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# CLOSE/ REREAD

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"RECOGNIZING THAT TEXT IS INTERTEXT IS ONE THING. SEEING THAT A TEXT IS A SOCIAL SPACE IS ANOTHER. [...] TO SAY THAT IT'S A SOCIAL SPACE IS TO SAY THAT STUFF IS GOING ON: PEOPLE, THINGS, ARE MEETING THERE AND INTERACTING, RUBBING OFF ONE ANOTHER, BRUSHING AGAINST ONE ANOTHER—AND YOU ENTER INTO THAT SOCIAL SPACE, TO TRY TO BE PART OF IT. [...] THERE ARE THINGS TO DO, PLACES TO GO, AND PEOPLE TO SEE IN READING AND WRITING - AND IT'S ABOUT MAYBE EVEN TRYING TO FIGURE OUT SOME KIND OF ETHICALLY RESPONSIBLE WAY TO BE IN THAT WORLD WITH OTHER THINGS."

- Fred Moten, *The Undercommons*<sup>1</sup>

Dear Reader,

Reading is taking part. It asks us to take part. In the act and practice of reading, there is something akin to what painter Lily Briscoe experiences at the close of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. After years of painstaking effort, the final paragraph of Woolf's novel shows Briscoe returning to her canvas "as if she were recalled by something over there." Whether the artwork remembers or beckons to the artist, this "recalled" suggests that the painting itself solicits her into a multidirectional encounter. Rather than an inert object on which Briscoe puts an act of creation, Woolf positions the canvas itself as an active participant in this creative act.

In turn, Woolf asks us, dear reader, to consider the painting as a site where a critical eye negotiates the meaning of experience. Briscoe is unconcerned with the painting's fate: "it would be hung in the attics" or "it would be destroyed. But what did that matter," she asks herself. The meaning of her work would not be generated by preservation or institutional recognition, but rather by the intentional encounter. It is the relational act of attention and engagement that matters—the moment when "with a sudden intensity" Briscoe draws

"a line there, in the centre" and decides her painting is "done," "finished": "I have had my vision." In these final moments from *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf does not guarantee that this vision will last, instead exploring that moment of relation with the text, when Briscoe enters her canvas as a social space. She does not conquer or master it. She engages and inhabits it. Reading asks the same of us.<sup>2</sup>

Lily's attentive vision in the final moments of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* models the way that we at *Close/Read* aim to approach knowledge and theory: as responsive attention to texts that pushes intellectual engagement to develop through, with, and as a lived practice. In the epigraph above, poet, theorist, and writer Fred Moten suggests that to enter a text is to recognize that "there are things to do, places to go, and people to see in reading and writing." Likewise, it is precisely from such recognition that undergraduate scholarship begins. To publish student work is to affirm that knowledge is produced in encounters between people and texts. *Close/Read* intends to exercise the power of interpretation that emerges from such encounters—meeting, interacting with, and "brushing against" the ideas, stories, things, and people that inhabit the social spaces of literature and media.

In this spirit, we encourage you: be unabashed; be audacious. Read, write, do, and theorize. Take part in the serendipitous encounter between the reader and text—and in the subsequent frictions of interpretation.

*Close/Read* exists to give form and venue to such encounters. If the text is a social space, then so too is this journal. This project is borne of the sentiment that the comparative method is and ought to be for everyone, that meaning is not a latent or secret quality of the text. It takes shape with and through readers, as they move across and between works of literature, art, theory, and media—inhabiting multiple social spaces at once and exploring the tensions and resonances within and between them to test ideas and develop knowledge. *Close/Read* exists to formalize and collectivize that process, and to support collaborative undergraduate engagement with literature and media.

In our first call for papers, we did not specify a theme. We invited writers and readers alike to define and delimit the kind of intellectual and creative environment in which they wanted to participate. The essays gathered here—whether they address literary, visual, or cinematic works—treat their objects as spaces to be inhabited. Each does so in its own way: Paulina Gașiorowska stages a Lacanian intervention in the medieval discourse of *Minne* in the poetry of Walther von der Vogelweide, tracking its oscillations between the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary. Attending to questions of adaptation, Xinke Huang analyzes Julie Taymor’s cinematic reworking of Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* through its comical and spectacular treatment of its source material. Ryan Gumlia then places Georg Lukács’ critical

insights on modernism in conversation with Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to illustrate how Conrad’s narrative form registers the ideological tensions that Lukács identifies in the modern condition. Arushi Chokshi offers a genealogy of Venetian color in painting and shows how these varying sensibilities created artistic traditions that would prove foundational to European painting. Finally, Sydney Suh excavates the political implications of experimental, avant-garde aesthetics in 1970s South Korea under authoritarian rule. Across these essays, the comparative method repositions readers along evolving axes of similarity and difference to generate novel relations between seemingly disparate texts. The mode of reading promoted by this journal takes difference as a point of methodological departure and distance itself becomes a prerequisite for interpretation.

I would like to thank the core team that brought the idea of this publication to life—Ella Kopper, Lulu Ryan, and Ben Graham. Moreover, many thanks to our faculty supervisor Jayson Lantz, who has been an invaluable resource in putting this publication together. Thank you also to Professor Gian-Maria Annovi and the entire Department of Comparative Literature at USC for creating a space where this kind of project can thrive.

If a text is a social space, then every act of reading is an entrance into relation. This journal invites you to step inside and take part.

Sincerely,  
Aumrita Savdharia

<sup>1</sup> Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927; Harcourt, 1989), 208–09.

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## "Waz Ist Minne?" Walther von der Vogelweide, Jacques Lacan, and the perverse potentials of courtly love

Paulina Gaşiorowska, Brown University '27

### Introduction

Upon taking up "The Problem of Sublimation" in his 1959-1960 ethics seminar, Jacques Lacan selects the Medieval German theory and practice of *Minne* [courtly love] as a "paradigm" and "exemplary form" of that problematic yet fundamental process,<sup>1</sup> a process which "raises an object...to the dignity of the Thing."<sup>2</sup> *Minne*, after all, stands at the intersection of poetry, eroticism, and ethics—an intersection that is nothing short of "stupefying."<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, it was a "highly important" and "deliberately articulated" activity,<sup>4</sup> with "determining" influence on "the appearance, articulation, establishment, of a whole moral code, of a whole ethic, a whole way of life" that grew to dominate Medieval manners and culture.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, it consisted in projecting "a certain transgression of desire,"<sup>6</sup> grounded in a historical context of "highly profound and secret heresy."<sup>7</sup>

Though evidently admiring of *Minne*'s significance – and, as a "literary" art in particular<sup>8</sup> – Lacan's analysis tends to evoke it without reference to the specificities of literary evidence (with the exception of "Curious Case of Sublimation," included in a "Supplementary

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: 1959-1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 128.

<sup>2</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 112.

<sup>3</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 128.

<sup>4</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 145-49.

<sup>5</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 125.

<sup>6</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 125.

<sup>8</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 107.

Note" <sup>9</sup>). This paper sets out to juxtapose the Lacanian view of *Minne* with an oeuvre that may not be as prone to such monolithic analysis—that of Middle High German *Minnesänger* Walther von der Vogelweide. Walther did compose work that fits into Lacan's framework, one of its best examples being "Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien."<sup>10</sup> There, he constructs that exact sublimated ideal of a beautiful yet unattainable Lady, in strict accordance with the chivalric-romantic convention. However, in songs such as "Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?,"<sup>11</sup> "Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name,"<sup>12</sup> or "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,"<sup>13</sup> the *Minnesänger* questions and sets out to subvert the traditional categories of this genre which, in the words of J. W. Thomas, he personally considered "ridiculous."<sup>14</sup> Subsequently, although Walther remains within the generic codes and structures of the so-called *hohe minne*, and thus inevitably tends to revert back to the Lacanian sublimation process, his surprisingly skeptical, imaginative, and optimistic poetic spirit indicates that the potential for another form of love may not be lost.

### The Minne Paradigm in "Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien"

In "Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien" ["Look how rich a store of treasures"],<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 161-64.

<sup>10</sup> Walther von der Vogelweide, "Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien" (L 51,13), in *Die Gedichte Walthers von der Vogelweide*, trans. Hans Böhm (Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1944), 97.

<sup>11</sup> Walther, "Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?" (L 69,1), in *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Walther, "Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name" (L 48,38), in *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Walther, "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz" (L 74,20), in *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 115.

<sup>14</sup> J. W. Thomas, *Medieval German Lyric Verse in English Translation* (University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Walther, "Muget ir schouwen" (L 51,13), 97. English translation from W. Alison Phillips, "May Song" in *Selected Poems of Walter von der Vogelweide* (Smith, Elder, & Co., 1896), 15.

Walther speaks of a beloved woman of undeniable beauty and inexplicable cruelty. To be exact, according to the way the singer addresses her in the fifth stanza, she is a “frowe” [Lady]<sup>16</sup>—a term conventionally used to address ladies of high social standing. At first, however, the woman is apostrophized as “Rôter munt,”<sup>17</sup> and then as “minneclîch[] mund[].”<sup>18</sup> This oral metonymy posits the Lady’s bodily attractiveness as immediately evident, fundamental to and exhaustive of her as subject of address. Throughout, the singer also associates her with ladylike notions of beauty,<sup>19</sup> joy,<sup>20</sup> wealth and happiness,<sup>21</sup> as well as the power to connect to the natural world,<sup>22</sup> whose delights he celebrates in the first three stanzas.

These romantic and favorable notions, however, remain in the realm of skeptical and anxious potential. The frowe does not abide by the lover’s favorable constructions and happy associations; instead, she mocks his struggle in his love for her [“scham dich daz dû mich an lachest / nâch dem schaden mîn”], wastes his time—and, implicitly, his virile youthfulness [“owê sô verlerner stunde”],<sup>23</sup> torments and treats him with cruelty [“an iu einer ez mir wirret, / ungenædic wîp”].<sup>24</sup> Blurring the line between total devotion and total subjugation, the singer identifies her as a source of his potential happiness, but also the source of his actual sorrow: “Daz mich, frowe, an frôiden irret, / daz ist iuwer lîp. / [...] ir sît doch genâden rîche].”<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, even as he denotes the Lady as removed from all humanity, blind to the

world around her, his poetics still invest her with absolute power over the (in)accessibility of pleasure in his life [“muget ir umbe sehen? / sich frôit al diu welt gemeine: / möhte mir von iu ein kleine / frôideln geschehen!”].<sup>26</sup> In spite of, or because of, her merciless and dehumanising unkindness, his last words still desire at least a fraction of her favour, still believe her to be the right source of his satisfaction and joy.

Walther’s frowe in “Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien” is a paradigmatic Lady of medieval courtly love poetry, an exemplary object of *Minne*. Over and over, the audience finds out about the woman’s beauty and her power—and not much else. She never answers the singer’s addresses—that is, with anything other than acts of cruelty and states of privation—and consequently can never be motivated or understood as a real person. In Lacanian terms, the language of the desiring subject insists only on staging interruptions to a fulfilling connection with *the* object of his desire; meaning, his clear and rigid poetic form only serves to render her physically and socially inaccessible, epistemologically and emotionally obscure. Lacan argues that, over the straightforward satisfaction of the pleasure principle, the subject of *Minne* opts for “the pleasure of experiencing unpleasure,” indefinitely and perversely prolonging the pleasure of desiring via the socially sanctioned techniques of squandering it.<sup>27</sup> Subsequently, ‘a woman’ is sublimated into ‘the Lady’: *she/She* grows to symbolize substantial ethical and existential stakes for the poetic subject, but she herself becomes “emptied of all substance.”<sup>28</sup> The staging of the Lady’s excessive, unreal, and arbitrary cruelty catalyzes this process;<sup>29</sup> for her

<sup>16</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 33.

<sup>17</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 25.

<sup>18</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 31.

<sup>19</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 29.

<sup>20</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 48.

<sup>21</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 38.

<sup>22</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 42.

<sup>23</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), lines 27-30.

<sup>24</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), lines 35-36.

<sup>25</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), lines 33-38.

<sup>26</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), lines 45-48.

<sup>27</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 148-50.

<sup>28</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 149.

<sup>29</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 150.

to remain inhuman, depersonalized as “nothing other than being as signifier,”<sup>30</sup> she must be “terrifying, [an] inhuman partner.”<sup>31</sup> Sublimation is thus not a mode of “idealization,”<sup>32</sup> but rather a counterpart to “perversion” as one of “two forms of transgression beyond the limits normally assigned to the pleasure principle in opposition to the reality principle.”<sup>33</sup> After all, the cruelty of the beautiful Lady in “Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien” disfigures her aesthetic allure explicitly [“...wie dû dich swachest!”].<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, this places no real limit on the singer’s desire for her love—a fact he confesses, or rather shamelessly exclaims, in the last two lines of the *Minnesang*: “möhte mir von iu ein kleine / fröidelîn geschehen!”<sup>35</sup>

### Potential Other Objects in “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” and “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name”

However, even in this “exemplary” *Minnesang* of sublimation, Walther’s skeptical interference into the codes guiding the courtly love tradition makes itself known. In the fourth stanza, the lover bemoans: “owê sô verlornere stunde, / sol von minneclîchem munde / solch unminne ergân!” Although the lament emerges in conditional rather than declarative form—Hans Böhm translates it as “Wehe über die übel angewandte Zeit, wenn aus so lieblichem Mund solche Lieblosigkeit kommen soll!”<sup>36</sup>—its paradoxical association of the “minneclîche” object with *unminne* does gesture towards a hope for an alternate notion of the genre,<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 214.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 150.

<sup>32</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 109.

<sup>34</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 25.

<sup>35</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), lines 47–48.

<sup>36</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), trans. Böhm, lines 30–32.

<sup>37</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 31.

where unkindness is not a worthy object of poetic veneration.

Walther moves towards a theory of this other courtly love in the *Minnesang*: “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” [“Can any tell me what love is?”].<sup>38</sup> In his analysis for the third volume of *The Camden House History of German Literature* (2006), Will Hasty remarks that the song still includes the “standard complaints” towards the lady, constructions of “distance from the beloved,” and explications of the singer’s suffering that are “set pieces of *hohe minne*.” However, he notes it also opens with a “dispassionate” and “critical” reflection about the value and purpose of courtly love, which renders it “as much a commentary on love as a love song proper,” more of a hybrid of *Minnesang* and *Sangsprüche*.<sup>39</sup>

The singer of “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” is so unsatisfied with the epistemic limits which dominate the *Minne* tradition that tradition that he shifts the poetic structure out of the desire to *love* onto the desire to *know*.<sup>40</sup> Opening with a question, which is addressed not to his Lady but to his entire audience, he confesses that he does not understand the paradigm that defines his genre. Instead of casting himself in the codified role of the suffering but conventional lover yet another time, Walther aims at a kind of vulnerability, as he undermines his expertise as a *Minnesänger*—that is, as *the* person who should know what *Minne* is. Nonetheless, the singer admits that he desires to overcome that ignorance [“sô wist ichs gerne mê”],<sup>41</sup> and especially to find a

<sup>38</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” (L 69,1), in *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 69. English translation from Phillips, “Love is two hearts’ happiness” [Can any tell me what love is?], *Selected Poems*, 10.

<sup>39</sup> Will Hasty, “Walther von der Vogelweid,” in *The Camden House History of German Literature, Volume 3: German Literature of the High Middle Ages* (Camden House, 2006), 115.

<sup>40</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 1.

<sup>41</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 2.

signifier to (re)name that wrongly painful type of *Minne*: “minne ist minne, tuot si wol: / tuot si wê, so enheizet si niht rehte minne.”<sup>42</sup> Walther thus emerges as standing against the epistemological obscurity and arbitrary cruelty that defines the sublimated object of the Lacanian *Minne*.

Though Walther does not propose a new name for that wrong type of *Minne*, he does outline a vision for the new category of “rehte minne.”<sup>43</sup> In this moment, he finds himself in a situation Slavoj Žižek undertakes in “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing” (1994): “Where courtly love fails, the possibility of ‘real’ love emerges.”<sup>44</sup> For Walther, that right or ‘real’ type of *Minne* “ist zweier herzen wünne.”<sup>45</sup> That is, it is beautiful if shared equally, but burdensome—if not impossible—when only one partner strives to sustain it [“sol abe ungeteilet sîn, sô enkans ein herze alleine niht enthalten”].<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, though the singer asks for help from his beloved,<sup>47</sup> it is a plea for reciprocal effort, not for the double diminutive of “ein *kleine* fröidelîn,” as in the last line of “Muget ir schouwen waz dem meien.”<sup>48</sup>

Walther unravels an analogous effort of redefining the linguistic categories and codified limits of *Minne* in “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name” [“Woman must ever be a woman’s highest name”].<sup>49</sup> In this *Minnesang*, the singer rejects the value of the Middle High German term *frowe*—a term already discussed previously, denoting in particular a woman’s

<sup>42</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), lines 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 6.

<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing,” in *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six essays on woman and causality* (Verso, 1994), 150.

<sup>45</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 10.

<sup>46</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), lines 12-13.

<sup>47</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 14.

<sup>48</sup> Walther, “Muget ir schouwen” (L 51,13), line 48.

<sup>49</sup> Walther, “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name” (L 48,38), in *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 87. English translation from Phillips, “Woman and Lady” [Woman must ever be a woman’s highest name], *Selected Poems*, 59.

high social status—in favor of the term *wîp*. The latter possessed more natural connotations, without indication of the woman’s class,<sup>50</sup> and thus of her value within patriarchal structures of marital exchange. The singer argues that “frowe” has the capacity for “hōene[n]” [dishonour, contempt], while “wîp dêt ein name ders alle kroenet.”<sup>51</sup> As such, he transgresses the fetishistic conditions of exclusivity and unattainability that medieval courtly culture formulated around highborn women, and thus that defined the conventional object of *hohe minne*: the superhumanly alluring and inhumanely cruel Lady. In that, Walther gestures towards what Žižek describes as the notion of medieval woman that is not “just the name for a distortion of inflection of the male discourse” or the “reified-fetishized effect” of “the specter of ‘woman-in-herself.’”<sup>52</sup> After all, the horizontal ennobling gesture of crowning “alle” women, regardless of ‘high’ or ‘low’ social standing, subverts even the vertical directionalities of the sublimation process—which, in Lacan’s words is meant to “raise[] the object...to the *dignity* of the Thing.”<sup>53</sup>

Notwithstanding, the singer of “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” nevertheless does not propose a new social code. He merely questions,<sup>54</sup> and he guesses.<sup>55</sup> When he ceases his reflection and returns to his ‘real’ “Frowe” in the song’s latter half, the schism between his dreamed “rehte minne” and his ‘real’ love situation crystallizes immediately.<sup>56</sup> He “...trag[t]

<sup>50</sup> H. Swaton, “‘jâ muget ir an der vrouwen daz schoeniste wîp schouwen ...?’—vrouwe und wîp,” *Sælde und êre—Mittelhochdeutsche Schlüsselbegriffe*, accessed December 31, 2025, [http://www.saelde-und-ere.at/Hauptseite/Mhdt/MhdtBegriffe/vrouwe\\_wip.html](http://www.saelde-und-ere.at/Hauptseite/Mhdt/MhdtBegriffe/vrouwe_wip.html).

<sup>51</sup> Walther, “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hōhste name,” *Die Gedichte*, line 13.

<sup>52</sup> Žižek, “Woman as Thing,” 165.

<sup>53</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 112.

<sup>54</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 1.

<sup>55</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 8.

<sup>56</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 15.

ein teil ze swære,” meanwhile his Lady has not indicated the smallest intention of helping him [“wellest dû mir helfen, sô hilf an der zît”].<sup>57</sup> The singer also reenters the self-staged trap of painful disavowal. He promises he will not give up his *Minne* or become a free man [“ein ledic man”<sup>58</sup>] until the Lady admits her indifference explicitly [“endelîche”<sup>59</sup>]. To that end, nearly the entire final stanza consists of questions. However, these enquiries speak *of* her in the distanced third person, and they are never directed *to* her as a subject of address or response.<sup>60</sup> Further, in apparent re-acknowledgement of his expertise as a *Minnesänger*—that is, of his social dependence on the strictly articulated codes of the genre—Walther reminds his silent beloved “daz dich lützel ieman baz geloben kan.”<sup>61</sup> That is, he relies on the erotic-poetic fetish of her unattainability to sustain the uniqueness of his art and love, and thus his livelihood.

Similarly, “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hohste name” is not as interested in a less elitist or masculinist reinterpretation of women’s role in the courtly structures of love, but rather in a recategorization of the feminine for constructing a more worthy but equally strict and sublimated object of a male lover’s *Minne*. The singer proclaims: “under frowen sint unwîp, / under wîben sint si tiure.”<sup>62</sup> This means that there do exist clear distinctions between a “wîp” and an “unwîp,” between right and wrong womanhood—just not in terms of class, but nature. And, in this view, “Der Name Weib und echtes Weibtum sind beide überaus hold.”<sup>63</sup> As such, Walther believes the sublimated illusion

<sup>57</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), lines 15–16.

<sup>58</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 19.

<sup>59</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 18.

<sup>60</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), lines 22–28.

<sup>61</sup> Walther, “Saget mir ieman” (L 69,1), line 21.

<sup>62</sup> Walther, “Wîp muoz iemer” (L 48,38), lines 5–6.

<sup>63</sup> Walther, “Wîp muoz iemer” (L 48,38), lines 7–8.

that the signifier of the Lady derives from the real woman, and that the Symbolic of the feminine object attains to the Real of the desired Thing.

### **A Potential for a Subject in “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz”**

In his translation of Walther’s oeuvre into modern German (1944), Hans Böhm categorizes “Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” and “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hohste name” under the heading “Wider die hohe minne: Gegen Reimar.” Rei(n)mar von Hugenu was Walther’s poetic mentor (if not father figure), and then his poetic rival. The two *Minnesänger* disagreed on the qualities and objects that *Minnesang* should celebrate. Reinmar was a proponent of eternal painstaking devotion to the Lady in the form of *hohe minne*, and thus more in line with the Lacanian *Minne* of sublimation. However, especially later in his career, Walther saw potential in a more lighthearted, accessible, and optimistic notion of love, which he called *niedere minne*.<sup>64</sup> In this context, the songs in the previous section (“Saget mir ieman, waz ist minne?” and “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hohste name”) deconstruct an established generic code, rather than developing a new one. This negative poetic status may be the reason behind the anxious skeptical reactivity that characterizes the former as well as the abstract dogmatic rejection that characterizes the latter.

Walther also composed songs in that new genre of *niedere minne*, one of its best examples being ““Nemt, frowe, disen kranz” [“Lady, accept this wreath!”].<sup>65</sup> As H. B. Willson notes in

<sup>64</sup> Hasty, “Walther von der Vogelweid,” 111–12.

<sup>65</sup> Walther, ““Nemt, frowe, disen kranz” (74,20), *Die Gedichte*, trans. Böhm, 115. English translation from Phillips, “A Dream of Love” [“Lady, accept this wreath!”], *Selected Poems*, 24–25. With this *Minnesang*, I do not follow the stanza order from Böhm, but the one argued for in H. B. Willson, ““Nemt, vrowe, disen kranz,”” *Medium Ævum* 34, no. 3 (1965): 189–202.

his analysis of the *Minnesang* (1965), the singer uses the term “frowe,” but to address a “maget”<sup>66</sup>—another Middle High German term denoting feminine identity, one that similarly to *wîp* holds no “connotations of rank.” Willson continues his argument, stating that this alteration produces an “intentionally strong contrast.”<sup>67</sup> However, it is not a contrast that necessarily rejects one term in favor of the other, as was the case in “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hôhste name,” but that opens them both onto mutually reinforcing signification. Unlike “Wîp muoz iemer sîn der wîbe hôhste name,” the singer does not impose a *kr̥ne* upon the woman either, as he implies he could not afford it.<sup>68</sup> Instead, he asks her to receive a “kranz”—a wreath which he suggests he made himself,<sup>69</sup> and which she explicitly appreciates and then accepts.<sup>70</sup> That is, she finally responds to his gesture of love. The song exemplifies Hasty’s claim that “next to the depiction of the beloved woman as someone of relatively (i.e. to the lady of *hohe minne*) lower social status...is the idea of a love that is both mutual and fulfilled.”<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, in admitting the limitations of language in representing true reciprocal love: “wirt mirs iht mêr, daz trage ich tougen,”<sup>72</sup> and remarking on the blossoming natural landscape,<sup>73</sup> the singer indicates that the relationship is rich, and has been consummated. As such, he has never been “lieber,”<sup>74</sup> a term that gestures beyond *minne*, towards *liebe*. Walther’s speaker has his audience note his joyous bodily state: “seht, dô muost ich von fröiden lachen.”<sup>75</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” lines 1-2.

<sup>67</sup> Willson, “Nemt, vrowe, disen kranz,” 191.

<sup>68</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” lines 5-7.

<sup>69</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” line 12.

<sup>70</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” line 17.

<sup>71</sup> Hasty, “Walther von der Vogelweid,” 113.

<sup>72</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” lines 23–24.

<sup>73</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” lines 27–28.

<sup>74</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” line 26.

<sup>75</sup> Walther, “Nemt, frowe, disen kranz,” line 29.

He is free(,) to finally be happy.

“Nemt, frowe, disen kranz” thus correlates the Lacanian dynamics of sublimation with dynamics of medieval class and rank. In this lengthy but strikingly pertinent quote, W. Alison Phillips provides this as context for his 1896 translation of Walther's works into English:

Between the humble singer and his highborn 'Lady' there could be no thought of marriage; and, indeed, in a society where unamrried girls were kept in great seclusion, the ladies to whom the poets addressed their songs were, more often than not, already wives. And from this follows that, by another convention, the identity of the lady to whom a poet was supposed to be paying his addresses had to be kept by him a profound secret... it is impossible to suppose that, even if the 'gallant troubadours' had escaped the vigilance of the 'watchers' or 'guardians' of whom they so often complain, the fathers, husbands, and brothers of the ladies in question would have for a moment tolerated the presence of the low-born singers,... if their poetical hopes and aspirations had been taken seriously.<sup>76</sup>

Consequently, the fundamental sublimation framework of unaddressed complaint, excessive romantic privation, and symbolic depersonalization emerges as a social necessity. The stakes that motivate the staging of “conventional obstacles” on the poetic field of *Minne* for the desiring male subject—a staging which aims at “elevating the value of the object” and thus at concealing the “inherent impossibility of attaining” it<sup>77</sup>—are not simply erotic and ethical, but social and material. After all, in contrast to Reinmar, Walther was presumably lowborn.<sup>78</sup> He could neither truly love nor truly know the highborn lady as a ‘fellow-creature’ [*Nebenmensch*]<sup>78</sup>—not just because “attaining” the Lady is “inherently” impossible, but because the lady and the

<sup>76</sup> Phillips, *Selected Poems*, xxi-xxii.

<sup>77</sup> Žižek, “Woman as Thing,” 155.

<sup>78</sup> Hasty, “Walther von der Vogelweid,” 110.

*Minnesänger* would have been inherently mutually unattainable by virtue of class.<sup>79</sup> This distinction may be potent for Lacan's occasional tendency towards rank arbitrariness: "Whatever the social position of him who functions in the role, the inaccessibility of the object is posited as a point of departure,"<sup>80</sup> or Žižek's seamless projection of the Lady-*Minnesänger* relationship onto the "vassal to his feudal Master-Sovereign" relationship,<sup>81</sup> a medieval dynamic of, potentially, more 'real' access.

In this new genre, then, does "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz" posit another subject? Its woman receives another role, the *frowe-maget*, but she remains depersonalized in her namelessness, textual silence, and unknown motive. And, despite her *niedere* status, the singer insists on staging her according to *hohe minne* codes, addressing her with the formal "ir"<sup>82</sup> and swearing "triuwe" to her,<sup>83</sup> a promise resembling "the oath of fealty he would swear to a lady of high rank."<sup>84</sup> Most damningly, as the final stanza reveals:

[The singer] has not actually met the maid and enjoyed her love... he has constructed the entire scene of a meeting with her within the framework of a dream. She is his ideal of feminine beauty and charm, literally: the girl of his dreams. And since the girl herself is an ideal, rather than a reality, the same must be said of the whole relationship.<sup>85</sup>

At least in the waking world, , the singer is still stuck in his real sorrow ["sorgen"].<sup>86</sup> The new type of *Minne* he desires is "just as difficult to

<sup>79</sup> Žižek, "Woman as Thing," 155.

<sup>80</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 149.

<sup>81</sup> Žižek, "Woman as Thing," 151.

<sup>82</sup> Walther, "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz," line 3.

<sup>83</sup> Walther, "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz," line 8.

<sup>84</sup> Willson, "Nemt, vrowe, disen kranz," 191.

<sup>85</sup> Willson, "Nemt, vrowe, disen kranz" 198.

<sup>86</sup> Walther, "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz," line 36.

attain as in the conventional type of song"—a "structurally analogous," though highly imaginative, "'perversion'" of the Lacanian *Minne*.<sup>87</sup> Thus, in this new genre, Walther fails to posit another subject, although he does dream her—and in this perversion, this counterpart to sublimation itself, rests the potential for "transgression beyond the limits normally assigned...."<sup>88</sup>

## Conclusion

The *Minnesänge* of Walther von der Vogelweide merge skepticism with optimism, tradition with subversion, and reflective sorrow with lighthearted joy, constantly negotiating between what Lacan would call the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary. The songs did not revolutionize the *Minne* paradigm, nor do they offer a satisfactory positive alternative. Nonetheless, they are as "deliberately articulated" as they are profoundly "stupefying."<sup>89</sup> It is thanks to its pursuit of the new, the other, and the occasionally perverse that Walther's oeuvre develops such a polyvalent relationship with the aesthetic, erotic, and socioethical stakes of the Lacanian *Minne*, and thus desires to dream towards a love unlimited by it.

<sup>87</sup> Willson, "Nemt, frowe, disen kranz," 191-201.

<sup>88</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 109.

<sup>89</sup> Lacan, *Ethics*, 125.

## Dark Humor and Carnavalesque Spectacle: A Comparison Between Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Julie Taymor's *Titus*

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*Titus Andronicus* is Shakespeare's earliest tragedy and was one of the most popular plays during the Elizabethan era. It tells the story of a series of revenge incidents between the Roman general Titus and his captive, the Goth Queen Tamora. The play is not widely recognized in academia. Literary theorists criticize it for its gory plots filled with killing, rape, and dismemberment. The "untimely" dark humor that runs through the story seems to further highlight the bad taste. Scholar John Dover Wilson commented that the story "seems to jolt and bump along like some broken-down cart, laden with bleeding corpses from an Elizabethan scaffold and driven by an executioner from Bedlam dressed in cap and bells." However, in 1999, Julie Taymor, a musical director who just achieved great success with Broadway's "The Lion King," turned her attention to this totally different tragedy and decided to create her first film based on it. She holds respect and love for the original play and instead of "rewriting" the story, she hopes to "fill it out visually," combining realism and surrealism in formal construction to reflect the complexity of the story itself. Taymor notices and values the absurd and nightmarish "outrageous humor juxtaposed to potent tragedy" in *Titus Andronicus*, making this balance of humor and cruelty a focal point of the film as well.<sup>1</sup> This paper will compare the comic effects and functions of the film *Titus* with the original

play, exploring how Taymor adopts Shakespeare's style, enhances it through cinematic techniques, and incorporates her unique innovations and omissions, reflecting her artistic intentions.

In Shakespeare's play, the most notable and frequently criticized aspect is his wordplay-like rhetorical treatment of body parts— "Not only is a hand chopped off on stage: worse, dreadful puns are made about it."<sup>2</sup> On one hand, the play contains multiple instances where metaphors of mutilation are later literalized or materialized. When Marcus nominates Titus as the emperor, he describes Rome as "headless"; this rhetoric originally metaphorically represents the chaotic situation of the empire, but it is materialized when two of Titus's sons are beheaded. When Bassianus rebuts Saturninus by saying, "Rape call you it, my lord, to seize my own, My true-betrothed love and now my wife," he intends to legitimize his relationship with Lavinia, yet the metaphor of "rape" is also brutally realized on Lavinia later. When read retrospectively, these literalized metaphors seem prophetic, conveying a sense of tragic fate. As such metaphors increase in number, a sense of artificiality emerges, making readers feel they are both related to and detached from the plot, pointing more toward the author's sophisticated textual experimentation. This kind of deliberate "alienation" from painful scenes is Shakespeare's dark humor. Meanwhile, the atrocity produced by the materialization of rhetoric could be seen as a metaphor for "speech is violence." Shakespeare seems to reflect on the nature of language, exploring its enormous potential to distort and provoke reality.

On the other hand, the text frequently

<sup>1</sup> Maria De Luca et al., "Mayhem, Madness, Method: An Interview with Julie Taymor," *Cinéaste* 25, no. 1 (2000): 31.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Titus Andronicus*, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 1.

uses metonymy and exploits the multiple meanings of words to achieve puns. For example, the element of "hand" appears over sixty times in the text: when his son is wronged and the tribunes all act indifferently, Titus says, "Give me a sword, I'll chop off my hands too, For they have fought for Rome, and all in vain"; when Aaron deceives Titus, saying that the emperor needs his hand to redeem his son, Titus replies, "Lend me thy hand, and I will give thee mine"; when Titus sees Lavinia mutilated, he deplores, "what accursed hand, hath made thee handless in thy father's sight?" These puns based on suffering create a greater sense of alienation than the metaphors hidden across the broader text. They do not possess any fate-indicative significance related to the theme; their existence is almost solely for the sake of dark humor itself. Moreover, Shakespeare positions the characters who suffer most as the mouthpieces for these jokes, rendering their dialogue somewhat jarring and lacking in psychological authenticity. Shakespeare's textual detachment may weaken the emotional coherence of the story, but we must acknowledge the aesthetic value of this "excess of dramatic witness with a talent untamed."<sup>3</sup>

Taymor's *Titus* retains most of the original play's metaphors and puns, restoring Shakespeare's dark humor. Moreover, the film's rich audiovisual language diminishes the sense of disjunction brought by the rhetoric, immersing the audience more deeply. For instance, in the scene where Aaron cuts off Titus's hand, the film's rapid background music, dazzling light effects from lightning, and the significantly shaky camera tracking the actor's movement all create a tense atmosphere. This greatly engages the

audience's emotions, draws their attention, and reduces their focus on the somewhat abrupt text itself; Anthony Hopkins' vivid performance also makes the dialogue more realistic and natural. This seamless incorporation of dark humor makes the film's narrative smoother and more complete—although films lack the intimate reader-author dialogue space unique to literary texts, losing the intellectual interaction with the author, who seemingly transcends the narrative and floats above the text.

While Taymor reproduces the literalization of metaphors from the original play, she also uses cinematic technology to further explore and materialize new metaphors in the story. For example, in the scene after Lavinia's mutilation, Taymor arranges for her to stand on a stump, shockingly replacing her amputated limbs with branches. The stump and branches visually represent the pun on Lavinia's "stumps," echoing Marcus' mournful exclamation of "what stern ungentle hands.. .have made thy body bare of her two branches" and Aaron's joke about "trimming" in the ending part of the story. The imagery is disturbingly unsettling, and it's hard to say it has a traditional "comic effect," but to some degree, it might provoke "laughter" from the audience. If Shakespeare manipulates the relationship between language and events on a realistic level, Taymor's use of rhetorical materialization directly extends to the magical dimension, injecting Shakespeare's humor with a new, crazier life. If the former is somewhat surprising for some readers, then Taymor's adaptation might be an "eye-opening" experience. This horrifying representation that shatters imagination, combined with the suspense and anxiety built up in the audience's mind during the first half of the film, might

<sup>3</sup> Albert H. Tricomi, "The Aesthetics of Mutilation in *Titus Andronicus*," in *Shakespeare and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 226-39.

prompt “laughter” at this moment as a coping mechanism to face shocking disruptions and release emotional tension.

Shakespeare's use of metaphors and puns introduces a rhetorical humor that is somewhat detached. However, on the narrative level, *Titus Andronicus* is enveloped in a chaotic, frenzied, carnival-like comic sense, resembling a “broken-down cart from Bedlam.” Mikhail Bakhtin, a 20th-century Russian literary critic, proposes in his book “Rabelais and His World” that the carnival itself is a collective, ritualistic festival that can be traced back to medieval European folk traditions—where people set aside work to experience a “second life” in the squares, engaging in festive revelry, eating, drinking, dissolving public boundaries in laughter. Bakhtin develops the concept of the carnival as a literary mode that uses chaos and humor to subvert power structures. He believes that the carnival's significant features are reflected not only in the grotesque festive imagery but also in the “crowning-uncrowning,” the transformative power that subverts the established order.<sup>4</sup> To some extent, the character portrayal and narrative in *Titus Andronicus* resonate with Bakhtin's theory of “carnivalization of literature.”

The grotesqueness, as a superficial feature of the carnival, is primarily manifested through imagery in *Titus Andronicus*. Shakespeare's depiction of grotesque bodies is closely tied to Bakhtin's “material bodily principle.” Bakhtin believes that “the classical body is sealed and finished; it does not leak. The grotesque body, however, is one whose orifices are open to the world. It spills over well-defined bounds.”<sup>5</sup> Shakespeare's play is

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Paul Allen Miller, “The Bodily Grotesque in Roman Satire: Images of Sterility,” *Arethusa* 31, no. 3 (September 1998): 257-83.

filled with extensive dismemberment—sacrificed viscera, tongues plucked out, hands amputated, heads chopped off—all displaying this “incompleteness.” Dismemberment anatomically disrupts the integrity of the characters' bodies; the originally coherent bodies that conform to classical aesthetics and evoke a sense of sublimity are degraded to a form of grotesque, ugly, physical abnormality. The “openness” left by dismemberment symbolizes the breaking of boundaries and interaction with the outside world; “the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.” Lavinia's mutilation is a visual representation of the “orifice.” Marcus describes her wounds as “...this loss of blood, as from a conduit with three issuing spouts.” Although Lavinia is muted and silenced, these bleeding openings disrupt the order of language, demanding spectators' full attention and consuming them, emitting a devouring power more resonant than any sound. Taymor impactfully visualizes these grotesque bodies through her filmic techniques. First, the camera language's “show, don't tell” nature inherently enhances emotional engagement and draws the audience's attention more effectively. For example, in the shot where Marcus discovers and approaches Lavinia, she turns towards him, bending forward with arms and mouth wide open, as blood pours from her mouth, streaming down with the wind. The effect of slow-motion freezes time, compelling the audience to fully absorb the visual impact. Meanwhile, the camera smoothly zooms in from a medium shot to a medium close-up; the audience is drawn increasingly closer to Lavinia, whose body expands and whose mouth, deep and black-hole-like, begins to dominate the center of the screen—even though she is silent, the audience feels engulfed by her pain and fear.

Second, Taymor introduces an innovative narrative element in the film, which she calls Penny Arcade Nightmares (PAN).<sup>6</sup> These consist of a series of surrealistic, stylized images that reveal characters' psychological traumas or hallucinations, or are strategically placed in the narrative as transitions. The magical, creative visual style of PAN effectively embodies the grotesque's exaggerated effect. On one hand, PAN represents Bakhtin's concept of the open and unfinished body that is "blended with the world, with animals, with objects."<sup>7</sup> In Titus's hallucination about his son Mutius, Mutius's head eerily connects to the body of a sacrificial lamb, questioning his father's conscience. In Lavinia's flashback of her rape, she is a hybrid of a human and a doe, hinting at her innocence and exploited nature. On the other hand, PAN also showcases grotesque body parts. In the transition PAN at the end of Act 1, Alarbus's dismembered limbs and torso float in the air; in Titus's fantasy of the Revenge, the "goddess" reveals an overly swollen chest and belly—parts that for Bakhtin are significant in their protrusion and boundary-breaking.

Third, Taymor places a greater emphasis on sexuality linked to "lower bodily functions." Following the scene where Titus shoots arrows, the audience will see a nude party in a swimming pool, and Tamora and Saturninus lying naked in bed. Taymor also accentuates the incestuous energy between the Goth mother and her sons, and among the two brothers. For example, while Shakespeare's original play only shows the boy's dialogue arguing over Lavinia, in the film, they are entangled in bed, discussing their desires.

Bakhtin believes that by gaming with and mocking terrifying things, they are

transformed into comical monsters; the humor inherent in the grotesque images themselves stems from the audience's overcoming of the horror they represent. This explanation is similar to the previously mentioned idea that "laughter" can be seen as a coping mechanism to alleviate stress in the face of overwhelming impacts. However, the grotesque images in *Titus Andronicus* are too bloody and cruel to truly face with an attitude of "mockery"—in fact, the greatest sense of humor in the story does not come from the grotesque images themselves, but from the degradation of these images, the changes and contrasts between being "crowned" and then "uncrowned": the humor arises from the subversive nature of the carnival. At the beginning of the play, Titus is nominated as emperor for defending Rome, yet he advocates the tradition of "the eldest son succeeding the throne", even going so far as to ruthlessly kill his own rebellious son, symbolizing harsh patriarchal authority; Lavinia is beautiful and graceful, like "Rome's rich ornament," and possesses the "precious" chastity; Titus's sons return from the battlefield as brave, glorious warriors obedient to their father; their uncle Marcus is also a just and generous tribune. The Andronici family entirely aligns with serious, traditional morality and order. However, for the Goths, from the moment Titus ignores a mother's pleas and orders the brutal dismemberment and sacrifice of Alarbus, the Andronici represents an oppressive regime. The reversal of roles between Tamora and Titus, with the former being "crowned" and the latter being "uncrowned," is triggered by Saturninus' succession. From then on, the Goths adopt a "carnavalesque" style of revenge, inflicting sins with a mad, ecstatic attitude. Their atrocities are unbearably cruel yet contain a certain

<sup>6</sup>De Luca et al., "Mayhem, Madness, Method," 30.

<sup>7</sup>Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

subversive meaning. This dissolution of the old order and serious traditions brings a pleasure of mental liberation, to some extent provoking “laughter”—especially when we adopt the perspective of the Moor Aaron, who, due to racial reasons, suffers the most significant structural oppression and thus experiences the humor brought about by subversion more intensely.

Aaron appears twice as a criminal in public executions. Foucault states, “In these executions, which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince, there was the whole aspect of the carnival, in which the rules were inverted, authority mocked, and criminals transformed into heroes.”<sup>8</sup> His statement aligns perfectly with Aaron’s situation. Every public execution in the story actually serves to mask the incompetence and hollowness of those in power. Initially, when Alarbus is sacrificed, Rome is in a chaotic, “headless” state; Saturninus orders the execution of the messenger clown in a state of panic and terror; and when Aaron is executed, Lucius is either in exile or has just experienced the death of his father and sister and ascended to the throne.<sup>9</sup> Aaron’s sadistic delight in evil deeds and his enthusiasm for subversive, carnivalesque fervor leave the vacant, rigid Lucius defenseless. Faced with Aaron’s joke about Lavinia being “trimmed,” Lucius can only weakly retort, “Call'st thou that trimming?” And by the story’s end, Lucius’s impassioned judgment and accusations also fail to impact Aaron, who mocks, “I am no baby...If one good deed in all my life I did, I do repent it from my very soul.”

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Molly Easo Smith, “Spectacles of Torment in Titus Andronicus,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no. 2 (1996): 315.

In such situations, the audience is overawed but impressed by Aaron’s powerful sense of evil and humor, finding Lucius stiff, boring, and even laughable. The philosopher Henri Bergson’s theory aptly explains the latter’s comic effect—laughter arises when the audience perceives “something mechanical in something living.”<sup>10</sup> The Andronici, represented by Lucius, facing the Goths’ carnivalesque revenge, are stiff and powerless, embodying their adherence to dogmatism and mechanized thinking, forgetting the complexity and flexibility of human nature. Marcus’ poetic description is another example of this rigidity. Faced with Lavinia’s tragic situation, he expresses, “a crimson river of warm blood, like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind, doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips, coming and going with thy honey breath.” His language is equally feeble and awkward, unable to counter the fervor of the carnival-style energy and even trivializing Lavinia’s pain, creating a comic effect.

The film “Titus” vividly portrays the contrast between the “crowning” and “uncrowning” of the Andronici, demonstrating the powerful subversive power. For example, after Titus’s triumphant return, there is a scene where his sons bathe in the bathroom. Taymor uses a medium long shot, framing it like a symmetrical oil painting. Light streams in from circular windows above, steam rises creating a mist, and light and shadows intermingle. Nude males resembling ancient Greek sculptures give a sense of sublimity. This classical beauty further highlights the future degradation of the sons being beheaded and exiled, revealing the Goths’ disruption of order. Another example is the scene where Lavinia is mutilated; her pure

<sup>10</sup> Henri Bergson et al., *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2014).

white dress and the heavy background music create a sense of sanctity, which contrasts sharply with her grotesque disfigurement after the injury. Additionally, the director's handling of Aaron's character also shows her acknowledgment of the power of subversion. Aaron is the character who "breaks the fourth wall" most frequently in the film, stepping out of the narrative to speak directly to the audience. It enhances the audience's engagement, allowing them to empathize with Aaron more deeply, and to a certain extent, better understand his eager humor in disrupting all order. However, the film significantly reduces the mechanical, dogmatic sense of the Andronici. In the scene where Marcus confronts Lavinia, Taymor cuts most of the pretentious, awkward lyrical language. At the same time, the film's visual effects and the actor's performance inject power into Marcus' reaction. The director gives Marcus nearly 20 seconds of close-up: his pupils dilate, his lips tremble, and his expression of grief exhausts the entire screen, delivering a tremendous emotional impact to the audience. As Epstein said, "The close-up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm, I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of his suffering. I would be able to taste the tears."<sup>11</sup> Taymor's camera work softens the stiffness of the Andronici, making the characters' emotions more natural and full, yet also reducing some of the comedic effects.

The Andronici's retaliation against the Goths begins when Titus decides to accept and enter into the narrative of the carnival. Upon discovering his daughter mutilated, his son exiled, and his own hand exchanged for the chopped-off heads of his other two children, "Dramatic decorum dictates that you should

rant ('Now is a time to storm,' says Marcus),"<sup>12</sup> yet Titus laughs: "Ha, ha, ha!" Taymor believes that "when we're in our deepest, darkest circumstances...the only way to survive is through humor."<sup>13</sup> Titus's laughter breaks through dogmatism and reverence, adopting the madness and comic approach of the carnival to respond to atrocities at his lowest point of being uncrowned and degraded, thereby reclaiming his humanity. From then on, his revenge carries the same carnival-style energy. His language becomes less serious, at times even becoming absurd and capricious: when consoling crying Lavinia, he says, "Get some little knife between thy teeth, and just against thy heart make thou a hole, that all the tears that thy poor eyes let fall may run into that sink"; upon seeing Marcus kill a fly, he laments, "How if that fly had a father and mother?" He sends ironic scrolls to the Chiron brothers, and even Aaron comments, "Were our witty empress well afoot, she would applaud Andronicus' conceit." He also shoots blasphemous arrows into the sky. However, the most carnival-like and terrifying scene is still the story's ending, with Titus serving as the chef at the banquet. The "banquet" culture itself is a significant concept in Bakhtin's theory. On one hand, in the public banquet, people set aside social hierarchies and power relations by sharing food, and engaging in a temporarily equal atmosphere. The banquet thus embodies the key characteristics of the carnival's "universality and richness." In Titus Andronicus, the final banquet is nominally for "peace, for love, for league," a campaign negotiation. The Roman Emperor, Queen, Tribunes, and Lucius, leading the Gothic army, at least outwardly gather politely together, temporarily dissolving the Roman-Goth binary

<sup>11</sup> Mary Ann Doane, "The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema," *differences* 14, no. 3 (December 2003): 109.

<sup>12</sup> Bate, *Titus Andronicus*, 11.

<sup>13</sup> De Luca et al., "Mayhem, Madness, Method," 31.

opposition that has persisted throughout the story. On the other hand, both the diners and the food are closely related to grotesque bodies. Appetite and digestion, the fundamental physiological needs belonging to lower bodily functions, are inherently anti-serious and anti-sublime; meat also implies dismemberment and death—especially since, at Titus' feast, the meat pies are made from the bodies of the Chiron brothers: "Let me go grind their bones to powder small, and with this hateful liquor temper it, and in that paste let their vile heads be baked." All previous grotesque dismemberment images seem to pave the way for this final kitchen dissection. Equally impressive is Titus further degrading himself to a clown figure, dressing in a chef's outfit that even surprises Saturninus. Although he does not participate as one of the diners, he enters the banquet's revelry in a humorous and powerful manner. When Tamora eats the meat pie, the grotesqueness comes not only from her consuming human flesh but also from her swallowing sons born from her own womb; her pride and dignity are defiled, her persona reduced to a physical, animalistic level. Titus, in a more "humorous" carnival-style revenge, demotes the self-righteous Gothic queen, uncrowning her. After revealing the truth, his immediate stabbing of Tamora and the ensuing melee might seem odd. But perhaps deep, painful psychological torment more closely resembles the aesthetics of serious tragedy, while a chaotic, hasty, and manic farce fits a carnival-style ending better.

Taymor's film depicts and even magnifies the carnivalesque characteristics of Titus's revenge, highlighting his madness more explicitly. In the scene where Tamora disguises herself as Revenge to deceive Titus, Shakespeare directly states Titus's sobriety in

the play: "I know them all, though they suppose me mad." However, Taymor believes that Shakespeare's handling makes "the idea of madness is just not clear." She removed this line, leaving the audience with ambiguous suspense, making them feel that Titus "is most reasonable when he is most mad," echoing the complexity of the carnival. Additionally, Taymor's visual treatment of the banquet also accentuates the grotesqueness and richness of the carnival. Firstly, the stark contrast in guests' costumes reflects the inclusivity of the banquet—indeed, the universality of the carnival is more emphasized throughout the film. Taymor blends styles from different eras, combining "retro-contemporary-futuristic" artistic expressions in architecture, props, and costumes. This not only makes the audience feel that Titus represents "a compendium of 2,000 years of warfare and violence," but also breaks and blurs cultural boundaries in a carnivalesque manner, weakening the story's self-other dichotomy. Secondly, the close-ups of steaming meat pies and guests swallowing and chewing food diminish the sense of sublime beauty, making the banquet more worldly and highlighting its material physicality. Lastly, Titus appearing in a stark white chef's uniform behind a red curtain also brings a dramatic comic effect.

In Bakhtin's theory, folktales often conclude with a banquet. He believes that eating signifies the triumph of life over death, representing the way people absorb nature's food, thereby gaining renewal. The banquet is an "end that contains the potentialities of the new beginning."<sup>14</sup> It symbolizes the "regenerative power" of the carnival as a mode of social reform, overturning stable, closed systems into continuous possibilities. However,

<sup>14</sup> Shanti Elliott, "Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore," *Folklore Forum* (1999): 129-39.

the banquet in *Titus Andronicus*, although concluding a series of revenge events, seems not to bring about “new possibilities.” In Shakespeare’s play, Lucius ascends to the throne. Ironically, he is the one who cruelly sacrifices Alarbus, inaugurating the chain of revenge. When he describes in detail before the crowd—“Alarbus’ limbs are lopped, and entrails feed the sacrificing fire, whose smoke like incense doth perfume the sky,” his actions are fundamentally no different from Aaron’s. Although the final lines of the play suggest, “Then afterwards, to order well the state, that like events may ne’er it ruin,” Lucius’s rule actually signifies a return to the Andronici family’s original dogmatic and harsh old order. The author does not leave much hope for possibilities; instead, the ending seems to hint at the beginning of another vicious cycle. Overall, in Shakespeare’s story, the function of the carnival acts more like a “safety valve”; after temporarily releasing social tensions, the order is maintained.<sup>15</sup>

Taymor’s handling of the ending in the film differs from Shakespeare’s. While she retains Lucius’s succession, she emphasizes the “alliance” between Lucius’s young son and Tamora’s newborn infant: the film’s final scene is a long shot of little Lucius walking towards a gradually brightening sunrise, holding the baby. This image clearly symbolizes rebirth and hope. However, against a backdrop where structural oppression remains unshaken, this “hope” appears somewhat hollow and forced, like a consolation and call to action from Taymor to the audience. Shakespeare’s stance and intent in the story are not prominent, not carrying a clear message to alert or enlighten the audience; Taymor’s film, however, is reflective and educational. Apart from the

call-to-action “hopeful” ending, the entire film employs a Brechtian distancing effect. The audience views the characters and events entirely from the perspective of little Lucius. On one hand, the child’s innocence contrasts starkly with the story’s brutality, forcing the audience to empathize from the perspective of a child, critical of violence. On the other hand, this voyeuristic viewpoint, along with techniques like “breaking the fourth wall,” and other metacinematic elements—such as the carnival wagon “freak show” in the film—point to the medium of film itself, reminding the audience that they are observers outside the drama, allowing them to disengage from the plot and reflect independently on their own situation. For Taymor, even Titus’s laughter serves a similar purpose: to prevent “the audience from getting so locked into the sentimentality that they can’t also step out of it and be aware of what’s happening, and of their own feelings about it.”<sup>16</sup>

To summarize, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare employs black humor as a rhetorical device to achieve an intellectual aesthetic pleasure, while the narrative of revenge itself echoes Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival—the grotesque images and their symbolic transformative power possess subversive and liberating humor. On one hand, Taymor’s film vividly continues, and even amplifies, the comic sense of the original play through its use of audiovisual language. On the other hand, for the sake of narrative authenticity and coherence, Taymor cuts some of the black humor from the Shakespearean drama that was achieved through “detachment” and “abruptness.” However, she enhances the Brechtian effect of alienation in her own work through a meta-discursive approach, aiming to guide the audience to reflect on the theme of violence independently.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Holquist, “Bakhtin and Rabelais: Theory as Praxis,” *boundary 2* 11, no. 1-2 (1982): 5.

<sup>16</sup> De Luca et al., “Mayhem, Madness, Method,” 31.

# Marlow, The Awakened Modernist: Placing Georg Lukács' "The Ideology of Modernism" In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

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## I | Introduction

In 1902, Joseph Conrad introduced to Western literature one of the most enigmatic characters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: narrative vessel of the *Heart of Darkness*, Charles Marlow. Conrad's novel is, at its core, a disrupted text. An onslaught of asides, outbursts, and digressions shatter the ideal of conventional narrative, and he recomposes the shards into the delicate mosaic of an individual embroiled in both inter- and intra-personal conflict. Indeed, Marlow's is an embattled consciousness, under siege of competing desires and fears that emotionally punctuate his storytelling. Fortunately, his meta-narrative complaints offer a means of understanding an otherwise inscrutable internal conflict. By way of an ontological exclamation in *Section I*, Georg Lukács' 1962 essay, "The Ideology of Modernism," offers critical insights into both Marlow's psychic evolution and his narrative motivations. Juxtaposing these two works transforms the *Heart of Darkness* into the portrait of an awakened Lukácsian Modernist: Marlow, through his encounter with Kurtz and Kurtz's Intended, realizes the Modernist condition—that humans are inherently solitary and unable to meaningfully develop relationships with others—and revolts through narration, hoping that either the effective transmission of his experience or the discovery of a contradiction will remedy his Modernist conversion. At stake in this effort is a recovered capacity to engage in society. It is this active struggle that endows the *Heart of Darkness* with

its characteristic complexity, for at its heart, it is a struggle to understand each reality, the other, and the self.

## II | Marlow

Marlow articulates his psychological conflict in the first major meta-narrative outburst. His tale proceeds relatively smoothly until he reaches the Middle Station, where a benign discourse on Kurtz flares frustration: "I had heard Mr. Kurtz was in there [...]—God knows! Yet somehow it didn't bring any image with it."<sup>1</sup> Marlow's frustration with the weakness of the signifier in portraying the signified leads into the major critical point of the narration:

I did not see the man in the name any more than you do. Do you see him? Do you see the story? Do you see anything? It seems to me I am trying to tell you a dream—making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation.

His intuition develops into certainty as he evaluates:

No, it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream—alone...<sup>2</sup>

This statement not only recharacterizes Marlow's preceding and succeeding narrative work but imports paved literary theory into the discussion. Marlow's claim, a dogmatic evaluation of the human condition, aligns perfectly with Lukács' definition of Modernist thought. In response to the fundamental question—"What is Man?"—the Modernists abandon the Realist school's conviction in the

<sup>1</sup>Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Penguin Classics, 2012), pp. 20.

<sup>2</sup>Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

Aristotelian dictum that “Man is zoon politikon, a social animal” and retorts that man is “by nature solitary, asocial, [and] unable to enter into relationships with other human beings.” No man can truly understand another in this world of pervasive loneliness where reality cannot be impacted, nor can other human beings be affected by individual, subjective experiences. Marlow’s assessment of this comprehensive solitude develops the Modernist consequence that “Man, thus imagined, may establish contact with other individuals [...] only in a superficial, accidental manner; only, ontologically speaking, by retrospective reflection.”<sup>3</sup> Attempts to convey life experience are futile, especially where the nature of the experience is nothing but retrospective reflection on another; here, Kurtz.

Marlow’s conviction in his declaration, however, is immediately questioned. Not only does he continue to narrate his adventure, but after pausing, sheepishly adds: “Of course in this you fellows see more than I could then. You see me, whom you know...”<sup>4</sup> The central tension thus rears its head. The version of himself that Marlow is attempting to relay in his narrative cannot be seen by his listeners, just as he could not see Kurtz while in conversation at the Middle Station. Recognizing this reality and applying it to his own narrative act, however, is too destabilizing a task. Present in Marlow is a simultaneous desire to relay an experience, and a conviction that no experience can be relayed. Marlow is no Modernist disciple; he is a convert unprepared to accept the consequences. At eleven different moments, he confirms a statement with the outward appeal “you see.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Georg Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1962), pp. 19 -20.

<sup>4</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 19, 21, 24, 41, 42, 47, 55, 58, 60

In ten different moments, he conjoins a description with the phrase “you know.”<sup>6</sup> Marlow does not intend to traverse the content of his telling alone yet again, and now takes with him the belief that his audience can share the sentiments of both his present and narrated selves, all the while latently aware, however, that this work, and the potentially retroactive component of alleviating himself of his past solitude, is impossible. The result is a self-conscious, unsustainable narrative that incessantly seeks the authorization of its audience.

The descriptions of the prime narrator, the unnamed individual who is listening to and portraying Marlow’s narrative work to the reader, confirms Marlow’s plight. The desperate ‘Do you see anything?’ is met with the solemn “[i]t had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another.” Marlow is isolated by the darkness of the night, and his voice is even stripped from his personage as the prime narrator notes that “[f]or a long time he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice.” Marlow is thus condemned to the same fate as the Kurtz in his portrayal as he too becomes divorced from his form, represented only by an empty signifier of himself while his listeners perceive his voice to “shape itself without human lips.”<sup>7</sup> The effect of the ‘Do you see him?’ section is thus to portray Marlow as a broken man, correct in his fear that he cannot be understood but desiring to be understood nonetheless as he delivers a narrative to an indiscernible audience. The answer to how he came to this state can be found in the very name that produced enough anxiety and frustration to tear his narrative and motivate the assertion of the Modernist

<sup>6</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 17, 19, 22, 27, 30, 34, 39, 41, 48, 50, 54, 55, 58, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

ideology.

### III | Kurtz

Marlow's encounter with Kurtz dissolves his faith in the Realist tenet that human beings can understand each other and forces upon him the devastating Modernist reality that "Man is [...] as inexplicable to others as to himself."<sup>8</sup> From the onset, Kurtz confounds conception. He begins as the inscrutable story of a man traveling three hundred miles on a float of ivory before turning "towards the depths of the wilderness,"<sup>9</sup> and he becomes the vibrating voice produced by a body incapable of whispering, the face satiated by every emotion even in the throes of disease. Such impossibilities, Marlow notes, are "as true as everything else in his life," and it is finally when intercepting him in yet another return to the wilderness that Marlow recognizes no human, but an exhaled vapour of the Earth:

And, don't you see, the terror of the position was [...] in this, that I had to deal with a being to whom I could not appeal in the name of anything high or low. I had [...] to invoke him—himself—his own exalted and incredible degradation. There was nothing either above or below him, and I knew it. He had kicked himself loose of the earth. Confound the man! he had kicked the very earth to pieces. He was alone, and I before him did not know whether I stood on the ground or floated in the air.

Kurtz's inscrutability, his answer that he knows "perfectly" what he is doing while Marlow can only speculate that the man's motives arise from forgotten instinct, ruptures the Realist facade. Marlow's reality, tethered together by human relationships and a belief in the social man, is kicked apart by this counter-example, this truly solitary man, this man as animal. The weight of this moment proves powerful enough to tear his

narrative in another outburst:

I've been telling you what we said—repeating the phrases we pronounced—but what's the good? They were common everyday words—the familiar, vague sounds exchanged on every waking day of life. But what of that? They had behind them, to my mind, the terrific suggestiveness of words heard in dreams, of phrases spoken in nightmares.

Frustration with the impotence of communication continues to infect Marlow's world. Words—the raw materials of the exchange with Kurtz—reiterated beyond the moment carry none of their previous importance. The words meant to convey the experience are equally inept, failing to portrait the time spent at the Inner Station just as much as any other moment of the adventure. Words—demonstrably feeble architects—are thus equally inept at establishing relationships between human beings. Marlow saw in that climactic moment that Kurtz "could not have been more irretrievably lost," that Kurtz could not have been any more alone or more beyond human reach even though "the foundations of [their] intimacy were being laid" in the grass. Thrusting deeper into the Modernist architecture, Marlow acknowledges the insanity of Kurtz's soul, an insanity wrought by isolation and demanded when Kurtz's soul "had looked within itself."<sup>10</sup> Lukács provides a mechanism for this exact diagnosis: "If reality cannot be understood [...] then the individual's subjectivity—alone in the universe, reflecting only itself—takes on an equally incomprehensible and horrific character."<sup>11</sup> Marlow witnessed this incomprehensibility, this "inconceivable mystery" at war with itself—"I had [...] to go through the ordeal of looking into it myself"—disillusioning him with the naivety of the Realist school in a movement that would

<sup>8</sup> Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 26.

<sup>9</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 38.

prove accursed for any citizen.<sup>12</sup> This is the seaman's "unpardonable sin;" this is the event that proves a "blow on the very heart," to be remembered, dreamed of, and terrorized by for "years after" though "no one may know of it."<sup>13</sup>

The Kurtz encounter, though, does not end here; his death galvanizes Marlow's subscription to the Modernist ideology and introduces the ontological imagery of light and dark. As the steamer returns to Europe, Kurtz's life diminishes swiftly, but this reduction to non-being is not accompanied by any new clarity. Vision fixed upon no item in particular, Kurtz appears to revel in his solitude, taunting Marlow with "indefinable" smiles and transitioning between a voice that at times survives his waning strength and at others is ripped from him by the supernatural. Marlow even divorces the withering physical form, a "hollow sham," from the shade of an original that frequents the body's consciousness to provide bursts of desire and struggle. These increasingly unreal descriptions are warranted by his final judgment of the living man: "His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines." Marlow knows Kurtz is not to be understood, and in this knowledge he discerns in everyone an innate darkness. This darkness is a pollutant that cannot be contained. In the final moments of life, it condemns Kurtz to a solitary death: "I was startled to hear him say a little tremulously, 'I am lying here in the dark waiting for death.' The light was within a foot of his eyes."<sup>14</sup> It is in this subjective darkness that Kurtz utters his famous proclamation. At what exactly does Kurtz cry? Marlow sees in

the despair the Modernist truth so capable of "withering [...] one's belief in mankind."<sup>15</sup> Decimated by the experience, Marlow disappoints Lukács' Realist sympathies with the meditation that life is a "droll thing," "a mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose," testifying not to any "meaningfulness" in human action.<sup>16</sup> The only course motivating him now is a devotion to his alienator, the decision "to dream the nightmare out to the end, and to show [his] loyalty to Kurtz once more." It becomes clear that this devotion is the acceptance of the Modernist ideology, especially where Lukács describes such a maneuver as "find[ing] its complement in the reduction of reality to a nightmare."<sup>17</sup> In this new nightmare, Kurtz's stare, which could not receive light but still embraced "the whole universe," can be understood, and the pursuit of wisdom can be foregone. The whole universe is fundamentally dark, isolating individuals and doling out purely subjective knowledge that cannot be shared. Marlow's awakening is concluded by his interaction with Kurtz's Intended, completing the dark-light dichotomy and setting the stage for the state of his narrative. Marlow's integration back into society, understandably, fails. As Lukács would insert, poisoned by an ideology of the subjective, Marlow's life "lacks both content and direction."<sup>18</sup> He stumbles about, generally annoyed with the presence and even sight of other people, always isolated by the feeling that others "could not possibly know the things [he] knew."<sup>19</sup> This is notably distinct from the state of rest he mentions he occupied before embarking on the voyage into Africa, which is characterized as deliberate and leisurely after

<sup>12</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 54-56.

<sup>15</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 36.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 57.

<sup>18</sup> Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 30.

<sup>19</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 57.

six years of traversing oceans across the globe. As such, in this new condition of jaded physical and mental illness, the narrative temporarily loses any sense of direction. Marked by random encounters with people interested in Kurtz's belongings, Marlow's desire does not return until an inscrutable interest in speaking with Kurtz's Intended brings the story to its final scene. With "no clear perception of what it was [he] really wanted," Marlow visits the Intended's residence. The proximity to Kurtz, however, forces reality to begin to falter anew. Visions of Kurtz and the steamboat journey bombard his consciousness:

He lived then before me; he lived as much as he had ever lived [...] The vision seemed to enter the house with me—the stretcher, the phantom-bearers, the wild crowd of obedient worshippers, the gloom of the forests, the glitter of the reach between the murky bends, the beat of the drum, regular and muffled like the beating of a heart—the heart of a conquering darkness.

Perspective flattens across time; Marlow sees in singular moments a collage of past and present, "her and him in the same instant of time." The 'Do you see him?' outburst finally earns its urgency as Kurtz's final cry rings in his ears and darkness accompanies his movement toward the Intended; but the darkness finally faces opposition. Though the conversation, laden with dramatic irony, confirms the reality that others cannot be known, the darkness pervading the room struggles before the Intended who "remained illumined by the inextinguishable light of belief and love." Light, then, is decidedly divorced from truth but present in Realist faith. The Intended's unwavering conviction that "no one knew him so well as [her]" nearly plays for laughs in a scene where Marlow sees "[t]he darkness how reality proceeds despite his realizations. Others survive the darkness with torches of belief that

are devoid of truth, in genuine, full-hearted subscriptions to the Realist school, in unqualified beliefs in the capacity to interact with and understand others. "The horror" becomes too great—the horror of the massive social lie, the flimsy mistruth that holds together social relations:

I was on the point of crying at her, 'Don't you hear them?' The dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! The horror!'

But Marlow finally resigns in full: "The last word he pronounced was—your name." The devotion to Kurtz, to the Modernist ideology remains, for the time being, a solitary venture. Though the universe even mocks his stress, (the heavens remain intact, reminding him of the meaninglessness of his choice and that his internal conflict is but a "trifle"), the weight of Marlow's decision to lie requires account.<sup>20</sup> Directly before the 'Do you see him?' outburst, he makes clear: "You know I hate, detest, and can't bear a lie [...] There is a taint of death [...] It makes me miserable and sick."<sup>21</sup> This decision is clearly not made lightly and weighs two dreadful impacts: Marlow has a choice between inciting the misery of telling a lie or potentially disillusioning the Intended with the Realist faith. His opting for the former magnifies the severity of Marlow's condition, for he determines guaranteed misery to be less painful than the possibility of his fate affecting a woman. The ultimate formulation of his concern, though, that the true reveal would have been "too dark—too dark altogether" is the final note in the realization and acceptance of the Modernist condition.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 59-62.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

<sup>22</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 63.

#### IV | Synthesis

Placing Marlow's ideological movements next to the earlier static examination of his psyche yields a more comprehensive understanding of Marlow and the movement of the Heart of Darkness. The Marlow we meet on the Nellie is a "wanderer," one without home nor direction, one distinct from the regular seamen for whom "there is nothing mysterious," for all is mysterious to his Modernist sensibilities. His tales refuse simple interpretations and appear devoid of meaning, all the while he delivers them in "the pose of a Buddha," in the form of the icon of a religion in which failing to grasp the true nature of reality is a source of suffering. The prime narrator's casual slight that Marlow seems "unaware of what [his] audience would like best to hear" gains profundity, and the meaning of the journey at large can be better understood:

[T]o understand the effect of it on me you ought to know how I got out there, what I saw, how I went up that river to the place where I first met the poor chap. It was the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience. It seemed somehow to throw a kind of light on everything about me—and into my thoughts. It was [...] not very clear [...] And yet it seemed to throw a kind of light.<sup>23</sup>

The answers that can explain Kurtz's internal workings and the wisdom gained in the final moments of life remain unclear. The light thrown is not grand wisdom, but awareness of the tools that keep humans in contact, the faith that underpins ultimately imaginary social relationships. It is the illuminating faith of Kurtz's Intended, juxtaposed against the impenetrable darkness that shrouded Kurtz's life and death, that illuminates a fundamentally broken trade and slowly corrodes Marlow's

resolve as he engages in his narrative. Pure irritation with the weakness of language and the mirage of social connection is, after all, what motivates the 'Do you see him?' outburst, in conjunction with the realization that he participated in the mirage. Marlow's internal contemplation of Kurtz's presence in the jungle happened while the Manager of the Middle Station "jabbered about himself."<sup>24</sup> The tinder for the flaring frustration thus included his abandonment of another's narrative, of another's attempt at establishing a social relationship and being understood. This trace of irony brings to present the possibility that his audience may now be letting him jabber without attentive listening. It is knowledge of the self that besets his efforts. Again, however, attempting to share this light is not his only motive. As much as Marlow is trying to explain, he is also "trying to account to [him]self for [...] Mr. Kurtz."<sup>25</sup> The painful row of attempting to share knowledge that itself informs it cannot be shared is pushing him to question its origin. The narrative proceeds, even when it is unclear if there are listeners, even if everyone may be asleep, because there is a chance that in its telling Marlow will find an error, a misstep that led him awry, which can disprove the ideological consequences of his encounter with Kurtz. Marlow, unfortunately, is not in luck. His meditations on the presence of truth are admonished—"Try to be civil, Marlow"—as he is prompted to stop asking disruptive questions.<sup>26</sup> Kurtz remains an inscrutable catalyst, and Marlow's narrative remains impotent. No one can understand the impact of ontological solitude wrought by the journey into the jungle, the journey to Kurtz, the journey to an unimaginable region "a man's untrammelled

<sup>24</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 20.

<sup>25</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 2-4.

feet may take him into by the way of solitude.”<sup>27</sup>  
Solitude realized is solitude everlasting.

## V | Lukács

A developed appreciation of Marlow’s intentions, struggles, and convictions as he grapples with the Modernist ideology allows readers to discover in his narrative two important literary symptoms Lukács attributes to its presence. The first concerns the matter of character representation. The overt reduction to subjectivity and the darkness’s quieting of reality reduce a number of the characters to their “abstract” potentiality instead of their “concrete” potentiality, their innumerable possibilities instead of their realized possibilities.<sup>28</sup> Marlow’s work in this vein primarily concerns Kurtz. By the end of the novel, with his actual decisions and choices unknown to the greater public, he becomes all that people expected or thought he could be. A cousin of Kurtz informs Marlow that in Kurtz “was the making of an immense success,” and a journalist offers that “Kurtz’s proper sphere ought to have been politics,”<sup>29</sup> but no one can name precisely what he had been or knew what he would become. Kurtz’s Intended’s perception of him is no less concerned with potential; she still feels pride that she “believed in him more than any one on earth.”<sup>30</sup> The indeterminate nature of the individual, constricted by society’s inability to understand motive, displays its principal consequence through every other “character” in the novel. When abstract potential converges with reality, “characterizations [become] transferable from one individual to another.”<sup>31</sup> It is no surprise that, beyond Marlow and Kurtz, no other

<sup>27</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 38.

<sup>28</sup> Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” 21.

<sup>29</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Lukács, “The Ideology of Modernism,” 24.

individuals in the work are named. Marlow’s audience, denoted by their professions, could be any group of individuals; their identities are irrelevant, for their ability to establish real relations are bankrupt. The Intended, representative of all women that Marlow believes should be kept ignorant of the Modernist condition, could be replaced by all others, as all are equally enamored with their faith in knowing their loved ones. Professions and possessions replace names both when Marlow the narrator and the prime narrator exist within the Modernist condition.

The second literary symptom concerns perspective. Lukács argues that perspective permits selection, which permits development and a hierarchy of value; the Modernist ideology dispenses with the matter altogether. The lack of selective perspective in Marlow’s narrative is neither difficult to notice nor understand. Marlow is not approximating the Realist’s school’s interest in character development. His interest in accounting for Kurtz, the fact that the story is told for the self, may even be promoting the attention given to seemingly unimportant episodes in a general disinterest in constructing significance hierarchies. The time spent describing the absence of rivets or the honor of the cannibals, which admittedly can be symbolic and thus developmentally impactful, far exceeds time spent on seemingly more important events, such as Marlow’s illness following Kurtz’s death. The hierarchy is subverted more directly in moments in which Marlow comes face-to-face with conventionally horrific images. He is not majorly affected by the heads that adorn the posts surrounding Kurtz’s makeshift home, letting their reveal and discussion float by unemphasized in a formal stream of consciousness. The absence of perspective may not be entirely the fault of Marlow’s narrative goals but also of the

environment traversed in his voyage. At times, Marlow's tale positions him as the victim of anti-Realist and anti-perspective assaults perpetrated by the African wilderness. Marlow describes how the journey up the river resembled "traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," with the labour and quality of the trip creating a sensation of being "bewitched and cut off for ever from everything [he] had known once—somewhere—far away—in another existence perhaps."<sup>32</sup> The stillness, wonder, and inscrutability of the wilderness may have had their share in distorting time and collapsing the past into the present, but Marlow also endows his own story with the very same phenomenon. This is to say, Marlow does not only describe that there existed a rift between "experienced time" and "real time" but moves non-linearly between episodes and repeats past considerations beside present considerations. Events are omitted or rushed past without care, only with regard to sensation in a tapestry threaded by the philosophy of "Subjective Idealism," and in favor of a story in which all that matters and all that there is proves to be "only human consciousness, constantly building, modifying, rebuilding new worlds."<sup>33</sup> After all, while telling his story and grappling with the Modernist ideology, what can be known is what can be perceived and felt by the self, and thus comprises the majority of content over which a Modernist narrator may have jurisdiction.

## VI | Conclusion

The prime narrator is offered the final remarks of the novel and uses the opportunity to level an indecisive judgment on Marlow's narrative effort, at once describing its impotence and suggesting an interpersonal impact. The

<sup>32</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 26.

<sup>33</sup> Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism," 37.

Director breaks the silence that follows the conclusion of the narrative with a comment on their losing the first of the ebb, suggesting that the narrative properly enthralled all, for the arrival of the ebb was expected to conclude Marlow's story-telling time at its genesis. The failure to comment on the narrative, however, questions the extent to which this engagement was purely driven by entertainment. No interaction suggests Marlow accomplished his goal as no one reveals themselves more fit to understand the man; he rests as a Buddha just as when he began his story. The singular notable change, though, arrives in the final line as the prime narrator notes, "the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed sombre under an overcast sky—seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness."<sup>34</sup> The chance sequence of events involving the inscrutable Kurtz and his distressed Intended proved sufficient to reveal the darkness to Marlow in a rather exceptional case, but just as Kurtz proved the possibility of solitude, Marlow proves the possibility of revelation. Though this darkness is noticed in a limited, non-totalizing capacity, the confusion provoked by Marlow, attended to with strict attention throughout his narrative, may have proven sufficient in priming the prime narrator's eyes for a sight of the Modernist condition. Notably, it would not be the success of Marlow's story that catalyzed the awakening, but its utter failure, later to be interpreted through and developed by retrospective reflection. Beyond this possibility, Marlow fails both with transmitting his experience and denying its philosophical power. The *Heart of Darkness* thus lends itself to being read as a pitiable portrait of a man futilely revolting against the reality of the Modernist human condition, and a satire of critics like Lukács

<sup>34</sup> Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 63.

who decry the Modernist ideology. If Marlow is read as a struggling Lukács and the Kurtz narrative is replaced with the “Ideology of Modernism,” we see the irony in critique. For if the Modernist ideology accurately identifies the human condition, it need not be concerned with criticism. In other words: *It does not matter if you flail*. If it reflects reality, there is no escape.

## The Evolution of Venetian Color

Arushi Chokshi, Brandeis University '27

Giovanni Bellini's *Christ Carrying the Cross* (Fig. 1), completed between 1505 and 1510, is an oil portrait on canvas of Christ as he carries the cross over his shoulder. Viewers can only glimpse the center of the cross, as the focus of the portrait is Christ, as the painting is meant to function as a private devotional image that aids in prayer. The cross serves to further push Christ to the forefront of the pictorial space, placing the beholder's focus on him so they are better able to devote their attention and prayer towards him. The painting is not narrative-focused, so viewers are left to discern the context behind the moment Bellini captures Christ on their own. Bellini paints Christ with the warm, rich flesh tones characteristic of Venetian paintings in the early sixteenth century. The darker contours have been glazed upon lighter portions of the canvas, making it seem as though the lighting of Christ's face comes from within him and radiates outward. The shadows are blended seamlessly into the midtones and highlights, making the flesh appear soft and smooth.

Paris Bordone's *Christ Disputing in the Temple* (Fig. 2), painted 40 years later between 1543 and 1547, is an oil painting on canvas that depicts the only event from Christ's childhood that is mentioned in the gospels. Christ is the highest person in the composition, elevating him as the calm, composed middle amid restless bodies and agitated facial expressions, and he is slightly left of the central door. Bordone employs rectilinear perspective in depicting the rectangular space of the temple, and beholders catch a glimpse of the landscape through a window at the back of the room, creating a deeper pictorial space, though there is not much sense of atmospheric perspective.

Furthermore, Bordone utilizes a vibrant, pigmented color palette in his depiction of the scene. Mary and Jesus are emphasized in their pink and blue clothing, while the rest of the figures in the painting are dressed in similar shades of orange, red, purple, and green. The paint is applied in thick, opaque layers, with uniform brushwork. Bordone does not leave anything up for interpretation or speculation, as his depiction of facial expressions and inclusion of many biblical figures makes the scene of the painting clear.

Titian's *The Rape of Europa* (Fig. 3) painted between 1559 and 1562 is an oil on canvas and depicts Europa as she is abducted by the god Jupiter in the form of a bull. Titian builds up the brushwork in the foreground of the painting, which contains Europa, the bull, and three putti, to convey the closer proximity of the figures to the beholder. He applies less paint to the canvas reserved for the background, creating a deep atmospheric perspective and allowing the viewer to understand the depth of the landscape behind the figures in the foreground. The visible, active brushwork animates the figures in the painting while involving beholders in Titian's artistic process. Europa's flailing body is placed to the side and is off-balance, to convey her movement and helplessness on the bull as she is abducted. The composition and the inclusion of the putti communicate the imminence of Europa's rape, alluding to the entire story without expressly depicting the events.<sup>35</sup> Titian utilizes a color palette of blue, pink, and orange in his painting of the mythological story.

These three paintings epitomize the evolution of the Venetian Renaissance oil painting technique in the sixteenth century. As opposed to the Florentine and Roman schools of

<sup>35</sup> Nate Silver, "Titian's Rape of Europa" (London and New Haven: Yale University Press 2020) 171.

painting, which emphasized the sketch and design aspects of a painting, known as *disegno*, as a sign of academic achievement, Venetian painting placed a strong emphasis on the application of color, known as *colorito*.<sup>2</sup> According to art historian David Rosand, in Venice, drawing remained “ancillary to painting” as it aided Venetian artists by giving their composition a direction, without solidifying the composition.<sup>3</sup> An artist’s ability to successfully apply color to a sketch to animate a composition was seen as a higher achievement than their primary sketch envisioning the final painting. This emphasis on *colorito* stayed consistent through the Renaissance period in Venice, while the techniques which artists employed to color their paintings developed in the sixteenth century.

Bellini’s *Christ Carrying the Cross* is an example of the effects of the importance of color on the early Venetian Renaissance technique, as beholders see the coloring of the flesh as implying existence and life. In Florence and Rome, the contortion and movement of the body imbued figures with life. However, Venetians did not see muscularity and movement as a sign of life, due to the location of Venice on the ever-moving sea, but rather saw properly modeling flesh as animating figures.<sup>4</sup> The focus on rendering the color of skin well to imply life led to fewer depictions of figures in movement in early Venetian Renaissance paintings, as is seen in the Bellini. Christ is still, and viewers can only see above his shoulders, so the attention is placed on the rendering of the skin on his face. Bellini

renders Christ’s flesh in warm tones, adding redshades in the transitions between the dark contours and highlights that model his face. Through the warm-toned composition and inclusion of red to seamlessly blend the shadows with the midtone of the skin, Bellini alludes to the blood flowing beneath Christ’s face and imbues him with life.

Furthermore, Bellini utilizes the translucent properties of oil paint, glazing thin layers of colors on top of a lighter ground, which makes the light appear to emanate from within the painting in *Christ Carrying the Cross*.<sup>1</sup> This diffusion of light heightens the life-like appearance of Bellini’s Christ, as he almost appears to glow gold from within. Bellini does not emphasize texture, which is reflected in the highly polished, smooth surface of his painting. The brushstrokes are invisible due to the translucent application of oil paint, and Bellini’s usage of the paint’s slow-drying qualities to create seamless transitions between the contours and the highlights in the painting makes it naturalistic. The work is almost mirror-like as a result of Bellini’s *colorito*, his ability to reflect light’s properties and his coloring of his subject, and the stroke of his brush is used to represent Christ properly. Here, as in many early Venetian Renaissance paintings, the coloring and its application are used to try to imitate processes in nature, which was seen as the height of artistry in early sixteenth-century Venetian art.

Bordone’s *Christ Disputing in the Temple* is an important example of the mid-sixteenth century shift from exploiting the translucent properties of the oil medium to tapping into its capacity for opacity, and this shift contextualizes the *colorito* of Titian’s later works. Bordone still infuses his characters with

<sup>2</sup> David Rosand “Conditions of Painting in Venice” (Cambridge 1997) 15.

<sup>3</sup> Rosand “Conditions of Painting in Venice” (Cambridge 1997) 17.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Hills *Venetian Color* (New Haven, 1999) 216.

<sup>1</sup> Rosand “Conditions of Painting in Venice” (Cambridge 1997) 11.

life through vibrant coloring, but this painting shows a change from the sheer application of Bellini's brush, demonstrating a shift from the early Venetian painting technique. This switch began with Giorgione, who built lighter colors on a darker ground in order to tap into the fatty qualities of oil paint while exploiting the rough texture of the canvas surface.<sup>5</sup> Rather than smooth, imperceptible transitions between light and dark, this new method allows painters like Bordone to use impasto to thickly layer paint on the canvas, creating a rich, vibrant, and textured surface. This technique is especially visible in the drapery of the figures' clothes in Bordone's painting, as the folds of the fabric are activated by the viscous coats of oil paint. Though Bordone does not focus on leaving all of his brushwork visible to the beholder, in the fabrics of the figures, he does emphasize the texture of the clothes through visible brush strokes. Bordone uses visible brushwork in a representational sense, as the texture of the clothing contrasts with the smooth surfaces of the flesh of the figures and the marble in the temple, and makes the world he depicts in his painting seem more real. Though his brushwork does not lend itself to creating atmospheric perspective, his utilization of impasto and some visible brushstrokes to build the world of his painting is an important example of the transition between Bellini's paintings and Titian's later works.

Titian's *Rape of Europa* is a model of the late development of the Venetian *colorito* technique, which was spearheaded by Titian as a master of color application involving the texture created by his brushwork and the tone of his colors. Titian continued to use vibrant colors to show life in his works, as is seen throughout Venetian Renaissance painting, but combined the luminosity of the pigments with

<sup>5</sup> Rosand "Conditions of Painting in Venice" (Cambridge 1997) 12.

the texture he created with his brush strokes to render a world.<sup>6</sup> In this painting, and his other later works, Titian's visible brushwork and different levels of opacity of paint within the work animate the painting as well as lend themselves to creating atmospheric perspective. Continuing the technique developed by Giorgione, Titian builds light colors on a dark canvas ground, and the darker base unifies the different relationships formed between colors.<sup>7</sup> Titian's base allows him to play with the opacity and layering of the paint to create atmospheric perspective, as he paints the background with thinner layers of paint, leaving some of the canvas ground visible, and his minimal rendering makes the background landscape appear further from the viewer. He counters his minimal application of color to the landscape in the background by extensively building opaque layers of paint on the figures in the foreground, using impasto to bring them closer to the viewer. The contrast between the opacity of the foreground and background creates phenomenal depth and aids in sculpting the world depicted in this work. This technique to deepen the perspective is a shift from Bellini's and Bordone's respective works, as neither of the previous artists played with levels of opacity to create depth in their compositions.

Furthermore, Titian's *macchie*, or visible, loose brushwork, reaches the capacity of paint to represent different forms and textures while also expressing and adding another layer of meaning to his painting. In his different manipulations of paint to render the different textures of feathers, flesh, fins, and scales, Titian realizes the mimetic capabilities of his medium.<sup>8</sup> To render the fish, Titian uses the

<sup>6</sup> Hills *Venetian Color* (New Haven, 1999) 220.

<sup>7</sup> David Rosand "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush" (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 2 (1981)) 91.

<sup>8</sup> Rosand "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush" (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 2 (1981)) 91.

translucent properties of oil paint to communicate the slickness of the scales, but builds thick layers of paint to render the bull's fur to communicate the heaviness and heat of its coat. Additionally, Titian utilizes a dryer brush in order to convey the textures of the feathers on the wings of his putti. In differentiating the textures and opacity of the paint, Titian uses his brush in a myriad of ways to fully represent and animate the figures he depicts in *The Rape of Europa*. Titian not only represents figures, forms, and perspective through the stroke of his brush, but also expresses additional meaning by leaving his brushstrokes visible to the viewer. According to Rosand, Titian's visible brushwork temporarily removes viewers from the narrative of his painting, and he engages beholders in his process of creating art, thus projecting himself onto those who see his painting.<sup>9</sup> Hence, Titian's technique of painting is both self-expressive and beautifully representational.

In *The Rape of Europa*, Titian's *macchie* makes the painting appear effortless despite the scrutiny, attention to detail, and time placed in the painting. Titian constructed his painting so that some portions of the painting have incredibly nuanced and detailed brushwork, while others simply have bold swaths of color that suggest form instead of fully define it. In describing this work, Vasari explains that though "perfect from a distance," the painting "cannot be seen from close up," but argues that this skill conceals the effort of Titian's compositions while making the pictures seem alive.<sup>10</sup> Further demonstrating the expressive abilities of Titian's technique, his brushwork allows the beholder to immerse

themselves in the narrative of a perfect-looking painting from afar, as well as recognize the painting as a work of manual labor from close. The visibility of Titian's brushstrokes adds dynamism and a sense of effortlessness to the painting that other artists have tried and failed to imitate as they underestimate the thought behind each brushmark. Titian maximizes the capabilities of the slow-drying medium by taking his time and letting each layer dry to properly build up the paint on the canvas for his desired effect.

To conclude, Titian's *The Rape of Europa* is seen as the pinnacle of the Venetian Renaissance oil paint genre, due to its inventive use of vibrant colors, brushwork, and the opacity of paint, and encompasses the ways in which paintings such as Bellini's *Christ Carrying the Cross* and Bordone's *Christ Disputing the Temple* evolved in the sixteenth century. In his time, Titian was seen as in another league, and contemporaries such as Vasari recognized that his method of painting was not replicable. Since no one could hold a candle to Titian's *colorito*, the Roman and Florentine *disegno* endured in Europe as the superior method of creating art. However, Titian's legacy and influence is seen in the methods of visible brushwork, opaque layers of oil paint, and textured canvas surfaces seen in the Impressionist movement of the nineteenth century. It is important to recognize the role of Venetian paintings, such as the three discussed, in contemporary art, as the evolution of the Venetian oil painting tradition has had lasting impacts on the creation of art.

<sup>9</sup> Rosand "Titian and the Eloquence of the Brush" (*Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 2 (1981)) 95-96.

<sup>10</sup> Giorgio Vasari "Life of Titian" (Oxford University Press, 1991) 504.

## Illustrations



Fig 1. Giovanni Bellini, *Christ Carrying the Cross*, 1505-1510, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.



Fig 2. Paris Bordone, *Christ Disputing the Temple*, 1543-1547, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

**Illustrations (cont.)**

Fig 3. Titian, *The Rape of Europa*, 1559-1562, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

## A Recontextualized Avant-Garde: Ideological Subversion in the Third AG Exhibition

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Under the government of President Park Chung-hee, late twentieth-century South Korea oversaw a rapid state-mandated industrialization, characterized by an authoritarian government and public unrest. Often referred to as a period of “compressed modernization,” Park’s promotion of expeditious economic and urban expansion proved beneficial for South Korea’s development as a contending player among other global powers, yet resulted in widespread socio-political suppression. Accordingly, the state-sponsored National Exhibition system, or Gukjeon, dominated the art world to eliminate potential political opposition in visual culture. In spite of this, the late 1960s to early 1970s witnessed the formation of the Korean Avant-Garde Association (AG) and other artist collectives that actively responded to the harsh realities imposed by Park’s regime and the intensities of whirlwind modernization. Following many of the ideas theorized by critic and art historian Lee Yil, members of AG sought to intertwine art with life to reflect the uncharted socio-political atmosphere, repurposing and expanding upon approaches of various Western avant-gardes.<sup>11</sup> In order to emulate the realities of South Korean society, AG synthesized mediums and employed natural and found objects. This overtly transcended the Gukjeon’s display requisites, which categorized artworks by genre. Strictly speaking, AG’s

<sup>11</sup> Ji Eun Sung, *Objects, Actions, and Participation in the Art of Korea, 1960-1980* (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2022), accessed November 25, 2025, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/media/stream/pdf/24/1.0421275/4>.

experimentalism was anti-governmental on a formal level,<sup>12</sup> laying the groundwork for subversion within the museum space. Even so, early 1970s experimental art in South Korea was previously dismissed by art historians as largely apolitical and derivative of the West’s aesthetic radicalism. Scholar Sooran Choi, however, claims that AG employed covert political activism in their works, using their associations with Western experimentalism to bypass censorship and conceal their motives from the state.<sup>13</sup>

In 1972, Park dissolved the National Assembly under a declaration of martial law, resulting in mass censorship of the press and speech.<sup>14</sup> Despite being forced into discretion about the ideologies and the anti-governmental sentiment that informed their oeuvre, AG continued to hold exhibitions at state-funded museums and arts institutions, which were conservative in their selection of artists to comply with governmental oversight.<sup>15</sup> This makes A Deconceptualized World (탈관념의 세계), the third AG exhibition held the same year at the National Museum of Modern Art, Gyeongbokgung Palace, a particularly interesting case study to dissect the group’s pushback against the Park’s dictatorial policies. To expand upon Choi’s scholarship, I will argue that the arrangement of these artworks was a form of anti-governmental subversion in itself, examining the exhibition as

<sup>12</sup> Kyung An Chung, Yeon-Shim Chung, Soyeon Kim, and Katharine B. Wagner, *Korean Art from 1953* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Sooran Choi, “Manifestations of a Zombie Avant-Garde: South Korean Performance and Conceptual Art in the 1970s,” *re•bus*, no. 9 (2020): 74-108, accessed November 25, 2025, [https://www.academia.edu/42990711/Manifestations\\_of\\_a\\_Zombie\\_Avant\\_garde\\_South\\_Korean\\_Performance\\_and\\_Conceptual\\_Art\\_in\\_the\\_1970s](https://www.academia.edu/42990711/Manifestations_of_a_Zombie_Avant_garde_South_Korean_Performance_and_Conceptual_Art_in_the_1970s).

<sup>14</sup> Choi, “Manifestations of a Zombie Avant-garde,” 76.

<sup>15</sup> Yeon-Shim Chung, “Ha Chong-Hyun’s Early Work and the Experimental AG Group,” in *Ha Chong-Hyun* (New York, 2022).

another device for AG's camouflaged insurgence. Upon analyzing the facets of this exhibition, it is crucial to note that there is a severe lack of documentation and written scholarship on AG due to the underrepresentation of experimental art circulating within the museum and the Gukjeon systems during the postwar period. By citing various sources that reference the exhibition, I have attempted to piece together the displayed works in order to synthesize its design and layout.

Following the Korean War, the government controlled many aspects of daily life, heavily infringing upon the country's arts and culture establishments. Tony Bennett's "Exhibitionary Complex" appropriately describes the functions of the South Korean art museum in the mid- to late-twentieth century. The museum is an instrument of the state to inscribe and broadcast "messages of power," which are framed as the enrichment of culture through persuasive modes of display.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it aims to cultivate a national identity through the guise of promoting state-wide social and educational progress. In comparing Foucault's ideas of the carceral system to the museum structure, Bennett claims that the purpose of the museum is to create a self-regulating society through the constant potential of being watched and watching over others, ensuring the state's control over the public through dynamics of visibility. And yet, what is to make of the individuals that slip between the cracks, the subversive recusants that maintain a cognizance of this infrastructure and use these edifices to their advantage, inhabiting a temporal realm between the controller and the controlled? Here, it is helpful to consider how Stefano

Harney and Fred Moten's conception of the undercommons, although discussed in relation to the university, is present within any institutionalized space at the state's disposal, including the museum. Motivated by a desire for self-development that exists outside the realms of institutional or socially normative requirements, such as attaining income or recognition, those affiliated with the undercommons are fugitives, stealing the institution's resources and producing dissident scholarship that refuses to be co-opted by the university's agenda. Applied to the museum, the notion of the undercommons creates a realm for the subversive intellectual to exist within the exhibitionary complex, remaining "in but not of" the structure of the institution.<sup>2</sup> In the case of postwar South Korea, its inhabitants are the avant-gardists who engage in a seemingly inconspicuous experimentalism, ascribed to a desire to promote international contemporaneity by importing Western values of aestheticism. They steal exhibition space from the nationalized museum to furtively advance their anti-authoritarian morals under the pretense of disseminating global art trends to the public, ultimately engaging in a criminal relationship with a state-operated establishment.

The majority of works in the third AG exhibition were conceptual and installation-based. A Deconceptualized World was characterized by multisensory art, oftentimes employing natural and industrial materials used in architecture and urban planning,<sup>3</sup> a response to the specific conditions instigated by Park's compressed modernization. Through investigating materiality and dematerialization, AG artists explored process and indeterminacy, evoking dynamics of space through the

<sup>1</sup> Tony Bennett, "The Exhibitionary Complex," *New Formations*, no. 4 (1988): 73-102.

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Chung, "Ha Chong-Hyun's Early Work," 6.

physical relation of their pieces as they were situated within the exhibition. By focusing on object-oriented relationships, the arrangement of artworks molded and responded to the gallery architecture. Works were sprawled on the floor and raw objects were placed around the exhibition in a seemingly arbitrary manner, yet definitively impeded the viewer's passageway through space. Exhibitions that obstructed the museum's essential functions, such as viewers easily moving through the displays, tended to prove strenuous for institutions.<sup>4</sup> The decisive, yet purportedly haphazard placement of the artworks was likely attributed to Western avant-garde influence, allowing AG artists to remain unscathed by governmental repercussions despite their disruptive curatorial approaches. In addition, there was an evident lack of pedestals or plinths to display sculptural installations, demonstrating AG's imitation of the barren and uncertain day-to-day realities of postwar South Korea. In this case, it is not just the artworks that act as an extension of life, but their organization as they exist in the exhibition itself, demonstrating the artists' emphasis on evoking indeterminate spatial dynamics through displays that reflected the instability of South Korea's urbanizing atmosphere.

The installation of Lee Kun-yong's *Relation 72-1* and an unknown work by Kim Ku-lim offers formal insight into how object relationality was practically applied in the context of the museum

<sup>4</sup>In Japan, nationalized museums often resisted exhibition formats that disrupted viewer circulation and conventional modes of spectatorship. In 1964, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Art closed the *Yōimuri Indépendant* after avant-garde artists occupied extensive floor space, produced loud noises, and incorporated partial nudity in their works. The 1970 Tokyo Biennale, which adopted similarly disruptive curatorial practices, was likewise met with negative audience response and low attendance rates. See Yoshiaki Tōno, *Bunka-chō Art Platform Japan Translation Series: Exhibition Histories* (Bunka-chō Art Platform Japan, 2021); and Eliza Tan, "Tokyo Biennale 1970 as Contact Point," Tate, 2016.

space. Relation is situated at the far end of the gallery and composed of two large rocks, one bound with rope to a support column and one placed on the ground diagonally to its right, both of which are set slightly askew from Ku-lim's work established firmly in the center of the floor (figure 1).<sup>5</sup> With these pieces hindering a straight, designated pathway through the gallery, viewers are dispersed around the compositions, contributing to an imbalanced dissemination of bodies that initially appear to visually complement that asymmetry of the exhibition's layout. From the perspective of the exhibitionary complex, however, there is a refusal to remain locatable, eliminating the potential for self-regulation constructed through dynamics of visibility. The resolute placement of artworks creates an inability for the viewer to stand in a determinate, central point within the museum space observable from all angles. This confronts an essential function of the museum: a subterfuge against the institution at stake. Further, display pedestals and plinths are absent in the exhibition, ensuring the works remain unembellished. The unadorned natural, raw, and industrial materials emulate the realities of a rapidly industrializing nation, capturing a distinction between the austere conditions of postwar South Korea and the cultural idealization of the museum space. Through implicative countermoves against the Gukjeon's traditional modes of display, the undercommons emerge from the constraints of the exhibitionary complex, its inhabitants purloining the resource of exhibition space to resist authoritarian censorship.

The spatial dynamics present in *Relation* instill a subversive quality in the exhibition by continuing to interact with the museum's

<sup>5</sup> Yeon-Shim Chung, "AG(Avant-Garde) 그룹의 실험미술 전시 연구," *Journal of History of Modern Art* (현대미술사연구) 51 (2022): 48. Photograph from the Park Seok-won Archive.

architecture as well. As previously stated, the piece's arrangement within the exhibition consists of one large rock tied to a column and another diagonally positioned on the floor, bound by rope tied to another support column (figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Its use of natural and found objects creates a discernible juxtaposition between the artwork and the sterile structure of the white cube gallery, reinforcing the harsh realities that resulted from Park's idealized agenda of modernization. Moreover, Kun-yong's decision to secure the rock to the side of the support column actively responds to the physical space through its installation, drawing the viewer's attention to the gallery architecture. The blatant contrast of materiality facilitates the audience's engagement with not only the artwork, but the surrounding exhibition setting as well. If the exhibitionary complex asserts that museum architecture is a control mechanism that guarantees constant visibility through structural design, then *Relation's* response to the gallery's physical format generates a consciousness of these commandeering techniques, a subtle yet effectually redolent rejection of authoritarian scrutiny. The installation of the corresponding rock on the ground produces a similar effect. A rope is stretched tautly between the rock and column, establishing a barrier. Its extension outward to form a tangible encumbrance derides the notion of architectural design as a means of state-mechanized control. By instigating a divergence from a designated pathway through the exhibition, the spatial dynamics in *Relation* assume control over a predetermined movement of bodies governed by the exhibitionary complex, confronting a key objective of the museum.

<sup>6</sup> MMCA Research Lab, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.mmcaresearch.kr/timeline/view.do?searchStartActiveYear=1972&searchYearmm=197201>.

By continuing to explore materiality, Lee Kun-yong's *Corporeal Term* critiques the museum as a representation of government supremacy. Relocating a block of earth with an uprooted tree trunk into the gallery, Kun-yong purported that the purpose of his work was to integrate natural materials into the museum. Despite this, audience reception alluded to the work's implicit insurgence, even including a spectator's comment that the work resembled "a hood placed over one's head before execution." While Kun-yong did indeed attempt to convey the widespread feelings of uprootedness that ensued from the Korean War, the work's display in a state-operated setting provides an opportunity to acknowledge its subversion within the context of the exhibition. Similar to *Relation*, the organic and industrial materials employed in the piece, which included red soil, gravel, sand, and cement,<sup>7</sup> implemented a stark contiguity against the rigid composure of the white cube space. By facilitating an interaction between the materials of South Korea's urbanizing landscape and a nationalized establishment, a subtle yet decisive antithesis is brought into question: another perceivable inconsistency between the stringent composure of the museum and the incorporation of materials belonging to the realities of a modernizing state (figure 3).<sup>8</sup> Additionally, rare insight into an audience member's reception allows an understanding of how viewers actively shaped the meaning of the artwork through interpretations reflective of South Korea's socio-political conditions,

<sup>7</sup> Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, "Description of *Corporeal Term*, 1971/2023," *The Guggenheim Museums and Foundation*, 2023, accessed December 1, 2025, <https://www.guggenheim.org/audio/track/description-of-corporeal-term-1971-2023>.

<sup>8</sup> Sooran Choi, "Manifestations of a Zombie Avant-Garde: South Korean Performance and Conceptual Art in the 1970s," *re•bus* 9 (2020): 91. Photograph from the personal archive of Lee Kun-yong.

imbuing the exhibition with an agitational connotation. The museum becomes a metonymy for the authoritarianism of Park's regime, and the artwork's emphasis on materiality manifests as a criticism of the conditions brought on by an ambitious agenda of modernization. This subverts state-broadcasted messages of power within the museum space, undermining the exhibitionary complex by forcing viewers to reevaluate the fabric of their reality under dictatorial rule. Thus, the undercommons materialize as Kun-yong imposes an awareness of life under authoritarianism on the public realm. This redefines the installation of *Corporal Term* in a national museum as an informal dissemination of fugitive knowledge, shaped by pertinent audience interpretation.

Framing the nationalized museum through the exhibitionary complex offers insight into how government suppression permeated the educational and cultural spheres, shedding light on the socio-political atmosphere under Park's regime. By challenging the functions of the museum as defined by Bennett, A *Deconceptualized World* demonstrates the implicit subversion of AG's practice, examining early 1970s South Korean experimentalism as covert political agency rather than merely imitative and derivative of Western avant-garde aesthetics. AG's refusal of state-imposed limitations of expression, instilled in their individual artworks but also holistically in their 1972 exhibition, blurs the categories of the state and the public it controls. AG artists assume the role of the subversive intellectual and cultivate a previously unidentified realm that establishes itself as the undercommons, a liminal space characterized by dissidence and the fugitive dissemination of principles and knowledge. If the exhibitionary complex contextualizes the role of the museum, then the undercommons

situates the avant-garde's role within the institution, a repudiation of authoritarian supremacy. In confronting the museum's functions through the precarious organization of works within the confines of a nationalized setting, AG artists took residence in the undercommons, recontextualizing a previously overlooked and underwritten period of innovative postwar experimentalism.

### Illustrations:



Figure 1. Installation view of works by Kim Ku-lim and Lee Kun-yong, *3rd AG Exhibition*, 1972.  
(Photo: Fair Use)

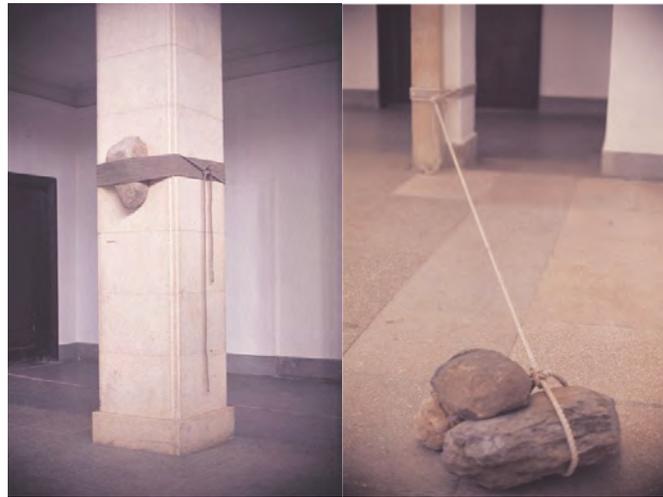


Figure 2. (a-b) *Relation*, installation views, Lee Kun-yong, 1972.  
(Photo: Fair Use)



Figure 3. *Corporal Term*, installation view, Lee Kun-yong, 1972.  
(Photo: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Korea.)



"'Waz Ist Minne?' Walther von der Vogelweide, Jacques Lacan, and the perverse potentials of courtly love" by Paulina Gaşiorowska

"Dark Humor and Carnavalesque Spectacle: A Comparison Between Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and Julie Taymor's *Titus*" by Xinke Huang

"Marlow, The Awakened Modernist: Placing Georg Lukács' 'The Ideology of Modernism' In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" by Ryan Gumlia

"The Evolution of Venetian Color" by Arushi Chokshi

"A Recontextualized Avant-Garde: Ideological Subversion in the Third AG Exhibition" by Sydney Suh