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## Oblique Gazes

**The *Je Ne Sais Quoi* and the Uncanny as Forms of Undecidability in Post-Enlightenment Aesthetics**

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**ABSTRACT:** The article compares the aesthetic notions of the *je ne sais quoi* (as it emerges in the Renaissance and is widely debated in the eighteenth century) and of the 'uncanny' as theorized by Ernst Jentsch and Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century. Its hypothesis is that both notions, in situating aesthetic experience in a liminal space between pleasure and trouble, can be considered after-images of non-aesthetical notions — notions that belong to the domain of the sacred and have metamorphosed as forms of aesthetic undecidability through the paradigmatic fracture of early modernity. The article focuses on depictions of female figures directing their gaze upward — in the iconography of Sade's *Justine*, in popular imagery connected with Lourdes apparitions (1858), in medium photography, and in the images taken by Charcot of his hysterical patients at the Salpêtrière — and argues that they become a Warburgian *Pathosformel* indicating a space of undecidability and 'non-sense' between the subject and otherness.

# OBLIQUE GAZES

The *Je Ne Sais Quoi* and the Uncanny as Forms of  
Undecidability in Post-Enlightenment Aesthetics

Fabio Camilletti

Her eyes, which were grey with a shade of green through them,  
had a habit of glancing upwards when she spoke with anyone,  
which made her look like a little perverse Madonna.

James Joyce, *The Dubliners*<sup>1</sup>

[Dora] remained *two hours* in front of the Sistine Madonna, rapt  
in silent admiration. When I asked her what had pleased her so  
much about the picture she could find no clear answer to make.  
At last she said: 'The Madonna'.

Sigmund Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*

1. When speaking of Our Lady of Lourdes as an *imago*, we are obliged to shift between theological and aesthetical resonances, thus either speaking of an apparition (the 'Lady' seen by Bernadette Soubirous in 1858) or of a material simulacrum (the iconography of the 'Lady' as vulgarized by arts and popular imagery). In both cases, as we will see, the Lady-*imago* troubles the viewer, engendering adversarial and not easily definable feelings. Through the case study of Our Lady of Lourdes, or, more precisely, of a detail of its *imago* (the upward-looking eyes), my intention here is to draw comparisons and to explore two specific aesthetical notions. Although separated by a remarkable historical distance, they share an analogous aim, namely to render by verbal means an undecidability in feeling, experienced in front of an *imago*.

The first notion is commonly known as '*je ne sais quoi*'. It first emerged in the Renaissance in order to grasp and to define the 'certain

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1 I especially thank Bruno Besana for having brought this quotation to my attention. I would also like to thank here all the ICI fellows of the year 2008-09 for having variously contributed to the elaboration of the present essay with inspiration, suggestions and advice. Unless otherwise specified, all translations in this essay are mine.

something' that is neither beautiful nor sublime.<sup>2</sup> The other one is the 'uncanny', a word shaped in its modern acceptance around the end of the eighteenth century and popularized by the Freudian essay of 1919.<sup>3</sup> These two notions are unknown to classical and medieval aesthetics: in this essay, I however argue that both can be understood as metamorphoses and after-images of previous conceptualizations that did not belong to the domain of aesthetics but rather to that of theology, and more generally to that of the sacred. Both the *je ne sais quoi* and the uncanny ground the aesthetical experience in an ambiguous and tense co-existence of different (and often opposite) feelings, thus determining a peculiar undecidability in the viewer. The definitions themselves of the *je ne sais quoi* and of the uncanny stress the undecidable nature of the aesthetical experiences they aim to denote. While the *je ne sais quoi* eludes its object by denying any positive definition, the uncanny (either in the English or in the German form of 'das Unheimliche') is articulated on a negative prefix ('un-') connected to the roots 'cunnan' (Old English for 'to know how to', 'to be able to') or 'Heim' (German for 'home'), consequently pursuing a double operation. On the one hand, the uncanny is not based on a positive definition, but rather on a negation. On the other hand, we witness the construction of an antinomy (possible/impossible, homely/unhomely), which, as Freud highlights, leads in the German word *Unheimliche* to the fusion of the two terms in an undecidable hybridism.

Both notions affirm then that determined aesthetical feelings are substantially irreducible to the domain of *Logos*. They concurrently attest to the emergence of a fracture. The *je ne sais quoi* situates the aesthetical *jouissance* in a liminal zone between harmony (*proportio*) and alterity. While reversing the classical dream of art as the domain of 'measure' and of pure forms, it questions the utopia of *kalokagathia* by not solely identifying aesthetic enjoyment with the experiences of beauty and of pleasure. Then again, it is worth remarking that the Freudian theorizations of the uncanny and of the 'death-drive' are basi-

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2 For a historical overview of the *je ne sais quoi*, cf. Paolo D'Angelo and Stefano Velotti, *Il 'non so che': Storia di un'idea estetica* (Palermo: Aesthetica, 1997) and Richard Scholar, *The Je-Ne-Sais-Quoi in Early Modern Europe: Encounters with a Certain Something* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

3 I quote from Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by David McLintock and Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003). On the concept of the uncanny, cf. Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

cally concurrent, moreover sharing an analogous theoretical move. Both *The Uncanny* (1919) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) concur, in the end, upon the erosion of the Socratic equation between ‘good’ and ‘beautiful’ as the ultimate purposes of the human being. Eventually, the two notions locate the ambiguous aesthetic feeling in the troubling acknowledgment of an alterity within the image itself.

In analyzing both the *je ne sais quoi* and the uncanny as forms of undecidability experienced in front of an *imago*, I will adopt here this last notion in its full semantic medieval extension, inquiring into both the *je ne sais quoi* and the uncanny as after-images if its complex plurality. From this perspective, we can speak of *imago* as a paragon-*figura* (‘et creavit Deus hominem ad imaginem suam’; ‘So God created man in his own image’, *Genesis* I, 27a), as a material object-*simulacrum*, and eventually as immaterial image-*phantasma* (dream, ghost, apparition, mental image, mirror-reflection).<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, I can add that medieval psychology (from this perspective, I think, not differently from psychoanalysis) has given a full account of the interaction between *visibilia* and *invisibilia*, between mental and carved images, and between illusory apparitions and tangible presences: such a conceptual apparatus was, however, granted by a paradigmatic structure, namely by a theoretical frame determining the conceptual and actual experience of visual contemplation.<sup>5</sup> Equally, despite the lack of such a notion as the unconscious, it defined a horizon of scientific expectation where the inexplicable was indistinctly set under the notions of *miraculosum* or of *diabolicum*. I argue that the fall of such a paradigmatic structure (already begun, Didi-Huberman argues, in the Renaissance)<sup>6</sup> gives birth in post-Enlightenment times to an ambiguous no man’s land, where superstition persists along with experimental science and with such forms of knowl-

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4 See Michael Camille, *The Gothic Idol: Ideology and the Image-Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 43 and Eugenio Burgio, *Racconti di immagini: Trentotto capitoli sui poteri della rappresentazione nel Medioevo occidentale* (Alessandria: Edizioni dell’Orso, 2001), pp. 6-7.

5 For the notion of ‘paradigm’ I refer to Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum: Sul metodo* (Turin: Boringhieri, 2008), who discusses its genealogy in Kuhn’s, Canguilhem’s and Foucault’s writings.

6 Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance et Figuration* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990), who underlines how the visual experience reflected in Fra Angelico’s paintings, rooted in Aquinas’s theology, is already misunderstood by his contemporaries.



The Virgin Appearing to Bernadette (devotional image, late nineteenth century, France).

edge as theology, medicine and (para)psychology. From this perspective, the uncanny hierophany taking place in 1858 in Lourdes can be seen as an eloquent example: arising in a superstitious context, analysed and dissected with the cooperation and the conflict of theological, medical and pseudo-scientific forms of knowledge, the Massabielle Lady is placed on an intermediate point between positivism and anti-modernity, as well as between science and the supernatural.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, as an enigmatic logograph, it questions the very notion of image and its meaning, because it is the ungraspable evidence of an ‘otherness’ in which the limits of language and of its (diurnal) logic become evident.

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7 On the notion of ‘antimodernity’ see Antoine Compagnon, *Les antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

2. The Lady joins her hands and looks up to the sky. The expression is not unintentional: 'Lady' keeps a feudal and courtly flavour, and, in being one of the possible translations of the medieval Occitan *Dompna*, designates something beyond femininity, a space of Otherness.<sup>8</sup> The two gestures engender what Aby Warburg called a *Pathosformel*:<sup>9</sup> the two concurrent movements create a tension, in which a feeling sparkles. The Lady's body stages a rhetorical operation: movements become tropes, the image/appearance shows itself as a signifier.

Still – signifier of what? The meaning ('le sens') of images is in itself, as Georges Didi-Huberman writes, 'an interweaving, a perversion'.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it implies the concurrent interaction of at least three paradigms: that of semiotics (*sema*), aesthetics (*aesthesis*), and the pathetic (*pathos*).<sup>11</sup> As a form of extra-verbal communication, gesture (*gestus*)<sup>12</sup> is the place where these three levels of interpretation interact and collide, a synecdoche through which a 'scientific method' (as that of Warburg or of the young Freud)<sup>13</sup> can detect the inner genealogy and the manifold declinations of the *imago*.

Gestures are however scarcely univocal. Warburg doubtlessly perceived this, while recognizing that the tableaux of the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* were fields of forces, where the same *Pathosformel* could alternately be polarized and de-polarized in binary and opposite directions, from the dancing nymph to the head-cutter maenad.<sup>14</sup> The same occurs in the Lady of the Massabielle grotto, whose nature is equally characterized by a peculiar undecidability: her gesture, while alluding to a wide iconographic tradition, shows an impalpable ambiguity, somehow shifting between the uncanny and the sacred.

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8 Cf. Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment* (London-New York: Verso, 2005), pp. 89-112.

9 On the notion of *Pathosformel*, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002).

10 Georges Didi-Huberman, *La pittura incarnata: Saggio sull'immagine vivente* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2008), p. 11.

11 Ibid.

12 On *gestus*, cf. André Chastel, *Le geste dans l'art* (Paris: Liana Levi, 2001).

13 See Carlo Ginzburg, 'Spie: Radici di un paradigma indiziario', in *Il segno dei tre: Holmes, Dupin, Peirce*, ed. by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), pp. 95-136 and, for the relationship Warburg-Freud, Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, pp. 273-334.

14 Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, pp. 340-54.

From the beginning, the Lourdes apparitions sound ambiguous. In his reportage on Lourdes, the Italian writer Mario Soldati wrote that the city smelled of spiritualism: rather than the atmosphere of a more or less sincere Catholicism, what could be perceived in Lourdes was basically the flavour of a mid-nineteenth century supernatural, indefinably welded with positivism.<sup>15</sup> Chronology and evidence indeed support Soldati's impression. Having taken place only ten years after the first experiments orchestrated by the Fox sisters in the United States (1848), the Lourdes apparitions shared much in common with concurrent experiences of spiritualist contact and actually engendered a remarkable amount of attention in the spiritualistic press.<sup>16</sup> Like a medium, Bernadette Soubirous experienced visions in a sort of state of trance and in a very similar way to that of the Fox sisters, she acted as an intermediary between supernatural manifestations and the community, propitiating the evocation through the direction of the rosary.

Even Bernadette herself experienced a certain feeling of ambiguity, as did the community in which she lived. When she saw the apparition for the first time, she thought that it could be an evil spirit: the next time, she brought some holy water in order to exorcize the figure.<sup>17</sup> When the apparition did not escape, people guessed that it might have been the ghost of a pious, recently deceased lady: both the identification with an evil ghost and with the benevolent apparition of a saint-like figure acted as forms of domestication of the inexplicable.<sup>18</sup> It is definitely revealing that, in her first depositions, Bernadette referred to the apparition as a 'damsel' ('uo pétito damizélo'), namely the Pyrenean patois word for 'fairy'.<sup>19</sup> Until their last talk, Bernadette actually refused to admit that the apparition was the Virgin Mary: the apparition had never called itself as such, and when asked it had only replied with the famous sentence 'I am the Immaculate Conception' ('Que soy era Immaculada Counceciou').

The apparition was therefore an indefinable creature from the beginning. It is revealing, I think, that Bernadette – when asked to name

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15 Mario Soldati, *Un viaggio a Lourdes*, ed. by Salvatore S. Nigro (Palermo: Sellerio, 2006), p. 55.

16 Cf. Ruth Harris, *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (London: Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1999), pp. 59 and 375-76.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

it – chose her definition from the register of folklore: while admitting that it ‘looked like’ a girl, she, however, named the apparition with a qualification belonging to the ‘little people’, namely to an un-gendered category of creatures, traditionally placed beyond all dichotomies adopted in Western Christian culture (man/woman, body/soul, Heaven/Hell). Even the definition of ‘Immaculate Conception’ contributes to the undecidability of the apparition with regard to its nature, as far as it denotes a concept and not a specific individuality. In her depositions, Bernadette usually speaks of the apparition as of *Aquerò* (‘that one’): the nature of the apparition goes beyond any specific qualification, becoming an ‘evidence’ which is impossible to completely grasp, if not by an elementary, denotative act.

If *Aquerò* is indefinable from the point of view of *sema*, her apparition does not produce different effects from that of *aisthesis*. In front of the apparition, Bernadette experiences an equivocal feeling, ambiguously situated between the uncanny and a devout joy. Later declinations of the Lourdes theme in literature (from Zola to Huysmans and eventually the erotic quivers of Guido da Verona)<sup>20</sup> testify to an analogous plurality of possible readings. On the three levels of *sema*, of *aesthesis* and *pathos*, *Aquerò* remains indefinable: despite later interpretations, more or less conveyed through the frame of specific modes of knowledge (theological, medical, of spiritualistic) it remains a sign that cannot be deciphered.

3. ‘Statue or painting? Dead woman or dream?’ The question posed by the young, ill lady in Heine’s *Florentine Nights* stands as a general allegory of this virgin-like *Frauentypus* – half-blissful, half-uncanny – which seems to haunt post-Enlightenment Europe.<sup>21</sup> From miracles that flourished more or less spontaneously during the Napoleonic wars – when Mary becomes a Catholic Marianne, a traditionalist and papist icon – to the apparitions taking place during the Bourbon Restoration (Rue di Bac, La Salette) and eventually to the promulgation of the Immaculate

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20 Zola’s *Lourdes* dates to 1894, Huysmans’s *Les fables de Lourdes* to 1906. Guido da Verona’s novel is *Sciogli la treccia Maria Maddalena* (1920), where the main character, an aesthete, chooses Lourdes as the location to engender a promiscuous triangle with two dames of the *demi-monde*.

21 See at least Stéphane Michaud, *Muse et madone: Visages de la femme de la Révolution française aux apparitions de Lourdes* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).



Conception dogma in 1854, the image of the Virgin seems to cross such central questions of post-Enlightenment thought and sensibility, such as those of a quest for an a-theological metaphysics (A.W. Schlegel, Novalis, Zacharias Werner), of visionary aesthetics (Jean Paul, Blake, Nerval) and of primitivism in the arts (Wackenroder and Tieck, the Nazarens, D.G. Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood). This happens independently from personal religious beliefs, and with equal frequency on both sides of the Rhine (although such personalities like Schlegel, Brentano and Werner eventually turn to Catholicism). I will introduce here two examples, both taken from the last decade of the eighteenth century.

The first example comes from France. In 1791, Sade publishes *Justine ou les Malheurs de la vertu*, a novel which transforms the traditional, hagiographic plot of the ‘persecuted girl’ into an apology of vice.<sup>22</sup> To emblemize the misadventures of his heroine, Sade asked the painter Philippe Chéry – whose speciality, before the Revolution, had been religious painting – to make a frontispiece staging ‘Virtue’ persecuted by ‘Lust’ and ‘Impiety’ (‘Irréligion’).<sup>23</sup> Now, this image has evident Marian traits: like Our Lady of Lourdes, she lifts her eyes up to the sky, according to the iconography of the *Mater Dolorosa* (and it is perhaps not by chance, we can add, if the snake seems, somehow, to shift under the foot of such an *Addolorata*, as in the most classic of religious iconographies).

Such an oblique presence of the Virgin is, however, not limited to the paratextual dimension of the book. In the middle of the novel, Justine is imprisoned in a monastery, where libertine monks keep other

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22 The first hint of such an interpretation is in Mario Praz’s 1930 book *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, ed. by Paola Colaiacomo (Florence: Sansoni, 1999), p. 103, and has subsequently been elaborated by D’Arco Silvio Avalle, ‘Da santa Uliva a Justine’, in Aleksandr N.J. Veselovskij-Sade, *La fanciulla perseguitata*, ed. by d’Arco Silvio Avalle (Milan: Bompiani, 1977), pp. 7-33.

23 The image is thus explained in some editions. Cf. Marquis de Sade, *Oeuvres*, ed. by Michel Delon, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1990-98), vol. II, p. 1219 and: ‘Virtue, between Lust and Impiety. Lust is on the left, disguised as a young man whose leg is enclosed by a snake, symbolizing the perpetrator of our evil; with a hand she removes the veil of Modesty, which preserved Virtue from the profanes’ gaze, and so does with the other, while her right foot directs the fall in which she wants her to collapse’ (ibid., p. 124).

young girls for their pleasure: the monastery is consecrated to Mary, and it is said to hold a miraculous simulacrum of the Virgin, which is shown every year to pilgrims on Assumption Day.

The great day finally arrived. Would you believe, Madame, to what depths of monstrous impiety the friars sank during the festival? They fancied that a visible miracle would considerably enhance their good name and consequently dressed Florette, who was the youngest and smallest of us, in all the Virgin's finery, secured her fast around the waist by ropes which could not be seen, and ordered her to raise her arms solemnly heavenwards when the host was lifted up. Since the unhappy creature was threatened with the most cruel treatment if she uttered a single word or failed to carry out her role, she performed to the best of her ability and the fraud was every whit as successful as could have been wished for. The congregation acclaimed a miracle, gave rich offerings to the Virgin, and went away more convinced than ever of the mercy of the Heavenly Mother. To crown their impiety, the libertines required Florette to appear at supper dressed in the costume which had brought her such homage, and each inflamed his odious desires by subjecting her, she still wearing the same vestments, to his lewd whims.<sup>24</sup>

This apparition of the Virgin is, in accordance with the Enlightenment and with revolutionary propaganda, an act of treachery orchestrated by a debauched clergy. I will now compare it with another apparition, completely different with regard to its background and modalities, described six years later in Germany. In 1797, Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder published the *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders* in Berlin: the first chapter, titled *Raphael's Vision (Rafaels Erscheinung)*, tells the story of the *Madonna Sistina*, whose image had first been proposed as an artistic paragon in Winckelmann's *Gedanken* (1755), and that later haunted nineteenth and even twentieth-century aesthetics, from Dostoevsky to Cézanne, from Nietzsche and Freud to Dalí.<sup>25</sup> Wackenroder quotes a passage from a letter written by Raphael to Baldassar Castiglione in 1514, where the painter asserts how, 'essendo carestia di belle donne, io mi servo di certa idea che mi viene alla mente' ('happening to be dearth of beautiful women, I make use of a certain idea coming to my mind'). This passage was certainly

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24 Marquis de Sade, *The Misfortunes of Virtue and Other Early Tales*, transl. David Coward (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 91.

25 Cf. Michele Cometa, *Parole che dipingono: Letteratura e cultura visuale tra Settecento e Novecento* (Rome: Meltemi, 2004), pp. 121-44.

influenced by the Greek myth of the painter Zeuxis, who had created a paragon of feminine beauty while composing a mental image of the best part of the five most beautiful ladies he had seen. Wackenroder's operation goes far beyond this. On the one hand, while quoting the passage, Wackenroder substitutes the image of the Virgin Mary for the original one of the nymph Galatea mentioned by Raphael. On the other hand, and more importantly, Wackenroder reads the 'certain idea coming to my mind' (a classical tradition, popularized by medieval medicine and having reverberations in the popular culture of the sixteenth century)<sup>26</sup> as a mystic experience of supernatural revelation. For this purpose, Wackenroder invents an unpublished manuscript written by Bramante: here, Raphael is said to have always wished to paint the Virgin Mary, but to have felt the task much tougher than his forces.

Once, at night, after having prayed to the Virgin in his dream, as it often happened to him, he was violently shaken, and suddenly woke up. In the dark night his eyes were struck by a clear light, on the wall in front of the bed; looking closely, he perceived that the painting of the Madonna that he had not yet completed was hanging on the wall, and that now, enlightened by a sweetest ray of light, had not only become an accomplished painting, but looked as if it was alive. The sense of divinity [Göttlichkeit] in this painting struck him so much that Raphael burst into tears. The image gazed at him with an indescribably sweet expression in the eyes; it seemed like she was about to move at any moment, and eventually he happened to think that she actually moved. But, which was the most wonderful, it seemed to him that this image was precisely the one he had always been looking for, although until that moment he had only an obscure and indistinct idea.<sup>27</sup>

The image is an answer to the inability of conscious intellect to conceptualize spiritual beauty: still, it is a tautological answer, insofar as it is defined by itself, by the mere, actual presence of the painting. While re-elaborating Renaissance materials, Wackenroder plausibly makes reference to a more ancient tradition, namely that, as Pavel Florenskij understood well,<sup>28</sup> of *acheiropoieta*, of 'icons not made by hands'. Traditionally considered as painted by St Luke, 'quia, utpote graecus, in

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26 Lina Bolzoni, *La stanza della memoria* (Turin: Einaudi, 1995), p. 149.

27 Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck, *Herzensergießungen eines kunstliebenden Klosterbruders*, ed. by Richard Benz (Leipzig: Reclam, 1964), p. 9.

28 Pavel Florenskij, *Le porte regali: Saggio sull'icona*, ed. by Elémire Zolla (Milan: Adelphi, 1972), p. 75n.

pictoria arte erat praecipuus' ('because, being Greek, was particularly keen in the art of painting'),<sup>29</sup> the *acheiropoieta* worshipped in medieval Italy were normally Byzantine icons, mythicized because of their oriental origin.<sup>30</sup> In the Western European Middle Ages, the notion of *acheiropoieton* was constructed in order to articulate the problem of painting *invisibilia*: between the Biblical prohibition of idolatry and the necessity of a visual dimension implied by incarnation in Christian theology, *acheiropoieta* provided an avenue for contextualizing the practice of painting itself. In such accounts, the creation of the work of art is explained in terms of a supernatural intervention. The structure of the miracle, as it can be read in Nicolaus Maniacutius or in a later manuscript now in the Vatican archives, is not very different from that of Wackenroder:

He then took some palm wood, he smoothed it carefully, and he prepared it very diligently for the work he had decided upon; but the divine hand anticipated human work, and the Master's care accomplished the task before the disciple. Indeed, the rock fallen from the mountain without the push of any hand, the one who was conceived in the Mother's womb without any fleshly desire, wanted to be portrayed in this icon without human intervention.<sup>31</sup>

While the Blessed Virgin was sojourning with the apostles, they decided among themselves – because of her beauty and of that one she had given birth to – to paint her most admirable visage, and it is said that it had been only sketched by the hand of Luke the Evangelist, and that immediately after her portrait was found, shining with marvellous beauty not for the operation of human hands, but for God's will.<sup>32</sup>

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29 Nicolaus Maniacutius, *Historia Imaginis Salvatoris*, twelfth century, quoted in Burgio, *Racconti di immagini*, pp. 96-105, p. 98.

30 Cf. Michele Bacci, *Il pennello dell'Evangelista: Storia delle immagini sacre attribuite a San Luca* (Pisa: ETS, 1998).

31 'Assumens igitur palmam summo eam studio complanavit, et ad propositum opus idoneam diligentissime praeparavit; sed divina manu[s] humanum praevenit stadium, et opus discipuli praesumpsit cura magistris. Nam lapis sine manibus de monte praecisus, et sine carnali concupiscentia in Matris ventre conceptus absque humano opera in hac tabula voluit figurari [...]' (Burgio, *Racconti di immagini*, p. 98).

32 'Cum autem Beata Maria moraretur cum apostolis propter eius, quam peperit, et suam pulchritudinem hoc inter se statuerunt, ut depingeretur ammirabilis vultus eius, et per manus Lucae evangelistae designatus tantummodo dicitur et postmo-

What is lacking, contrary to Wackenroder's text, is any description of images, any attempt to render their divine nature: the image is not described in any way, and narration is only meant to testify to the miraculous happening. An image is something alluding to the divine, something 'that cannot be seen of men':<sup>33</sup> still, the space where the divine takes place (in Wackenroder, the life-like features of the image, its skin, the sweetness of its eyes) is not defined by any means, and only apodictically asserted by the text.

I therefore argue that, in Wackenroder's account, a metamorphosis has taken place: while the miraculous event has been transferred into the domain of a visionary experience, we also witness the theoretical attempt to situate divinity in the realm of style. It is in style, in 'a certain something' belonging to Raphael and to that painting only, that divinity becomes manifest; it is in style that the inanimate, bi-dimensional nature of the painting appears to be alive, watching the viewer in the very moment that the viewer is watching it.

With this view in mind, I think the proximity between Sade's passage and Wackenroder's can be individuated. Although quite dissimilar, the two images – the young Florette disguised as the Virgin Mary, and the Virgin Mary who appears to the painter – are closer than it could seem at first glance. Actually, while staging a 'miraculous' apparition of the Virgin, they both theatricalize the vision, situating it in a specular dialectic between animate and inanimate, and between artifice and illusion. On the one hand Florette, a living being, acts like a *tableau vivant*: immobilized and dressed like a statue, she is obliged to move in an automaton-like way, making the 'uncanny valley' of a simulacrum suddenly come to life. In Wackenroder's narration, on the other hand, a lifeless simulacrum shows lifelike features: a motionless painting gives the hint of a movement; the 'indescribably sweet expression of the eyes' suggests the illusion of life. Both images show a supernatural nature: a divinity, however, which is just suggested and drafted, situated beyond their nature as simulacra, and precisely derived from their artificiality.

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dum inventa est figura eius ammirabili decore praeifulgens non operibus manuum carnalium sed Domini iussu' (ibid, p. 106).

33 Giralduus from Barri's *Speculum Ecclesiae* tells the story of another *acheiropoi-eton*. 'Quam cum papa quidam, ut fertur, inspicere praesumpsisset, statim lumen oculorum admisit' ('It is said that a certain pope, who had the presumption of watching it directly, lost his sight', ibid., p. 77).

The *Sistine Madonna* is divine because it is a painting, a work of art so perfect that it gives the impression of life; Florette is divine because of the masquerade, an artificiality projecting on her the looks of an icon. Both, in other words, show a glimpse of divinity in the undecidability about their nature, felt by Raphael and by the pilgrims but also by the monks of Sainte-Marie-des-Bois, whose ‘impiety’ is precisely excited by the identification artificially created between the real Florette and the Virgin Mary she performs. Artistic creation, religious faith and erotic excitement are articulated around the same illusion: as a fetish-object, the image alludes to an inaccessible otherness, be it ‘spiritual beauty’, ‘heavenly mother’ or inaccessible purity. From this point of view, Pierre Klossowski was right: adoration and blasphemy, sadism and courtly love are expressions of the same tension longing for the unattainable.<sup>34</sup>

4. It is in the detail, Warburg said, that God is hidden. In the same way, both Raphael’s *Madonna* and *Florette* show their divine nature in details, in glimpses of otherness suddenly appearing on the surface of the artificiality they are made of. Georges Didi-Huberman speaks of a ‘luminosity’ dangerously attracting the view: ‘in the moment when what shines becomes beauty, the luminous spot globally influences our relationship with the object’, be it the shining surface of a mirror (like in the myth of Narcissus), an aquatic depth (the privileged place for the epiphanies of nymphs)<sup>35</sup> or the games of correspondence created around human skin, marbles and coloured stones in medieval and Renaissance art.<sup>36</sup> Freud’s *Dora*, Didi-Huberman recalls, was precisely attracted by the ‘enchancing whiteness’ of Lady K.’s body, ambiguously melted with

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34 See Pierre Klossowski, *Sade mon prochain* (Paris: Seuil, 1947), p. 148: ‘Casting doubt on the virgin, on the religious idea of virginity, has nothing surprising in a materialist and anti-Christian time: virginity appears then, to an unbeliever, as a state as absurd as that of marital faithfulness. Sade’s soul aspires however to purity and faithfulness inasmuch as they have become incomprehensible aims. Sade’s entire oeuvre seems to be nothing else than a lonely, desperate cry directed towards inaccessible purity; a cry covered and kind of set in a canticle of blasphemies. *I am excluded from purity since I want to possess her who is pure. I cannot desire purity, but at the same time I am impure since I want to enjoy the unenjoyable purity.*’ The chapter where this passage is included was suppressed by Klossowski in the second edition of the book, published in 1967.

35 See Roberto Calasso, *La letteratura e gli dèi* (Milan: Adelphi, 2001), p. 37 and *La follia che viene dalle ninfe* (Milan: Adelphi, 2005), p. 32.

36 Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico* and *La pittura incarnata*, p. 74.

that of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*, which she had seen in Dresden: the 'shining' perceived in painted, sculpted, imagined bodies is the sign of an otherness, of the belonging of image to another order of reality.

The Greeks indicated such a concept with the word *Charis*. *Charis* is a mythological and aesthetic notion: it eventually passed to the domain of Christian theology, where, opposed to *Eros*, it signals a spiritual and non-carnal love.<sup>37</sup> Where *Charis* is, where something shines, divinity can be perceived: it is a lightness, a breeze, a glimpse of otherness troubling a given context, the same otherness perceived by Warburg in the Ghirlandaio 'nymph', destabilizing with her pagan and airy *gestus* the Christian-medieval gravity of the painting. The Latin translation of *Charis* is *gratia*, and *gratia* is precisely, in theology as well as in artistic theory, the notion invoked in order to speak (and to render visually) the beauty of the Virgin Mary.

The medieval debate around this concept is very wide, and I will only make here a quick overview. It is approximately in the twelfth century (and mainly through the theology developed in Cistercian environments) that the Virgin Mary, *gratia plena*, starts to embody and unify both the meanings of the word *gratia*, both as spiritual pureness and as aesthetic nobility. In Rupert of Deutz's commentary on the *Song of Songs*, in Honorius Augustodunensis's *Sigillum Mariae* and in Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons, Mary's purity is strictly connected with her beauty, both derived from her plenitude of grace. It is, however, only in Baldwin of Exeter's *Tractatus septimus de salutatione angelica*, composed in the late twelfth century, that grace is identified with something situated beyond beauty and beyond the elements which traditionally constituted it (*proportio* and *claritas*). Grace is something that shines in proportions, but is not identified with them: otherwise, Baldwin argues, how could evil people possibly be beautiful? Grace must, therefore, be something else: it derives from an inner, spiritual beauty, reflected in the luminosity of skin as a symbol for virginity, and in the chaste flush of

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37 On the Greek notion of *Charis*, see Karl Deichgräber, *Charis und Chariten, Grazie und Grazien* (München: Ernst Heimeran, 1971) and Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). On the etymology and the uses of Latin *gratia*, cf. Claude Moussy, *Gratia et sa famille* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1966). On the genealogy leading from Greek *Charis* to spiritual love and to *gratia* as a theological and aesthetical notion, see Martino Rossi Monti, *Il cielo in terra: La grazia fra teologia ed estetica* (Torino: UTET, 2008).

the visage as a sign for modesty. At its greatest, writes Baldwin, grace is manifest in eyes: if eyes are *speculum animae*, and at the same time a feature of aesthetic beauty, it is in eyes that the two notions of spiritual *Charis* and of aesthetic *gratia* are evident and harmonized.<sup>38</sup> If on the one hand grace is something impalpable, irreducible to any aesthetic canon, on the other hand we witness a very precise constellation of the areas of the body where grace becomes evident: skin and eyes, namely (transferring our analysis to the domain of art) those details where the ability of the painter is most at stake, where the painting can give the mimetic impression of being alive.

This theological overview allows us to perceive better what happens to grace with the decay of medieval paradigms of visual experience. The problem of aesthetic grace is widely debated in the Renaissance and symptomatically connected to Raphael as the painter of grace par excellence. It is in this environment that the notion of grace is gradually turned into that of the *je ne sais quoi*, in order to define ‘an unsaid’ of images which cannot be reduced to aesthetic alchemies. Raphael is, from this point of view, a paradigmatic painter. One of the first attestations of the *je ne sais quoi*, the Italian expression ‘non so che’, is to be found precisely in relation to Raphael, in Lodovico Dolce’s *Dialogo della pittura* (1557):

Raphael was said to be gracious because, apart from cleverness [invenzione], organization [disegno] and variety, and apart from the fact that all his works excite feelings at the most [movono sommamente], one can find in them that element [parte] which, as Pliny writes, Apelles’s figures possessed: which is beauty [venustà], namely that a certain something which pleases so much either in painters or in poets, filling the soul with a pleasure that is so infinite insofar as we do not know from where the element pleasing us so much emerges [non sapendo da qual parte esca quello che a noi tanto piace].<sup>39</sup>

It is impossible to reconstruct here the wanderings of the *je ne sais quoi* as a notion. Still, by aiming to replace the theological *gratia*, it attempts to convey ‘an unsaid’ of visuality, a space that – as the definition implicitly admits – remains untold and indeterminate. This space is that of an elided sacred, the *Charis* connected by the Greeks with the subtle presence of nymphs or the plenitude of *gratia* reflected in the Virgin Mary’s

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38 Rossi Monti, *Il cielo in terra*, pp. 62-73.

39 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 142-45 and 150.



eyes and skin. The result is a swerve, a metamorphosis: the medieval notion of *acheiropoieton* becomes, as in Wackenroder, a visionary and mystic experience; miraculous images become a hoax orchestrated by impious monks; the *gratia* unifying spiritual and physical beauty in the visage of Mary becomes the virgin-like appearance inspiring the lubricious desire of libertines. The *je ne sais quoi*, as an a-theological definition, emerges precisely when the paradigmatic frame sustaining the notion of *Charis/gratia* has decayed: placing an undefined otherness where the divine was, it alludes to a 'beyond' without defining its borders and nature. In parallel, the *je ne sais quoi* denotes a destabilizing experience: the figural relationship through which Florette becomes the Virgin Mary, to the monks' eyes, is a moment in which the Ego is no longer master in its own house, when illusions suddenly become true, thus destabilizing the subject. Like the *je ne sais quoi*, this feeling also arises from surprise: from the sudden acknowledgment, in other words, that what we don't believe (anymore) can still, despite everything, become manifest in front of our eyes.

5. Like the *je ne sais quoi*, the uncanny too is a relatively new aesthetic notion: vaguely circulating in Romantic aesthetics, it is defined in the environment of early twentieth-century psychoanalysis, first by Ernst Jentsch and then, in 1919, by Sigmund Freud. As in the case of the *je ne sais quoi*, the uncanny is rooted in a sort of undecidability: both Jentsch and Freud seem quite aware of a peculiar prominence of subjectivity in uncanny feeling, determining a remarkable difficulty in giving an unitary definition. Freud notes that 'people differ greatly in their sensitivity to this kind of feeling', adding that he himself 'must plead guilty to exceptional obtuseness in this regard, when great delicacy of feeling would be more appropriate'.<sup>40</sup> This statement is extremely interesting for two reasons. First of all, because of its literary implications: it is well known, indeed, that a subjective point of view, either in the form of a first-person narrative (as in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*) or of an inner monologue (as in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*) is a literary technique widely used in so-called 'fantastic literature', a genre in which the undecidability between the rational and supernatural explication of events is a strongly constitutive element.<sup>41</sup>

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40 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 124.

41 Cf. the famous notion of the 'fantastic tale' elaborated by Tzvetan Todorov,

This establishes a connection between psychoanalysis and fantastic literature, not only in the sense defined by Freud (namely, that writers have often anticipated psychoanalytic discoveries), but also from the point of view of writing techniques. If Freud's clinical essays are written, as it has been often stated,<sup>42</sup> with the structure of crime and mystery stories, patients' speeches (as well as the suspense created by Freud in articulating his writings) often create a peculiar feeling of ambiguity, which is precisely grounded on subjectivity and on a contamination between supernatural and rationalistic instances. And if fantastic literature stages 'after-images' of a 'traditional' supernatural, marked by post-Enlightenment disenchantment and by a tension between 'natural' and 'supernatural' explanations, psychoanalysis – according to an eloquent passage of *The Uncanny* – does not act otherwise. 'The Middle Ages', writes Freud, 'attributed all these manifestations of sickness [...] to the influence of demons': he would not be surprised 'to hear that psychoanalysis, which seeks to uncover these secret forces, [has] for this reason itself come to seem uncanny to many people'.<sup>43</sup>

What matters here, however, is the 'delicacy' evoked by Freud. Already in Jentsch the uncanny was characterized by a peculiarly floating nature: for very similar reasons, Freud turned to Daniel Sanders's dictionary, to Schelling's famous quotation (that the uncanny is 'alles, was ein Geheimnis, im Verborgenen bleiben sollte und hervorgetreten ist', 'the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light')<sup>44</sup> and eventually to E.T.A. Hoffmann. Dictionary definitions and literary examples helped in grasping the nature of what is 'frightening [...] what evokes fear and dread'<sup>45</sup> (but is neither the one nor the other), of what 'commonly merges with what arouses fear in general'<sup>46</sup> (but is not fear), of something which 'is not

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*Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), and the consideration on first-person narrative and fantastic literature made by Francesco Orlando, 'Forms of the Supernatural in Narrative', in *The Novel*, ed. by Franco Moretti, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), II, pp. 207-43 (p. 232).

42 For example by Mario Lavagetto, *Freud, la letteratura e altro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2001).

43 Freud, *The Uncanny*, p. 150.

44 Ibid., p. 132.

45 Ibid., p. 123.

46 Ibid.

always used in a clearly definable sense' but has a specificity, a 'common nucleus', concludes Freud, 'which allows us to distinguish the "uncanny" within the field of the frightening'.<sup>47</sup>

As an aesthetic category, the uncanny is therefore something that exists but cannot be defined: denotation is systematically deferred, masked and enveloped by the staging of several rhetorical strategies – periphrases, litotes, oxymora, and eventually tautologies ('uncanny is what is felt to be uncanny'). Such undecidability, as we have seen, is incorporated even within the word itself. The undecidability between 'troubling familiarity' and 'familiar troubling' is situated within Freud's etymological turn in the pair *Heimliche/Unheimliche*, meant as a binary opposition, an affirmation/negation co-existing in the same word: the interchangeability between the two signifiers, both denoting either the one or the other meaning, delineates a tensive core around which the double sign (*Un*)heimliche, like a Warburgian *Pathosformel*, is alternately polarized and de-polarized.

According to Freud, such duality is a peculiarity of the unconscious. In the *Interpretation of Dreams*, he notes that dream logic seems to ignore the Aristotelian principle of contradiction: while diurnal, a-symmetric logic does not admit that two contradictory statements can be true at the same time, that of dreams tends to incorporate binary oppositions in double and alternate signs. Then, in an article of 1910, Freud comes back to the same topic, noting that the same phenomenon could be retraced in 'primal' languages, where it often happened that the same linguistic sign could denote antithetic terms: this confirmed, in Freud's opinion, the 'archaic regressive character of thought expression in dreams'.<sup>48</sup>

Ambiguity and undecidability signal, as in the relationship *gratia/je ne sais quoi*, the presence of a culturally repressed sacred element: the duality of (*Un*)heimliche is implicitly seen as the residue of a magical-ritual conception of the world, either belonging to 'archaic' times (what Freud, in *The Uncanny*, called 'animism') or to the time of an equally animist 'infantile omnipotence'. The word (*Un*)heimliche itself is therefore a *Nachleben der Antike*: the residue of a symmetric logic which has become inaccessible to the adult or to the 'civilized' individual

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47 Ibid.

48 Sigmund Freud, 'The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words', in *The Standard Edition*, ed. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Vintage, 2001), XI, pp. 155-61.

except in the domain of dreams, and even more eloquent insofar as the word (*Un*)heimliche shows, incorporated within, the very mechanics of (dis)enchantment. From this perspective, the uncanny is an after-image of the sacred, the sign of the absence of metaphysics, which cannot ever grasp its object precisely because such an object is lacking.

The uncanny is therefore a form of the *je ne sais quoi*, whose outcome is not, we might say, a troubling pleasure, but rather a pleasing trouble: in the same way as the eighteenth-century *je ne sais quoi* questioned the monolithic fixedness of classical beauty through an impalpable alterity perceived in irregularity, the uncanny finds a familiarity in the irremediable alterity that causes fear. In an ideal scale between beauty and horror as absolute forms of ‘otherness’, the *je ne sais quoi* and the uncanny would hence meet somewhere in the middle, between pleasure and trouble: their space is that of an allusive and unfamiliar otherness, made evident in the perimeters of simplicity and of familiarity. In other words, both show unexpectedness in the expected: as intruders in the House, both the *je ne sais quoi* and the uncanny insinuate a doubt, thus opening a window to alterity.

6. Let us go back to the apparition of Our Lady of Lourdes. The Lady, we said, looks upward to the sky, as in Chéry’s engraving. There, eye movement served as an emblem of the ‘misadventures of virtue’: here, it alludes to the celestial nature of the apparition. Is it only this?

We find an analogue expression, twenty years after the apparitions, in the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière* (1878). The photo is a picture of Augustine, the most photographed of Charcot’s patients, and it is classified among the ‘attitudes passionnelles’ as ‘ecstasy’ (‘extase’).<sup>49</sup> Charcot himself, in 1887, published *Les démoniaques dans l’art*, where experiences of mystical ecstasy or diabolical possession – taken from medieval and early modern pictures – were considered as manifestations of psychical illnesses and thus explained. Charcot’s operation, however, was ambiguous: first of all because the ideas of ecstasy and of possession, rather than explained by medical interpretation, actually came to haunt clinical portraits (in the same way as psychoanalysis itself, as Freud would have recognized, would become

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49 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, transl. by Alisa Hartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 146.

uncanny for many people). ‘They invoked religious ecstasy to explain hysterical ecstasy,’ writes Didi-Huberman, ‘and in return explained religious ecstasy, its stigmata of all kinds and its whole story, as the hysterical manifestations of pure erotic deliria’.<sup>50</sup> The short circuit created by the juxtaposition of religious ecstasy and of its medicalization left the visible and symptomatic manifestations of ecstasy to solely epitomize themselves. Like Warburg, Charcot chose to explain images with images: again, interpretation was entrapped in the aporia of the incommunicable situated beyond images. The hysterical symptom itself, as Freud would have acknowledged, ‘makes use of images and attitudes [...] because hysteria itself behaves [...] like an image, an image of memory. The symptom [...] is like a symbol’.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective, psychoanalysis is an experience of image-reading, the impossible task of reducing *imagines* to the domain of *Logos*.

In pursuing this task, the analysis is trapped in the impossibility of completely grasping its object, and therefore to recur to negation in order to embody ambiguous feelings (‘*je ne sais quoi*’, ‘*Unheimliche*’, ‘*Uncanny*’). While attempting to grasp a glimpse of divinity in an earthly *imago* (the *je ne sais quoi* as an afterimage of *gratia*) or to understand the troubling otherness of a presumed familiarity (the uncanny), the subject is caught within a choice. This choice is the *vel* evoked by Lacan in seminar XI, in which, ‘whatever choice one makes, the consequence is a *neither the one, nor the other*’:<sup>52</sup> in our case, we should better speak of *both the one and the other*, the two terms of the antinomy (divine/human, familiar/alien) welded in an enigmatic unity.

Thus, the image of the ‘Lady’s body – ‘culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity’<sup>53</sup> – stands as the privileged medium for emblemizing such a unity. In the *imago*, not unlike the relationship of courtly love (another game of image manipulation), the subject contemplates a glimpse of otherness, which, in an age of disenchantment, with the lack of any paradigmatic structure guaranteeing the nature of what we are watching, cannot engender but an ambiguous feeling. Eyes

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50 Ibid., p. 148.

51 Ibid., p. 159.

52 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XI: Le quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* 1964, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 191.

53 Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. xi.

looking upwards (where *Charis* once glimpsed) can equally be those of the Virgin Mary, of persecuted virtue, of Bernadette, of Augustine or of a medium; they can symbolize ecstasy, orgasm, agony, spiritualistic trance; they can be equally blissful, uncanny, deathly or gracious. The oblique gaze of the painting reverberates in that of the viewer, in the undecidability of the viewer's feeling.

Fabio Camilletti, 'Oblique Gazes: The *Je Ne Sais Quoi* and the Uncanny as Forms of Undecidability in Post-Enlightenment Aesthetics', in *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 1 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 71–91 <[https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01\\_04](https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01_04)>

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