

## Hypothesis of the Stolen Aesthetics

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You can say *The Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* is a detective film because of its riddle. As a rule, in a detective film, as in any gothic system—like Marxism or psychoanalysis—at any rate, in a system where there is a façade and inside a riddle, you enjoy finding the explanation. In a more baroque system, as in the system of *Hypothesis*, you don't enjoy finding the enigma, but rather go from one level of interpretation to another. It's like the horizon: once you reach the horizon, there's still (another) horizon.<sup>1</sup>

Ruiz's *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* (1978) is an intriguing exploration of the relations between art and life, and between both pictorial and cinematic images and thought. The film was originally planned as a collaborative documentary on Pierre Klossowski's ideas and aesthetic practices, that would take place in Ruiz's words "in a situation that was befitting to him,"<sup>2</sup> through the cinematic creation of *tableau vivants*. These *tableau vivants*, a practice which pervades Klossowski's theoretical and fictional work were, in the film, attributed to the fictitious 19<sup>th</sup> century painter Tonnerre, whose paintings are obsessively collected by Octave, the central, clearly autobiographical character from Klossowski's novel, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*.<sup>3</sup> A *tableau vivant* is the reconstitution of a famous painting using human bodies with the maximum of attention paid to recreating the detail of the original in order to duplicate or intensify its effects. This activity of the 19<sup>th</sup> century salon can be understood as a highly perverse reproductive technique that instead of making an original more exchangeable through the multiplication of copies,<sup>4</sup> would render it absolutely singular through its corporeal actualization in "living material." Given Klossowski's obsessive interests in art, perversion and mysticism, it is not hard to understand the occult "aura" that such a practice would exercise on his imagination.

So the original idea, which would have required Klossowski to play both himself and his fictional character in order to narrate a series of recreated fictitious paintings attributed to a non-existent painter, and in fact based on obsessive themes from his own work, already had a dizzying blend of truth and fiction, documentation and simulation.

Things were, however, complicated by the fact that Klossowski left suddenly for Italy, leaving Ruiz with a collection of false paintings, some extras and no script. He was left with no option but to improvise a fiction, in which his “special kind of Spanish suitable for translation into French”<sup>5</sup> became a parody of Klossowski’s own archaic, bourgeois style, a free translation of his aesthetic theories into the idiom of the art film, in every possible sense of the expression.

Perhaps provoked by Klossowski’s disappearance, Ruiz organised the film around a constitutive absence, namely the idea of the “stolen painting.” The novelistic paintings attributed to the fictional painter Tonnerre from Klossowski’s novel would be examined as a series whose true significance could only be grasped in the relations between them rather than in the “thematics” of the individual paintings. This turned the project into a strange kind of detective film about art, featuring a single protagonist, “the collector” as the investigator, and a series of paintings re-constituted as *tableau vivants* as the suspects.

However, just as the collector warns the narrator and the audience about the numerous traps set by the paintings, it would be a mistake to think that this was a film solely, or even primarily about art. Instead, it should be understood as an examination of the creation of theories and theoretical systems that artistic and other phenomena can provoke, about the theoretical monomania that Klossowski is such an exemplary case of. The conceit of the “stolen painting hypothesis,” that is the use of an absent part of a system to account for that system’s anomalies, is also highly resonant with Deleuze’s concept of the series. This particular use of Deleuze’s concept of the series, as well as Klossowski’s theorization of the suspended gestures of the *tableau vivant*, is suggestive of a Neo-Baroque or occult dimension to modern aesthetic theory and practice. The elaboration of this “stolen” aesthetics exemplified by the work of Deleuze, Klossowski and Ruiz will be the aim of the rest of this essay.

### **Pierre Klossowski, the Demonic Theory of Art and the *Tableau Vivant***

Here, in the case of Tonnerre, I am referring to the fascination exerted upon him by this in itself false genre (of the *tableau vivant*), very much in fashion during the period. The game consisted in rendering as faithfully as possible the gestures, the poses, the lighting, the effect one supposed produced by the masterpiece of such and such a painter. But this was not simply art imitating life—it was a pretext. The emotion sought after in this make-believe was that life giving itself as a spectacle to life; of life hanging in suspense...<sup>6</sup>

For Klossowski, the work of art is not an autonomous entity but the site of a demonic complicity that begins with the artist and his particular obsession or phantasm, and is then (potentially) repeated in the experience of the viewer. It is demonic, because for

Klossowski the unconscious psychic phantasms that psychoanalysis asserts are imaginary, are both exterior to the subject and completely real.<sup>7</sup> A demon thus conceived is a virtual entity, a kind of intermediary between the human and the inaccessible divine, but it requires an image or simulacrum in order to be actualized. This conception of art led Klossowski to an idiosyncratic understanding of art's supposed mimetic relationship to the real. For Klossowski it was an error of realism to believe that the mimetic function of art should lie in a reproduction of the real world, an error that is only compounded by the rejection of mimesis in contemporary abstract art in favour of "broken objects, [and] images gone to pieces."<sup>8</sup> The idea that technical practices such as photography have freed painting from the need to represent the real world is for Klossowski a complete misunderstanding of the mimetic function of art that also underestimates the mimetic power of photography and cinema. Instead, mimesis should be understood as the reproduction of a phantasm, or the tracing of a demonic encounter that actualizes and makes communicable an otherwise virtual, but perfectly real force. Figurative, or as Deleuze says figural art,<sup>9</sup> considered as a block of sensation or a phantasm caught in an image, in other words as a simulacrum, can only "reproduce the demonic strategy,"<sup>10</sup> by producing the same condition in the viewer as originally experienced by the artist in submitting to the phantasm. For Klossowski this demonic complicity, as opposed to the subjectivity of the artist, explains the haunting power of works of art: "What then sustains the action of a "finished picture," if not the coming and going of this "demonic" presence, between the artist and his simulacrum, the simulacrum and its viewer."<sup>11</sup> The same conception of simulacra is equally present in the novels of Klossowski that were the basis of Ruiz's film.

In *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, there is an alternation between two journals, one kept by the perverse Octave, described by his wife Roberte as an "old man, spry despite his years, [...] this relic in whom there survives the bourgeois caprices of a bygone period which the disorder of our own has restored to fashion,"<sup>12</sup> and one kept by Roberte, who, along with Octave's unexhibitable collection of paintings by the fictional 19th century academic painter, Tonnerre, form the twin obsessions of his existence. In the book, these obsessions are presented as being entirely inter-related:

Just what does contemplating such painted scenes satisfy in me?... It can be put in words of one syllable: these paintings, in the guise of art, realize that which I am practically incapable of doing in life, with Roberte, although I don't shrink from practicing the thing without at all realizing it.<sup>13</sup>

The thing in question, is "awakening the emotion aroused by a certain feminine physiognomy," which is the particular phantasm captured by the simulacral paintings of Tonnerre, whatever their ostensive theme.<sup>14</sup> The disturbing fact that the simulacrum of Roberte is a product of Klossowski's own obsession with the physiognomy of his wife, Denise Morin-Sinclair, is perhaps what lead Ruiz to leave this simulacrum aside

with the exception of its appearance in the mythological form of Diana the huntress, in favour of that of the Baphomet, the demonic, metamorphic figure par excellence that was the subject of Klossowski's final and most enigmatic novel.

The novel *The Baphomet*,<sup>15</sup> which is set primarily in the atemporal, metaphysical world of "pure spirits," concerns a ritual supposedly practiced by the Templars, based on the sacrifice of a perfect youth. In the prologue to the novel, the young Ogier is smuggled into the Templar order by his Aunt who has adjoining lands, in order to tempt the monk-soldiers and thereby cause the ruination of the order and the dispossession of their land. When this treachery is discovered, rather than simply punish Ogier, they decide to use him in a ritual to summon the Baphomet through a ceremony in which he is both priest and sacrifice. The enigmatic result of this ritual is that the youth's "uncorrupted body... resplendent with beauty, hands bound behind his back, hanging from a rope around its neck,"<sup>16</sup> remains perpetually suspended, despite the destruction of the order and the death of all its members. In a sense the Baphomet is an allegory for the same timeless suspension of a phantasm that the work of art enacts, the capturing of a phantasm in an image that long outlives its original "creator."

It is this simulacrum of *The Baphomet* that Ruiz employed to cinematically translate Klossowski's ideas in *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*. By cinematically constructing a series of fictitious paintings as *tableaux vivants*, whose inter-relationships are based around the ritual of the Baphomet, Ruiz was not so much making a film about Klossowski's theories as directly enacting them. Certainly a cinematic *tableau vivant* does not produce an identical effect as a live one, but in its ambiguous intermediate status between a pictorial and a cinematic image, as an image that is in apparent stasis, and yet breathes and pulsates, it enacts a similar type of suspension of life as the practice of *tableau vivants* itself. In addition to this, in its ability to provoke theoretical activity through being part of a series, the use of *tableau vivants* in *Hypothesis* is clearly allegorical of the power of both pictorial and cinematic images to provoke thought, to generate complex levels of interpretation. Furthermore, in its aporetic structure it is an attempt to examine the void at the centre of all systems whether philosophical or aesthetic, the point at which they open out onto an unspecifiable, chaotic outside. This is in accordance with Ruiz's own approach to cinema, which is to view films not as self-enclosed entities but as open systems that constantly evoke other films and images to infinity.<sup>17</sup> In this sense cinematic images can function in a similar manner to *tableau vivants*: rather than the unambiguous representation of a particular time and place, they are potentially nothing more than suspended poses and scenes opening out onto infinite relations with other images. In the original practice of *tableau vivants* a suspension of time was enacted through the relationship set up between the original models who posed for the artist and the re-constitution of the same poses in the present. The cinema, like the practice of *tableau vivants*, is an art of demonic repetition, of simulation, but it extends the powers of repetition from a simple doubling into a wild proliferation of images. It is this cinematic power of simulacral repetition, and the sense that what is repeated is other to what the images appear to represent, that is developed in

*Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting* through the cinematic exploration of its precursor, the tableau vivant.

However, there is one further crucial element to this film that has been implicit throughout this paper, namely the aesthetic theories of Gilles Deleuze. While Ruiz's occasional mentions of Deleuze seem disproportionate to the affinities between his cinematic practice and Deleuze's ideas especially in the latter's work on cinema, Deleuze's complete avoidance of Ruiz in his *Cinema* books seems even more surprising. In the case of *Hypothesis*, it is not Deleuze's cinematic theories but his concept of the series that becomes an organizational principle used in order to translate Klossowski's theories into cinematic terms. Therefore it is worth examining this concept in more detail, in order to understand both how it functions in the film, and the relationship it generates between the aesthetics of Ruiz, Deleuze and Klossowski.

### **From the Stolen Painting to the Stolen Aesthetics: The Series in Deleuze and Ruiz**

A book of philosophy should be in part a very particular species of detective novel, in part a kind of science fiction. By detective novel we mean that concepts, with their zones of presence, should intervene to resolve local situations. They themselves change along with the problems. They have spheres of influence where... they operate in relation to 'dramas' and by means of a certain 'cruelty'.<sup>18</sup>

In *The Logic of Sense*,<sup>19</sup> which is itself a serial work composed of overlapping "series" rather than chapters, Deleuze defines the series as always heterogenous: "every unique series, whose homogenous terms are distinguished only according to type or degree, necessarily subsumes under it two heterogenous series." These two homogenous series are composed of terms of the same type but that differ in nature from the terms of the other series and it is in the interference between these two series that the passage enacted by the complex series is constituted: the series is always multi-serial. A series might be constructed, for example, between a series of events and the states of affairs in which these events might or might not be realized. The strictest examples of series can be found in mathematics, but they also occur in literature and processes of signification. The relation between the signifier and signified as posited by Saussure should, according to Deleuze, be understood as this mutual interference between simultaneous series. In fact, he redefines the terms signifier and signified as the construction of a heterogeneous series through inter-relation between an event-series and a series corresponding to states of affairs.<sup>20</sup> In some ways this is similar to Derrida's concept of *différance* or Lacan's account of the sliding of the chains of signifieds under their signifiers, although it is considerably more abstract. What is interesting about Deleuze's formulation is its applicability to works of art, in that it can form a model for the multiple relations

between two series of terms, which constitute a novel, for example, without reducing these relations to a fixed meaning. For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter,"<sup>21</sup> there are two interfering series involving a compromising letter that is successfully hidden by being left out in the open, and that is then discovered by a third character, which suggests an endless repetitive circulation. This example was of course used by Lacan, and must also be seen as a direct precursor to Ruiz's film in which the stolen letter is refigured as a stolen painting. Deleuze points out several more complex examples of this serial technique, for example in James Joyce's *Ulysses*,<sup>22</sup> between the signifying series "Bloom" and the signified series "Ulysses," in Klossowski's novels, in the "double" sign designated by the name Roberte and in Gombrowicz between a series of hanged animals and feminine mouths in *Cosmos*.<sup>23</sup> From these literary series, Deleuze derives three crucial components of the serial method:

1. The terms of one series displace those of the other, hence the minister who appears in different positions in the two series in Poe's story: in other words there is an essential variation or lack of correspondence between the two series.
2. One of the series, the signifying series is in excess over the other series.
3. Finally and most importantly there is a paradoxical case that ensures this relationship between the two series and is not reducible to either series.

This last requirement, which is fulfilled for example in Lacan's reading of the Poe story by the circulating letter, is clearly evident in *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*, as the missing painting that interrupts the series of paintings. For Deleuze, this paradoxical entity is present in both series and ensures their circulation and communication precisely through maintaining their divergence. In the last part of this paper I would like to examine the operation of the stolen painting in *Hypothesis* as just such a paradoxical entity and show how it ensures the circulation of the two heterogeneous series that the film constructs.

The apparent simplicity of the collection of Tonnerre's paintings is a deceptive one, which is problematised from the outset by the conjecture of the stolen painting. As each painting is reconstructed as a *tableau vivant*, linked by some seemingly insignificant detail of lighting or gesture to the next in the series, various complications arise: are these relations that the collector indicates not purely arbitrary, when all kinds of other relations between the paintings seem to exist? Does each successive painting not seem to repeat, or even to contain within it elements of the previous ones? Passing over the substantial problems involved with the hypothesis of the missing fourth painting, which would have been the central one in the series, when we come to the fifth painting things become considerably more complicated. We are told that this painting entitled *The Scandal* composed of nine miniature melodramatic scenes from family life arranged to be read like the face of a clock, also has its basis in an actual scandal featuring the

very models “from a respected family” who posed for the painting. We also learn that the events and rumours surrounding this scandal were re-iterated in a “roman-à-clef” that appears to incorporate all the narratives suggested by all the paintings up until this point, even, surprisingly, including the first one of the mythological scene of Diana and Acteon. Furthermore, as the collector recites the incredibly perverse and complicated plot of the novel, it becomes clear that the series of paintings are all interwoven with a different series corresponding to what the collector has already referred to as “the ceremony.” This ceremonial series is what the collector was referring to when he stated at the beginning of the film that the paintings do not show but rather “make allusion”; namely, that instead of a simple series of paintings there are the two series of the paintings reconstructed as *tableaux vivants*, or the signifying series and the series of gestures that make up the ceremony itself, which is increasingly revealed to be the *Rite of the Baphomet*, as the signified series. Some indication of how the communication between the two series operates is given by the seemingly chaotic nature of the sixth painting, in which figures from all the other paintings, and some figures we haven’t seen before (whose presence is explained through the hypothesis of the stolen painting), are arranged in groups of three. This chaotic assemblage is explicated as being the tracing of gestures from the previous painting, all of which form circular curves.<sup>24</sup>

The apparent resolution of the enigma in terms of the re-enactment of the ceremony of the *Baphomet*, however, remains highly problematic, not least because of the paradoxical role of the missing painting. As just the type of paradoxical element, or empty square that Deleuze referred to as the key to the functioning of complex series, the stolen painting is the absent center, the mysterious point that belongs to both series and yet is given in neither. What the film demonstrates is that this empty space, rather than being a lack, is precisely what generates the endless theoretical speculation about the paintings, the ceremony and their inter-relationship that the paintings provoke. Considering that its connection to the preceding painting was a mask, and what follows it is the representation of a scandal involving the ceremony, it is implied that the missing painting is the key to the ceremony itself. It is precisely what Deleuze refers to as an empty place, characterized by both lack and excess at the same time: “in one case...an extremely mobile *empty place*... in another case an *occupant without a place*.”<sup>25</sup> There is the empty place between the two adjacent paintings, which can never be specified, and the mask, itself an allegory of the irreducible gap between the two series of appearance and the real, or signifiers and signifieds, which is an occupant without a place.

Nevertheless, in a sense the repetition of this paradoxical missing element *is* the ceremony, in that it makes the series of *tableau vivants* and the series of ceremonial gestures communicate by endlessly diverging, and thus generates an experience of the ceremony in the viewer, however incoherent and incomplete this experience might be. In witnessing the very suspended gestures of the *tableau vivants*, which are the simulation of a ceremony that exceeds rational explanation, the potential of works of art to suspend spatio-temporal relations is directly performed through cinematic means: what the film

demonstrates, above all, is the power of the cinema to hold life in suspension, to offer life as a spectacle to itself in a demonic doubling of the affective power of the *tableau vivant*. As such the film is both an enactment of Deleuze's concept of the series and Klossowski's theories of the demonic complicity involved in works of art, offering to the viewer a simulacrum in which the singular phantasm that was the object of the ceremony of the *Baphomet*, or at the very least a heretical neo-baroque tendency in contemporary aesthetics, is actualized once again. Along these lines, perhaps the simulacrum of Klossowski and his aesthetic theories that the film enacts could be a similarly paradoxical element, the empty square, absent yet excessive, linking the two heterogeneous series of Deleuze's philosophy and Ruiz's film-making in a divergent yet productive occult communication, that is itself a missing or stolen element from most accounts of contemporary aesthetic practice and theory. One might then want to bring in other simulacral series, such as those constructed by Witold Gombrowicz in his novels *Cosmos* and *Pornografia*, which Deleuze refers to in conjunction with Klossowski, and whose affinity to Klossowski's aesthetics could be attributed to their shared Polish background. And then there is the even stronger affinity between Ruiz's aesthetics and those of Gombrowicz, who like Ruiz constructed radically deterritorialized, neo-baroque works that function as thought-provoking infernal machines. All of the above could then be seen as the multiple components of a minor modernist series-assemblage, a neo-baroque aesthetics of sobriety, operating at a considerable distance from modernist aesthetics as it is conventionally understood.

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## Notes

1. Raul Ruiz, "Two Comments on *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*," *Raul Ruiz Dossier* (Sydney: AFTRS) 2.
2. Ruiz, "Two Comments on *Hypothesis of the Stolen Painting*" 2.
3. In Pierre Klossowski, *Roberte Ce Soir* and *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press, 1969).
4. As analysed in Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,

- Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968) 217-252.
5. Raul Ruiz, and Ian Christie, "Problems of Time, Space and Perception: Ian Christie Interviews Raul Ruiz," *Raul Ruiz Dossier* (Sydney: AFTRS) 2.
  6. Klossowski, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* 100.
  7. The demon or phantasm is an external force, actualized in the relation between the artist and the painting and then again in its reception. See Pierre Klossowski, "On the Collaboration of Demons in Works of Art," *Art and Text* 18 (1985): 9-10.
  8. Klossowski, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* 143.
  9. See Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, unpublished translation by Daniel Smith.
  10. Klossowski, "On the Collaboration of Demons in Works of Art" 10.
  11. Klossowski, "On the Collaboration of Demons in Works of Art" 10. For a detailed analysis of Klossowski's conception of the simulacrum see Scott Durham, *Phantom Communities: The Simulacrum and the Limits of Postmodernism* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998) 76-114.
  12. Klossowski, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* 114.
  13. Klossowski, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* 115.
  14. The way the narrator practices this in everyday life is via what he calls the "laws of hospitality," by means of which he offers his wife to any-one who visits his home, thereby multiplying both her identity and his own. Through practising this rite, which is based on the detailed examination, interpretation and intensification of the ambivalent corporeal gestures of his wife, Octave sees himself, like an artist, as engaged in the creation of simulacra: "Such making common property of a cherished living person, is not without analogy to the hallowed gaze of an artist" (Klossowski, *The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes* 123).
  15. Pierre Klossowski, *The Baphomet*, trans. Sophie Hawkes and Stephen Sarterelli (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1998).
  16. Juan Garcia Ponce, "Introduction," *The Baphomet* xvii.
  17. See Raul Ruiz, *Poetics of Cinema*, trans. Brian Holmes (Paris: Éditions Dis Voir), in which Ruiz adopts Walter Benjamin's idea of the optical unconscious as the basis for a wide range of speculations on the nature of primarily cinematic images. Benjamin's idea that there is an unconscious of images, that is a paradoxical "corpus of signs capable of conspiring against visual conventions" (32), is used by Ruiz in order to affirm a heretical, simulacral approach to cinematic images in both practice and theory. The cinema, for Ruiz, in its overproduction of signs always overflows whatever normative intentions might be imposed on it in the interests of standardization: the various theses on the cinema as a hegemonic "culture industry" only deal with the conscious intentions of mainstream cinema, rather than the unconscious and accidental effects that this cinema continually produces.
  18. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) xx.
  19. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia UP, 1990).
  20. "We call the "signifier" any sign which presents in itself an aspect of sense, we call the signified, on the contrary, that which serves as the correlative to this aspect of sense... the signifier is primarily the event as the ideal logical attribute of a state of affairs, and the signified is the state of affairs together with its qualities and real relations" (37). In addition to the fact that Deleuze dispenses with the necessity of language in order to describe the signifier/signified relation, he also shifts it away from referential meaning towards the mutual interference of two series defined independently of their contents/terms.
  21. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter," *Selected Tales*, ed. David Van Leer (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1998) 249-265.
  22. James Joyce, *Ulysses*, ed. Jeri Johnson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).
  23. In Witold Gombrowicz, *Cosmos and Pornographia*, trans. Eric Mosbacher and Alastair

Hamilton (New York: Grove Press, 1978) and Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* 39.

24. The placement of characters in groups of three indicates the combination of these gestures in three dimensions into spheres, which sets up a relation to the luminous sphere in the final picture, which is a symbolic portrayal of the ritual of the *Baphomet* itself.

25. Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* 41.

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