play thus adds another characteristic to the logic of the workplace: a woman must always fulfill the role already assigned to her. If she cannot exert a specific feminine role (in the mechanical menial jobs around her), she must then play a sexual role, which in her marriage develops mechanically as well. The Young Woman endures a mechanical life in which the patriarchal system alienates every aspect of her personality, breaking her down into a mechanical wife, detached mother, automated worker.

In the mediasphere of the early twentieth century, technologies fragmented the human sensorium and alienated subjects. Machinal incorporates technologies of media to the body and pairs them with the inhuman character of language to display how much the human body is always already technological. The increased entrapment of men and women in the factory makes it seem as if technology is responsible for the erosion of the so-called human spirit. These views set up a separation between the purely human and the technological, the natural and the artificial, where the latter contaminates and destroys

\[90\] Ibid. 12.
the former. However, while on the one hand this dichotomy seems to demonize technology, on the other, the philosophical distinction actually protects the illusion of a purely human spirit. In a sleight of hand, this binary position upholds the category of the human (as the masculine, positivistic, Eurocentric subject) all the while chastising the mechanical as responsible for the poor labor conditions of the time. The trickery masks the real force behind the enslavement of men and women at the turn of the century: namely, the group of men who designed, programed, financed, and perpetuated the economic system. The interpretation that something ontological about technology inherently destroys the human is akin to Walter Benjamin’s famous allegory of the automaton as representing the mechanical aspects of historical materialism in his famous “Theses on the Concept of History” (1940). The automaton appears as a mechanical program devoid of intention when in fact a dwarf chess-master sits inside the mannequin. For *Machinal*, the automaton is the economic system in place that entraps women into a primarily functional role, whereas the dwarf is the patriarchal logic that steers the system.

*Machinal* explores the ways traditional labor imitates the body and separates it from the sensory technologies only to invent an abyss between technological developments and the human body. When technology appears as prosthetics, which enhance and substitute for what is already there (the human), the “original” image of the body becomes naturalized and transforms into an ontological unit. The myriad technologies that appear to “displace” the human actually work as a way, first, to reaffirm the very body it pretends to undermine. A phonograph imitating the human ear, a stylus imitating a hand, or a camera imitating the eye all work, on the one hand, to highlight the insufficiency of the body, but, on the other, to reaffirm the human as a soul. The
sacrificial logic of mimesis reemerges: in a sleight of hand, the human body disappears and gives way to a perennial soul.

**Understanding the Machine: The Expressions of Man**

*Machinal* stages a critique of the pervasive character of media technology by presenting a world in which everyone becomes mechanical. Stage directions dictate the mechanical aspect of the industrial early twentieth-century world. Treadwell’s play broke in the theater scene during a time of high critique of industrialism, and offered a feminist look at the industrial evacuation of subjectivity. Alongside Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* (1923) and Eugene O’Neill’s *Dynamo* (1929), *Machinal* displays a mechanical industrial world that imposes an established image of what it means to be a woman, contingent on the power of the market, on female characters. The Young Woman appears as “essentially soft, tender” while “the life around her is essentially hard, mechanized” (xi). This duality further emphasizes the simple contrast the play enacts. In terms of setting, stage directions call for “two basic sets,” while the only change of furniture and props are the “essential things, full of character.” An important element of expressionism, the lighting further emphasizes contrast, “concentrated and intense. – Light and shadow – bright light and darkness,” which all contribute to the environment of the play.

Traditionally, expressionism in theater bordered on minimalism, on the one hand, and an almost surrealist style, on the other.91 *Machinal* plays into this duality by a focus

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on the “essential” characteristics of the characters, minimizing them to a mechanical function. At the same time, the stage becomes exaggerated, almost as in a dream: the sounds of riveting machines, the intense light, and short, broken lines transform the world into a large machine, as if the Young Woman literally lived inside a factory. The expressionist aspect of the play contributes to building an industrial environment with the “rhythm of our common city speech, its brassy sound, its trick of repetition, etc.” (xi). The attempt in the play of imitating the sounds and rhythm of the city becomes exaggerated—the play takes mimesis to an extreme, radically forcing the mechanical metaphor into an avant-garde performance akin to Futurist aesthetics.

The avant-garde of Machinal shares similar concerns with Futurism, in understanding the work of machines as intrinsic to modern life. While Machinal questions the mechanicity of modernity, Italian Futurism celebrated the rise of the machines and the new aesthetic of speed. In Russia, Futurism found a second home and, aligned to the communist utopia of the Third International, produced works that questioned the use of machines by the oligarchy and celebrated the dream of a futuristic redeemed society without classes. Albeit employing elements of Futurism, Treadwell distanced the play from these forms of Futurism that would later develop into fascism and aligned herself with the likes of Raoul Hausmann and Fernand Léger, who offered hesitant criticism of the belief in a mechanical supremacy. Hausmann’s Dada photomontages represent an obsession with machines as symptomatic of an automated way of thinking. For him, even though the Marxist criticism of the machines accurately determined the mechanical metaphor at the heart of capitalism, it also reproduced the system of exclusion it tried to eschew. Like Machinal, Fernand Léger employed a
Futurist aesthetic in a film that treats the world of the machines like a whimsical ballet. In the film, the machines all circle around the figure of two women creating erotic insinuations intertwined with the logic of capitalism. Thus, *Ballet Mécanique* emphasizes the masculine bent of capitalism in framing and trapping the woman.

In Hausmann’s *Tatlin lebtz zu Hause* (Tatlin at Home – 1920, pictured below), the structure of the brain appears as a series of repetitions. The shape of circles repeats in the various figures of wheels and cogs, and the phallic shape appears most prominently as the doubled diagonal probe, aside from the other vertical and horizontal tubes. The probes themselves use circles as rings and springs to compose their long shapes, as circles compose the phallus. Considering its placement at the top of a man’s head, this intricate mechanism serves as an allegory for the human mind. This mechanical brain absorbs information through its scoped left eye and processes thought through its multiple wheels and cylinders. Human thought is, thus, systematic, methodical, and ultimately mechanic. Because of the figures of wheels, which compose every aspect of this mind, the mechanical brain functions through revolutions, a pun that ties modern thought to a robotic machine—as if the modern brain thinking through revolutions were simply executing the algorithm of a system.

The reference to Vladimir Tatlin in the title connects Hausmann’s mechanical brain to Tatlin’s famous tower, which, like the probes in the collage, is a phallus built by repetition of circles. A monument to the Third International, the tower furthers a Marxist belief that progress, and the ultimate redeemed society, would emerge from repeated revolutions. This progressive process builds on a Hegelian dialectic, in which a truth emerges from a cyclical tergiversation between two antithetical propositions. In the figure
Raoul Hausmann, *Tatlin lebtz zu Hause* (Tatlin at Home - 1920)
of the tower, each turn leads to a higher level, from the wide and low basis to the higher and more exclusive rungs of the top. Tatlin only built the tower as a model for a much bigger version that would celebrate the Bolshevik revolution—the grandiose plan would culminate in a large protruding monument, like the most public monuments of war and history, phallic symbols erect in public spaces.

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In Hausmann’s photomontage, dialectical thought appears instead as an imposition on the human mind, a mechanical system that evacuates thought and leaves a head full of cogs. The man at the center of the collage has a brain full of mechanisms that follow a series of dialectic revolutions, but rather than emerging into a tower of truth, they spin without purpose and culminate in a series of self-indulged phallic products. The probes further examine one another, alluding to the self-centered aspect of this kind of thought. Hausmann’s mechanical brain receives input through a narrowly defined field of
vision and processes such information through a pre-established array of machinery (the dialectic methodology) that always arrives at the same self-serving conclusions. For the German Dada, the mechanical brain and systematic mind are dehumanizing and reductive.

As an allusion to Vladimir Tatlin and the work of the Soviet international, Hausmann’s photomontage criticizes the reductive form of thought employed by the Russian avant-garde. While the communist international and the various artistic endeavors supporting “Tatlin at Home” tried to offer a revolutionary form of art by opposing the capitalist establishment, they actually used the very form of reductive methodology they tried to eschew. In the end, the collage juxtaposes the inward thinking intellectual (front center) onto the penniless man inspecting his pockets in the background. The collage suggests that while one man thinks endlessly through his machinery of thought, the other starves—a direct criticism to the sanctimonious yet self-serving nature of historical materialism in the first half of the twentieth century. Benjamin’s automaton also sought to criticize the same problem in the historical materialism of the Third International. When faced with the threat of Nazism, the Third International signed a non-aggression agreement, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, that would leave the Communist Party disengaged with World War II but would effectively be the death sentence to Marxist Jewish intellectuals trying to flee Germany and Vichy France—Benjamin being one of them.

In *ABCD, self-portrait* (c. 1923, pictured below), Hausmann further develops his criticism of mechanical form of thinking, but in this collage he plays with the senses. The collage presents the artist’s face at the center, mouth open and eyes looking forward.
Raoul Hausmann, *ABCD, Self-Portrait* (c. 1923)
The several clippings around his face emphasize aspects of human communication: the left eye sits behind a scope, the mouth clenches the letters “ABCD,” and circular scrawls emanate from the right ear. The letters VOCE, or “voice” in Italian, connect the right ear to the mouth, as a telephone would. These references to vision, speech, and hearing suggest that human communication uses these senses as its primary technology. The mouth and the ear rely on agglomeration of phonemes to produce meaning, while the eye needs a focus and a frame to configure its field of vision. Even the sense of touch appears in the collage as a form of communication, at the bottom of the collage with the figure of two hands performing a pelvic exam. The hands receive input and diagnose, or “read” the body. The collage reduces the artist to a node of communication permeated through sound, vision, and touch.

However, even though the collage explores the wealth of the human sensorium, it only does so through synesthesia. The visual art of collage can only explore sound and touch through images, coding all senses through one master sense. The work further breaks communication down to units, or pieces of code that can be represented visually. The recurrence of letters and numbers performs the visual representation of sound, functioning in the visual realm as mediating signs. Most of the numbers in the piece appear as ticket stubs (Stücke) for a performance of the Kaiserjubilee, a classical concert in celebration of the Kaiser. The very word Stücke in German means both the ticket stub and a “unit,” highlighting the synecdochal aspect of the ticket stub. Everything on the collage is a unit of representation: letters and numbers, but also the maps in the lower and upper right corners, and the gynecological diagram, a map of the female body in itself.
This collage reduces the wealth of human knowledge and experience into visual units that can be assembled and/or dismembered.

As a whole, the collage appears as a chaotic random assemblage, without a master narrative; but each individual part, or each section of the piece, constructs a narrative about communication. The assembled word, VOCE, refers to the act of speaking, but also to the Italian avant-garde political magazine La Voce (1908-1916), which from 1914 to 1916 exclusively published poetry and questioned the nature of poetics. The banknote at the bottom left corner bears the face of John Amos Comenius, the Czech-born pedagogue who was responsible for developing the modern Western educational system, but who also devoted part of his life to the didactics of early-language acquisition. The maps focus on the global South, with the one on the upper right corner showing a detailed image of the Suez Canal, which is a means of communication between two bodies of water. Moreover, as a marvel of modern industrialization, the canal shortened the distance between Western civilization and the Eastern and Southern worlds. It influenced the political and economic dynamics of the early twentieth century as well. These bits of communication and information carry over from Hausmann’s earlier Tatlin piece, which features a map as well as a diagram of the human body. In its fragmentary and chaotic aesthetic, these collages question the problems of communication through this panoply of mediating devices: maps, banknotes, ticket stubs, diagrams, and newspapers.

Finally, the two shots of the globe, along with a long series of ticket stubs all the way up to the “C” in VOCE create the figure of an erect penis, which, sitting just above the medical diagram of a uterine contraction massage, emphasize a sexual dynamic to the piece. The phallus created by the globes and ticket stubs suggest that the assemblage of
bits of language—letters, numbers, and images—build a master, masculine discourse. The medical diagram at the bottom further evokes the dominance of masculine discourse. It displays a uterine contraction massage, a practice employed by doctors (always men) in the late-nineteenth century known as the only cure for “hysteria.” In the medical imagination, the procedure would stimulate the contraction of the uterus, cause a “uterine paroxysm” (or an orgasm) and calm the hysterical woman. In Hausmann’s “ABCD,” this diagram appears slightly behind the phallus of letters, numbers, and maps, as if the abundance of masculine discourse covered over, or imposed itself, on the female body. In that sense, the piece suggests that language itself works as a prosthetic technology that subjugates the human body as in the kinds of violence nineteenth-century medicine imposed on women.

This violence was abetted by a Positive knowledge produced and reproduced through a series of media apparatuses such as drawings and diagramming, but also through the very language treated as a technological prosthesis. In this self-portrait, cut out into the oval shape of the head, the photograph of the artist lies behind several layers of prosthetics: words representing the voice, a scope representing the framed vision, and the letters ABCD clenched within the artist’s mouth. Like the man at the center of “Tatlin at Home,” human communication relies on these forms of technology. It uses these units to build its discourse. At the same time, the work suggests, the very technology that is supposed to facilitate communication, instead imposes on the human body and frames what can be seen, heard, or said.

As the art of collage layers pieces of text onto others, it creates a hierarchy of visual cues. The upper layers mask the human face; the artist’s ears have been removed
and several layers partially cover the left eye and mouth. Thus, the technology of
language and its visual representation (in the alpha-numerical code) obscure the human
organs responsible for communication. A trompe-l’oeil happens in this piece and
represents a similar trompe-l’oeil of human communication in general: the alphabet hides
the body as a technology and presents speech as a “natural” occurrence, as if these words
and images were not dependent on a human apparatus. Similarly, as Derrida notes in Of
Grammatology (1967), in communication the voice signals a presence of the interlocutor,
which mistakenly obscures the apparatus of the human body and presents communication
as resulting from a Cartesian subject in full control of his speech. In “ABCD,” this
illusion becomes visible as an illusion. The collage depicts communication as a
prosthetic, external technology contingent on a historical moment of the Western
educational system and always privileging the masculine order by producing a violence
onto those who partake in discourse. In Lacanian terms, the alphabet here works as a key
technology for masking yet imposing the symbolic order.

Finally, Hausmann’s use of collage further emphasizes the dissociative aspect of
the human sensorium at the beginning of the twentieth century. In his photomontages, he
mixes painting, photography, and found paper objects (newspapers, money bills, maps).
While the mixed media creates a comprehensible whole, where all the parts work
together in an almost seamlessly manner, at the same time it brings attention to the
separate ways the human sensorium produces, stores, and disseminates data.
**Rendering Complexity: Repetition and the Mechanical Ballet**

The separation of the sensorium and the simplifying impulse permeate these works on mechanical life. In *Machinal*, when it comes to the plot structure, the play falls within the traditional expressionist form that invites simplification. The historiography of the play follows a particular logic: each episode illuminates one specific stage in her life. Just like the stages of the cross, each episode works almost as an image, or a static moment that represents a larger narrative structure. The transition between each episode happens through sound and music. The first episode ends on the sound of a radio, which keeps playing as the lights come back on for episode two. The radio reminds us of the pervasive influence of media culture in their lives (appearing both in the office and the home) and in their sense of history, marking the passage of time. In other episodes, the sound goes from the jazz on the radio to a big jazz band, from the rhythm of music to steel riveting, from music and dim voices to the clicking of telegraph instruments. The audio transitions coupled with the darkness of the fade-out create the effect of a chronological passage of time through the disconnection between seeing and hearing. The presence of media apparatuses and mechanical noises makes the effect visible as a result of the apparatuses at play in the play.

While the simplification of the plot structure may be representative of an Expressionist aesthetics in the play, the insistence of industrial sound coupled with musical instruments function more in the Futurist realm. Similarly, Fernand Léger’s post-Dada film *Ballet Mécanique* (1928), in collaboration with Dudley Murphy and Man Ray, incorporated the music of George Antheil into the film, which synchronizes sounds of musical instruments to the industrial sounds of sirens and propellers. The dialectic of
natural and artificial appears here as a constant struggle between seemingly natural sounds and images and industrial apparatuses. Xylophones and glockenspiels constitute the most prevalent instrumental sounds in Antheil’s soundtrack. Created from progressively increasing sizes of metal or wooden bars and pipes, these instruments follow a geometrical progression to order its musical scale. They make visible the geometrical progression at the heart of music—like the Circle of Fifths—and they embody the struggle between the geometric imposition of reason onto the fluid and melodic aspect of music. Xylophones and glockenspiels also embody in themselves this paradoxical nature: they are percussion yet present melody.

The paradoxes of modern life appear in the *Ballet Mécanique* as a constant tergiversation between the figures of triangles and circles, which also represent the binaries of natural/artificial and fluid/stable.

![Triangle and Circle](image)

The opening scenes display and animated alternation between a triangle and a circle. Soon after, a continuity sequence highlights their relationship. First, the scene frames a pendulum moving back and forth from the camera.
The pendulum reflects the camera, sitting tightly atop a tripod and swinging with the pendular motion of its reflection. The scene then cuts to a close-up of the pendulum through kaleidoscopic lenses that frame its circular shape within a series of triangles. A few scenes later, the kaleidoscopic lenses return, framing via triangles other circular and conical pieces of machinery. On the one hand, the film shows these two figures as conflicting forces—the straight versus the curved lines—as if the binary natural/artificial were in a constant conflict. The tripod of the camera contrasts to the circular opening of the lenses; a woman’s upper lip forms two triangles opposed to the circular traces of the lower lip. But, on the other hand, these conflicting forces also complement each other and appear as inseparable in many moments. The figure of the pendulum itself challenges this duality because its movements marries the circular movement of the circumference to the angular displacement of the swinging radius. Thus, by extension, the natural/artificial dichotomy seems to be intermingled.

Other avant-garde artists used this marriage of triangles to spheres as representative of life in modern times. The vortex of the Vorticists incorporates the movement of the pendulum; Salvador Dalí had a phase of obsession with the Fibonacci spiral in the horns of rhinoceroses; Man Ray had several drawings that featured spirals,
including his film *Etoile de Mer* (Sea star - 1928), which was written by Robert Desnos. The French surrealist, in turn, also wrote a poetry collection titled *The Geometry of Daniel* (1939), which plays with geometrical figures found in nature, especially the circle and triangles. Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase* reduces human vision of movement to a series of triangular shapes, which, put together, form the fluid and circular shapes of movement. *Ballet Mécanique*’s use of the triangle and circle, of kaleidoscopic lenses, and of repetition gives an overall sense of spiraling, of spinning around an axis while moving up and down.

Recurring in modernist art, the figure of the spiral allegorizes a series of modernist themes. As Nico Israel shows in *Spirals: The Whirled Image in Twentieth Century Literature and Art* (2015), modernists employed the spiral to represent their revolutionary views on history and science, as a way to rethink their methodologies, and as a way to explore its vertigo quality and challenge the primacy of the visual.92

In *Ballet Mécanique* the spiraling aesthetic serves two purposes. First, it introduces the logic of reversal because representation circles around one fixed point, at times showing it from one angle, at times reversing the view. This reversal is evident in

one of the final scenes where the animated triangle from the beginning reemerges, but in an alternation with its own image upside down. The upward triangle suggests the phallic order of men that is disrupted by the reversed vaginal logic of the tip-down triangle. This dance between a triangle and its upside down reflection underscores the sexual politics of the film.

A horse collar takes the place of the triangle and dances with its own image upside down, creating a figure that resembles a vagina, clitoris and everything. Even though the play on the visual and the attention to the mechanisms of framing the human subject steer the filmic narrative such as it is, Ballet Mecanique’s primary human subjects are two women. Actress, model, and singer Kiki de Montparnasse leisurely plays in a swing throughout the movie.
The recurring close-up shot of her smile plays with the theme of triangle and circles as the makeup on her upper lip traces two triangles while her bottom lip forms a perfect curve.

The other woman, a farm worker carrying a bag of produce up a staircase, appears as a much less sexualized version of femininity. As if out of a socialist realist painting, this worker has no makeup and no fancy clothes. She appears before the camera from a distance, serving the manual labor of the farm economy. Again, the logic of reversal reins: the scene repeats, as if in a cycle, the image of the clothed woman ascending the stairs, reversing Duchamp’s *Nude Descending Stairs*. 
The repetition and reversal evoke the second purpose of the spiral aesthetic: dissecting human vision and its apparatus. Just as the Spiral of Theodorus uses figures of triangles to create the illusion of a circular motion, the filmic apparatus uses static images to produce an illusion of movement. Man Ray’s earlier drawing *Admiration of the Orchestrelle for the Cinematograph* (1919) appears to have an influence here—especially since Man Ray was responsible for the photography of the film. In the drawing, beams of light travel through the canvas and bounce off of circular figures composed of an assemblage of triangles. The film thus dissects human vision and perception, particularly as it pertains to the cinematograph. Repetition offers a detailed look at the scenes and exposes the progressive nature of moving images, whereas reversal reveals the framing apparatus of film. In the end, the ballet depicts how movement in film is a trick on the eyes.

A final shot signals the visual trickery of cinema: a close-up shot of Kiki de Montparnasse’s eye stares back at the camera. Reversing the logic of cinema, her eye looks back at the audience, gesturing toward the act of seeing. Her eye functions like mimicry in the ocelli of butterflies: while the illusory eyes seem to stare back at the subject, they actually disguise the apparatus of cinema that is there to be seen. The film
embodies the gaze for the subject to hide its own visibility. The close-up shot also excludes everything else from the scene—all the audience can see are her eyes. The film effectively fragments Kiki’s body and, through a synecdoche, reduces her to one function.

The Machine Never Stops: Sacrifice on the Altar of Capitalism

Breaking apart the human body enacts a logic of distancing. Each isolated body part or separated sense proposes a dissociation of information and results in a distancing of signifier and signified. The perfect signifier that haunts the protagonist of Machinal represents the tradition of writing and the emphasis on logos and linearity. Luce Irigaray calls this the “onto-theo-logic,” which contributes to “the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal.” For the battle of the sexes, the univocal character of truth means that feminine will always have to be subjugated to the masculine order of discourse. For Irigaray, philosophical discourse does not acknowledge or theorize femininity save for as a function of masculinity. As she notes, the philosophical logos “stems in large part from its power to reduce all others to the economy of the Same” (78). For instance, psychoanalytical discourse studies desire and pleasure from a masculine perspective, which, according to Irigaray, privileges the visual to the detriment of the tactile, a sense she considers one of the bases of feminine sexuality.

Machinal further disrupts the logic of the perfect signifier through a play on the differences between the visual and the auditory. The play performs daily activities in the Young Woman’s life, key moments that outline the overall narrative from meeting her husband, to getting married, having a child, and finally dying. But the play omits the key events in each episode, leaving the audience to imagine the main action. She meets her husband and he proposes, but we just find out she accepted his offer because we see them as husband and wife in their honeymoon (we miss the proposal and the actual wedding). The honeymoon episode in turn ends right as they are about to have their first sexual encounter, and the next episode opens after she has given birth. The courtroom episode ends right before the judge gives a sentence. Finally, the apotheosis of the play happens with her execution, but, just like the other episodes, the lights go out and the curtain falls when the electricity comes on. Machinal explores the events that lead up to and result from the climax, but it omits all climatic events—they play only through foreplay. Machinal reverses historical discourse and disrupts phallocentric logic by deploying a narrative form that only implies main events, thus disrupting teleology and the “onto-theo-logic” of presence that requires climatic events to be chronicled in faithful detail.

While the play disrupts the dominance of the logos in its overarching narrative, the Young Woman herself also represents a challenge to the primacy of the perfect signifier through her repeated struggle with popular sayings and idioms that represent the automated aspect of human speech. During her love escapade, away from her husband and child, the Young Woman sings lullabies to her new object of desire, a Mexican man she met at a bar:
WOMAN *(laughs and sings)*. Hey, diddle, diddle, the cat and the fiddle, The cow jumped over the moon, The little dog laughed to see the sport, And the dish ran away with the spoon –

*Both laugh.*

I never thought that had any sense before – now I get it.

For her entire life, she had just repeated the lines without thinking, just as she had with other stock phrases and traditional practices. Now she “understands” that “the dish ran away with the spoon” represents her love affair with this man. The only significance she can find in this traditional song is a context-specific interpretation. Likewise, in the opening scene of this episode, the Young Woman listens to a seashell, saying she can hear the ocean.

WOMAN. You can hear the sea in ’em, you know?

MAN. Yeah. I know.

WOMAN. I wonder why that is?

The only moment in her life she actually feels alive and free from the oppression of her husband is when she indulges in these moments where she deploys language not to signify but to entertain. Her attitude toward language is a reverse mimesis: instead of imitating, she wants to create.

In the moments when she sings lullabies and wonders about the sonic features of the seashell, the Young Woman does not at first push back against the normalcy of language (much to the contrary), but, in her naiveté, she does expose the lack of connection between the utterance and enunciation, which problematizes the basis of the
onto-theo-logic.\textsuperscript{94} For Irigaray, such instances of disconnection can redefine language and open space for the feminine. When “every dichotomizing—and at the same time redoubling—break, including the one between enunciation and utterance, has to be disrupted” (79). Irigaray borrows from Émile Benveniste’s theory of language, in which “enunciation” (\textit{enonciation}) relates to a specific use of language, working only within a specific context, whereas “utterances” (\textit{énoncé}) are the general rules of language, or the meaning of a sentence regardless of context. For this division to work, utterances can only appear as enunciations, as specific uses within a context. In her naiveté, the Young Woman exposes a problem in this dichotomy: the enunciations of lullabies have no meaning in the specific context, they go on only as an empty reproduction of discourse—only as utterances.\textsuperscript{95}

In the process of creating her own fluid position in this automated world—in her reverse mimesis—the Young Woman reverses the divisions between enunciation and utterance and creates her own interpretation of lullabies. Thus, the division of enunciation and utterance also raises the question of subjectivity. On the one hand, enunciation needs a subject who claims the utterance for his/her specific need. For Benveniste, the process of uttering an enunciation is also a process of becoming, as the individual becomes a subject of discourse. In \textit{Machinal}, the Young Woman borrows utterances from her

\textsuperscript{94} Irigaray p. 79.

\textsuperscript{95} In criticizing the abyss between utterance and enunciation, \textit{Machinal} also challenges other linguistic binaries at the center of onto-theo-logic such as \textit{signifier/signified} and \textit{langue/parole}. 
discourse community but never makes them her own—she doesn’t become a subject in her use of language. The fact that she sings lullabies emphasizes this dichotomy as she has just reluctantly become a mother—yet doesn’t accept the role willingly. In episode four (Motherhood), she refuses to acknowledge her daughter or to breastfeed. Her later inability to explain the meaning behind the lullabies suggests that, as a mother, her role is not to act for herself, but rather to follow the rules already outlined for her. Her very own mother, in episode two, upholds this tradition more than anyone else in the play. As she asks,

MOTHER. Love! – what does that amount to! Will it clothe you? Will it feed you? Will it pay the bills?

The mother uses guilt to force the Young Woman to follow the rules established by tradition.

MOTHER. I’ll tell you what you can count on! You can count that you’ve got to eat and sleep and get up and put clothes on your back and take ’em off again – that you got to get old – and that you got to die. That’s what you can count on! The rest is in your head!

She asks her to marry a financially stable and powerful man, and to acquiesce to the caregiver role. Whenever the Young Woman disagrees or shows contempt, the Mother suggests, “You are crazy,” evoking the discourse of mental illness as a controlling mechanism. While the father is absent in this household, the mother enforces the law through guilt—even though the law is not hers.

The rules of discourse that dictate the Young Woman’s lives, many of which she does not understand, apparently come from no one: they are the rules of the system, or
the Symbolic order. In fact, even her husband follows these rules in his use of language. After the Young Woman has had a child and recovers in the hospital while dealing with postpartum depression, her husband gives her advice to overcome the moment:

HUSBAND. [...] Oh I’ve been down – but I haven’t stayed down. I’ve been licked but I haven’t stayed licked! I’ve pulled myself up by me own bootstraps, and that’s what you’ve got to do! Will power! That’s what conquers! Look at me! Now you’ve got to brace up! Face the music! Stand the gaff! Take life by the horns! Look it in the face! – Having a baby’s natural! Perfectly natural thing—

He plays the role of the father, telling the woman-child what she needs to do. His recurrent use of “you’ve got to” makes his suggestions sound imperative, like rules. His lecture to her about how to face such a difficult experience shows that he can only talk through stock phrases. “Face the music,” “stand the gaff,” “take life by the horns” appear as expressions that do the talking for him—as standard responses, or mantras of the workplace. The phrases “will power” and “to pull oneself by one’s bootstraps” have a distinctly economic connotation too, as in a motivational speech. His role turns childbirth and the work of motherhood into a business as he commands the Young Woman to follow the rules of the workplace.

Even though the play portrays an absent father (her mother lives alone) and presents the husband as someone who also follows the rules, these instances of seeming masculine subversion work only as a tromp-l’œil which disguises the male-dominated discourse in these absent figures. *Machinal* suggests that the media apparatuses of the modern workplace distance the perception of male domination and diffuse such
perceptions from masculine figures of power into a disseminated systemic masculinity. In a logic of sacrifice, the father is absent and the husband has no power only to disguise the patriarchy inherent in the system itself. In an apparent emancipatory move, typewriters—as well as film, photography, gramophone, telephone, and other sense-perception apparatuses—welcome women into the workforce and give them a power of representation, but only to constrain them within limited roles in both the workforce and the realm of representation. Women appear in predetermined professions such as typewriters, stenographers, secretaries, telephone operators, and nurses, or in feminine roles as trophy wives, mothers, pin-up models, and objects of desire.

While at the hospital, the doctor stands in for the father figure who sets the rules. As the doctor forces the young woman to breastfeed, a nurse objects. He responds: “I decide what we better and better not here, Nurse!” The clear hierarchy follows the logic of capital doubled as patriarchy: the man/boss imposes his rules onto the subaltern woman/nurse. The dynamic of dominance and hierarchy of speech appears even more pointedly when the doctor decides to prescribe a different medicine to the Young Woman: “Wait—I’ll change her medicine (Takes a pad and writes prescription in Latin. Hands it to NURSE.)” The stage direction calling for a “prescription in Latin,” a detail so difficult to present to an audience, shows the function of language in maintaining the discursive dominance of the doctor over the Young Woman.
The imperative use of language by these masculine figures work as what Flusser calls the current act of writing *program.* For the Czech-Brazilian philosopher, rules for behavior such as the ten commandments predisposed laws. In the nineteenth century, these laws pertained to human’s behaviors toward machines—as in instructor’s manuals. This shift from the imperative rule of conduct into a set of commands that help humans control machines exposes how the commandments themselves, and other rules for social behavior, treat “human beings as though they were apparatuses” (56). The figure of God in the myth of the Ten Commandments works as a dehumanized “superhuman figure that made human beings into marionettes (apparatuses)” (57). In *Machinal,* the rules of the workplace turn the characters into puppets who can only mechanically replicate the order of the market.

Flusser’s linking the Ten Commandments and the superhuman hints at the mediate power of the apparatus. He notes that as a result of the imperative mechanization of language, “because programs instruct apparatuses, the burden of instruction shifts from human beings to inanimate objects” (58). Where before humans needed to perform tasks themselves, now they could displace such tasks onto an apparatus. With the displacement of instructions, the “burden” (and we can read this as the responsibility or guilt) also shifts from humans to the machine. The individual cannot be held accountable when a machine performs an action. Like the figure of God, the machine in *Machinal* helps disseminate the burden, responsibility, and guilt of male dominance onto a complex

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system of apparatuses. Through this process, the very language of dominance becomes invisible and unintelligible.

After she has killed her husband, the Young Woman faces a trial, where the language of the Judge, of the Lawyer for Defense, and of the Lawyer for Prosecution all sound foreign and inaccessible to the Young Woman. The stage directions call for a “verbose, ‘eloquent’ typical criminal defense lawyer,” and ask that every character, except the Young Woman, use words and movement of “routine—mechanical. Each is going through the motions of his own game” (60). During the cross-examination, it becomes clear that the Young Woman does not know how to operate within the language of the court and her lawyer has to intervene and speak for her:

LAWYER FOR DEFENSE. Then explain just what you meant by saying ‘my husband’s bed’.

YOUNG WOMAN. Well – I –

LAWYER FOR DEFENSE. You meant his side of the the bed, didn’t you?

Despite the difficulty of expressing herself in this scenario, she performs well in the early stages of the cross-examination, even dodging damning questions from the prosecution.

Eventually, however, the Lawyer for Prosecution finds a way to extract a confession. With an affidavit from the Young Woman’s lover, the prosecutor starts reading aloud the document that chronicles her love escapades at an apartment in Manhattan. Trying to stop the Prosecution from disclosing too much personal information, she confesses to the murder. The affidavit thus works like blackmail: the prosecution threatens to release information unless she confesses. The logic of mechanization appears once again in this move. The prosecution presents the document
as if it were trying to show the jury her infidelity, but the ultimate result is a confession. Like a program, the prosecution deploys a mechanism that will eventually lead to a delayed unrelated result. Just like the language of the courtroom, the tactics also distance the prosecution from the responsibility or burden of the confession—it appears as a natural admission of guilt rather than prosecutorial manipulation.

The judge and the lawyers disappear as punishing individuals and become part of the system, thus avoiding responsibility and burden. They all embody the function of the name-of-the-father, especially the judge who utters courtroom sentences here and there (“objection overruled,” “sustained,” “noted,” etc.). The primary form of communication for him involves stock phrases that enact the rules of law. The only moment he comes out to make a more significant statement is the comic part:

JUDGE. You confess you killed your husband? […] To be free? Is that the only reason?

YOUNG WOMAN. Yes.

JUDGE. If you just wanted to be free – why didn’t you divorce him?

YOUNG WOMAN. Oh I couldn’t do that!! I couldn’t hurt him like that!

Throughout the entire trial, the judge remains silent except for the mechanically routine responses to the courtroom situation. His power is diffused into the figures of the Lawyers, the Bailiff, the Jury. In this brief moment when the Judge breaks with rigor, the audience can see his humanized yet masculine side, which cannot understand the woman’s perspective.

If in the workplace and in the household the husband is the law, in the hospital the doctor appears as the ruling figure, and in the courtroom the judge fulfills the role. In the
last episode of the play (in prison before her execution), the priest steps in as the father figure and word of law (the Young Woman herself calls him Father). He attempts to give her the last rites and, after she has expressed disdain for his prayers, he turns to Latin: “Gratiam tuum, quaesumus, Domine mentibus nostris infunde; ut qui, Angelo nuntiante…” (78). The appearance of Latin in this last scene, right before the apotheotic moment of her death, repeats the doctor’s prescriptions and again demonstrate how language works as a mediating apparatus that distances the burden from the individual to the system. For the priest, her death does not represent an instance of masculinity sacrificing the feminine, but a necessary protection for society. The choice of the “Angelus” prayer also reaffirms the exclusionary and mediate aspect of the father’s speech (or the word of law) by using a Latin form.

The Young Woman’s death attests to the biopolitical character of the play. The female protagonist appears as a challenge to social order; her death is a way to immunize the system. Defying the literal meaning of the term “spectacle,” the final scene of Machinal transforms the death of the protagonist into a show that cannot be seen. Even though the audience does not have a visual representation of the Young Woman’s death, they can still understand the entertainment aspect of the death scene because of the reporting of the journalists—only as an audio spectacle. At the opening of Foucault’s Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison, the biopolitical thinker describes a spectacle of torture and killing: the executioners parade the condemned while they slowly torture, kill, and finally quarter him. The disappearance of the practice of public torture in the modern penal system (and the shift to conceal systematic killing within the catacombs of the prison) intrigues Foucault, who sees a move from the killing as an exemplary power
of the law to the act of purging a communal threat. Peter Sloterdijk interprets this move in the logic of biopolitics as coterminous with Foucault’s famous periodization that the modern prerogative changed from “let live and make die” to “make live and let die.” As he notes, the practice of spectacle killing signified the “triumph of the law over wrongdoing and the exclusion of delinquents from moral society.” The transition then marks the biopolitical moment of modernity, where capital punishment doesn’t work to give pleasure, but instead serves the purpose of immunizing society from a threat.

Only during the episode in the courtroom do we find out the Young Woman’s name: Helen Jones. Only before the law, in front of the Judge, does she becomes an individual subject to punishment for the crime of killing her husband. She does not have the individual power of subjectivity when she is at the workplace nor on her honeymoon, much less during the process of becoming a mother in a hospital (where she is only referred to as the patient). But before the law, she becomes an individual who needs to be put to death for the benefit of society. The (un)Naming is very convenient for the status quo. While on the one hand the play dehumanizes every woman (“any woman, a regular woman”) during normal moments of her life, it bestows her with individual name and subjectivity when facing punishment (albeit the name includes the patronym “Jones”).

The religious discourse invoked in the final episode of the play uses the prayer of the “Angelus” as a repetitive practice, or a performative form of utterance that gives an

97 Foucault, Society Must Be Defended, p. 239.

individual person a set of rights before the rule of God. The prayer acts in a self-fashioning performance, but it does not extend the right to the woman. Instead, the priest is the only one who has access to God and, as with the judge in the courthouse, only passes on the right to life to the woman so it can be taken away. She becomes a subject in the court so she can be held accountable for the death of her husband; she becomes a subject for the church so she can be sacrificed. The logic of the machine, and the logic of sacrifice assumes another sacrificial logic, the killing of a (feminine) criminal to maintain (masculine) social order.

The systematic killing of Helen Jones through this sacrificial execution further reinforces the rule of law and is crucial to keeping the order. Giorgio Agamben calls this procedure the “anthropological machine,” the set of apparatuses that constitute the human, usually in opposition to an animal other. Like the protagonist in Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion (1913), the Young Woman appears as an untamed beast, waiting for the imposition of order to domesticate her into a proper member of society. During her honeymoon, as she readies for the imminent sex scene with her husband, the stage directions call for a look of “animal terror” in her eyes (26). When she fails to serve the purpose of mere reproduction (either by failing to reproduce textual material at the workplace or to willingly produce and care for her offspring), the system needs to purge her.

Each episode of the play chronicles a moment in her life, but each also focuses on distinct social institutions that work toward maintaining, controlling, and distributing power. The office, the hospital, the courtroom, and the confessional represent the institutions of market, medicine, law, and religion, respectively, with their associated
forms of discourse and father figures in the boss, the doctor, the judge, and the priest. These institutions represent what Foucault outlines as traditional forms of disciplinary control that focus on dominating individual bodies.\textsuperscript{99} For instance, under the auspices of a Father (priest) representing another Father (god), the church used techniques such as the confession and the communion to control human behavior. But these institutions do not control the Young Woman as an individual body; they keep her anonymous for the most part of the play. Likewise, as very few other characters have names, the play shows the universalizing power of control.

When the Young Woman appears at the trial, the play introduces two new characters who follow her along in the last two episodes. These three reporters comment on the action, giving a second-hand observation to accompany the live events. The play thus inscribes the discourse of the press within the narrative with a double effect. Primarily, the journalists offer different perspectives on the events, tailoring the content to their respective imaginary audiences:

FIRST REPORTER (\textit{writing rapidly}). The defense sprang a surprise at the opening of the court this morning by putting the accused woman on the stand. The prosecution was swept off its feet by this daring defense strategy and – \textit{(instruments get louder.)}

\textsuperscript{99} Foucault, Michel. \textit{Society Must Be Defended} (1975-1976), trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003). He analyzes the mechanisms of discipline in madness (p. 31), Roman law (p. 34), and in Catholic monarchies (p. 35).
SECOND REPORTER. Trembling and scarcely able to stand, Helen Jones, accused murderess, had to be almost carried to the witness stand this morning when her lawyer– (61)

The First Reporter presents the move as a cunning tactic by the defense, while the Second Reporter focuses on the Young Woman’s nervous demeanor. They both offer contrasting views at the beginning of the trial and set the tone of Defense versus Prosecution for the audience.

However, on another level of the play, these reporters actually intrude in the representation of the events and offer specific interpretations. In the last episode, in the execution room, the scene fades out and the execution appears only as an audio. “Out of darkness come the voices of REPORTERS” (82), narrating the scene that cannot be seen:

FIRST REPORTER. Here they are!
SECOND REPORTER. How little she looks! She’s gotten smaller.
THIRD REPORTER. Hush. (82)

Their commentary alternates with the Priest’s prayers and the final scene ensues devoid of lighting, with the narrative of the reporters acting as mediating eyes. In the final scene, just as during the trial, the reporters impose their own reading of the execution onto the audience. The First Reporter asks: “Her lips are moving – what is she saying?” (81). And later notes: “Did you see that? She fixed her hair under the cap – pulled her hair out under the cap” (82). The spectators of the play can only follow the spectacle of death through the mediated view of the reporters, and the entire apparatus of the media. The presence of reporters in the play brings the claim for “truth” of journalism into the world of the play only to challenge it.
Instead of giving the audience access to the action through the visual potential of theater, the play instead breaks the senses down and focuses more on the audio, which creates a dynamic of obsession in the play. The final scene presents the electrocution of the Young Woman as both the assertion of a (masculine) Law over the (female) individual, and the social indulgence in the aesthetic pleasure of death. The First Reporter’s near-obsessive description of the death (“Did you see that?” “Here it is!”), coupled with the play’s choice to not give a visual of the final scene, highlights the First Reporter’s desire to see the veiled action at the same time that it exacerbates the senses by shutting down the visual and heightening the auditory. The dark stage also sheds light on the veiled nature of modern executions (shielded from the public at large) while available as an object of desire for a few witnesses.

The play emphasizes and challenges the patriarchal power of the system by denying the audience the realm of vision at such a climactic moment of the narrative. *Machinal* denies the voyeuristic pleasure of seeing only to privilege a sonic intimacy. As Irigaray reminds us, visual pleasure is inherently masculine, which women’s writing challenges by putting “the torch to fetish words, proper terms, well-constructed forms.”  

Masculine writing privileges sight, where women’s writing “takes each figure back to its source, which is among other things tactile” (79). The play breaks down the human sensorium to point to how the focus on each sense privileges the construction of a different type of knowledge. Referring us back to the opening episode, *Machinal* ends with a fragmented sensorium, in the same way that each worker in the office executes a

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100 Irigaray. 79.
sense-specific task. The recurrence of these media apparatuses in the play suggest that they exacerbate the act of fragmentation and privilege one sense over the other. Through this selection process, media apparatuses determine the sexual politics of modernity.

The politics of seeing and the fragmentary nature of the senses in *Machinal* also delineate the function and limits of modern execution. As she meets with the Priest in her cell, before her demise, the Young Woman struggles with the thought of death and does not find the voice of the Priest soothing. At that moment, the “Voice of a Negro offstage—begins to sing a Negro spiritual,” and helps her cope. The jailer tries to shut him up while the young woman identifies with the voice: “He helps me!” As the voice offstage grows louder and drowns the voice of the priest, the latter finally switches his prayer from English into Latin, distancing the procedure of execution from the executed. The “Negro spiritual” drowns out the voice of the priest who prays a psalm: “…I am become like to a pelican of the wilderness. I am like a night raven in the house. I have watched and become as a sparrow all along on the housetop…” (78). Praying for the woman, the priest projects onto her his desire to be submissive to the will of God (and to follow the rule of law). The prayer’s focus on birds echoes in the Young Woman’s position as caged, and in the African-American man who, despite being likewise caged, sings. The Priest thus likens the Young Woman (and by extension the African-American man) to animals who need to obey the word of the Father. In that sense, *Machinal* suggests that the dehumanizing force of the system transforms the woman and the African-American man into animals so they can be killed.

The idea of a machine that sustains a clear boundary between humans and animals also reminds us of the main technological object at the center of the scene. Used in
executions in New York since the 1890s, electric currents were first conceived for capital
punishment after years of experimenting on animals, some of which were put to death for
public safety concerns (such as the famous case of the elephant Topsy at Coney Island).
A perfect marriage between techne and thanatos, the technology of death offers a reliable
and efficient way for the system exercise its immunity. As the reporters discuss:

FIRST REPORTER. Suppose the machine shouldn’t work!
SECOND REPORTER. It’ll work. – It always works!
The machine that always works here refers both to the literal electric chair in front of
them and to the larger masculine machine at play. “It always works!” responds the
second reporter with a certain thrill in his voice. The relief that the machine always
works, that the machine is trustworthy, evokes the beauty of techne provided by the
electric chair, which, vis-à-vis other technologies in the play, represents the climax of the
modern era.

In the end, not a specific man, but the system puts the Young Woman to death.
The mechanism of the electric chair, doubled in the mechanism of the social system,
makes it look like a ghost runs the execution. The mechanical media apparatuses
throughout the play also reproduce this dynamic and function to fragment, separate, and
alienate the characters in Machinal. When one of them tries to break free, she dies to
maintain the immunity of the system. Her last words: “(calling out): Somebody! Somebod— Her voice is cut off” (83). And the Priest has the last words of the play:
“Christ have mercy – Lord have mercy – Christ have mercy –” (83). This scene shows
the ghost begging for redemption while disguised in the figure of the Father. Agamben’s
use of the term “anthropological machine” resonates with Machinal’s argument that the
set of apparatuses used to produce an image of the human are always mechanical and, as such, displace the burden and responsibility of the father who actually sets the rules. *Machinal* exposes the “anthropological machine” to be controlled by a father in disguise; that is, the play exposes the “anthropos” as a masculine figure hiding and manipulating the apparatus.

In *Machinal*, the dynamic of subordinated woman is the background and rule from which the feminine heroine attempts to break free. By extension, her inability to fit within the male-dominated world of machines represents the powerful work of women who pushed against the dominant discourse. Ultimately, the Young Woman’s failed function in the workplace as a typewriter points to a problem in this masculine-centered world: the play explores the precise difficulty, or outright impossibility, of transcribing words without interfering with the material. Her failed function as a typewriter reminds us that typewriters (the apparatuses themselves, as well as the people) also fail in reproducing words—instead, they interfere with the message they transmit. In that sense, the play focuses on the impossibility of a pure representation, of a transparent transcription, and finally the fallacy of belief in a perfect signifier.

As the play portrays this domesticated, masculine, and mechanical world juxtaposed to a wealth of media apparatuses, the play also suggests that while these apparatuses produce and replicate an image of the subject, this subject is always masculine—and following a set of phallocentric rules (and laws). These technologies were developed by men and for men and produce our very concept of humanity. These technologies relegate the figure of the woman to an inferior piece of this machinery—just as a cog that exerts a simple task, like a phone operator who connects one line to another,
a stenographer or typewriter who simply reproduces words onto a page, or a trophy wife who provides her husband with affection and children. Two different yet related logics of sacrifice emerge from *Machinal*. First, the masculine figure who traditionally plays the role of the father, of God, or of the symbolic order, disappears only to reemerge as the system itself. Second, the killing of the female character as immunity for the system represents the larger purging and controlling of femininity for the benefit of the system, which, now masked, hides its masculine substratum.
Chapter Four

**Dial M for Mimesis: Uxoricide and the Telephonic Apparatus**

The mid-twentieth century was fascinated with romanticizing the battle of the sexes in filmic representations. While modern drama delved into the darker side of husband and wife strife, big studios in Hollywood produced several romantic comedies that played with the theme of wives making it into the workforce, challenging their husband’s role as breadwinner, and creating a family dispute, such as Columbia’s *The Awful Truth* (1937), and MGM’s *Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Woman of the Year* (1942), and *Adam's Rib* (1949). In England, early 1900s theater of such suffragettes as Elizabeth Baker, Cicely Hamilton, Elizabeth Robins, and Githa Sowerby produced feminist plays that directly addressed voting rights of women as well as their economic dependence on men. Alongside the Edwardian Gaiety Theatre, with its farcical elements and dependence
on the burlesque to attract larger audiences, English drama delved into the tension between women in a masculine world in George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion* (1913) and *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* (1893), and Somerset Maugham’s *The Constant Wife* (1926), as well as in such imported works as Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879),¹ and Gerhardt Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* (1892). In the American context, Expressionist theater of Elmer Rice, Eugene O’Neill, and Sophie Treadwell painted a dark picture of the relationship between men and women under the increased industrialization of modernity. Maurine Dallas Watkins’ *Chicago* (1926), Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1927), and O’Neill’s *Dynamo* (1929) present the battle of the sexes as a literal fight, using the figures of uxoricide and mariticide as climatic moments in their plot.

Meanwhile, in the Hollywood la-la-land, big studios were producing romantic comedies that centered around marital strife, usually when the women gained power as professionals. Hollywood made magic when a historical situation of male phobia over women’s suffrage and their increasing involvement in economic and social life became a comedic love-story, ending with a usual diplomatic, domesticated resolution that maintained masculine power while permitting some level of controlled feminine assertion. Along with romanticizing of the battle of the sexes, these blockbusters also

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actively participated in helping Hollywood commodify the female bodies of the stars and dictate a norm of behavior for women through the Motion Pictures Code.

An exception to the studio rule of Hollywood, Alfred Hitchcock presented a bleaker version of the struggle between husband and wife, usually involving murders and love affairs. In *Rebecca* (1940), the woman protagonist struggles with the towering image of her husband’s ex-wife, only to discover that he had murdered her. In *Two Strangers on a Train* (1951) two men find in each other the perfect alibi to get rid of their own wives. When the studio era began to erode in the 1950s and independent filmmakers had more creative autonomy, Hitchcock had cemented the control over his own productions because of his fame and continued to obsess over murderous husbands and philandering wives. Marital strife appears as a theme in several of his later productions, in the films *Vertigo* (1958), *Psycho* (1960), and *Frenzy* (1972), the master of suspense used the trope of gender tension to further their plots. In *Dial M for Murder* (1954) the struggle between husband and wife culminates in the husband’s attempted murder of the wife as a punishment for trying to break with social rules—and like Sophie Treadwell’s *Machinal* (1928), the legal system in place supports the husband’s attempt, as he manipulates the police inspector to bring charges against his wife.

In the film, retired tennis star Tony Wendice (Ray Milland) creates an elaborate plan to murder his own wife, Margot (Grace Kelly), and inherit her wealth. The crime is to take place during the visit of Margot’s close friend Mark Halliday (Robert Cummings), a murder-mystery novel writer from America who had a brief affair with Margot years ago. Thus, the crime both benefits Tony economically and takes revenge for the love affair. To design the perfect murder and create an airtight alibi, Tony blackmails an old
acquaintance, C. A. Swann (Anthony Dawson), who has recently been involved in fraud and used a fake identity to take advantage of and steal from high-class women. Tony’s murderous *complot* involves an intricate mechanism: while out at a stag party alone with Mark, and while Margot sleeps in their bedroom at home, Tony makes Swann come into his house and hide behind the curtains awaiting the signal that the plan has begun. From the party, Tony rings home, luring his wife out of bed and close to the telephone by the curtains where Swann hides. From behind the curtains, Swann jumps out and chokes Margot using an old stocking. The intricate plot ultimately fails, because Margot reaches for a pair of scissors left out on the desk and, in trying to save herself, kills Swann.

Adjusting to the circumstances, Tony manipulates the crime scene to make the police inspector (John Williams) think Margot intentionally killed Swann in a premeditated murder. She is arrested, tried, and sentenced to death.

In a final twist, Mark Halliday employs his mystery-novel writing skills and invents an equally intricate fib to convince the police of Margot’s innocence. Unbeknownst to him, the fictitious story reinterprets the evidence in the way it actually happened. Mark’s fabrication involves Tony admitting to an attempt to kill his own wife, an attempt that failed. The fabrication would exonerate Margot and implicate Tony in the act of attempted murder, a much lesser crime. However, the invented story functions like Hamlet’s mousetrap play and makes it clear that Tony was indeed the mastermind behind the entire incident. The police catch on to Tony’s guilt in the entire complot and stage a counterplot to catch him in the act of covering up his traces. With the success of the counterplot, the police apprehend Tony and exonerate Margot, in a studio era, Hollywood-style happy ending.
The trope of uxoricide in *Dial M* engages with a tradition of representation of women in film that frame the female body within certain established types, and restrain femininity into a subjugated position. As Laura Mulvey notes, women have appeared in film as two functions: “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium.”102 Serving both as an intra- and extra-diegetic entity, the woman serves as a model for conduct and behavior. However, as Teresa de Lauretis further suggests, not only does the woman serve as a model to feminine representation in cinema, but she is also “doubly bound to that very representation which … makes her complicit in the production of (her) woman-ness.”103 In a cyclical reversal, women served both as examples and models for the industry, but always confined in the process of representation. The film portrays Margot trapped, helpless within a murderous plot. Just as her character cannot escape her husband’s Machiavellian machinations, women in film cannot escape the established types set for them. Albeit imposed by Warner Bros, Hitchcock’s use of the re-emergent 3D technology of the late 1950s emphasizes this inability to get away by creating a depth perception that enframes Margot in a set surrounded by objects limiting her movement. Like her position within the plot, Margot’s position within the set follows the traditional Hollywood


stereotype by evacuating her agency and making her dependent on either her husband or her friend.

Foremost, *Dial M for Murder* exposes the role of *plot* and its mechanical substratum in constricting the role of women in film. In *Dial M*, the murder mystery novel and the romantic love-story conflict as the narrative opens with references to the love triangle between Tony, Margot, and Mark, but then focuses on the murder as the central element of the story. The battle between Tony and Mark over Margot’s love outlines two possible outcomes for the woman: either she becomes the damsel in distress saved by Mark, or she becomes a victim in a murder plot. She cannot deviate from these two possibilities. The film’s recurrent references to other media such as photography, the radio, and the telephone further work to place Margot in the latter role in the plot—of the victim. Photographs help Tony blackmail Swann, the radio keeps her at home during Tony and Mark’s outing, and the telephone triggers the murder. All of these apparatuses attest to the involvement of media apparatuses in determining the roles of women in culture—telephones keep women confined to the household, radio disseminates rules of conduct, and photography turns women into an objectified sexuality.

At the center of the murderous plot assisting Tony in the attempted murder of his wife, the telephonic apparatus functions as a metaphorical unit: as the system in place to control women in modern economic life.
The montage highlights the mechanical role of the telephone with a static shot of the inner workings of the automated rotary system that connected Tony to his wife and signaled to the murderer that the plan had begun. This shot also allegorizes a historical moment in the late 1940s when women were edged out of the workforce by an emergent technology: in the same way that Tony uses the telephone to stage the murder, men used the automated rotary system as a substitute for the primarily feminine occupation of telephone operators. The move to relegate women to the household exposed how much women’s role in the economy had become equivalent to the mechanical. In *Women and the Machine* (2001), Julie Wosk notices that the figures of women in modern times always appear in conjunction with mechanical devices—sewing machines, bicycles, cars, airplanes. Likewise, in *Mechanical Bride* (1951), Marshall McLuhan suggests that twentieth-century economy equated women with appliances, which substituted the know-how in the household. Within the realm of the house, women could passively listen to the radio, read the news, or indulge in romance novels (all of which Margot does in the film). Along with the emerging forms of advertisement that targeted women as household
managers, these metaphors of women as cogs in the larger machinery of capitalism
framed femininity as functional: a trophy wife, the telephone operator, secretary, the
typist, stenographer, etc.

During the murder scene with the telephone, the montage highlights the
importance of another mechanical device in the filmic apparatus. The alternating shots of
pocket watches stress the role of time in both the murder plot within the narrative as well
as the film’s larger narrative.

The ticking of clocks sets the tone of suspense in the film, but they also frame the
progression of events and underline the illusion of simultaneity cinema accomplishes
through the technique of parallel editing. The close-ups of clocks within the suspenseful
progression of the murder plot further refer to a basic apparatus of film: the presentation
of an illusion of movement. Cinema works as a stringing together of static images that,
when played in sequence through a brief time interval, produce an illusion of movement
on the screen. As clocks string together a series of positions to produce an effect of
temporal progression, cinema uses a sequence of frames to produce movement.

*Dial M*’s playfulness with clocks and its questioning of time in narrative places
the film within a tradition of such early avant-garde films as Hans Richter’s *Ghosts
Before Breakfast* (1926), which explore the apparatus of film in all of its mechanical
potential. In *Ghosts Before Breakfast*, floating clocks frame the film and mark the varying portrayals of temporal progression. The film’s use of an early stop-motion technology enables the expansion and condensation of time, slowing down and speeding up progressions. Through this playful chronological recreation, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* pushes against the boundaries of mimetic representation, recreating perceptions of time. *Ghosts Before Breakfast* and *Dial M* expose the apparatus of cinema as a representation machine, the thriller genre to be mechanically and chronologically plot-driven, and mimesis itself as always depending on the intricate set of apparatuses involved in the game of representation.

By referring to the figures of clocks in connection to the woman trapped within the realm of the camera, *Dial M for Murder* links the mechanical domestication of time in narrative to the mechanical domestication of women within the audiovisual discourse of early twentieth century in the figure of women as stenographers, typists, and telephone operators. Furthermore, in displaying the telephone as an apparatus by which Tony distances himself from the murder of his wife, Hitchcock exposes the genius of the system, to use Thomas Schatz’s analysis of Hollywood: just like the telephone, the cinematic apparatus masks a masculine prejudice that works behind the scenes to reinforce the stereotypical, subjugated role of women and to laud unreal role of men.

**The Penile Code**

Tony’s little complot to assert his power in the household hinges on his ability to impose his own version of reality onto the social fabric around him, manipulating evidence to corroborate his version of the events. In such actions, the murder plot
fashions Tony’s subjectivity, actively changing the power relations in his family. By contrast, Margot appears as an entirely submissive and passive entity in the film. When she wants to go to the theater by herself, Tony forbids her; when she goes to the movies, Mark accompanies her. During the entire film, she acts only as a victim, without any say in her fate. The dynamic of dominance in these stereotypical roles become evident in the film through a form of self-awareness, especially in the filmic techniques that explore the tension of the film with theater, on the one hand, and with different systems of representation that appear throughout, on the other. The various media present in the film (radio, photography, newspaper, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and others) are in constant dialogue and take issue with mimesis: how do these different forms of representation mimetically reproduce representations?

As an adaptation of Frederick Knott’s 1952 Dial M for Murder stage play, which first premiered on Television through a BBC production, Hitchcock’s film plays on the tensions among cinema, theater, and other media. In his interview with François Truffaut, Hitchcock himself notes the difficulty in dealing with the theatrical within film. Usually, filmmakers will ventilate the script by adding external footage (which in Dial M is minimal), but that “overlooks the fact that the basic quality of any play is precisely its confinement.” Even though in the adaptation of a stage play Hitchcock “emphasized the theatrical aspects,” on another level Dial M flaunts the filmic—it explores filmic conventions within the confinement of theatricality. Not only does the film open with a rapid fire series of exterior establishing shots, setting up a montage that rapidly moves into the action of the story (Margot’s kissing scenes with her husband, Tony, and her lover, Mark); but also within the main setting of the movie, their living room—the
unchanging locus of action where theatricality would thrive—a constant change in camera angle explores cinema’s ability to change perspective and point of view. Different from *Rope* (1948), where the long takes bridge the filmic and the theatrical, *Dial M for Murder* relies on low-angle, short, tracking shots at a medium height. These shots offer a somewhat vertiginous change in point of view.

Hollywood films usually follow the conventions of continuity editing to avoid confusion in the position of characters within the scene. This editing technique inherits the positionality of theater where the audience stays in place in one point of view filling in as the figurative fourth wall of the apartment. *Dial M for Murder* defies this rule by occasionally jumping the 180-degree line and inverting the direction of the camera. Despite shifting almost seamlessly from one side of the 180-degree line to the other, these shots defy traditional Hollywood practice. Thanks to the studio set-up for Hitchcock, where the walls move in and out, the camera can flip 180 degrees across the room to track the movements of characters within the confined space of the apartment. These 180-degree flips coupled with the constant short tracking shots explore the nuances of cinema as opposed to the static perspective of theater. The play with theater within the medium of film actually creates a self-aware style where the film is in constant dialogue with other media as a film. The self-awareness marks the reversed mimesis aspect of *Dial M for Murder* because the movie transcends the relationship between work of art and the world by placing the film within a specific artistic tradition: film vis-à-vis theater.

While the tension between cinema and other media permeates the film, the tension between this film and Hitchcock’s oeuvre permeates criticism on *Dial M*. Even though it was a success in the box office, the thriller passed almost uncommented upon
by critics in the scholarship that enshrined Hitchcock as a master of suspense. Much of
the disregard of Dial M results from how Hitchcock himself saw the project: “There isn’t
very much we can say about that one,” he complains in his interview with François
Truffaut, “Warner’s had bought the rights to the Broadway stage hit Dial M for Murder. I
immediately said I’d take it because that was coasting, playing it safe.” On top of his
contempt for this movie, Hitchcock resented the introduction of 3D technology by
Warner Bros as yet another constraint on the production. The canon of Hitchcock studies
discusses this movie only in passing and focuses more on his other masterpieces such as
Rope, Rear Window, The Birds, Saboteur, and The Man Who Knew Too Much, which
become fodder for discussion of the psychological implications of film and the
technological developments Hitchcock pioneered. Nevertheless, the plot of Dial M relates
to several of other Hitchcock classics in so far as it uses the hallmarks of the
Hitchcockean narrative to present the story: matricide, role inversion, blackmail, murder
plots, mysteries, key objects, and dramatic irony. Like Rope, the killer outlines his
intention to carry out a perfect murder. Like Rear Window, Two Strangers on a Train,
and Vertigo, the murder mystery and love story fuse into one plot, highlighting the close
relationship between love and death (or the death drive and the pleasure principle). Like
North by Northwest, Dial M plays with mistaken identities and one person passing for
another. Like Two Strangers, a murder plot happens when the murderer blackmails
someone else into taking his role and carrying out the murder.

Despite the several impositions by studios on the production and the demands of
the audience for the traditional Hitchcock hallmarks, Dial M exemplifies how Hitchcock
was able to challenge tradition while working through it. The film challenged the
theatrical by flaunting the filmic in the choice to shoot the film within a constricted theatre set, while also deploying the reemergent 3D technology. Whereas the early 50s saw Hollywood move to CinemaScope and Cinerama and their wider screen ratio (1:2.35 as opposed to the 1:1.33), Hitchcock used 3D technology imposed by Warner Bros to widen the screen another way, by giving it a larger depth-perception. The 3D technology also raises again the question of mimesis through a series of elements in the mise-en-scène. As Tony sits on his desk and begins to blackmail C. A. Swann into killing Margot, the camera frames another meaningful parallel of flowers on the desk next to him: a vase of bright yellow flowers next to a bright yellow lamp depicting flowers.

This parallel between a natural aesthetic object (the flowers) and the artistic depiction of such natural beauty (the lamp) begs the question of how art imitates reality. The mise-en-scene of the film comes back to this theme by tracing the figures of the flowers in the room.
The parallel between Margot and the flowers, the upholstery of the chairs, and the armoire in the back all further emphasize beautiful representations of flowers. The framing of these shots plays with cinematic depth, which suggests a hierarchical relation between flowers, lamps, painting of flowers, and the woman.

The motif of flowers places *Dial M* within an aesthetic discussion of beauty and art. Particularly for modernist art and literature, flowers represent a synecdoche of beauty, but in a very unique form. For Stein, “a rose is a rose is a rose”; Mrs. Dalloway begins her day by going to buy the flowers herself; Emily Grierson’s dead body lies under a crown of flowers in *A Rose for Emily*. These flowers also represent the constant battle between the fleeting beauty of nature and the immortal nature of art in *Fleurs du Mal* and *Portrait of Dorian Gray*. In most of these cases, flowers stand in close relationship to the female, as they usually depict fragile, passing beauty, a stereotype for women in art. These representations all take the flowers for an experiment on mimesis: how do the different realms of art reproduce this object?
The mimetic apparatus of *Dial M* ultimately suggests that Margot is like a flower: beautiful, delicate, fragile, and fleeting. When Mark and Margot discuss their affair and how someone has found out about them—and has been blackmailing Margot—the camera frames a parallel between Margot and a painting depicting a vase of flowers.

Margot’s red dress in the focus of a medium shot ties her to the flowers in the background painting. Just as the painter framed the flowers in the painting, Tony will frame Margot in his murder plot. Just as the apparatus of representation places the flowers in a specific light and perspective, *Dial M* frames Margot in a specific tradition of representation, where the feminine parallels the fragile beauty of flowers. The red color as the metaphorical link here further implies a notion of desire and submission tied to Margot: the red of love and sexual desire as well as of blood and murder.

The realm of representation surrounding and encroaching on Margot appears in the film as a series of doubled figures in the mise-en-scène: lamps, trophies, paintings, vases, and furniture. Margot appears in medium shots, obscured by objects in the foreground that usually parallel objects in the background, creating a structure of a chain
of representation. The 3D technology further emphasizes the depth and the equivalence between what is closest to the audience and what is farthest. In the original, 3D version of the film, the audience would perceive the flowers as if they had jumped out of the screen, while the armoire would remain in the far background. Trapped between the foreground and background, Margot takes on a role in the chain of representation, which imposes on her the stereotypical function of feminine as beautiful yet delicate. Teresa De Lauretis argues that such stereotypical roles both create and follow the logic of cinema, because “the dominant cinema specifies woman in a particular social and natural order, sets her up in certain positions of meaning, fixes her in a certain identification.”\textsuperscript{104} In the film, the entire apparatus of cinema frames Margot in a specific class and displays her social role as a natural phenomenon, just as Tony will later frame her for the murder.

While the recurring use of deep focus gives the scenes in the apartment depth, it also creates an illusion of parallelism among elements in the mise-en-scène. While Tony blackmails Swann, a series of doubled figures such as glasses of whiskey, canes, umbrellas, lamps, and decorations appear in different frames. These objects help map the geography of the apartment, which, though simple, becomes dizzying because of the constant jumps across the 180-degree line. At the same time, these objects create a chain of signification that outlines the gender dynamics of the film. The doubled glasses of whiskey and canes represent in the visual realm the relationship Tony attempts to create with Swann in the verbal, that the latter would stand in for the former: one cane for another, one glass for another. A small figurine of a geisha in the background stands

\textsuperscript{104} De Lauretis. \textit{Alice Doesn’t}. p. 15.
directly across from the mantle that displays Tony’s trophies and reminds the viewer of two traditional functional roles of women in the economy: prostitutes and trophy wives. Background objects try to outline the plot, and make the plot evident as the film develops.

*.Dial M* further exposes the cinematic apparatus by clearly marking the process of framing within the diegesis. Lamps scattered around the room help map the apartment as they frame several shots within the living room and work as static points around which the camera moves.

Always at the edge of the shot reverse shots, these lamps exacerbate the depth of the scenes and organize the room, all the while serving as a reminder of the apparatus of cinema. Lamps work as sources of light that illuminate the environment for the characters and cast light on the subjects in focus. These sources of light also dictate the position of the camera and the subject, steering the point of view and the gaze. Thus, placing such props within the shot-reverse-shot, using them to steer the eyeline match between Tony Wendice and his murder accomplice, reveals the apparatus of cinema at play in the scene.
It reminds us of the presence of the camera and the different points of view it constantly conveys.

Later in the film, as Tony tries to frame Margot for the botched murder, he substitutes a stocking for a scarf in an attempt to incriminate Margot. Later, as the police commissioner sets up the trap to catch Tony, he uses a set of doubled figures as well: a latchkey substitutes for a door key and one trench coat substitutes for another. The repetition of substitutions further highlights the empty nature of the chain of signification in mimetic representation. In fact, other aspects of the mise-en-scène focus on the empty equivalence of signifying objects through a series of doubled figures. Because these objects gain different values as the plot progresses, as they serve different functions and change the roles of each character, these objects (latchkey, trench coat, stocking, scarf) turn the realm of representation into a game, and language into play. In Dial M, there is no established meaning for an object nor a character—their values change as the elements of the plot relate to each other. Similar to Alfred Jarry’s essays, H G Wells’s “Triumphs of a Taxidermist,” Michel Serres’ ferret game, and the Young Woman’s interpretation of lullabies in Machinal, language and images here become a playful negotiation of power, where each object functions only relative to the chain of signifiers that frame it.

The contrast between Tony’s active role in the plot and Margot’s passive personality suggests that representations of sex in Hollywood followed a pattern of established roles. For women, these roles were particularly reductive. As Richard Maltby notes, unlike other facets of art and culture in the early twentieth century, “Hollywood emphatically did not exclude [women] either from its movies or from the audience it sought to attract” (104). Through the category of “woman’s film,” or the specific genre
that featured romance and melodrama, Hollywood sought to understand the desires of women and produce works that explored that profitable market. As Maltby relates, “Hollywood companies have always pre-tested their product by showing it to preview audiences before its final editing and release, in an attempt to ensure that the movie provides a maximum of audience pleasure and therefore a maximum profit” (55). In this logic, a feedback mechanism would permit the feminine audience commentary on the movie, shaping the morals and depictions in the screen to the overall desire of the audience and the population at large.

The industrial system of filmmaking in the era of big studios, what Thomas Schatz calls the “genius of the system,” guaranteed that the industry imposed models of behavior for both men and women. The roles available for men were as reductive as for women, but instead of building the idea of submissive personalities, studios promoted most of the masculine roles as active, strong, characters. Like the flowers, Margot cannot represent much outside the role imposed on her. Luce Irigaray notices a similar situation in the discourse of Western philosophy. For her, the feminine subject has to play by rules of subjectivity established as masculine—as the Phallic signifier—because “The substance of the plants, like that of any (female) being, cannot move, or move beyond, the ontological status assigned to it.”

Discourse always imposes onto the subject a predetermined role. Whether it is the discourse of Western philosophy or of the Hollywood system, the subject has to play within the rules established by each discursive

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tradiBio evolution. Margot must fulfill her role as the obedient, domesticated wife like the flowers fulfill the role of artistic beauty. Her red dress alludes to the duplicitous role of women in Hollywood, as objects of sexual desire, on the one hand, and as the target of male violence on the other (between the pleasure principle and the death drive).

As a prolific cultural industry, the Hollywood system of representation at the middle of the twentieth century further influenced the roles of women in the economy. In This Sex Which is Not One (1977), Luce Irigaray notes that representations of women as always subordinate to the masculine happens through a systematicity, or a set of cultural and linguistic strategies that places every subject in “a position of mastery,” albeit a position always “self-representative of the ‘masculine subject’” (74). Within this system, and within language itself, women can speak only through models of masculine discursivity, affirming masculine power in the very use of discourse. The cultural apparatuses in modern times contribute to building a vision of women through a series of visible and mostly invisible strategies, which dictate social conduct. Cinema participates in this dynamic by establishing types of conduct that women then imitate. Dial M’s rapid opening shots build the background story of the film: the shots quickly cut from Margot and Tony kissing, to the arrival of Mark, and then to Margot and Mark kissing, all of which establish the love triangle central to the story. Margot’s central place in these shots and her iconic red dress attest to what Teresa de Lauretis, following Laura Mulvey, suggests about the role of women in cinema: “the woman is framed by the look of the camera as an icon, or object of the gaze: an image made to be looked at by the spectator,
whose look is relayed by the look of the male character(s).”\textsuperscript{106} Margot’s iconic red dress already signals her sexual nature, but the back-to-back shots of her kissing Tony and Mark further suggest that Margot exists in the film as a link between these two male characters. These shots place Margot physically within a sexual politics, as the prized trophy between the game Tony and Mark play.

During the Hollywood studio era, the roles of female characters followed this dynamic—always as a leverage to the male-centered plot. What Irigaray notes about language and discourse applies here, \textit{mutatis mutandis}, to cinema as well. Women can only participate in public discourse through the model of \textit{mimicry}: to speak, women have to imitate the always masculine discourse. To participate in films, women have to fill the roles already established by a masculine industry bound to maintain the gendered norms of the times. Femininity in cinema could only be determined by participating in a very exclusionary masculine discourse. Despite the seeming inescapability of the problem, Irigaray suggests that, within the realm of mimicry, a “reversal is always possible” (77). By playing with the figure of mimesis, by actively taking part in the act of imitation, a woman can “try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it” (76). That is to say, actively participating in the masculine discourse of exclusion, they can “make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language” (76). Irigaray describes the aesthetic plight of the modernist

\textsuperscript{106} De Lauretis, Teresa. \textit{Alice Doesn’t: Feminsim, Semiotics, Cinema}, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1984), p. 139.
self-awareness as well as its recovery: to reverse the plan of mimesis revealing the apparatus of language, the media, and the techniques employed in constructing a vision of the world, which language usually obscures only to present as natural. Thus, as part of a modernist impetus to make the apparatus visible as mechanical (or “systematic,” in Irigaray’s terms), Dial M offers us this form of reversed mimesis, calling attention to the processes involved in the apparatus of modern culture.

Besides providing cues for the gender dynamics of the plot, the objects around the apartment also raise the question of mimetic representation in cinema. The physical distance between these objects within the frame calls attention to the different levels of representation and the relationship between an object trapped in the realm of fiction (the flowers in the armoire) and the object “out in the world” (the flowers in the vase). While this dynamic happens on the level of the mise-en-scène, the dialogue between Tony and Mark also questions mimesis and the relationship between representation in and outside of diegesis. Right before Tony sets up the murder plot, he asks Mark about his opinion as a mystery thriller writer: how can one go about designing and implementing the perfect murder in a novel? Mark says, “I could plan one better than most people, but I doubt I could carry it out.” To which Tony, who has just meticulously planned the intricate murder and is about to enact it, probes in an air of curiosity, “Oh? Why not?” And Mark finally explains: “Well, because in stories things usually turn out as the author intended. And then in real life they don’t… always.” In a reversed way, this little scene begs the question about mimesis: if art imitates life, can life in turn imitate art? In a form of Hitchcockean dramatic irony, Tony can surreptitiously speak to Mark and Margot (who is
in the room) about his plans for murder as he prepares to challenge the conception that plans, or plots, work well *on paper*, but not so much in *real life*.

Tony ultimately fails because the police inspector sets up a counterplot based on Mark’s invented narrative that reinterprets the evidence and offers an alternative account that exonerates Margot. While Tony’s mimetic strategy enacts a murder previously planned, Mark’s reverse mimesis retroactively plans a crime that already happened. “Hear me out,” he begins, “Tony, I’ve been writing this stuff for years.” As Mark outlines his convoluted and fabricated story, he shocks Tony by describing the events exactly as they happened. His fictional plot works unintentionally as a mousetrap play: it provokes the tell in the murderer.

All of these events happen within the diegesis of the film and the movie contains every level of representation depicted within the diegesis. Neither of these scenes actually refers to some reality outside of art, even though the 3D creates an illusion, sometimes eerie, that such outside could exist or that some levels could be closer to the audience. However, this constant play with the distance of representation as well as Mark and Tony’s conversation about plots in fiction and in reality make it evident that an apparatus of representation is always at play. Because of the visibility of the filmic apparatus, and the visibility of the plot in Mark’s fib, the film calls attention to the processes through which the figure of the woman can be controlled, dominated, and framed in the Hollywood studio era.

If Margot fulfills the masculine desire for a submissive femininity, Tony stands as just one stereotypical model of masculinity, the villain, directly opposed to the hero, Mark. Along with Margot, the two competing figures enact the traditional structure of
good versus evil, where the triumphant male earns the love of the damsel in distress. The sexual differences in *Dial M* follow a very traditional plot structure, but only to a certain extent. At the end of the studio era, and already with enormous creative freedom, Hitchcock used stereotypes of masculinity to expose how dangerous and unreal these stereotypes were. In *Rope*, the professor whose intellectual curiosity toys with the taboos of murder becomes a role model for a crime; in *Rear Window*, the hero is a peeping Tom, curious about the lives of his neighbors. In Hitchcock’s works, men always appear as both strong and dangerous, both reasonable and murderous. In particular, *Dial M* features a strong and assertive protagonist, who meticulously calculates his actions to bring his plan to fruition. However, the strong male character is also a cold murderer who can witness his wife’s suffering without flinching. The male lead begins as a strong hero, but ends as Pierrot, murderer of his wife; the actual hero of the film is the sidekick.

Whereas the film frames Margot within a tradition of representation of femininity and masculinity in Hollywood, it also places her in the specific role of female characters in Hitchcock’s oeuvre. One of the early critics of Hitchcock’s works, Robin Wood, outlines a set of plot structures that often recur and enact a social politics of sexuality within Hitchcockian universe: the “falsely accused man” and the “guilty woman” (241).¹⁰⁷ For the former, the plot usually goes that the man has some sort of guilt—usually sexual—but is accused of an altogether different crime. For Wood, the plot usually progresses unanimously into the complete restoration of the subject into society (242). For the plot of the guilty woman, the woman is always indeed guilty and the plot

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usually progresses in one of two ways: 1. The woman is guilty beyond repair, in which case she needs to be put to death by the male character who plots her killing; 2. She can be restored to society only after some mode of punishment. “What they do provide is a thoroughgoing and radical analysis of the difficulties placed on successful heterosexual union by the social structures and sexual organization of patriarchal capitalism” (248).

_Dial M_ displaces both Hitchcockean stereotypes of feminine guilt through the competing figures of Tony and Mark. For Tony, Margot’s infidelity has made her unsuitable for a wife, and must be put to death. For Mark, on the other hand, Margot’s crime of not telling her husband of their affair is redeemable, but only after he himself can sweep in and save her. Within this duel between Mark and Tony, Margot finds herself without any role, completely submissive and at the mercy of her male counterparts. Throughout Hitchcock’s works, female figures appear as fragile and domesticated, unable to fend for themselves. The only instances where femininity appears strong and assertive are in the figures of mothers, whose assertions are not only overbearing on their children, but also ultimately terrifying. Thus, women in Hitchcock appear between _philia_ and _phobia_: the exotic to be conquered or the dangerous who will destroy us all. For Wood, these representations of women parsed into two stereotypical categories, and “the resolution of the guilty woman” had more to do, “perhaps, with the constraints of the Motion Picture Code than with Hitchcock’s or the spectator’s sympathies or more judgement” (243).

Hitchcock’s representation of sexuality toed the line of what the Motion Picture Code considered appropriate. This tension in the politics of representation emphasizes what Luce Irigaray calls the power struggle inherent to mimetic representation.
Differently than most other representations of women in Hollywood, Hitchcock’s *Dial M* reflects on the technical apparatus involved in the act of representation by making cinematic processes visible. The film first focuses on invoking the distance between imitation and the imitated, through the parallel figures in the mise-en-scène, and then by exposing the chain of signification these figures create.

**Hello Operator!**

At the end of the film, Margot’s destiny hinges on the outcome of the battle between Tony and Mark. If Tony could maintain his story, Margot would face the death penalty. If, however, Mark’s faux story convinces the inspector of Tony’s guilt, Margot could be exonerated. Likewise, her status as a *character* in the film also depends on this outcome: If Tony succeeds, she will be a victim in his murder-mystery intrigue; if Mark wins, she will be the damsel-in-distress in a love story. Tergiversating between the two stereotypical roles, Margot finds herself inoperative, passively waiting for the proper resolution that will frame her. The opening montage foreshadows the situation, two parallel shots of Margot kissing (first her husband and then her lover) give the viewer a quick understanding of the love triangle and her role between the two men.

The montage also alludes to yet another apparatus involved with cinema: The Hollywood industry. At the time the movie came out, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) had established the infamous Motion Picture Production Code, also known as the Hays Code, which strongly dictated how some themes and scenes were censored before being approved for a general audience. Even though compliant with the Hays Code, the two kisses signal to the code’s request to be
careful when portraying excessive and lustful kissing. The same code dictated how women should be portrayed—as “never selling her virtue”—and asked restraint when depicting “the institution of marriage.” Very subtly, Hitchcock’s *Dial M* suggests that the relationship between Margot and Tony, as well as the more general relationships between men and women, were always mediated through the technical apparatus of cinema. The ideological apparatus of Hollywood also mediated femininity and imposed its strict code of conduct on how the image of women in the world should be constructed.

The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 serves as an example of a more oblique form of influence the industry had on its audience. As Richard Maltby acknowledges, the code was a mechanism of regulation focused primarily on the “erotic, both in the specific sense of the representation of sexuality, and in the more generalized notion that the very act of looking at cinema depends on the scopophilic instinct.”¹⁰⁸ On the one hand, the code emphasized the portrayal of women as domesticated and compliant, always ultimately adhering to established societal norms, even when the female character challenged her male counterparts. On the other hand, however, the code tolerated the inevitable subliminal portrayal of women as sexualized objects of desire, which was essential for cinema to function and for the Hollywood industry to thrive.

At the end of the Studio Era, and in the beginning of Hitchcock’s most famous and independent years, *Dial M* signaled the influence of the Hays Code on production and the systematic masculinity proposed by Hollywood. However, even though the code overtly dictated rules of conduct for filmmakers, *Dial M* also exposes the mechanisms the

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industry used to mask its systematic masculinity. The central action in the plot circles around Tony’s intricate murder plot that distances him from the crime scene all-the-while executing the program of subjugating his wife. During this scene, a shot of the automated rotary system creates a metaphorical unit between the telephonic apparatus in Tony’s murder plot and in the filmic plot. This synecdoche suggests that while Tony uses the telephone to create distance from the murder, the film uses the cinematic apparatus to disguise the masculine logic behind the industry.

To start his *complot*, Tony makes his way out of the party and finds a pay phone from which he calls home. As soon as he dials the number, the shot cuts to a still of the fully automated rotary system connecting Tony to Margot. The rotary machine shot connects the plot Tony set in place to the entire apparatus of the film. One small, simple, seemingly innocent task, a phone call home, makes Margot walk out of her room and to the desk close to the blinds, where her killer awaits to strangle her. Dialing his home number triggers the rotary machine to connect line A with line B, and thus permitting the flux of electromagnetic pulse to transfer Tony’s voice to his wife, the call transfers a different message to her killer: the plan has begun. This series of events distance him from the task this apparatus performs. Graham Bell’s invention separates the affection of the voice from the body, thus creating an absent presence. Tony can be home, present through the murder, while still at the stag party, the “perfect alibi”: the ability to perform a murder while completely absent from the crime scene.

The mechanical movement of switches evokes the mechanical aspect of Tony’s own original murder plot. The scene thus connects the words *plot* and *complot* by exposing the mechanicity of his machination. The murder plot thus functions as a
mechanical apparatus, or an automated clockwork, which Tony sets in motion. In *Into the Universe of Technical Images*, Vilém Flusser offers a definition of *automation* that encompasses the mechanical aspect as “a self-governing computation of accidental events, excluding human intervention and stopping at a situation that human beings have determined to be informative” (19). Tony’s plot works as an automation—he set up a series of seemingly accidental events, which will ultimately lead to an “informative” situation: Margot’s death. The murderous plot begins with a simple phone call that triggers a set of “accidental” events.

The automation at the center of Tony’s complot is also at the center of media apparatuses such as cinema itself. As Flusser notes, images produced by photography, film, television, and computers, all of which he calls technical images, spring into existence from an intricate apparatus that turns the recording of light on gelatin, or of electromagnetic pulse in a silicon chip, into an automated process. In cinema, the camera automated the technical production of art, capturing and storing light and sound to be reproduced later. But specially for Hollywood, the automation process happened on another level, as the entire system of studio production in the twenties and thirties functioned as a large automated system as well. Hollywood cinema had become all part of a grand design to keep the output of films at a high pace. Thomas Schatz has referred to this process as the “genius of the system,” or the film industry’s overarching grasp on production and dissemination of cultural products through studios that strategically “developed a repertoire of contract stars and story formulas that were refined and

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continually recirculated through the marketplace.”¹¹⁰ Immediately before Hitchcock’s rise to fame, the big studio era turned Hollywood into an automated and seemingly headless system where its films projected to the audience an image of proper conduct.

Even though the incredible complexity of the studio system gave off the impression of collaboration, Tino Balio suggests that the reality was quite different, “filmmaking was a group effort involving a strict division of labor with a producer at the helm.”¹¹¹ The grand design of Hollywood shifted power in the industry, taking away the creative independence of most directors and placing it in the hands of producers who proceeded to privilege rapid output and profitability. Another key aspect of the system, which mimics the cinematic apparatus, is its ability to completely efface its automated and mechanical substratum. With the camera, the entire apparatus of cinema disappears as the image appears on a screen, almost as if in magic. The entire mechanical process necessary for these machines to record information disappears from view and we see only the final product. Similarly, the studio system masked the intention and power of the producers through the layered complexity of the system, which made it look as if each film emerged as an individual work of art and not as a product in a line of production. Even the fact that producers relied on the marketability and success of previous films to make decisions about the next production does not mean that viewers were in control of production. Much to the contrary, the feedback loop between studios and audiences meant that studios influenced viewers and told them what to enjoy much more than vice-


versa. In this sleight of hand, the apparatus doubles as a distancing device: while portraying images as if they just appeared without intention, it masks the role of producers who calculated the output of films.

To signal the automated machinery of Hollywood and the distancing produced by the apparatus, *Dial M for Murder* employs the figure of the automated rotary system, which plays a paradoxical role in the murder scene, just as the telephone line in general plays a paradoxical role in communication. As Avital Ronell reminds us of the telephone line, “[it] holds together what it separates.”112 In this case, the telephone works like a simile: it connects two distant people all the while maintaining their distance. In *Dial M*, the rotary system brings together the husband and wife, like the veil of marriage itself, while exacerbating the distance between the two: the husband uses this tool to jump start the wife’s murder. The telephone as the main axis between Tony and Margot also brings together the realm of gentlemen and the stag party and the domestic world of the woman, isolated at home, with only the telephone to keep her company. Like all similes, the telephone keeps both terms next to each other but still always separated by the abyss of the “like.”

On the one hand, the telephone, just like every other medium, creates this paradox of separate togetherness, which helps Tony with his plot while giving him an alibi. On the other hand, the telephone has a particular role in *Dial M*, triggering the murder plot to begin. As Ronell notes, the telephone regularly reappears in film “thematizing the hallucinatory power it holds over dramatic action, calling forth a destiny in its finitude,

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arranging a string of statements attached to the will to power." The rotary system extends the climax of *Dial M* by creating a distance between events and maintaining the tension through a complete dissociation of the senses. The audience sees part of the action in the apartment, but then misses other parts, viewing the struggle between Margot and Swann through Tony’s perspective, confined to the dissonant noises coming through the earpiece. Yet, despite delaying the action, the telephone is supposed to bring the plan together and connect the distant elements of the plot. Tony expects the telephone to connect him with the killer who will bring about Margot’s finitude and, in turn, the film’s own telos. Except that the plan fails and the telephone succeeds in connecting Tony to Margot. She picks up the call and speaks into the mouthpiece signaling the impending end of Tony’s will to power.

Ultimately, Tony’s machination to have Margot killed relies on an illusory divide in the realm of the senses where the empire of vision supersedes the sonic. The hallucinatory power of the telephone exacerbates this illusory divide, by breaking the body apart and isolating the sonic realm. Tony uses the same manipulation of effects to construct the visual illusion that Margot is guilty. After the botched murder, while the police haven’t yet arrived at the scene, Tony manipulates the visual plane hoping to incriminate Margot: he switches the original murder weapon (Swann’s scarf) with a similar looking stocking (Margot’s), he puts away her sewing kit, suggesting she premeditated the murder and kept the scissors out; he closes the backdoor to imply the killer was invited in. Tony also shows the police inspector a picture of him and the killer

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113 Ibid. 213.
at a reunion dinner years ago, using more visual proof to set up his version of events. When the police investigate the crime scene, the camera angle changes to an overhead shot that maps the entire set, giving the audience a visual map of the crime and of Tony’s clues.

The film constantly plays with the divide of the senses. On the night of her murder, Margot decides to go out to the movies while Tony desperately tries to convince her to stay home and listen to the radio: “Saturday night theater, darling!” He begs. “I don’t like thrillers” she responds. Tony further openly threatens Swann into participating in the plan because “no one will believe you, it’s your word against mine.” The law depends on an oral testimony from Tony, which could be considered proof enough to incriminate Swann.

However, Tony’s initial success in manipulating the crime scene and using the telephone as an alibi points to the problem of overreliance in English law (and virtually modern law at large) on the status of verbal and visual proof to incriminate a suspect. Tony’s oral testimony against Swann would only hold up in court because Tony is of a higher social standing and doesn’t have Swann’s history of criminal impersonation. Likewise, the field of visual proof can be manipulated, as Tony demonstrates. Therefore, even though Dial M shows that the system trusts the proof of isolated sense data (visual clues or oral testimony), the film also suggests that the data is never isolated—or never raw, as Lisa Gittelman has argued.114 Essentially, the data that Tony arranges and the

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inspector collects only appears as pure evidence, but these data are always associated on
the one hand with other senses and, on the other, with a narrative addendum.

For the perfect crime, Tony explores and manipulates this very gap between the
isolated evidence and the narrative attached to it. Between himself and the crime scene,
Tony inserts the apparatus of the telephone, which breaks down the human sensorium and
distances him from the realm of the crime. The criminal device in *Dial M* exposes how
media apparatuses can at once execute an action while masking the intention behind of
the executer. In media apparatuses in general, and in the telephone specifically,
automation makes the action seem completely natural, as if no force worked behind it.
But because the audience can see the masculine power Tony yields behind his plan, they
witness the process of masking the male logic behind the killing.

If on one level the telephone distances Tony and the crime scene, on another it
connects the figure of the automated rotary system to the murder plot and the filmic plot.
The telephone thus works within the film as a synecdoche of the entire murder, of which
it is an essential part, and as an allegory of the cinematic apparatus as well. The
mechanical, automated falling-into-place of the rotary system’s parts mimics the
murderous plot’s sequential and interconnected nature, as well as the film’s narrative
structure that depends on a series of linked scenes to make sense. The telephone stands in
for the role of film within the system of Hollywood, which at once creates magic on the
screen and masks the masculine code behind studio production.
Hamlet, Hecuba, Hitchcock, Hans Richter: The Intrusion of Play into Time

During the scene of the attempted murder, the montage shifts between shots of Tony at the stag party to shots of the killer in the apartment, both checking their watches. The tension in the scene increases as the editing cuts between the two as they check the time. The scene finally reaches a climax creating dramatic irony when the audience realizes, by comparing the two watches, that Tony’s has stopped and that the plan might go awry. The close-ups of the clocks that show the progression of time creating tension has a long history in Hollywood films, alluding both to the importance of time in the modern world, but also to the importance of time perception. The recurrence of clocks in Dial M emphasizes the tension of temporality in cinema and the possibility to manipulate temporal perception through montage, mise-en-scène, sound, and other techniques of the apparatus.

In fact, the cross cutting to produce dramatic irony as well as the exposition of Tony’s plot as mechanical indicate how, even though movement and sound seem to magically to appear on a screen, they are inevitably the result of an intricate apparatus. In Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as entr’actes in history (1989), Siegfried Zielinski notes that the entire apparatus of film, including criticism alongside the praxis of cinema, hinges on the illusion of movement perception, usually accompanied by sound. Such illusion, which can be “planned, produced, commented on, and appreciated,” develops

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out of a mechanical structure. Just as clocks arrest time into an unnatural countable, Zielinski suggests, “The new artefacts for dissecting and reassembling visuals were further objectifications in a process where homogeneous awareness of time was replaced by a linear awareness of time, with its persistent, uniform measures and rhythms that are unknown in nature.” Cinema arrests movements and sounds all the while giving them structure and order. As a seemingly natural organization of reality, this structure always depends on the very apparatus it seems to magically disavow.

In the references to clocks, Dial M alludes to the work of clocks and time in movement perception similarly to how Dadaism did thirty years before with Hans Richter’s short film Ghosts Before Breakfast (Vormittagspuk 1926). In this short film, images of a clock frame the temporal displacements of the narrative, while brief circular scenes radically experiment with the perception of movement. These scenes show men getting ready for church on a Sunday morning while the objects around them rebel and take on a life of their own. The film thus plays with two illusions: first, that objects can move on their own, and second, that time progressions can be disrupted and reversed. The former happens through a wealth of special effects that mask the hand of the director in manipulating filmic stock such as stop motion, time-lapse, and substitution splice. Inversely, the latter illusion happens through an exaggerated use of reverse motion, slow motion, and repeating encores that disrupt the narrative flow and play with linearity.

The Dada plight with the Cabaret Voltaire centers around a paradoxical time: while, on the one hand, they produced several works that pushed against the boundaries

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116 Ibid. 74.
of traditional conceptions of time with a rich imagery of broken down clocks and the play of asynchronous simultaneous poems, on the other, they also produced a wealth of diaries, histories, memoirs, almanacs, and accounts of Dada itself that record methodically events in what would seem like the beads of a rosary. *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary, Memoirs of a Dada Drummer, En Avant Dada,* to name but a few, represent the dada obsession with temporality. Whereas, as Walter Benjamin notes, the French revolution attempted to inaugurate a new time by introducing a new calendar, Dada introduces a new time by appropriating a traditional time-frame and taking it to its limits.

*Ghosts Before Breakfast* plays with this very idea of paradox or, as Richter would later describe it, the “principle of contradiction.” The title of the film sets up the temporal theme: *Vormittagsspuk* translates more literally as “Ghosts before Noon.” A clock counting down to noon frames the film. It opens with a close-up of the clock set to ten in the morning that rapidly progresses to eleven. It then cuts to several short scenes of things moving on their own—hats, ties, trays, revolvers; windows and a basket opens and closes; a fire hose unwinds and rewinds. With stop-motion technique, stop tricks, and time-lapse scenes, these objects animate on the screen in recurring loops. The structure of the film creates a paradoxical understanding of time—one that can extrapolate to history: while the film focuses on the minute progression of small facts, such facts are always undercut by a larger series of radical disruptions that thwart progress, sending us back to

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the beginning of the previous scene only to progress again through the causal chain, which sometimes actually progresses the reversed way, as in a mirror.

For instance, early in the film, a shot frames a fire hose in its case before the case opens by itself and the hose starts unrolling as if through its own volition. The very next shot depicts a water jet (which one assumes comes from the hose) keeps a bowler hat suspended in the air, moving to and fro. As the bowler hat washes away, the scene reverses and the water moves backward into the hose that finally rewinds back into the case. The scenes in which the fire hose unwinds and rewinds are reversals of the same shot.

The movement progresses in one direction only to later regress through a reversed shot. The water moves one way first and the other later, as if magically drying itself and flowing backwards into the hose. The illusion of movement in film defies the laws of physics, anything is possible on this Sunday morning.

On a metafictional level, the framing in this shot makes the firehose resemble film stock, which rolls out as the movie progresses. Ghosts uses filmic technique to represent the very use of filmic technique. This metafictional move becomes a self-reflexive depiction of the filmic apparatus as it progresses through shooting: unwinding the hose imitates film recording, whereas rewinding the hose represents the rewinding of film
essential for the backward shot. While Richter jests with film filming film, irony emerges in the reversal of the imitation process: instead of film representing objects, we have objects representing film. The irony further intensifies in the wordplay each scene creates. Throughout the work, images of guns and shooting targets reappear, alluding to the semantic closeness of the meanings for “shot” and the historical importance of firearms in the development of cinema.

As guns appear in the movie, they dance around in a mechanical ballet, as if moving on their own. A close shot of a revolver’s cylinder and hammer allude to the technology underlying early motion-capture experiments that would later effect the emergence of cinema, such as the trigger mechanism in Eadweard Muybridge’s photographic series, Étienne-Jules Marey’s chronophotography, and Pierre Jules César Janssen’s photographic revolver. These experiments in early cinematography paved the way for cinema all the while testing motion capture and reproduction, and investigating how the human sensorium combines a series of static images to produce the illusion of movement. Immediately after the revolver’s hammer clicks multiple times, the shot cuts to a refrain in which a man looks in the distance, focalizing the act of viewing.
Drawing on the early experiment on motion capture, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* explores the construction of movement perception by manipulating perspective. With the same stock film of marching feet mirrored in both vertical and horizontal axes, the movie creates a narrative of uphill and then downhill movement.

As the frame rotates ninety degrees counterclockwise, the feet appear to be going uphill; when it rotates clockwise, the feet go downhill. Immediately after this montage, Richter uses a backward shot of feet going upstairs to make them look like backward feet descending stairs. Like *Ballet Méchanique*, the shot of stairs plays both with the tradition
of film (as a reference to Eisenstein’s Odessa steps) and Muybridge’s study of movement through the camera. If reverse mimesis in *Ghosts* represents filmmaking, here it exposes how filmmaking produces conceptions of movement through manipulation of techniques.

In spite of the short refrains repeating themselves over and over in a chaotic assemblage of images, the montage in *Ghosts* creates small scenes of progression and regression, and gives the film a temporal dimension. In time-lapse and stop motion shots, a plant grows its stems and leaves, a group of men lose their beards, coffee fills the glasses for breakfast, and water pours out of a hose. On the one hand, these scenes explore our ability to fulfill the abyss between two points in a causal chain or, rather, our inability to *not* fulfill those points.

The coffee cups are empty in one shot and full in the next so the audience fills in the blank by assuming someone transferred the coffee into each cup. On the other hand, the play with time lapse and causal chains exposes the apparatus of cinema as the manipulation of illusion that it is. By radically stretching the causal relationship between these images, the film calls attention to how cinema itself is an assembly of static images into a cohesive perception of movement. As an experiment in motion capture, *Ghosts* presents not only a vision of movement—of things moving around—but of how we capture, store, and reproduce movement in film.
The short refrains affirm a general tempo of the film and challenge historical and religious conceptions of time. Coupled with the short instances of stop motion, these refrains work as an articulation of time as a series of perceptions, which are individual and controllable. The film closes with the clock winding down to noon, at which point it breaks in the middle and the word “ende” (end in German) surfaces from behind it. Along with the Sunday attires worn by the main characters throughout, this final scene represents both an ironic teleology and eschatology. The “ende” appearing through the clockwork proposes that the assemblage of progressive scenes leads to an ultimate end, but the telos of the film happens to be the very breaking down of time and of teleology itself, signified by the broken clock.

*Dial M for Murder* and *Ghosts Before Breakfast* respond to the question of temporality by slowing down or speeding up time, stretching the plot. However, whereas *Ghosts* focuses on cinematic play, *Dial M* further refers to a historical moment through the automated rotary system shot as an allegory to mid-twentieth century economy. The mechanical apparatus stands in for the socio-historical moment where the automated rotary system eliminated the woman from the workplace. Up to 1970s, the task of connecting lines through a manual switchboard was always relegated to women, who worked as phone operators. In the film, the attempt to kill Margot happens through the rotary system, which coincidentally functioned in the silencing of women in the larger social-historical context. Thus, the shot suggests that women serve only the functional role of a piece of machinery, very much like other professions related to communication technologies such as typewriters, stenographers, and typesetters. For Friedrich Kittler, the typewriter “brought to light the rules regulating discourse,” namely that the role of men
was to think, create, and get credit for textual production, while women were semantically equated to an appliance. “The device for ‘everybody’ forgot women.” In telephony, women also functioned as an automated rotary system, connecting the different lines. Telephone operators processed information, received and connected lines, but were almost never subject of considerable speech. In the realm of the home, telephones contributed to relegation of women to domestic life, as opposed to the male public discourse. Women used telephones to communicate, but such communication never made it outside the domestic realm. In that sense, the telephone, with all of its potential for connectivity, isolated women within the realm of the home.

**Framed: Mark’s Mousetrap Play**

Like the typewriter in *Machinal*, the telephone in *Dial M for Murder* connotes a sexual dynamic. In *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan suggests a relationship between these apparatuses and the image of women: “the typewriter and the telephone are the most unidentical twins that have taken over the revamping of the American girl with technological ruthlessness and thoroughness” (266). For the Canadian media theorist, the telephone helped reshape the figure of women in the workplace by transforming the profession of prostitution from the publicly displayed worker in the red-light district to the veiled activity of the call-girl. But sex-workers were not the only ones affected and reshaped by this technological advance, the telephone helped reshape the figure of women.

Whereas the film exposes the internal workings of the telephone, the larger culture-industrial dimension of cinema tries to obscure for its viewers the social, cultural,
economic, and technical aspects of film and its sexual politics. The cinematic apparatus presents images as a magical apparition of images on screen—as if the world just happened to be simply imitated before their eyes. As Siegfried Zielinski notes, these sets of apparatuses function within the audiovisual discourse as masked, presented as natural parts of the world of cinema. In fact, he contends that cinema itself marks “a vanishing point of technical, cultural, and social processes,” where the technical aspects of the media meet their socio-cultural politics, albeit this connection is never visible.\textsuperscript{118} One example of the intricate structures that audiovisual discourse suppress only to present as natural is the device of plot. As De Lauretis notes, the organization of events, the process of weaving a story asserts a distinct sexual politics:

Film narrative too, if Lotman’s typology be credited, is a process by which the text-images distributed across the film (be they images of people, objects, or of movement itself) are finally regrouped in the two zones of sexual difference, from which they take their culturally preconstructed meaning: mythical subject and obstacle, maleness and femaleness.\textsuperscript{119}

Events appear on a screen as the natural flow of time, disguising how much the production has designed them. However, in modernism, such parts of the apparatus that are supposed to be hidden come to the foreground and reveal the audiovisual discourse to be mechanical and always contaminating and producing the very imitation they claim to perform objectively. Further into \textit{Dial M}, right before Margot’s execution, the problem of

\textsuperscript{118} Zielinski. \textit{Audiovisions}. p. 11.

\textsuperscript{119} De Lauretis. Alice Doesn’t. p. 138.
mimesis resurfaces again. In a desperate plight to save her life, Mark comes up with a plan that re-interprets evidence exonerating Margot. “Tony, I’ve been writing this stuff for years. I figured out something for you to tell them.” He solves the crime without trying—his false, invented story effectively represents the events more accurately than he would know, and more accurately than the police were able to interpret at first. The dramatic irony hits a high point: he asks Tony to confess falsely to a crime he did indeed commit.

The self-awareness comes to a climactic moment in Mark’s mouse-trap plot. Invented like all of his other mystery novels, the fake plot actually outlines the entirety of Dial M for Murder, down to minute details. The mouse-trap works as a reversed mimesis. Mark forces the world to fit into his own creative interpretations of evidence, which at first differ from the police investigation. If Tony’s murderous plot works clockwise, Mark’s goes counter-clockwise. In the end, Mark’s reversed mimesis helps the police catch Tony and exonerate Margot. In his final confession, Tony pours a drink, “As you said it, Mark. It might work out on paper, but…” In Dial M, the illusion of the cinematic apparatus becomes visible as an illusion—the black box appears as the audiovisual discourse Zielinski calls a set of “technical systems and artefacts.” In this case, mimetic art works because of an illusion that what appears on paper (or screen) happens naturally. However, in these self-reflective moments, Dial M not only plays with this illusion but actually makes the illusion visible. Hitchcock’s films pries open the black box of the apparatus and investigates its inner workings, showing us how the murder

\[120\] Zielinski. Audiovisions. p. 18.
mystery plot, or the love story, function through a set of mechanical elements that combine to form the illusion of movement.

Thus, the perpetration of the crime functions through visual misguidance, but so does the capture of the criminal. The police investigator plays a trick on Tony which eventually leads to his plan falling apart. Such a trick hinges on a series of objects that look alike and are switched when Tony isn’t looking—the inspector switches his trench coat with a latchkey with Tony’s similar looking trench coat; the latchkeys are also different, even though similar: “latchkeys all look alike” the inspector suggests, foreshadowing to the viewer his plan to play on visual misdirection. Countering the Tony’s crime of using visual cues to frame Margot, the inspector and Mark both use the very technique exposing the machination as a machination. Through a form of reversed mimesis, where the thriller writer and the police inspector force the facts in front of them to fit within a “fictitious” story, they expose Tony’s plot as a machination.

The doubled images framing each scene as well as the duplicate objects composing the mise-en-scène further create an aesthetics of substitution for the film. In terms of the plot, these substitutions work to benefit Tony and obscure his role in the murder plot. Swann stands in for Tony in the act of killing, giving him the perfect alibi. Mark Halliday is a surrogate for Margot’s love object, giving Tony the motive for the murder. In turn, Margot sits at the trial as a defendant in Swann’s death, while Tony sits at home. The similarity between substitution in the mise-en-scène and substitution in the plot structure ultimately signal the playful aspect of cinema—that the images on the screen all work as part of a game of representation and substitutions, where figures stand in for something else. *Dial M* turns the progressive chain of signifiers into a recurring
loop where images replace other images in a never-ending circle. If representation is a
game, Irigaray would say masculine rules determine its functioning, especially as in the
end Tony manipulates the playing field for his benefit.

At the same time, the telephone breaks down human sensorium and separates the
visual from the sound, evoking the mediasphere of the middle of the twentieth century,
when media apparatuses such as the radio and the novel (both language-based media)
struggled with the emergence of the television and cinema as competing forces. Likewise,
the separation points to cinema’s own conflicted history between silent films and the
talkies. The telephone thus signals to cinema’s origin as theater and the change from an
artistic medium of presence (in theater, where the stars are all present) into absence (in
(cinema, where the stars are usually absent).

The conversation between cinema and other media goes beyond the intra-diegetic
references to theater. The movie also invokes the newspaper, radio, and photography. In
the opening scenes, a close-up of The Times piece about Mark Halliday’s arrival in
London works as a bridging shot that establishes the opening setting. Through this close-
up with no voice-over narration, viewers become readers and, instead of watching the
progression of the film, they have to read. The ekphrastic move dispels the illusion that
film relies solely on visual vision and sound, while also alerting us to the temporal
progression of the filmic narrative. As part of the opening bridging sequence, the still of
the newspaper sets the temporal tone to the entire movie: alluding both to the diegetic
time of the plot and extra-diegetic historical moment of tension between the sexes.
Coda

Shooting Animals

On the heels of Erich Auerbach’s work, the conversations surrounding mimesis and aesthetics have largely equated imitation with the representation of reality. Because mimesis is the production of a copy, scholars assume the existence of an original that both predates the copy and dictates its existence. Even though Auerbach’s *Mimesis* outlines with great precision the linguistic techniques writers have employed to construct illusions of realism, and even though he writes one of the most ambitious histories of literature and secularism, his argument concludes by encompassing this vast and heterogeneous corpus of literature under the banner of the “literary forms of the imitation of life” (554). Lauding modern literature for its unshackling from the restraints of religion, Auerbach finds in “the representation of reality” an alternative to the representation of God. However, in this model, the verses change but the song remains
the same. Reality takes the place of God as the master-signifier. Instead of honoring God, modern works of art must honor “reality,” which can be just as fleeting, mysterious, and fabricated as God himself.

The modernist works of reverse mimesis largely challenge this view of the mimetic faculty by first evoking the figure of imitation only to then produce imitations without originals. They game the system, manipulate the playing field, ultimately producing conflicting reality effects that refer to a preceding ontological realm, but one that is so absurd it can never be believed. Through deceit and play, the works of reverse mimesis illuminate the constructed nature of imitation and expose the very paradox at the heart of mimesis (and representation): how to become the same while remaining different.

The development of what Michael Taussig calls “mimetically capacious machines … in the second half of the nineteenth century” brought a new set of problems to the study of mimesis.121 As Walter Benjamin would later argue, the highly technological environment of the late nineteenth century transformed art, which now could lose its aura as it was mechanically reproduced.122 Speaking of a photograph by David Octavius Hill, which depicted a fishwife looking off-camera while holding a straw basket, Benjamin also suggested that photography had the power of awakening our “optical unconscious,”


or of depicting details in the image that are not intentionally staged by the photographer.\textsuperscript{123} Whereas a painter needs to calculate every detail that goes into an image, the photographer records several details unconsciously—and other details that the spectator wouldn’t notice on a daily basis, but would at the careful examination of a still image. For instance, a photograph enables the spectator to analyze the minutia in the very moment a person “starts to walk,” focusing on nuances that escape the conscious mind when observing real-life walking.

The ability of photography to awaken the optical unconscious, or to imitate layers of meaning beyond the staged reality, creates an illusion that the hand of the photographer is not present and that the final product is a manifestation of nature. In fact, in “Ontology of the Photographic Image” (1960), André Bazin argues that photography satisfies our “obsession with realism” (7).\textsuperscript{124} Because of its automatic character, “Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty” (7). For Bazin, photography tricks the viewer into believing the final product duplicates nature, as if reality bloomed on paper like a flower.

Bazin’s metaphor emphasizes the representation of nature and insinuates that photography could work as a scientific exhibit because it could take artifice away from the work of representation. The scientist would not need to rely on an artist to depict

\textsuperscript{123} Benjamin, Walter. “A Short History of Photography” (1931).

\textsuperscript{124} Bazin, André. “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” translated by Hugh Gray \textit{(Film Quarterly} vol. 13, No. 4, 1960), pp. 4-9.
natural objects but rather could use an apparatus that mechanically “captured” the natural world—a pure mimesis of nature. Catalan photographer Joan Fontcuberta’s photographic exhibit *Fauna: the incredible bestiary of professor Ameisenhaufen*, exhibited in Europe between 1985 and 1989, challenges the very idea that photography could imitate nature without the hand of the artist. Fontcuberta staged *Fauna* as an exhibit of photographs he found with friend, writer and scientist Pere Formiguera, while vacationing at Cape Wrath in the north of Scotland. At a lugubrious residence turned into a Bed and Breakfast they stumble upon an archive of photographic plates, annotations in German, instruments of dissection, bottles of formaldehyde, and some taxidermied animals that raised goose bumps. This archive belonged to Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen, who captured, mounted, and studied these animals. The beasts are: a snake with feet, elephants with wings, the upper-body of a baboon attached to the body of a deer, a monkey with a horn and wings, among several other creatures. Like H. G. Wells’s taxidermist, Fontcuberta invented these animals to expose how photography could be manipulated to produce an effect of reality of an absurd subject matter.

By appropriating the visual language of taxidermy, Fontcuberta’s reverse mimesis subverts objectivity and exposes the human point of view inherent to any science. Ultimately, his photographic bestiary operates in the same way that a novel, a short-story, or a poem work: an artist may plan and craft a work of art, but language always evades the speaker. A photograph of an animal in nature may function as a visual reference for a study on the specific animal, but, as an image, the photograph becomes text. The final work might reveal nuances unperceived by the conscious mind, but these nuances are
always already mediated by the apparatus of language. Fontcuberta’s animals remind us that both writing and images are textual material—and not an outside reality.

**A Foray into the World of Imaginary Animals (and Humans)**

Around the time he prepared to stage *Fauna*, Fontcuberta met and began a collaboration with Vilém Flusser. The Czech-Brazilian media theorist was living in southern France where, along with visual artists Louis Bec and François Bazzoli, and engineer Abraham Moles, he had created in 1972 the *Institute Scientifique de Recherche Paranaturaliste* (Scientific Institute for Paranaturalist Research – I.S.R.P.), which fostered intellectual community to produce alternative natures. Like Fontcuberta, Flusser was invested in producing invented animals such as the *Bibliophagus convictus*, a bee-like insect that lodges itself in the skulls of academics and devours textual material, or the most famous *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*, a fictional rendition of the then-understudied vampire squid.

The philosophical background of the ISRP influenced Joan Fontcuberta and his *Fauna*. With the objective of studying “the incapability of living beings to understand their own existence,” the Institute strove to explore alternative natures, or different

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ways to represent the world. Even their printing practices were not mainstream. The group of friends published their own writings at the institute’s press (usually 60 copies per work) located in Louis Bec’s backyard. Bec acted as the president of the institute and defined himself as a zoosystemician, François Bazzoli was the vice-president, and Flusser their Philosophical Counselor. However, the ISRP was very successful in its paranaturalist endeavors, so much so that it became a recognized scientific institute by the French National Center for Scientific Research.

As philosophical counselor, Flusser articulated the two main goals of the institute in an unpublished reflection on the ISRP: “(a.) to criticize nature as it was proposed by the creator, (for example, to show the flaws and inconsistencies in the construction of galaxies or the ears of mammals), and (b.) to propose the construction of different natures than that of the creator, that is: propose the construction of paranatures.”¹²⁷ But who exactly does Flusser mean by the creator, a figure who, he claims, has become of an “unbearable academicism”? He answers, “this creator and inventor, in the old days identified as ‘God,’ is the Renaissance bourgeois man. Before him there was no nature in the sense employed by us” (2). Following this line, the Institute understands that nature is a product of culture, and not the opposite.

If culture produces nature, then a change in culture could produce different forms of nature. Flusser further suggests that we push forward one more step, and that criticizing nature in itself is not as interesting as proposing new natures. As he urges: “It is absolutely ridiculous today to try and orient ourselves through only one nature when

(a.) we know how this nature was created; (b.) we don’t feel well in it; (c.) we’re starting to pollute it, both materially and epistemologically; and (d.) we are capable of producing better natures” (3). This task of producing alternative beings and natures is the main focus of this institute. Following this pataphysical vein, Fontcuberta’s Fauna answers Flusser’s call to explore alternate possibilities for the natural world, all the while reflecting on the process of representation. Irony and parody are central to these projects: their paranatural system brings to the center the question of point of view—of subjectivity. As Flusser notes, “every paranature needs to be underpinned by irony, a dangerous but questioning attitude.”128

Fontcuberta’s bestiary begins with a sense of irony in representing imaginary animals through humor. The exhibit claims to be found materials by Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera.

Dr. Peter Ameisenhaufen

His colleague’s name is the first hint at the irony of the project: Formiguera is the Spanish translation of Ameisenhaufen—anthill. His first name, Pere, invokes the famous French play Ubu Roi—Pere Ubu—written by the creator of ‘pataphysics, Alfred Jarry. The humor multiplies as the visitors find the life story of Peter Ameisenhauffer in a plaque framing the exhibit and narrating the story of his life: he was born in Munich and was raised by his aunt in Dortmund—his mother had passed during childbirth and his father lived in Tanzania as an explorer, hunter, and safari guide. His father remarried a nurse named Else but both died while Peter was still young: his step-mother was devoured by a lion she was trying to domesticate; his father died from cerebral hemorrhage resulting from a violent strike by an elephant trunk.

Within the ironic framing, the staged photographs of invented animals reveal an urge in science to turn nature into narrative. Fontcuberta’s *Solenoglypha Polipodida*, the snake with legs, appears as four photographs.
They are all black and white and dated 30 April 1941. The first shows the animal in a position of attack—erect on its six pairs of legs; the second shows it in a position of “Whistling” to attract its prey and feed; the third as it is captured by Ameisenhaufer and the last in the laboratory, segmented and in front of a plate to be analyzed. This series of photographs creates a narrative of capture and death. Coupled with the scientific description that understands this animal as an “extremely aggressive being” who kills to eat but also for the “pleasure of killing,” the overall narrative presents the zoologist as “doing us a favor” in capturing, killing, and analyzing this animal. Its name also reinforces the scientific narrative: Solenoglypha polipodida comes from the Greek for many-legged (polipod-) image (-glypha) of seriousness (soleno-). The scientist naming this animal sees it as a serious threat, imposing his interpretation of nature onto the animal through the layered name.

The same narrative apparatus appears in the flying monkey with a horn (Cercopithecus icarocornus). When describing the place where the specimen was seen, Ameisenhaufer’s notes describe his exploration of the depths of the Amazon in Brazil and his encounter with an indigenous tribe who introduced him to this animal. When
describing the “Manners” of the animal, he goes into a long analysis of the Cercopithecus’s function in the indigenous tribe that holds it as a sacred being.

The first photograph, then, presents the animal sitting on a sacrificial totem. The following images are mostly blurry and attempt to represent the animal’s movements—taking off, searching for prey, hunting, and flying. The only analysis possible of this animal is done on drawings in paper, which work as a retrofitted narrative. Fontcuberta’s animals appear in the exhibition as photographic remains of an archive now lost.

Through the interpretation of the photographs as copies, registers of a lost archive, the exhibit sets up a dialectic between original (the archive now lost) and the copies (the
photographs). The copies now give us a snapshot of what the totality of the archive was, but also imply that there is something missing here: the skins. In Benjamin’s terms, the visitor to the exhibit can see a mechanical reproduction of the (original) work of art (or science), which now lacks the aura of its original. By extension then, the actual skins of dead animals become synonymous with the aura of the object and, with such status, the skins represent a score of assumptions about scientific presentation within a natural history scenario—namely, the presence of the animal, the reality effect of Realism, and an epistemological claim to truth of the scientific (positivistic) discourse.

Fontcuberta’s choice of photography as the main medium of this exhibit invokes the nature of photographic realism. He exhibited Fauna in several galleries around Europe and at the MoMA in New York—all of them art galleries. Despite this location, Fontcuberta set up Fauna to resemble a natural history museum, which tricked some visitors into believing the exhibit. Because people associate photography with the power to represent the world faithfully—of bringing us one step closer to the world of animals and things—the urge to believe takes control, even before such an absurd presentation. Within the environment of an art gallery, the fact that Fontcuberta’s artistic photographs mimic the form of a natural history exhibit with a disturbing level of success demonstrates that the aura of the object of art (or object of science) is nothing more than an illusory effect built within the process of presentation—that is, within the natural history museum or the art gallery. He followed a protocol for displaying art, but because the art work used references to an external world in the same way a natural history museum does, it created an aura effect, which, coupled with the sheer absurdity of the subject matter, created feelings of frustration for some viewers. Some felt as if they had
been lured into the fantasy of a reality outside the text only to realize that such reality never existed.

In that sense, the Spanish photographer shows us how much “aura” is an artificially created and heavily manipulated effect, even on objects of science or pre-mechanical reproduction works of art. The auratic effect of a mounted polar bear is not that we get to experience the skin of the animal, or have any direct relationship with nature, but rather the illusion that we do—the illusion that we are in the presence of an animal, nature, an Other. The same goes for art: the aura of the Mona Lisa today does not depend so much on the painting’s ontological presence at the Louvre, but instead on the illusion created by the museum apparatus, the architecture and interior design of the building, the spotlights, the presence of security guards who threaten those who linger too long, the barriers that keep viewers at bay, and other props that tell us “that’s the one”—something viewers can never verify on their own accord. The experience of an art museum relies on these illusions. They attract thousands of viewers every day to snap a photograph of the Mona Lisa, a photograph that proves “I have been there,” I have experienced the aura. In Towards a Philosophy of Photography, Flusser argues that photos are another layer of mediation that separates human beings and the world. As he suggests, “They are supposed to be maps but they turn into screens: Instead of representing the world, they obscure it until human beings’ lives finally become a function of the images they create” (10). Fontcuberta’s photographic animals create an effect of aura to expose how even the other objects in the museum (mounted animals in a natural history museum or a painting at the Louvre, for example) are all just images with the illusion of an aura.
The Limitation of Life

Like the other works of reverse mimesis discussed in this dissertation, Fontcuberta’s bestiary reflects on the process of imitation. In this sense, his works are not serious about the subject matter per se, but rather about how each discipline or field talks about each topic. Alfred Jarry’s pataphysical essays, H. G. Wells’ short story, and Roger Caillois’ experimental studies investigate the system of science and the production of knowledge. Sophie Treadwell’s play and Hitchcock’s movie pay attention to the role of visual data and oral testimony as legal evidence for the conviction of criminals. Raoul Hausmann’s collages question the creation of information in journalism (and its influence on and by the financial market). Fernand Léger’s Ballet Mécanique depicts the construction of the female figure in film. And Hans Richter’s short film reflects on the creation of time perception in history and religion. These works understand the paradox of mediation: at the same time they connect subject and object all the while mediating between them, that is, always keeping each entity separate.

Reverse mimesis, thus, becomes intimately connected to the ubiquitous representation of media in art, which coincides with what Julian Murphet has described as “a concerted becoming-media of the arts.”¹²⁹ For Murphet, this modernist self-awareness is an awareness of the status of art as a media object, involved in capturing, processing, and reproducing data. These works of reverse mimesis feature a wealth of

media machines such as the typewriter, camera, and telephone, while revealing the products they create, such as newspapers, scientific journals, taxidermy mounts, films, and photographs. Through the connection between the media apparatus and their products, reverse mimesis also exposes how the larger institutional, ideological apparatuses surrounding these media objects also operate: the film industry, the scientific community, and the penal system. Finally, through its play with the convoluted levels of apparatuses, reverse mimesis also demonstrates how these media machines and their systems constantly produce the very data they claim to capture.

The process of mimesis in general requires an adaptation from one medium to another. For mimesis to be considered adequate as representation, the changes need to be quite simple and irrelevant. First comes the original, and then, mutatis mutandis, the copy. The appropriate changes defined in “mutatis mutandis” become imperceptible in the reproduction because they are only necessary to adjust a topic to a new medium and to conceal this medium behind the hypothetical truth it conveys. Reverse mimesis dwells precisely in the in-between of mutatis mutandis. These works explore the abyss of representation between signifier and signified, freely replicating an ever-evolving chain of signifiers that creatively reconfigure the world around them.
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