ABSTRACT

We in the industrialized West inhabit a highly visual environment saturated by myriad material and “lifestyle” commodities, promising each of us more happiness, pleasure, individuality, love and beauty, etc., if we will only hear their call, and make their purchase. This project analyzes how these things have come to signify for us over the course of the last two centuries, and how we have learned to consume those meanings. I argue that philosophical and subjective revolutions taking place just before and within Romanticism coincided with market imperatives arising during the Industrial Revolution, which creates a new kind of idealistic, highly visual and aestheticized relationship to fetishized goods. This relationship is now based upon the exchange values of commodities, which affects our relationship with the entire material and social environment, and diminishes both our subjective differences and our understanding of the physical, material qualities of things. Two French novels of the nineteenth century, and one French novel and film from the twentieth century, are studied for the ways in which they account for, exemplify, and critique these changes.
Dedicated to those I love who made my graduate studies possible, with their years of patience, confidence, love and support—Willy, Robin, Todd, Anna; my grandparents Verne and Mary, Bill and Helen, Einar and Lorraine; my cousins out in Montana; and my mother, Charlotte.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the faculty of the Department of French and Italian at The Ohio State University for all the support they have given me over these many years, especially Eugene Holland, for the supervision of critical independent studies, and his good-humored patience and encouragement during the course of this project; also Judith Mayne for her accurate and rigorous critiques, and simply stunning presence; Karlis Racevskis, for an enviable example of the scholarly life; Charles Minahen, for great close reading and thorough critique of seminar papers; Charles Klopp, for general bonhomie and sage advice; Mihaela Marin, for excellent reading suggestions; Danielle Marx-Scouras for Camus and bright energy; Anthony Allen for making medieval French literature so alive, and everyone else I have neglected to mention who made my graduate work at OSU fun and rewarding.

I would like to thank Steven Shaviro from the University of Washington for trying to help me shape questions about idealism and Romanticism—my ongoing confusion reflects in no way upon him—and for introducing me to Shelley and film theory.
I also want to acknowledge and thank the administrative staff in the Department of French and Italian: over the years, Marlin, Jody, Laura and Patty made working there fun, and so easy.
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Major Field: French and Italian

Minor Fields: Film, Critical Theory, 19th Century
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We must be willing to consider expanded definitions of how romanticism has been incorporated by American fascism.

--Anis Shivani1

Carrie was an apt student of fortune’s ways—of fortune’s superficialities. Seeing a thing, she would immediately set to inquiring how she would look, properly related to it.... Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. The voice of the so-called inanimate! Who shall translate for us the language of the stones? ‘My dear,’ said the lace collar she secured from Partridge’s, ‘I fit you beautifully; don’t give me up.’ ‘Ah, such little feet,’ said the leather of the soft new shoes; ‘how effectively I cover them. What a pity they should ever want my aid.’

--Theodore Dreiser2

The following pages are an attempt to hear and translate part of the “language of the stones” and the “so-called inanimate,” which speaks as persuasively to us now as it did for Sister Carrie over a century ago. We in the industrialized West are confronted by

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a super abundance of pleading commodities at every turn, promising, here in this life, all manner of rewards to the faithful who yield to the call of their desires.

Recent desires of my own for finer clothing resulted in the purchase of a new sewing machine, and the range of emotions provoked by the acquisition of this utilitarian piece of nineteenth-century technology is intimately related to the analysis at hand. Impatient anticipation characterized the week I waited for it to materialize, after an impulse Internet purchase. When the delivery woman finally appeared with a box, my heart leaped with hope and excitement. I hauled the box into my office, cleared space in private, tore through multiple layers of packing, cut open smaller boxes, removed styrofoam and plastic, separated items, unwrapped mysterious parts.

Once freed from its insulating layers, I confronted the object, and began to establish a relationship. I took in the design, the color, the surfaces: it seemed plastic-y, which forced me to quash a rising critique of inauthenticity. I had a fleeting sensation of time, and technical evolution. I took parts off, opened doors. It’s a uniquely black White sewing machine, with knobs, lettering, stitch patterns, and pinstripes detailed in white. The plastic was smooth and warm, molded; the handle integrated into the top. Impossible smoothness, technical perfection: no dysfunction or flaw disrupted the pure pleasure and reward high of new acquisition. Magic happens! I thought: the tiny picture on my computer monitor had become solid, present, three-dimensional within days—and just for me! My impulse was to turn all the knobs, lift all levers, open compartments, make it deliver more, again. Sweet sensations to savor: they do not last, as the first rush is the most powerful.
My next impulse was to share the high, to show it off, to bond with others around my purchase, to demonstrate my prestige to another, as mediated and proved by this third term; a colleague was amused, but less impressed. The object didn’t speak to her, but I felt warm and proud—my good taste! my non-academic interests! I settled in, alone again, for new pleasures—the Owner’s Manual. I compared the textual descriptions and diagrams within the manual to the object itself, testing my cognitive abilities and mechanical aptitude. I moved from text to thing, I grasped new meanings, I understood functions, made sense of visible parts, caressed the machine. It sat quietly, unmoving, patient; and thus far, so very generous.

The following pages attempt a kind of genealogy of these sensations and meanings, a brief history and analysis of our modern relationship to, and through, commodities, objects, and the material world, including the visual and spectacular elements of this relationship. In their diagnostic capacities, artists engage and explore cultural and subjective changes, and it is therefore through analyses of several fictional works that this study traces the evolution of certain subjective relations with the material world. Whereas the novel was the commodity art form of the nineteenth century, narrative film is its most important offspring and counterpart in the twentieth century, and examples of each will be discussed. Commodities and commodification will be a central concern, and it is perfectly apt that in the opening citation clothing

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speaks to Carrie, as textiles were the core commodities mass-produced during the
Industrial Revolution; this was made possible, in part, by the invention of better
looms—and better sewing machines.4

The sewing machine plays a critical role in the nineteenth-century imaginary,
and forms a kind of historical, mechanical bridge between some of the major ideas
under consideration in this project: as Alan Williams writes in his history of French
cinema,

If the nineteenth century marked a kind of cultural birth or rebirth of
vision, one favorite object of society’s collective gaze was the phenomenon of
movement. One reason for this, no doubt, was the recent development of the
sewing machine, the mechanical loom, and many other devices that could
perform simple actions very quickly.5

Industrialization and mass-production of textiles and other consumer goods
provoked new ways of seeing and relating to objects. Williams reports the revelation
Louis Lumiere had one sleepless night, during which he envisioned a crucial step of
bricolage in the invention of the motion picture camera: “It consisted...of a set of
movable claws that was given an intermittent movement by a mechanism analogous to
that of the sewing machine” (23). Louis had figured out how “to combine two things:
the fits-and-starts motion imparted to fabric in the sewing machine, and the sprocket
drive of (Edison’s) Kinetoscope” (23). Thus were joined, at the close of the century, the
mechanical motion and reproduction (of material) from its beginning, with the

4 For historical background on the technical revolutions of the early nineteenth century, see Arnold
5 Alan Williams, Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking (Cambridge: Harvard University
mechanical reproduction (of images) that ended it—two of the most influential technologies of the last two hundred-odd years.

These and other technological advances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries form a critical background for the study of later nineteenth- and twentieth-century material and visual culture, as well as the contemporary philosophical and artistic movements grouped under the term Romanticism.⁶ This movement had an enormous impact on modern subjectivity, and subject-object relationships—especially with the broad range of textiles coming initially from England, and driving the expansion of its empire. Also important during this period are developments in steel and glass production which allow for the creation of the new urban commercial spaces, or arcades, so fascinating to the Baudelairean flâneur.⁷

At least as important as the influx of new consumer goods into France in the early part of the century were these covered arcades, the large glass windows facilitating their display, and the new kind of entertainment of strolling and window-shopping, or leche-vitrine, encouraged by these spaces. Previously, walking in the city was a risky and unpleasant activity, given the famous Parisian boue, the narrow or nonexistent sidewalks, and the amount of carriage traffic; comings and goings for those

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who could not afford a *voiture* were minimized and endured. Nor was there was much
to *look at* in the course of a commercial or social venture *en ville*: those who had
business to conduct or purchases to make simply went to the shop in question (e.g., the
lawyer’s, the pawnbroker’s, the draper’s), made their choices and purchased their
goods, or placed their orders.

With the construction of the arcades however, a new public space was created,
one protected from the elements and the chaos of the street—a commercial space which
encouraged a relationship with goods now mediated only by the display window, rather
than by the shopkeeper. These consumer goods could be observed and coveted in
public, though paradoxically in a more private and intimate manner: one retained the
anonymity of the street while gaining the freedom to contemplate the goods without
interacting socially with either their sellers or producers. In such a dynamic earlier
relationships between producers and consumers of goods gave way to more direct and
personal relationships between the consumers and the commodities themselves.\(^8\)

Western Europeans whose lives spanned a good portion of the nineteenth
century, especially those in the expanding urban areas, not only experienced an
explosion in the amount of available consumer goods, but also of visual phenomena.
With window shopping now possible, strolling in the arcades and “taking in the sights”
becomes an engaging and fashionable pastime. This environment also provided the rare
space in which “respectable” women were able to walk alone, a development at once
liberating and unsettling. While undoubtedly a welcome freedom for the *bourgeoise*

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homemaker, male observers of the period (Baudelaire again the obvious example) registered a degree of anxiety and confusion at the blurring of social boundaries and gender roles in this new phenomenon. Heretofore single women on the streets were often prostitutes or of the lower classes, many of whom were themselves forced by low wages and poverty into various degrees of prostitution.9

In these new spaces, organized as they were around spectating and consumption, it was difficult to discern who and what was or was not for sale. Paradoxically, the increase in freedom and mobility provoked by evolving market forces was accompanied by a subordination and reorientation of social interaction to a commercial setting, to a space organized around interaction with and consumption of commodities. In Deleuze and Guattari’s formulation, the deterritorializing drive of capitalism, its drive to break down social strictures inimical to maximal exchange and circulation, is here countered by the need to channel these forces into the production of a consumerate engaged with, and desirous of, its products.10

Also of great importance to the increase of visual stimuli in the early nineteenth century were the revolutions in paper making and printing techniques that occur around 1830, enabling a huge increase in printed matter—magazines, newspapers, novels, lithographs and advertising.11 Emile de Girardin’s La Presse, launched in 1836, is the first paper to fix annual subscription fees at a low rate, with the rest of its operating expenses covered by advertising. Other papers quickly adopt this model, and circulation

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11 See Hauser, op.cit.
rates soar, along with the demand for “content” with which to fill the papers. The *feuilletons*, or serialized novels, become wildly popular among all classes, and writers such as Alexandre Dumas and Eugene Sue make a great deal of money supplying this democratized commodity. Demand is so great, notes Arnold Hauser, that “Whole factories of literature are set up and novels produced almost mechanically” (16). Along with newspapers there were also large increases in the numbers of libraries, collections, translations, encyclopedias and other printed materials.\footnote{For an analysis of the period’s rage for collection and exposition, see Philippe Hamon, *Expositions: littérature et architecture au XIXe siècle* (Jose Corti, 1989).} Photography itself arrives soon after the revolution in printing, although its official invention in the 1830’s was preceded and arguably anticipated by all manner of visual gadgets, dioramas, panoramas and the like, which fed the growing hunger for visual stimulation.

This project analyses a Western, capitalist economic and social system as its influence and reach expands in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of primary interest is the creation of consumer demand equal to the increased capacity for commodity production. Contemporaneous with the revolution in industrial production was a revolution in philosophical, artistic and subjective world-view that found its expression in Romanticism, the artistic and philosophical revolution which arguably still defines our modernity and subjectivity. “Romanticism” is of course a capacious and problematic term, but one which I understand generally, following Virgil Nemoianu, as
“the unfolding of the social and cultural implications and potentialities implicit in the large human model that had been gradually constituted during the eighteenth century.”¹³

Romanticism was crucial to the market’s fantastic successes in the “post-Romantic” period—if it had not existed, one might say, capitalism would have had to invent it. Individual and social changes occasioned by and within Romanticism combined with contemporary market imperatives to birth, in the course of the nineteenth century, a new kind of consumerist mentality, a degradation of Romantic aspirations which certainly would have been abhorrent to the Romantics themselves, but which meshed fortuitously with the market economy. In part, these changes influenced subjective relationships to a newly-present world of material goods, which come to bear many of the more exalted meanings and values of the Romantics, formerly located in such abstractions as the Divine, Poetry, the Artist, Freedom, etc. Along with these new ways of relating to the objective world came different ways of seeing: the economic imperatives at work increasingly stimulated production and consumption of visual representations of all kinds. Economic and cultural forces provoked the desire for spectating, and fed this growing desire by constantly increasing the scope of the representable—the things available to be “looked at.”

The three novels and one film analyzed in the following chapters are all in various ways, and to greater or lesser degrees, rhetorically and thematically implicated in and critical of these processes; the texts have been chosen for the ways in which they

engage explicitly with market forces and the presence of commodities and consumer culture in everyday life. Important in these texts is their recognition of the increasing pervasiveness of the visual in contemporary life, i.e., how important “looking” is to consumerism and modern culture generally, and the subjective, social and political effects of this hyper-visuality. Several key philosophical and critical works provide a framework for thinking about the two strands of inquiry in play here—the evolving subjective, phenomenological relationship of the consumer to the newfound objects of desire, and the impact of heightened visuality on the self and its culture—and provide a number of ideas to be tested against and in the fictional works under examination.

Not until the upheavals and revolutions grouped under the rubric of Romanticism do we see the appearance of what Colin Campbell calls “the Romantic ethic and the spirit of modern consumerism,” in his book of the same name, where he attempts to do for Romanticism and capitalism what Max Weber does for Protestantism and capitalism; that is, trace the evolution of particular modes of feeling and patterns of belief (religious, affective) in relation to economic and material developments. Building on the new kind of Rousseauian interiority and preoccupation with the self which Kant, Fichte, et.al. take up, and which many later thinkers have posited as arising during this period (e.g., Foucault), the Romantics turned both toward inner exploration and to the relation between self and other, especially the otherness of the natural world.14

14 The Romantics were also much interested in the self as other, or the other within the self. For a discussion of these topos in Shelley, see C.E. Pulos, The Deep Truth: A Study of Shelley’s Skepticism (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954).
The conception of subjectivity that developed during Romanticism, and particularly the dialectic with the “outside” that intensified with the exploration and elaboration of the individual self, oscillated between a desire for solitary contemplation and self-reflection and one for connection and integration with a totality, whether cosmic or social: paraphrasing M.H. Abrams, Nemoianu writes that “The identification between mind and outer universe is the great redeeming aim of the romantics...the growing mind of the poet not only stands for, but is the universal mind” (19-20).

However, as Thomas Mcfarland writes in *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, “the existence of so powerful a need suggests that the situation actually obtaining must be the contrary of unity: that is, one of fragmentation, of things not tied together, not harmonious, not architectonically ordered” (xi).

In Baudelaire’s late-Romantic writing, for example, we find a powerful staging of these tensions and this oscillation, particularly in the figure of the *flâneur* so important to Walter Benjamin and later critics like Ross Chambers, a figure who walks the streets and arcades of Paris, alternating between a kind of self-composed observation and an agitated desire for connection and integration, for a “bain de la multitude” of the sort we see in *A une passante*, or Poe’s *Man of the Crowd*. This sense of fragmentation, and of the isolated individual consciousness of which Munch’s *The Scream* is perhaps the most striking image, will be important to the Modernism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and prefigures the still later theoretical concept of the “decentered” subject.
“Othering” and “otherness” were central themes of those few poets, writers and philosophers, mainly from England and Germany, who initially comprised the Romantic movement around the turn of the century; one could even call Romanticism an art or techne of othering, of cultivating and exploring internal and external distances in search of inspiration, and the possibility of transcendence of individuality, of unification with others, nature, the divine. Georg Lukács observes how these subjective and objective concerns necessarily go hand-in-hand: in the context of a discussion of kantian epistemology he writes that “every contemplative stance and thus every kind of ‘pure thought’ that must undertake the task of knowing an object outside itself raises the problem of subjectivity and objectivity.” Such questions were vitally important for the Romantics, as they are for this project, in which I attempt to trace how a certain sense of self, and the relationship of self to other (people, the unknown, the material world), combined with contemporary economic imperatives to facilitate modern consumerism.

The conjunction of artistic and philosophical idealism and abstraction and the material concerns of modern commodity production in the early nineteenth century could not have occurred before. On the one hand, France did not possess the technical, industrial capabilities necessary for large scale production, lagging as it did behind England; in another respect the subject best-suited to the desiring-consumption of mass-produced commodities did not yet exist, although, primarily among the upper classes, it

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15 See Peckham, Birth of Romanticism.
was evolving in this direction. While eighteenth-century Europe is known as an enlightened era of rationalism, religious skepticism and scientific advance (embodied in the Encyclopédie), the sentimental, affective counterparts of these values are often overlooked, as Campbell points out in his discussion of the cult of sensibility embodied in the period’s ideal “Man of Feeling,” who exhibited a marked “susceptibility to tender feelings, typically exhibited by a show of tears...an ability to enter into the sufferings of others” (140).

Henry Mackenzie’s short book of that name from 1771 describes this “culture of emotional lability” to which so many among the middle and upper classes aspired. Indeed, the word “romantic” as used in the eighteenth century was synonymous with the terms “feeling” and “sentiment,” as Morse Peckham writes in The Birth of Romanticism: 1790-1815: “Romantic” literature of the era was characterized by “its unstable emotionality, its wildness and supernaturalism, its extreme imaginative freedom, and the license it gave to its writers to mix what the classicism of the 17th and early 18th centuries kept carefully separated” (33). Sterne’s Sentimental Journey, Goethe’s Werther and Walpole’s Castle of Otranto demonstrate that alongside the reasoned philosophical, political and scientific currents of the century ran others of sentimental excess and emotional absorption that were of great importance for the Romantics—for every contrat social a nouvelle Héloïse, for every Candide a Werther.

Since Campbell finds Weber’s work focused more on the “Protestant ethic” than the “spirit of capitalism,” he supplements Weber by devoting more attention to the

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17 Peckham, Birth of Romanticism 18.
latter, applying Weber’s insights beyond the seventeenth-century Protestants to the religious and affective currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

    Weber’s claim concerning the nature of the link between Protestantism and capitalism is not denied, but extended such that both the rational ascetic and the sentimental Pietistic sides of that religious movement are seen as contributing to the development of the modern economy...whilst (Weber) concentrated on outlining those Protestant teachings which he considered had influenced the development of an ethic favourable to a capitalist spirit, it is necessary here to disentangle the origins of another ethic from those self-same teachings...stressing the central role of a cultural ‘ethic’ in enabling the introduction of a ‘modern’ form of economic action, demonstrating both their ‘congruence’ and their psychological and cultural connections.  

His study of how certain “ethics” facilitated the development of modern consumerist behavior recognizes that traditional economic analyses of production, with their rational \textit{homo economicus} motivated solely by objective needs, neglect the crucial role in modern capitalism of desiring production; that is, of producing appetite and desire in the consumerate that must go far beyond simplistic notions of utilitarian, “needs-based” behavior.

    Campbell considers Romanticism a critical moment in these developments, and notes that as he began his research “consideration of Romanticism as a socio-cultural movement, functionally interconnected with an emerging industrial society, appeared minimal, whilst I could not find any examination of what one might call ‘the romantic ingredient’ in modern life, the ‘romantical’ as opposed to the ‘rational’” (4). Or as he writes elsewhere, “other phenomena, largely neglected by social scientists, were somehow deeply implicated in both this revolution (Romanticism) and modern

consumer behaviour; phenomena such as fashion, romantic love, taste and the reading of fiction” (7). It is precisely the influence of these phenomena on “modern consumer behavior” that will be explored in the readings to follow.

Along with Campbell’s discussion of the relationship between Romanticism and market forces, Lukács’ readings of Marx, and his analyses of commodification, or “reification” in his terminology, suggest provocative ways of thinking about the subjective and formal effects of advanced market economies. Lukács’ writings on the concept of reification are relevant for his critique of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism, and the extension of economic forces into subjective and social worlds. Reification at the most reductive level simply means commodification of the abstract, i.e., the rendering of intangibles into quantifiable things, especially into things that can measured, priced and sold. Capitalist rationalization and specialization, its drive to quantify all forms of production and exchange—labor time first and foremost—create a situation where all subjective, social and material phenomena come to be seen and treated as “things,” and exchanged not for their use-values, but for their exchange values. This kind of exchange within an economy where production is production for the market represents a “perversion,” or turning and looking away from the use-value of a given object to a mediating third term (money), or to other values and meanings which the object can be made to signify (status, freedom, love, etc). Lucien Goldmann describes the effects of the market economy on social relationships, and on subject-object relationships:
Dans la vie économique, qui constitue la partie la plus importante de la vie sociale moderne, toute relation authentique avec l’aspect qualitatif des objets et des êtres tend à disparaître, aussi bien des relations entre les hommes et les choses que des relations interhumaines, pour être remplacée par une relation médiatisée et dégradée: la relation avec les valeurs d’échange purement quantitatives.19

Some “things” are obviously not easily quantified or exchanged—e.g., desire, security, love, cultural dominance—but given capitalism’s imperative to create markets, and commodities to exchange within those markets, it would obviously be counterproductive for such primary motivations to fall outside its purview. The logic of the commodity structure thus dictates that it “penetrate society in all its aspects and...remould it in its own image” (HCC 85). The commodity fetishism arising under these conditions is for Lukačs “a specific problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism” (HCC 84). The problem posed in his “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat” essay is: “how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the total outer and inner life of society?” (HCC 84). For him the influence is indeed thorough, extending “right into the worker’s ‘soul,’” where “even his psychological attributes are separated from his total personality and placed in opposition to it so as to facilitate their integration into specialised rational systems and their reduction to statistically viable concepts” (HCC 88).20

Georg Simmel describes much the same phenomenon in his essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” with his characterization of money as universal equivalent:

20 Guy Debord will call this phenomenon “separation perfected.” See La Société du spectacle (Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1983).
Money is concerned only with what is common to all: it asks for the exchange value, it reduces all quality and individuality to the question: How much? All intimate emotional relations between persons are founded in their individuality, whereas in rational relations man is reckoned with like a number, like an element which is in itself indifferent. Only the objective measurable achievement is of interest.\(^2\)

Commodified objects cease to be exchanged for their functional use-values, but rather for abstract exchange-values; likewise this “fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails a fragmentation of its subject,” who becomes increasingly separated and “contemplative,” i.e., habituated to regarding his labor and production as concrete, exchangeable things separate from himself (HCC 89).

The dual effect of commodification works both on the subject’s perception of its labor and production, and on its perception of objects: “This rational objectification conceals above all the immediate—qualitative and material—character of things as things...the individual object which man confronts directly, either as producer or consumer, is distorted in its objectivity by its commodity character” (HCC 92-3). Once all objects acquire an exchange value they relate to other objects on the basis of these external values, or meanings, and it is these latter which are marketed and consumed. We would thus expect to find evidence of these trends—subjective developments and social relations aligning with and around market forces—in contemporary artistic productions, and I believe this realignment is indeed visible in the readings to follow.

On a formal level I draw upon Lukács’ distinction between “narrative,” realistic fiction and “descriptive,” naturalistic fiction, especially as outlined in his essay “Narrate

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or Describe?” for Lukács Emile Zola stands as the exemplary naturalist: in his fiction reality tends to be described “from the standpoint of an observer,” whereas in the realist novelists he prefers (Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy) it is largely narrated “from the standpoint of a participant” (ND 111). This latter method of narration, privileged by Lukács, presents more accurately for him the totality of social life and the subject’s position within it, whereas the former results from the pervasive, reified condition in which the artist is so enmeshed that s/he cannot or will not create a fictional world that shows all the social and historical forces acting upon its characters, who struggle and act within their historical conditions. Instead, what are journalistically “described” are static tableaux, of greater or lesser interest in themselves, but often irrelevant to the action of the novel and its protagonist. The tendency is to delineate myriad minute details, to attempt “photographic” descriptions; even when Zola discusses social problems, “they are simply described as social facts, as results, as caput mortuum of a social process” (ND 113-4).

Lukačs believes that Flaubert “achieves his symbolic content through irony and consequently on a considerable level of artistry and to some extent with genuine artistic means,” but that Zola substitutes symbols for the significance that would come from proper narration and contextualization: “in the case of Zola, the symbol is supposed to embody social monumentality and is supposed to imbue episodes otherwise meaningless, with great social significance...[t]he metaphor is over-inflated in the attempt to encompass reality” (ND 115). Or in other words, Zola relies too heavily on

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“telling” and not enough on “showing.” Certainly there are grand, central symbols in Zola’s novel—the train, the mine, Les Halles, Nana, the department store—but they are not simply thrown in here and there to break the monotony of description; rather, they gain their considerable and lasting force from the layers of description, strata if you will, in his novels’ architecture, that are built up along with, and within, the narrative. Zola writes in this regard that “Nos descriptions n’ont plus un rôle purement pittoresque, elles sont là pour donner le drame entier, les personnages avec l’entourage qui agit sur eux,” and elsewhere: “Dans ce qu’on nomme notre fureur de description, nous ne cédons presque jamais au seul besoin de décrire; cela se complique toujours en nous d’intentions symphoniques et humaines.”

Certainly it is often the case in Zola that “The object is made a symbol,” and I would add, an image (ND 131). Lukács alludes to this while critiquing Zola’s “assemblage of all the important details as seen from various points of view,” which results in “a series of static pictures, of still lives connected to each other according to their own inner logic” (emphasis added, ND 144). I would qualify the manner of connection as one resulting from an external, idealist, market logic, but the notion of discrete objects relating to each other on the basis of the ideas and images—qua signs—which they evoke in the subject is one Jean Baudrillard explored at length in his Système des objets, La Société de consommation, and Pour une critique de l’économie politique du signe, where he contends that consumption is a pure idealist practice

involving the consumption of the relationship between things, or more accurately, the idea of the relationship between things.24

Baudrillard’s version of a Marxist semiotics, under elaboration at roughly the same time as the two twentieth-century works under consideration in this study, proves more provocative and applicable in their context, and will supplement Lukačs’ theories, which seem most relevant and insightful in the context of the nineteenth century.

Baudrillard is important for the way he updates Marxist critique by shifting emphasis from the traditional primacy of production, the economic “base” of capitalism, to “superstructural” questions of imagery and surface—the tendency for commodity culture to become a visual, aestheticized culture of spectacle—and the ways in which commodities signify for their consumers.25 Baudrillard’s addition of semiotics and linguistics to Marx contributes to our understanding of consumption as a “pure idealist practice,” i.e., one in which it is primarily the ideas and the connotations associated with commodities, what they refer to or signify, which are marketed and consumed; what makes this possible in the course of the nineteenth century, and to an even greater extent in the twentieth, are the subjective conditions arising within and out of Romanticism.

Campbell’s theory of the importance of Romantic idealism to modern, consumerist subjectivity, combined with Lukačs’ analysis of the place of the commodity-object in everyday life, yields a fresh way of looking at the increasing

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25 For his revaluation of the notions of base and superstructure, see Le Miroir de la production; ou, L’illusion critique du matérialisme historique (Paris: Libraire Générale Française, 1994).
importance of objects in the nineteenth-century novel, and the importance for the novels’ characters, and narrators, of the visible array of commodities. Revisiting these questions in a novel of the nineteen sixties, in light of Baudrillard’s critique, shows the degree to which these movements have intensified, culturally and subjectively. In the last reading of an explicitly visual (as opposed to verbally descriptive, or ekphrastic) medium—a film, also from the sixties—I suggest that the various logics and cultural movements at work in the previous texts have found their logical expression in the visual fascination with things, and that the reification decried by Lukács is pervasive, but not monolithic, and can be exposed, unsettled, and even turned critically back upon itself.

The first text under consideration is Gustave Flaubert’s l’Education sentimentale. This chapter examines how the wealth of commodities flooding the culture in the early nineteenth century enters into the post-Romantic, “realist” novel, and provides multiple new sites for erotic focus and investment of meaning. The novel’s hero demonstrates a consistent impulse toward idealization and fetishization clearly derived from the same kind of Romantic fiction his soul sister Emma Bovary devoured at the convent. These tendencies predispose our hero to fetishize material things and idealizations, at the expense of direct engagement with or understanding of the real conditions of, and actors in, his life. As is often the case in Romantic narratives, the “problematic hero’s” projects and fantasies consistently result in failure and
disillusionment. The failures of Flaubert’s hero stem from his inability or refusal to “see” clearly his idealized love object, and his preference for fetishizing and investing value in objects next to, or associated with her. This perversion, or “looking away,” comes easily to Frédéric Moreau, who is always turning his attention either to things proximate to Mme Arnoux, or to his idealized image of her, and never to the actual person before him. Frédéric’s attention to and preference for significant objects (as opposed to “significant others”), is often ridiculed and ironized by the narrator. Flaubert himself seems fascinated with the material and decorative: he devotes a good deal of time and space to descriptions of the physical places in which his characters move, and the myriad objects and furnishings within them. Often these descriptions of decor, clothing, furnishings, etc. have no particular relation to psychological or plot development, and delight in the profusion of colors and materials in Frédéric’s urban environment; this attraction exerted by things, and the amount of attention devoted to them, increases radically in Zola’s novel.

The next chapter looks at Zola’s *Au Bonheur des dames*, which studies the growth of the modern department store, the creation of marketing science, and, more generally, the triumph of modern capitalism over traditional, small-scale commerce. The development of contemporary patterns of consumption, and the importance to them of orchestrating consumers’ relationships to commodities, of seduction, of desiring production and of the creation of “needs” and “lack” in order to produce a consumerate

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complementary to the capacities of modern industrial production, are all detailed in prodigious and predictably zolian length. This chapter builds on the previous one by focusing more on the rationalization of modern consumer behavior, and the explicit relationships that develop between consumer and commodity, subject and object.27 Zola’s analysis of the hidden “machinery” or “architecture” of seduction at work behind the apparent transparency of the commercial space figures importantly. Whereas Flaubert’s novel details his hero’s subjective dreaminess, sense of loss, and inability to connect with his beloved deriving from his dysfunctional Romantic ideology, Zola’s heros (and heroïnes), are far more lively and pragmatic, and do succeed in developing close, rewarding relationships—but only with commodities. It is not accidental that Zola’s novel has a happy ending, since it is a celebration of the great success story of the nineteenth century—the triumph of the “world system,” as Immanuel Wallerstein calls it—developed in Western Europe and the United States over the last several centuries.28 Frédéric Moreau’s burning, distant passion for an absurdly idealized love object looks positively quaint next to the “hot” environment of Zola’s department store, where fights break out over lace, and the flâneur’s hunger for the “bain de la multitude” becomes a submission to the promise of multiple pleasures proffered by the “bain des choses.”29

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27 What is organized and “rationalized” is a kind of controlled chaos: excessive desires, addictions and seemingly random movements are carefully provoked and channeled.
29 For a now-classic history of Western conceptions of passion and love, see Denis de Rougemont, L’Amour et l’Occident (Paris: Plon, 1939).
Rhetorically, formally, the attention paid to things and décor in Flaubert’s narrative expands and intensifies in Zola’s novel to an extreme degree, such that we find page after page of minute, obsessive descriptions of the commodities circulating throughout the department store, and throughout the narrative. The emphasis Flaubert places on observing and describing, on visual surfaces, increases dramatically; if Campbell were more important for the Romantic background of Flaubert’s novel, here Lukačs’s concept of reification is most relevant—especially his theories of how the increasing reliance on and valorization of description in narrative fiction is closely linked to processes of commodification.

The idealizing tendencies and desires of Flaubert’s hero are still, however ineffectually, directed toward an actual person; in Zola’s novel talk of “soul mates” and such has little place: the emphasis here is on the goods, which really have become the “stuff that dreams are made of.” To pick up and update this story, and see how these dreams play out in the twentieth century, is the task of the next chapter, in which we look at a novel whose main characters no longer have any knowledge of a time “before” the consumer culture they inhabit, and who are little more than ciphers “stocked” full of desire for various consumer goods.

George Perec’s Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante shows in bleak detail how the romanticism of Frédéric Moreau conjoined with the economic processes described by Zola and evolved during the twentieth century. The new class of post-WWII consumers to which Pérec’s characters belong has thoroughly internalized the
appetites and tastes Zola’s characters were just developing. Perec’s young Parisian couple is entirely constituted by their desires for the various goods they see everywhere in advertisements and magazines, and during ritual bouts of window shopping. The characters have neither physical presence nor sensuality, nor any psychological depth. Their passions center exclusively on the longing for and consumption of various objects and experiences, which they approach and worship as fervently as any acolyte. Whereas Frédéric Moreau’s passions were directed, however ineffectually, toward an actual person, and Zola’s consumers still struggled with guilt over their growing addiction to shopping, Perec’s couple’s behavior lacks any suggestion of an “otherwise,” or a “prior to”; there is in the novel a pervasive sense of inevitability or historical determinism behind these subjective and economic modalities, relieved only by the occasional sentiment of absence or loss. Their world does not seem recognizably different from ours, but with the previous discussion of Zola’s novel in mind, we will be aware of the extent to which this world—internal and external—was in fact engineered for specific purposes, i.e., the rapid turnover of commodities mass-produced for the market.

Predictably, Perec’s characters have a hyper-visual, aestheticized relationship to their world: emphasis throughout the novel is on impersonal description and surface appearance. The novel opens with a disembodied eye passing over and through its characters’ dream apartment, describing and cataloging all the items it would ideally contain, and how they would be arrayed to “communicate,” as Baudrillard would say. This drive toward detailed description, toward a visual relationship with the culture and its artifacts, increases in the course of these fictions; its logical culmination, what it
really wants, as it were, is to be seen. The final reading of this project is therefore an example of what is often considered the twentieth century’s primary artistic medium (as the novel was the nineteenth’s)—film. One of Jean-Luc Godard’s films from the sixties is analyzed in chapter five for the ways in which he explores many of the same questions as his contemporary Pérec; Godard, with of course his own unique style and particular preoccupations, explores many of Pérec’s concerns.

Godard’s films of the early sixties deal explicitly with the burgeoning consumer culture that appeared in post-war Europe during the late fifties and sixties. The influx of commodities into everyday life was troubling for many European intellectuals, and Godard’s films of the period meditate frequently on the impact of commodity culture on subjectivity and social relationships, how and what all these new “things” mean, and the nature of imagery, often in relation to written texts. Parts of Masculin/Féminin, for example, directly quote Pérec’s novel, and have similar plot lines: market research—interviewing and cataloging disparate things and experiences—are common to both, as is the importance of the cinema for their characters. It is in Godard’s film 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle, however, that we see his most striking preoccupation with the image, with subjective affect and subject-object relations.

In Godard’s film I am interested in his attention to and interrogation of looking, at objects and subjects, and suggest that in some way disruptive of reification he actually looks “too closely,” that he pushes the logic of reification to the extreme, and in so doing unsettles “given” meanings in a kind of filmic deconstruction. Related to this
procedure is his practice of citation: market forces and logics, including and especially the discourse of advertising, imbue commodities and relationships with certain meanings, such that they are always “citing” other reified ideas—freedom, love, romance, patriotism, success, etc. Godard over-cites, he makes citation an explicit subject and tool, and thus actually restores a measure of materiality and difference to objects, people and relationships, which runs contrary to the homogenizing tendencies of idealizing, reified, “simulacral” discourses.
CHAPTER 2

FLAUBERT: LOSING

_The meaning of an object always flickers._

--Barthes\(^{30}\)

_Il n’y de vrai que les “rapports,” c’est-a-dire la façon dont nous percevons les objets._

--Flaubert\(^{31}\)

Strong critical interest in Flaubert’s _l’Education sentimentale_ attests to its current status as one of the most important nineteenth-century novels. Much more than _Madame Bovary_, this later work details the century’s concerns and obsessions: the experience and writing of history; Romanticism and its legacy; industrialization, material culture and the development of capitalism; realism as an artistic ideal; the notion of progress; the changing roles of the artist and artistic production; time, revolution, the rise of the bourgeoisie and decline of the aristocracy, etc. Flaubert set out with the explicit intent to describe his culture in all its sentimental and intellectual


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currents, as experienced by the generation coming of age at mid-century—a generation which witnessed several political revolutions, and was closely connected to ongoing artistic and economic revolutions.\textsuperscript{32}

Among the important changes of the time were great increases in physical mobility and in the exchange of goods and capital, as well as in visual stimuli and spectacles of all sorts. In a sense, “moving” and “looking” are two major aspects of the nineteenth century under analysis here: from a backward look to the Romantic influences on Flaubert’s generation and his fictional characters, we consider how the Romantic, idealist tendency to look “up,” to seek union and transcendence, gives way to a more sustainable and pragmatic looking “down” at the material object-world \textit{ici-bas}. While the idealized dream world of \textit{l’Education sentimentale’s} hero, as for Madame Bovary, rests in a distant, frustrating stasis, the tangible, material world “at hand” increases in mobility and fluidity: characters and their possessions move and exchange meanings with a rapidity dizzying to Frédéric. His own Romantic ideology, like Emma Bovary’s, is dysfunctional in social and affective relationships due in large part to its idealizing drive, but it finds purchase in the world of material goods and things, which readily bear and reflect investments of meaning and value.

With this increased attention in Flaubert to the material world comes an increased emphasis, for novelist and character alike, on its visual characteristics, on surfaces, and on looking in general; attention which often provokes a kind of vertigo or sensory overload—a strangely benumbing affect—in the main character. Flaubert’s

\footnotetext{32 For a historian’s view of the same period, see Eric Hobsbawm’s \textit{The Age of Revolution} (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962).}
“realistic” method of description reflects these trends, this movement from the ideal and invisible to the material and visual, with its preoccupation with objects and surface description; via Flaubert’s ironizing he critiques his protagonist’s superficiality, idealism, and investment in objects, but at the same time the novelist himself seems genuinely fascinated by the increased presence and mobility of things in his environment.33

The end of the Second Republic with the “18 Brumaire” of Napoleon le petit profoundly disillusioned Flaubert’s generation, which had matured during the thirties and forties when Romanticism in art and republican ideals in politics predominated among artists and intellectuals; along with its many other facets Romanticism was, as Ross Chambers remarks, “an intensely political moment,” albeit one with decidedly mixed effects on the political scene.34 The spleen of Baudelaire and the acerbic irony of Flaubert, itself often targeting Romanticism (particularly its dreamy escapist tendencies), surely owe much to the disappointments of the 1848 revolutions—France’s of course, along with the many others across Europe.35 It is thus unsurprising to find in Flaubert’s history of “sentiment” a progression from idealism to disillusionment among several of its characters. Frédéric Moreau is, however, less political than sentimental; he

33 On this question of implication vs. critique, see Danger Sensation et objets. For an analysis of Flaubertian irony see Christopher Prendergast, The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendhal, Nerval, Flaubert. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
34 Ross Chambers, “Literature Deterritorialized,” A New History of French Literature, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) 712. France arguably concentrated its early romantic energies on the Revolution and the subsequent Napoleonic empire building before turning them to artistic production in the ’20s and ’30s. Romanticism in England coincided with a repressive, reactionary political scene, which limited the freedoms and publications of the Romantics—Byron’s exile, Shelley’s occasional poems that were unpublished until long after the events under critique had passed (e.g., “The Mask of Anarchy,” “England in 1819”).
35 See Hobsbawn Age of Revolution.
is so thoroughly detached and self-absorbed that politics barely impinge upon his consciousness, preoccupied as it is with dreams of amorous fulfillment and grandiose, imaginary achievements in law, painting, historiography, diplomacy, etc. Exemplary of his disinterest in worldly affairs is the excursion he and his mistress take from Paris to Fontainebleau during the critical days of June, 1848. Richard Terdiman notes in this regard the way “[t]he novel reproduces this sense that the action of the revolution happens alongside the concerns of its characters, but never engages them directly,” and suggests that this disengagement reflects the frustration and impotence felt by so many of the period’s intellectuals and artists. This lack of contact or direct engagement describes most of Frédéric’s experiences—affective, intellectual, artistic—which are characterized by fantasy and idealization. In his case it is not a question of political failures which result in cynicism and detachment: he can’t be said to have that excuse, because Frédéric never had or has any particular politics, with the possible exception of his brief flirtation with running for public office. What plagues him is rather a fundamentally dysfunctional way of thinking that inhibits direct action or engagement, and undercuts all of his various projects from the outset.

As Terdiman points out, in the case of Emma Bovary it is not her status as a provincial woman of modest means lacking in formal education that results in her frustration and eventual disaster, but rather her inability to match lived experience with the Romantic narratives she consumed during her stay in the convent. Frédéric Moreau is, in contrast, an educated, urban male of (eventually) considerable means who is also

continually frustrated and disillusioned. He does not, like Emma, end a suicide, but if anything his perseverance and survival is testament to his inertia and velleity; Emma is a far more active and impassioned character, and of the two the only one capable of such dramatic action. What is common to both characters is their inheritance from Romantic fiction of a large number of ready-made clichés: their inability to make reality fit these ideals is one of the primary sources of Flaubert’s relentless ironizing. These philosophical idées reçues of Frédéric predestine to failure his relationships and various undertakings, while paradoxically fueling his tendency to relate to and value material objects over people.

The very first images of Frédéric suggest the Romantic type with a penchant for idealization, “à longs cheveux et qui tenait un album sous son bras...immobile”; we learn that he is on his way home to “languir” for two months before starting law school. His attitude is contemplative and melancholic, and as “il contemplait des clochers, des édifices...bientôt, Paris disparaissant, il poussa un grand soupir” (47). His youthful ambitions imagine artistic and sentimental pursuits—plays to be written, paintings to be painted, loves to pursue, the under-appreciated beauty of his soul, melancholy verse—until the “apparition” of Mme Arnoux, the woman who will be his great love, and generally enduring obsession. Now he speculates about her presumed exotic origins (she is a brunette), and her resemblance to the heroines of the Romantic

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36 This could serve as one definition of irony, and also supports Goldmann’s thesis, via Lukačs, about the problematic hero as one who cannot find “authentic values” within their world.
fiction with which he is so familiar: “Il la supposait d’origine andalouse, créole peut-être.... Elle ressemblait aux femmes des livres romantiques” (50, 53). Even the soundtrack provided by an itinerant harpist for Frédéric’s fantasy recounts “une romance orientale, où il était question de poignards, de fleurs et d’étoiles” (51).

Conversing later with his friend Deslauriers, we learn Frédéric’s “opinions littéraires étaient changeées: il estimait par-dessus tout la passion; Werther, René, Franck, Lara, Lélia et d’autres plus médiocres l’enthousiasmaient presque également”; that “la musique lui semblait seule capable d’exprimer ses troubles intérieurs”; that “la surface des choses l’appréhendait, et il voulait peindre” (58). These interests will all prove transitory, however, tried on only to be quickly discarded or forgotten. What does remain, as with Emma Bovary, are his predelictions for such dreamy idealization.

Neither Emma nor Frédéric succeeds in clearing their heads of “true love,” “soul mates,” white horses, purple sunsets and the like long enough to engage with the people and world around them. Their formative diet of Romantic fiction has furnished a set of expectations and ideals that nowhere finds adequation or fulfillment in lived relations and experience, and indeed precludes appreciation of variance, spontaneity and present beauty.39 The novel Frédéric later toys at writing is set in Venice (perhaps the signifier par excellence of the Romantic), with himself as a “Sylvio” and his love as an “Antonia”; in his story it is almost exactly a question of the “poignards...fleurs et...étoiles” the harpist sings of in the opening scene: what passages he completes are comprised of duels with rivals, fiery destruction and moonlight serenades. His own life

39 There is a marvelously succinct characterization of this horror of the material near-at-hand in Mme Bovary, where it is said of Emma “Plus les choses étaient voisines, plus sa pensée s’en detournait,” i.e., the closer she draws to the real, the more she looks elsewhere, to the ideal.
at this point is, however, too disappointingly unlike his dreams, and he soon abandons the novel—as he eventually abandons every one of his projects.

Frédéric’s impatience with the lengthy and sustained effort necessary to actually produce art (or finish his law degree, or make money with M. Dambreuse, or become a politician, etc. etc.) is very recognizably modern: to Romanticism we owe our great freedoms of self-creation and stylization, but also our taste for pre-packaged “style.” As it is usually much easier to seem than to be, to buy a persona rather than expend the effort necessary to create one, so too for Frédéric is his persistent idealizing and fantasizing a kind of clean and easy substitute for the difficult work of (self) creation, and his passion for “Mme Arnoux” really a prophylactic, gauze-filtered substitute for the dangers inherent in loving another person. 40 When he, for example, wanders distractedly through the streets, he imagines every woman that approaches to be his beloved, and continually maps her onto them; as the illusion collapses with the distance between them, the disappointment is for him “chaque fois une déception nouvelle” (66). Any of these other women might actually be of interest to him, and interested in him, were it not for his relentless compulsion to idealize: as the object of his passion is necessarily elsewhere, he is doomed to these continual “déceptions nouvelles.”

Such an approach has the additional effect of rendering all his listless activities equal in some important and disturbing sense: once he has derealized his world in this way, everything he does has the same weak valence, whether it’s browsing through

40 Rather than simply lament the “inauthenticity” of the masses, I would add that the “elitists” themselves have been in the forefront of theorizing and valorizing the fluid, malleable nature of subjectivity. This is no news to marketers, who have been busily creating subjects to fill every “niche market” that can be imagined, defined or created.
“brochures sous les arcades de l’Odeón,” reading the *Revue des deux mondes* in a café, hearing at the Collège de France “pendant une heure une leçon de chinois ou d’économie politique,” or composing German waltzes at home—all activities are equally ridiculous, insignificant and interchangeable (66). Simmel analyzes this specifically urban and modern flattening of affect in a highly-commodified environment. In such a milieu the subject struggles to maintain a sense of identity and individuality, but “The self-preservation of certain personalities is brought at the price of devaluing the whole objective world, a devaluation which in the end unavoidably drags one's own personality down into a feeling of the same worthlessness” (MML). However, if serious personal or inter-personal engagement proves impossible for Frédéric, he does engage profoundly and readily with material goods: again and again his gaze and affect, theoretically directed at Mme Arnoux, fall instead upon the fetishized objects surrounding her.

Frédéric’s first encounter with his love object echoes in many ways Charles Bovary’s with Emma Rouault: Flaubert’s fragmentary description of Marie Arnoux gives only a vague impression of various physical traits—dark curls and skin, strong eyebrows, straight nose, fine fingers—and concentrates instead on her clothing, and the general aesthetic effect of “toute sa personne...sur le fond de l’air bleu” (50). In the beginning, as throughout the novel, the things *around* Mme Arnoux are most compelling for Frédéric—her hat, ribbons, dress, shawl, the chairs and carpet under her, *objets d’art* in her apartments, etc. Rather than look carefully at this woman who is so
éblouissante to him, his attention and desire for intimacy are deflected onto the things “about” her—her name, her home, her dresses.

Since this initial “apparition” of Mme Arnoux on the boat home to Nogent-sur-Seine (“Ce fut comme une apparition”) proves too difficult to consider frankly, he moves off to the side for safer observation: “il se planta tout près de son ombrelle (50). This movement to the side, this sliding off or looking away, will be the characteristic move of Frédéric throughout the novel (50).41 What he now observes closely are Mme Arnoux’s material “props.” Once installed in metonymic intimacy near one of her possessions, he is immediately attracted to another (her “panier à ouvrage”), and his desire to know everything about her moves down the signifying chain to her “nom, sa demeure...les meubles de sa chambres, toutes les robes qu’elle avait portées” (50).

Frédéric’s fleeting “désir de la possession physique même disparaissait sous une envie plus profonde, une curiosité douleureuse qui n’avait pas de limites”: unlimited because Mme Arnoux’s physical, intellectual and emotional being serves merely to feed his fantasies, which are even more compelling than his brief sexual desire. Another example is immediately forthcoming: as he speculates about the possibility of Mme Arnoux’s exotic origins, he notices her shawl hung on the brass railing behind the bench. Attention to the actual object (“un long châle à bandes violette”) quickly fades as he enters another reverie involving the object’s lucky proximity to its owner: “Elle

41 Psychoanalytically speaking, this is exactly the fetishistic turn, the “perversion” away from the too-bright object. What we are concerned with here is of course fetishism of commodities, but the distinction is unclear. Perhaps a good deal of Freud’s notion of perversion, much as Lacan’s notion of lack, could be historicized and more firmly rooted in economic history than in any psycho-sexual universality. Capitalism does seem to have made us all (more) perverse, as Freud argued civilization made us neurotic. See Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1, Sec. 4, and Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents, Trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).
avait dû, bien des fois, au milieu de la mer, durant les soirs humides, en envelopper sa
taille, s’en couvrir les pieds, dormir dedans!” (50). Such “désir de la possession
physique” as might be muster ed is again displaced onto an object eroticized by its
nearness to Mme Arnoux—to her waist, feet, sleeping body. Flaubert suggests the
untenability of such fantasies however, and their persistent “slippage” from reality, by
interrupting Frédéric’s dreams with a sudden awareness of the imminent slipping of the
(real) shawl off the railing and into the river. Heroically, Frédéric leaps to catch it, and
in so doing achieves a rare success; he is rewarded for this gallantry with an expression
of thanks from Mme Arnoux.

The later treatment of Frédéric’s return to Paris, after receiving a substantial
inheritance from his uncle, further underscores the disconnect between Frédéric’s vivid
fantasy life and the world around him. His haste to *parvenir* and his visions of opulent
apartments and amorous conquests contrast ironically with the boredom of the carriage
ride, and with the passing visions of “le mur d’un grange, ou bien une auberge, toute
seule...le four d’un boulanger projet[ant] des lueurs d’incendie...au seuil d’une porte,
une femme, debout,” etc. (131). His eager first sights of Paris reveal “l’intérieur
d’ignobles cours pleines d’immondices, avec des flaques d’eau sale au milieu...[d]es
enseignes de sage-femme...[d]es affiches...aux trois quarts déchirées, tremblaient au
vent comme des guenilles...une pluie fine tombait, il faisait froid, le ciel était pâle”
(132). Nonetheless, such is the power of Frédéric’s fantasy life that he is able to
completely replace these dreary sights with a characteristically disembodied image of
Mme Arnoux: “deux yeux qui valaient pour lui le soleil resplendissaient derrière la
brume” (132). The final irony here of course is that Mme Arnoux is nowhere shining behind the fog, actual or imagined: the Arnoux have had another child, sold their business and moved during Frédéric’s extended séjour en province.

Frédéric is particularly disposed to the contemplation of shadows and fog, as evident in the passage where we learn of his earlier nocturnal loitering outside the Arnoux’s print shop, the perfectly titled Art Industriel, where he stares at the lighted apartments over the shop, presuming that the Arnoux live above their business. That space, as Mme’s imagined domicile, is charged for him with desire, longing and projection: “au-dessus de la boutique d’Arnoux, il y avait au premier étage trois fenêtres, éclairées chaque soir. Des ombres circulaient par derrière, une surtout, c’était la sienne; et il se dérangeait de très loin pour regarder ces fenêtres et contempler cette ombre” (emphasis added, 64). This is a wonderfully condensed image reminiscent of a magic lantern, Balinese puppet theater or Plato’s famous allegory, and reveals ironically, en abîme if you will, Frédéric’s normal, idealist modus operandi. Windows generally promise a kind of depth, an access to a reality behind the surface; again however, this signifier is empty for Frédéric, and instead of permitting him access to a kind of (albeit factitious) intimacy with at least Mme Arnoux’s (real) shadow, they reflect, through Flaubert’s style indirect libre, his (narcissistic) fantasies and projections back upon himself—“une surtout, c’était la sienne.”

The charm and significance with which he has invested these windows vanishes instantly when Arnoux remarks later that his wife stopped by the shop to visit before returning home: “Le charme des choses amiantes se retira tout à coup. Ce qu’il y
sentait confusionément épandu venait de s’évanouir, ou plutôt n’y avait jamais été. Il éprouvait une surprise infinie et comme la douleur d’une trahison”—a betrayal because the material support for his fantasies proves entirely inadequate, and indifferent, to them (emphasis added, 79). It is a measure of the weakness and fragility of Frédéric’s idealism and fantastic libidinal investments that they can be so quickly created, more or less ex nihilo, and then so quickly disappear; his supposedly all-consuming “grande passion” for Mme Arnoux itself comes and goes several times during the course of the novel, demonstrating that even that central investment does not “stick” reliably (67). More consistently reliable, however, are the myriad material objects which Frédéric fetishizes in the course of the narrative.

Flaubert was clearly fascinated with the role of material culture in the subjective lives of his characters, who inhabit environments dense with things—artistic reproductions, exotic goods imported from the colonies, clothing and accouterments, mass-produced industrial commodities, articles of antiquity, etc. Whereas things play a marginal role in Romantic texts, and serve in Balzac, for example, as background indicators of his characters’ psychology and social status, in Flaubert’s text they come to take on lives of their own (often with little relation to those of his characters), and hold value and interest in themselves.

In an earlier work such as Adolphe, for example, there are few if any “things”; the narrative focuses instead on the characters’ psychologies and emotional dynamics. Constant’s narrator is largely interested in the psychological observations with which he often interrupts Adolphe’s love story, and indeed suggests that Adolphe’s motivations
are factitious. Adolphe is dying to invest in something, to find meaning somewhere, but his love-object Ellénore cannot hold or bear his investments for more than brief periods—hence Adolphe’s enormous frustration and sense of impotence; his romantic lieux communs, like Frédéric’s, are dysfunctional and inadequate. Both, steeped in the same Romantic air, tend to paralysis and inaction, to a strong sense of subjective isolation, to interiority and self-absorption. What is strikingly different in Flaubert’s novel however, is the number of material objects that have appeared to populate its domestic and social environments.42 This influx of goods is of course a direct result of the era’s increased industrial production, an economic revolution which also entailed many changes in subjective and social experience.

The youthful Frédéric is frustrated in his quest for love by lack of access to his beloved, and lack of a presentable base from which to launch his artistic, intellectual and amorous projects. His money problems at least are solved by his uncle’s death at the end of Part One, at which time he comes into a substantial inheritance. Upon learning of his new wealth, he immediately envisions himself at Mme Arnoux’s side, presenting her a gift (“quelque cadeau”); perhaps more important for him than the gift however, is that it be wrapped “dans du papier de soie,” an emphasis on packaging that undermines the significance of this act of symbolic exchange. Here the surface and display of the thing assumes a greater importance than the thing itself, the “ground,” so to speak. This image of courtship, of a deepening (human, love) relationship turns

42 Rather than providing simply background effects, the things in Flaubert’s novel often live and move in the same plane as his characters.
quickly to an ecstatic, narcissistic vision of the luxury goods he’ll soon be able to procure; unlike the vague “quelque cadeau,” he has no trouble envisioning his own future acquisitions in detail: “son tilbury, non, un coupé plutôt! un coupé noir, avec un domestique en livrée brune.” The sound of his (imaginary) horse mingles with “le murmure de leurs baisers,” bliss that “se renouvellerait tous les jours, indéfiniment.” Now he will also be able to receive the Arnoux in his new, richly-appointed house, “la salle à manger...en cuir rouge, le boudoir en soie jaune, des divans partout! et quelles étagères! quels vases de Chine! quels tapis!” This whirl of luxury goods leaves him breathless, in the kind of éblouissement, ivresse or stupefaction which things and the contemplation of things often provoke in him: “Ces images arrivaient si tumultueusement, qu’il sentait la tête lui tourner” (emphasis added, 126).

It is not the socializing, or the “set,” that takes precedence here for Frédéric, but the setting; not the relations, but the decor; not the gift, but the package. His dreams of love are displaced onto and confounded with the world of expensive things, of decor and props, with which he can now afford to intoxicate himself, and he continues the imaginary list of furnishings for his chosen lifestyle: “il sentit une ivresse le submerger...comme l’architecte qui fait le plan d’un palais, il arrangea, d’avance, sa vie. Il l’emplit de délicatesses et de splendeurs; elle montait jusqu’au ciel; une prodigalité de choses y apparaissait; et cette contemplation était si profonde, que les objets extérieurs avaient disparus” (emphasis added, 131). Remarkably condensed in this passage are all of the major themes under discussion: the movement away from concrete, material

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43 This architectural metaphor will become literal, and very important, in Zola’s Au Bonheur des dames, whose entrepreneur Octave Mouret is portrayed as a genius at designing and organizing the space of his department store, and the layout of goods within it. See also Hamon Expositions.
relations toward a “higher,” ideal realm where fantasy and romanticizing can run freely, unbridled by any unpredictable, potentially contrary or disturbing realities; the proliferation of things; their spectacularization; and the kind of stupefaction or “ivresse” which accompanies his relationship to these commodities—and to the idea, or image, of them—as well as the suggestion that this way of thinking and relating to the world effectively distances oneself from it.44

Many objects circulate and travel throughout the text and its principal settings, e.g., the Arnoux’s home and Frédéric’s mistress’s house (he and M. Arnoux share for a time the same mistress). One of the principal effects of this circulation, given the kind of significance Frédéric attaches to material goods, is a confusion in his mind of the two women, both of whom he is courting at various times, albeit with different means and for different ends. Both are, for Frédéric, deeply connected by the objects that surround and pass between them; M. Arnoux frequently takes gifts to one that he has already given to the other:

Cette confusion était provoquée par des similitudes entre les deux logements. Un des bahuts que l’on voyait autrefois boulevard Montmartre ornait à présent la salle à manger de Rosanette, l’autre le salon de Mme Arnoux...une foule de petits cadeaux, des écrans, des boîtes, des éventails allaient et venaient de chez la maîtresse chez l’épouse, car, sans la moindre gêne, Arnoux, souvent, reprenait à l’une ce qu’il lui avait donné, pour l’offrir à l’autre” (167).45

This acceleration of goods and exchange becomes increasingly confusing to Frédéric, who has difficulty keeping track of the emotional and libidinal values he has invested in these various objects.

44 “[L]es objets extérieurs avaient disparu”; compare to the quote above from Madame Bovary, “Plus les choses étaient voisines, plus sa pensée s’en détournait” (footnote 39, p.33).
45 Gift-giving here hardly cements these relationships, contra the social systems analysed by Mauss, and if anything undermines them.
The density and seductiveness of the material goods in Frédéric’s environment is frequently disorienting. Soon after entering le monde, he attends a costume ball with his future mistress Rosanette. Frédéric’s reaction to the opulence and spectacle confronting him there is typical: “[Il] fut d’abord ébloui par les lumières; il n’aperçut que de la soie, du velours, des épaules nues, une masse de couleurs...des murailles tendues de soie jaune, avec des portraits au pastel...des torchères de cristal...[d]e hautes lampes...dominaient des corbeilles de fleurs” (142). The luxury and quantity of objects and decoration at the ball, the sheer amount of visual information, is so overwhelming that he can barely focus.

Flaubert’s description de-emphasizes the characters in favor of their surroundings: Frédéric’s impressions are of flashes of color, fabric and furnishing rather than of any particular individuals. The attraction of things overshadows the partygoers, reduced in this passage to “des épaules nues.” In another scene it is the dancers’ costumes, and not the dancers themselves, which move: “toutes les femmes, assises autour du salon sur les banquettes, se levèrent à la file, prestement; et leurs jupes, leurs écharpes, leurs coiffures se mirent à tourner” (146). This derealization of the characters’ physicality, their dissolution into their objective environment, is frequent in the novel, although not yet to the degree that we will find in Zola. Flaubert describes in a letter to his niece this tendency of the “background,” of the presumably incidental, to overshadow the action, characters or “foreground”: “j’ai bien du mal à emboîter mes personnages dans les événements; les fonds emportent les premiers plans.”

Frédéric suffers a constant cognitive deficit in these situations: his dislocation and instability, his trouble ingesting all the whirl and motion, are underscored by the appearance of his old friend Hussoneet, who greets him enthusiastically (“l’accablait de félicitations”), but to whom Frédéric, “décontenancé par toutes ces personnes, ne savait que répondre” (142). The spectacle of costumed revelers to-ing and fro-ing, the “masse” of colors, the “prodigalité” of things and sights, is stupefying for him, and provokes a kind of vertigo, or Sartrean nausea avant la lettre: “Frédéric, en regardant ces personnes, éprouvait un sentiment d’abandon, un malaise” (143). Famously, when Rosanette asks him to dance “(il) s’excusa, ne savant pas danser.”

Unable to engage at even this perfunctory, formal level, Frédéric, “mécontent de lui-même, et ne sachant quoi faire, se mit à errer dans le bal” (143). Instead of dancing, he contents himself with spectating and observing the decor: “Ces élégances, qui seraient aujourd’hui des misères pour les pareilles de Rosanette, l’éblouirent; et il admirait tout...[c]’était bien là un milieu fait pour lui plaire” (emphasis added, 144). There is definitely a pleasurable aspect to this milieu, once the “sentiment d’abandon, [le] malaise” passes, or once the proper distance is attained.47 After this last inventory, Frédéric manages a conversation with several other guests, in part about the costume of a certain banker’s son disguised as a Turkish guard. This member of the bourgeoisie has the most realistic costume of all the guests, but of “un aspect si pauvre...enfin tellement déplorable et réussi” (145). Rather than be admired for its authenticity, however, he simply provokes disgust. The irony suggests that certain realities—poverty,

47 Frédéric resembles here Baudelaire’s flâneurs, or Poe’s Man of the Crowd, characters who were always fascinated with playing, and plying, the subjective line between safe-but-distant observer and vulnerable participant.
violence—can be alluded to, but can not be simulated too closely: the simulation must remain clean, non-threatening and safely distant from the actuality—much as Frédéric’s stock of ideal images and rosy scenarios (romantic, professional, etc.) keep him safely, if frustratingly, insulated.

Frédéric’s next big social event, a party at the home of the aristocrat-turned-bourgeois M. Dambreuse, recalls in many ways the prior costume ball: his first impressions are again of clothing, rich *mobilier* and soft lighting. Again the guests complement and support the architecture and interior design, rather than *vice versa*:

> un pouf énorme supportait une jardinière, dont les fleurs, s’inclinant comme des panaches, surplombaient la tête des femmes assises en rond tout autour, tandis que d’autres occupaient les bergères formant deux lignes droites interrompues symétriquement par les grands rideaux des fenêtres en velours nacarat et les hautes baies des portes à linteau doré (176).

Flaubert’s characteristically halting and measured prose is surprisingly breathless here, though its subject matter is familiar. Immediately following the crowd is described in a manner now familiar from Rosanette’s party: body parts are fragmented and mixed with clothing, and contribute merely accents here and there. Instead of “épaules nues” we’re shown some heads and faces, though the emphasis is still on the furniture, decor, costume and *bibelots* filling the various salons:

> La foule des hommes qui se tenaient debout sur le parquet, avec leur chapeau à la main, faisait de loin une seule masse noire, où les rubans des boutonnières mettaient des points rouges ça et là, et que rendait plus sombre la monotone blancheur des cravates...[l]es tetes grises, les perruques etatien nombreuses; de place en place, un crâne chauve luisait (176).

Such is the initial description of the guests, after which Flaubert continues with a description of “les grandes torchères...le buffet...[l]es trois autres salons (qui)
regorgaient d’objets d’art: paysages de maîtres contre les murs, porcelaines au bord des
tables, chinoiseries sur les consoles; des paravents de laque se développaient devant les
fenêtres, des touffes de caméliais montaient dans les cheminées” (176-7). These
descriptions again privilege objects over characters, who seem bland in comparison, and
receive considerably less attention. Their indifferent physicality is hardly improved by
their insipid personalities: Frédéric overhears snatches of utterly banal conversation,
e.g., “‘Il va faire, tout à l’heure, une chaleur!—Oh! c’est vrai, étouffante!—De qui donc
cette polka?’...d’autres causaient chemins de fer, libre-échange...une histoire de chasse”;
and finally, the flatly leaden observation that “un légitimiste et un orléaniste
discutaient” (177).

The female guests come off no better than their male counterparts in terms of
vapidity. Frédéric drifts into Mme Dambreuse boudoir, where again particular women
are of little interest to him, and while “toutes sortes de beautés se trouvaient là,” none,
any more than their male counterparts in the next room, has anything of interest to say.
What the group as a whole does contribute are visual effects, either as counterpoints to
or in harmony with their clothing and the rest of the decor:

Leurs longues jupes, bouffant autour d’elles, semblaient des flots d’où
leur taille emergait, et les seins s’offraient aux regards dans l’échancrure des
corsages...[l]e ton mat de leurs gants faisait ressortir la blancheur humaine de,
leurs bras...les taches lumineuses des pierreries etalees sur les poitrines, et l’éclat
doux des perles accompagnant les visages se melaien au miroitement des
anneaux d’or, aux dentelles, à la poudre, aux plumes, au vermillon des petites
bouches, à la nacre des dents (179).

The scene is safely observed by Frédéric, “campé derrière elles avec son lorgnon dans
l’oeil.” Jewelry, décolleté, flowers, coifs—all is spectacle and static tableau here,
where, as the narrator suggests, a kind of “placidité presque bestiale” reigns, with everything and everyone as reified and worthy of description as anything else (179).

In an earlier scene there is a beautifully descriptive passage again illustrating the frequent preponderance of things over people, the attention given to looking, and the subjective effects of look-ing on the look-er. During a period of lassitude before Frédéric gains regular access to the Arnoux household, he goes sightseeing along the Champs-Elysées and watches the carriages go by, paying particular attention of course to those with female passengers, in hopes of catching a glimpse of his loved one. The prose subsumes the people into the carriages, clothes and tack, and fragments bodies and things in such a way that the “things” are clearly privileged over the people, and it’s uncertain which exactly are more reminiscent of Mme Arnoux:

Ses yeux erraient sur les têtes féminines; et de vagues ressemblances amenaient à sa mémoire Mme Arnoux. Il se la figurait, au milieu des autres, dans un de ces petits coupés, pareils au coupé de Mme Dambreuse...[l]es cochers baissaient le menton dans leurs cravates, les roues se mettaient à tourner plus vite, le macadam grinçait; et tous les équipages descendaient au grand trot la longue avenue (65).

The horses drawing these carriages are signified by their manes, and in the following sentence we see a metonymic progression from the manes to the carriage windows, and if not to those inside, at least to their clothing. Interestingly, it’s the light, and its reflection, binding these things together: “Les crinières étaient près des crinières, les lanternes près des lanternes; les étriers d’acier, les gourmettes d’argent, les boucles de cuivre, jetaient ça et là des points lumineux entre les culottes courtes, les gants blancs, et les fourrures qui retombaient sur le blason des portières” (65). This vision provokes Frédéric’s familiar vertigo, as he struggles to take in all this visual information: “Il se
sentait comme perdu dans un monde lointain”—a trembling, scintillating world clamoring for his attention (“Les réverbères se balançaient, en faisant trembler sur la boue de longs reflets jaunâtres”), whose inhabitants pale into “Des ombres gliss(ant) au bord des trottoirs, avec des parapluies” (65).

In the passages above, Frédéric’s sense of éblouissement, vertigo and stupefaction before spectacles dense with visual stimuli indicate a kind of cognitive deficit vis-à-vis the quantity of information in his environment. Frédéric has similar trouble with the contemplation of Mme Arnoux: “La contemplation de cette femme l’énervait, comme l’usage d’un parfum trop fort. Cela descendit dans les profondeurs de son tempérament, et devenait presque une manière générale de sentir, un mode nouveau d’exister” (102). Enervait is an interesting choice, with its connotations of both weakness and agitation: this new way of being and feeling arises from Frédéric’s contemplation of his ideal (person, or image?), and seems to be a pleasurably intoxicating kind of torpor, or feverishness. Might this new way of being describe a nascent consumerist approach to the world, an evolving subjectivity, or affective (“sentimental”) education? Turning back to the text, we see Flaubert’s next sentence begins “Les prostituées qu’il rencontrait au feu du gaz...” and four subsequent lines describe how Frédéric sees his love in every other woman he encounters. The next ten lines suddenly have Frédéric window shopping, avidly observing “le long des boutiques, les cachemires, les dentelles et les pendeloques de pierreries, en les imaginant drapés autour de ses reins, cousues à son corsage, faisant des feux dans sa chevelure noir” (102).
As much difficulty as he has looking at or contemplating her directly, Frédéric has no trouble imagining that all these objects refer to, or stand for, his loved one: “les fleurs s’épanouissaient pour qu’elle les choisît...les petites pantoufles de satin à bordure de cygne (why this detail?) semblaient attendre son pied” (102). Indeed, beyond these associations with luxury goods, he finds her everywhere generalized onto the environment, fragmented and conflated with a receptive material world; or as a kind of absent center around which all else revolves: “toutes les rues conduisaient vers sa maison; les voitures ne stationnaient sur les places que pour y mener plus vite; Paris se rapportait à sa personne” (102). But is seeing his love everywhere and in everything not tantamount to not really seeing her at all, anywhere? Recall that this is the woman he is practically unable to look at, forced as he is to shunt his glance and his desire onto her environs, onto the things nearby (or, to the extent that they are dissociated from her person, various body parts—hair, wrists, skin):

Chaque mot qui sortait de sa bouche semblait à Frédéric être une chose nouvelle, une dépendance exclusive de sa personne, Il regardait attentivement les effilés de sa coiffure, caressant par le bout son épaule nue; et il n’en detnachait pas ses yeux, il enfonçait son âme dans la blancheur de cette chair féminine; cependant, il n’osait lever ses paupières, pour la voir plus haut, face à face (85).

By contrast, he is always capable of attending to the things around Mme Arnoux—“aimant tout ce qui dépendait de Mme Arnoux, ses meubles, ses domestiques, sa maison, sa rue”—which are much more vivid: “Il connaissait chacun de ses

48 When the Arnoux move and she is no longer in the same environment, she loses the aura that had been provided by her former furnishings: “Frédéric s’était attendu à des spasmes de joie; mais les passions s’étiolent quand on les dépayse, et, ne retrouvant plus Mme Arnoux dans le milieu où il l’avait connue, elle lui semblait avoir perdu quelque chose, porter confusion comme une dégradation, enfin n’être pas la même. Le calme de son cœur le stupéfiait”—without her props nearby, the supports for his fabrication, she doesn’t affect him in the same way (137).
ongles...son peigne, ses gants, ses bagues étaient pour lui des choses particulières, importantes comme des œuvres d’art, presque animées comme des personnes; toutes lui prenaient le coeur et augmentaient sa passion” (92). Unable to look her in the eyes, Frédéric finds the things surrounding Mme Arnoux like so many windows which do permit him to look at her; or more precisely, at his safely denatured and idealized image of her.

For Frédéric the material world is alive and responsive to him, as in this description of M. Arnoux’s boutique—interesting to Frédéric for its association with Arnoux’s wife:

Les grandes lettres composant le nom d’Arnoux sur la plaque de marbre...lui semblaient toutes particulières et grosses de signification, comme une écriture sacrée. Le large trottoir, descendant, facilitait sa marche, la porte tournait presque d’elle-même; et la poignée, lisse au toucher, avait la douceur et comme l’intelligence d’une main dans la sienne (77).

These material artifacts are animated by Frédéric in an updated, and more pedestrian, version of Romantic fallacy. At the moment of the outbreak of the 1848 revolution, the very day he has finally talked Mme Arnoux into a tryst, he paces impatiently in the streets, where he “considérait les fentes des pavés, la gueule des gouttières, les candélabres, les numéros au-dessus des portes. Les objets les plus minimes devenaient pour lui des compagnons, ou plutôt des spectateurs ironiques” (277). She is unable to keep their rendez-vous however, and those “objets...minimes” are his only companions on this day. On another occasion Mme Arnoux visits his apartments, after which “il contempla le fauteuil où elle s’était assise et tous les objets...
qu’elle avait touchés. Quelque chose d’elle circulait autour de lui. La caresse de sa présence durait encore” (201).

Mme Arnoux’s troublesome presence aside, what generates the greatest interest for Frédéric are the material goods which inhabit and traverse the domestic and commercial spaces of the novel. Frédéric’s affinity for things is visible from the novel’s first page, as we have seen. Already in the description of the boat’s passengers is evidence that things, costumes, decor and their descriptions will be more compelling than the characters: after a cursory identification of Frédéric’s fellow travelers as “quelques bourgeois...des ouvriers, des gens de boutique avec leurs femmes et leurs enfants,” there follows a long description of their shabby travel clothes: “on avait coutume alors de se vêtir sordidement en voyage” (49).

However “sordide” or nondescript, these garments are of sufficient interest for Flaubert to detail at length the “vieilles calottes grecques...des chapeaux déteints...de maigres habit noirs...des redingotes...quelque gilet à châle...une chemise de calicot...des épingles de chrysocale” etc. As this list continues, the passengers get worked back in among their clothing: “deux ou trois gredins tenaient des bambous à ganse de cuir (are the “gredins” supporting the “bambous,” or vice versa?)...des pères de famille ouvraient de gros yeux...un joueur de harpe en haillons se reposait, accoudé sur son instrument” (49). There is more description of all the trash lying about, and the whole effect is of a certain squalor and weariness—ironically, a most decidedly unromantic setting, and hardly one in which we’d expect to find the subsequent “apparition” of Marie Arnoux.
Of all the things which move through the narrative vying for attention, the most mobile and recurringly significant item is the Renaissance “coffret à tiroirs d’argent,” a gift from Arnoux to his wife which Frédéric notices on his first visit to the Arnoux household. It appears initially in a list of the “choses intimes” which furnish their cozy foyer, “un endroit paisible, honnête et familier” (83). Fittingly, it takes its place on the mantel, along with the obligatory clock and various bibelots, all of which contribute to the impression of bourgeois order and prosperity. Later in the evening Mme Arnoux is complimented on the gift by a guest, at which point Arnoux “fut pris d’attendrissement, et lui donna un baiser devant tout le monde” (85). The overall impression of love, loyalty and stability is symbolized by this object; for Frédéric the little box is part of the magic of Mme Arnoux’s intimate surroundings, significant because of its close association with his loved one.

In the box’s next appearance its meaning changes, and it is now explicitly associated with commerce and adultery: during an argument with her husband Mme Arnoux dramatically pulls a receipt for a present to Rosanette from the box. Now, rather than highlighting the couple’s affection and marital bonds, the coffret signifies dissension and strife (184). Still later it reappears at Rosanette’s house, where Frédéric is particularly disturbed to find it divorced from its original context: “C’était celui de Mme Arnoux! Alors, il éprouva un attendrissement, et en même temps comme le scandale d’une profanation. Il avait envie d’y porter les mains, de l’ouvrir” (261). While exciting tenderness by its enduring association with his ideal woman, the coffret, as a substitute for her, also perturbs him by its appearance in the courtesan’s “baser”
milieu—as if it had betrayed him by nonchalantly revealing how fickle and transitory its meaning could be. The box’s final betrayal occurs near the end of the novel, after the Arnoux have gone bankrupt and left town, and the remains of their possessions are being auctioned off. Frédéric’s wealthy new mistress, Mme Dambreuse, maliciously insists on stopping in for a look. The scene which ensues brings together a remarkable number of the novel’s actors—objects, commerce, sentiment, and all three of Frédéric’s love interests—in addition to being the swan song, so to speak, of the coffret, and by extension, Frédéric’s grand obsession.

The box’s appearance on the auction block, its travels, the degree of importance it holds in Frédéric’s memory and in his “sentimental education,” are evident in the following citation:

On posa devant les brocanteurs un petit coffret avec des médaillons, des angles et des fermoirs d’argent, le même qu’il avait vu au premier dîner dans la rue de Choiseul, qui ensuite avait été chez Rosanette, était revenu chez Mme Arnoux; souvent, pendant leurs conversations, ses yeux le rencontraient; il était lié à ses souvenirs les plus chers, et son âme se fondrait d’attendrissement, quand Mme Dambreuse dit tout à coup: Tiens! Je vais l’acheter (387).

This object now contains within itself the entire history of Frédéric’s love affair; certainly its final appearance marks the disappearance of Mme Arnoux, and the end of a major chapter in Frédéric’s life, a life whose most enduring theme has been his passion for this woman. The box is now Mme Arnoux for Frédéric, and holds enormous symbolic value for him. Its purchase by his new mistress, who is obviously aware of its significance for him, “provoque un des rares actes de sa vie: la rupture avec Madame
Dambreuse,” and thus his sacrifice of a fortune. This last exchange, this final resting place of his “grande passion” in the hands of Mme Dambreuse, is too much for Frédéric, who “sentit un grand froid lui traverser le coeur” (389). Maureen Jameson observes that “Dans l’hôtel des ventes, il est prouvé à Frédéric que les objets n’ont aucun lien intrinsèque avec la femme aimée. Ils sont aussi susceptibles aux tripotages combines par le pouvoir et l’argent.” This is perhaps the central, and most disturbing, lesson of Frédéric’s sentimental education, and suggests that he needs rather to unlearn his approach both to love and to the material world.

When he first arrives at the auction, where he will finally separate (literally or figuratively) from the three important women in his life (Rosanette too makes her final appearance here), Frédéric is sickened to see Mme Arnoux’s possessions displayed and handed about, and experiences this promiscuity as a violation of his love and intimacy with her:

Quand Frédéric entra, les jupons, les fichus, les mouchoirs, et jusqu’aux chemises étaient passés de main en main, retournés,... Ensuite, on vendit ses robes, puis un de ses chapeaux dont la plume cassée retombait, puis ses fourrures, puis trois paires de bottines; et le partage de ses reliques, où il retrouvait confusément les formes de ses membres, lui semblait une atrocité, comme s’il avait vu des corbeaux déchiquetant son cadavre. L’atmosphère de la salle, toute chargée d’haleines, l’écoeurait (387).

The crowd’s avid breath and the violent current of acquisition foreshadow later scenes in Zola’s Au Bonheur des dames, where crowds of women, whipped into a frenzy by the

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51 It would be unsurprising if Flaubert titled his novel ironically to suggest that his hero’s “education” was really a miseducation, and that if he learns anything by the end, it is only by unlearning his assumptions about the nature of love.
myriad seductions of the department store, will lay waste to whole departments filled with lace and undergarments.

The auction sequence unfolds like a nightmarish loss of faith for Frédéric, like apostasy: the anonymous dispersal of Mme Arnoux’s “reliques,” which he had so closely associated with her, and invested so dearly in, provokes a crisis in his religion of “Mme Arnoux”—a crisis in his ideal, and thus in his entire system of signification and valuation. For Frédéric the presence of her clothes and other possessions equals the presence of Mme Arnoux, and his relationship to them was deeper than to the woman herself; so closely associated are they in his mind that in her clothes he can see “les formes de ses membres.” Likewise a tapestry suggests “ses pieds mignons frolant en venant vers lui,” and “les deux écrans de la cheminée...était rendu plus doux par le contact de ses mains....C’était comme des parties de son coeur qui s’en allait avec ces choses” (387-8). Something crucial in Frédéric is dying, slipping away with these goods, and as if entranced he succumbs to “la monotonie des mêmes voix, des mêmes gestes,” which “l’engourdissait de fatigue, lui causait une torpeur funèbre, une dissolution”—a stupor from which he is aroused not by Rosanette’s touch at his side, but by the rustle of her silk dress (388). Noteworthy too is the fact that the two women he has not idealized, not loved platonically (but rather physically), are present at this moment, whereas his “real” love is “present” only by proxy, by association with her things—things which here explicitly mark her absence and symbolic death.
Frédéric’s passion for his idealized Mme Arnoux is genuine, and is fairly constant throughout the narrative. Their love was of course, and necessarily, impossible, and is safely relegated during their last meeting, at the end of the novel, to the wistful realm of the conditional past, used once by each character during their awkward encounter: “Quel bonheur nous aurions eu!” says Frédéric; Mme Arnoux states simply that “J’aurais voulu vous rendre heureux” (394-5). Perec’s reworking of Flaubert a hundred years later will recall this lost state of the “could have” and “would have”; we will turn first to Zola, however, for an analysis of the intervening commercial and subjective developments that eventually render Perec’s characters more “unbearably light” than Flaubert’s.
CHAPTER 3

ZOLA: LEARNING

It is the entrepreneurs who know the rules of the world and the laws of God.
--George Gilder\textsuperscript{52}

Objects are unobservable. Only relationships between objects are observable.
--Marshall Mcluhan

Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, long a neglected volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, has received a great deal of attention in recent decades. Historians, feminists, marketers and theoreticians of visual and consumer culture have studied its analysis of modern marketing and product display techniques, and its spectacle of mass consumption in the Second Empire's new “temple of commerce,” the eponymous department store. Zola details both the development of the department store and its impact on traditional forms of business, but also, and most importantly for this study,

the creation and education of a modern consumerate complementary to capitalist mass production and critical to its success, as Galbraith, Baudrillard, et. al. have observed.\textsuperscript{53}

The production of a new class of eager, “interested” shoppers necessitated an increased appetite for consumption, and the enhancement and development of sensations of lack and desire that were previously inchoate or nonexistent; to this end Zola's ingenious entrepreneurial hero, Octave Mouret (modeled on the Bon Marché’s own Aristide Boucicaut), carefully plans and organizes a highly seductive environment in his department store, his “theater of operations,” in which the whole architecture of seduction pretends to transparency, claiming simply to "give the people what they want."

Mouret does not, of course, create these new desiring subjects \textit{ex nihilo}: his raw material—the ideological and subjective conditions then current—evolved during the previous century of European thought and history, one which saw the appearance of certain desires and propensities that would complement the new economic imperatives, especially the sentimentalist and hedonist strains Campbell analyzes. Zola’s description of these processes, however, lends a sense of inevitability to them—the kind of natural, evolutionary imperative that we find in his other novels—with the difference that these economic and subjective changes, while destructive of traditional commercial, social and subjective phenomena, are celebrated as positive developments.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{53} That this population is initially almost entirely female is important for gender considerations, as well as those exploring the historical links between women’s “liberation,” freedom of movement, economic determination and consumerism.

\textsuperscript{54} Zola is certainly critical of economic exploitation in this and other novels, but in \textit{Au Bonheur} he seems to be even more critical of a kind of petit bourgeois conservatism that he sees impeding economic and social progress.
L’Education sentimentale is a novel of despair, apathy and defeat chronicling a generation’s fatigue and disillusionment, Au Bonheur des dames, written fifteen-odd years later, is one of triumph and optimism—consciously so, as Zola writes in early notes: “Je veux dans Au Bonheur des Dames faire le poème de l’activité moderne. Donc, changement complet de philosophie; plus de pessimisme d’abord, ne pas conclure à la bêtise et à la mélancolie de la vie...car Pot-Bouille et les autres suffisent pour montrer les médiocrités et les avortements de l’existence.” Industrial expansion and the growth of capitalism during the Second Empire were indeed some of the most dynamic and successful movements of his time, and his novel describes those forces dramatically.

Mouret's (and Boucicaut’s) particular contributions to the development of mass production and consumption rely on the creation and management of an intimate relationship between the consumerate and the consumables—linens, silks, clothing, furnishings, domestic bibelots, etc.—with which he decorates and fills his store. Much of the “genius” attributed to Zola’s hero lies in his careful design of the department store—its basic architectural features as well as product displays and the layout of the various departments, or rayons. The impressiveness of this architecture and these methods of presentation, evolving since improvements in steel and glass construction led to the creation of the proto-mall arcades so fascinating to Baudelaire’s flâneur, is described from the first page of the novel, where Denise et frères encounter their new

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“home”—literally for Denise, who will soon move into the store as an employee, figuratively for her brothers, who count on her support, as well as for those for whom the store and its ideologies will become a kind of spiritual home.

Their stunned first impressions of the brightly illuminated store evokes the “shock” of modernity described by Benjamin, recalling the scene in Baudelaire’s *Les yeux des pauvres* where a poor man and his sons stand transfixed before a new café, its warm interior lighting sparkling on the shiny fixtures and radiating into the street. In *Au Bonheur* the trio, newly arrived from the country, turns a corner to find itself directly before the store, where light and goods seem to pour from the front door and display windows: “un éboulement de marchandises à bon marché, la tentation de la porte...un déballage géant de foire, le magasin semblait crever et jeter son trop-plein à la rue” (9). From where they stand the store windows appear to extend indefinitely down the block, “un développement qui lui semblait sans fin, dans la fuite de la perspective” (8). Denise stops short, agape at the sight: “la jeune fille s’arêta net de surprise. ‘Oh! dit-elle, regarde un peu, Jean!’ Et ils restèrent plantés, serres les uns contre les autres...‘Ah bien!’ reprit-elle après un silence, ‘en voilà un magasin’” (7).

The novel describes many similar sensations of shock and awe before the spectacle of the new commerce, exemplified in these opening lines by Denise’s “Oh!...regarde...!” In the autumn morning half-light the grey streets of Paris contrast starkly with the vitality of the store, which “bourdonnait à l’intérieur comme une ruche qui s’éveille. ‘Fichtre! dit Jean. Ça enfoche Valognes...[l]e tien n’était pas si beau” (8). Denise quickly forgets the provincial store where she had apprenticed, and which in

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56 For Zola as well the new commerce seems “un développement...sans fin.”
comparison pales into insignificance, for this one “lui gonflait le coeur, la retenait, émue, intéressée, oubliuse du reste” (8). Her emotional reaction will be echoed again and again by Mouret’s clientele, who is repeatedly held “émue, intéressée, oubliuse du reste” by the goods and spectacles he puts on display; this affective response is exactly the one desired and cultivated by the master salesman, for an emotional response, engaged with the commodities and distant from the “reste,” is the one most conducive to establishing personal relationships between the consumers and the goods, and to increasing temptation and impulse-buying. The Romantic valorization of feeling and hunger for connection and integration is now organized within this commercial environment.

Present from the first pages are links between this new commercial phenomenon and eroticism, seduction and gender. Thus far Denise has seen only women working inside the store, and reading its name prompts her brother to think of romance; in a rare example of zolian humor Jean reads aloud: “‘Au Bonheur des Dames’...avec son rire tendre de bel adolescent, qui avait eu déjà une histoire de femme à Valognes. ‘Hein? C’est gentil, c’est ça qui doit faire courir le monde!’” (8). Jean recognizes intuitively here that the new commerce will lean heavily on the creation and exploitation of female desire. Denise herself is still too fascinated by the spectacle of merchandise for much reflection or joshing however, and for the moment “L’oncle Baudu était oublié. Pépé lui-même...ouvrait ses yeux énormes. Une voiture les forçait tous trois à quitter le milieu de la place” (9).
The spectacular sight of the store and its awe-inspiring effect on the young family entail a kind of dehumanization and loss of affect: not only do they forget where they are (Paris, middle of the street), and what they are doing (looking for Uncle Baudu’s drapery shop), but they seem to drift out of time and memory, and their will and purpose fade with the profusion of sights, with so much looking. Eyes glued to the window displays, they drift mechanically down the sidewalk:

machinalement...ils suivirent les vitrines, s’arrêtant de nouveau devant chaque etalage. D’abord, ils furent séduits par un arrangement compliqué: en haut, des parapluies, poses obliquement, semblaient mettre un toit de cabane rustique; dessous, des bas de soie, pendus a’des tringles, montraient des profils arrondis de mollets...une admiration la clouait au trottoir...[d]u coup, (Jean) etait lui-même redevenu immobile, la bouche ouverte (emphasis added, 9-11).57

That umbrellas and silk stockings figure among the commodities here is unsurprising, for umbrellas (that most Parisian of accessories, along with the silk scarf) will later mediate the commercial struggle between the neighborhood’s stubborn, old-economy craftsman Bourras, who sells meticulously hand-made umbrella handles, and Mouret, with the mass-produced versions he can sell much more cheaply.58 Silk (along with lace) is one of the store’s primary fetish goods, and Zola makes much of its erotic connotations and metonymical closeness to the female body—stockings here, other types of undergarments elsewhere. Like the characters in l’Education sentimentale who often paled beside their clothes and possessions, the consumers of these goods are of lesser importance in Zola’s descriptions than the things themselves, as if it were the

57 This kind of slack, static affect, this fascination and intoxication with visual and cognitive overload, is described many times in the novel, and clearly resembles the fetishism and idealization of Frédéric Moreau; it also looks forward to the passivity of Perec’s characters and Godard’s obsession with the being and surface of things in 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle.

58 A familiar question of economies of scale and mass-production; compare Wal-Mart, the Au Bonheur of the late twentieth century.
goods that animate and shape their wearers, rather than the reverse: the stockings’
“chairs dont le grain satiné avait la douceur d’une peau de blonde” suggest “profils
arrondis de mollets,” and “des gants...jetés symétriquement...leurs doigts allongés, leur
paume étroite de vierge byzantine” suggest or refer to the hands which fill them, like
Mme Arnoux’s clothing does for Frédéric at the auction, near the end of _L’Education
sentimentale_ (9).

In these few introductory paragraphs Zola sketches out the dynamics of
commodification, representation and visual fascination which will be elaborated and
explored throughout the novel—the way commodities signify other things, other ideas
and other worlds, how they become the raw materials and building blocks of fantasy,
and are used to suggest, or “cite,” “rusticity,” “shapeliness,” or “blonleness”: “un toit
de cabane rustique...des profils arrondis de mollets...les chairs...d’une peau de blonde,”
etc. (9).

Mouret’s store is designed to maximize flow and circulation: of light, people,
goods, and of course, money. Utilizing new building materials the architect, “par hasard
intelligent, un jeune homme amoureux des temps nouveaux, ne s’était servi de la pierre
que pour les sous-sols et les piles d’angle”; heavy mason work is avoided to increase
the amount of interior space, and the entry of natural light: “Partout on avait gagné de
l’espace, l’air et la lumière entraient librement, le public circulait à l’aise” (248). From
the central gallery the open space and exposed ironwork of _Au Bonheur_ resemble “une
nef de gare...escaliers suspendus, traversée de ponts volants,” and give the impression,
“sous la lumière blanche des vitrages,” of “une architecture légère, une dentelle compliquée où passait le jour, la réalisation d’un palais du rêve” (263). The visible structural elements contribute to the transparency effect, the apparent candor, of the store: “le jeune architecte avait eu l’honnêteté et le courage de ne pas déguiser (the ironwork) sous une couche de badigeon, imitant la pierre ou le bois” (263). Care has been taken to highlight the merchandise, and decorative elements that might distract attention from the goods are kept to a minimum: “En bas, pour ne point nuire aux marchandises, la décoration était sobre, de grande parties unies, de teinte neutre...à mesure que la charpente métallique montait, les chapiteaux des colonnes devenaient plus riches” (263).

This new economic system is built upon the old, which it transforms and subsumes as ways of thinking and doing business evolve in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a material and ideological process Zola describes here in terms reminiscent of Hugo’s “Ceci tuera cela” chapter from *Notre Dame de Paris*, in which Hugo suggested that the book would replace architecture as the enduring monument and historical record. “Reading” and symbol, perhaps, but for Zola architecture and the organization of spatial relationships is quite healthy: “Bien que l’architecte se servît des construction existentes, il les ouvrait de toutes parts, pour les aménager; et, au milieu...il bâtissait une galerie centrale, vaste comme une église...“(230). The aesthetic richness of design above provides a complement, or counterpoint and balance, to the material riches below (263).
The *Au Bonheur* is the antithesis of Uncle Baudu’s poor *Vieil Elbeuf*, with its musty, cave-like interior where he rages impotently while being slowly driven out of business, his family disintegrating, his daughter succumbing to tuberculosis.\(^{59}\) The old store “n’avait que trois fenêtres de façade” which allow little light to enter: “à droite et à gauche, deux vitrines profondes, noires, poussiéreuses, où l’on distinguait vaguement des pièces d’étoffe entassées. La porte, ouverte, semblait donner sur les ténèbres humides d’une cave” (12). Still dazzled by the sight of the thriving new store, Denise and her brothers shrink away when confronted with the old, dying one: “Denise et les petits eurent une hésitation devant les ténèbres de la boutique. Aveuglés par le plein jour de la rue, ils battaient des paupières comme au seuil d’un trou inconnu, t”tant le sol du pied, ayant la peur instinctive de quelque marche traitresse...(une) crainte vague...” (14).

The characterization of the old store as a kind of diseased and menacing underworld, with its colors of “ocre et...bitume” and “une odeur "pre de chimie,” contrasts clearly with the vision of the new store as a temple of health and purity, “la cathédrale du commerce moderne, solide et légère, faite pour un peuple de clientes” (12, 15, 248). Mouret’s cathedral is an updated version of the Gothic architectural ideal—soaring space filled with natural light—with the crucial difference that the faithful’s attention is not to be directed vertically “on high,” but rather to the material

\(^{59}\) Or as it used to be called, “consumption.” This most characteristic of nineteenth-century maladies (along with syphilis) involves a kind of “self” consumption, which results in pulmonary blockage and lack of (air) flow; a failure or lack of healthy “commerce,” if you will, with the outside world. Syphilis might be thought of as the other side of this coin, often arising from *too much* (sexual) commerce, or at least commerce with the wrong people (typically infected prostitutes); and originally of course from commerce between the Old World and the New.
blessings of this plane—to a given rayon and its goods. Where the Gothic cathedral was designed to elevate sight and sentiment to facilitate contemplation of the holy light and grace descending from beyond the intermediary house of God, Mouret’s cathedral brings light within in order to mettre en valeur his material goods, which represent a new gospel, and the promise of earthly fulfillment. In both religious models, however, access and relation to the divine is also mediated by a man—formerly the priest, and now Mouret, the entrepreneurial apostle of the new commerce.

Zola’s description of Mouret and his enterprise clearly suggests a new kind of religion, one with its high priest, sacraments, mysteries of commodity fetishism and, of course, temple (of commerce). Zola makes this analogy repeatedly: a window display is called a “chapelle élevée au culte des graces de la femme,” to whom “il lui élevait un temple, la faisait encenser par une légion de commis, créait le rite d’un culte nouveau” (10, 84). The empty store is filled with “un silence frissonnant de chapelle” (103); Mouret is vexed that a rival had the clever idea “de faire bénir ses magasins par le curé de la Madeleine, suivi de tout son clergé!” (415); a white sale is “cette religion du blanc” (419); his new store a “religion nouvelle, les églises que désertait peu à peu la foi chancelante étaient remplaçées par son bazaar, dans les mes inoccupées désormais” (449). We see here how God has not so much been killed under capitalism as he has been brought down to earth in a modern pantheism, reduced to the human, material plane, fragmented, generalized throughout the product line, and reused for a tidy profit. And yes, “recycled,” too—in larger runs and lowered prices.
Zola creates another biological metaphor in this novel, but now the store is the voracious beast, rather than the mine in *Germinal*, or the courtesan in *Nana*. In the basement of the “machine géant” is the “mouth,” the conveyor belt where “des arrivages du monde entier” are received. It is likened to a river that “on avait du...élargir” with the expansion of the store: “elle avait maintenant un lit de fleuve, où le continuflot des marchandises roulait avec la voix haute des grandes eaux; c’était...un déchargement sans arrêt...bu par la maison insatiable” (352). During an inspection, Mouret considers the conveyor’s smooth delivery of goods a natural phenomenon, like the circulation of blood, or the water cycle: “Elle fonctionnait, des files de caisses descendaient toutes seules, sans qu’on vit les hommes dont les mains les poussaient, en haut; et elles semblaient se précipiter d’elles-mêmes, ruisseler en pluie d’une source superieure. Puis, des ballots parurent, tournant sur eux-mêmes comme des cailloux roulés...” (42-3). Once digested, displayed and resold above, the mass of goods returns to the basement for repacking and delivery. Contemplating the apparent chaos, Mouret “regardait ce dégorgement des marchandises, dont il venait de voir la maison s’engorger, à l’extrémité opposée des sous-sols: l’énorme courant aboutissait là, sortait par là’dans la rue, après avoir déposé de l’or au fond des caisses” (353). Again, the deliberate and controlled operations of mass-production are obscured, and seem to have a “natural” life of their own.

The customers are also caught up in these flows; while conversing on the sidewalk during the famous white sale, a group of women are sucked inside, like the goods into the basement: “Peu a`peu...le flot les prenait; et elles n’eurent qu’a`
s’abandonner au courant, elles passeront la porte comme soulevées, sans en avoir conscience.” They will also be disgorged eventually, “après avoir déposé de l’or dans des caisses” (417). The customers’ self-abandonment and loss of will before the swirl of goods, the silent pressure on them to “give in” to consuming desires, is a recurring theme in the novel, and recalls Frédéric Moreau’s frequent numbness and vertigo before spectacles dense with objects and visual information.

The layout of the store’s various departments and the goods within them, from the sidewalk-level window treatments to the furthest reaches of the interior, maximizes specific kinds of interactions with the things on offer. We have seen the effect produced on Denise and her brothers at their first sight of the store’s façade and expanse of window displays; the main entrance is also constructed and ornamented for maximum excitement and attraction, as Mouret explains: “D’abord, on devait s’écraser pour entrer, il fallait que, de la rue, on crût à une émeute” (250). This riotous effect is achieved by piling a variety of discounted goods around the doorway so that the cluster of browsers sifting through them will give the impression that the store is packed full of shoppers. As for the interior, “(Mouret) posait en loi que pas un coin du Bonheur des Dames ne devait rester désert” (250). Off-season items are surrounded by popular ones in order to keep all departments lively; slower-moving, big-ticket items such as carpeting and furniture are moved off the ground floor entirely, relegated to the back of upper floors, so that departments with less traffic are concealed from below.

One of Mouret’s strokes of genius occurs two days before a big sale, when he realizes that his previous method of arranging the various departments is, while entirely
logical, not the optimal one for his commercial designs of maximum exposure and temptation: “C’était pourtant un classement d’une logique absolue, les tissus d’un côte, les objets confectionnés de l’autre, un ordre intelligent qui devait permettre aux clients de se diriger elles-mêmes” (250). This enlightened ideal of organization and self-navigation within a comprehensible, orderly system is all wrong for Mouret’s purposes however, and when he realizes it, “il se sentait ébranlé...il s’était écrié qu’il fallait ‘lui casser tout ça,’” and he orders the store be turned upside down before the sale opens (251). General chaos ensues: “le patron devenait fou, personne ne comprenait, c’était une consternation générale” (251). Mouret alone is calm and confident in the rightness of his “folly” and revolutionary vision—“avec la tranquille assurance de son génie” (251).

When his right-hand man Bourdoncle finally manages to coax an explanation out of him, Mouret describes how earlier methods of organization were based on a different logic, and must give way to the new, modern logic of increased circulation, increased contact with the goods, and general subjective disorientation—his own poetic version of “dérèglement systématique des sens”: “Une jolie idée de géomètre que j’avais eue là!...Comprenez donc que je localisais la foule. Une femme entrait, allait droit ou elle voulait aller...sans même s’être un peu perdue!” (252). To his methodical, short-sighted manager il daigna expliquer son idée, en baissant la voix... ‘Premièrement, ce va-et-vient continu de clientes les disperse un peu partout, les multiplie et leur fait perdre la tête...si elles désirent par exemple la doublure après avoir acheté la robe, ces voyages en tous sens triplent pour elles la grandeur de la maison...elles sont forcées de traverser des rayons où elles n’auraient pas mis les pieds, des tentations les y accrochent au passage, et elles succombent...(252).
In such a “crise d’inspiration” we see how Mouret revolts against outmoded notions of logic and classification, of subjective mastery, perspective and comprehension, in favor of a hidden organization which only *seems* haphazard and disorganized, but which has been calculated to disorient his consumers (“leur fait perdre la tête”), increase their contact with the commodities, and their suggestibility, so that they will respond more “freely” and with more “abandon” to temptation.\(^{60}\)

The results of his theory are revealed during the sale: the customers are confused, disoriented and annoyed, and struggle to “read,” to make sense of, the revolutionary new layout: “Mme Desforges se plaignait: était-ce ridicule, ces bazars où il fallait faire deux lieues pour mettre la main sur le moindre article! Mme Marty se disait aussi morte de fatigue” (274). Hers is a pleasurable lassitude, however: “elle n’en jouissait pas moins profondément de cette fatigue, de cette mort lente de ses forces, au milieu de l’inépuisable déballage des marchandises. Le coup de génie de Mouret la tenait tout entière. Au passage, chaque rayon l’arrêtait” (274).\(^{61}\) With each successive stop, new seductions appear, until “Mme Marty, dont les yeux se dilataient, grisée par ce défilé de choses riches qui dansaient devant elle, répétait à demi-voix...‘Vous avez raison, il n’y a pas d’ordre, dans ce magasin. On se perd, on fait des bêtises’”—exactly the point, of course, of the deliberate disorder engineered by Mouret (274).

\(^{60}\) The rhetoric here is highly Romantic: prior logic and reason, an orderly system in which the subject could easily navigate, is overthrown by his shattering insight (“il se sentait ébranlé”). His folly, his stroke of intuitive genius will free his clients from the constraints of Enlightenment logic—free them to encounter more, different stuff, and to *feel more*.

\(^{61}\) This description of slow, progressive, and pleasurable loss of force resembles subjective reports of opiate users, and also Frederic at Rosanette’s ball, which he found confusing, but nonetheless “un milieu fait pour lui plaire” (144). How much truer of Mouret’s department store! Marx was right again about religion being the opiate of the masses—but the new religion is consumerism.
Zola’s preparatory studies of the *Bon Marché* discuss at length the importance of high-volume sales and turnover, of “moving the product,” to increase the flow of capital:

Le commerce de ces grands magasins est basé sur le renouvellement rapide du capital. Ainsi, si l’on a un million de capital, il s’agit de le faire revenir trois ou quatre fois en marchandise pendant une année, c’est-à-dire d’établir un roulement de marchandises assez grand pour que le capital représenté par elles, passe trois ou quatre fois dans le magasin. Donc, il faut vendre beaucoup, et pour cela vendre bon marché; en outre, il faut attirer le client par la présence de toutes les marchandises imaginaires (utiles à la femme) dans un seul lieu. De là l’idée de ces bazars pour la femme, ou elle trouve tout ce qui lui faut jusqu’à du superflu (et même quelques bibelots pour les hommes...). On a joint l’enfant, naturellement (469).

Within the novel Mouret explains this system to Baron Hartmann, his future financier: “Vous entendez, monsieur le baron, toute la mécanique est là...[n]ous n’avons pas besoin de gros roulement de fonds. Notre effort unique est de nous débarrasser très vite de la marchandise achetée, pour la remplacer par d’autre, ce qui fait rendre au capital autant de fois son intérêt...” (81). The emphasis on “flow” and exchange, on stimulating movement and turnover, is particularly clear in the vocabulary of these citations: “renouvellement rapide...faire revenir...un roulement...passe,” “débarrasser... remplacer...rendre,” etc. In order to maintain and increase turnover, the current of goods and money, an ever-expanding, increasingly-hungry consumerate would have to be created: Mouret’s *techn_ of seduction, serendipitous strokes of “genius” aside, is thus part of the system’s logic, and critically important to its success.

Mouret is said to have “le génie de la mécanique administrative, il rêvait d’organiser la maison de manière à d’exploiter les appétits des autres,” underscoring the systematic nature of Mouret’s methodology (42). During another impatient explanation
to his competent but uninspired middle management, Mouret explains why it can be
advantageous, for example, to sell a popular item at a loss: “si nous attirons toutes les
femmes et si nous les tenons à notre merci, séduites, affolées devant l’entassement de
nos marchandises, vidant leur porte-monnaie sans compter! Le tout, mon cher, est de les
allumer...” (45). His explanation to Baron Hartmann uses similar terms:

plus haut que les faits déjà donnés, au sommet, apparut l’exploitation de la
femme. Tout y aboutissait, le capital sans cesse renouvé, le système de
l’entassement des marchandises, le bon marché qui attire...la femme...au
continuel piège de leurs occasions...étourdie devant leurs étalages. (Les
magasins) avaient éveillé dans sa chair de nouveaux désirs, ils etaient une
tentation immense, ou elle succombait fatalement...gagnée par la coquetterie,
puis devorée (83).

New desiring subjects, new worshippers for Mouret’s modern City of God, must be
brought into his temple and shown the way to happiness and liberation; their
“happiness” and “liberty,” as we will see in Perec, is however highly problematic.

The power and persuasiveness of Mouret’s seductions are visible in the figure of
Mme Marty, one of a new species of compulsive shoppers whose professor husband
struggles to support her “rage de dépense,” helpless as she is before “toutes les
nouveautés de la mode, dont elle subissait l’irrésistible séduction” (69). The strain
placed on the overworked husband by her consumption, and the factitious nature of
Mouret’s rhetoric, is clear in a later passage, where les Marty, Mouret and others are
discussing some new lace on offer. Asked why she resisted buying a length, given her
husband’s supposed tolerance of her expenditures, the husband “dut s’incliner, en

62 This could be a description of Zola’s method as well—to seduce and “allumer” the reader with an
“entassement” of detailed descriptions.
déclarant que sa femme était bien libre” (90). Directly following this passage the impact of such expenditures on her family, and by extension on the middle class, is restated: “comme Mouret affirmait justement que les nouveaux magasins augmentaient le bien-être des ménages de la bourgeoisie moyenne, il lui lança un terrible regard, l’éclair de haine d’un timide qui n’ose étrangler les gens” (90). The “freedoms” of and benefits to Mme Marty and the other habitués of Mouret’s store is called into question here, while Mouret espouses the libertarian faith in the market as an ideal, and as a liberating means of self-creation.

Mouret works deliberately to increase the impression of freedom and transparency involved in his enterprise; that there are prices to be paid, and various degrees of compulsion and bondage at work, is clearly suggested in the scene above, where M. Marty suffocates in the background of a casual conversation about recent purchases. This passage also underscores the social nature of consumption: as elsewhere, the women’s conversation and interaction is entirely mediated by their purchases, or desired purchases, and “noun-speak,” or a language in which the description and discussion of things predominate, is their dominant discourse.

Mme Bourdelais claims for herself a greater degree of control and agency than Mme Marty, who describes her addiction at one point in transgressive terms: “Si je ne me dépêche pas de prendre mon lacet et de me sauver, je suis perdue” (259). Mme Bourdelais claims instead to exploit the store as it gradually lowers prices in order to clear out ageing merchandise, and keep turnover high: “Puisque les magasins baissaient les prix, il n’y avait qu’à attendre. Elle ne voulait pas être exploitée par eux, c’était elle
qui profitait de leurs véritables occasions...elle se vantait de ne leur avoir jamais laissé un sou de gain” (259). She has on one occasion purportedly come to an exposition of 
*nouveautés* not for her own pleasure, but simply for her children’s amusement, and she “expliquait de son air tranquille de jolie femme pratique, qu’elle avait voulu montrer ça aux petits...‘Ce n’est pas moi qu’ils attraperont!’” (259). But “they” certainly will, as she and her three children are later seen “chargés de paquets...‘Ne m’en parle pas! s’écria Mme Bourdelais. Je suis furieuse...Ils vous prennent par ces petits êtres, maintenant!... comment veux-tu résister à des bébés qui ont envie de tout? J’étais venue les promener, et voilà que je dévalise les magasins!” (277). Overhearing, Mouret smirks in the background “d’un air souriant. Elle l’aperçu, elle se plaignit gaîment, avec un fond d’irritation réelle, de ces pièges tendus à la tendresse des mères...lui, toujours souriant...jouissait de ce triomphe” (277). Marketers have of course long since learned the importance of capturing the attention of children, and nurturing brand awareness and loyalty as early as possible.

In the previous paragraphs a number of key themes appear: one is the importance for large-scale capitalism of *flow*, or movement and exchange—of goods, clientele, money, images—another is the desirable impression of the system’s autonomy, in which it seems to function logically and inevitably with no one responsible.63 Yet another is the spectacular nature of so many of the scenes—how Mouret *inspects* and inventories the operation, much as the author himself—which suggests a fascinating visual element to the movement of capital and commodities, and

63 For the importances of flow(s) to capitalism, see Deleuze and Guattari *L’Anti-Oedipe*. 

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to the shifting displays of goods generally. This inventorying eye recalls Baudelairian *flânerie*, but it is not until Zola and his contemporaries (e.g., the Goncourts, Huysmans) that this sort of cataloging becomes a major element of the French novel; Perec will take inventorying and cataloging to still another level in his novel of struggling *psychosociologues* who conduct market research.

Lukačs discusses these aspects of Zola’s descriptive prose—how it differs from that of Balzac or Flaubert, and its relation to the social and economic forces at work during the period. His critique of Zola’s method and his preference for Balzac over Zola or Flaubert is well-known. His dislikes the apparent sterility of Flaubert’s ironic distance, his resigned and bitter fascination with the triumphs of bourgeois capitalism and the hypocrisies of its ideology; with Zola he respects the critical and progressive intent of the author, but believes his journalistic method and descriptive style are ultimately so much a product of the socio-economic processes he would represent and critique, and so implicated in them, that his fiction fails to represent social reality accurately in its totality as, say, Balzac’s did, and is thus hampered in its reformist intent. It is in part a question of the nature of “realistic” representation: it does often seem, paradoxically, that one comes closer to this latter ideal not by careful documentation and exhaustive, microscopic attention to detail, but rather by the creation of elaborate, imaginary worlds and social milieus which are clearly “other,” but which attain a truth-value in their dialectic with the actual that a “faithful” copy cannot.

Goldmann makes a similar point in *Pour une sociologie du roman*:

La relation entre la pensée collective et les grandes créations individuelles littéraires, philosophiques, théologiques, etc., réside non pas dans
Zola’s complicity with that which he would critique—the intricacies of capitalist enterprise during the Second Empire—is more explicit in this novel than in his others, and this paean to the triumphs of bourgeois capitalism has, after all, a “happy end,” however contrived the sudden marriage of Denise and Mouret appears in the final sentences.\(^64\)

Much of Zola’s presumed realism rests on the extensive research undertaken before his projects, and his detailed descriptions of everyday activities. Most interesting for this study are his lengthy descriptions and lists of everyday objects—the flood of commodities, the crowds of shoppers, that pass through the department store. In Flaubert’s novel description is often a kind of distraction or turn from the plot and activities of his characters—the occasion for ironic observations and rhetorical flourishes. The love story between Frédéric and Mme Arnoux remains one of the primary elements throughout Flaubert’s narrative, notwithstanding Frédéric’s fetishizing and idealization, and the many objects in the novel which fascinate its characters and author alike. In Zola’s novel by contrast, one often has the sense that plot, character and relationships are mere conventions providing narrative support for the lists and descriptions—that the things populating the novel, with the arguable

\(^{64}\) There were surely scores of other popular novels with feel-good endings at the time, but it’s telling that I can’t think of one, that they are little read or studied. This, I would argue, has much to do with the bourgeois valorization of self-critique. In Laura Quinney’s provocative work on the relation of negative, critical rhetoric to the perceived realism and truth value of literary works (Literary Criteria and the Power of Truth), she explores their positive correlation, and the ensuing lure for writers of the negative. Most of Zola’s work fits this pattern: he was of course much criticized by his peers for focusing on the the dark, bleak and “unseemly” aspects of society and individual character, subjects which seemed to indicate the truth, or “naturalism,” of his fiction.
exception of Mouret, are of greater interest to its author than his characters. In Au
Bonheur des dames the love story between Denise Baudu and Octave Mouret seems
purely conventional, a secondary thread that gives the novel structure, narrative arc and
a certain tension, i.e., Denise’s rise from destitution to wealth, and her consistent refusal
of Mouret’s advances until his final proposal of marriage—a familiar pattern of the
bildungsroman.

There are certainly zolian crowds in the novel, but more interesting are the
commodities filling the store whose descriptions fill page after page, like Mouret’s
goods heaped on racks and tables aisle after aisle. For example, the first substantial list
is a long description of an “oriental salon” Mouret has created out of Oriental rugs, and
is a model for the many lists to follow:

> il venait d’acheter dans le Levant...une collection de tapis anciens...en tirait
simplement un décor splendide...des tapis de Smyrne...les portières de
Karamanie et de Syrie...les portières de Diarbekir...les longs tapis d’Hisphahan,
de Teheran et de Kermančha, les tapis plus larges de Schoumaka et de
Madras...les tapis de la Mecque...du Daghestan...du Kurdistan.... La Turquie,
l’Arabie, la Perse, les Indes etaient là. On avait vidé les palais, dévalisé les
mosquées et les bazars...” (95).

The “East” is reified and obtainable here, for a price of course, and has been
aestheticized to serve a primarily decorative purpose. There’s no irony here (when is
there in Zola?), and this is not a description of background or secondary decor: these
things, these names and their relationships, are the subject of Zola’s interest and
attention—his main characters, so to speak. Where Flaubert’s ironic descriptions reveal
anger and disillusionment, Zola’s descriptions simply show in a celebration of naming:
there is obviously pleasure in playing with this poetry of nouns (here signifiers of the exotic), pleasure which will also be evident in Perec’s *Les choses*.

Arnold Hauser’s observation that by the Second Empire the bourgeoisie “had become romantic and in fact, to a certain extent, the romantic element in society par excellence” is certainly supported by Zola’s characterization of Mouret, who emerges early in the novel as an updated version of the Romantic hero, the pragmatic poet of capitalism who reconciles genius and dreamy sentimentality with hard-nosed materialism and canny business sense, his “génie de la mécanique administrative” (78, 42). Our first encounter with Mouret exemplifies this reconciliation: he has just returned to his office from a *nuit blanche* of partying with various actresses—one of his “échappées de jeune veuf... où le besoin du plaisir l’égarait”—but within minutes transforms himself into a man “solide, l’œil vif, la peau fraîche, tout à la besogne, comme s’il eut passé dix heures au lit”; after a tender nod to his dead wife’s portrait, Mouret is ready for the business of the day (37). He is the model of the tough entrepreneurial type who disdains sleep, parties at will, and still puts in long hours manipulating goods, capital and people with a steady hand and sharp eye.

The romanesque story of Mouret’s dead wife symbolizes neatly the incorporation of an older ideology into the newer capitalist values (she financed the store’s construction, but died from a fall during the course of it and stained the foundations with a blood sacrifice, like those often sanctifying religious cathedrals). Mouret stands between or beyond this dialectic, having successfully, “ingeniously”
synthesized both the old and the new economic forms in his highly fluid, adaptive manner; he is alternately dreamy and capricious, or ruthlessly determined. One might have expected his right-hand man Bourdoncle to have achieved Mouret’s success instead; earlier in their careers “(Bourdoncle) semblait alors devoir supplanter aisément son camarade, moins sérieux, et qui avait toutes sortes de fuites, une apparente étourderie, des histoires de femmes inquiétantes” (37). However, Bourdoncle lacks the “coup de génie de ce Provençal passionné, ni son audace, ni sa gr“ce victorieuse”; he doesn’t possess Mouret’s visionary, intuitive feel for the development of a new culture of consumption that would combine aspects of poetry, sentimentality and aesthetics to produce a larger consumerate with greater appetite (37-8). Again, Romantic rhetoric of intuition and inspiration was recontextualized, and Mouret’s character anticipates the rhetoric of modern entrepreneurship most memorably exemplified in our times by the film *Wall Street*’s Gordon Gecko.

The dynamic Mouret also contrasts vividly with his pallid former school-mate and friend Vallagnosc, a representative of the moribund aristocracy mired in lassitude and *mal de siècle*. Mouret chides him at one point for his ennui and worldly disdain, “lorsque le siècle entier se jetait à l’avenir...(il) raillait les désespérés, les dégoutés, les pessimistes, tous ces malades de nos sciences commen_antes, qui prenaient des airs pleureurs de poëtes ou des mines pincées de sceptiques” (74). In this brief sketch Zola alludes to one of the interesting paradoxes of the nineteenth century, i.e., the coexistence of such pessimism, despair and failure with enormous technical achievement and social reorganization, and the ascendancy of the bourgeois class to a
position of cultural and economic dominance. But perhaps he also points toward its answer: those who, like Mouret, succeeded in blending Romantic values like sentimentality and intuition with economic imperatives would be rewarded; those who remained simply Romantic would burn out and fade away, like so many of the Romantics themselves. Aristocrats like Vallognosc, unable to adapt, would drown in cynicism and despair; old-style businessmen like Uncle Baudu, or old Bourras, the umbrella handle craftsman, would be bankrupted and forced to work for Mouret, or not at all.

In contrast to the extended, traditional family of Uncle Baudu, all of whom live and work together in the *Vieil Elbeuf*, and represent the “old economy,” the Zola represents the Lhomme family as a new kind of domestic unit, one that also shows the pressures of the new economic system on the individual and on the traditional family, but is more adaptable, and thus better-suited to its values. The Lhomme all work in Mouret’s store, with greater or lesser competence. While the Baudus cling to the past, unable to change with the times, and are thus in the process of being crushed by rage, inertia and disease, the Lhomme family is fragmenting, adapting, and undergoing the kinds of decoding that will result in more numerous, independent economic units, capable of producing and consuming at an increased rate. In a customary rant Baudu rails at the

*Au Bonheur* d’en face, ces sauvages, qui se massacraient entre eux avec leur lutte pour la vie, d’en arriver à détruire la famille. Et il citait leurs voisins de campagne, Lhomme, la mere, le pere, le fils, tous les trois employes dans la
baraque, des gens sans intérieur, toujours dehors, ne mangeant chez eux que le dimanche, une vie d’hôtel et de table d’hôte enfin! (emphasis added, 29).

The Lhomme, underhanded and cutthroat as they become, succeed where the Baudu fail—their ascent mirrors the Baudu’s descent, and they eventually even acquire Uncle Baudu’s retirement home—because they are amenable to Mouret’s new system: with their “famille débandée et leur libre existence,” they have become flexible, foregone “interiority” and their proper “place” in favor of living “outside” in accordance with the new market imperatives, and for which they are well-rewarded.

In spite of Baudu’s grumbling about how unheard of it is, “les caissiers qui rachetaient les propriétés des patrons...tout craquait, la famille n’existait plus, on vivait a´l’hôtel” etc., the Lhomme, as Mme Baudu gently reminds her husband, “t’ont payé” (234-5). Though they do succeed in making a good deal of money, Zola is critical of the Lhommes to the extent that he indicates they have divested themselves of their ethical sense along with domestic conventions: the son Albert prefers to chase women and slack off at work, and he and the father both end up stealing from the store. They do however survive, where the Baudu do not; the petty bourgeois values structuring the Baudu home and shop—thrift, patience, tradition, the “value of a dollar”—have to be eliminated for Mouret’s new economy to flourish, and for waste and addiction to rule as the principal values of its new dynamic. It is Uncle Baudu’s, and by extension all of the traditional petits commerçants, inertia and inability to adopt these new modes of business and presentation that doom them.
CHAPTER 4

PEREC: WANTING

“[C]’est bien d’images seulement qu’ils voulaient s’enivrer”
--Claude Burgelin

“J’ai essayé de décrire la fascination des choses, la pression qu’elles exercent”
--Georges Perec

Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante opens with an inventory of the ideal apartment of its protagonists—a visual feast of a dream space and its furnishings that would be completely fulfilling to its inhabitants—and ends with their anticipation of another kind of “repas,” which promises instead to be “franchement insipide.”

Between the lush dreams of his young couple and the banality of their actual situation as middle class temporary workers, George Perec explores the ambiguities confronting a certain generation of French youth—twenty-somethings during the Algerian war—as

65 Claude Burgelin, Georges Perec (Malesherbes: Editions du Seuil, 1988) 47.
they negotiate the social and economic changes of the newly affluent culture developing in France (as elsewhere in Western Europe) in the late nineteen-fifties and early sixties.

The relative prosperity of the period, and its new consumer culture recently-imported from the States, contrasted powerfully with previous decades of stagnation, war and reconstruction; these economic and cultural changes provoked many critiques by Baudrillard, Foucault, Godard, et.al., who attempted to assess social and subjective conditions in the era. Père's description of this *milieu* and the generation coming of age in a period of material abundance clearly struck a chord: this first novel promptly sold a hundred thousand copies, won the Prix Renaudot, was translated into over a dozen languages, and remained his most popular novel until the publication of *La vie, mode d'emploi* in the late Seventies.

Père's analysis of “the practices of everyday life,” or what he called the “infra-ordinaire,” is described by Claude Burgelin in his study of Père's diverse body of work: “Les textes de Père proposent les chemins d’une amitié attentive et inventive avec les choses et les êtres comme avec les mots, dans une acceptation des signes et des valeurs du quotidien.” In this respect Père continues in a novelistic tradition that dated back a century, and had been explored by Flaubert, the Goncourts, Huysmans, Sartre, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet and others. Arguably the first close (French) attention paid to the weight and pressure of the commodity-object upon the subjective and social was Flaubert’s; Père himself explicitly cites *L’Education sentimentale* as a precursor to his own novel, which also charts the sentimental education and desires of a class of

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young people not unlike Frédéric Moreau and his peers. Perec admits to including in *Les choses* several allusions to, and outright borrowings from, Flaubert’s novel; Burgelin goes further, writing that “Tout commence avec Flaubert. Dans ce lieu idéal qu’évoque la première page, il y a sa marque. Ce *Ville-de-Montereau* (the boat Frédéric takes home to *Nogent-sur-Seine*) qui appareillait aux premières lignes de *l’Education sentimentale* est ici image-fétiche, gravure échouée au mur” of their dream apartment (39). Perec’s use of an omniscient third-person narrator, *style indirect libre*, and his privileging of the visual and the descriptive over interiority and psychology all recall Flaubert’s earlier work.

Of crucial importance for Perec’s novel is this question of the “image-fétiche”: the idealizing and obsessiveness of Frédéric Moreau are exaggerated to such a degree in Perec’s novel that his characters lose all physical presence, and to the extent that they have interiority or subjectivity, it is composed entirely of their relentless hunger for trendy consumer goods and pre-packaged lifestyle “experiences”; their frustrated desires and apotheoses of fantastic dream worlds go far beyond anything envisioned by Flaubert or Zola. In Burgelin’s formulation “[Perec] ne cherche pas a’leur donner intérriorité psychologique, intimité sensorielle ou présence corporelle. Grosso modo, ils n’ont ni corps ni “me: personnages qui restent tels et ne deviennent des personnes” (21).

Perec’s characters are two-dimensional compared to Frédéric, Marie Arnoux, Denise Baudu or Octave Mouret, but their idealizing drive, and its debt to the Romantic, is familiar from those earlier characters.\(^70\) The Romantic inclinations of Frédéric

\(^70\) Baudrillard writes that “Jérôme et Sylvie n’existent pas en tant que couple: leur seule réalité, c’est “Jerome-et-Sylvie,“ pure complicité transparent dans le système d’objets qui la signifie.” *Système* 280.
Moreau have combined and evolved with the market forces and innovations described
by Zola to become much more subtle and sophisticated—and pervasive—in the
following century, and provoke the restless desires and superficial relationships we see
in Perec. His couple’s frustrations, their psychology, their religious relationship to the
objects and experiences they covet, their social relationships with others in the “new
class” they comprise, and the highly visual quality of their world, along with, on a
rhetorical level, Perec’s predilection for descriptions and lists, all mark this novel as the
twentieth-century successor of those earlier works.

Comparing the opening scenes of the three novels under discussion brings up a
number of important resemblances: all three open with a voyage, or movement and
allusions to travel—Frédéric on the boat to Nogent; Denise and her brothers just off the
train from Cherbourg; and Perec’s disembodied “oeil” traveling around an imaginary
apartment, passing over, among a multiplicity of genial bibelots, pictures of the Ville-
de-Montereau and “une locomotive de Stephenson,” both underscoring the importance
of movement and travel as a theme (11). Flaubert’s famous introductory paragraphs
describe the chaos of the parisian quai, and the young Moreau returning from his
uncle’s, where his mother hopes to obtain “l’heritage” for him; Zola’s first paragraphs
describe Denise and her two brothers en route to Uncle Baudu’s, also hoping to obtain
financial support (a job, in her case). The question of financial means is raised in
Perec’s novel immediately after the description of the couple’s ideal apartment.
In both earlier novels the characters’ physical appearance, relationships and background are described, but in Perec’s initial pages there are no “subjects”; his characters are neither named nor described for many pages, and only referred to as “ils.” Nor are any relationships described, or background information given—only an impersonal “eye” imagining the dream apartment whose material aspects, however heterogeneous, would relate to each other and harmonize seamlessly with the nameless inhabitants’ spiritual, intellectual and material lives—where “[l]a vie...serait facile, serait simple. Toutes les obligations, tous les problèmes qu’implique la vie matérielle trouveraient une solution naturelle” (14).

The Romantic emphasis on style and self-creation becomes an obsession with *lifestyle*, and the acquisition of the proper goods. These inhabitants have a ghostly quality, and exist in a suspended, ahistorical, asocial state with their possessions, furniture and decor. But rather than an easy correspondence between subjects and their objects, whose imaginary “[appartement serait rarement en ordre, mais son désordre même serait son plus grand charme,” where “[l]e confort ambiant leur semblerait un fait acquis, une donnée initiale, un état de leur nature,” the impersonality and anonymity of these figures, along with Perec’s use of the conditional tense and the roving, disembodied “eye,” signal instead the would-be occupants’ *distance* from the material world, and the extent to which their obsession with things and “ambience”—as they have idealized and imagined it—renders lasting and gratifying social and material relationships impossible.
In this initial, thoroughly Romantic vision of transcendence and adequation,

Leur appartement serait rarement en ordre, mais son désordre même serait son plus grand charme... Il leur semblerait parfois qu’une vie entière pourrait s’écouler entre ces murs couverts de livres, entre ces objets si parfaitement domestiqués qu’ils auraient fini par les croire de tout temps créés à leur unique usage, entre ces choses belles et simples, douces, lumineuses... leurs moyens et leurs désirs s’accorderaient en tous points, en tous temps. Ils appelleriaient cet équilibre bonheur (emphasis added, 14-16).

They dream of a perfect correspondence between their intellectual and emotional lives and their material, built environment; in brief moments they do achieve this communion: “Ils étaient épris de la liberté. Il leur semblait que le monde entier était à leur mesure; ils vivaient au rythme exact de leur soif, et leur exubérance était inextinguible; leur enthousiasme ne connaissait plus de bornes. Ils auraient pu marcher, courir, danser, chanter toute la nuit” (43). This intermittent reinforcement, these brief highs, produce their precious sensations of freedom and expansion, but are frustratingly short-lived. They serve, however, to drive their next bout of consumption, their next investment in commodities and experiences that promise a return to those elusive bonheurs.

The first line of chapter two closes the opening idyll with Perec’s use of the conditional past, giving the lie to their dreams of perfection: “Ils auraient aimé être riches. Ils croyaient qu’ils auraient su l’être. Ils auraient su s’habiller, regarder, sourire comme des gens riches” (17). Of course, while not poor, the gulf between the immensity and variety of their desires for luxury goods and their modest, intermittent incomes is maddeningly huge. In this respect they are heirs to Zola’s Mme de Bovès, the aristocrat of Au Bonheur des dames, whose husband allots her but little money for
shopping: like her their tastes are refined, and their desires far exceed their ability to consume (14-16). They consider themselves, in fact, modern aristocrats, who could have borne wealth and privilege lightly, cultivated the art of living and “the small effect” as well as—and the comparison is thoroughly apt—the aesthetes of the nineteenth century: “Ils auraient eu le tact, la discrétion nécessaire. Ils auraient oublié leur richesse...l’auraient respiré...Leur vie aurait été un art de vivre” (17). The dandies were the Romantic aristocrats of consumption, spiritual fathers of Perec’s Jérôme and Sophie; by Perec’s time, however, such exclusive, rarefied tastes and complex signifying practices—especially their methods of acquisition and combination of particular objects—have become democratized and mass-produced.

The world Jérôme and Sylvie inhabit is fragmented into discrete signs, moments, items; the pleasure this fragmentation and their “reading” of these signs gives them is closely tied to their sense of liberty: “Ils se regardaient en souriant dans les glaces des devantures. Il leur semblait que tout était parfait; ils marchaient librement...le moindre de leurs gestes...apparais[ait] comme l’expression évidente, immédiate, d’un bonheur inépuisable” (48). This remarkable image of the “glaces des devantures” recalls similar scenes from Baudelaire (“Les yeux des pauvres”), or Denise Baudu et frères rapt before the marvels of Zola’s department store, and suggests how much their pleasures are mediated and simulacral.

Perec describes their ability to déchiffrer, ou même susciter, ces signes favorables...[m]ais, dans ces moment où ils se laissaient emporter par un sentiment de calme plat, d’éternité, que nulle
Their occasional sensations of freedom and exaltation are so very fragile because they have been purchased, supplied, and inevitably wane only to be sought again; yet they remain convinced that this expansion, like their love, would be limitless and indestructible—if only they were rich.

The earlier novels we have looked at, though saturated with objects and attention to the built environment, are still love stories at some level—Frédéric’s enduring, if occasionally interrupted, obsession with Mme Arnoux; the novel-long arc of Denise’s conquest of Mouret—but there is hardly any mention in Perec’s novel of a love relation between its two main characters, whose coupledom is simply a given; what binds them are their shared desires. Nor do gender considerations figure in the novel: where in Zola the “hidden” architecture behind Mouret’s seductions is male, and the desires cultivated female, in Perec’s novel gender distinctions disappear.⁷¹ Eroticism, desire and obsession in Les Choses revolve entirely around, or are sublimated into, Jérôme and Sophie’s lust for consumer goods and commodified experiences: “Ils voulaient jouir de la vie, mais partout autour d’eux, la jouissance se confondait avec la propriété”; “propriété” is particularly apt, denoting as it does both “property” and

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⁷¹ In Zola’s novel gender distinctions are already problematized, however: Mouret is figured as a mixture of hard-headed businessman and gentler, more effeminate seducer, and his success is credited in part to his familiarity with his “féminine side,” and to how well he “understands” women.
“ownership,” neither of which, given their eternal frustration, could they ever have
enough, regardless how much money they might earn (55). Their pleasures are
necessarily fleeting, and dissipate quickly with acquisition.

In contrast, both Flaubert’s and Zola’s novels devote significant space to the
love stories. Frédéric’s desire for his ideal woman is critical to that narrative, although
his relationship to the material world—“la pression des choses”—comprises a
significant portion of the novel. For Zola’s part, the love story is present in Au Bonheur,
but feels conventional and almost obligatory, ending as it does on the last page with
Denise “conquering” Mouret by obtaining his proposal of marriage; their “affair” is
however frequently implausible in a novel far more interested in the life of things and
the new economy—the Cinderella story in Zola is not primarily Denise’s, but
capitalism’s.

By Perec’s time, however, a work whose characters bond entirely around their
shared lust for material goods and designer lifestyles was not only possible, but perhaps
inevitable. In his study of enumeration in the novel from Flaubert to Perec, André
Brochu observes that “Ils semblent s’entendre cependant sur l’innombrable choses qui
composent le bonheur dont il rêvent...[l]eur amour réciproque, s’il existe, passe
entièrement par ces objets-mirages qu’ils convoitent ensemble et qui absorbent tout
d’eux-mêmes.”72 Subjects without “centers,” they have, like Yahweh, breathed life into
the objects of their desire, but such expenditure has drained them, left them feverishly
over-heated, modern consumptives gasping for breath, or vampires driven to seek fresh

72 André Brochu, Roman et enumeration de Flaubert a’Perec (Département d’études françaises: Université
de Montréal, 1996) 131.
blood. Jérôme and Sophie’s “love life” mirrors closely their bank balance:

“L’économique, parfois, les dévorait tout entiers. Ils ne cessaient pas d’y penser. Leur vie affective même, dans une large mesure, en dépendait étroitement” (56). When flush or stable financially, “leur bonheur commun était indestructible,” but “aux premiers signes d’un déficit, ils se dressaient l’un contre l’autre” (56-7). Perec makes rare mention of “leur amour” here in order to show how their “bonheur commun,” their sympathy of “gouts...fantaisie...invention....appendits [qui] se confond[ent] dans une liberté identique,” is so feeble and dependent on certains “moments privilégiés,” i.e., they love and identify with each other only as long as and to the extent which they are capable of consuming together (56-7).

As temporary workers in the new field of market research, they affect a certain superior distance or irony to their subject, and to the masses whom they interview, masses presumably less conscious than they of marketing strategy.73 The real irony however, is that it is they themselves who are most implicated in the cycle of desire and consumption, and more deeply at the mercy of its intermittent reinforcements:

Ils s’asseyait en face de ces gens qui croient aux marques, aux slogans, aux images qui leur sont proposées...mais eux-mêmes, sans trop savoir pourquoi, avec le sentiment curieux, presque inquietant, que quelque chose leur échappait, ne trouvaient-ils pas belles certaines affiches, formidables certains slogans, geniaux certains films-annonces?...ils mettaient en marché leurs magnetophones, ils disaient hm hm avec le ton qu’il fallait, ils truquaient leurs interviews, ils b’clairaient leurs analyses, ils rêvaient, confusionement, d’autre chose (71-2).

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73 In Godard’s Masculin/Féminin Paul also dabbles in market research (“Do you take the Pill? Are you a member of the Pepsi Generation?” etc.).
Like their friends, products of their time and class and the same seductive diet of images, they share a predictable fantasy life; even, and especially, when they are conscious of this: “Ils n’étaient pas, disaient-ils, tout à fait dupes. Ils savaient garder leurs distances. Ils étaient décontractés, ou du moins tentaient de l’être. Ils avaient de l’humour. Ils étaient loin d’être betes” (41). In fact, “La relative lucidité qu’ils ont par rapport à leur rôle social ne fait que les ligoter davantage” (Burgelin 44). Their awareness of this fact hovers just below the surface of consciousness, always threatening their tenuous and fragile “bonheurs”: their “rêves imbéciles...ne tenaient pas debout. Ils étouffaient. Ils se sentaient sombrer” (57). Similarly, the day after a drunken debauch with friends and renewed vows to resist such expenditure and over-consumption, they feel “un sentiment ambigu, comme si le mouvement même qui les avait portés à boire n’avait fait qu’aviver une incompréhension plus fondamentale, une irritation plus insistante, une contradiction plus fermée dont ils ne pouvait se distraire” (43). Their indulgences are at once their principal pleasures, and the source—because they are short-lived and ultimately dissatisfying—of a nagging half-awareness of the factitious nature of their desires and gratifications.

As their domestic life and relationship revolve exclusively around their shared desires for the objects and experiences adequate to their tastes, so too do their external relationships with their peers, with whom they constitute “toute une bande, une fine

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74 The fundamental link between consumption and addiction, “le mouvement qui les avait portés a boire” is suggested here. Addiction—excessive and obsessive expenditure and consumption—is the limit to which capitalist subjects must simultaneously be driven and pulled back. Addicts are naturally ideal consumers, but also at much higher risk of “going too far” and becoming unfit for production (i.e., work). Hence the creation of an enormous psychological and pharmaceutical apparatus to encourage the “right” kinds of “moderate” addiction, and to minimize its potentially harmful effects on the socius, on productivity. Happily for those economic sectors, these treatments also require substantial outlays of money.
équipe” : “Ils appartenaient, presque tous, aux milieux de la publicité,” and they share “des habitudes communes, des goûts, des souvenirs communs” (34). Perec’s rhetoric reinforces this sameness and interchangeability, constantly repeating “Ils avaient...ils avaient”: “ils” referring ambiguously to Jérôme and Sylvie, or to them and their friends. In any case, “Leurs souvenirs d’enfance se ressemblaient, comme étaient presque identiques les chemins qu’ils avaient suivis, leur lente émergence du milieu familial, les perspectives qu’ils semblaient s’être choisis” (41). Perec implies in this formulation (“ils semblaient...”) the extent to which their “perspectives,” values and desires have been conditioned by a common “lifestyle” discourse. Gathering ritually with their peers in cafés or bars with the perfect ambiance, “ils évoquaient, avec un abandon presque rituel, leurs amours, leurs désirs, leurs voyages, leurs refus, leurs enthouasismes, sans s’étonner, mais s’enchantant presque, au contraire, de la ressemblance de leur histoire et de l’identité de leurs points de vue”—pleasurable for the comforting and reassuring way they reinforce each other (35).75

Perec’s vocabulary—“enchantant,” “rituel,” “abandon”—evokes the quasi-religious and mythic nature of the sort of dream life of desire these young people

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75 This mirroring and reinforcing tendency of interest groups has only been exacerbated by new communication and information technology: rather than promoting the understanding of diversity and commonality, it has increased fragmentation and polarization, made it easier than ever to associate exclusively with those who think alike and share the same interests. Myriad mutually exclusive versions of reality can be constructed in which the same films, music, books, pornography, politics, religion, sexual preferences, language, video games, fashion, etc. are shared by a given sector of the population, who have less and less understanding of or contact with other sectors. This can be wonderfully liberating for those previously isolated from like-minded thinkers, but also has serious implications for civil society and democracy. It becomes increasingly difficult for given sectors to comprehend each other, to find any common language with which to communicate. Nor is this just a “virtual” phenomenon of amazon.com buying profiles, as vast expanses of our country’s interior, especially more rural areas, are abandoned by anyone with a progressive or alternative bent for the Coasts and a few major urban areas of the interior, which only reinforces the national polarization and lack of cross-cultural dialogue. This is good for niche marketers, but problematic for cultural diversity and a two-party political system.
inhabit; in spite of this “sympathie première” however, their connections are really quite tenuous: more often than not “il n’émergeât rien d’autre que des relations distantes, des coups de téléphone de loin en loin” (35). The mirroring they experience amongst each other, “déteignant les uns sur les autres,” reinforces their sameness, their identity, and the simulacral nature of their relationships: “Trop évolués pour se ressembler parfaitement, mais, sans doute, pas encore assez pour ne pas s’imiter plus ou moins consciemment, ils passaient une grande partie de leur vie en échanges” (34).

Another description of the couple and their peers further reinforces the similarity of what Girard would call their mimetic drives: “Ils étaient vêtus, en gros, de la même façon, c’est-à-dire avec ce gout adapté, qui, tant pour les hommes que pour les femmes, fait tout le prix de Madame Express, et par contrecoup, de son époux. D’ailleurs, ils devaient beaucoup à ce couple modèle” (36). Godard’s heroine in 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d’elle will also turn to Madame Express for guidance on what to wear, and more importantly, on what to want. Perec is explicit on the extent to which his couple’s styles and tastes are *imitations* of a “lifestyle” model; achieving this model is, necessarily, just beyond their means—hence their enduring frustration. It will take the widespread adoption of buying on credit in subsequent decades before such a class of consumers is capable of obtaining a much greater portion of the requisite objects and experiences. Of course, it is in the nature of a system predicated on lack and frustrated desire, of a promised fulfillment that remains fleeting or just out of reach, to continually ratchet up the levels of “taste,” and the kinds of things that would presumably bring
perfect happiness and harmony, so that they remain forever beyond attainment—but not beyond the *possibility* of attainment. Baudrillard explains in this regard

> qu’il n’ait pas de limites à la consommation. Si elle était ce pour quoi on la prend naïvement: une absorption, une dévoration, on devrait arriver à une saturation. Si elle était relative à l’ordre des besoins, on devrait s’acheminer vers une satisfaction. Or, nous savons qu’il n’en est rien: on veut consommer de plus en plus.\(^{76}\)

What Perec writes about their taste in clothing stands as an excellent description of their desires and tastes *tout court*:

> la disproportion, partout décelable, entre la qualité de leurs goûts vestimentaires (rien n’était trop beau pour eux) et la quantité d’argent dont ils disposaient en temps ordinaire était un signe évident.... Dans le monde qui était le leur, il était presque de règle de désirer toujours plus qu’on ne pouvait acquérir.... Ce n’était pas eux qui l’avait décrêté; c’était une loi de la civilisation, une donnée de fait dont la publicité en général, les magazines, l’art des étalages, le spectacle de la rue, et même, sous un certain aspect, l’ensemble de productions communément appelées culturelles, étaient les expressions les plus conformes. Ils avaient tort, des lors, de se sentir, à certains instants atteints dans leur dignité: ces petites mortifications...faisaient elles aussi *marcher le commerce* (emphasis added, 39-40).

Zola’s store has become their world, as has his rhetoric of the biological/economic imperative at work: the “*loi de la civilisation, une donnée de fait*” of which all these cultural productions—magazines, displays, advertisements—are a part, along with their necessary production of lack and dissatisfaction.

This class’s ritualized habits, gestures and conversations (“Ils parlaient d’eux-mêmes et du monde, de tout et de rien, de leurs goûts, de leurs ambitions”) are, if vaguely unfulfilling, all that they can imagine, and not without their pleasures, their *petits bonheurs*. Nonetheless, the least misunderstanding or discord between friends reveals the fragile nature of their cohesion, “des antagonismes sourds” following which

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\(^{76}\) Baudrillard *Système* 282.
“leur belle amitié s’écroulait. Ils découvraient, avec une stupeur feinte, qu’Un Tel, qu’ils croyaient généreux, était la mesquinerie même, que tel autre n’était qu’un égoïste sec. Des tiraillements survenaient, des ruptures se consommaient” (41). As with the objects and tastes that define them, and from which they derive their sense of place and meaning, so too is the reinforcement given by their peers, these “others,” critical for their subjective stability, for their self-affirmation: “Mais ils étaient ainsi faits que, quelque humeur qu’ils en eussent parfois, le groupe qu’ils formaient les définissait presque entièrement. Ils n’avaient pas, hors de lui, de vie réelle” (42).

Nor is there any sense of these characters as physical bodies; we are given no description of their size, shape, hair color, eyes, etc. This heightens the impression of sameness and interchangeability among these young people, as well as the sense that they are merely ciphers, collections of desire and idées courantes that illustrate their thorough implication in the market economy of goods, no less than the intellectual one of ideas. Of course they “hang out” together constantly, but less out of any mutual desire than out of need, as with their friends, for the reinforcement they give each other, for the stabilizing influence they have on each other’s fragile identities; in Brochu’s formulation “Ce dont crèvent à petit feu Jérôme et Sylvie, c’est d’excès d’identique. Rien ne différencie Jérôme de Sylvie, ni les distingue vraiment de leur groupe d’amis” (43).

Often they engage in ritual evocations of the vacations they could take, books they could write, the political situation, films they’ve seen or are going to see, the future of humanity—all subjects equally meaningful (or meaningless), which make up their
“rêves collectifs,” with the result that “ils finissaient par perdre tout contact avec la réalité” (43). Or they gather for “des dîners monstrueux, de véritables fêtes” (43). The context and vocabulary here clearly recall theories of expenditure, waste and exchange: laden with food and drink, nine or ten people would pack into someone’s apartment, where “Ils mangeaient et buvaient pendant des heures entières” (44).77 Perec is clearly conscious of the ritual nature of their consumption, and remarks that “[l]exubérance et l’abondance de ces repas étaient curieuses: à vrai dire, d’un strict point de vue culinaire, ils mangeaient de façon médiocre” (44).

As with all of their pursuits, they are content to signify, cite, or allude to “haute cuisine,” and disinterested in actually learning culinary arts; it suffices that they produce the image of luxury: “Ils témoignaient, en cela, encore une fois, de l’ambiguïté de leur situation: l’image qu’ils se faisaient d’un festin...[d]’une certaine manière, ils aimaient tout ce qui niait la cuisine et exaltait l’apparat. Ils aimaient l’abondance et la richesse apparentes” (44-5). Their ideal foods are those which are complete in themselves, “ready-to-eat”: “la vue d’une charcuterie, parfois, les faisait presque défaillir, parce que tout y est consommable, tout de suite” (45). But as elsewhere, the disconnect between their reality and their idealization, their imagination of things, breaks down all too easily: “ils aimaient les pâtés...les oeufs en gelée: ils y succombaient trop souvent, et le regrettaient, une fois leurs yeux satisfaits...car ce n’était, après tout, qu’un œuf dur” (45).

77 See Marcel Mauss, Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques (1924), and Georges Bataille, La Part maudite precede par La Notion de dépense (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967).
Perec describes, in one of his many ludic and heterogeneous lists, how this new class and its possessions are “aisément identifiables”:

"Leurs appartements...se ressemblaient: on y retrouvait les mêmes canapés crasseux, les mêmes tables dites rustiques, les mêmes amoncellements de livres et de disques, les mêmes vieux pots, vieilles bouteilles, vieux verres, vieux bocaux, indifféremment remplis de fleurs, de crayons de menue monnaie, de cigarettes, de bonbons, de trombones (35-6).

Perec’s class of “hommes nouveaux” comes largely from the petite bourgeoisie, to which they no longer feel attached, and whose values they have more or less shed: “Ils venaient, presque tous, de la petite-bourgeoisie, et ses valeurs, pensaient-ils, ne leur suffisaient plus: ils lorgnaient avec envie, avec désespoir, vers le confort évident, le luxe, la perfection des grands bourgeois. Ils n’avaient pas de passé, pas de tradition” (40). This is, not coincidentally, the condition of the ideal capitalist subject: any enduring sense of identity, tradition or memory impedes the kind of fluid, decentered, malleable subjectivity most conducive and susceptible to desiring production.78

Jérome, Sophie and their peers may have shed many of their connections to the past and to their traditions, including Catholicism, but they are not without religion—far from it. They worship fervently, but their religion is a kind of pantheism where God is present in the material things they covet, the fetishes they wonder at and desire. Their church is the city, Mouret’s city-become-sign, a catechism of desire where they worship while window shopping. On long evening walks through the streets of Paris they seek salvation and redemption, the meaning of life, and something that would slake their

78 Which is why traditional cultures, Islamic or otherwise, in which religious practices fundamental to identity permeate the simplest activities, rightly perceive liberalism as a great threat to their existence.
thirst: “Ils se promenaient souvent le soir, humaient le vent, léchaient les vitrines” (71).

Perec sketches the familiar paths, the hidden dangers of their modern quests, the map of their desire:

Ils laissaient derrière eux le Treizième tout proche...évitaient la sinistre rue Cuvier...et empruntaient, presque invariablement, la rue Monge, puis la rue des Ecoles, gagnaient Saint-Michel, Saint-Germain...le Palais-Royal, l’Opera, ou la gare Montparnasse, Vavin, la rue d’Assas, Saint-Sulpice, le Luxembourg (71).

On these pilgrimages into the shadows, these moveable, visual feasts, they commune with the spirits of commodities, the gods of taste:

[i]ls marchaient lentement. Ils s’arretâient devant chaque antiquaire, collaient leurs yeux aux devantures obscures, distinguaient, à travers les grilles, les reflets rougeâtres d’un canape de cuir, le décor de feuillage d’une assiette ou d’un plat en faïence, la luisance d’un verre taille ou d’un bougeoir de cuivre, la finesse galbe d’une chaise cannée (71).

Their behavior, and the value which they attribute to these commodities, recall the Romantic fallacy, a kind of mystic union with nature.

On and on they trek, soaking in this “bain de la multitude”—not of people, as for Baudelaire’s flâneur, but of things. Further into mystery and revelation, into the center of their “real:”

De station en station, antiquaires, libraires, marchands de disques, cartes des restaurants, agences de voyages, chemisiers, tailleurs, fromagers, chausseurs, confiseurs, charcuteries de luxe, papetiers, leurs itinéraires composaient leur véritable univers: là reposaient leurs ambitions, leurs espoirs. La’était la vraie vie, la vie qu’ils voulaient connaître, qu’ils voulaient mener (71).

Somewhere in the heart of all this production and consumption and desire, more truly than they know, is their very reason for being: “c’était pour ces saumons, pour ces tapis, pour ces cristaux, que vingt-cinq ans plus tot, une employée et une coiffeuse les avaient
mis au monde”; their primary function and purpose in life is to covet and consume this wealth of products (71).

After their over-heated communions these adepts rejoin the world, and its “grande machine publicitaire dont ils étaient les pions minuscules,” with their ardor temporarily sated, and feeling mildly superior, righteous even: “il leur semblait qu’ils n’avaient pas tout a fait oublié les merveilles estompeés, les secrets dévoilés de leur fervente quête nocturne. Ils s’asseyaient en face de ces gens qui croient aux marques, aux slogans, aux images qui leur sont proposées...” (72). And yet, and again, the worm of doubt nags; they sense, “sans savoir trop pourquoi, avec le sentiment curieux, presque inquiétant, que quelque chose leur échappait...ils rêvaient, confusément, d’autre chose” (72). But what the “autre chose” might be is obscure and ambiguous, both to them and to the reader of Perec’s novel.

If there is for Perec one explicit model and prescription for their lifestyle, it is the weekly magazine l’Express. While they often find it annoying or politically suspect, it remains “l’hebdomadaire dont ils faisaient le plus grand cas. Ils ne l’aimaient guère, mais ils l’achetaient...[i]ls ne s’en cachaient pas: ils étaient des gens pour l’Express” (36-7). It’s unnecessary that they agree with its content, as “la violence même de leurs réactions n’avait d’égale que leur sujétion: ils feuilletaient le journal en maugréant...ils le rejetaient loin d’eux...[m]ais ils le lisaient, c’était un fait, et ils s’en imprégnaien” (37). Neither is it necessary (or desirable) that they be able to afford the goods and lifestyles pictured therein:
ils s’écartaient sensiblement des modes d’achat que l’Express proposait. Ils n’étaient pas encore tout à fait ‘installés’...L’Express conseillait, donc, sous couleur de petites boutiques pas chères et sympathiques...des officines où le gout du jour exigeait, pour être convenablement perçu, une amélioration radicale de l’installation précédente; les murs blanchis à la chaux étaient indispensables, la moquette tête de nègres était nécessaire...les poutres apparentes étaient de rigueur.

Scoff as they will, this chatty, self-assured discourse is infectious, and they are fascinated and seduced by its tone, its subject matter, its advertising; as with their so-called friends, l’Express serves the crucial function of at once suggesting what they should be interested in, think about (“les préoccupations les plus courantes de leur vie de tous les jours”), dream of purchasing, and reinforcing their identity; or as Perec asks, “Où auraient-ils pu trouver plus exact reflet de leur gouts, de leur désirs?” (37). In spite of their doubts over whether “l’Express fut un journal de gauche,” and suspicions that “il était sans aucun doute possible un journal sinistre,” it remains the discourse that best “correspondait à leur art de vivre” (36-7). Again the phrase “art de vivre” appears, alluding to the aestheticizing drive of the modern market economy.

Jérôme, Sylvie and their indistinguishable friends all long for similar goods; l’Express feeds them what they want, and tells them what to want: “N’étaient-ils pas jeunes? N’étaient-ils pas riches, modérément?” (37). L’Express fragments the world, like Perec’s prose, like their market surveys, into digestible, quantifiable bits:

tous les signes du confort: les gros peignoirs de bain, les démystifications brillantes, les plages à la mode, la cuisine exotique, les trucs utiles, les analyses intelligentes, les secrets des dieux, les petits trous pas chers, les différents sons de cloche, les idées neues, les petites robes, les plats surgelés, les détails élégants, les scandales bon ton, les conseils de dernière minute” (emphasis added, 37).
In this short list Perec covers a wide swathe of the “knowable,” “consumable” world—“la fascination des choses”—all reified to represent signes du confort: the aesthetic attention to detail; the erotic, domestic and interpersonal; the body and the sensual; the intellectual; the scientific; and even, and especially, the religious. Perec describes this new religion, with its rituals, prescriptions for living and behavior, and promises of earthly reward. This sense of the sacred character of their desiring vocation is deepened by the next line, in which “Ils rêvaient, à mi-voix de divans Chesterfield. L’Express y rêvait avec eux” (37). Their fervor is for acquisition, and they pursue devoutly “à bon compte des étains, des chaises paillées, des verres qui invitaient à boire, des couteaux à manche de corne, des écuelles patinées dont ils faisaient des objets précieux” (38). Their faith in their bible and its reflection of their tastes (or vice versa) is so firm that “[d]e toutes ces choses, ils en étaient sûrs, [L’Express] avait parlé, ou allait parler” (38).

In many ways L’Express performs similar cultural and ideological work in Perec’s novel as the Au Bonheur in Zola’s novel: both provide symbolic systems, meaningful relationships between and with the goods on offer, and both position their readers/shoppers as consumers before products. L’Express can go much further however, in its review of the things worth “looking at” and thinking about; by the sixties and among Jérôme and Sylvie’s class, there is no longer any need to instill desire or school a public in the pleasures of consumption, and in the ability to see the world as so many discrete parts available for recombination to suit one’s particular “style” and sense of “interior decorating.” L’Express signals the triumph of Mouret’s system of
seduction and desire, for its readers are already converts, already belong to the flock, whereas Mouret must still perform miracles, as it were, to win converts and build his congregation. Neither system functions tyrannically, of course (and this is much the genius of capitalism)—one can choose to read the magazine or not, enter the “grand magasin” or not. Jérôme and Sophie get frustrated and angry with the magazine; they “know better,” but they’re compelled to keep coming back for their fix: “Ils ne l’aimaient guère, à vrai dire, mais ils l’achetaient...ils retrouvaient en lui...les préoccupations les plus courantes de leur vie de tous les jours” (36).79

The center of the novel—the end of Part One—terminates in an hallucinatory, oneiric sequence prompted by an enquête agricole that “les mena dans la France entière” (78). Their brief impressions of the farms they visit predictably center on the furnishings and objects they find in the farmhouses: “le poste de télévision, les fauteuils à oreilles, les huches de chêne clair, les cuivres, les étains, les faïences,” etc. (78). These many discrete objects float through their awareness without provoking any particular attention to or interest in actual rural life, although they are, ironically, being paid specifically to study “l’insertion de l’agriculture dans la vie moderne” (78). They are unable to attend to these present issues, as “leur esprit était ailleurs” (78). Once they

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79 It’s interesting to note the various meanings and origins of “magazine”/“magasin”: before becoming a collection of articles and photographs, a “magazine” was a storehouse where various resources and provisions were kept. In a sense Zola’s department store is both, as it also arranges collections of “articles” into symbolic groupings of goods to be looked at; the periodical l’Express stores, for Perec’s protagonists, all of the goods worth consuming (looking at). See also Paul Virilio’s exploration of the connection between the camera and the gun in Guerre et cinéma (Paris: Editions Cahiers du cinéma, 1991). Both contain magazines: the one for film, the other for bullets...the department store and the periodical in a sense combine the two, as both are major parts of an arsenal of images on the economic front.
drift into fantasy mode and replace the farms they're visiting with reified, simulacral versions, a frenzied orgy of material consumption, promiscuity, plenitude and power ensues.

Freed of the mundane and irritating surveys of the “fermier du demain, du Marché commun, des décisions gouvernementales en matière de blé et de betterave,” they set off on a fantastic, imaginary romp through “rural life”: “Ils se voyaient aller et venir dans la maison désertée. Ils montaient des escaliers cirés, pénéttraient dans des chambres au volets clos...ouvraient des placards haut de trois mètres...Dans la pénombres des greniers, ils découvraient d’innombrable trésors” (79). All the things belonging to this other, rural, traditional world are now appropriated by their imaginations, and speak directly to them: “Dans les caves interminables, les attendaient les foudres et les barriques, les jarres pleines d’huiles et de miel, les tonneaux de salaisons, les jambons fumés...les tonnelets de marc” (79). These imaginary visions of penetration into half-lit enclosed or underground spaces, filled with goods speaking just to them, are hard not to read as evocations of their unconscious, and also recall the overheated scenes in Zola’s novel, where intoxicated shoppers stampede through lace and lingerie departments, plunging hands into piles of goods with hot breath and a frantic desire for contact and consumption. For those earlier, unschooled shoppers, this experience and relationship with material goods was confined to Mouret’s store; Jérôme and Sophie are able and compelled to generalize these relationships throughout their world.
Echoing Mouret’s triumphant gaze from the top floor of his department store, where he looked out upon Paris and dreamed of bringing the whole city, the entire world, under his roof and into his economy, is Jérôme and Sophie’s panorama from the “sommet du château d’eau,” from whence they survey “la ferme toute entière...la route...qui menait à la Nationale et, tout autour, à l’infini, les grandes stries jaunes des champs de blé...se perdant à l’horizon...” (80). This impression of a world-made-spectacle for their delectation grows stronger in the following passages, where their narcissism and fantasies of power are even more pronounced.

The last several pages of these visions return to the city, and describe outrageous, utopic, ecstatic images of expansion, transcendence, unity and power that rival those of any Romantic. This ekstasis commences where the landscape disappears on the horizon, arising out of this liminal zone, much as the poetry of Shelley, for example, often does: “Alors, par bouffées, survenaient d’autres mirages. C’étaient des marchés immenses, d’interminables galeries marchandes, des restaurants inouïs. Tout ce qui se mange et tout ce qui se boit leur était offert” (80). Again, their imaginary world opens and offers its material riches to them exclusively, and through these details, these sign-objects of “pleasure” and “happiness,” they pass into a serene realm of perfection.

But first, there are

des caisses, des cageots, des couffins, des paniers, débordant de grosses pommes...de poires...de raisins...des étalages de mangues et de figues, de melons, de pastèques, de citrons, de grenades, des sacs d’amandes, de noix, de pistaches...Ils sombraient dans l’abondance. Ils laissaient se dresser des Halles colossales...(81)
Their appetites are boundless, this hallucination of power and abundance utterly over the top: “Des locomotives apparaissaient...des camions de brebis, des casiers de langoustes...[d]es millions de pains sortaient de milliers de fours. Des tonnes de café étaient déchargées des navires. Puis, plus loin encore...ils voyaient se dresser des cités de cent étages” (81).

These invisible cities appear like Coleridge’s Xanadu, or an image out of Baudelaire’s *Rêve parisien*: they are hard, empty, modernist, sterile, and technologically advanced. Their ideal dream world has been created to their measure, shaped to harmonize with their every desire and expectation:

Ils longeait les façades d’acier, de bois rares, de verres, de marbre. Dans le hall central, le long d’un mur de verre taille qui renvoyait dans la cite entiere des millions d’arc-en-ciel, jaillissaient du cinquantième etage une cascade qu’entouraient les vertigineuses spirales de deux escaliers d’aluminum...Des ascenseurs les emportaient...Des portes s’ouvraient devant eux (81).

Behind these doors lie other worlds—lecture halls, theaters, gardens, museums “concus a leur unique usage,” jungles, the sea, echo chambers, and underlying it all, “Dans les sous-sols immenses, à perte de vue, oeuvraient des machines dociles”—just as in the basement of Mouret’s department store (82). This vast system with all its technologies promises unconditional attention, perfection, happiness, novelty: “Ils se laissaient aller de merveille en merveille, de surprise en surprise. Il leur suffisait de vivre, d’etre la, pour que s’offre le monde entier. Leurs navires, leurs trains, leurs fusées sillonnaient la planète entière. Le monde leur appartenait...” (82). The power harnessed for them is unlimited, full of “innombrables bonheurs”: they run with horses, scale peaks, ski tree-lined runs, swim in still lakes, walk in the rain through boundless forests.
And there are, of course, also “porcelaines précieuses...livres reliés de cuir...tables d’acajou, de vêtements de soie ou de lin...tapis de Boukhara, de dobermans bondissants” (83).

In these fantasies they are briefly one with their perfect world, perfectly sated: “Leurs corps, leurs gestes étaient infiniment beaux, leurs regards sereins, leurs coeurs transparents, leurs sourires limpides” (83). For the culmination of this utopic vision Perec, by now obviously ironizing, describes their “brève apothéose” in which “ils se voyaient construire des palais gigantesques” (83). Bizarrely, the next image is of “des plaines nivelees” where “des milliers de feux de joie étaient allumés, des millions d’hommes venaient chanter la Messie” (83). And still more: “Sur des terrasses colossales, dix milles cuivres jouaient le Requiem de Verdi. Des poèmes étaient gravés sur le flanc des montagnes. Des jardins surgissaient dans les déserts. Des villes entières n’étaient que des fresques” (84). Apotheosis, indeed. These final images show the height of their narcissism, and the degree to which, following Baudrillard, their world has become symbolic, the sign-system—mountains poems, cities frescoes—envisioned by Mouret as he looks out across Paris, where monuments become symbols, diacritical marks—the Madeleine a circumflex, etc. The material substrate, whether nature, the social or commodities, can be signified and resignified to fuel the desires of Jérôme and Sophie, and promise power, bliss, fulfillment—and even deliver on those promises, at least briefly. For Perec’s couple never does “construire” anything, and at the end of their greatest joys, their wildest fantasies, they are left emptier, more exhausted, more depleted than before.
As this “mirage” comes to a close at the end of Part One, they go from these visions of expansion and wholeness, where “Ils croyaient imaginer le bonheur; ils croyaient que leur invention était libre, magnifique, que par vagues successives, elle impregnait l’univers,” to a deathly stasis and vacuity, because there really is no there there: “Ils se retrouvaient seuls, immobiles, un peu vides. Une plaine grise et glaçée, une steppe aride: nul palais ne se dressait aux portes des déserts, nulle esplanade ne leur servait d’horizon” (84). All these “images scintillantes...qui arrivaient en foule...de vertige, de vitesse, de lumière, de triomphe” seem shaped and linked by an internal, necessary logic: “il leur semblait d’abord qu’elles s’ench’inaient avec une nécessité surprenante, selon une harmonie sans limites...une totalité spectaculaire et triomphale, une complète image du monde, une organisation cohérente qu’ils pouvaient enfin comprendre, déchiffrer” (84). Their expansiveness and liberty seem boundless: “Il leur semblait d’abord que leurs sensations se décuplaient, que s’amplifiaient à l’infini leurs facultés de voir et de sentir...le monde allait à eux.... Leur vie était amour et ivresse. Leur passion ne connaissait pas de limites; leur liberté était sans contrainte” (85).

But as it turns out, it was all just an evanescent projection which fragments, crumbles and slips away; they are left suffocating under “l’amoncellement de détails. Les images s’estompaient, se brouillaient,” as if they had ever only been but “reflets très lointains...la dérisoire projection de leurs désirs” (84). The images evaporate, and finally “il ne restait rien,” except...the murmur of the tape recorder, the rambling commentary of a farmer, the trees and fields surrounding the farmhouse, and themselves, drowning, tiny dots in the universe: “Ils étaient ce petit point scintillant sur la longue route noire.
Ils étaient un petit îlot de pauvreté sur la grande mer d’abondance... Ils se sentaient écrasés” (86). Their religion of desire and consumption, their ways of making sense of the world have clearly failed them, and failed to provide any sustainable antidote to the nagging consciousness of themselves as dissatisfied and insignificant.

Like all frustrated idealists, they “turn away” when faced with mundane or uncomfortable realities. In like manner did Frédéric turn from the present to a fantasy life of ideal, and impossible, creations. He too was disinterested in or unable to actually work towards the creation of anything substantial—a career, literary production, artistic skills, a functional relationship—preferring also his rich dream life, and the acquisition of material goods to use as props for his various poses. In this he is Jérôme and Sylvie’s spiritual grandfather, and his own experience again underscores the fact that more money would be no cure for their shared malaise.

Before taking the drastic step in Part Two of moving to Tunisia, they first consider the possibility of a simpler life somewhere in the French countryside, but their dreams of the country are the same: they can’t help but idealize in the same way, substituting new fantasies of “rural life” for their urban ones. Thus the opening of Part Two is just like the opening of Part One: their vision of the ideal “country life” and all its poses and trappings, is merely another simulacrum: “Ils n’en envisageaient jamais les possibilités, ou plutôt, les impossibilités, réelles” (90). Thus “Ils rêvaient de vivre à la campagne, à l’abri de toute tentation. Leur vie serait frugale et limpide” (89). They would have all the requisite possessions, perform “life in the country” comme il faut:

Ils auraient une maison de pierres blanches... de chauds pantalons de velours côtelé, des gros souliers, un anorak, une canne à bout ferre, un chapeau,
et ils feraient chaque jour de longues promenades dans les forêts. Puis ils rentreraient, ils se prépareraient du thé et des toasts, comme les Anglais...ils liraient les grands romans qu’ils n’avaient jamais eu le temps de lire, ils recevraient leurs amis (89).

The vague malaise and vertiginous feeling that haunts the young couple, and their lack of intellectual and affective grounding, can barely be kept at bay in Paris, where they are surrounded and reinforced by their friends, and by the surfeit of material goods; it overwhelms them during their flight to Tunisia in search of authenticity and renewal. No longer able to support their life of frustration and compromise, in which “La tension était trop forte en ce monde qui promettait tant, qui ne donnait rien,” they escape to this “exotic” locale, hoping to find a simpler life, more real, more grounded in concrete relationships, with fewer material distractions. We know this attempt is doomed however, by all that has come before, and by Perec’s first use of the passé simple in the novel: “Ils tenterent de fuir” (89).

Perec writes that their life in Paris “n’avait été qu’une espèce de danse incessante sur une corde tendue, qui ne débouchait sur rien; une fringale vide, un désir nu, sans limites et sans appuis” (92). Their predisposition to living in a certain imaginary and ideal world where they would be happy if they only could afford x, and y, etc., renders them completely unable to make sense of their new home in Sfax, a lesser, provincial Tunisian city of which they have no prior conceptions and no romantic scenarios (“If You’re Thinking of Living in...Sfax” never having appeared in their lifestyle bible, l’Express). Moreover, since they haven’t any particular “selves” to
“leave behind” or “renew,” they are completely at a loss in this new environment. Sfax for them simply is: it represents a real that is completely enigmatic and other.80

Burgelin comments on their confusion and disorientation in their new home, indicating the degree of sameness and conformity of their earlier life, and of their soi disant tastes: “Quand quelque chose de réellement différent fait irruption dans leur vie—la Tunisie—c’est pour eux l’expérience de la solitude et du mal de vivre...[I]a dépression menace constamment les personnages des Choses”(45-6).81 They cannot “signify” or make sense of Sfax, “une ville opaque” and because they cannot “Ils y restèrent toujours étrangers”:

Ils n’en comprenaient pas les mécanismes les plus simples, ils n’y voyaient qu’un dédale de rues...leurs promenades n’avaient pas de but; ils tournaient en rond, craignant à tout instant de se perdre, se lasaient vite. Rien, finalement, ne les attirait...dans cette incompréhensible alternance de rues...dans cette foule qu’ils ne voyaient aller nulle part (96, 100).

Paul Schwartz writes that “They become new people with new occupations and new concerns. They exchange a universe too charged with things, too full, for a universe which is, from their point of view, too empty.”82

This “emptiness” has of course nothing to do with the things and people going about their daily lives in Sfax, and everything to do with their own inability to “imagine” this place and these lives: they have no idea how to consume Tunisia and make it meaningful, no primer on what to desire there, no lifestyle models for how to

80 Undoubtedly a certain degree of Said’s “orientalism” is also at work here, contributing to the difficulty they have “making sense” in this foreign setting. Paul Bowles’ expatriots experience something similar when they completely unravel in a similar environment in The Sheltering Sky.
81 Compare American reactions to the events of 9/11/01, another kind of irruption of the real—confusion, anger, depression, denial, baffled observations about how much it was “like a movie,” etc.
82 Paul Schwartz, Georges Perec: Traces of his Passage (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc. 1988)
perform “life in Sfax.” Which is why, avid consumers that they are, they are uninterested in the rare and often high-quality goods they find on their occasional trips to the *souk*:

*Ils n’achetaient rien...ils ne se sentaient pas attirés. Aucun de ces objets, pour somptueux qu’ils fussent parfois, ne leur donnait une *impression de richesse*. Ils passaient, amusés ou indifférents, mais tout ce qu’ils voyaient demeurait *étranger*, appartenait à un autre monde, ne les concernait pas. Et ils ne rapportaient de ces voyages que des images de vide, de sécheresse...*(emphasis added, 107-8).

They seek vainly for things in this new world that correspond with their existing imaginary, with their catalogue of the desirable: “Ils cherchaient autour d’eux des signes de connivence. Rien ne leur répondait”; nothing in their environment responds, they feel no “impressions de richesses,” and they’re left uncomprehending (101).

There is one exception to the general blankness and aridity that they feel in front of things Tunisian, and that is the lovely house of an English couple to which they are invited. This “paradis sur terre,” “la maison de leurs rêves, la plus belle des demeures,” with its gardens, fruit trees, curious architecture and charming rooms sounds quite beautiful in Perec’s description, and is, “comme dans leurs rêves,” the nearest thing to “la Tunisie cosmopolite aux prestigieux vestiges, au climat agréable, à la vie pittoresque et colorée” in which they could have imagined living. Still, “ce luxe, cette aisance, cette profusion de choses offertes, cette évidence de la beauté ne les concernaient plus” (109). Here is perhaps the only moment resembling growth or change for these characters, of an awareness of their situation: where in their former lives “Ils se seraient damnés...pour les jets d’eau des jardins, pour la moquette écossaise du grand vestibule, pour les panneaux de chêne de la bibliothèque,” now “ils ne les comprenaient plus; ils
manquaient de points de repère” (109). Perec writes that in that comfortable, Tunisian colonial atmosphere they would have had their best chance: they might have made sense of “la Tunisie cosmopolite aux prestigieux vestiges, au climat agréable, à la vie pittoresque et colorée” (109). Their imaginaries could have wrapped around such a colonial dream; but alas, they had landed in Sfax, and “ils n’étaient devenus que des Sfaxiens, des provinciaux, des exilés.”83 Not that they weren’t already strangers, so to speak, in Paris; the Sfax interlude simply intensifies their disconnection and emptiness by removing all the material and imaginary supports that existed in Paris.

Their fantastic image repertoire shrinks in Sfax from lack of feeding, but without it they are at a loss, empty of desire, fall outside of time: “ils manquaient de points de repère...[m]onde sans souvenirs, sans mémoire. Du temps passa encore, des jours et des semaines désertiques, qui ne comptaient pas. Ils ne connaissaient plus d’envie. Monde indifférent” (109-10). Perec’s rich, highly-descriptive and playful prose flattens out at the end of the desert dream (”Monde indifférent”), suggesting the colorlessness and mechanical rhythm of lives now void of their former objects of desire, of their consumerist raison d’être and value system: “Des trains arrivés, des navires accostaient au port, débarquaient des machines-outils...Leur vie continuait, identique...Ils étaient des somnambules. Ils ne savaient plus ce qu’ils voulaient. Ils étaient dépossédés” (110).

As they come to the end of the Tunisian experiment, they vaguely recall an earlier time in their lives when “ils avaient eu au moins la frénésie d’avoir. Cette exigence, souvent, leur avait tenu lieu d’existence. Ils se s’étaient sentis tendus en

83 They found themselves, in Camus’ formulation, not in the royaume, but in exil.
avant, impatient, dévorés de désirs” (110). Neither “here” nor “there,” now they sleepwalk through their purgatory, wondering “Qu’avaient-ils fait? Que s’était-il passé?,” quietly suffocating, while “Quelque chose qui ressemblait à une tragédie tranquille, très douce, s’installait au cœur de leur vie ralentie. Ils étaient perdus dans les décombres d’un très vieux rêve, dans des débris sans forme” (110). This is a kind of death, but an ambiguous one without salvation or redemption. Part Two ends here, and for Perec’s couple “Il ne restait rien. Ils étaient à bout de course, au terme de cette trajectoire ambiguë qui avait été leur vie pendant six ans, au terme de cette quête indécise qui ne les avait menés nulle part, qui ne leur avait rien appris” (110). The question of what they have or haven’t learned is more ambiguous here than Perec states: if they’re no more capable of “la frénésie d’avoir,” they have perhaps at least unlearned or become detached from it—their “sentimental education,” as it were, would consist, like Frédéric Moreau’s, in the unlearning of certain fetishistic models of desire.

Part Two ends with Perec’s couple adrift in Sfax, and as he writes “Tout aurait pu continuer ainsi”; Jérôme would have found a job, they would have had a decent income, they probably would have been reassigned eventually to Tunis, made new friends, bought a car, had “une belle villa, un grand jardin” (111). But now Perec looks into the future, and uses the future tense for the first time: “Mais il ne leur sera pas si facile d’échapper leur histoire” (111). They will eventually miss springtime in Paris, and decide to move back: “Ils reverront Paris et ce sera une véritable fête” (113). They will marvel again at the Seine, the streets at night, the food, the grands magasins stuffed
with goods: “Ils plongeront leurs mains dans les amas de soieries, caresseront les lourds flacons de parfum, effleureront les cravates” (113). They will try part-time market research again, be bored, dream of fortunes, the country, Sfax, but “Ils ne tiendront pas longtemps” (113). They will, finally, decide to be sérieux, and they will find full-time jobs in advertising, jobs that will make them financially secure, though not rich: “Ils auront leur divan Chesterfield, leurs fauteuils de cuir naturel souples...leurs tables rustiques, leurs lutrins, leurs tapis de soie, leurs bibliothèques de chêne clair...les faïences, les couverts d’argent, les nappes de dentelle, les riches reliures de cuir rouges” (115). They will be comfortable, the future will look bright...and yet, as they settle into the dining car en route to their new life, “le repas qu’on leur servira sera franchement insipide” (116).

But why? Have they done something wrong? Flaubert writes of Frédéric’s and his friend Deslauriers’ life at the end of \textit{L’Education sentimentale} that “Ils l’avaient manquée tous les deux, celui qui avait rêvé l’amour, celui qui avait rêvé pouvoir. Quelle en était la raison?” Frédéric suggests “le défaut de la ligne droite”; Deslauriers blames for his part an “excès de rectitude...J’avais trop de logique, et toi de sentiment” (397). Both are right. Should Perec’s couple have tried to maintain their liberties, continued to seek emploi précaire, live la vie bohème? Perec himself writes that “Les gens qui choisissent de gagner d’abord de l’argent, ceux qui réservent pour plus tard...leurs vrais projets, n’ont pas forcément tort,” whereas those who try to maximize freedom and immediate gratification without “selling out” “seront toujours malheureux” (55). Perec claimed that his novel was not a condemnation of \textit{la société de consommation}, but
rather a description of the problems faced by a class of “gens...ni riches ni pauvres,”
who “rêvent de richesse et pourraient s’enrichir”; a class sufficiently well-off that basic
needs are no longer an issue, but not rich enough not to have to worry about money, and
too impatient to buckle down for fifteen-odd years to be able to afford the freedoms,
experiences and goods they want now: “Ils pouvaient, tout comme les autres, arriver;
mais ils ne voulaient qu’être arrivés” (55).

Impatience, writes Perec, “est une vertu du XXè siècle”; and the nineteenth, as
we have seen in Flaubert, though certainly to a lesser degree (55). Jérôme and Sophie
are victims of their culture’s economic successes: the growth and prosperity which have
brought so many goods and experiences within reach, or within the possibility of reach,
were driven by the creation of hungry and impatient consumers like themselves, who
were taught to read and consume its signifiers of happiness, freedom, style, etc. But “la
devie moderne excitait leur propre malheur,” and necessarily so (56). Instead of the ability
to pay attention to and experience life—sensual, social, spiritual—as it unfolds around
them, they are constantly lacking, driven incessantly to look away, toward the mirages:
“ils avaient du monde possible des images qui pouvaient paraître exaltantes” (56). As I
have tried to suggest, it is their investment in these idealized images and the meanings
attached to commercial goods that marks them as products of their economy, and
distances them from meaningful social and material experiences. In Godard’s 2 ou 3
 choses que je sais d’elle we will find another character from this class who is also
struggling to make sense of her disease.

--Jean-Luc Godard

Several of Godard’s early films directly explore issues raised in Perec’s Les choses, and like that novel, analyze consumer culture and modernization in the nineteen sixties, and the sociological repercussions of these changes. Masculin/Féminin and Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle in particular examine the effects of commodification, advertising and popular culture on social relations, on subjectivity, and on the status of things and consumer goods in the environment—especially their

presence as visual artifacts. Passages from Les choses reappear almost verbatim in Masculin/Féminin, whose main characters share Jérôme and Sophie’s profession as market researchers, and their fascination with cinema and popular culture generally (Pepsi, pop music, contraception, fashion, etc). Like Zola’s novel, the film takes place in Paris, a Paris again under construction, which figures as a vast marketplace and site of consumption. Godard explores, like Perec, the frustration and desperation provoked by the discrepancy between a large sector of the population’s limited buying power and the wealth of goods available for consumption.

Godard reportedly took his subject from a newspaper article describing banlieusardes who were resorting to part-time prostitution, and generalized the phenomenon across the urban culture, reflecting upon “The idea that, in order to live in Parisian society today, at whatever level on whatever plane, one is forced to prostitute oneself in one way or another, or else live in conditions resembling those of prostitution.”85 Again, this problematic consumer culture is figured as a primarily American import, and Williams notes the degree to which “Deux ou trois choses...focuses principally on the Americanization of French economic and cultural life” (385). Of Godard’s earlier films however, it is in 2 ou 3 choses that he examines most explicitly social and subject-object relationships, and the visual, spectacular nature of these relationships as they develop within consumer culture.86

86 The echo of Perec’s title in Godard’s is perhaps unintentional, but it does suggest similar preoccupations, and how both artists are interested in observing and cataloging things —literally counting, in Godard’s title—and historical and cultural analysis of these productions. The experimental, provisional nature of these attempts is clear in Godard’s titular uncertainty (two, or three things I know?
The following remarks, though now treating a different medium (film rather than the novel), continue to lean on a lukaćsian/baudrillardean line of critique, and the notion of fetishism, which has run through all of the readings thus far. “Fetishism” as I have used it owes more to Marx than Freud—hence the emphasis on its spiritual and philosophical aspects—although Freud’s conception of a “turning away” or substitution has proven useful. What is at issue in Godard, of course, has more to do with a kind of visual fascination, or cinematic fetishization of objects and people.

The question of gender differences in relation to material objects and commodities is a difficult one beyond the scope of this project, but interesting for the question of whether or not women desire and consume different meanings than men in material objects and social relations. Godard’s work is certainly of enduring interest to feminist film critics for the way in which he sets up typically voyeuristic situations involving “objectified” female subjects, only to undercut spectatorial pleasure and authority. My focus below, however, is less on the sexual politics which saturate this film in particular, and instead on Godard’s use of montage, his use of citation, his general tendency to “hyper-reify,” and his attempts to restore and maintain distance, difference, between people and things.

Alan Williams writes that “Jean-Luc Godard was the one enfant terrible of the New Wave who remained terrible even when the industry slouched back to commercial

more or less?) and Perec’s subtitle ‘A History of the Sixties,’ as well as his use of the conditional tense throughout the novel (‘Your eye would pass over...They would have known how to be rich,” etc.).
normalcy in the mid 1960s” (379). It is commonly accepted that Godard’s work develops a more Marxist perspective during the sixties, and begins to treat explicitly questions of class, production, exploitation, commercialism, etc.; his later films are more focused on individuals, and philosophical and spiritual concerns—Nouvelle vague and Je vous salue, Marie would be two examples of the latter, as Weekend, La Chinoise, and One plus one are of the former. Throughout his career, however, he returns obsessively to problems of language and communication, love, commodification, voyeurism, gender roles, social hierarchies, the relation between words and images, and the nature and knowledge of looking, and he approaches these problems within highly unconventional narrative structures. His films constitute, in Judith Mayne’s formulation, a “radical inquiry into cinematic representation.”87 Or as Robert Stam contends: “From Two or Three Things on, Godard is increasingly concerned with the mise-en-scene of the procedures of representation itself.”88

Central to this inquiry is Godard’s preoccupation with the material world, with the body of objects, and bodies of people, especially women, who inhabit it. In 2 ou 3 choses as elsewhere, Godard’s camera often lingers patiently, querulously, and even hypnotically on objects and people—most famously on the coffee cup-cum-universe and the burning cigarette at the end—but it also dwells on construction sites, signs, radio transistors, a beer tap, faces, a fashion magazine, book titles, postcards, an Austin

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88 Robert Stam, Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 231.
Mini, leaves, a sheaf of paper filled with notes, etc.\textsuperscript{89} Such shots recur in later works—the extreme close-ups of flowers in \textit{Je vous salue, Marie}, and the last, shocking image of her lip-sticked mouth recall the shots of rustling leaves, and the final burning cigarette tip, in \textit{2 ou 3 choses}—but in \textit{2 ou 3 choses} these shots appear primarily in commercial contexts in a film, after all, about a day in the life of an occasional prostitute. In these shots Godard seems to be scratching at the material surface of things, trying to prize up or precipitate their meanings, to hear or make them speak through their enigmatic surfaces; he is, in David Sterritt’s words, “seeking to capture—or glimpse, or sense, or \textit{something}—the spiritual dimension that Godard now suspects is an integral part of the everyday world.”\textsuperscript{90}

Godard observes and interrogates everyday objects or social interactions like an anthropologist, or as the narrator of \textit{2 ou 3 choses} says, a biologist. “It is a matter,” Godard says in an interview, “of describing a ‘complex’ (\textit{ensemble}). This ‘complex’ and its parts...must be described and talked about as both objects and subjects. What I mean is that I cannot avoid the fact that all things exist both from the inside and the outside” (GOG 239). Godard practices a kind of participant-observer filmmaking in which he regards things, in both the particular and general sense of the word, by trying to look more closely, and watch himself looking. At extreme moments, and at the technical limits of his equipment, his camera seems to be trying to look inside things, or

\textsuperscript{89} Contrary to Wheeler Winston Dixon’s observations, however, there is no cream in the coffee (sugar cubes are stirred in), and the final close-up of the cigarette is certainly dramatic, but not “extremely lengthy.” Wheeler Winston Dixon, \textit{The Films of Jean-Luc Godard} (Albany: State University of New York Press) 76.

under their surfaces. Clearly, though, for a filmmaker the play of light on surfaces is where the action is; Godard recognizes this, and explicitly says, or shows, as much in shots like the burning cigarette, or Mary’s rouged, open mouth. Her red lipstick in extreme close up is utterly fascinating, but as striking is the black, abyssal interior(ity) it rims.

It is interesting to juxtapose these two shots: with the cigarette it is the center of the frame which burns red, and the background which is black, invisible; with the mouth the “frame” or outline is in red (the lips), and the center black, absent. In the former the external world disappears and is inaccessible, and what is present and real is this glowing thing; in the latter it is the internal world, Mary’s interiority, which is absent, and her red lips that signal her new self-determination and subjective being-in-the-world—Mary-as-individual rather than Mary-as-womb—now that the task imposed upon her of bearing and raising a son has been fulfilled. In either case, getting any closer in these shots to the “interior,” as in the coffee cup sequence, would be fruitless or physically impossible, so Godard is left relying on montage and language, which is notoriously problematic for him (as indeed for all (post) modernists). Montage, juxtaposition, and exploiting the gap between language and image are his preferred tools for disrupting conventional ways of seeing and thinking, and constitute his investigative method.

Instead of a philosophical project that seeks the internal essence and meaning of objects, what they “really are inside,” Godard watches for other meanings to arise in the distance deliberately maintained between spectator and image, subject and object. As
Michael Witt observes, “From his earliest critical articles, across his art cinema of the 1960s, Godard obsessively reworks his view of cinema as that which visualizes, and gives material form to (i.e., reifies), the space of the relationship between things and people.” An appraisal Godard makes of Nicholas Ray’s filmmaking underscores these aspirations: “On ne s’intéresse plus aux objets, mais à ce qu’il y a entre les objets, et devient a` son tour objet. Nicholas Ray nous force a` regarder comme réel ce que l’on ne regardait pas comme irréel, que l’on ne regardait pas” (Godard in Witt 115).

Some of the things in 2 ou 3 choses that Godard observes closely, un“naturally,” include physical objects like cranes and constructions sites, car roofs, leaves, gas pumps, the material qualities of letters and words; but also more abstract things, like the complex relationships in a café, the ubiquity of advertising discourse, and the possible connections between the American adventure in Vietnam and prostitution in Paris (one of Juliette’s clients is an “American” photographer covering Vietnam, her husband transcribes radio transmissions about Vietnam). With such scrutiny Godard attempts to recover, according to Sterritt, “the clear, productive reality of objects and images from the artificial signs and manufactured meanings that glut our contemporary world,” especially signs and meanings that are generated by and in the service of commerce (22). Jump-cuts, weird sound effects, voice-overs, narrative absurdities, close-ups and other formal elements all contribute to the Brechtian “alienation effects” so common, and so frequently off-putting, in his films. Such effects disrupt normal kinds of identification, visual pleasure and cinematic narration, and constantly re-establish and

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maintain the subject-spectator’s distance and discreteness from the object-images viewed.

In this Godard is very much a Romantic: he seeks in distinction, in the discrete and divided, the connections between people, and between people and their environment, as well as the possibility of transcendence—unity, love, the divine.92 Godard strives to hold, regard and respect alterity at a distance, to keep subjects and objects separate, rather than pretend that difference and separation between them don’t exist, or that given meanings “naturally” adhere to, or inhere in, everyday objects and relationships.93 As his narrator in 2 ou 3 choses says:

je trouve qu’il y a simplement une raison de vivre parce qu’il y a d’abord le souvenir et, ensuite, le présent et la faculté de s’y arrêter pour en jouir—c’est à dire justement d’avoir attrapé au passage une raison de vivre et de l’avoir gardée quelques secondes après qu’elle vienne d’être decouverte au milieu des circonstances les plus simples, leur prise de possession par l’esprit de l’homme, un monde nouveau ou les hommes à la fois et les choses connaîtront des rapports harmonieux: voila mon but.94

By disrupting unconscious viewing habits and preconceptions of “reality,” we may approach the elusive real, and see things again “like new,” if only for brief and precious moments. This is basically Godard’s ideal of cinema—the power and early promise of cinema which he believes was gradually neglected in favor of more reassuringly “commercial” images and narratives. As James Williams and Michael Temple observe in their study of the relationship between word and image in Godard, “[C]inema

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92 Romantic also in another sense, as Sterritt points out: “Only a deeply romantic artist—motivated by a strong belief in the possibility of innovative, idiosyncratic expression—would persist so steadily in aesthetic enterprises greeted with such incomprehensions by so many spectators so much of the time” (31).
93 Here Godard follows in an ethical tradition that would include Husserl, Levinas, Derrida.
94 Alfred Guzzetti, Two or Three Things I Know About Her: Analysis of a Film by Godard (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) 216-22. All subsequent citations from the film are taken from this work.
(according to Godard) quickly became obsessed with the need for spectacle, abdicating its documentary power and capacity to engender new ideas and sensations in favour of two very familiar stories, sex and death.95

Through artifices like the use of alternating color filters of the nude Brigitte Bardot in the beginning of Le Mépris, viewing jouissance is often disrupted, or displaced onto unusual things (a cup of coffee beautiful and enchanting?!). Stam writes that “Godard...offers images which create erotic expectations, and then frustrates or subverts them” (56). Godard frequently offers iconic and stunning images of his female protagonists—often close-ups of their faces—but also frequently denies erotic gratification: Seberg and Belmondo’s love-making in A Bout de souffle is rendered as silly thrashing under a sheet; the nude couple at the beginning of Une Femme mariée is obscured, with only their intertwined legs visible; Juliette and her friend Marianne parade nude for the photographer, but their bodies are shown only from the shoulders up, with travel bags covering their heads. Of the Bardot scene mentioned above, Stam contends that “Red, white and blue filters remind us of specifically cinematographic mediations and transfigure the image of Bardot’s body into pure chromatic plasticity” (59). Likewise, Godard dispenses with these nude shots in the first scene, before any narrative investment or erotic charge has been created for the viewer.

Distance between the viewing subject and viewed object is reestablished in these and other ways, and considered as itself something worthy of consideration, a consideration which again increases the separation between, and at the same time the

integrity of, both subject and object. Of 2 ou 3 choses Sylvain Godet writes: “Le film procède en fait par propagation, juxtaposition d'idées, analogies, bref, tout le contraire d'un discours politique rigide. Le paradoxe est alors le suivant: plus Godard s'intéresse à la réalité sociale la plus immédiate, moins ses films sont réalistes.”96 Less “realistic” because such interests require new ways of looking at social links and subject-object relationships that pervert the conventional “order of things,” the “natural” significance of everyday objects and our rapports with them.97 As Williams writes, “One can rarely forget, watching a Godard film, that in it the spectator is responsible for constructing the work’s meaning for him- or herself, and that this process is anything but simple, logical and natural” (383).

Williams finds it “somewhat surprising that...Godard set out to make realistic films,” given the non-conventional structures of his later work (383). This is not so surprising if we believe that Godard has always attempted to tease out the real, and as a former critic with André Bazin’s Cahiers du Cinéma, he believes cinema has a unique power in this respect. Realism as he practices it, however, requires a high level of artifice and manipulation on the part of the filmmaker, who is deeply mistrustful of given meanings, and of what in narrative and filmmaking is most palatable, most reassuring to our a priori expectations and “common sense.” A cinema, a literature, or an ideology which glosses, papers over or otherwise ignores these differences and

96 Cahiers du Cinéma (May 1967).
97 It is interesting that Derrida has brusquely denied any influence of Godard on his own work, although it is entirely plausible, given their ages and the milieu from which they’ve both come, that they could have developed similar concerns and methods apart from each other. Both tend to interrogate a problem from the underside, as it were, by picking small, seemingly innocuous details that can be turned around and taken apart in order to shake up and make visible the social and ideological networks in which they are embedded. Godard’s deconstruction works on both visual and linguistic levels, however.
relationships in favor of what I call the “prophylactic ideology of simulacra” actually disrespects the thingness, the being, the reality both of its subjects and its objects, and rather distances one from things, and other subjects. Constantly grounded in the material and ever-conscious of difference, Godard’s films often achieve breathtaking and philosophically rich effects seemingly at odds with their apparently random, aleatory qualities and unconventional structures.

Sterritt remarks on the materiality of Godard’s cinema of things thus: “He increasingly considers cinema to be the language of things, at once firmly material and exhilaratingly conceptual” (37). In other words Godard observes intently the materiality of things in his films, looking for them, and the act of observation itself—the cinematic process—to provoke more metaphysical speculations, and perhaps offer glimpses of previously unnoticed realities. Or in another register, Godard highlights or exaggerates reified meanings in order to deconstruct them. Instead of accepting things at “face” value, Godard looks at them so closely, or juxtaposes them in such an unusual manner, that the given meanings are undermined and falter, and others surface that are perhaps more real; a kind of dialectic is set up between the given and these new possibilities which yields fresh perceptions. Godard looks at his culture with its reified meanings, its “system of objects” and tendency to objectify things and experiences, and says well, if these are the building blocks of everyday life, then in order to understand them we’ll make them our own primary subject matter, stare at them long and hard, recombine them, displace them contextually, take them out of their given forms of
“communication,” put them into communication with other objects and see what arises from the dialogue.

At the beginning of the car wash/garage sequence in *2 ou 3 choses*, the narrator claims that “Il y a de plus en plus interférence de l’image et du langage” (190). Guzzetti notes that this is “a strikingly accurate description of an often remarked upon tendency in Godard’s style, manifested variously as a preoccupation with signs, advertising, and quotation, a fondness for intertitles, and a willingness to allow characters to talk at length—in general, a readiness to contradict the received opinion that says ‘show, don’t tell’” (191). It is this kind of “interference” or promiscuity that Godard exacerbates in order to make visible or conscious the way things are put, and held, together—the way they “make sense.” I would disagree with Guzzetti’s latter comment, however: certainly there is in Godard “a readiness to contradict received opinion”—more than a readiness, a determination—but Godard doesn’t eschew “showing” in favor of “telling”; if anything, he shows excessively, *too much*: he even shows himself and his characters telling, and shows how they tell.

Guzzetti acknowledges a few paragraphs later that Godard’s narrator “wonders...how he should ‘show or say’ what happened” (194-5). An early shot in the garage sequence has nearly the entire frame taken up with an advertisement for some kind of car product (finish wax?), with the word “Protege” and a drawing of a car with one or two people inside speeding happily off to the right of the poster. No diegetic sound accompanies this shot, which occurs seconds after the narrator claims that “on
peut dire à la limite que, vivre en société aujourd’hui, c’est quasiment vivre dans une
d’énorme bande dessinée”; Juliette’s husband Robert walks across the frame to the left,
figuratively “colliding” with the trajectory of the car drawing (191-2). The next shot
animates the poster by replacing the car design of the advertisement with the “real”
Austin Mini, and Robert’s presence with that of Juliette and her friend Marianne; loud
noises from the garage accompany this shot. As Guzzetti writes, “the image and sound suggest that (shot) 12.5 (the Mini plus Juliette and Marianne) is the comic strip of 12.4
(the poster and Robert) come to life” (195).

By association with the poster, via the editing, Juliette, Marianne and the Mini
seem to have stepped out of the advertisement, or the advertisement come to life. These
two shots, when placed together, suggest the power and influence of commercial values,
of advertising, on everyday life. The next shot suggests that this is a malign influence,
or at least one with potentially destructive effects: it shows a wrecked car, a poster for
some other product or service (“VIT”) that “assures pleasant, economical trips, without
incidents,” and an unidentified person framed from the shoulders to the knees (195).
This three-shot montage progresses, then, from the “comic strip” car of the poster, to
the real car with Juliette and Marianne, to the real (wrecked) car, which contrasts with
the VIT poster’s assurance of “trips with incidents,” or as Guzzetti writes “the warning
‘protect’ has gone unheeded and VIT has not kept its promise”—all in a three-shot
montage of about 25 seconds (195).
In a way Godard performs embarrassing, even obscene gestures: he looks too closely, and pretends not to know what “everyone already knows.” It is as if he said “we have a culture of image and surface, a ‘society of the spectacle,’ so I’ll do image, surface and spectacle, too—but I’ll do it to the extreme, look for weaknesses, see if it doesn’t implode.” His strategy is a kind of hyper-reification: his camera and montage render objects, people and their relationships alike material, moreso even than the fetishistic consumer culture he inhabits, as Sterritt notes his later film *Nouvelle vague*: “*Nouvelle vague*...mak(es) all the world into objects” (236).

By such extreme reifying the “normal” ideas affixed to these things are shaken up and called into question. This strategy is remarkably similar to that urged a few years later by Deleuze and Guattari, who proposed pushing market logics of desiring production and, in their terminology, “deterritorializing,” to the extreme, seeing them through *jusqu’au bout*, where they would break free of capitalism’s “reterritorializing” and limiting movements that reinstate constraints upon desire, that reinser what they call the repressive mechanism of Oedipus into the unconscious, and into social relations, especially as embodied in the nuclear family. Market forces can either be regulated and protected from their own excesses, as in classical liberal economics, or encouraged to run more freely than ever. In the latter case radical change is certain,

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98 He works like Peter Falk’s Columbo: he plays dumb, he pretends not to have understood, he asks that you repeat the story again because, well, he’s old, unhip, and a little slow. In later films he actually plays a “foolish uncle” character (e.g., *Prénom: Carmen*).
99 See Debord *Societe du spectacle*.
100 See Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipe*.
101 But the Captains of Consciousness and globalized hyper-capitalism don’t seem to believe their own rhetoric: While they were urging global free exchange (labor, resources, currency) and communication, didn’t they imagine reactionary anti-market fundamentalisms would also adopt creative, decentralized structures and modern communications technology to wage war on the very real threats embodied by the
and poses very real risks. Given enough rope, capitalism can eagerly hang itself, and will tend toward centralization and corruption, as the many corporate scandals and excesses of the last several years demonstrate (Enron, Tyco, etc. at home, Parmalat abroad). Perhaps more threatening to the system than runaway greed is the fact that the market’s fever to deterritorialize, to pervade and expose, to render visible, quantifiable and exchangeable all aspects of subjective and cultural life, may eventually undermine the very desire driving it—desire that thrives on the manufacture of lack and discontent.

I have written previously about the question of “citation,” critiquing what I find to be a facile cinematic shorthand in which ideas, feelings, relationships between characters, and between characters and their environment, are not explored for themselves, observed or trusted to develop, but in the interests of plot progression simply stated as the case; if you prefer, the prevalence of “telling” versus “showing.” A book of philosophy at a character’s café table might signify or connote “bohemian intellectual,” or khaki shorts and a truck “rugged outdoor enthusiast.” In both cases a type has been quickly suggested or “cited” so that further scenes in a museum, or

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Industrialized West? Globalization can’t only mean that their labor, resources and markets are ours, but also their fundamental religious and cultural conflicts.

102 Surely the Muslim reaction that has erupted so dramatically in recent years is in part a reaction to deterritorializing, globalizing pressures exerted by the global hyper-capitalism of the 1990’s, which was itself still subject to a good degree of regulation.

103 Consider the most basic, but also the most accurate and central paradigm for the conjunction of technology, desire, visuality and the market—pornography. This “baser underside” of our cultural expression reveals most clearly the market’s drive to expose and render visible. The production and representation of every imaginable fetish, the complete exposure and demystification of every body and configuration of bodies, must reach a saturation point where motive desire is enervated. See Laura Kipnis, Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America (New York: Grove Press, 1996).
kayaking, etc. will ring “true to type” for the viewer, with the details (book, shorts) providing *effets du réel*; advertising is of course the primary producer of such shorthand ways of meaning, and Godard signals his abiding interest in its discourse in an early article:

Advertising...is so representative of our society that it is a richer treasure trove of documentation than any archive. I buy certain papers solely to be able to read the advertisements. All of it interests me: how the slogans change, the graphics, the ways of seducing the consumer public. The importance of advertising is enormous, and so little recognised that I was attacked for being too outspoken about sex when all I did was film the posters which can be seen on any wall.104

It is not surprising then that all manner of advertisements appear in Godard’s films, where he often shows posters, pieces of ads, book titles, words and letters. Given his fondness for citations of all kinds—from Belmondo’s “Bogart” fedora in *A bout de souffle* and the frequent insertion of written text, to the *cas limite* of his 1990 film *Nouvelle vague*—a film whose “dialogue” is almost entirely made up of citations from literature and philosophy—the question arises: in what ways does Godard’s literal citation differ from the kinds of citation so common in advertising and commercial cinema? Juliette’s first words in *2 ou 3 choses* are in fact a call to citation, and themselves cited from Brecht: “Oui, parler comme des citations de vérité. C’est le père Brecht qui disait ça. Que les acteurs doivent citer” (26).

Juliette’s/Marina Vlady’s performance and delivery throughout the film confirm this commitment to citation, with her flat, generally affectless delivery of queries and observations that often seem un- or barely- related to the action and context. She also reads verbatim from *Madame Express*, delivers frequent *non sequitors* (“Je regarde le

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104 Sight and Sound (1966).
mur, les objets. Maintenant. Jamais. La. Provisoirement...je regarde dehors”), and
appears to be receiving her lines from someone off-camera (178). This was apparently
the case, as Marina Vlady describes Godard’s method: “I have, in effect, no text to
learn, since Jean-Luc speaks the text to me at the moment the scene is shot...Jean-Luc
gives me banal sentences to say, like ‘pass the salt,’ and then, at the same time, during
the scene, he asks me questions, to which I must reply point blank, by means of a
microphone which he speaks into and an earphone behind my ear” (29).

On several occasions Juliette begin her lines with “oui” or “non,” presumably in
response to a question that the film viewer cannot hear: “Exactement comme dans un
roman de Simenon. Non, je ne sais pas lequel. Euh, oui, Touriste de bananes, c’est ca”
(emphasis added, 32). Her husband Robert repeats aloud the text of a radio broadcast he
picks up on his shortwave about Vietnam, and later scribbles on a notepad full of
seemingly random words and phrases that he claims to collect from “l’au-delà” (274).
During the same sequence the two characters named Bouvard and Pécuchet sit behind a
pile of books from which they read and copy random passages, one after another. The
list of similar instances of citation in this and other Godard films could be multiplied
indefinitely. What makes his use of these methods different from that of advertising is
his foregrounding of the deliberate and artificial nature of his citations, and the specific
attention he accords them, how they are made the subject of inquiry, visually and by the

---105 Vlady’s performance here, and Godard’s direction of her, is much the same as that Robert Bresson
wanted from his actors, or “models” as he called them—usually non-professionals. Her face is a central
subject of the film, but, while certainly attractive, her indifference and lack of affect inhibits
“objectification” of the feminine, in the usual sense. She does some shopping, but like all of the activities
we see her engaged in, it is fairly listless and mechanical, and it’s not clear what, if anything, she herself
desires.
actors and narrator. This hyper-attention to details calls into question the ideologies and meanings with which they have been saddled by the hype of idealizing marketing and social discourses, and renews their material strangeness and alterity.

Guzzetti is probably right to signal the influence of Francis Ponge on Godard when, for example, his narrator comments in 2 ou 3 choses “Les objets existent, et si on leur accorde un soin plus attentif qu’aux personnes, c’est qu’ils existent justement plus que ces personnes,” and he suggests that views of a soap box (Pax), a radio (Roger’s shortwave), and a cigarette (presumably Juliette’s) may be indebted to Ponge’s poems in Le Parti pris des choses on those same objects (210-13). He could have mentioned as well Benjamin, Sartre, Apollinaire, Barthes, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Queneau, or a number of other artists and philosophers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Theorization and representation of the object, and its close relative the detail—what Naomi Schor calls “the multiple modes of investment in the trivial everywhere at work in modern society...the playground of fetishism”—has been widespread in the last century-plus, as she writes at the outset of her study of the evolution of Western attitudes toward the detail: “We live in an age when the detail enjoys a rare prominence.”106 From an idealist aesthetics of totality, attention has shifted to the detail, now often privileged as denoting the real, and which, when represented in fiction or photography, contributes to the effet du réel.

2 ou 3 choses opens with a long shot of a Parisian housing project under construction, signaling at the outset Godard’s interest in physical changes in urban

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106 Naomi Schor, Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine (New York: Methuen, 1987) 6, 3.
space, concrete developments that entail the social and subjective effects, or “mutations” as he calls them, under scrutiny. In an interview from the period Godard describes his project as follows:

Dans 2 ou 3 choses que je sais d'elle...il s'agit de l'aménagement de la région parisienne, sur le plan de la recherche pure...Il y a bien sur, le pretexte qui est la vie, et parfois la prostitution dans les grands ensembles; mais l'objectif reel, c'est d'observer une grande mutation. Pour moi, décrire la vie moderne, ce n'est pas decrire, comme certains journaux, les gadgets ou la progression des affaires, c'est d'observer les mutations.107

Godard’s fascination with the remaking of urban spaces, and the mutations and pathologies of their inhabitants, was shared by his English contemporary, J.G. Ballard, who was considering exactly these issues in the late sixties and seventies (e.g., Concrete Jungle, Crash, High Rise). Indeed, the look of Godard’s film, its sterile living spaces and actress Marina Vlady’s cool, affectless performance prefigure Ballard’s work exactly. Perec’s characters, in contrast, live in an environment much more dense with things, and do experience certain affects: burning desire for acquisition, remorse for over-indulging, existential terror.

Near the beginning of the film, Juliette enters a café and sits in a corner, above and behind which is a mirrored wall. Next to her sits a man engrossed in a newspaper who is seated across from a young woman, who is herself looking idly through a fashion magazine. This woman is Juliette’s “semblable, sa soeur,” according to the narrator. The montage in the following sequence forcefully links the two women and the magazine with a series of edits from one to the other, visually and spatially

107 L’Avant-Scène (May 1967).
confirming the relationship suggested by the voice-over. Williams and Temple describe
the importance of montage for Godard: “As the basic language of filmic thought it
offered the possibility of disclosing unknown truths about the world and of inventing
new relations with it” (108). The magazine, and the images of women within it,
triangulates Juliette’s relationship with this other woman by providing a third element to
mediate and establish their connection.108 Women reading fashion magazines is
probably a cliche, and certainly a commonplace in cinema and television; recall also
aspiring pop star Madeleine’s scrutiny of them in Masculin/Féminin, during her first
encounter with Paul (aspiring pop star Chantal Goya and New Wave favorite Jean-
Pierre Léaud).109 Godard’s versions, however, do not use the magazines as mere props,
but instead as important cultural artifacts, as objects bearing important if obscure
meanings, that bind subjects together—in this instance around the “fashion system.”

Fashion and the images it produces are of course a potent site of commodity-
image production: the “high” end of a cultural continuum on which pornography would
be the “low” other (end), with advertising and popular film falling in between. Godard’s
voice-over verbalizes the juxtaposition and exchangeability of these images as the
camera cuts from close-ups of the magazine pages turning, to close-ups of the women’s
faces, while asking whether the truth lies in “profile” or “full-face,” and what an object
is anyway. The magazine’s “objective” status as artifact of the real has already been

108 On the concept of mediation, see Goldmann Sociologie du roman, and René Girard, Mensonge
109 Goya’s portrayal of Madeleine is much more conventionally “cute,” although again Godard calls
attention to her status as commodity (young female pop singer): when she combs her hair while Paul flirts
with her, attending to her self-presentation, her look, she combs obsessively, too much and to no visible
effect. By the end of that film, however, when Paul dies in a fall from the balcony of a new apartment
building from which he was trying to take a photograph—presumably in an ensemble like
Juliette’s—Madeleine’s confused last words (“J’hésite”) could have been spoken by Juliette.
called into question by the narrator, who describes it as “cet objet que dans le langage
journalistique on nomme une revue,” another example of “making strange” which
designates it as fair game for observation, interrogation and investigation—the task
which the narrator sets himself, as “le biologiste scrute les rapports entre l’individu et
de la race en évolution” (124, 110).

Interrogating the nature of the object is often prelude in Godard’s films, and
especially in 2 ou 3 choses, to interrogation of the nature of the subject, and to various
social critiques and philosophical ruminations, mostly on the ambiguity of language and
epistemology. Sterritt notes the connection for Godard of the common and quotidian to
the metaphysical: “Clues to such cosmic puzzles can be found in philosophical inquiry
and also in imaginative rumination on the people, places and things of everyday life”
(27). Godard often starts a sequence with close observation or description of a thing,
which then provokes incertitude and further speculation, as if the realities of
contemporary life must be sought in the analysis of objects and commodities.110 In a
culture pervaded by commodities, market values and discourses, he tries to take apart
and make sense of its subjects and objects and their relationships; or at least unsettle
those relationships and the meanings attached to them.

In the above women-magazine sequence the question “Et d’abord un objet,
qu’est-ce que c’est?” is posed over a shot of the young woman, thus demanding the
unsaid question: then what is a subject? The question “Où est donc la vérité?” voiced
over a shot of the magazine, is followed by “de face ou de profil?” which could refer
either to the pictures in the magazine or to the women present, and finally “…un objet,

110 Which is exactly what Lukács claimed in his “Reification” essay. Lukács History.
qu’est-ce que c’est?” is asked while holding the steady close-up of the woman’s face. In this way the metonymic, visual associations are reinforced by the narrator’s text, and show him at a loss to explain any of these images and relationships. “Full-face or profile?” is the photographer’s dilemma, the question of one seeking the “best angle”; here it’s not the most visually pleasurable or narratively convincing angle that is sought, but rather the one which might allow a glimpse of essence, fresh significance or particularity.

This searching, this question of how best to see, opens the film, where Marina Vlady is shown poorly lit from several different angles—facing the camera, then looking to the right, then looking to the left. The camera tries two different angles, two different compositions of Marina/Juliette centered in the frame, with an apartment block filling first the left side, then the right, as the voice-over claims ignorance of her hair color, and the unimportance of whether she is in fact looking right or left: “Maintenant, elle tourne la tête à droite, mais ça n’a pas d’importance,” and then: “Maintenant elle a tourné la tête à gauche, mais ça n’a pas d’importance” (26, 30). Obviously there is some importance however, or the actress would not have moved and the shot not been taken, or not remarked upon by the narrator, who thus calls his own authority, and the reliability of his “research,” into question from the start—as he also does in the following description.111

111 The narrator undermines his omniscience throughout the film. The film was shot in August and September of 1966, but at one point the narrator makes reference to a scene in the “fin d’après-midi d’octobre”; Guzzetti suggests that Godard may have been recording the voice-over then, which finds support in his question immediately before, when he wonders in the imperfect tense what he should have spoken about (filmed?): “Fallait-il parler de Juliette ou des feuillages?...tous les deux tremblaient doucement en ce début de fin d’après-midi d’octobre” (224). Guzzetti is puzzled by “tremblaient,” since nothing is made in the sequence of her “trembling”; the narrator could be remembering and commenting
The narrator’s first attempt to describe his actress (“Elle, c’est Marina Vlady. Elle est actrice”) notes that she is wearing a dark blue sweater with two yellow stripes, and that her hair may be light or dark brown, “Je ne sais pas exactement” (24).\(^{112}\) It is in fact difficult to determine her exact hair color in this shot, as the actress is poorly lit; with his uncertainty the narrator puts himself in the viewer’s position as investigator, and denies omniscience. The viewer is thus enlisted from the beginning, and made an accomplice in Godard’s investigations, his “essay.” Godard says of 2 ou 3 choses that it “isn’t a film, it’s an attempt at a film and is presented as such” (Godard in Sterritt 16). As Vlady turns to face the other way, Godard further blurs the fictive and real by naming her character: “Elle, c’est Juliette Janson. Elle habite ici” (30). This move into the fictional allows the narrator no more certainty about what he is seeing, however, as he says again: “Ses cheveux sont ch’tain fonce ou alors brun clair. Je ne sais pas exactement” (30). Juliette herself is as hesitant and unsure of the nature and reality of her environment, which she also observes and calls into question shortly afterward: “Qu’est-ce que je regarde?” she asks, “le plancher; c’est tout. Je sens le tissu de la nappe contre ma main” (42).\(^{113}\)

In the same way Godard looks, touches, tries to observe and understand what he is seeing:

(This film) is much more ambitious (than Made in U.S.A., whose filming overlapped that of 2 ou 3 choses), both on the documentary level, since it is

\(^{112}\) This equivocation and ambiguity in the color, and “knowing” color and the meaning of words, is a recurring theme.

\(^{113}\) Godard makes “touching,” tactile perception, an explicit part of Prénom: Carmen, where, playing Uncle Godard to Marouschka Detmers’ Carmen, he repeatedly touches things, as if to verify their reality.
about the replanning of the Parisian area, and on the level of pure research, since
it is a film in which I am continually asking myself what I am doing...[b]ut the
real purpose of the film is to observe a huge mutation. ¹¹⁴

He refers to the physical aspects of this mutation from the film’s first shots (overpasses
under construction, a crane), while his narrator suggests that governmental projects
aimed at reform and modernization are really thinly-disguised efforts to facilitate the
operations of “grand capitalisme” (36).

This critique of cynical economic dispositifs is interrupted by the introduction of
Marina/Juliette on the terrace, before the narrator goes on to claim that these systematic
and centralizing reforms aggravate “les distorsions de l’économie nationale, et plus
encore celles de la morale quotidienne qui la fonde” (38). His discourse on political
economy is particularized with Juliette now “in the picture,” and it is her depressing
condition which will serve as the primary example of faltering “morale quotidienne”
(39). The suggestion that evolving market forces entail negative influences on personal
and social “morale” is some centuries old by the time Godard’s narrator makes it, and
much more interesting is how Godard relates subjective, affective, social “mutations” to
an explicit interest in la société de consommation, both its material productions (clothes,
cars, boxes of cleaning products, postcards of Hollywood) and its more abstract
meaning-productions (self-fashioning, freedom, romance, love).¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Jean Narboni and Tom Milne, eds., Godard on Godard. Critical writings by Jean-Luc Godard,
¹¹⁵ It’s interesting, given the emphasis on cleaning products as a signifier of consumer culture in this film,
and in other critiques of the period (Baudrillard’s Système), e.g., boxes of soap, disinfectants, deodorants,
shampoo, etc., to reconsider the Protestant maxim “cleanliness is next to godliness” in relation to Weber
and Campbell’s discussion of the Protestant and Romantic ethics that facilitated modern capitalism and
consumerism: Here is just one example of how this kind of ideal can be attained (or sold) through the
consumption and (religious) use of the proper material products, how the acquisition and use of the
Contrary to Guzzetti’s suggestion that this first sequence has “little to do with the narrative,” in three short minutes, including the introductory shots of the film’s title, it raises all of the major themes and settings under scrutiny in the film: “construction,” in literal and ideological senses (building sites, “les distorsions...de la morale quotidienne”); uncertainty (“2 or 3 choses,” Juliette’s hair color); narrative unreliability (the pretended “unimportance” of her movements); the interest in and presence of material objects, and people as objects (the crane, the gas pumps, Juliette); the centrality of advertising; freedom and movement (shot of a gas station); consumption and exchange (shot of a commercial space); the problem of money (“Il faut que je me débrouille. Robert a, je crois, cent dix mille francs par moi”); citation as a method, hence the question of mimesis and the real (“parler comme des citations de vérité,” “les acteurs doivent citer,” “Il y a deux ans, à la Martinique. Exactement comme dans un roman de Simenon”); mediation, of language and image (a shot through a store window of the gas station); and the problematic status of the social (shot of an empty table and chairs in some kind of public space, what appears to be a café or restaurant).

In the beginning of the next sequence many of the interests signaled above are confirmed, first with a shot of Raymond Aron’s book title, *Dix-huit leçons sur la société industrielle*, under Juliette’s question “Qu’est-ce je regarde?” (42). Her answer highlights her visual and tactile relationship with her physical environment (“Le plancher...Je sens le tissu...” 42). Next there is a close-up of the inner workings of a radio, and then follows the exchange between husband Robert and his friend Roger.

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external (product) brings one’s internal being into harmony with the divine and transcendent. For related history of the period see Ross *Fast Cars*. 
about Vietnam. During this scene Juliette sits briefly with the men while they play with the shortwave, and reads randomly from *L’Express*, foreshadowing the later scene with her “semblable” and the fashion magazine, as well as Bouvard and Pécuchet’s random reading and copying in the café where Robert waits, erasing his own notes.

Juliette’s choice of *L’Express* recalls the importance of the weekly magazine for Perec’s young couple, who consult it faithfully for guidance in matters of style and taste. While sitting briefly with the two men, she reads aloud ad copy for “Louis Ferraud” tights, distracting Robert, who asks that she “arrête (ses) conneries!” “C’est Madame Express qui dit ça,” she retorts, exasperated. When he claims not to know what that is (“Connais pas”), she replies that he is without “aucune culture” (48). Juliette takes *L’Express* as her guide to and cultural authority about everyday life; Robert’s ignorance or impatience with the pronouncements of this authority equals a lack of “culture.” After she leaves to put the children to bed, her husband’s friend asks how he was able to afford their Austin Mini, and Robert praises his wife’s knack for “finding bargains,” presumably unaware how she is funding her purchases.

The next morning Juliette leaves her daughter at the sketchy day-care center in the ensemble (it appears that couples rent rooms there by the hour, or less), and goes downtown to shop for clothing; not, alas, in a grand magasin à la Zola, but otherwise the scene could have been lifted from his novel: only women—customers and sales “associates”—are present, materials are assessed (“C’est du coton?...Vous avez des robes comme ça?”), and when a sales clerk addresses the camera, her lines echo exactly the conversations of Zola’s clerks, many of whom were in their day, like Juliette, forced
into *de facto* prostitution to make ends meet: “Je sors à sept heures. J’ai rendez-vous à huit heures avec Jean-Claude” (93-4). Another says directly to the camera: “Déjeuner, il est trois heures,” then to herself “Des shetland bleu marine?” (98). As the saleswoman mixes references to workday rationalization and commodities, Juliette, off-screen, says “Un nouveau langage devra être construit” (98).

Godard is trying to invent this new language, a “ newer” new language of things capable of critiquing the one bequeathed to us by Zola’s Mouret, and the Romantic emphasis on self-creation and the spiritualization of material. Clearly the physical and social productions of his culture demand new description and observation, new ways of seeing, which would be elements of this language. Sterritt notes in this respect Godard’s “desire to fuse physics and metaphysics in works more deeply speculative than he (or perhaps anyone) has created before. He increasingly considers cinema to be the language of things, at once firmly material and exhilaratingly conceptual” (37).

After leaving the clothing boutique, Juliette stops in at the café, where the above-mentioned sequence is set. This sequence with Juliette, her neighbor, and the fashion magazine, also includes, in this seemingly unremarkable slice of everyday life, the barman, a pimp, a bored girl, and a guy smoking and drinking coffee. This social microcosm is, on the face of it, utterly banal, but for Godard these faces and surfaces involve mysterious relationships, the sorts of relationships and accessories of daily life with which he is fascinated. Refusing to take anything for granted in this scene, Godard’s montage operates a kind of cinematic deconstruction, interestingly enough at the same time that Derrida was formulating his own version. His camera dwells on the
“unimportant” things—the magazine, the beer tap, the cup, unknown characters—with as much interest as it does on his “main” character, and attempts to show what’s “missing” or obscured in a too-cursory glance at these things.

Stig Bjorkman writes that “Godard gives as much attention to the things surrounding the characters of the story as to the characters themselves. They are shown up in all their expressiveness and beauty.”116 Likewise, former New York Times film critic Renata Adler noted in her review of the film how “American shoes, and cigarettes, and styles and Cokes are treated by the camera with the feeling that nature lovers reserve for rocks and trees”; her observation is accurate en gros, although American shoes and cigarettes figure in the dialogue more than in the visuals (“Vous avez des Winston?” “C’est des souliers américains!”).117 This loving, open attention is what Godard himself urges: “We must move into modern life with a virgin eye.”118 Which is not to say that his “human subjects” are belittled; paradoxically, the reverse is true: the close attention he pays to material things and their meaning in-the-world validates and respects the humanity and difference of his actors-characters.

Sterritt writes, for example, that in Nouvelle vague “the presence of a movie star like Alain Delon had the same attraction for (Godard) as a tree in a landscape,” and quotes Godard as saying:

that he photographed Delon accordingly, showing ‘the same reverence for nature (as for) a dark close-up of a tree’s sinewy trunk’...Godard is not particularly concerned with Delon as a star, or even as an actor. He is interested

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118 Sight and Sound (1966).
in Delon and others (including the nonprofessionals who appear in many of his films) as existential beings-in-the-world, whose sheer presence constitutes a mystery as profound and seductive as anything the screenplay cooks up for them to do or say (236).

In the café a medium shot of the barman filling a drink and looking over his shoulder (presumably at Juliette, following the eyeline match), is followed by a lengthy close-up of the beer tap, thus recognizing his presence and labor; the connection between him and his customers is visually emphasized via these commercial transactions, these ordinary objects (taps, glasses, cups), and the commodities dispensed therein. Witt comments on this space of separation and connection in the context of Godard’s later work, but the observation would apply to earlier films as well:

Thus Godard repeats assertions regarding the importance of the relationship between objects (and between objects and subjects), when the theorization of what constitutes an object (or subject) has itself been subjected to a fundamental dislocation: from meaning as latent and immanent in the object in Idealist philosophy (quite overt in Godard’s early work, and exemplified in the ‘dissection’ of Nana in Vivre sa vie (1963)), the subject as historically constituted (in the Marxist-Leninist films), to the dissolution of object and subject into flux, and an emphatic insistence on the primacy of the ‘interspace’ or ‘interstice’ in the Sonimage video work (113).

The montage and narration make these connections, or liens, explicitly, with both raising questions about the way objects link subjects, individually and socially. The transition from Juliette and the other woman to the man and his coffee is made with four dramatic close-ups, all centered in the frame: the other woman looking left, towards Juliette; Juliette looking right; the coffee cup, spoon and saucer; and finally the man in profile, facing right and down. The three heads and the cup take up equal amounts of the frame, with the cup mediating the passage from Juliette to the man, at which point
the narrator wonders: “Peut-être qu’un objet est ce qui permet de relier, de passer d’un sujet à l’autre, donc de vivre en société, d’être ensemble” (132).

Interestingly, the rhythm of the film slows as we enter this other space of meditation, drifting out of ordinary perception. The gazes of the two women, heads slightly turned in the direction they’re looking, creates movement and anticipation for the next two shots, where the movement slows: the cup is still, inert, and the next shot of the man’s expressionless profile and eyes downturned, with no visible object in front of him, gives us nowhere to go and nothing to “look forward” to, so we are forced to slow up and sink into the rest of the sequence, which ends with the famous meditation on the coffee cup.

Godard arguably provokes a kind of modern sublime here in which the camera-narrator’s scrutiny of this innocuous object leads to an existential and metaphysical crisis, a renewed commitment to careful observation, and finally an expression of faith in the possibility of clarified perception and knowledge. No Shelleyan “Mont Blanc” or ravine of Arve is this, and yet the narrator echoes the Poet’s contemplations before that grand enigma: “Dizzy Ravine! and when I gaze on thee/I seem as in a trance sublime and strange/To muse on my own separate phantasy/...Holding an unremitting interchange/With the clear universe of things around.”119 Williams characterizes the scene thus: “In the film’s perhaps most spectacular sequence, a cup of coffee becomes the obsessive center of an implicit meditation on subjectivity and objecthood, a kind of cinematic poem about the thingness of things and the role of consciousness in a world which is irreducibly other” (385).

119 Shelley, Mont Blanc, lines 34-40.
To get there Godard “passes from one subject to another”—Juliette to the young man and his coffee and back, interspersed with the shots of the barman. A close-up establishing shot of the cup and saucer cuts to a close-up of its consumer, in profile. Juliette appears out of focus over his left shoulder, with nothing of note in the right side of the frame. There follow several back-and-forth cuts between the man and the cup, but each successive shot of the coffee is more extremely close-up, until finally the entire screen is filled by the liquid, and a bit of foam perhaps the diameter of a coin. Over this strange and dramatic vision Godard’s narrator speculates urgently, even desperately, about the nature of subjectivity, the social, language and communication, love, consciousness, being and nothingness, God and death—le tout, quoi.

The Romantic elements in the coffee sequence which lead to this expansion on the part of the narrator, viewer and Juliette, appear through the montage, and verbally through the voice-over. The sensory, apart from the audible supplement of the narrator’s whispered speculations and a couple tinklings of a spoon, is pure visual fascination, with the technical limits of the camera-apparatus straining to capture and represent the smallest details of this opaque liquid now filling the screen, its bubbles of sugary foam slowing hypnotically, swirling, dividing, coalescing, expiring and re-forming. The result is a kind of vertigo akin to lying outside at night under a clear sky, and this sequence similarly calls into question one’s place before the immensity of the unknown. While “other,” like the man whose face is intercut with the coffee, there is also a connection to this unknown, albeit a mysterious and ambiguous one: the voice-over intones “Le monde, mon semblable, mon frère” over a shot of the man, such that it’s unclear
whether the narrator feels kinship with the world, the man, or both (140-2). Sterritt writes that “As luminous as such an image is, Godard treasures it less for its visual beauty that for the hint it gives that physical and metaphysical realities are separated only by a thin shell of materiality that the camera’s probing gaze can almost penetrate” (27). One has the sense in this reverent scrutiny of the physical world that the transcendent, the divine, the ineffable saturates our surroundings, and can be seen in such everyday material artifacts and commodities—and is “in the details,” if you will—no less than in, say, Wordsworth’s daffodils.

During the last shot the camera also drifts out of focus—a striking visual metaphor for lack of mental clarity, and other frustrations of consciousness—while the narrator muses on the enigma of death; then it refocuses pleasurably to suggest the possibility of clarity and heightened awareness, a possibility echoed by the narration: “dire que les limites du langage sont celles du monde, que les limites de mon langage sont celles de mon monde. Et qu’en parlant je limite le monde, je le termine. Et que la mort, un jour logique et mystérieux, viendra abolir cette limite et qu’il n’y aura ni question, ni réponse; tout sera flou.” But if “par hasard les choses redeviennent nettes, ce ne peut être qu’avec l’apparition de la conscience. Ensuite, tout s’enchaîne” (144). At this moment of optimism, the camera refocuses, and a piece of the string music by Beethoven (the Romantic composer par excellence) wells up.

The music continues to amplify and strive upward as the narrator and film finally free themselves from the coffee to show Juliette walking through the streets in the afternoon sun. Our recent visual experience and the narrator’s philosophical
speculations, both passing from the mundane world of everyday objects and settings through the personal and social to the awesome and infinite, are now echoed by Juliette’s recollection of some lost feeling of unity that she’s been trying to recapture, perhaps even since “deux ans, a’la Martinique”: “Je ne sais pas où, ni quand. Je me souviens seulement que c’est arrivé. C’est un sentiment que j’ai recherché toute la journée. Il y avait l’odeur des arbres. Que j’étais le monde. Que le monde était moi. Le paysage, c’est comme un visage” (146-50). The suggestion here, as throughout the film, is that Juliette suffers from an inability to connect either to her physical environment or socially.

These last words of hers echo over the next shot of an unfinished bridge, where another normally unremarkable sight is reinvested with interest and mystery, both by the narrator and the montage. If the external world, even the built landscape, is like a face, we can perhaps learn to “see” or “read” it better, to experience it again with fewer preconceptions. If this sounds like a hesitant and over-qualified ambition, it is because Godard himself is constantly problematizing his own interpretive faculties and the significance of the characters and objects under scrutiny, even while insisting that he has no choice but to keep on looking: “il faut que j’écoute, il faut que je regarde autour de moi plus que jamais le monde, mon semblable, mon frere” (138). Sterritt accurately observes how his films are “haunted by the invisible,” and that Godard believes “the best to be hoped for is an allusive form of filmmaking that can evoke, suggest, and hint at dimensions of reality not available to our physical senses or the technological devices based on those senses” (24).
Later in the film, when Juliette drives to her husband’s auto repair garage, the narrator continues to wonder what ought to be looked at, and how it should be described; he comments too that there is always something in the image beyond, or before, language:

Pourtant, le langage, en tant que tel, ne suffit pas à déterminer l’image avec précision. Par exemple...par exemple, comment rendre compte des événements?...Oui, comment dire exactement ce qui s’est passé? Bien sûr, il y a Juliette, il y a son mari, il y a le garage. Mais est-ce bien ces mots et ces images qu’il faut employer? Sont-ils les seuls? Est-ce qu’il n’y en a pas d’autres? Est-ce que je parle trop fort? Est-ce que je regarde de trop loin ou de trop près? (192-8).

Juliette herself says that

aucun événement n’est vécu par lui-même. On découvre toujours qu’il est lié à ce qui l’entoure. C’est peut-être que, tout simplement, l’observateur de ce spectacle, c’est moi. Chaque habitant a eu des rapports avec des parties définies de la ville. Et avec quoi? Ah! Oui...L’image qu’il en nait est baignée de souvenirs et de significations. La clarté physique de cette image... (252-4).

Stephen Shaviro describes in his study of Blanchot and Bataille this uncertainty about the nature of the event, and our drive to assign it meaning, which is similar to Juliette’s and Godard’s:

It is happening, it has already happened, it has not yet happened, it is going to happen. Afterwards, we tell stories, we try to make sense of it. But something always go wrong. Whatever we say about it seems curiously off the mark. It is neither effable nor ineffable: it happens only in the words we use to describe it, and yet these words are never the right ones. Something has happened; it is too overwhelming to be relegated to absence; and yet there is also no way to render it in the present, to presence.\textsuperscript{120}

Godard’s narrator is constantly hesitating, trying out now one angle or possibility, now another, seeking out those “rapports définis avec la ville,” attempting to \textit{dégager} the

“souvenirs and significations” within which the images, relationships and events are awash.

To illustrate that there might be other perspectives on these people, and other people or things in sight equally interesting, Godard reshoots the Austin’s approach to Robert’s garage several times, from several different angles. Then his camera pans around the area, dwelling on rustling leaves, the cloudy sky, advertisements and signs (Dunlop, Mobil), and an unknown woman of whom the narrator says “Il y a aussi une autre jeune femme, dont nous ne saurons rien. Nous ne saurons même pas comment le dire en toute honnêteté” (202). All of these material elements are equally worthy of his, the camera’s, our attention—words, symbols and language are all tangible, material things in Godard’s films—but also equally mysterious, as Juliette says of the city itself: “Paris est une ville mystérieuse” (254).

Sterritt writes of Godard’s desire to make films in which fictional elements are inseparably linked with the physical realities that surround them. In his later films, this is joined by a greater-than-ever fascination with the material presence of words (words as sound) and a greater-than-ever suspicion toward the signifying power of words (words as meaning) (234).

This suspicion is of course already strong in his mid-sixties films, as we have seen by his use and manipulation of written texts—letters decontextualized, words spelled backwards, and random notation (by Robert, by Bouvard and Pécuchet). He also recognizes and is deeply suspicious of the power of our “sense-making” drive, what Shaviro calls a process of “discovering meanings, or...producing them. Everything is
safe, once we can interpret the symptoms of madness, once we can envelop the event in a
network of significations” (3).

If Godard hesitates so often, like Madeleine at the end of Masculin/Féminin, it is because he recognizes the ease with which we, with our sense-making drives, want to recuperate the opacity of the object and the event, and fall back upon the easiest idées recues, upon the “common sense” that kicks in with cognition. Shaviro writes that “If we can capture the event within forms and significations, it is only because the forms and significations are already at hand...[b]efore anything happens, we already live in a world of significations, of values, of social roles, of political commitments, of ideals of beauty and truth” (3). It is these given values and meanings that Godard is constantly working to turn over or see around while forestalling interpretation: “I think that the cinema should show things before they receive a name, so that they can be given a name, or that we can give in to the business of naming them” (JLG 240). It is not coincidental that Shaviro quotes Wittgenstein in this context (”the limits of my language mean the limits of my world”), just as Godard’s narrator has already quoted this same proposition while meditating over the coffee cup on, justement, the limits of his world and knowledge (5). Juliette also says at one point that “le langage, c’est la maison dans laquelle l’homme habite” (66). While playing with shots of the CAR ENTREE sign at the garage—now the whole sign, now only parts of it—the commentator wonders: “Pourquoi tous ces signes parmi nous qui finissent par me faire douter du langage et qui me submergent de significations, en noyant le réel au lieu de le dégager de
l’imaginaire?” (206-8). Or in Godard’s words, voiced over shots of the Mini, Marianne and Juliette:

A l’image, tout est permis, le meilleur et le pire. Devant moi, le bon sens quotidien est venu retablir la démarche brisée de ma raison. Les objets existent et si on leur accorde un soin plus attentif qu’aux personnes, c’est qu’ils existent justement plus que ces personnes. Les objets morts sont toujours vivants. Les personnes vivantes sont souvent déjà mortes (210-14).

It is hard not to think of poor Juliette in this context, who defines herself first as “indifférente,” then later, more ambiguously, as “pas encore mort.”

Juliette’s malaise closely resembles that of Perec’s young couple, which she resembles in many ways. They all “remain rootless drifters in a world where culture has lost its power to provide them a stable place, a unified identity” (Williams 384). Contra Williams I would say, however, that the culture has not so passively “lost” this power, but actively developed economic and social structures which inevitably dissolve subjective stability. Like Jérôme and Sophie, Juliette belongs more or less to the same social stratum, suffers from a lack of means adequate to her appetites, learns from Mme Express what is trendy and desirable, appears to have even less meaningful social contact than Jérôme and Sophie, and shares the same vague, wistful sense of loss and unease: “Je sens que quelque chose me manque, mais je sais pas trop quoi; ou j’ai peur et...ou bien que rien de particulier ne puisse me faire peur...” (135).

Like her sisters Madeleine and Nana in Masculin/Féminin and Vivre sa vie, she hesitates, wonders about the future, prostitutes herself. As a character embodied by a real actress in a film, she obviously has a physicality that Perec’s characters cannot, but her lack of affect and any visible desire is even more pronounced; Jérôme and Sophie,
after all, go into ecstasies of desire over new or dreamed-of purchases, debauch with
friends, swoon over films, have feverish orgies of window-shopping. Juliette is
disengaged even when she shops, which she seems to do as a pastime, for want of any
other activity, rather than out of any passion. Of all the characters in the film, she is the
most isolated and lacking in interests or relationships, the most “indifferent” as she
defines herself: her husband has his shortwave radio and friend Roger, is reading some
kind of self-improvement book, and tries to have a substantive conversation with a
bored girl in a café. In contrast, her supposed friend Marianne tries to make small talk
while doing Juliette’s nails, but Juliette ignores her. A young girl in the café where
Robert is waiting at least attempts to connect with, and to get some kind of advice from,
a famous philosopher, albeit in vain.

Juliette’s affect is, however, recognizably modern: wistful, jaded, with a hint of
irony, she seems drugged, and not in a good way. Bjorkman describes the film’s mood
thus: “Two or Three Things has a quality which is completely lacking in Godard’s
earlier work—hesitation. The film has a contemplative feeling and a calm which is
unusual” (188). I would argue that earlier films—Masculin/Féminin, or especially Le
Mépris—also had a certain contemplative feeling, but it is true that 2 ou 3 choses feels
like a meditation on the material world in ways those other films do not, which
Juliette’s cheerless observations reinforce. Godard, early in his career from our current
vantage, was explicit about how important this kind of meditation and contemplation
was to his cinema: “I am now on my thirteenth film, and yet I feel I have hardly begun
really to look at the world” (Sight and Sound 1966).
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

What lies ahead is a disturbance in the perception of what reality is; it is a shock, a mental concussion. And this outcome ought to interest us. Why? Because never has any progress in a technique been achieved without addressing its specific negative aspects. The specific negative aspect of these information superhighways is precisely this loss of orientation regarding alterity (the other), this disturbance in the relationship with the other and with the world. It is obvious that this loss of orientation, this non-situation, is going to usher in a deep crisis which will affect society and hence, democracy. --Paul Virilio121

The previous four texts, spanning a century of French artistic production, all attempt, in varying artistic and rhetorical forms, “to really look at the world,” to represent characters trying to make sense of their material and ideological contexts. As the presence of, and the attention demanded by, the material world increases within the growing market economy, these subjects are brought into ever more intimate contact with materials and objects that have been packaged for consumption, destined for exchange. In the process there does seem to be a weakening of the subject, a “flattening

of affect” in post-modernist terminology, that correlates with the increase in mobility
and vitality of the objects in circulation, and the connotations and meanings they carry
with them.

Flaubert’s Frédéric Moreau’s idealization of Mme Arnoux as essential Woman
or Beauty is a classic topos, and finds the predictable counterpart to her Madonna in his
courtesan-mistress Rosanette. What is new and interesting about Frédéric’s pulsions are
the way this fetishization shifts so smoothly from Platonic “looking up” toward his
Ideal, to “looking down” at the material world, to a displacement and mapping of his
attention and desires onto the material objects in proximity to and circulating around his
love-object. His frustrated dreams and desires find a safe outlet or focus in the material
world, where his affective investment in these “others” is more stable and less risky
than in another person, who can never inhabit the static place his idealizations have
created. As P.M. Weatherill observes, “Les amours de Frédéric, ses rêves d’évasion et
d’enlèvement, découlent directement d’un Romantisme incohérent et sentimental qui
semble constituer sa principale source d’inspiration.”¹²² The Romantic cult of feeling
and idealization to which Frédéric subscribes diminishes his possibility of relationship
with a real “other,” with real difference, and leads instead toward a religion and
fetishization of things, which are metonymically substituted for the missing person in a
false adequation, a denial of difference.¹²³ In Zola’s novel we see how these
relationships with material “others,” with commodified objects, are organized and

XXXVII.
¹²³ For an extended discussion of metonymy in Flaubert, see Jen Hall, “Metonymy’s Subversion of
Metaphor: (Dis)Figuring the Body in Flaubert, Céline, Sartre, and Ponge” (Diss. The Ohio State
University, 1999).
developed. With his desiring consumers there is no longer any “looking up,” as it is the objects themselves which are idealized, which carry value and interest, and fill the store with color and motion. A glance upward from the inside Zola’s store would, however, reveal the architect and conductor of these relationships and values standing at the top of the grand staircase, presiding over the whole architecture of seduction, his carefully organized spectacle of mass consumption in the new temple of commerce.

Zola’s entrepreneur, Octave Mouret, is cast as a genial Romantic hero at war with Enlightenment rationality, encouraging the faithful to cultivate irrational desires and restyle themselves through acquisition—to become artists of their own self-creation and presentation, to transcend traditional roles, economic structures and measured bourgeois values in an orgy of consumption. As Nemoianu writes: “It would seem that the insights of romanticism into special states of mind and romanticism’s yearning for remote times and places were now commercial products, turned out by a large industry for general consumption,” i.e., the Romantic emphasis on the poetry and religion of self-creation, and the possibility of knowing and merging with another, or the transcendent Other (God, nature), become in the course of the nineteenth century the rather more accessible poetry of things, and the creation of individual “style” through the consumption of objects, experiences and their signifiers (8). The Romantics’ replacement of God and religion with art and the individual artist results, in a market economy, in the aestheticization of everyday life and the mass-produced commodities within it.
We can follow this evolution, to a certain degree, even in the titles of the works chosen for this project: Flaubert’s title signals the importance of process (education) and feeling, or sentiment, to his protagonist; Zola’s novel as well takes up the question of feeling, but now it is a specific kind of feeling in question—“happiness,” which is presumably for sale (reified) in Mouret’s store; in Perec’s novel, and title, these subjective states have disappeared, to be replaced by “things,” and raw appetite for their acquisition; nor is there any sentiment in the title of Godard’s film—only the counting of things (“2 ou 3”), and the possibility of insight into their reality (“que je sais”).

The loss of subjective distinctions and predominance of material elements we saw in Flaubert’s ballroom scenes is heightened in Zola’s novel, where masses of consumers are reduced to blots of color and fevered desires; in Perec subjective differences dissolve even further, to the point where Jérôme and Sophie and their friends are perfectly interchangeable, and psychologically constituted of pure hunger for various products and “lifestyles.” They are the ideal consumers because they have fully internalized Mouret’s architecture of seduction, and become pure “lack.” Perec’s description of their behavior toward these goods has highly religious overtones, but their dreams of adequation and transcendence all involve the acquisition of the “proper” goods, and the perfection of lifestyle and happiness that would necessarily ensue with their aesthetically correct arraying: “Their ideal apartment possesses of course spaces appropriate for all of their activities, spaces which the imagination fills with lists of things, catalogs of desirable objects which fit together and form a harmonious vision” (Schwartz 7). Béhar indicates the very non-material, idealistic nature for Jérôme and
Sophie of the things and meanings they would consume: “Tout d’abord, on note une sorte de dichotomie entre la matérialité des objets et leur fonction fantasmatique et imaginaire” (22).

Godard’s Juliette shares a flatness of affect and lack of psychological depth with Jérôme and Sophie, but unlike them Godard gives her a running commentary on, and interrogation of, her situation; although she does shop, and prostitutes herself in order to do so, it seems to be more the entertainment and activity available to her, rather than the focus of any real desire. If and what she does desire is unclear; instead of the fevered longing of Perec’s characters, she drifts along in a sort of indifferent stupefaction. The nature of this affect, and its relationship to commodification, to the highly visual, aestheticized nature of the commodified environment, is one of things Godard explores. The kind of consumer affect in the face of an environment full of reified, commercial meanings and products is something Godard tries to unsettle, or deconstruct, through montage (“mon beau souci”) and the intense scrutiny of objects, of people moving through an environment dense with objects, and the meanings attributed to them by commercial discourses. With his Brechtian approach he defamiliarizes “everyday life,” and works to restore difference and materiality to subjects and objects alike.

Seth Schiesel describes in a recent New York Times article exactly the sort of emotional relationships with consumer goods, and the ways they can be idealized and made to signify, which this project attempts to analyze and historicize. The objects in question are part of a new line of luxury goods—cameras and home audio/visual.

components, fittingly—being developed and marketed by Sony. This line of goods has been named “Qualia,” a name and a concept “developed by Ken Mogi, a Sony researcher who studies the ways in which external experience, including the use of electronic devices, elicits emotional reactions. Mr. Mogi uses the word ‘qualia’ (the plural of a noun defined as ‘a quality abstracted as an independent, universal essence from a thing’) to describe those reactions.” This term, and its definition, nicely describe the process of abstraction and signification that I have suggested owes so much to early nineteenth-century philosophical and economic movements of the industrialized West.125

Unsurprisingly, the vocabulary Sony’s researchers and “lifestyle” analysts use to discuss these products has highly Romantic overtones. A woman producing a short film for the products describes how they are meant to evoke a certain feeling of beauty and awe which can then be transferred onto the product: “We want that emotional feeling you get looking over an incredible vista or looking closely at a leaf. We want someone to feel the same way holding the 016 camera” (emphasis added).126 The head of a “luxury lifestyle magazine” says that with luxury goods like these “It’s a matter of the entire visceral and emotional experience attached to it. It is about being inspired by

125 Noteworthy too is the ambiguity of this term: what exactly is an “independent, universal essence”? A “quality” of a thing is by definition external, not its essence; nor can it be “universal,” if what they are trying to describe, or more accurately create, is a particular attribute of a particular commodity. Independent, yes, in the sense that these “qualia” are meanings (exchange values) created outside the commodities by a whole economic, cultural, marketing apparatus; but these must then be tethered, or “attached,” to them in order for the commodities to sell—the exchange of goods depends upon this connection being made in the mind or emotions of the consumer. Deconstruction of this definition seems to indicate a certain confusion, or at least obfuscation, on the part of the marketers about exactly what they are trying to do.

126 Scenes for this four-minute promotional film were apparently shot in the jungles of Puerto Rico, and around Mt. Shasta, California. Mt. Shasta is also known as the “Magic Mountain,” and is considered a spiritual center—the Mont Blanc of California, if you will. But after all, the film and marketing campaign are intended to work a kind of magic, to create “fetish goods.”
products and services, whether that means hotels, boats, cars, jewelry. . . . It is that quality that Sony is trying so hard to infuse into Qualia” (emphasis added). Mogi repeats that “over and above technical requirements, Qualia products were designed to elicit an emotional response.” With digital cameras priced at 3,900 dollars, and home stereos and televisions at twelve to fifteen thousand, it is no wonder that “Sony is meticulously calibrating every aspect to exploit and influence the psychology of consumerism. ‘We want Qualia to change the way that people relate, emotionally, to these technologies,’ said Ken Sugawara, head of the United States Qualia team.”

I would argue that the change or difference Sugawara is working so hard to produce is not so much one of kind (qualitative), but one of degree (quantitative); my sewing machine, or a bijou from Wal-Mart also carry abstract, external meanings, and are designed to elicit emotional responses. However, someone who forks out twelve thousand dollars for a television set expects a larger “return” on their investment—a greater exchange value. To this end Sony, in a move reminiscent of Zola’s Octave Mouret, is carefully orchestrating its relationships with their customers, and more importantly, the customer’s relationship with their products. These will not be available over the Internet: customers will either have to visit the by-appointment-only showroom in Manhattan, or order over the phone, where “we can at least talk to the customer and make sure they really understand the product...Online, you just have no contact. Online, you see people buying things without really understanding them” (emphasis added). That is, without being exposed to the “entire visceral and emotional experience attached” to the object—for what is there, exactly, to “understand” about a television?
Nor is it, strictly speaking, a question of understanding, but rather one of feeling.

Here again the kind of awe and expansiveness before the vast and ineffable cultivated by the Romantics has been redirected onto material commodities, and is intended, as Baudrillard suggests, to be consumed along with them. Also very Romantic is the importance of style, distinction, and personal self-creation through acquisition and possession: “the Qualia concept illustrates how consumer electronics are becoming a personal accessory - an expression of one’s identity - in much the way that cars evolved from a mere conveyance available in a single color to an extension of personality.”

Recall my own excitement over the simple sewing machine with which this paper opened: it pleased me in part by “speaking” of me, and standing as a signifier of an identity desirable to me. And as we have seen throughout these readings, but especially in the Perec novel, the attempt to fashion a distinct self, to “express one’s identity” through consumption, is hardly a new phenomenon.

Self-expression is certainly “devoutly to be wished,” and a core value of Western liberalism; however, market economics don’t seem to create autonomous individuals, but rather interdependent, diffuse, “decentered,” subjects. The so-called “decentered subject” is a capitalist subject, a product of capitalism and its ideal subject—one who will consume anything, buy all manner of services, goods, lifestyles and identities in the service of self-(re)creation. Modern capitalism works, romantically, against the Enlightenment project by encouraging impulse, irrationality and addictive behavior. Critiques of the “centered humanist subject” thus jive perfectly with
marketing theory and business values, and are hardly “transgressive” of the economic order.

Along with reification and the easy consumption of ideas, the emphasis on spectacle and image—the aestheticization of everyday life—poses real political dangers for Western democracy, as Benjamin warned in his famous quote about the potential for fascism where politics become aestheticized. Christopher Lasch describes the relevance of these concerns in the context of recent American history, and the dangers inherent when

all politics becomes a form of spectacle. It is well known that Madison Avenue packages politicians and markets them as if they were cereals or deodorants; but the art of public relations penetrates more deeply into political life, transforming policy making itself. The modern prince...confuses successful completion of the task at hand with the impression he makes or hopes to make on others. Thus American officials blundered into the war in Vietnam.... More concerned with the trappings than with the reality of power, they convinced themselves that failure to intervene would damage American 'credibility...' [They] fret about their ability to rise to crisis, to project an image of decisiveness, to give a convincing performance of executive power... Public relations and propaganda have exalted the image and the pseudo-event.127

Fascism, I would suggest, is an even greater threat among decentered subjects accustomed to the consumption of highly aestheticized and idealized meanings, where individual, subjective differences blur, along with subject-object distinctions.

The books and film critiqued in the preceding pages all explore aspects of modern subjectivity, and point to the importance of commodification and hyper-visuality for subjects under Western market economies, economies increasingly global in operation and influence. Each text operates a unique cultural critique with marked

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formal differences, but taken together they provide a remarkable degree of insight into the last two centuries of Western history, and raise vital questions about the impact of hyper-capitalism on subjective and social experience. As this system appears increasingly unsustainable and headed toward some kind of profound crisis and change, it is important that we keep these issues in mind—that is, if we do indeed desire to create a freer, more creative, more equitable world.
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