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The Uses of Incongruities in Diderot's Works:

From the *Salons* to *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
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in French and Francophone Studies

by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Throughout his *œuvre*, Diderot declares that his writing follows the order of his thoughts, quite distinct from the rational order. Pursuing unexpected paths of free associations, Diderot builds his own philosophical system, according to the principle of incongruity. By juxtaposing ideas of art and morality, philosophy and science, and by adopting an active role of agent rather than dispassionate observer, Diderot uncovers new potentialities of interdisciplinary couplings and thereby creates original ideas.

The three works examined in this study, the *Salons*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* exemplify how the principle of incongruity functions within the Diderotian system. In the *Salons*, the confluence between art and morality creates a dynamic interaction of incongruities, which range from the beholder conversing with a

painted figure, to his entry into paintings. Not only did this interaction call for the reader's active participation, it also modified the meaning of the beautiful. In his exploration of the relationship between art and morality in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot stages a grotesque character endowed with the gift of mimesis. The Nephew uses pantomime as an alternative language to evoke a response from the beholder or reader. The language of gestures, which illustrates the mime's power of imagination leads to an expression of the sublime. This experience brings Diderot to the harmonization of discordant ideas, bringing forth transcendental knowledge. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot lets his imagination wander the farthest. His intellectual journey takes the reader from the conjecture that a rock can feel to the creation of a goat man. A mixture of philosophy and science, this text shows Diderot's materialism taken to the extreme. Diderot's imagined manipulations of matter in nature result in the conception of a prototype, which allows him to demonstrate how dead matter can transform into sentient matter. Based on the scientific theory of epigenesis, matter in nature goes through countless transformations in order to achieve this change. The incongruity of Diderot's monstrous creations illustrates the dynamics of his intellectual thought process by which he challenges the status quo.

In all three works, Diderot confronts the firm belief that knowledge can only be acquired through reason. His unrestrained imagination allows him to design experiments and manipulate them in order to transcend the limits of knowledge, and present a vision of the potentialities of nature that lie beyond man's observation.

The dissertation of Sandra Abijmil Gamson is approved.

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2014

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband Mark, and my sons Benjamin and Joshua.

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Introduction:

Writing Incongruities and Perceiving Dissonances in Diderot's Works

Characterized by his French contemporaries as the philosopher *par excellence* of the Enlightenment, Diderot was perceived as a controversial figure and a lead thinker in his time. He was also recognized as *le philosophe* internationally in the Republic of Letters, for his provocative, contentious and witty remarks on religion, aesthetics, art and morality. From 1746 until his death in 1784,¹ his curious mind led him into different areas of interest: literature, philosophy, the sciences and the arts. His literary creations varied from novels to theoretical texts, theater plays to philosophical dialogues, and to the art criticism of the Salon exhibitions for the *Correspondance littéraire philosophique et critique*.² Diderot's contribution to the philosophy of science is shown through his involvement as one of the editors of the *Encyclopédie*. This expansive collaborative project was recognized as a fountainhead of knowledge and served to enlighten a population who would have otherwise been left in the darkness of superstition. This monumental undertaking enabled Diderot to acquire knowledge in different areas of science, especially biology and chemistry, but he remained first and foremost a humanist. As it would turn out, this conjunction of the humanistic and scientific search for the truth in nature created tensions in Diderot's thought.

¹ 1746 marks the date of Diderot's writing of the *Pensées philosophiques*, his controversial work on religion.

² The *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique* was a bi-monthly newsletter in manuscript form edited by Diderot's friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm. Its intended audience was made up of a dozen princes and emperors of Europe such as Catherine II of Russia, Frederick the Great of Prussia, the queen of Sweden, the king of Poland (Stanislas Poniatowski), among others.

Some scholars and thinkers have criticized Diderot's status as a philosopher and denounced the lack of inner logic in his work. Such condemnations, which started in the eighteenth century, continue until today.³ Diderot's contemporaries reproached him for not fitting the mold of systematic philosophers and scientists, such as Étienne de Condillac (1714-1780) and Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), who wrote the *Traité de système* (1749) and *Systema naturæ* (1735), respectively. Diderot could not conform to the rigidity of such systems, and as an unconventional thinker, he was well aware that "si tu veux être philosophe, attends-toi à être tourné en ridicule."⁴ This adage, written in 1751, and which Diderot borrows from antiquity, proves to be true. The playwright Charles Palissot de Montenoy (1730-1814) ridiculed the encyclopedists in general, and especially Diderot, in a theatrical play entitled *Les Philosophes* (1760) and staged at the Comédie française. The main purpose of this public humiliation was to strip Diderot of his appellation as philosopher and belittle his work on the *Encyclopédie*. Daniel Brewer reminds us that Diderot's works were not all published in the eighteenth century, and that Palissot and other readers knew Diderot only through a few of his writings: the *Encyclopédie*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets*, the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, among other plays and tales (207). Palissot and other contemporaries of Diderot therefore based their judgments on only the few works that were available to them, a circumstance that hindered their ability to provide a unified image of him.

Later, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808-1889) was outraged by the Garnier brothers' decision to publish Diderot's complete works (28). He claimed that "la

³ In *Diderot's Part*, Andrew Clark traces criticism of Diderot as a philosopher in a chronological fashion starting with Barbey d'Aurevilly (2-6).

⁴ *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Hermann, 1978) 4:139. Future references to this edition will be indicated by the abbreviation "DPV" followed by the volume and page numbers.

philosophie de Diderot ne tient pas” (41) and that Diderot’s favored fragmented form – the mark of *Les Pensées philosophiques* and *L’Interprétation de la nature* – could not be synthesized as a coherent unit: “Diderot, en philosophie, n’est personne! ... Il n’a point de système. Il a de la passion philosophique, mais il n’a point de philosophie! Il a des tendances, des élans, des fougues philosophiques” (59). Such judgments present Diderot as an impulsive being incapable of philosophical rigor and misguided by sensory outbursts and passion. Diderot’s critics recognize his enthusiasm, but deny him his philosophy. Barbey d’Aurevilly claims that Diderot is only a product of his time, and takes the extreme position that Diderot did not influence eighteenth century thought (47). Albert Collignon, a contemporary of Barbey d’Aurevilly, comes to a different conclusion, and maintains that Diderot is a modern thinker whose brilliance is far ahead of his time (177). Contrary to those critics who castigate Diderot for a lack of system in his works, Collignon asserts that no system is great enough to encompass his thought: “Ne lui demandez pas de système: sa pensée est trop large, elle les ferait craquer tous” (177).

Following Collignon’s argument, Diderot’s thought cannot be organized according to a conventional system, but this perceived lack of order does not negate the merits of his philosophy. The contentious debate about whether his works deserve the title of philosophy also captured the attention of twentieth-century critics. Among them, Lester Crocker described Diderot’s thought as “complicated” (*Embattled Philosopher* 304) and “wander[ing], in apparently uncertain and contradictory fashion” (*Diderot’s Chaotic Order* 3). Anchored in a discussion of order and disorder, Crocker’s analysis shows that Diderot opts for contradiction since that is “the essence of reality” (168-169). Crocker’s investigations may have prompted Walter Rex to claim that Diderot’s

philosophical ideas “travel via illogic and disjunctions,” and calls “the most blatant kind of logical disjunction: contradiction – or contrariety” (xiv). He explains that Diderot presents a concept and denies it later in order to discuss “in counterpoint, the other side of the argument, the negative” (xiv). Even now, certain critics persist in finding Diderot’s lack of linearity problematic.

Nevertheless, while some scholars claim that the incoherence of his thoughts cannot allow for the development of a systematic philosophy, others have embraced his non-traditional and progressive thought process, in an attempt to provide meaningful insights into his vast *œuvre*. Even though Rex refers to Diderot as “the most public and extroverted of *philosophes*,” he remains reluctant to classify his work as philosophy (309-311). However, Colas Duflo and Pierre Hartmann have reinstated Diderot with his rightful title of philosopher. Duflo demonstrates that the philosophical unity of his multiform *œuvre* rests precisely on its multiplicity (*Diderot Philosophe* 9) and Hartmann shows that his originality lies in the insertion of philosophical discussions in a literary and fictional framework (364). Pierre de Saint-Amand is among those who have truly understood Diderot’s unique way of communicating his ideas. In *Le Labyrinthe de la relation*, he likens Diderot’s multidirectional reflections to a labyrinth, in which the maze-like structure allows for the weaving of relationships. Considering all the bifurcations and detours inherent to this structure, one can understand Diderot’s choice of writing through dialogue, and positioning himself off-center from the usual practices of the time, categorized as philosophical treatises or systems. Saint-Amand thus qualifies his work as “une œuvre de rupture à l’intérieur du XVIII^e siècle” (7). Indeed, Diderot’s work is incongruous both for its time and within itself.

My general approach in this project is to undo the preconceived belief that Diderot was not able to find his literary platform as a philosopher. Working in concert with scholars such as Colas Duflo or Andrew Clark, I want to explore how Diderot marked his heterogeneous literary productions with a stamp of genius. His literary imprint lies precisely in his use of incongruity in his works. Indeed, incongruity functions as an organizing principle, which is based on the voluntary act of interweaving different incompatible ideas. This “perspective by incongruity” (Kenneth Burke 69), to borrow a critic’s term, is Diderot’s *modus operandi*, by which he will approach the interaction between art and morality in three different literary forms: art criticism, philosophical dialogue, and *entretiens*. Diderot explains the interrelations of art and morality through different incongruities that either he notices or he himself imagines. I argue that incongruity represents his intellectual method and literary trademark that allows for the potentiality of new thoughts to emerge. Exemplary of the Enlightenment, the coexistence of reason and sensibility in a symbiotic relationship is illustrative of the era’s dynamic principle. It is also an era in which unreason and discontinuity help to shape the thought of what is traditionally called the Age of Reason.

Incongruities lead first of all to Diderot’s perception of dissonances. In the eighteenth century, the term dissonance was used principally in the context of music.⁵ Rousseau defines it in the *Encyclopédie* as “tout accord désagréable à l’oreille, tout intervalle qui n’est pas consonant” (“Dissonance”). As for Diderot, his definition is more

⁵ See Béatrice Didier, “La réflexion sur la dissonance chez les écrivains du XVIII^e siècle: D’Alembert, Diderot, Rousseau” for a historical account of the development of the term “dissonance”; James A. Winn, “Dissonance: 1613-1798”; Andrew Clark, *Diderot’s Part*, Chapter 3: “The Figure of Dissonance” 127-202, and more specifically, “Dissonance as a Musical Figure” 157-162.

positive than Rousseau's when he explains the need for dissonance as a means for our mind to avoid boredom:

Si l'esprit, qui est naturellement paresseux, s'accommode volontiers des rapports simples, comme il n'aime pas moins la variété qu'il craint la fatigue, on est quelquefois forcé d'user de rapports composés, tantôt pour faire valoir des rapports simples, tantôt pour éviter la monotonie, tantôt pour ajouter à l'expression, et c'est de là que naît en musique l'emploi que nous faisons de la dissonance...⁶

For Diderot, dissonance in music entails an inner experience of sound perception, and underscores the need for variety as means of recovering the consonant sound, thereby creating "rapports simples." Diderot suggests that these simple relationships are better perceived because of the dissonance of the composite relationships. The necessity for dissonance in music is a subject that is also raised by Louis de Jaucourt in the *Encyclopédie*. In his definition of the term "harmonie," Jaucourt claims that an additional dissonant sound is essential to perceive a complete harmony in successive consonant sounds: "c'est par [la dissonance] que l'oreille entend le discours harmonique, et qu'elle distingue ses phrases, ses repos, son commencement et sa fin. La dissonance est donc un son étranger qui s'ajoute à ceux d'un accord pour lier cet accord à d'autres" ("Harmonie"). Jaucourt concludes that dissonance is an extraneous sound that links the harmonious sounds together. It is thus through dissonance that a harmonious sound can be identified and appreciated.

The meaning of dissonance in the eighteenth century is not limited to music.

Indeed, Diderot expands his thought about dissonance in other arts:

c'est la peine qui rend le plaisir piquant; c'est l'ombre qui fait valoir la lumière; c'est à la fatigue que la jouissance doit sa douceur; c'est le jour nébuleux qui embellit le jour serein; c'est le vice qui sert de fard à la vertu; c'est la laideur qui

⁶ Diderot, *Mémoires sur différents sujets de mathématiques*, DPV 2: 257.

relève l'éclat de la beauté; c'est par l'opposition que les caractères se distinguent; c'est dans le clair-obscur que consiste la magie de la peinture; les poètes d'un goût exquis n'ont guère manqué de jeter une idée triste au milieu des images les plus riantes ou les plus voluptueuses; celles-ci en deviennent intéressantes; un peu de bruit lointain prête un charme inconcevable au silence; un être pensif relégué dans le coin d'une solitude, ajoute à la solitude. Un bonheur que rien n'altère devient fade.⁷

For Diderot, dissonance illustrates the necessary discord, which interrupts the inner order momentarily, and ultimately leads to an appreciation of that order. Pleasure, virtue and beauty, for instance, can each be valued only when each is juxtaposed with its opposing counterpart.

The figure of dissonance and its role in showing the relationship between the part and the whole in the workings of any organic body is the focus of *Diderot's Part*, in which Andrew Clark claims that “[d]issonance forces the listener, reader, or viewer to reconfigure or recreate what he or she is seeing or hearing, to see or hear differently” (102). The different experiences of dissonance in listening to a musical score, in reading, or in viewing artistic creations, are accompanied by the reader or beholder’s active participation in an attempt to “see a new order between things” (102). As Clark maintains, the perception of dissonance allows for a renegotiation of meaning (103). Contrasting and developing this reconfiguration will allow me to explore Diderot’s philosophical system and his underlying methodology.

By examining the concept of incongruity and the resulting dissonances in three of Diderot’s major works, the *Salons*, *Le Neveu de Rameau* and *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, I will better articulate his philosophical system. In each of these works, Diderot constructs

⁷Diderot, *Leçons de clavecin et principes d’harmonie*, DPV 19: 196.

uncommon analogies and creates dissonant effects. My analysis hopes to demonstrate that Diderot's overarching philosophical system is nourished by these incongruities.

Chapter One of this study, "Navigating the Beautiful through Morality in the *Salons*," examines three sources: Diderot's *Salons*, his *Traité du beau*, and paintings that were exhibited at the *Salon carré*⁸ in the Louvre. The editor of the *Correspondance littéraire*, Friedrich Melchior Grimm spurred Diderot to write in a new literary genre: art criticism. In the midst of editing the *Encyclopédie* (1751-1772), Diderot embarked on a journey into a topic fairly new to him: French paintings. Although he had already written the article "Beau" for the *Encyclopédie* (1751) on broad aesthetic considerations, his perspective nevertheless remained theoretical. Since Diderot himself realized that he lacked the technical knowledge necessary to critique the visual arts, between 1759 and 1763 he quickly assimilated art vocabulary and the principles of painting from the various painters whom he befriended and whose studios he visited: Chardin, Greuze, Vernet and La Tour. He also visited the different collections open to the public, such as the collection at the Palais du Luxembourg, the collection of the Duc d'Orléans at the Palais Royal, and the private collections of Jean de Jullienne and Étienne-François de Choiseul-Stainville, duc de Choiseul.

Diderot's aesthetic education helped him develop his own ideas about beauty. In the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751), Diderot even gained the confidence to expose the incompleteness of Charles Batteux's idea of "la belle nature" in *Les Beaux-Arts*

⁸ The *Salon carré* was a vast square room in the Louvre where the public exhibitions took place, and which became shortened to "Salons" to refer to the exhibitions themselves. Thomas Crow dates the Salon exhibitions occurring as regular events to 1737, and Herbert Dieckmann (*Cinq leçons sur Diderot* 130) provides an earlier date of 1725 when the Salon exhibitions were happening in the Salon but at irregular intervals.

réduits à un même principe (1746). In the article “Beau” of the *Encyclopédie*, Diderot then expanded his aesthetic thought. There he contends that the perception of relationships is at the heart of the beautiful: “la perception des rapports est donc le fondement du beau.”⁹ Diderot’s general and flexible definition makes beauty relative to one’s experience and taste. Indeed, for Diderot, the aesthetic judgment of beauty is linked to individual sensory experiences as well as one’s personal knowledge of nature. This preliminary theory of beauty is later refined in the *Salon de 1765* and the *Salon de 1767*, in which Diderot explains his repulsion at François Boucher’s pastoral paintings, and his attraction towards Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Joseph Vernet’s works. In his criticism of these three painters, Diderot detects incongruities and also creates them within his narratives. Anchored in a discussion on beauty and morality, this chapter considers how incongruities in paintings generate textual dissonances, and how they serve Diderot in his new reconfiguration of the ideal model of beauty, which reconciles art with morality.

In Chapter Two, “Performance of Passions,” I analyze *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and examine the manifestations of incongruity in the mixture of philosophical discourse and gestural language between the two characters, Moi, the philosopher, and Lui, the nephew of the great musical composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. Grounded in eighteenth-century French social identity and power struggles, *Le Neveu de Rameau* stages the Nephew as a grotesque protagonist whose existential crisis drives him to overturn Moi’s absolute philosophy, and reconfigure the meaning of abstract terms so that they align with his own experiences. The incompatibility between verbal language on morality and its

⁹The article “Beau” from the *Encyclopédie* is reproduced under a new title, “Recherches philosophiques sur l’origine et la nature du beau” (*Œuvres esthétiques* 428).

embodiment in a pantomime illustrates Diderot's approach, in which he displays marks of irrationality in an age of reason. While I characterize the Nephew as a grotesque character through his physical and moral traits, I show how his performances, imaginary experiments staged by Diderot, allow for sublimity in performance.

Finally, in Chapter Three, "The Limits of Analogy," I examine *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. In this collection of dialogues, incongruity generates Diderot's materialist discourse as it breaks reason down and suggests an alternative method of approaching nature. I investigate Diderot's repetitive use of analogical reasoning in a mixed philosophical and scientific discourse. In this text, he defines his materialist concept of the sensitivity of matter to explore the workings of nature. Diderot's thought experiments with matter, carried out in the imaginative world of his writing and not in a laboratory, allow him to draw analogies between musical instruments and thinking matter, insects and living matter, arthropods and the nervous system. Despite, or rather thanks to, the incongruity of his experiments and the analogies drawn from them, he is able to defend and illustrate his concept of sensitivity of matter through another leading scientific concept of the time – epigenesis – the creation of form out of non-form. Refuting preformationism, epigenesists argued that organisms did not develop from a miniature form of themselves, but rather matured from "a gradual diversification and differentiation of an initially undifferentiated entity," such as an egg ("Epigenesis" in *Webster's*). Therefore, Diderot destroys the initial form in each experiment to show its underlying non-form, which he later uses to create a new form, however whimsical or monstrous the result is. Unlike preformationists or creationists, he imagines any creation possible and accepts it as a worthy part of nature.

After having synthesized philosophical and scientific debates prevalent in eighteenth-century European intellectual circles, I examine how the harpsichord, the bee swarm and the spider web function as the springboards for his new creations. As the image of a harpsichord's vibrating strings explains the process of thinking, thinking matter is compared to a communication network endowed with sensitivity and memory. Similarly, the bee swarm functions as an explanation for the organization and workings of the living matter, and the spider and its web illustrate the workings of the human brain and nervous system. Diderot's experiments result in anomalies such as baby harpsichords, human polyps, and Cyclopes. *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* reaches its climax when Diderot proposes interspecies breeding that results in the creation of a goat-man, an image that unsettles the reader and provokes questions about the contrast between intellectual creation and natural creation.

In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, incongruity allows Diderot to present a vision of the potentialities of nature that lie beyond human observation. Diderot's accumulation of analogies creates an imaginary world illustrated by the Pygmalion myth at the beginning of *Le Rêve*. Likewise, the subsequent analogies imported from a scientific domain remain imaginary, since they are conceived of as philosophical abstractions, not scientifically proven facts. Incongruities entail the disintegration of reason and a boundless number of creations. Even though these creations are chaotic, they are part of what Diderot considers the unity of nature in all its diversity. The repetitiveness of the analogies contributes to the tautological design of the text, as the voluntary circularity of Diderot's demonstration foments the creation of alternate forms of beings such as monsters. Diderot invites d'Alembert and the reader to free themselves from convention

and think differently, as a means to advance philosophical thought about nature. Diderot uses incongruity as a tool to defeat reason, and is not at all destabilized by this novel intellectual method. The reader, however unsettled by this new approach to creativity, must embrace Diderot's unconventional thought process to appreciate his philosophical perspective. Even though the works of Diderot examined in this study bear the marks of hybrid literary forms, one stylistic element is common to them all and unites them with other works in his *œuvre* – namely, the power of dialogue. Diderot seems to favor exchanges of ideas through a nonchalant, conversational type of discourse, a platform in which he is able to present his views and at the same time the views of others.

I hope to establish that, contrary to the beliefs of Palissot or Barbey d'Aureville, Diderot truly has a philosophy, even though it is a philosophy of incongruities. The motto that Kant assigns to the Enlightenment – *sapere aude* – suits Diderot's philosophical engagement in his works. Diderot succeeds in pushing beyond the limits of reason in order to “dare to know” the unseen. Pushing the limits of analogy, and heuristically envisaging all the possibilities of creation in nature, amidst order and chaos, unity and multiplicity, Diderot dares to imagine the surreal, the unrepresentable, and the unseen.

Chapter One

Navigating the Beautiful through Morality in the *Salons*

Les beautés ont, dans les arts, le même fondement que les vérités dans la philosophie. Qu'est-ce que la vérité? La conformité de nos jugements avec les êtres. Qu'est-ce que la beauté d'imitation? La conformité de l'image avec la chose.

Diderot, *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*¹⁰

In 1759, Diderot was commissioned by his friend Friedrich Melchior Grimm to write a series of articles for the *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*, about paintings exhibited biennially in the Louvre. Grimm, a German diplomat in Paris, succeeded in having relationships with different princes of Europe, and even facilitated their purchase of paintings. Through the *Correspondance littéraire*, Grimm provided the dozen foreign subscribers of his newsletter with original Parisian cultural and intellectual accounts that differed from those in *Le Mercure de France*, one of the many periodicals readily available to the different European courts, though subject to censorship. The attraction of the international subscribers to the *Correspondance littéraire* was enhanced by their interest in learning of unpublished materials and reading the astute perspectives of the French philosophers.¹¹ In this way, the *Correspondance littéraire* served as an important medium for the diffusion of Enlightenment thought.

¹⁰ Denis Diderot, DPV 10: 150.

¹¹ Besides Diderot, Voltaire and Madame d'Épinay were among the collaborators of the *Correspondance littéraire*. See *La Correspondance littéraire de Grimm et de Meister (1754-1813)* 21, 49.

Diderot wrote his first *Salon* for the *Correspondance littéraire* in 1759. While other periodicals also contained reviews of the exhibitions displayed at the Louvre, Diderot recognized that he had to differentiate himself from other reviewers whose contributions were published in France and read abroad. Indeed, Diderot was not the traditional art reviewer who described paintings only according to the aesthetic standards set up by Paris's Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture,¹² where criteria such as line and color were essential. Although these technical matters concerned Diderot, he focused on the moral utility of the work of art as well.

Diderot's approach towards critiquing artworks reveals clearly his dual position as both philosopher and art critic. His richly creative mind revolutionizes art criticism, and a new literary form gradually emerges in his writings. Initially, in the *Salons de 1759*, *1761*, and *1763*, Diderot simply describes the paintings, and then explains how he would have painted them more effectively to connect the subject matter to its literary sources. Then, in the *Salon de 1765* and the *Salon de 1767*, his two longest essays, his strategy as an art critic changes. He adds a new element to his review, linking sensory experience to imagination. When a painting enralls him, he re-imagines it by placing himself inside the painting as a spectator or as an active character.¹³ He thereby designs a palimpsest that superimposes his imagination on the painting itself. This allows his "literary" paintings to correspond to his own idea of proper representation of nature. In his search for the correspondence between truth in nature and beauty in art, he succeeds in articulating his truth, which lies in the relation between the beholder and the painting.

¹² The Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture was founded in 1648, during the regency of Anne of Austria, mother of Louis XIV. See Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris*, for a detailed account of its establishment (27).

¹³ Diderot used this technique in his reviews of Greuze's painting "La jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort" in the *Salon de 1765*, and of Vernet's paintings in the *Salon de 1767*, among others.

When placed outside, as in traditional artistic descriptions, Diderot-beholder shows that he can establish a critical reading of the painting. At certain crucial points, however, he is seduced by particular artistic productions, and unavoidably drawn into them because of their power to inspire the imagination. Positioned both inside and outside the paintings, Diderot seeks to explore the functions of art as a catalyst for his own creativity.

Diderot's treatment of visual art becomes then a heuristic method by which he corrects the painter's vision of nature, and reconstructs it according to his own agenda. The narrative generated bears the mark of an experiment in which Diderot transforms the craftwork of the painters into another imagined nature in the process of becoming. Described as an "anti-salon," the *Salon de 1767* transcends the mere description of paintings (Stenger 42). Indeed, as Diderot's narrative constructs and deconstructs itself through the forging of the "ideal model" of beauty (Renaud 157), it becomes permeated with an ethical charge.¹⁴ Because he does not adhere to the art for art's sake creed, he values above all works of art that communicate a clear didactic message. The originality of his *Salons* lies in the interplay between morality and aesthetics, an interaction that lends itself to the reevaluation of *la belle nature*.

Reviewing works of art leads Diderot to express two ideas: that morality, such as acts of virtue and goodness, is a necessary criterion to judge the beauty of a painting, and that aesthetic sense can sometimes fall short because the work of art does not affect our soul. Focusing on the different incongruities that Diderot notices in paintings will allow us to explore this essential tension, and also investigate Diderot's response to it. His examinations of three painters, François Boucher (1703-1770), Jean-Baptiste Greuze

¹⁴ Jean Renaud describes *le salon de 1767* as a "texte [qui] ne cesse [...] de se constituer-déconstituer, et, si l'on peut dire de s'inachever" (157).

(1725-1805), and Claude-Joseph Vernet (1714-1789), help Diderot reflect more deeply on the characteristics of the beautiful in a work of art.

Before we delve into Diderot's thought on the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in a work of art, it is important to turn our attention to the meaning of aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Since Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750), aesthetics came to be understood as the "realm of perceptual knowledge, lying between practical and theoretical knowledge" (Boos 16). Diderot and other Enlightenment theoreticians believed that the acquisition of knowledge is mediated by observation and experience through the senses in order to reach the faculty of the understanding.¹⁵ Diderot stresses also the back and forth movement between reflection and the senses for the attainment of knowledge.¹⁶ This is the same movement that Diderot the art critic performs when he is placed in front of a work of art. The preliminary visual interaction with the painting is followed by thought about the painting's objects and subject matter. Knowledge then can be acquired when the beholder perceives the connections between the senses and thought. Such a perspective prompts Julie Arnold to examine Diderot's criticism of the *Salons* as an expression of sensationalism,¹⁷ in which sensory experiences produce mental images translated through a creative narrative. Arnold suggests that Diderot transforms the visual object into an

¹⁵ The Enlightenment thinkers differ on this point from the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes. In the *Discours de la méthode* (1637), he stipulates that reason, and not sensory perception, serves as the only certain means to reach knowledge, and claims that his being is based on thought ("je pense donc je suis" [66]).

¹⁶ Diderot writes in *De l'interprétation de la nature*, "Tout se réduit à revenir des sens à la réflexion, et de la réflexion aux sens" (DPV 9: 34). Diderot borrows the interdependence of sense perception and reflection from the English philosopher John Locke, who developed his ideas in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689).

¹⁷ In his *Traité des sensations* (1754), Étienne Condillac (1714-1780) sets forth his philosophical doctrine of the theory of knowledge based on sensations and perceptions, and rejects the Cartesian theory of innate ideas.

internal experience and thereby “sparks paintings into action on his mental stage” (17). From Arnold’s observation, it can be deduced that the narrative generated is beyond sensation itself: Diderot tends to supplement the painters’ work with a narrative of his mental images, imbued with an ethical outlook. But the painters’ images joined with Diderot’s imaginary “literary” paintings fuel the tension between the importance of the aesthetics of a work of art and its ethics. The re-creation of the painting can be understood as a productive incongruity because Diderot calls for the joining of the two sister arts, painting and literature, to expand his vision and understanding of paintings, and also to allow the readers of the *Salons* who have not seen the paintings to engage effectively with them.

To understand Diderot’s fascination with art permeated with morality, we must first consider how ethics was understood in the eighteenth century. In the *Encyclopédie*, for example, ethics is associated with morality and natural law.¹⁸ In his *Encyclopédie* article “Droit naturel,” Diderot maintains that every individual living in society would have to conform to moral issues under the authority of the “general will.”¹⁹ While Malebranche first used this notion in relation to God in the *Traité de la nature et de la grâce* (1680), Diderot modifies it by secularizing it. Diderot displaces God’s general laws established to understand the creation of the world, and locates them in the general will, an abstract ideal of moral conduct: “[c]’est la règle de la conduite relative d’un particulier à un particulier dans la même société; d’un particulier envers la société dont il

¹⁸ In the *Encyclopédie de Diderot et d’Alembert*, the entry for the word “éthique” refers to two other article entries, “morale” and “droit naturel”; Diderot wrote the latter article.

¹⁹ Diderot’s idea of the general will precedes Rousseau’s. In *The General Will before Rousseau*, Patrick Riley traces the use of the expression “general will” back to Malebranche’s *Traité de la nature et de la grâce* (1680). Diderot focuses on the state of nature, and places the general will within the human species. Rousseau, however, uses the general will to explain the organization of the civil state.

est membre, & de la société dont il est membre, envers les autres sociétés” (“Droit naturel,” DPV 7: 28). Under this new reformulation of natural law, the judgment of right and wrong remains solely the responsibility of the human species. Only by placing moral issues under the authority of the general will can morality be constant in our understanding. Diderot’s monist attitude derives from his belief that the human species desires the good for everyone. Returning to paintings, his moral considerations point to the exercise of both passion and reason in a painting in order to search for and acquire the truth. However, he realizes that the private art market influences painters’ productions, and consumerism leads to frivolous creations. Diderot then requires that paintings be morally stimulating for the good of the human species in general, and not for the satisfaction of a particular individual.

The relation between ethics and aesthetics in paintings, and more specifically between morality and art has been a subject of controversy from Plato’s time to today. In this chapter, I will focus on Diderot’s curious compulsion to join art and morality when reviewing paintings in the *Salons*. As a humanist, Diderot’s ethical values associated with aesthetic order depend on the beholder’s perceiving the emotional and intellectual effects of representing virtue and vice in a work of art. In *Art, Emotion and Ethics*, Berys Gaut writes that “[a]rt has the power to upset, to disturb, to make us question our assumptions, to change us. But it also has the power to celebrate our cherished convictions, to pacify us” (1). The Parisian cultural phenomenon of the Salon exhibitions at the Louvre is proof that art has a didactic role and a pleasing effect on the public. However, as we shall see from this study, works of art can also evoke Diderot’s antipathy because of a lack of a moral content.

Diderot's originality as an art reviewer is based on his diegeses of the different paintings that enthrall him. As he immerses himself inside the pictorial universe, he notes the clashing of disharmonious elements, and he emphasizes the ridiculous. He treats the lack of harmony between the objects as dissonances. According to Diderot, a work of art becomes more attractive to the beholder when the dissonances are present to intensify and bring to the fore the harmonious parts. These dissonances belong to the same category as incongruities, and they enter into a cause and effect relationship. Incongruities, or elements that are out of place, create a rupture in a preexisting order, and bring about dissonance. Diderot uses the different types of aesthetic and logical incongruities that he observes in paintings as a means to shift the discussion about aesthetics toward a discourse about the moral order, in search for a new principle that will supplant the traditional tenet in the aesthetic canon of the period, which was known as *la belle nature*.²⁰

The eighteenth century artist was not asked to paint nature pure and simple but rather to represent what was known as *la belle nature* (Ehrard I: 259). This new principle triggered much confusion among contemporary artists and theorists as to its meaning. For example, in *Les Beaux-Arts réduits à un même principe*, Charles Batteux explains *la belle nature*: “ce n'est pas le vrai qui est; mais le vrai qui peut être, le beau vrai, qui est représenté comme s'il existait réellement, et avec toutes les perfections qu'il peut recevoir” (92). Batteux's definition of “belle nature” does not satisfy Diderot, and the lack of precision incites him to write in the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*: “ceux qui ont

²⁰ The concept of *la belle nature* was developed in the seventeenth century by the painter Gian Pietro Bellori, who postulated that “l'imperfection de la nature conduisait les grands artistes à forger dans leur esprit ‘un exemple de beauté supérieure’ et, en la regardant, à ‘corriger la nature’” (Saint Girons, *Esthétiques du XVIII^e siècle* 84).

lu vos beaux-arts réduits à l'imitation de la belle nature se croyaient en droit d'exiger que vous leur expliquassiez clairement ce que c'est que la *belle nature*" (DPV 4: 190). While *la belle nature* encompasses for Batteux the idea of perfection, it does not for Diderot. "La nature ne fait rien d'incorrect," he says in the *Essais sur la peinture*. "Toute forme, belle ou laide, a sa cause, et de tous les êtres qui existent, il n'y en a pas un qui ne soit comme il doit être" (DPV 14: 343). In the *Lettre sur les aveugles* and *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Diderot challenges the concept of perfection inherent in Batteux's definition of *la belle nature* by showing that the blind and the deaf-mute are monsters who are nonetheless part of nature. Already present in his philosophical writings in his reflection on monstrosity, nature – be it beautiful or ugly – can be portrayed in paintings, according to Diderot, by following what he calls the "ideal model" of beauty. Also referred to as "modèle intérieur,"²¹ or "le beau idéal," this new aesthetic principle supersedes Batteux's vague notion of *la belle nature*. In *Génèse de l'esthétique française moderne 1680-1814*, Annie Becq reminds us that Diderot uses the concept of the ideal model subversively (534, 538). Diderot describes it in the preamble to the *Salon de 1767*, not as the union of existing beauties but rather as an artificial creation from within the artist's imagination. The ideal model of beauty for Diderot is founded on first constructing the idea of beauty in the artist's imagination – a prototype that does not exist in reality, but which is possible – and then representing that idea at its best potential, in order to create the desired effect of the work of art. While Batteux writes that "[I]es monstres sont effrayants dans la nature, dans les arts ils sont ridicules" (140), Diderot

²¹ See Diderot, *Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, in *Œuvres esthétiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1994) 838. Future references to this edition will be indicated by the abbreviation "OE."

urges the painters to represent the beauty of all nature, brought about through both verisimilitude (*le vraisemblable*) and truth (*le vrai*).

In order to specify the different uses of aesthetic incongruity in Diderot's *Salons*, it is useful to focus on Diderot's definition of beauty written in the *Encyclopédie* in 1751. He interprets beauty as the perception of relationships: "J'appelle ...*beau* hors de moi, tout ce qui contient en soi de quoi réveiller dans mon entendement l'idée de rapport; et *beau* par rapport à moi, tout ce qui réveille cette idée."²² He distinguishes between two kinds of beauty. First, beauty outside of us, which he later calls the "beau réel," is based on an objective intrinsic quality that is not conditioned by one's understanding and perception. For instance, Diderot claims that the Louvre is beautiful because of its structure, regardless of man's presence; he nonetheless realizes that its organization in terms of symmetry and proportion provokes in us the idea of relationships. Diderot argues further that relationships in themselves are not enough for the emergence of the beautiful. He insists on the perception of relationships as its necessary element.²³ The beauty outside of us, or the "beau reel," he continues, expresses only the potential trigger of connections in one's understanding, and therefore can be understood as a potential beauty. At a second level, only beauty in relation to us, which he identifies as the "beau relatif," successfully awakens a network of relationships in the beholder's mind.

Diderot's objective and subjective characteristics of beauty cannot be reconciled. Indeed, Jacques Chouillet warns us that the two parts of Diderot's definition of beauty,

²² Diderot, *Recherches philosophiques sur l'origine et la nature du beau*, in OE 418.

²³ Diderot writes, "La perception des rapports est donc le fondement du beau," in OE 428.

the “beau réel” and the “beau relatif” should be thought of as a paradoxical pairing.²⁴ On the one hand, Diderot’s objectivist contention posits the existence of relationships only in the object itself, and as such, this view seems to imply an absolute beauty. On the other hand, Diderot denies absolute beauty because “le rapport en général est une opération de l’entendement, qui considère soit un être, soit une qualité, en tant que cet être ou cette qualité suppose l’existence d’un autre être ou d’une autre qualité” (OE 424). In *Two Diderot Studies: Ethics and Aesthetics*, Crocker explains that while Diderot tries to differentiate objective from subjective beauty, he realizes that only a human being can make a value judgment about beauty. Ultimately, beauty, which is the perception of relationships, remains an aesthetic experience that is conditioned by understanding (57).

Judgments on paintings are based on the evocation of the perception of “rapport” and will therefore be contingent on one’s background and taste, factors that render them subjective. The crux of Diderot’s theory of the beautiful, when applied to the *Salons*, lies in the connection of the parts to the whole work of art. I thus define aesthetic incongruity as a perception of a disruption between the objects depicted in a painting, or between the object and the subject matter of the painting. Aesthetic incongruity presumes a rupture in the “beau relatif,” which causes a breach in the beholder’s understanding. Aesthetic incongruities perceived in a work of art allow Diderot to think further about the ideal model of beauty, and reconfigure it as a dynamic network of relations between thought and the senses. We shall see how, in the *Salons*, Diderot recreates through the act of

²⁴ See Jacques Chouillet, *La formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot*: “Il faut d’abord renoncer à se représenter les deux thèses, dont la rencontre est censée former l’esthétique de l’article Beau, comme les pièces d’un ensemble uniforme. Elles doivent être pensées dans leur adversité comme un couple antinomique” (306).

writing the very network of relationships that he requires in order to consider them esthetically successful.

By examining Diderot's criticism of Boucher, Greuze and Vernet, I will show that aesthetic incongruities lead him to solidify his understanding about beauty in art. Diderot reproaches Boucher for his lack of socio-historical and literary verisimilitude, and criticizes the painter's penchant for rendering nature beautified rather than beautiful. Boucher distances himself from the dominant classical norm, which incited Diderot to think further about the representation of nature, visualized and conceptualized not through imitation but through the artist's imagination. This is what happens in his criticism of Greuze. Greuze's propensity to paint melodramatic attitudes prompts Diderot to create an unexpected imagined narrative with the characters of the painting, where issues of vice and virtue are mixed with those of beauty. Greuze's paintings attract Diderot because they raise the question of the union of ethics and aesthetics in a work of art, and represent the subject matter in an unadorned arrangement. Vernet's paintings, presented to the reader of the *Salons* as "natural sites," allow Diderot to further his imaginative play and to construct a narrative based on an illusion, placing the narrator inside the painting. Diderot feels at ease to step inside some of the landscapes, to re-imagine them as "natural sites," and to recreate a virtual beauty of the surroundings, already invoked in paintings but perfected in Diderot's text. He stages such an incongruous infiltration of the critic within the painting to trigger a rich array of what Dubos, a contemporary critic, called "artificial emotions" (*passions artificielles*)²⁵ in his

²⁵ Dubos was a partisan of illustrating sentiment in a painting, in order to arouse emotion (or passion, as it was called in the eighteenth century) in the beholder, or in his words, awaken "des passions artificielles":

readers. These “esthetic” emotions do not give the beholder real feelings of pain or pleasure and are felt only as long as the observer is in front of the painting. But, as we shall see with Vernet’s paintings, Diderot’s esthetic emotions become real tears. The incongruities detected or created by Diderot allow him to awaken his senses and to exercise his reason in order to perceive a network of relationships between ethics and aesthetics. When Diderot perceives that these connections are missing in the paintings, he creates them in his narrative.

Incongruity and idealized nature: a study of François Boucher’s paintings in the *Salons*

In 1765, Boucher was named First Painter to King Louis XV and became director of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture. After his mythological paintings and pastoral landscapes had made him popular in the 1740’s and 50’s, he received commissions from Queen Marie Leszczyńska and Madame de Pompadour for small-scale decorative paintings. After the death of Louis XIV in 1715, the new king had left Versailles to reside in Paris, and by the 1740’s, the construction of *hôtels particuliers* in Paris was growing dramatically in order to accommodate the court and the financial élite. Similarly, the need to furnish these “new town mansions” increased the demand for small-scale decorative pictures—in the fashionable Rococo style (see Crow 11).

Though a favorite in royal circles, Boucher’s work was fiercely criticized by Diderot. He argues that Boucher, because of his status in the Academy, is supposed to serve as a model to other young painters, and to contribute to the grandeur of French art.

L’art ne pourrait-il pas créer, pour ainsi dire, des êtres d’une nouvelle nature? Ne pourrait-il pas produire des objets qui excitassent en nous des passions artificielles capables de nous occuper dans le moment que nous les sentons, & incapables de nous causer dans la suite des peines réelles & des afflictions véritables? (*Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* 14).

But instead, Boucher shows little seriousness in his paintings. Even though the court and the Salon public have developed a taste for Boucher's frivolous paintings, it is noteworthy that the Rococo painter abstains from exposing his work at the Salon of 1767, two years after Diderot's harsh critique. Boucher's refusal to exhibit his work in the Salon in 1767 shows the influence of Diderot in particular, and art critics in general, on painters' attitudes and productions.²⁶

In contrast with the court and public's attraction to Boucher's decorative paintings, Diderot adopts in the *Salons* a mixed position, in which his negative criticism exceeds the occasional praises. He admires Boucher's ability to bring out light and shadow through his knowledge of colors and mentions that contemporary artists even idolize Boucher for his command of technique as a painter:

Les artistes qui voient jusqu'où cet homme a surmonté les difficultés de la peinture, et pour qui c'est tout que ce mérite qui n'est guère bien connu que d'eux, fléchissent le genou devant lui. C'est leur dieu. (*Salon de 1761*, 222)²⁷

Even though some artists revere Boucher for his craft, Diderot objects to the vibrant colors that he uses. His view on the important link between truth and beauty, as articulated in the *Entretiens sur le fils naturel*,²⁸ explains his judgment in the *Salon de 1759* that Boucher's color tones in the *Nativité* are false: "J'avoue que le coloris en est faux; qu'elle a trop d'éclat; que l'enfant est de couleur rose" (81).²⁹ In the *Salon de 1763*,

²⁶Udolpho van de Sandt states: "Les manifestations de l'exaspération des artistes à propos des critiques sont innombrables. Certains, tels Boucher ... en 1767, las d'être malmenés, renoncent à exposer" ("Le Salon de l'Académie de 1759 à 1781") in *Diderot et l'art de Boucher à David* 82.

²⁷DPV 13.

²⁸See the epigraph to this chapter.

²⁹DPV 13

he reiterates his aversion to Boucher's excessive and unnatural color tones in an imaginary dialogue with the painter:

Si vous dites au peintre: 'Mais, monsieur Boucher, où avez-vous pris ces tons de couleur?' il vous répondra: 'Dans ma tête. – Mais ils sont faux. – Cela se peut, et je ne me suis pas soucié d'être vrai. Je peins un événement fabuleux avec un pinceau romanesque. Que savez-vous? la lumière du Thabor et celle du paradis sont peut-être comme cela. Avez-vous jamais été visité la nuit par des anges? – Non. – Ni moi non plus; et voilà pourquoi je m'essaye comme il me plaît dans une chose qui n'a point de modèle en nature. (355)³⁰

Diderot exploits the controversy about Boucher's use of artificial colors to explain that the painter did not intend to represent the truth, but rather to portray a romanesque, or an imaginary nature that cannot exist in reality.³¹ Indeed, we can see that Boucher's unprincipled attitude towards the rules of art pushes him to ignore the basic ideals of imitation, which are founded for Diderot on the creation of the "ideal model" of beauty.

Diderot aligns himself with the seventeenth-century painter and art theorist Charles Le Brun (1619-1690) and art critic Roger de Piles (1635-1709), who advised painters to return to antiquity because the Greek and Roman painters created the ideal model of beauty by producing art without a prior model. According to the German theorist Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), the observation of the nude on a daily basis allowed the Greek painters to "formulate certain general concepts of beauty, with reference both to individual parts of the body and to its overall proportions."³²

Beyond the formulation of concepts in crafting the ideal model of beauty, the Greeks had

³⁰DPV 13.

³¹In the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot calls Boucher's imaginary productions "indécentes et plates marionnettes" which hints at the artificiality of Boucher's characters. By opposition, he calls Greuze's *Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni* sublime paintings because of the true actions and attitudes depicted (DPV 14: 200).

³²Winckelmann, "Thoughts on the Imitation of the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks," in Nisbit, 35-36. Winckelmann explains that in Greece, young boys were exercising naked in gymnasiums for the artists to study the different movements and attitudes of the body.

to focus on observation, and work by trial and error, or as Diderot says “par un long et pénible tâtonnement” (*Salon de 1767*, 69).³³ In *L’Histoire des deux Indes* (1770), Diderot explains the paths that the ancients follow in order to reach the ideal model of beauty:

Le Grec favorisé du plus heureux climat, avait sans cesse sous les yeux le spectacle d’une nature merveilleuse, soit par ses charmes, soit par son horreur; des fleuves rapides; des montagnes escarpées; [...] la mer tantôt calme, tantôt agitée: tout ce qui échauffe l’âme, tout ce qui émeut et agrandit l’imagination. Imitateur scrupuleux, il la rendit d’abord telle qu’il la voyait. Bientôt il mit du discernement entre les modèles. Les principales fonctions des membres lui en indiquèrent les vices les plus grossiers qu’il corrigea. Il en sentit ensuite les moindres imperfections, qu’il corrigea encore; et ce fut ainsi qu’il s’éleva peu à peu au beau idéal, c’est-à-dire, au concept d’un être qui est possible peut-être, mais qui n’existe pas: car la nature ne fait rien de parfait.³⁴

The formation of the ideal model of beauty is for Diderot a process that is constantly evolving. The gradual changes and corrections that the Greeks perform onto the initial imitation allow them to reach a distilled version of nature. As an ideal, this model of beauty does not exist in nature but lies in the realm of the potential. Diderot speculates that Boucher may not have had the intention either to paint *la belle nature* or to represent the ideal model of beauty. Even though he accuses Boucher in the *Salon de 1759* of using false color tones in *Nativité*, the art critic mentions that this painting attests to the subjective experience of the beholder in front of the beautiful Virgin Mary. “Je ne serais pas fâché d’avoir ce tableau,” says Diderot to Grimm, “[t]outes les fois que vous viendriez chez moi, vous en diriez du mal, mais vous le regarderiez” (82). The beholder is attracted by this painting, but remains an outside spectator because the excessive colors hide the structure of real nature and thus hinder the arousal of emotions: “[l]a peinture est l’art d’aller à l’âme par l’entremise des yeux; si l’effet s’arrête aux yeux, le peintre n’a

³³ DPV 16.

³⁴ Diderot. *Histoire des deux Indes* in *Œuvres*. ed. Laurent Versini (Paris: Laffont, 1995) 3: 756-757.

fait que la moindre partie du chemin” (*Salon de 1765*, 226).³⁵ Diderot suggests that Boucher falls short in his works of art because he does not achieve the goal of luring the beholder inside the painting. By refusing to imitate nature, Boucher could not awaken in Diderot’s point of view, the idea of relationships, which is the prerequisite for the perception of the beautiful. Indeed, Diderot claims that Boucher is incapable of creating associations between objects inside the painting: “[c]es analogies fines et déliées qui appellent sur la toile les objets et qui les y lient par des fils imperceptibles, sur mon Dieu il ne sait ce que c’est” (*Salon de 1765*, 55). Boucher approximated the portrayal of the “beau réel” or the potentialities of beauty, but failed to reach the “beau relatif” or the actual beauty because of the absence of the perception of correspondences.

To be sure, the rules of painting such as considerations about line and color mattered less to Diderot, as a man of letters, than questions of verisimilitude (*le vraisemblable*) and truth (*le vrai*), which are closely linked to the notion of the imitation of *la belle nature*. The relationship between truth and verisimilitude goes beyond the conformity between the object in nature and its imitation in a work of art. Verisimilitude, which is an artificial truth in art,³⁶ represents for Diderot the congruity between the objects of the painting and the subject matter.

Not only does Diderot notice aesthetic incongruities, but also substantive ones. Diderot asserts that Boucher’s failure to portray the truth bespeaks of his unethical views in his pictorial representation of nature. In the *Salon de 1759*, Diderot reviews Boucher’s *Nativité*, remarking on an evident lack of verisimilitude in the depiction of the historical

³⁵ DPV 14.

³⁶ In *The Rule of Reason and the Ruses of the Heart*, Rémy Saisselin explains that “*Vraisemblance* is truth in the great domain of fiction, it is truth within the man-made world of art and in the representations possible in that world” (213).

event. The clear dichotomy between the subject matter, which is the birth of Jesus, and the objects present in the painting, such as “un lit galant en baldaquin” (81) or a canopy bed misrepresents the historical event. Furthermore, while the historical moment depicted is a religious one, and as such sacred, the canopy bed connotes a libertine sensibility. As we will see later, Boucher’s representations of shepherds in his pastoral paintings involve the same mix of devotional and libertine themes.

Even though Diderot does not use the term “incongruity” in the *Salons*, he refers to it indirectly through examples from literature. For instance, in Boucher’s *Angélique et Médor*, a painting exhibited in the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot questions the presence of a pillow in the following terms: “Au-dessous d’Angélique imaginez de la draperie, un coussin, un coussin, mon ami! qui va là comme le tapis du Nicaise de la Fontaine” (59). Nicaise, who refers to the eponymous hero in one of La Fontaine’s *Contes et nouvelles* (1665), is an apprentice tradesman, whose master’s daughter falls in love with him. Even after she marries a rich man, she meets Nicaise privately. But when he sees the luxurious clothes that she is wearing, he offers to get a rug to prevent her clothes from getting dirty. While the rug in La Fontaine’s story connotes a disconnection between the object and the context, the irony rather lies in the lover who cannot seize the moment. Instead, he pays attention to details and cleanliness, and abases himself to the point that the girl loses interest in him. Diderot’s reference to La Fontaine’s tale suggests that he perceives the concept of incongruity, but without naming it.

This is further developed in *Angélique et Médor*, as Diderot deplores the discrepancy between Ariosto’s story of *Roland Furieux* from which the painting is taken,

and Boucher's representation.³⁷ He even claims that aside from the title of the painting, nothing helps the spectator to identify the characters or the scene. Diderot's reference to "Roland furieux" shows that he expects the artistic creation to conform to the literary story: "Eh mordieu!" he exclaims, "il n'y avait qu'à se laisser mener par le poète. Comme le lieu de son aventure est plus beau, plus grand, plus pittoresque et mieux choisi!" (*Salon de 1765*, 59). The ideal model of beauty for Diderot remains then closely connected to the literary treatment of the subject matter.³⁸ Diderot seems to ignore Boucher's painting, and focuses on the traditional depiction of Médor engraving the names of the two lovers on the trunk of a tree.³⁹ In his narrative, Diderot distances himself from the message that Boucher's rococo iconography transmits, where the cupids who encircle the tree with garlands suggest desire and even erotic love. Diderot's virulent outburst against Boucher's quasi-libertine creations suggests an ethical questioning of the lewd representation of the nude in a work of art: "Cet homme ne prend le pinceau que pour me montrer des tétons et des fesses. Je suis bien aise d'en voir, mais je ne veux pas qu'on me les montre" (*Salon de 1765*, 59). Diderot is not against nudity in itself, but rather is troubled by Boucher's enticement. He objects to the awakening of desire in the spectator that such a painting prompts.

³⁷ Diderot describes Boucher's painting as follows: "Du même côté, mais sur un plan plus enfoncé, Médor debout, vu de face, le corps penché, porte sa main vers le tronc d'un arbre sur lequel il écrit apparemment les deux vers de Quinault, ces deux vers que Lulli a si bien mis en musique, et qui donnent lieu à toute la bonté d'âme de Roland de se montrer et de me faire pleurer quand les autres rient:

Angélique engage son coeur,
Médor en est vainqueur (*Salon de 1765*, 58)

³⁸ Diderot insists on the connection between art and poetry as expressed by Horace in the *Ars poetica*, "ut pictura poesis." As Rémy Saisselin explains in *Ut Pictura Poesis: Dubos to Diderot*, taste in the eighteenth century emerged as a confluence of the sister arts, in which men of letters and artists influenced one another (145).

³⁹ Toussaint Dubreuil (1561-1602) and Abraham Bloemaert (1564-1602) are precedents who indeed painted *Angélique et Médor* following more closely the traditional epic narrative by Ludovico Ariosto.

The representation of the nude, male or female, was, of course, common in the arts of Diderot's time. In countless history paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the gods of Greek and Roman antiquity are represented as nudes to show ideals of beauty. When Diderot reviews Carle Van Loo's painting *Les Grâces enchaînées par l'Amour* in the *Salon de 1763*, he makes a distinction between a nude female figure and one whose body parts are covered with a piece of cloth:

Une figure toute nue n'est point indécente. Placez un linge entre la main de la Vénus de Médicis, et la partie de son corps que cette main veut me dérober, et vous aurez fait d'une Vénus pudique une Vénus lascive... (343).

Diderot suggests that when a painter adds any type of material such as a garland or a cloth to cover parts of the body that moral decency demands concealing, the beholder's gaze becomes fixated on precisely those areas. It is Diderot's acute sensitivity to the differentiation between the classical nude and Boucher's indecent representation of the body that urges him to expose Boucher as a painter whose lifestyle contributed to lower moral standards:

Que voulez-vous que cet artiste jette sur sa toile? Ce qu'il a dans l'imagination. Et que peut avoir dans l'imagination un homme qui passe sa vie avec les prostituées du plus bas étage? (*Salon de 1765*, 54)

While one can claim that Diderot judges "the man rather than the work" (May and Topazio 7), Diderot's harsh critiques are triggered only by Boucher's fanciful paintings. Gita May maintains that Diderot's "polarity between his ethical preoccupations and his spontaneous enjoyment of purely pictorial values [...] explains his grudging admiration of Fragonard and Boucher, painters whose brio he keenly appreciated but whose clever exploitation of playful, libertine themes he deplored" (May and Topazio 14).

The resulting tension between Diderot's ethical demands and Boucher's libertine imprint is indicative of the former's attention to the ideal of art form, and of the latter's wanting to conform to the buyer's taste of the time. Diderot's objections to Boucher's salacious representation of the female nude extend to the libertine overtones in his treatment of idyllic bucolic life. In the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot complains about Boucher's meaningless pastoral paintings and wishes to see instead the mores of shepherds as represented in ancient bucolic poetry. The reference to Theocritus, and to Longus' "Daphnis and Chloe"⁴⁰ allows Diderot to set up a divide between the simple, naïve and true form of pastoral life depicted in this ancient bucolic poetry, and Boucher's idyllic and imaginary life of shepherds. What is striking in Diderot's narrative is that in his "engagement philosophique," he seems to steer the reader into an ethical interpretation of the painting.

The lack of verisimilitude in Boucher's idealized pastoral paintings can also be interpreted as social incongruity. In his discussion of Boucher's *Pastorale* in the *Salon de 1761*, Diderot criticizes the very subject of the painting, which portrays shepherds and shepherdesses dressed in silk clothes, sitting in the countryside, and surrounded by sheep, cattle, dogs, water and cauldrons. The luxurious clothing of the shepherds and their disengagement from their obligations show the misrepresentation of a social class. While Diderot calls this painting an absurdity, he also claims that one is attracted to it: "avec tout cela, on ne saurait quitter le tableau. Il vous attache. On y revient. C'est un vice si agréable" (222). Diderot praises the aesthetic effect of the painting in terms of the magical creation of light and shadows, but not in terms of the ethical message. On the

⁴⁰ See *Salon de 1765*, 65: Théocrite is the creator of ancient Greek bucolic poetry in the third century B.C. Longus is a Greek novelist and romancer in the second century A.D.

ethical level, conventional shepherds display a simple life typified by devotion. Yet on the visual level, Boucher's shepherds suggest a decadent lifestyle.

Diderot seized here on a crucial trait in Boucher. His pastoral paintings are indeed not based on any prior literary texts, but present affinities to Honoré d'Urfé's pastoral romance *L'Astrée* where the *mondain* is disguised as a shepherd in order to imagine himself living in a different world, and escape his own.⁴¹ Similarly, Boucher's pastorals display a crucial distortion in the depiction of the shepherds. He exploits an idealized vision of the simple life of shepherds, and reinforces the dichotomy between the costume, which identifies the characters of his paintings as the Regency élite, and the status of the characters, which can be identified as shepherds through the idealized landscape. Even though Boucher in his *pastorales* represented natural elements associated with bucolic life, he didn't represent conventional shepherds taking care of their flocks of sheep. He modified the status of the conventional shepherd and created a new imagery of made-up shepherds portrayed as pleasurably idle, and exhibiting frivolous sentimental love.

In the *Salons de 1765*, Diderot makes an analogy between Boucher's shepherdesses and the opera actress Favart in order to show that Boucher's pastoral paintings are not a representation of nature but rather a representation of poses in a performance, surrounded with symbolic objects: "La grâce de ses Bergères est la grâce de la Favart dans *Rose et Colas*" (54).⁴² While Boucher provides the beholder with different scenes of erotic symbolism, through a servile imitation of actors' theatrical poses from

⁴¹ In *L'imaginaire pastoral du XVII^e siècle*, Jean-Pierre Van Elslande explains that the fascination for the shepherds stems from the relationship between the pastoral and two currents of sensibilities: devotion and libertinage (2). He takes Honoré d'Urfé's pastoral romance *L'Astrée* (1607-1628) as a frame of reference, in which the characters bear a dual attitude: a "mondain" and a shepherd.

⁴² *Rose et Colas* is an *opéra comique* in one act, written by Michel-Jean Sedaine (1719-1797).

the comic opera, he fails to satisfy Diderot's requirement for the painting's narrative power, and as a result, the work of art remains without meaning: "Qu'est-ce que cela dit? Rien" says Diderot commenting on Boucher's *Autre pastorale* (*Salon de 1765*, 65).

Diderot's rages against Boucher's lack of taste, and his refusal to abide by the rule of verisimilitude, make him exclaim to himself "[h]ors du Salon, hors du Salon" (*Salon de 1765*, 61). Diderot does not consider Boucher's productions as worthy of being hung in the Louvre because according to him, Boucher is not able to capture the ideal model of beauty, to be constructed through the reconciliation of senses and thought, aesthetics and ethics. Unable to represent nature at its truest potential, Boucher is only imitating an imitation.

Diderot's request for meaning in painters' productions is rooted in his search for a universal principle that will reveal the structure of nature. In his review of *La Bergerie*, Diderot rejects Boucher's use of excessive detail, which he feels hamper the beholder's efforts to uncover the organization of the whole painting:

Mais que signifient ce vase et son piédestal? Que signifient ces lourdes branches dont il est surmonté? Quand on écrit, faut-il tout écrire? Quand on peint, faut-il tout peindre? De grâce, laissez quelque chose à suppléer par mon imagination. (*Salon de 1763*, 356)

Boucher's need to supply all the details may be interpreted as his tendency to create an idealized nature based on "le fabuleux." However, Diderot notices that the canvas has been so utilized in terms of space that he writes: "[p]oint d'air. Point de repos" (*Salon de 1763*, 356). These two fragmented propositions illustrate in Diderot's narrative itself the lack of space, and a feeling of suffocation. There is no space for the beholder to imagine anything else, or to add what is missing; everything has been given to him. There is thus

no possibility of unveiling the structures that make up *la belle nature*, because Boucher's accumulation of details interferes with the idea of a purified art. In his artistic productions, Boucher strives to create a beautified vision of nature, and consequently fails to assemble in his mind elements that may exist in reality and that would constitute the ideal model of beauty.

Throughout the *Salons*, Diderot condemns Boucher's paintings for their "beautified" imprint. In the process of beautification, Boucher cannot follow the rule of verisimilitude, which is a prerequisite for congruity for the philosopher. His colors are too brilliant, and the objects become insignificant for Diderot, especially when the painting becomes a hodgepodge: "une confusion d'objets entassés les uns sur les autres, si déplacés, si disparates, que c'est moins le tableau d'un homme sensé que le rêve d'un fou" (*Salon de 1765*, 54). Diderot highlights the absence of organization in Boucher's artistic productions. The accumulation of discordant objects hampers not only the beholder's identification of each object, but also that of the meaning of the whole painting.

It is in his writings on nature that Diderot expounds his views. In *De l'interprétation de la nature*, he suggests that the organization in nature, and not the details in themselves can expose the true constitution of reality, which is often difficult to distinguish because of the accumulation of too many parts. Manifested in different shapes and forms, the structure of nature is governed by a unifying principle so that the whole is in harmony with the parts. Thus, Diderot talks about a common prototype that connects different manifestations since modifications over time could occur in its organizational structure. For example, when he discusses the chain of beings in nature,

Diderot insists on continuity, and suggests that the different productions of nature generated by the metamorphoses that occur in the prototype show variety in forms even though they retain a resemblance in their parts. What is more telling about Diderot's interpretation is his final metaphor of such an underlying structure as an elusive woman whose changing appearance promises glimpses of her constitution which the onlooker hopes to know:

Il semble que la nature se soit plu à varier le même mécanisme d'une infinité de manières différentes. [...] Quand on voit les métamorphoses successives de l'enveloppe du prototype, quel qu'il ait été, [...], qui ne se sentirait porté à croire qu'il n'y a jamais eu qu'un premier être prototype de tous les êtres ? [...] Car il est évident que la nature n'a pu conserver tant de ressemblance dans les parties et affecter tant de variété dans les formes, sans avoir souvent rendu sensible dans un être organisé, ce qu'elle a dérobé dans un autre. C'est une femme qui aime à se travestir, et dont les différents déguisements, laissant échapper tantôt une partie tantôt une autre, donnent quelque espérance à ceux qui la suivent avec assiduité, de connaître un jour toute sa personne. (*De l'interprétation de la nature* 36-38)⁴³

Diderot explains the forms of nature by using the image of a disguised woman who would unveil herself part by part, but the task of reassembling all the parts and linking them together remains the responsibility of the beholder. In the *Éléments de physiologie*, Diderot states, "La forme n'est souvent qu'un masque qui trompe, et le chaînon qui paraît manquer réside peut-être dans un être connu, à qui les progrès de l'anatomie comparée n'ont encore pu assigner sa véritable place" (296).⁴⁴

Diderot's argument on the forms of nature implies that the structure of the parts in a painting can also elude the beholder. I argued that Diderot considers the accumulation of disparate objects as an incongruity since the link that would bind all these objects into a cohesive whole appears to be missing. I see the missing link in Boucher's refusal to

⁴³ DPV 9.

⁴⁴ DPV 17.

construct an ideal model of beauty, equally imbued with morality as one of Diderot's ideals. It is the reconciliation of ethics and aesthetics in the discourse on works of arts that can explain how Diderot can grasp the whole of the works of art. Through the metaphor of a woman in disguise, Diderot calls for the painters' active participation to remove the accumulated details in their artistic production, and to discover part by part the whole of nature. Boucher's paintings are not enticing enough because they fail to seduce the spectator, who remains outside the artwork. Comparable to an overly made-up woman, Boucher's paintings are too colorful, and because of the exaggeration of details, it becomes difficult to uncover the structure of nature in his artistic productions. The connection between the parts and the whole in Boucher's painting becomes severed because its multiple dissonances ultimately result in the disintegration of the painting as a whole. His pastorales are thus reduced to nothing because the numerous dissonances hinder the beholder's ability to perceive the harmony of the totality. While the goal of art is to render nature "perfectible" so that it becomes pleasing to the eyes, Diderot urges painters to avoid the excess of artifice and to show the hidden prototype instead. It is through the painters' repeated trials and errors that the creation of *la belle nature* will be actualized, and its structure revealed.

When Diderot suggested the need for dissonance in *Les mémoires de mathématiques* (1748) and *Leçons de clavecin et principe d'harmonie* (1771), as I have discussed previously, he insisted on the beneficial result of a measured amount of dissonances on the listener or the beholder to single out the harmonious parts. But, in Boucher's productions, the overly obtrusive dissonances monopolize, absorb and consume the paintings.

Incongruity and mystification: a study of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's paintings in the *Salons*

While he criticizes historical, narrative, social and aesthetic incongruities in Boucher's productions, and acts only as an outside spectator when confronted with Boucher's imaginary creations, Diderot himself when dealing with Greuze's paintings creates his own narrative incongruities imbued with an ethical charge. Indeed, Diderot's narrative strategies vary from a discrete irruption of his thoughts channeled by a figure in the painting, to the elaboration of a fictional dialogue with a character. His unique approach in manipulating Greuze's paintings by bringing life to the characters and interacting with them is a productive analytical tool motivated by the paintings themselves.

For unlike Boucher, Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) will enthrall Diderot with his capacity for infusing his artistic productions with an ethical dimension. When Diderot contemplates Greuze's artistic creations in the Salons of 1763 and 1765, he is attracted by the moral values and the true representation of the subject matter: "Voici votre peintre et le mien; le premier qui se soit avisé parmi nous de donner des mœurs à l'art..." (*Salon de 1765*, 177). In this conversation with Grimm, Diderot announces that he is Greuze's supporter in his pioneering spirit of introducing morality in art. In fact, Diderot calls this genre "la peinture morale":

D'abord le genre me plaît. C'est la peinture morale. Quoi donc, le pinceau n'a-t-il pas été assez et trop longtemps consacré à la débauche et au vice? ne devons-nous pas être satisfaits de le voir concourir enfin avec la poésie dramatique à nous toucher, à nous instruire, à nous corriger et à nous inviter à la vertu? Courage, mon ami Greuze! Fais de la morale en peinture, et fais-en toujours comme cela. (*Salon de 1763*, 394)

Diderot defends his position as a Greuze's sympathizer by reminding his readers of the painting's goal in the classical tradition to please and instruct the beholder, which was the ultimate aim of paintings.

In order to understand Greuze's professional trajectory, it is important to remember that painters in eighteenth-century France were subjected to competitions and rules set up by the Academy of Painting and Sculpture. They first had to present a *pièce d'agrégation* (admission piece), which would allow them to have their painting hung in the Salon, and also present a *morceau de réception* (a reception piece), to become a member of the Academy. The Academy promoted a hierarchy of genres, and ranked history paintings, in other words paintings based on historical or mythological subjects, as the highest genre. Genre paintings, the portrait and still life came next in line. More importantly, only history painters could become professors, or maintain a respectable function in the Academy, and this is exactly what Greuze was seeking with his history painting *Septime Sévère et Caracalla*.⁴⁵

Adhering to the classical hierarchy of genres, Diderot requires that the imitation of nature in paintings be founded on literary or historical grounds because of the moral value of the subject matter, and as a reaction against the Rococo artistic style.⁴⁶

However, in his *Essais sur la peinture*, Diderot seems to propose a broader definition of historical paintings to include Greuze and Vernet's work. He argues that the imitators of

⁴⁵ See *Salon de 1769*, in DPV 16: 641. The full title of this painting is *L'Empereur Sévère reproche à Caracalla son fils, d'avoir voulu l'assassiner dans les défilés d'Écosse, et lui dit: Si tu désires ma mort, ordonne à Papinien de me la donner avec cette épée.*

⁴⁶ In *Style rococo, style des "lumières,"* Roger Lauffer mentions that the German critics used the term "Rokoko" to denote the frivolity of the time in contrast to the seriousness associated with the term "Aufklärung" (8-9). It is important to note that the first part of the eighteenth century was pervaded by the Rococo style of painting. Its origins stem from Watteau's *fêtes galantes*, a genre exemplified by his famous painting *L'Embarquement pour Cythère* (1717). Painters such as Boucher and Fragonard followed Watteau's groundwork and were renowned for being painters of pleasure.

still life should be called genre painters, and the imitators of “sensitive and living nature,” history painters.⁴⁷ He contends that Greuze’s familial scenes and Vernet’s seaports trigger in his imagination an array of anecdotes,⁴⁸ and he consequently places these two painters at the same level as history painters such as Poussin, Le Brun or Van Loo.

In June 1755, Greuze was admitted (*agr  *) to the Acad  mie royale de peinture et de sculpture as a genre painter, and was supposed to present his reception piece—a genre painting—six months later, which he failed to do. Fourteen years later, ignoring the Academy’s conventions, he submitted instead a history painting *Septime S  v  re et Caracalla* as his reception piece in order to be accepted as a history painter. His strategy disconcerted many academicians since he did not abide by the set rules and procedures that the history painters had to follow before starting the official piece. Even though Greuze was considered the most important genre painter of his day (see Crow 134), he was not approved at the Academy as a history painter on the basis of *Septime S  v  re et Caracalla*. In fact, artists, critics and Academicians responded to it with scorn.⁴⁹ He was, however, received as a genre painter because of his prior acclaimed work.

⁴⁷ “Il me semble que la division de la peinture en peinture de genre et peinture d’histoire est sens  e, mais je voudrais qu’ on e  t un peu plus consult   la nature des choses dans cette division. On appelle du nom de peintres de genre indistinctement et ceux qui ne s’ occupent que des fleurs, des fruits, des animaux, des bois, des for  ts, des montagnes, et ceux qui empruntent leurs sc  nes de la vie commune et domestique; Tesniere, Wowermans, Greuze, Chardin, Louthembourg, Vernet m  me sont des peintres de genre. Cependant je proteste que le P  re qui fait la lecture    sa famille, le Fils ingrat, et les Fian  ailles de Greuze, que les Marines de Vernet qui m’ offrent toutes sortes d’ incidents et de sc  nes, sont autant pour moi des tableaux d’ histoire que les Sept Sacrements du Poussin, la Famille de Darius de Le Brun, ou la Suzanne de Van Loo. Voici ce que c’ est. La nature a diversifi   les   tres en froids, immobiles, non vivants, non sentants, non pensants, et en   tres qui vivent, sentent et pensent. La ligne   tait trac  e de toute   ternit  : il fallait appeler peintres de genre les imitateurs de la nature brute et morte; peintres d’ histoire, les imitateurs de la nature sensible et vivante; et la querelle   tait finie” (*Essais sur la peinture* in DPV 14: 398-399).

⁴⁸ Diderot had mentioned in the *Salon de 1765* that Greuze has the talent of depicting an event from which it would be easy to write a novel: “le premier qui se soit avis   ... d’ encha  ner des   v  nements d’ apr  s lesquels il serait facile de faire un roman” (177).

⁴⁹ For an exhaustive account of the reception of Greuze’s *Septime S  v  re et Caracalla*, see Jean Sez nec, “Diderot et l’ affaire Greuze,” *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 67 (1966): 339-56.

This painting, as we shall see, problematizes the productive tension between ethics and aesthetics. In his *Septime Sévère et Caracalla*, Greuze treats the subject of parricide in a Roman setting. The emperor Septimius Severus is scolding his son Caracalla for attempting to kill him. While the ethical element is a key component of historical paintings, so is the ease of comprehending the historical subject matter. However, Greuze chose a theme derived from the Roman historian Cassius Dio's *Roman History*,⁵⁰ which could not be easily identified by the French public, artists or academicians. Without the expanded title of the work, the subject matter is not necessarily identified as an attempted murder. The weapon – a sword – placed on a table next to the father's bed does not provide many background details either. Surely, Diderot sensed that Greuze's painting was endowed with what we would call today an anthropological dimension. Notably, *Septime Sévère et Caracalla* is a representation of the interaction between father and son, rather than the representation of a historical fact.

Apart from the indecipherability of the subject matter, Diderot and the Academicians had many objections to his aesthetic form. His lack of draftsmanship is evident in the deformity of Septime Sévère's limbs: "il a le poignet cassé" says Diderot and "la distance du cou au sternum est démesurée; on ne sait où va ni à quoi appartient le genou de la cuisse droite qui fait relever la couverture" (*Salon de 1769*, 644). Furthermore, the Academicians did not appreciate the painting because it attempted to convey a narrative through poor corporeal gestures and lowly expressions. Indeed, as Diderot remarks, Septime Sévère's right arm is extended and his right index finger is pointed at his son, but his action remains obscure:

⁵⁰ According to Mark Ledbury, the Roman history of Severus and Caracalla was unknown to French artists and commentators (171).

Le Septime Sévère est ignoble de caractère; il a la peau noire et basanée d'un forçat; son action est équivoque. [...]. Le Caracalla est plus ignoble encore que son père, c'est un vil et bas coquin; l'artiste n'a pas eu l'art d'allier la méchanceté avec la noblesse. C'est d'ailleurs une figure de bois sans mouvement et sans souplesse. (*Salon de 1769*, 644-645)

Greuze did not earn critical acclaim with his first trial history painting because of the aforementioned poor aesthetic form and obscure subject matter. Beyond these issues, he also offended the Academy by transgressing their conventions. By blending aspects of history and genre painting, he threatened the exclusivity of historical paintings and the privileges that history painters derived from their position in the Academy.⁵¹ Indeed, Diderot explains that Greuze left his genre and attempted a new artistic concept, where he combined the sentimentality of genre painting with the gravitas of antiquity.

The final aesthetic judgment of Diderot hinges on the simplicity of the background, which consists of an expansive wall covered with a piece of cloth, and on the rusticity of the setting. Here, on the other hand, on the account of an imitation that is closer to nature, Greuze succeeded where Boucher had failed. The former followed the Hellenic ideal by choosing an historical subject and by representing it with severity, simplicity and greatness; the latter only accumulated objects in order to embellish his paintings.

Even though *Septime Sévère et Caracalla* had been debased and deemed as a failure, it allows us to conclude that moral content alone – in this case, the ethical question of parricide – is not enough for an appreciation of the beautiful because the subject matter is hardly decipherable. Furthermore, the lack of aptitude in aesthetic form

⁵¹ Mark Ledbury argues that the critics feared Greuze's innovative idea of contaminating history painting with genre painting (see 162).

causes the disintegration of the painting since Greuze's craftsmanship does not help clarify the topic. The simultaneous presence of both ethics and aesthetics – which is lacking in this painting – is critical because it is their mutual interaction that allows for the production of meaning.

This is demonstrated in Diderot's attitude to his other familial paintings. Excelling as a genre painter, Greuze depicted mainly human actions in a familial setting and focused on moral issues in the family circle of peasant life. Indeed, he was highly esteemed for the genre paintings that he produced between 1755 and 1765. Contrary to Boucher, whose creations emanate only from his imagination, Greuze is a painter who observes man in private and public spaces:

[Greuze] porte son talent partout, dans les cohues populaires, dans les églises, aux marchés, aux promenades, dans les maisons, dans les rues; sans cesse il va recueillant des actions, des passions, des caractères, des expressions (*Salon de 1765*, 178-179).

It is the moral attitude of the characters in the paintings that prompts Diderot to declare that Greuze's sketches⁵² are beautiful, even sublime: "Cela est beau, très beau, sublime, tout, tout" (*Salon de 1765*, 199).

Le Fils ingrat and its matching piece *Le Fils puni* represent a sample of Greuze's productions, and they both portray simple life in the countryside with a focus on family interactions. Diderot pinpoints moral values in Greuze's paintings even amidst family discord. In the review of these two sketches, Diderot tells the story that can be extracted, but his narrative is charged with a discrete irruption of his thoughts, which are then transferred and tacked onto a character. For instance, in *Le Fils ingrat*, the oldest son

⁵²I am referring to the two matching sketches *Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni* that were exhibited at the Louvre in 1765.

goes against his parents' wishes and enlists voluntarily in the army.⁵³ The son triggers the father's anger because the old man feels that his son should not join the army unless forced to do so. To underscore filial defiance, Diderot stresses the generational gap and opposes "le bon vieillard" to "le jeune libertin" (*Salon de 1765*, 197). The father is outraged by his son's decision to leave the house and to abandon his filial duties, which consequently will reduce the family to an even more dire state of poverty.

The son's ingratitude toward his parents is founded on the breach within the family of the mutual understanding that a child's upbringing will be compensated for by his labor in supporting his family later (Barker 78). In order to stress the son's immoral behavior toward his parents, Diderot creates a narrative in which one of the daughters attempts to reinstate the moral order in the household by conversing with the culprit: "Malheureux, que fais-tu? Tu repousses ta mère, tu menaces ton père; mets-toi à genoux, et demande pardon" (*Salon de 1765*, 197). In his ekphrasis, Diderot describes the son's violent gestures against both his parents, which are visible in the painting, but the plea to kneel to ask for forgiveness is imagined. Described as an unnatural son, the ungrateful son will be blamed by Diderot in the matching piece *Le Fils puni* for the death of his father.

The story continues in *Le Fils puni*, where the son comes back from the army and finds his father dead. Diderot once again accompanies his description of the painting with imagined narratives generated by the characters' gestures and facial expressions. He describes the grieving mother in the following way: "Elle se tait; mais ses bras tendus vers le cadavre lui disent: tiens, vois, regarde, voilà l'état où tu l'as mis" (*Salon de 1765*,

⁵³ Emma Barker explains that the army was obligatory for peasant boys, who were chosen by drawing lots (see *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment* 78).

199). The extended arms directed toward the body of the father speak to Diderot. The mother's silence indicating her emotional state, she cannot utter one word and her physical gesture may not necessarily be interpreted as an accusation. However, in his narrative, Diderot does not allow the reader to identify with the son, and blames him for the death of his father. The mother's gestures arouse Diderot's emotions, and these, in turn, generate Diderot's narrative.⁵⁴ He supplies the missing words of the mother, and this imagined narrative accentuates the pathos of the scene. He goes beyond the description of what Greuze's painting illustrates, and his intrusions function as a trigger to arouse an emotional response from the reader.

Seeking to focus on the didactic aspect of these two sketches, *Le Fils puni* and *Le Fils ingrat*, Diderot states “[q]uelle leçon pour les pères et pour les enfants!” (*Salon de 1765*, 199). The son is blamed for his father's death, and carries the marks of his own ungrateful character. Diderot makes sure to point out that “[i]l a perdu la jambe dont il a repoussé sa mère, et il est perclus du bras dont il a menacé son père” (*Salon de 1765*, 199). The son in *Le Fils ingrat* was “un enfant dénaturé” (*Salon de 1765*, 197), a moral monster whose subversive behavior flew in the face of the social and cultural order of the time. In *Le Fils puni*, he becomes a physical monster bearing the imprints of war, of course, but more importantly, these outward signs of his rebelliousness against his father.

The reviews of *Le Fils ingrat* and *Le Fils puni* show that Diderot places himself at the intersection between two fields of inquiry, ethics and aesthetics. The familial disturbances in Greuze's pictorial representations attract Diderot because of the emotions they evoke. The discrete irruptions of Diderot's thoughts mediated by the daughter in *Le*

⁵⁴ Indeed, Diderot states: “Je ne sais quel effet cette courte et simple description d'une esquisse de tableau fera sur les autres; pour moi, j'avoue que je ne l'ai point faite sans émotion” (*Salon de 1765*, 199).

Fils ingrat, and by the mother in *Le Fils puni*, are striking. In this fashion, he succeeds in manipulating the meaning of the paintings in order to elicit a stronger emotional response from the reader. For Diderot, moral virtues are beautiful; moral vices are ugly. Beauty for him is a subjective judgment that is contingent on a feeling in the beholder.

At the same time, in his introduction of Greuze in the *Salon de 1765*, Diderot asserts that great crimes make beautiful paintings because of the creative power associated with the man of genius:

Je hais toutes ces petites bassesses qui ne montrent qu'une âme abjecte, mais je ne hais pas les grands crimes, premièrement parce qu'on en fait de beaux tableaux et de belles tragédies; et puis, c'est que les grandes et sublimes actions et les grands crimes portent le même caractère d'énergie. Si un homme n'était pas capable d'incendier une ville, un autre homme ne serait pas capable de se précipiter dans un gouffre pour la sauver. (178)

The analogy between sublime actions, crimes and beautiful paintings at the introduction of Greuze's review seems incongruous since Diderot praises Greuze for depicting morality in art. However, Michel Delon states that "le rapprochement entre grandes actions et grands crimes permettrait à Diderot de récupérer l'énergie criminelle, d'en espérer la reconversion" ("La Beauté du crime" 79). Indeed, the creative force of the man of genius⁵⁵ for Diderot would be to transform the energy of crime into a positive energy, that of virtue. Diderot then envisions and appreciates virtue by thinking of its opposite, vice. His argument is representative of the notion of dissonance posited in the introduction, mainly that it is through opposition that the positive action is valued. The actions of a virtuous man will be singled out and praised when contrasted with those of a wicked one.

⁵⁵The term "énergie" for Diderot means "la force créatrice du grand homme et du génie" (*Salon de 1765*, 178 note 480).

Diderot is challenging the reader to view crimes as potentially beautiful paintings. The effect of his argument is one of cognitive dissonance. This internal conflict engages the reader to participate more actively, and foments a critical response. In *Diderot's Counterpoints*, Walter Rex argues that Diderot's unexpected appeal for great crimes in art "represents an impulse to escape from, and even rebel against, Greuze's moral manipulations" (205). He also contends that this unforeseen topic "may also indicate, ... an awareness of the cruelty inherent in Greuze's allegedly moral scenes" (205). Contrary to Rex, I believe that Diderot manipulates Greuze's moral paintings. Diderot does not rebel against their moral contents but rather exploits their connotation to create an incongruous narrative, and consequently a discourse of dissonance to construct a provocative story. This phenomenon is apparent in Diderot's review of Greuze's *La jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort*, a painting exhibited in the Salon of 1765.

In Diderot's discussion of it, an unconscious fictional dialogue takes place between our art critic and the figure of the painting, a young girl.⁵⁶ The insertion of a narrative fiction into a visual representation of a young girl crying for her dead bird actually modifies the original meaning of the painting, which disappears. Diderot reinscribes the subject of the painting in his moral telling of the story, and converses with the young girl: "Çà, petite, ouvrez-moi votre coeur, parlez-moi vrai" (*Salon de 1765*, 180). "Parlez, je ne saurais vous deviner," he continues (182). Pretending not to be able to guess the subject of her sorrow, he creates a fictional story, about a romantic meeting between the young girl and her lover, in order to embellish the one that can be deduced

⁵⁶The state of unconsciousness is suggested by Diderot's surprise at finding himself conversing with the young girl: "Bientôt on se surprend conversant avec cette enfant et la consolant" (*Salon de 1765*, 180).

from the painting. He thus transforms the discussion of the painting into a sentimental story.

The metamorphosis of the subject of the painting from the visual reality to the fictional story that Diderot creates leaves the reader confused. Which story is the real one: the one alluded to by the painting's title, or the narrative that is told to us by Diderot, namely involving the loss of virginity. Especially striking is Diderot's effort to erase from the beholder's mind the subject that the painting appears to communicate, and to replace it with the story that he created. In his search for morality in paintings, he steers us away from the literal meaning that everyone can deduce from the painting, and directs us to an ethical discourse on virginity.⁵⁷ Diderot claims that it would be absurd to think that the girl is crying over the death of her bird. The new fictional story, however, allows Diderot to get closer to the young girl, and to become a "libertin" himself, as he takes pleasure in talking to her at this time of sorrow: "On s'approcherait de cette main pour la baiser, si on ne respectait cette enfant et sa douleur" (*Salon de 1765*, 180), and he strangely adds later on: "Je n'aime point à affliger, malgré cela, il ne me déplairait pas trop d'être la cause de sa peine" (*Salon de 1765*, 182). While he is reorienting the subject of the story toward a moral purpose, Diderot's moral stance is paradoxically skewed.

Through the incongruous dialogue between Diderot and the young girl, another "literary" painting is being written with unseen actions and activities imagined by

⁵⁷ We can ask ourselves whether or not the iconography of the dead bird outside of a cage was known and understood in the eighteenth century as a loss of virginity. Else-Marie Bukdahl explains: "Diderot avait raison de dire: 'Le sujet de ce petit poème est si fin, que beaucoup de personnes ne l'ont pas entendu,' car aucun des critiques n'y a vu la nuance sexuelle qu'il y avait trouvée" (in *Diderot et l'art de Boucher à David* 240). Diderot scholars, such as Bukdahl, Lochhead, Saisselin, Michel, and Seznec (among others), strongly believe that the story that Diderot tells regarding this painting is derived from his imagination. However, in "On Diderot's Art Criticism," Mira Friedman challenges this widely shared view, and claims it was based on a symbolic meaning that was really attached to a dead bird outside of a cage.

Diderot. Indeed, three imaginary scenes make up Diderot's narrative painting. Its first two episodes, which occur before the death of the bird, are not visible in Greuze's painting. They relate to the lover's visit and the girl's mother's attempt to console her, unaware of the reason of the grief. Diderot finally describes the last scene, the death of the bird, which is the moment depicted by Greuze.

Beauty for Diderot does not lie in the visible, but in the hidden nature that has to be unveiled through the creative force of a dynamic narrative. Nature is not fixed but in the process of becoming through a constant reconfiguration of all its different parts. Diderot seeks to imitate this movement of nature in his writing. He attempts to restructure his thoughts and his interpretations of a painting by altering its subject matter. His narrative strategy is grounded in a fictitious dialogue with the crying girl of the painting in order to embellish the apparent story of the artwork. When Diderot determines that there is not enough beauty in the story of the painting, he suggests it in his creative narrative. The exercise in itself is incongruous since Diderot goes beyond ekphrasis and creates a discrepancy between the ostensible subject of the painting and his description of it. He thus accomplishes at the narrative level exactly what he reproaches Boucher for doing at the aesthetic level, which is to prettify a painting. While Boucher aestheticizes his artistic creations, Diderot uses the same principle of rendering the painting more attractive through a different interpretation of the subject matter. But contrary to Boucher, Diderot succeeds in creating a stimulating fictional narrative, which captivates the reader.

We cannot lose sight of the fact that, when writing the *Salons*, Diderot addresses his friend Melchior Grimm, a real reader who also becomes a virtual character inside the

narrative. In reviewing this particular painting, he speaks to him in the following terms: “Mais, mon ami, ne riez-vous pas, vous d’entendre un grave personnage s’amuser à consoler une enfant en peinture de la perte de son oiseau, de la perte de tout ce qu’il vous plaira?” (*Salon de 1765*, 182). The verbs “s’amuser” and “rire” suggest a playful demeanor when writing the *Salon*. To be sure, Diderot’s narrative mystifies the reader because the boundary between truth and fiction in the representation is being blurred. By incorporating a fictional dialogue between him and the young painted figure, he transgresses the limits of art criticism. But his transgression enables him to create a memorable and titillating narrative about morality.

It also allows him to develop further his philosophical intuition about beauty. Not satisfied by the most direct meaning of the painting – a young girl crying for the death of her bird – Diderot replaces it with a fictional one – a young girl crying because of the loss of her virginity. The crafting of the new imagined and provoking story creates the “beau par rapport à moi,” or “le beau relatif,” to borrow Diderot’s words, which awakens a network of relationships in the reader’s mind. The sexual attraction between Diderot/ beholder and the girl is cogent in itself, and Diderot’s purpose is to reveal the covert subject of deflowering. The obscure and conjectural sexual innuendo asserted by Diderot uncovers a less certain meaning but a more dynamic painting, with elements that contribute to its beauty.

Incongruity and Claude-Joseph Vernet's magical nature

Diderot's analysis of "La Promenade Vernet"⁵⁸ pushes the mystification that he used in Greuze's painting *La jeune fille qui pleure son oiseau mort* even further. While he dialogues with Greuze's crying young girl from outside the painting, in Vernet's review Diderot transgresses boundaries between nature and art on the one hand, text and image on the other.

The description of Vernet's seven paintings in the *Salon de 1767* is grounded in an inconspicuous and original illusion. Diderot sets up his review on Vernet as if he were interrupting his daily visits to the Louvre for some vacation time in a neighboring countryside:

J'avais écrit le nom de cet artiste au haut de ma page et j'allais vous entretenir de ses ouvrages, lorsque je suis parti pour une campagne voisine de la mer et renommée pour la beauté de ses sites. (174)

This witty diversion functions as a deliberate ploy used to deceive the reader. While Diderot claims that he is delaying his review of Vernet, the reader soon realizes that Diderot describes his paintings from within, in other words, from inside the pictorial domain. He stages a promenade with a fictional abbé and his two pupils. During this fabricated stroll in the countryside, Diderot and the abbé exchange ideas about philosophy and art. Diderot feigns to ignore Vernet and his paintings, and describes the natural sites that he seems to see and experience during his illusory vacation. He gives an account of seven landscapes, which he titles "Premier site," "deuxième site," etc., until

⁵⁸ In a letter to Grimm, Diderot refers to his criticism of Vernet's landscapes as "promenade Vernet": "Et voilà ce qui aurait fait un joli paragraphe de la promenade Vernet." *Correspondance*, ed. Georges Roth, vol. 8 (Paris: Minuit, 1955) 199. Future references to this edition will be indicated by the abbreviation "Corr."

the last one, which he calls “septième tableau.” The change of vocabulary from “site” to “tableau” shows the progression between a narrative based on an illusion, which places the narrator in a “natural” site, and one that places him back to the original space: the Louvre.

The fictional narrative that Diderot imagines is anchored in the virtual natural sites. The physical infiltration of the narrator-beholder inside Vernet’s paintings, and his “absorption”⁵⁹ in the consequently demystified nature shows that Diderot perceives the work of art “non comme une entité absolue, mais comme une expérience vécue” (Gita May, *Diderot et Baudelaire* 68). In *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Michael Fried examines “Promenade Vernet” in terms of the physical entry of the narrator-beholder in the paintings (see 122). He explains that “[i]t was only by negating the beholder’s presence that this could be achieved: only by establishing the fiction of his absence or nonexistence could his actual placement before and enthrallment by the painting be secured” (103). Diderot’s literary maneuver, which I consider an incongruity, consists in a fictional travel beyond space and time, inside Vernet’s seven landscape paintings. The effect of this literary craftiness is a cognitive dissonance throughout the review.

His physical positioning inside the paintings creates, however, discussions about beauty and morality. In those debates, the insertion and movement of the beholder within the paintings and the corresponding jolts that the reader experiences as he is lured in and

⁵⁹ I borrow the term “absorption” from Michael Fried’s *Absorption and Theatricality*. Fried considers the “Promenade Vernet” in terms of the fiction that Diderot imagines, which is “the fiction of physically entering a group of paintings” (122).

out of Diderot's illusions, develop in discrete touches Diderot's view that beauty lies in a morality based on men's attitudes towards others.

As an active participant inside the paintings, Diderot succeeds in experiencing the beauty of nature in all its variety, and this unusual exposure triggers debates on morality between himself and his guide, the abbé. Diderot creates an illusion of identity between art and nature in order to demystify nature and strip it of its divine power. For him, the belief in God hinders man's understanding of morality. In *Two Diderot Studies: Ethics and Aesthetics*, Crocker suggests that in the Diderotian universe, "the concept of God is ethically, as well as scientifically sterile" (6).

Diderot denies God's involvement in the beauty of nature as well, and thus rejects the existence of nature as finality. He proposes instead a dynamic nature which functions under random forces. This changing nature prompts a discussion between Diderot and the abbé, which is set up so as to express opposite views. On the one hand, the abbé stands firmly in his convictions that only God could have made the beautiful sites that they are admiring.⁶⁰ On the other hand, Diderot claims that the nature that they both revere is Vernet's work. The interchangeability of nature and art is important because Diderot wants to suggest that while Vernet's paintings can teach the abbé to look at nature, nature can teach ways to look at a painting. Vernet succeeds in creating a beautiful nature through art, and Diderot transposes this artificial beauty to become part of an imaginary "natural" site. Consequently, Diderot calls Vernet a magician because the artist is able to dupe the observer into believing that what he sees is true. And in turn, Diderot can be called "un artisan d'illusions" because he wants to make the reader

⁶⁰The abbé says: "Vous avez beau dire Vernet, Vernet; je ne quitterai point la nature pour courir après son image. Quelque sublime que soit l'homme; ce n'est pas Dieu" (*Salon de 1767*, 177).

believe that the art critic is in front of a real landscape while he is in front of a work of art. At the end of the sixth landscape, the secret is revealed. Diderot divulges that he created the illusion, namely that he was standing in front of nature while he was actually in the Salon looking at Vernet's landscapes:

Ce n'est point un port de mer que l'artiste a voulu peindre. Oui, mon ami, l'*artiste*. Mon secret m'est échappé, et il n'est plus temps de recourir après. Entraîné par le charme du Clair de lune de Vernet, j'ai oublié que je vous avais fait un conte jusqu'à présent: que je m'étais supposé devant la nature, et l'illusion était bien facile; et tout à coup je me suis retrouvé de la campagne, au Salon... (*Salon de 1767*, 223)⁶¹

The crafting of illusions is a manifestation of Diderot's intellectual reflection. His thought process is displayed through unusual and strange narrative stratagems developed in his review of the third site. The specificity of his immersion inside this marine landscape lies in his interaction with painted figures. Diderot and the abbé are stranded on one side of a bay, which they have to cross to reach the château, their residence in the countryside. They decide to ask bargemen to take them on their boat and “[c]e qui fut dit, fut fait. Nous voilà embarqués, et vingt lorgnettes d'opéra braquées sur nous, et notre arrivée saluée par des cris de joie qui partaient de la terrasse et du sommet du château: nous y répondîmes selon l'usage” (189). While Diderot and the abbé in the other sites were only spectators who related their experiences from inside the landscape, they are now depicted as actors on stage. Through a role reversal, they become the objects of art that spectators see from the château, and they even bow at the cheering of the spectators.

As Diderot and the abbé are led to modify their conventional roles of spectators to become actors, the direction of the gaze is reversed, and the people from the terrace of the château see them cross the bay and react joyfully to their safe return. But Diderot does

⁶¹ The ellipses are part of Diderot's text.

not end the review of this site on a pleasant note. The dramatization of the first crossing of the bay is followed by Diderot's desire to create a more poeticized narrative, as he imagines a violent nature trapping him, the abbé and his pupils in its turmoil. Diderot, however, does not express his reaction to the storm, but rather communicates the reader's (or Grimm's) hypothetical response to the spectators' cries and pleading gestures.

Je vous raconte simplement la chose. Dans un moment plus poétique, j'aurais déchaîné les vents, soulevé les flots, montré la petite nacelle tantôt voisine des nues, tantôt précipitée au fond des abîmes; vous auriez frémi pour l'instituteur, ses jeunes élèves, et le vieux philosophe votre ami. J'aurais porté de la terrasse à vos oreilles, les cris des femmes éplorées. Vous auriez vu sur l'esplanade du château des mains levées vers le ciel; mais il n'y aurait pas eu un mot de vrai. (189-190)

Diderot seeks to show that paintings that contain a moral subject matter awaken his imagination, and stimulate his urge to design a tale. He recognizes that the purpose of poeticizing an art review rests on creating an effect of terror and horror. The imaginary crossing of the bay in calm and stormy waters is followed, as we shall see by imaginary shipwrecks inspired by Vernet's paintings.

While Diderot forcefully criticized Boucher's paintings for their lack of a moral objective, he found that Vernet's landscapes responded to his ideal, which is based on the presence of morality as one of the criteria for the beautiful: "Arrêtez à la surface de l'œil une image; que l'impression n'en passe ni à l'esprit ni au cœur, et elle n'aura plus rien de beau" (*Salon de 1767*, 195). James Creech maintains that Diderot values moralistic scenes more for their dramatic effect and less for their actual moral significance (68). Jean Starobinski also argues that it is not morality as such that interests Diderot, but the resulting emotional effect that ensues (*Diderot dans l'espace des peintres* 42). As both critics focus on the resulting sentiment generated by subjects of morality, I argue that

discussions of morality intermingled with issues of aesthetics in the *Salons* are necessary to provide the cohesiveness within a work of art. Morality in art represents the invisible link that would ultimately harmonize with aesthetics for the generation of the beautiful. While the surface of the work of art is made visible through line and color, morality has no form in a painting. The beholder can perceive a moral significance only if the painter chooses a subject matter that affects human understanding, and that relates to most people's experiences.

In *The Spectator and the Landscape in the Art Criticism of Diderot and His Contemporaries*, Ian Lochhead maintains that Diderot perceives the "interdependence of art and morality" in landscape paintings (11), a relationship that he elaborates in the "Promenade Vernet," in part to elevate Vernet's landscape productions to the same level as history paintings (9).⁶² More importantly, the "rapport" between morality and beauty imposed by Diderot corresponds to the representation of the "grande idée" that he always requires of painters in any genre. Morality in paintings exemplifies the overarching idea that will help the painter organize his creation, and in turn inform the beholder instantly about the subject of the painting.

For Diderot, the unifying idea that structures most of Vernet's marine paintings is the stormy seascape motif. This subject matter attracts Diderot because of the engaging confluence of an unruly nature and man's attitudes. Identified as a shipwreck, the seventh painting is according to Diderot "un tableau de l'effet le plus piquant et le plus grand" (*Salon de 1767*, 229). While he pretends to finish his account of Vernet, he continues his discussion through another subterfuge. He alleges that he is dreaming, and

⁶² Lochhead maintains that Vernet's shipwrecks' dramatic power was the key element that could rank them at the same level as history paintings.

that he is witnessing two shipwrecks, but with two different human reactions. The first shipwreck initiated by fire is a tragic scene of human cruelty. It is the representation of self-seeking individuals who would kill others to save their own lives. The second shipwreck brought about by a storm is a more pathetic scene of sailors working relentlessly to try to save everyone. It is the sailors' acts of heroism and self-sacrifice⁶³ that make Diderot cry.⁶⁴

These two versions of shipwrecks that he imagines show the ambivalence of Diderot's thoughts on morality. In the first story, in which a fire causes the accident, Diderot describes evil manifestations of human beings toward others in a time of distress. The lucky ones, who have climbed aboard a lifeboat, judge that it is necessary to kill those who try to get into it for fear that the extra weight might cause the lifeboat to sink, and everyone to perish. As the law of necessity overrides the law of morality, the screams of terror and horror of the passengers left behind can be heard. However, the residents of the region cannot watch this carnage as it is happening, and look away. Diderot's narrative exposes a moral incongruity because the essence of morality is displaced to justify, as Diderot writes, the "loi terrible de la nécessité" (230).

The second shipwreck however is caused by a storm, a natural phenomenon. According to Michel Delon, "la nature se refuse désormais à toute finalité morale ou

⁶³ In "Le naufrage ou du désordre des émotions esthétiques," Vanessa de Senarclens examines the emotional disorder, in the form of pleasure, that spectators feel when confronted with a tragic scene. She explains that the "plaisir tragique" is based on men's ambivalent moral attitudes, on the one hand cruel, on the other hand, noble (97).

⁶⁴ "Je voyais toutes ces scènes touchantes, et j'en versais des larmes réelles" (*Salon de 1767*, 231). Diderot states that he cried "real tears," and was thus afflicted by real emotions, not artificial ones such as Dubos claimed, in his *Reflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, that art could trigger. We can speculate that Diderot considers Vernet's art to represent Nature itself, and not an imitation. Diderot's emotions seem different depending on whether he is a spectator within an imagined scene or a traditional observer outside of the painting.

historique.” If nature is amoral for Diderot, as Delon suggests, then the manifestations of nature, such as a storm, are meaningless.⁶⁵ But as soon as the storm affects men and functions as a threatening force, the shipwreck induced by the storm regains a moral dimension. The cruelty that occurs in the first shipwreck is being replaced by virtuous actions in the second ship accident.

Diderot’s uncanny immersion inside the paintings allows him to experience a dynamic and unpredictable nature. This self-evolving and self-generating nature is already present in the *Lettre sur les aveugles* (1749), in which Diderot uses the blind mathematician Saunderson as evidence that the deformity displayed in the loss of sight is due to a disordered nature. After all, Saunderson raises an important question about the connection between the order of nature and a supreme being who created it. He claims that if nature were the work of God, then blind people would not exist, and anomalies of nature would not occur. Saunderson explains his vision of the workings of the world, a universe where, at the beginning of its creation, “mes semblables étaient fort communs” (51),⁶⁶ and considers the world as in continual flux, by which matter is destroyed and reformed anew in order to find the right combination of matter that can survive.

The same movement of destruction and reconstruction of the forms of nature is reproduced in the “Promenade Vernet” when the reader gets abruptly transported from site to site with no chance of return. In the “Promenade Vernet,” Jacques Chouillet interprets the static image coming to life as “la vitalisation de l’inerte” (125). Julie Arnold argues further that when Diderot enters a painting, “he jolts th[e] static image into

⁶⁵ Michel Delon states: “La tempête apparaît comme perte des références, comme une ruine du sens” (“Joseph Vernet et Diderot dans la tempête” 32).

⁶⁶ DPV 4.

movement” (18). As they are constantly jolted from one fictional space to the next, Diderot, the abbé and the reader all experience the jarring disruptions. The numerous jolts can be interpreted as the disintegration of the forms of nature, followed by their reassembly in a different combination. In the *Pensées détachées sur la peinture*, Diderot elaborates on this dynamic prototype of nature by referring to Vernet’s magical craft in these terms:

Je me lève avant l’astre du jour. Je promène mes regards sur un paysage varié par des montagnes tapissées de verdure; de grands arbres touffus s’élèvent sur leurs sommets; de vastes prairies sont étendues à leurs pieds; ces prairies sont coupées par les détours d’une rivière qui serpente. Là, c’est un château; ici, c’est une chaumière. Je vois arriver de loin le pâtre avec ses troupeaux; il sort à peine du hameau, et la poussière me dérobe encore la vue de ses animaux. Toute cette scène silencieuse et presque monotone a sa couleur terne et réelle. Cependant l’astre du jour a paru, et tout a changé par une multitude innombrable et subite de prêts et d’emprunts; c’est un autre tableau, où il ne reste pas une feuille, pas un brin d’herbe, pas un point du premier. Mets la main sur la conscience, Vernet, et réponds-moi: Es-tu le rival du soleil? Et ce prodige est-il aussi au bout de ton pinceau? (OE 809)

Diderot describes Vernet’s prototype of nature by comparing the forms of nature at two different moments: at night and by day. As soon as the sun rises, essential changes occur in the painting. Diderot seeks to show that even though the structure of the painting remains the same, a single modification such as light triggers enormous change in it. The effect of substituting darkness for light is the creation of a new painting.

To return to Diderot’s thought on the relationship between the beautiful and the true in art, as delineated in the *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel*, the conformity of the image with the real object may have been his initial concern in 1757. But the writing of the *Salons* triggers a shift in his understanding of the representation of nature in art. His focus moves toward the imitation of the ideal model of beauty, a prototype that the

painter needs to construct in his imagination before painting. Diderot conceives of the ideal model of beauty as the painters' creation of a new paradigm that surpasses Nature itself. Indeed Diderot states that artists must have in their imagination "quelque chose d'ultérieur à la nature" (*Salon de 1767*, 330).

Under his new dynamic understanding of the ideal model of beauty, Diderot shows that morality and beauty are interconnected. Analysis of his reviews of Boucher, Greuze and Vernet reveals that he does not believe in aesthetic autonomy. Even though it is a matter of interpretation, Diderot is concerned with the harmony between the whole work of art and its parts, between its content and its form, between its ethics and aesthetics. Diderot succeeds in creating in his new narrative, "literary" paintings that bear the mark of their creator's "bel esprit." He can be described as "someone who develops not only his reason, but also his powers of imagination, attention, memory, and sensitivity" (Beiser 121). His creative narrative can be considered a work of genius, in part because he understands the challenges of writing reviews of paintings:

Pour décrire un Salon à mon gré et au vôtre, savez-vous, mon ami, ce qu'il faudrait avoir? Toutes les sortes de goût, un cœur sensible à tous les charmes, une âme susceptible d'une infinité d'enthousiasmes différents, une variété de style qui répondît à la variété des pinceaux; pouvoir être grand ou voluptueux avec Deshays, simple et vrai avec Chardin, délicat avec Vien, pathétique avec Greuze, produire toutes les illusions possibles avec Vernet. Et dites-moi où est ce Vertumne-là? (*Salon de 1763*, 341)

Diderot wishes to make his style conform to the particularities of each painter in order to recreate the essence of each painting for the readers of the *Correspondance littéraire*. Through unusual practices of dialogue with a painted figure and self-immersion in a painting, Diderot creates dissonances that awaken the reader's attention. The constant interaction between morality and beauty both influences the understanding

of the beautiful and fosters the readers' active participation, providing an original example of how morality puts pressure on artists and art critics. Beyond allowing for the readers' engagement, the imagined narrative mobilizes the importance of morality in paintings. This investigation of how philosophy and art converge in Diderot's art criticism leads to two inquiries that will be developed in the following chapters. The analysis of the intersection between beauty and morality in the *Salons* focused on the dynamics of dissonances and the conformity of Diderot's response with each painter. As an art critic, Diderot hence succeeded to prove the risk and the need of dissonances. In chapter two, the focus on a grotesque character and his desire for liberating his passions will provide another example of their productive use.

Chapter Two

Performance of Passions: *Le Neveu de Rameau*

ce sont des dissonances dans l'harmonie sociale qu'il faut scavoir placer, preparer et sauver. Rien de si plat qu'une suite d'accords parfaits. Il faut quelque chose qui pique, qui separe le faisceau, et qui en eparpille les rayons.

Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*⁶⁷

In 1760, the playwright Charles Palissot de Montenoy attacked the *philosophes*, particularly Diderot, in a comedy entitled *Les Philosophes*, performed at the Comédie française. Palissot questioned Diderot's validity as a philosopher, and claimed that the *Encyclopédie* could never be a work of genius.⁶⁸ Diderot's response to this social humiliation came in the form of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, which was started in the second half of 1761 and published posthumously in 1804.⁶⁹ In this work, Diderot mentions the adversaries of the encyclopedists by name, and delivers a fierce mixture of satire, philosophy and art. While the work is imbued with a satirical tone against the anti-encyclopedists, it expresses Diderot's main ideas on morality and aesthetics through

⁶⁷ Denis Diderot, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, ed. Jean Fabre (Geneva: Droz, 1950) 94. References are to this edition.

⁶⁸ Georges May cites Palissot in "L'angoisse de l'échec et la genèse du 'Neveu de Rameau'": "On se réserve la liberté de penser qu'un dictionnaire, quelque bon qu'il puisse être, ne fut jamais un ouvrage de génie" (292).

⁶⁹ For an account of the genesis of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, see Georges May, "L'angoisse de l'échec et la genèse du 'Neveu de Rameau,'" where May associates Palissot's attacks on Diderot and the *Encyclopédie* from 1757 to 1760 with Diderot's feelings of revenge against the anti-encyclopedists by writing his masterpiece *Le Neveu de Rameau*.

dialogue, the literary form most suited to present the author's thoughts from different perspectives.

The philosophical dialogue between Moi (Diderot-narrator) and Lui (the nephew of the renowned musical composer Jean-Philippe Rameau) is a conversation *à bâtons rompus*, a desultory discourse that raises varied abstract subjects such as the man of genius,⁷⁰ the education of children, and the moral question of good and evil.⁷¹ While the different topics are articulated in word and in gesture, in both verbal and corporeal languages, these two forms of communication hint at Diderot's heuristic process in the search for the essence of human nature. *Le Neveu de Rameau* is a profound work of dialectics, one that will posit Moi as the philosopher and defender of truth and morality, and Lui as the "énergumène," a possessed being who wishes to be a man of genius.

Throughout the dialogue, the two interlocutors cannot reach consensus as to the basic definition of moral terms. Moi exemplifies the altruistic position, while Lui takes a mercenary stance. This difference in beliefs between the two protagonists reveals the inefficacy of verbal language for Lui to express his ideas. Diderot tries to shed light on abstract philosophical doctrines by placing them outside of himself in the figure of Lui. This grotesque character turns to pantomime, a mimetic language that speaks to his

⁷⁰ The expression "man of genius" translates "l'homme de genie." See Leonard Tancock, trans., *Rameau's Nephew and D'Alembert's Dream* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 36.

⁷¹ In the eighteenth century, the problem of evil elicited lively debates among thinkers and intellectuals. Pierre Bayle (1647-1706) and Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) started the controversy and positioned themselves on opposite sides. Bayle argued against theodicy while Leibniz declared it possible through his philosophical adage that our world is "the best of all possible worlds" (*le meilleur des mondes possibles*). In *Candide*, Voltaire ridicules Leibniz's statement by showing that individual experiences, not philosophical discourses, promote the understanding of the presence of evil in the world. The heart of the debate lay in the questioning of God's existence. In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot goes further, dismisses the reality of the problem of evil and claims that the world is amoral. For a deeper analysis of the problem of evil in the eighteenth century, see Lester Crocker, *An Age of Crisis* 36-70.

imaginative mind. The language of gestures, however, renders these ideas more concrete, but not necessarily more understandable.

As a talented mime, Lui is indeed able to imitate different behaviors adopted from the social fabric of eighteenth-century France. He is a character taken from the low strata of society, and mimesis represents for him a “social adaptation” in the word of a critic (Donald 293) and a “survival strategy” (Donald 298). In fact, this social mimesis is Lui’s *modus operandi*, which allows him to access higher levels of society, even though he cannot sustain the façade. The Bertins’ home is the social milieu in which Lui is a guest at the dinner table among other writers, actors and musicians, whose dearth of talent has reduced them to the subservient role of household jesters. Lui understands that he has to differentiate himself from the other guests, and succeeds in keeping his seat at the table by making the others laugh, and more importantly, by assisting Bertin’s mistress, Mlle Hus, in her lamentable career as an actress.

Diderot criticizes eighteenth-century French society from the diametrically opposite positions of rogue and philosopher. Constructed as a dialogue between these two protagonists with interposed pantomimes, the text examines ethical questions. The unexpected association between dialogue and pantomime, triggered by a lack of consensus about the meaning of abstract terms allows Diderot to channel ethical ideas through Lui’s performances, and then to reconfigure a new and extended meaning of these philosophical doctrines. The resulting gap between verbal discourse on conventional morality and its representation in a mimed performance represents Diderot’s fundamental method to show the effect of unreason caused by Lui’s unrestrained imagination. The discrepancy in the logic is mirrored by discontinuity in Diderot’s style

and rhetorical devices, mostly exemplified in his description of Lui during the one-man show pantomime. Lui's often-contradictory physical and moral traits, coupled with his miming gestures, epitomize the hybrid attributes of a grotesque character.

The different incongruities outlined above create various layers of dissonances. On the meta-narrative level, Diderot's dissonances are based on his belief that the Enlightenment is not solely an age of reason, but rather an age in which reason and sensibility, reason and imagination, intermingle to become the essential characteristic of the time. This new heterogeneous property that emerges during mid-century is expounded and displayed in *Le Neveu de Rameau* by means of the two divergent protagonists. On the narrative level, Lui's social dissonances are most prevalent in the milieu of the Bertin's household, in which he has to play the role of jester in order to amuse his patrons. Even though he claims that the jester is a natural role for him, he cannot sustain it and exhibits a dissonant behavior when he insults the abbé de la Porte at dinner and thus fails to maintain the pretence of civility. All the same, Bertin and his mistress use him to promote their own ambitions. Because Mlle Hus lacks talent as an actress, Lui is compelled to find her roles by ruse and to applaud alone at her mediocre performances. He is now perceived as a mad man by the upper echelon of society, the very people he had sought to impress. He realizes that his mask has been removed and his efforts have backfired. Lui's dissonant behaviors ricochet, and Moi feels their effect by proxy, which results in a psychological tension that Moi aims to ease.

The different dissonances serve to destabilize both protagonists and force them to reconsider the meaning of abstract terms. The lack of consonance between the two different visions of Moi and Lui in all aspects of social and moral conduct is mitigated by

Lui's experience of the sublime. At the end of the pantomime of the one-man band, Lui is immersed in a trance, which captivates Moi. As an eyewitness, Moi observes in awe the physical effects that the sublime has on Lui. The immediacy of the response by means of Lui's body affects Moi who cannot utter any words momentarily. The experience of the sublime, even though ephemeral, will allow the possibility of reconfiguring the narrow-minded philosophical doctrines that Moi sets forth. Moi's philosophy, based on universal value judgments clashes with Lui's because it does not take into account the diversity in social and economic status of eighteenth-century men in Paris. Moi stands for a conventional and universal notion of goodness and virtue while Lui believes only in his own individual welfare. Lui finds himself hungry in the streets of Paris because he cannot pretend to be someone else anymore. It is the Nephew's state of crisis that provokes the sublime to occur, and as Baldine Saint Girons claims, "le sublime n'est pas: il advient" (*Fiat Lux* 11). Indeed, the characteristic of the sublime lies in its process of becoming, and as such, it is distinguished by its unseizable quality.

This emergence of the sublime in *Le Neveu de Rameau* is caused by Lui's strong desires to confront his existential crisis and to become "un homme de génie." Since he cannot fulfill his desires in reality, he will satisfy them by means of performances. Rejecting mediocrity in poetry, rhetoric and music, he uses his extravagant imagination during his multiple pantomimes to show his brilliance in the art of mimesis. The void that Lui feels in his life due to his deplorable musical career will be compensated by the possibility of a different world with different rules. It is in this context that the sublime emerges: Moi and Lui come up against a dilemma about their position on value judgments. Moi remains in the realm of abstractions, as he expounds his ideal vision of

morality in which he links virtue with happiness. Questioning the usefulness of philosophical language, Lui, on the other hand, uses an alternative language, that of gestures which finally leads to the suspension of the ego, a state of trance, which is characteristic of the sublime.⁷² Although Diderot does not theorize the sublime in any of his works, it is implicitly present in *Le Neveu de Rameau* in opposition to and in convergence with the grotesque protagonist. Lui's experience of the sublime allows him to reach a transcendental knowledge and extract a deeper meaning of human destiny. Lui's ultimate goal is to refute "Moi's constant return to virtue as the sole principle of man's happiness" (Doolittle 45).

Incongruity as Diderot's thought process

The opening lines of *Le Neveu de Rameau* introduce the concept of incongruity, which displays a close affinity to the narrator's unique thought process, as he compares his divergent thinking to his wenches: "Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins"(3). While thoughts and prostitutes function on different planes of inquiry – philosophical abstraction in opposition with the empirical realm of the senses – the metaphor stresses their shared fleeting character. The libertine tone that is evoked through the frivolous image of the wenches warns the reader about the process of Diderot's reasoning, and makes him question the lapses in the connections developed later in the dialogue.

Most importantly, Diderot signals to his reader that he is not developing a philosophical system characterized by its linearity, but is rather seeking a more effective

⁷² *In Fiat Lux. Une philosophie du sublime*, Baldine Saint Girons defines the sublime as: "la suspension du moi: le fil de la coexistence se défait, le miroir de la représentation vole en éclats, nous sommes 'ravis', ... dans le piège même de notre étonnement" (9).

method for attaining and communicating knowledge. The alternative method that Diderot proposes is based on non-linearity: the metaphor of the wench explains the manner by which the narrator discusses an idea and leaves it for another without establishing any apparent links. This original means of “logical” thinking is illustrated in the alternating utterances of the two interlocutors in the text: both protagonists discuss one topic, abruptly leave it for another and come back to it later. This non-sequitur dialogue hence creates various relationships with multiple threads that weave into a network of communications:

C'est une chose singulière que la conversation... Voyez les circuits que nous avons faits. Les rêves d'un malade en délire ne sont pas plus hétéroclites. Cependant, comme il n'y a rien de décousu ni dans la tête d'un homme qui rêve, ni dans celle d'un fou, tout tient aussi dans la conversation; mais il seroit quelquefois bien difficile de retrouver les chaînons imperceptibles qui ont attiré tant d'idées disparates.⁷³

In this excerpt from a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland, Diderot informs the reader that the difficulty in drafting a dialogue lies in the construction of a linear narrative because of the invisible links that connect all the dissimilar ideas. Diderot's goal is to present his ideas from a different perspective, and he succeeds in generating productive meaning through incongruity, which exemplifies his order of thought. In *De l'interprétation de la nature* (1753), Diderot had expressed the promotion of thought over language. He writes, “Je laisserai les pensées se succéder sous ma plume, dans l'ordre même selon lequel les objets se sont offerts à ma réflexion” (DPV 9: 27). Diderot's preoccupation with “coordinating language with the patterns of thought” (Hayes 149) in the *Lettres sur les sourds et muets* (1751), leads him to propose writing “sans ordre” (DPV 4: 95) in the *Additions à la Lettre sur les aveugles* (1782). While Diderot claims

⁷³ Letter of 20 October 1760 to Sophie Volland, Corr 3: 172-173.

that he writes without order, his contention cannot be taken at face value. In the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (1773-74), he cautions against the one who wishes to organize and put things in order: “Méfiez-vous de celui qui veut mettre de l’ordre” (*Œuvres philosophiques* 512),⁷⁴ because ordering his thoughts implies the establishment of a certain hierarchy, which would limit the possibility of multifarious connections. Furthermore, hierarchy implies classification, and would inhibit the free rein of association of ideas. Reluctant to put his thoughts in order, Diderot wishes to see what happens “when orders are multiplied” (Hayes 144). This non-order for Diderot allows for the proliferation of many relationships that would not have been possible otherwise. Rather than propagating his ideas within a rigidly ordered system, he seeks to liberate his thoughts so that they can evolve and form relationships, even incongruous ones.

According to Pierre de Saint-Amand, Diderot’s reasoning resembles the image of a maze with all the interruptions and digressions associated with its structure, and stands in opposition to Descartes’ method of the “ligne droite” (Saint-Amand 62). In the *Discours de la méthode* (1637), Descartes gives the example of travelers lost in a forest, and advises them to walk in a straight line until they finally arrive somewhere. The straight trajectory for Descartes is more beneficial than wandering around and being lost in the middle of the forest. He used the allegory of the forest to warn against the labyrinthine trajectory as a means to acquire knowledge.⁷⁵ It is precisely this labyrinthine

⁷⁴ Diderot. *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. Paul Vernière (Paris: Garnier Frères), 1964. Future references to this edition will be indicated by the abbreviation “OP.”

⁷⁵ Descartes. *Discours de la méthode*. In the third part of the work, Descartes states:
“Imitant en cela les voyageurs qui, se trouvant égarés en quelque forêt, ne doivent pas errer en tournoyant, tantôt d’un côté, tantôt d’un autre, ni encore moins s’arrêter en une place, mais

circuit that prompts Saint-Amand to suggest Diderot's rupture in the continuum of logical reasoning, which gives way to apparent discontinuity in relationships, or forced association between ideas (59). It is, however, the free association of ideas and pantomimes that allows Diderot to prove that, even amidst disorder, human nature can reach a new order of understanding. Incongruities become then the medium by which knowledge is acquired.

Reason and unreason: two ways of disseminating knowledge

The principle of incongruity in *Le Neveu de Rameau* is reflected in the abrupt shift from philosophical discourse to gestures. A debate on morality is interjected with various descriptive performances of a passionate mime whose talents extend to playing different roles. This back and forth movement suggests the lack of hegemony of reason over sentiment. The interference of emotion constitutes a schism with the common eighteenth-century emphasis on reason.

In *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer claims that reason was the central, unifying principle of the age (5). However, in the middle of the century, a shift occurred in the enlightened philosophical circles, and "sentiment" seen as a proof of sensibility became prevalent in aesthetic criticism. "Both reason and feeling were recognized as springs of human behavior," as George Rosen puts it (255). *Le Neveu de Rameau* (written 1761-1770's) is an illustration of this change in its most exaggerated

marcher toujours le plus droit qu'ils peuvent vers un même côté, et ne le changer point... car, par ce moyen, s'ils ne vont justement où ils désirent, ils arriveront au moins à la fin quelque part, où vraisemblablement ils seront mieux que dans le milieu d'une forêt" (57).

form, and it exemplifies further the irrationality emerging from the joining of universal reason with exaggerated emotion.

In order to break apart from the widespread belief that the eighteenth century is an age of reason, and from the conviction that reason alone can guarantee continuity of knowledge—a unified network connecting the widely dispersed elements of knowledge—Diderot uses incongruities as a tool to prove that unreason can also lead to the promotion of knowledge. Indeed, Lester Crocker went so far as to call the eighteenth century “the age of unreason, or the age of the irrational” (“What Is Modern about the Eighteenth Century?” 92). In order to understand *Le Neveu de Rameau* in relation to the paradigm of unreason, it is important to note that this principle is in direct consequence of “the century’s desire for continuity and its dread of discontinuity” (Ilie 1: 19). The ideal continuity of knowledge pervading the enlightened circles of eighteenth-century France in the name of reason is illustrated by Diderot’s work on the *Encyclopédie*, a monumental collaborative endeavor that demonstrates connections between art, philosophy and science. But even in the encyclopedic project, the alphabetical order of the articles is disrupted by the different cross-references needed for a deeper understanding. While Diderot recognizes that knowledge has to be organized for its dissemination, he also realizes that the elementary form of an encyclopedia is too limiting to cover all the possible meanings of a term. Knowledge is thus presented as fragmented, and it is the responsibility of the reader to assemble all the different parts and understand all the different meanings provided in the cross-references.

Apart from the discontinuous propagation of knowledge determined by the encyclopedic format, the eighteenth century does not follow a steady and continuous

increase in the development of arts and sciences. As the century progresses, and scientific discoveries move forward, gaps and unresolved questions remain and are elucidated by imagination. As Paul Ilie suggests, the Enlightenment's "fundamental project of rational knowledge suffered from fragmentation and irrationalities" (1). Similarly, George Rosen characterizes the eighteenth century as heterogeneous (see 255) because reason and unreason were in a constant state of tension, and the shift from one to the other opened up the way to irrationality.

Diderot's unrestrained imagination in *Le Neveu de Rameau* shows the effect of unreason in a philosophical dialogue that calls for a connection between philosophy and art. He satirizes the idealized notion of continuity in the development of knowledge by showing the incongruity between philosophical and gestural language. *Le Neveu* itself constitutes a rupture in form and content among contemporary works. It is indeed an unclassifiable text that displays the role of verbal and non-verbal communication in acquiring knowledge.

Discontinuity represents one of the ways incongruity is manifested in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. Diderot plays with the illusion of continuity in his description of the one-man show pantomime, in which Lui performs twenty different roles at once: "s'il quittoit la partie du chant, c'etoit pour prendre celle des instruments qu'il laissoit subitement, pour revenir a celle de la voix; entrelassant l'une a l'autre, de maniere a conserver les liaisons, et l'unité de tout" (84). The illusion of continuity in this pantomime is simultaneously asserted and contradicted through Diderot's style, which lacks uniformity. First, Diderot-narrator describes the actions and feelings of the Nephew through anaphora of the personal pronoun "il," which produces an effect of mechanical actions: "Il pleuroit, il

rioit, il soupiroit; il regardoit...” (84). Examining Diderot’s use of “repetitive rhetoric,” Aram Vartanian perceives it as the paradox of the “conscious automaton” (389). The repetitiveness functions simultaneously to describe an unchanging automated character, and also, paradoxically, to illustrate the uninterrupted variety of feelings. Additionally, the accelerated narrative fostered by short, fragmented sentences separated by semicolons is counteracted by use of the present participle (“il roucoulait les traversières, criant, chantant, se demenant”), which slows down the pace and contributes to the prolongation of the action (84).

This deceptive continuum in the actions of the mime is not an isolated phenomenon. It is present throughout the dialogue, and serves a specific purpose: to circumvent a moral quandary by disguising it in a mime’s aesthetic productions. The anecdote of the Renegade of Avignon that Lui recounts to Moi illustrates discontinuity in the transition from a discourse on morality to pantomime. The Renegade, a Christian man, pretending to be Jewish, befriends a wealthy Jew for the sole purpose of stealing his money and possessions. He not only steals the Jewish man’s wealth, but also denounces him to the Inquisition, which for Lui represents the sublimity of the Renegade of Avignon’s wickedness. The surprising element about this anecdote lies in the way in which Lui tells it. In fact, by recounting this story, Lui is performing the imagined dialogue between the Jew and the Renegade. As he revels in telling the story, Lui states that, after the Inquisition captured the Jew, “on fit un beau feu de joye” (75). The euphemism used in this expression, so reminiscent of the capture of Candide and Pangloss by the Inquisition in Voltaire’s *Candide*, shows the ironic distance that Lui takes in relationship to the atrocious act of burning a human being at the stake. Lui

asserts that his ironic tone shows his excellence in the art of storytelling. But Moi feels horror because of the juxtaposition of the Renegade's evil actions and Lui's reaction to the story. Lui recognizes his moral degradation, and transforms the openly avowed depravity into a pantomime of a "chant en fugue"(76), a song of triumph characterized by its contrapuntal composition. Wishing to be recognized as a hero because he is "original dans [s]on avilissement" (76), Lui shows his new morality of catering to his own well-being rather than satisfying the needs of the majority.

The anecdote of the Renegade of Avignon shows a shift in emphasis from a moral dilemma to the miming of a song as a sign of triumph. Baffled by this unexpected transition from morality to its musical representation, the narrator exclaims: "Je commençois a supporter avec peine la presence d'un homme qui discutoit une action horrible, un execrable forfait, comme un connoisseur en peinture ou en poesie, examine les beautés d'un ouvrage de gout; ou comme un moraliste ou un historien releve et fait eclater les circonstances d'une action heroique" (76). In the "interference" between aesthetic and moral considerations, Hans Jauss suggests that there is no possible agreement in moral issues between Moi and Lui, and communication can continue only through discussions on aesthetics (Jauss 161). Moi claims that Lui "s'entendoit mieux en bonne musique qu'en bonnes mœurs" (Diderot 76) and shifts the discussion to that of music. While Lui is neither a moralist nor a successful musician, his "aesthetic judgment is the formal vehicle by which his ethical judgments are presented" (Bresnick 105). The Nephew amuses the people at the Café de la Régence with his clownish performances using pantomimes, and the discussions on music function as a diversion from a discourse on morality. In this manner, Diderot experiments with abstractions and expresses the

different moral issues through pantomimes, which, as stated earlier, render them more concrete, but not necessarily more understandable. But through this metamorphosis, Diderot is diminishing the value of morality. Lui's pantomimes serve to question Moi's idealization of morality in which virtue is equated with happiness and vice with wickedness. Lui's desire is to expand the meaning of vice and virtue, at the risk of diluting their basic meaning, and even inverting them: "Il pourroit arriver que vous appellassiez vice ce que j'appelle vertu, et vertu ce que j'appelle vice" (62). Because these moral values have no fixed meaning for Lui, they are inherently arbitrary and interchangeable, and depend solely on his selfish desires.⁷⁶

The illusion of continuity that Diderot gives to Lui's actions, as seen in the pantomime of the one-man band, is further asserted in the description of his thought process. This is achieved by using the coordinating conjunction "et" when Lui transitions between abstractions about good and evil, and concrete everyday necessities such as consumption of food. When Moi asks Lui what he did the past year, Lui answers:

Ce que vous, moi et tous les autres font: du bien, du mal et rien. Et puis j'ai eu faim, et j'ai mangé, quand l'occasion s'en est présentée; apres avoir mangé, j'ai eu soif, et j'ai bu quelquefois. Cependant la barbe me venoit; et quand elle a été venue, je l'ai fait raser. (7)

The contiguity of these two subjects shocks the reader because of their lack of "rapport." The discourse on morality, which is articulated at the same level as basic quotidian needs, such as food consumption and shaving one's beard, loses its pertinence. In an effort to represent abstract subjects through language, Diderot places the two terms "le bien" and "le mal" contiguously as a means to show that each term can be defined by its opposite,

⁷⁶ When discussing *Le Neveu de Rameau* in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Hegel suggests that the nephew's language emerges from a disrupted consciousness where the notions of "good" and "bad" become inverted (316).

and cannot be represented without the other. Lui demonstrates that cumulative language is not necessarily the best medium to find answers to abstract philosophical subjects because of the inability to represent them. Diderot does not negate good and evil explicitly, but the word “rien” at the end of the sentence “du bien, du mal et rien” implies the irrelevance of morality. Does Diderot deny the presence of moral value in the universe,⁷⁷ or does he rather want to link good and evil with the Nephew’s ordinary individual experience, such as having feelings of hunger? Diderot defines the term “rien” in the *Encyclopédie* as follows: “Qui dit *rien* déclare par son langage qu’il éloigne toute réalité” (DPV 8: 50). Consequently, by saying the word *rien*, Lui abstains from forming representations of abstract ideas through language. The inadequacy of language makes him resort to pantomime, and the disordered energy creates a grotesque effect.

Lui: a grotesque character

Departure from language and reason yields to the possibility of grotesque forms. These are manifested in Lui’s moral and physical traits, as well as in his performances. Commonly associated with the irrational and the incomprehensible, the grotesque seems to elude meaning. Since the excavations of Nero’s *Domus Aurea*, or Golden House, in Rome during the late fifteenth-century, the term “grotesque” has been linked to the Italian word *grottesche*, which designates a certain ornamental style of frescos that were uncovered there (Remshardt 4). This style of painting portrays temples in which human, animal and vegetable worlds are fused. Likewise, art historian and critic Thomas Crow defines the word “grotesque” in his work as “the antique form involving the fanciful

⁷⁷ In *An Age of Crisis*, Lester Crocker suggests that the materialists “denied the metaphysical reality of evil, and the very existence of a problem of evil, inasmuch as the universe is simply empty of moral value” (44).

interweaving of human and animal forms with foliage and scrollwork” (59). This mixture of forms suggests a desire to break from convention, and “signifies a rupture with classical art even in the period of antiquity” (Iehl 6).⁷⁸ The creation of a dynamic and composite production stemming from an unrestrained imagination leads to new conceptions of painting in which one form dissolves into another. The important element lies in the many possibilities of creation, but the uncommon grouping of the human, animal, and vegetable together challenges and undermines yardsticks related to verisimilitude.

The grotesque, which is first and foremost an aesthetic category, is not restricted to pictorial representation, but also finds its way into literature. In the sixteenth-century, Michel de Montaigne characterizes his essays as grotesque and monstrous bodies due to their fragmented parts:

Considérant la conduite de la besongne d’un peintre que j’ay, il m’a pris envie de l’ensuivre. Il choisit le plus bel endroit et milieu de chaque paroy, pour y loger un tableau élaboré de toute sa suffisance; et, le vuide tout au tour, il le remplit de crottesques, qui sont peintures fantasques, n’ayant grâce qu’en la variété et estrangeté. Que sont-ce icy aussi, à la verité, que crottesques et corps monstrueux, rappiepez de divers membres, sans certaine figure, n’ayants ordre, suite ny proportion que fortuite? (“De l’amitié” [I.xxviii] 181)

His daring comparison elucidates the basic features of the grotesque, which revolve around absence of order and lack of proportion. The transfer of this flexible category from paintings to literary productions indicates that heterogeneity represents the main characteristic of the grotesque, and promotes varied, whimsical creations.

Throughout the centuries, the meaning of the term grotesque has evolved, and many definitions exist. The two prominent critics of the grotesque, Wolfgang Kayser and

⁷⁸ Iehl characterizes this rupture with classical art, as the first grotesque, which implies the evolution of this aesthetic category throughout the centuries. (Translation of Iehl quotation is mine.)

Mikhail Bakhtin⁷⁹ view it from different perspectives. The former characterizes the grotesque as “an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world,” which are expressed through “ominous powers” and “incomprehensible forces” (Kayser 188). The latter associates the grotesque with the culture of the carnival in which the festive masks and ambiance subvert the inequalities between the classes, and question social and moral doctrines in order to overturn the rules already in place (Bakhtin 10). These two polar visions represent a springboard for a better understanding of the grotesque in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. If Montaigne’s vision highlights whimsical heterogeneity, Kayser’s interpretation points out the exorcizing power of the grotesque, and Bakhtin’s work focuses on the subversion generated by the grotesque, Diderot’s work defines the grotesque as a byproduct of societal repression, moral deviation, and physiological mutation.

Diderot’s scholars and critics have devoted little attention to the grotesque in *Le Neveu de Rameau*. The influence of Socrates, Rabelais, Montaigne and Molière on Diderot’s comic vision has been well documented,⁸⁰ but studies on the grotesque remain scarce. Some critics have posited Lui as a grotesque character. James Doolittle asserts in his work, that “all of the pantomimes...serve to emphasize the grotesque personality of the performer” (53). Similarly, Carol Sherman focuses on Lui’s performances, and attempts to explain Lui’s essence further by arguing that the pantomime of *l’homme orchestre* “deforms or erases his natural proportions; he breaks the law of identity, of the

⁷⁹ Wolfgang Kayser. *The grotesque in art and literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁸⁰ For Stephen Werner, the pictorial representation of the nephew’s “clowning” performance embodies the essence or the spirit of the carnival, which in and of itself marks the emblem of comedy (76). In *Diderot et Molière*, Adrienne Hytier suggests that “[p]our Diderot, ... Molière représente plus qu’une source de culture, il représente aussi une des influences, peut-être la plus importante, quoique indirecte, sur la formation de ses théories dramatiques”(77).

static” (117). While Sherman raises the question of alienation,⁸¹ Nicole Denoit suggests a lack of meaning: “[I]’angoisse du non-sens apparaît derrière le rire” (529). For Denoit, the grotesque conveys meaninglessness, but it actually bears the mark of a valid game of role-playing. Jean Starobinski contends that Lui takes on a grotesque role when he insults the abbé de La Porte during a dinner at the Bertin-Hus household (“Le Dîner chez Bertin” 193). By adopting this role, Lui places “the grotesque in performance” (Remshardt 2). Ralf Remshardt notes the paradox between the grotesque and performance: “performance is...self-articulating, an act that speaks for itself, but the grotesque..., is often beyond articulation, is unspeakable” (*ibid.*). Even though he recognizes this potential ambiguity, Remshardt argues that the grotesque and performance are “inseparable” (*ibid.*).

Before exploring the relationship between the grotesque and performance in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, we will first examine Lui’s distinctive characteristics that make him a grotesque protagonist. From the beginning of the dialogue, Diderot-narrator presents Lui through different contradictory physical characteristics and these heterogeneous qualities follow a temporal pattern of “variability” based on a series of alternatives:⁸²

Quelquefois, il est maigre et have... Le mois suivant, il est gras et replet...
Aujourd’hui, en linge sale, en culote déchirée, couvert de lambeaux, presque sans
souliers, il va la tête basse, il se dérobe... Demain, poudré, chaussé, frisé, bien
vetu, il marche la tête haute, il se montre... (4)

⁸¹ For a deeper discussion on alienation and pantomime, see Phoebe von Held, “Mad Mimetics: Alienation and Theatricality in the Figure of the ‘Neveu de Rameau,’” *Diderot Studies* 30 (2007): 275-294.

⁸² According to Starobinski in “L’incipit du *Neveu de Rameau*,” “L’ouverture... aura mis en place... une série d’alternatives, une succession de contraires associés, qui préparent le lecteur à cette apothéose de la variabilité qui s’établira dans le portrait de Rameau” (50).

While Diderot sets up so many disparities in Lui's physical description through opposites, the resulting image can only be that of a caricature or a *pagode*.⁸³ In the *pantomime de la pagode*, Lui kneads imaginary dough with his fingers, and shapes it to create a deformed figurine representing himself: "C'est ainsi que [la nature] me fit et me jetta, a coté d'autres pagodes, les unes a gros ventres ratatinés, a cols courts, a gros yeux hors de la tete, apoplectiques; d'autres a cols obliques; il y en avoit de seches, a l'oeil vif, au nez crochu" (97). Lui's projection as a "pagode heteroclite" (97) illustrates Diderot's understanding of the workings of nature, which sometimes produces beings with irregular forms. Lui, in fact suggests that in the process of creating him, nature digressed and bundled such a being. The agency of natural creation is undermined by the illustration of this "écart," an example of nature's digression. The figurines created from imaginary clay suggest monstrous physical characteristics for Moi who interprets Lui's gestures. Lui says that he is thrown into a social milieu in which the *pagodes* laugh at each other's deformities: "toutes se mirent a crever de rire, en me voyant: et moi de mettre mes deux poings sur mes cotes, et a crever de rire, en les voyant" (97). This pantomime can be understood as a metaphor that unravels Lui's deepest fear: as a physical monster, he must remain with others who resemble him. Lui is threatened by this social ostracism, and reacts by laughing at the group of figurines as a means to "counteract the horror" (Remshardt 85) that he sees in their physical deformities. But the mutual laughter that Lui and the figurines share has a cathartic effect, which leads Lui to the realization that a new social order is possible, in which all of nature's creations are accepted.

⁸³The *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1762) defines the word "pagode" as a little porcelain figurine with a mobile head. See Ed. Jean Fabre, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, "Lexique" 277.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote also of nature's deviation in her progeny in *De la génération des animaux* : “celui qui ne ressemble pas aux parents est déjà à certains égards un monstre: car dans ce cas, la nature s'est, dans une certaine mesure, écartée du type générique... Une déficience, aussi bien que la présence de parties supplémentaires, est une monstruosité” (qtd. Ibrahim, *Qu'est-ce qu'un monstre* 19). Lui acknowledges that he is missing the paternal fiber,⁸⁴ and the lack of the “molecule paternelle” (Diderot 90) makes him a moral deviant. The relationship that Diderot is trying to establish between physiology and moral attitudes points to his desire to detect a biological influence on individual behavior. As Diderot underlines all the potential causes for Lui's moral deviations, he shifts the blame from nature to ‘biology’ to society.

Similar to his physical characterizations, Lui's moral traits are presented as a series of dualities: “C'est un composé de hauteur et de bassesse, de bon sens et de déraison. Il faut que les notions de l'honnête et du deshonnête soient bien étrangement brouillées dans sa tête” (4). Such a description prompts Andrew Curran to define Lui as the “Enlightenment *rejeton*: the supremely bizarre and contradictory creature of singular moral beliefs and actions who dissents from Diderot's moral utilitarianism” (128).

Described as a bizarre offspring of the Enlightenment, Lui blames social and cultural conventions for his peculiar disposition. Diderot magnifies Lui's heterogeneous characteristics by using a logically aporetic assertion to illustrate it: “Rien ne dissemble plus de lui que lui même,” claims Diderot-narrator (4). The logical possibility of not resembling oneself can hold true only if Lui wears various masks. Indeed, Lui perceives

⁸⁴The word *fibre* is understood in the eighteenth-century as the basic unit of organization in cellular tissue. See Diderot's *Éléments de physiologie*: “La fibre...est la matière du tissu cellulaire qui lie et enveloppe l'organe” (DPV 17: 341).

eighteenth-century French society as one in which everyone is forced to play different roles and wear different masks in order to conform to fixed conventions. In the social milieu of the Bertin-Hus household, Lui wears the mask of the *bouffon*. To secure his basic sustenance, Lui is compelled to amuse his patrons, Monsieur Bertin and his mistress Mlle Hus, by lowering himself to a position of ridicule: “J’étois leur petit Rameau, leur joli Rameau, leur Rameau le fou, l’impertinent, l’ignorant, le paresseux, le gourmand, le bouffon, la grosse bête” (18). As long as Lui remains in his place, and assumes the role dictated by societal norms, he is able to liven up their mundane existence, and foment a sort of excitement. But as soon as he lifts his mask and speaks the truth, he reveals a dissonant behavior unfamiliar to his patrons, who can no longer accept him as part of their society. He uses his common sense and reason for the first time and divulges the secret workings of the Bertin-Hus’ milieu. His lapse in discretion toward Bertin leads to the adverse consequence of his being ousted from his patrons’ household.

Lui’s expulsion from his protectors’ house is at the center of his individual crisis. The motive for his ousting does not lie primarily in the fact that Lui insulted the abbé de La Porte, and called him “un maestoso cazzo fra duoi coglioni” (63), an obscene affront that generated laughter from everyone, except from Bertin. Rather, it rests more on Bertin’s perception of Lui’s bold behavior, which is founded on the belief that he is indispensable to the Bertin milieu. Indeed, when Bertin scolds him, Lui feels pride and audacity at the thought that “on ne pouvoit se passer de moi . . . , j’étois un homme essentiel” (65). While Lui is playing the role of the jester dictated by Bertin, (“Ai je été différent aujourd’huy de moi meme [?] . . . je ne lui ai point manqué” [64]), he blames the

master of the house for having invited the abbé, and the *gueux* at dinner. Doolittle explains, that “the crime is not the knowing of the truth, but the failure to preserve the hypocritical appearance” (43).

From his experience in the Bertin-Hus’ social milieu, Lui understands that one has to master the art of distracting, amusing, shocking, and finally appeasing his wealthy audience if he wants to profit from them. His well-being comes with a price: he must suspend his reason, and show his gratitude through voluntary subjugation, abasement, and hypocrisy. Yet once, only once, Lui is unable to continue his act. When he insults the abbé de la Porte and removes his mask of civility, his irreverence offends the couple and disrupts their expectations of his proper behavior.

The Bertin-Hus milieu represents a microcosm of eighteenth-century French society in which beggars entertain the masters of the house in exchange for food. These beggars are failed musicians such as Lui, and leaders of the anti-encyclopedist group, such as Palissot. In this social environment, Lui is stripped of his manhood and dignity. Even though he exhibits extreme qualities, oscillating between the high and the low, Lui consistently remains low in status.⁸⁵ At the Bertin-Hus household, Lui explains that the new guest, the abbé de La Porte, will experience a vertical descent from presiding over the table at dinner to becoming a stationary figure at the lower end of the table:

“Comment, l’abbé, lui dis-je, vous presidez? voila qui est fort bien pour aujourd’huy; mais demain, vous descendrez, s’il vous plait, d’une assiette; apres demain, d’une autre assiette; et ainsi d’assiette en assiette, soit a droite, soit a gauche, jusqu’a ce que... vous deveniez stationnaire a coté de moi” (63). As newcomers join the group, Lui finds

⁸⁵ As Jean Starobinski puts it, “le lieu naturel que s’attribue le Neveu est toujours le bas” (“Le Dîner chez Bertin” 192).

himself repositioned against his will, and describes himself to be slithering as a worm: “[il] rampe...C’est l’allure du ver; c’est mon allure” (47). The animal images⁸⁶ that refer to Lui lead to his further dehumanization, which reinforces the loss of his dignity. Being the first one to experience the descent, Lui is also the first one to recognize his own abjection. His expulsion from the Bertin-Hus household gives Lui the opportunity to experience a gradual ascent, but only in his performative acts of pantomime.

Le Neveu de Rameau exhibits the grotesque in performance by staging the rogue character of Lui in the public setting of the Café de la Régence in Paris. The use of a grotesque protagonist is conducive to challenge conventional truths in place in eighteenth-century France, by means of a social game of acting behind the mask. Many critics associate the grotesque with Bakhtin’s idea of the carnival, which represents “the symbol and incarnation of the true folk festival” (220). For Bakhtin, the carnival is a social celebration for all the people, and “it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” (10). Bakhtin explains further that in the eighteenth century the carnival as an institution disintegrated, and carnivalesque elements remained present in the *commedia dell’arte* (34). The Italian theater, which had been banished from France in 1697, joined the acrobatic and theatrical troupes of the fairs,

⁸⁶ Besides comparing himself to a worm, the Nephew sees himself also as a dog (“Le grand chien que je suis” [19]). The image of the dog is further developed with the story of Bouret and his dog in order to show how his “masters” treat Rameau. Roger Laufer examines “l’imagerie animale” (402) or a zoomorphic representation of men, and he gives a number of examples from *Le Neveu de Rameau* to illustrate this phenomenon. Laufer suggests that all the references to animality are not gratuitous and express Rameau’s vision about human relationships in eighteenth-century French society (“Structure et signification du *Neveu de Rameau* de Diderot” 403).

which brought about a mixed theatrical genre, using pantomimes or monologues as their rhetorical medium.⁸⁷

In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Lui's performances embody the essence or the spirit of the *commedia dell'arte*, a world that Diderot had called grotesque because of the actors' excessive gestures.⁸⁸ The one-man band pantomime is the representation of Lui who plays all the instruments of a whole orchestra through physical contortions. Lui's body speaks with its gestures, and becomes the visual medium of performance. Indeed, characteristic of a pantomime, the only sense used by the audience is sight. Just as Diderot himself used to plug his ears during operas in order to feel the actors' emotions,⁸⁹ he invites the spectator in the Café de la Régence to imitate him in order to absorb every feeling of this mute opera.

Lui's performance of the one-man band magnetizes the people inside and outside the café. During the performance, the strong fascination for the grotesque figure makes those at the café, such as the chess players, halt their activities. All their focus is on him, as they attempt to make sense of this *tableau mouvant* or a moving representation of an engrossed being whose performance is impossible. Rémy Astruc claims that "le grotesque s'impose... à la connaissance comme le lieu de l'impossibilité réalisée" (39).

⁸⁷ Thomas Crow explains that the comical and satirical undertones of the intrigues of Harlequin and Scaramouche (the characters of the Italian theater) collided with the king's serious way of life (48-49).

⁸⁸ In *De la poésie dramatique*, Diderot compares the characters of the farce to those of Jacques Callot (1592-1635), the illustrator of the *commedia dell'arte*, and calls them "les grotesques" (Chapter VI, "Du drame burlesque," OE 202).

⁸⁹ In *Lettre sur les sourds et muets*, Diderot imagines two experiments to show the order of our thoughts: the first one involves people speaking a foreign language incomprehensible to him, and the second one includes what he calls "un muet de convention." Diderot goes even further in his experiment and performs it with a real mute, "un muet de naissance" (DPV 4: 138, 141). It is under these premises that Diderot divulges his experiment at the opera. Since he claims to know most of the plays by memory, he plugs his ears to hear better, and through this method, he assesses the concordance between the gestures and language (148).

This practice of the impossible is anchored by the figure of Lui who invents his own musical composition by mixing French and Italian tunes, and performs twenty different roles, all by himself. This type of performance has affinities with what Wolfgang Kayser has called the “fantastic grotesque” (186), which he associates with the “oneiric worlds” (186).

The dreamlike quality that emerges from Lui’s gestures responds to his desire to be someone else. Instead of being one of the *pagodes* in the house of Bertin, he realizes that he wants to be a man of genius: “je voudrais bien etre un autre, au hazard d’etre un homme de genie, un grand homme” (15). *Le Neveu de Rameau* starts with the subject of genius, a central theme that will branch out into the topic of morality about good and evil. Lui’s thoughts about men of genius are contradictory, to say the least, because he founds his beliefs on his uncle, who happens to be the great composer Jean-Philippe Rameau. At first Lui feels jealous toward his uncle whom he considers a man of genius, and yet he calls him with scorn “un philosophe dans son espece” (8)⁹⁰ because of his selfishness and insensitivity towards his wife, daughter and him. “Ils ne sont bons qu’a une chose,” Lui declares, referring to men of genius, whose specialty is reduced to only one thing, “Passé cela, rien” (9). Lui then suggests that “le mal est toujours venu ici bas, par quelque homme de genie” (9). Moi agrees with Lui that his uncle is “un homme dur; [...] un brutal; [...] sans humanité; [...] avare; [...] mauvais pere, mauvais epoux; mauvais oncle” (11), but objects to the relationship that Lui establishes between the man of genius and wickedness. Moi detects in Lui’s analogy between men of genius, the uncle and wickedness an incomplete reasoning, that one of the encyclopedists defines as “une

⁹⁰ In the critical edition of *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Jean Fabre provides the definition of “philosophe” given in the *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* (1732, 1743) as “dur, insensible, misanthrope” (123 note 28).

induction incomplète qui étend sa conclusion au-delà des principes, et qui, d'un nombre d'exemples observés, conclut généralement pour toute l'espèce" ("Induction").

Compelled to provide a better understanding of the term "genius," Lui performs different pantomimes, which illustrate Lui's reasons for wanting to become a man of genius.

The pantomime of *le grand homme heureux* starts with Lui talking to himself about his desire to be known as a "grand homme." It describes his actual dream of composing like his uncle, Jean-Philippe Rameau, and of being recognized for his virtual productions:

Rameau, tu voudrais bien avoir fait ces deux morceaux la; si tu avois fait ces deux morceaux la, tu en ferois bien deux autres; et quand tu en aurois fait un certain nombre, on te joueroit, on te chanteroit partout; quand tu marcherois, tu aurois la tête droite; la conscience te rendroit temoignage a toi meme de ton propre merite; les autres te designeroient du doigt. (16)

By using the subject pronoun "tu," Lui projects his desire to become a man of genius through a process of "extériorisation" (Starobinski, "L'Incipit" 61). In placing the idea of genius in an "other," in other words, in the figure of Lui, Diderot's goal is to concretize the idea and make it visible in the form of Lui's body. Thus, Lui's monologue describes hypothetical situations suggested by the use of the conditional. The illusory and ephemeral fame is important to him because it would provide not only basic needs such as shelter and sustenance, but also a libertine lifestyle filled with wine and beautiful women. His obsession with being a "grand homme" is illustrated by the repetition of this expression five times later in the text, an expression that seems incongruous and comical since the reader knows that he is really a procurer and a parasite. The pantomime that follows the monologue is even more complex and surprising because of the mimed gestures that he seemingly performs with absent objects:

On dirait: c'est lui qui a fait les jolies gavotes (et il chantoit les gavotes); puis...il ajoutoit ... tu aurois une bonne maison (et il en mesuroit l'etendue avec ses bras), un bon lit (et il s'y etendoit nonchalamment), de bons vins (qu'il goutoit en faisant claquer sa langue contre son palais), un bon equipage (et il levoit le pié pour y monter), de jolies femmes (a qui il prenoit deja la gorge et qu'il regardoit voluptueusement)... (16)

Lui's desire to be a man of genius differs from Moi's goal in life. While Moi places Socrates and Racine at the level of genius because of the literary productions that they left for posterity, Lui's vision is based on self-interest. Contrary to Moi's idea of genius, which is anchored in the "abstract, theoretical level, Lui distorts the philosophic argument in order to consider genius at the concrete, functional level where it may be measured by the success, prompt and tangible, of the artist's endeavors" (Fellows 188). Lui's genius can be captured in performance, and more specifically through his rare and unique talent in the art of mimesis: "Je suis rare dans mon espece, oui, tres rare" (65), he tells Moi. Lui gauges his success on becoming a man of genius by comparing himself to the rogues that he aspires to emulate. Just as the story of the Renegade of Avignon shows, Lui finds sublimity in wickedness because he looks with reverence on those who would perpetrate great crimes: "On crache sur un petit filou; mais on ne peut refuser une sorte de consideration a un grand criminel. Son courage vous etonne. Son atrocité vous fait frémir" (72).

Being ousted from the Bertin's house represents an important event as it provides the impetus for Lui to make value judgments in comparison to his experiences. It empowers him to stand up to Moi, challenge his abstract ideas and even mock him. The grotesque in performance is a medium by which Lui corrupts Moi's optimistic ideals. The pantomimes evoke in the spectator a dualistic response in which opposite emotions

are interwoven, resulting in a jarring effect of mental discord. Moi describes his conflicted emotional state after viewing each of Lui's performances: "l'ame agitée de deux mouvements opposés, je ne scavois si je m'abandonnerois a l'envie de rire, ou au transport de l'indignation" (24). This heightened tension felt by Moi is in accordance with Philip Thomson's notion of the grotesque, mainly that it presents essentially "the unresolved clash of incompatibles" (27). Just as the grotesque frescos that were uncovered in the caves in the late antiquity presented a fusion of incompatible forms, the grotesque in *Le Neveu de Rameau* is illustrated by the discordant effect of conflicting emotions experienced by the spectator viewing the pantomime. This conflict aligns also with Joel Cooper's theory of "vicarious cognitive dissonance," which he defines as "experiencing dissonance through the actions of another person" (117). In his view, this "empathic transmission of emotions" is founded on "a common membership in important social groups" (119). Indeed, Lui reminds Moi that they both used to belong to the same society. In order to earn some money, Lui recounts the story of the piano lesson that he gives to students, without knowing, as he says, accompaniment and composition, just as Moi used to give math lessons only pretending to know the subject. By placing Moi and Lui in the same social group, Diderot promotes a certain commonality in experiences between the two protagonists. While the chess players and other spectators laugh, Moi never does. He is caught up in the pantomimes, which are manifestations of Lui's social entanglements. The cognitive dissonances felt by Moi when viewing the grotesque in performance will be eased by the sublime. According to Remshardt, "drama may present the ugly or the grotesque if it safely removes it or converts it into sublimity" (126).

Indeed, the representation of the grotesque as previously examined, gives way to the sublimity in the performance itself.

The sublime in performance

In the *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1751), Diderot imagines a linguistic study with individuals who are deaf-mute from birth, and others who pretend to be so for the sake of experiment, with a view to examine the natural order of words in language. He proposes to supplant verbal communication with the language of gestures in order to better understand the formation of language itself. He gives an example borrowed from Shakespearean tragedy to show that the *sublime de situation* (DPV 4: 143), or situations in which actions are rendered through gestures are endowed with a sort of energy unparalleled in verbal language. He remarks: “on oublie la pensée la plus sublime; mais ces traits ne s’effacent point” (*ibid.*). Diderot’s observation prompts Brian Elkner to claim that “[t]he sublime de situation is directed toward imprinting in the beholder an ineffaceable image that has no need to be ‘translated,’ that does not depend on the current ‘value’ of certain words” (149). This indelible image is manifested by the figure of Lui in *Le Neveu de Rameau* as he performs the pantomime of the one-man band. This performance, which is limited to gestures and silence, is filled with a profound energy.⁹¹

In the pantomime of the one-man band, Lui exhibits his passions not only for music, but also for the art of imitation. Possessed by his passion to become a man of genius, Lui is miming an entire orchestra by himself. He is in constant motion,

⁹¹ In *Diderot, poète de l’énergie*, Jacques Chouillet writes: “On est en droit de supposer que le discours qui se réduirait en un mot, à un geste, ou même au silence total, serait de tous les modes d’expression, le plus ‘énergique’” (32).

mimicking each instrument in sequence without any interruption. Unexpectedly, he shifts into the miming of nature. This abrupt transition shows the focus that Diderot wishes to place on the similarity between music and nature, which lies in their immediate reception. Described by Diderot as strong winds, torrents, tempest, the sound of thunder, the tenebrous night, and even silence, the natural sublime that Lui is supposedly miming fulfils the criteria that Edmund Burke had posited as the causes of the sublime in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).⁹² The “affinities” between Burke and Diderot, which Gita May locates in the *Salon de 1767*, relate to the natural sublime, “the grand and wild aspects of nature... those that reveal the mysterious, enormous, untamed forces that surround us” (*Diderot and Burke* 532). As a pioneer of the sublime, the Greek rhetorician Longinus had explained in the third century that sublimity found in the external world is caused by man’s admiration when faced with “what passes his understanding” (48):

we are by nature led to marvel, not, indeed, at little streams, clear and useful though they be, but at the Nile, the Danube, or the Rhine, and still more at the Ocean. [...] nor do we consider our little fire more worthy of admiration than the craters of Etna whose eruptions throw up rocks and mighty boulders or at times pour forth rivers of lava from that single fire within the earth (47-48).

Longinus suggests that nature’s greatness and energy exceed human comprehension and thus associates the sublime with the divine power of creation, which is expressed in the Book of Genesis as a *Fiat lux*: “And God said. What? Let there be light, and there was light” (qtd. in Longinus 14). Baldine Saint Girons explains that the relationship between the thought of light and its actual creation illustrates the interplay between the spiritual and the sensible in the Longinian sublime (*Fiat Lux* 49).

⁹² Burke’s *Enquiry* was translated into French in 1765.

In the eighteenth century, however, the process of secularizing the sublime began in England with John Baillie, who founded his conception of the sublime on sensations (Monk 74), and continued with Edmund Burke, who focused on the emotion of terror. Both Baillie and Burke underlined the psychological aspect of this aesthetic category (Monk 73), and displaced the focus of the experience of the sublime from the object itself to a subjective judgment.

For Diderot, the sublime does not remain solely in the objects of the external world. It is rather inextricably associated with the subject who is experiencing the emotion (Elkner 146). In his *Correspondance*, Diderot writes: “Les choses ne sont rien en elles-mêmes. Elles n’ont ni douceur ni amertume réelles. Ce qui les fait ce qu’elles sont, c’est notre âme” (2: 189). In the *Salon de 1767*, Diderot found in Joseph Vernet’s landscape paintings the very essence of a sublime aesthetic. As Peyrache-Leborgne has noted, Diderot’s taste for Lucretian storms and violent nature invokes the sublime (40-41) because of the emotion of terror they elicit in the spectator.⁹³ In connecting the sublime to the subject, and basing it on a psychological impression, Diderot strips nature of its divine source, and thereby secularizes the sublime.

Diderot requires the presence of man to experience nature’s “désordre sublime” (“Cabinet d’histoire naturelle” 240). Nature’s chaos, characterized by its violent energy, is associated with the sublime because of the clear dominance of natural phenomena over humanity. In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, he describes what Lui is miming in these terms:

Que ne lui vis je pas faire? [...] c’étoit une femme qui se pame de douleur; c’étoit un malheureux livré a tout son desespoir; un temple qui s’eleve; des oiseaux qui

⁹³ Diderot states in the *Salon de 1767*: “Tout ce qui étonne l’âme, tout ce qui imprime un sentiment de terreur conduit au sublime. Une vaste plaine n’étonne pas comme l’océan, ni l’océan tranquille comme l’océan agité” (DPV 16 : 234)

se taisent au soleil couchant; des eaux qui murmurent [*sic*] dans un lieu solitaire et frais, ou qui descendent en torrents du haut des montagnes; un orage, une tempete, la plainte de ceux qui vont perir, melée au sifflement des vents, au fracas du tonnerre; c'etoit la nuit, avec ses tenebres; c'etoit l'ombre et le silence; car le silence meme se peint par des sons. (84-85)

The examples that Diderot provides range from a woman swooning from the pains of childbirth to the wailing sound of men who will succumb to nature's might. The calm waters gain sudden energy and are followed by an unrestrained storm. This energy of nature, described as intense jolts, lends itself to the emergence of the sublime.

Defined as "l'*élévation*," or "un mouvement ascensionnel" the sublime or *sublimis* is linked to the idea of the dynamic, and to the movement required to capture it (Saint Girons, *Fiat Lux* 17). This movement, which is a "cruelle énergie [qui] bout au fond du cœur de l'homme" (*Salon de 1767*, DPV 16: 327), motivates Jacques Chouillet to analogize this energy to that caused by the eruption of a volcano (*Diderot poète de l'énergie* 12). In *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Lui's passions are similarly liberated by means of the pantomime of the one-man band. An apologist of the "passions fortes" (11), Diderot associates the passions with the sublime in the *Pensées philosophiques* (1746), and claims that they are the source of man's pleasure (DPV 2: 17). Without passions, Diderot asserts, there is no sublime in works of art or in virtue:

il n'y a que les passions et les grandes passions qui puissent élever l'âme aux grandes choses. Sans elles, plus de sublime, soit dans les mœurs, soit dans les ouvrages; les beaux-arts retournent en enfance, et la vertu devient minutieuse. (17)

Diderot wishes to show that the freed passions contain the energy from which the ascending movement of the soul takes place during the experience of the sublime.

The sublime for Diderot eases the dissonances between a hermetic philosophical language and a more liberating language of gestures. While Diderot does not theorize the

sublime, he examines it through the window of human experience. As a grotesque protagonist, Lui uses the language of gestures in such a passionate way that his soul becomes passive⁹⁴ and his whole being entranced to the point of being unconscious of his actions and of the world around him:

Sa tete etoit tout a fait perdue. Epuisé de fatigue, tel qu'un homme qui sort d'un profond sommeil ou d'une longue distraction; il resta immobile, stupide, étonné. Il tournoit ses regards autour de lui, comme un homme égaré qui cherche a reconnoitre le lieu ou il se trouve. Il attendoit le retour de ses forces et de ses esprits; il essuyoit machinalement son visage. (*Le Neveu de Rameau* 85)

When Lui finishes his performance, he resembles a man who has just woken up from a deep sleep. Even though the dream state is not explicit, it is definitely implied by Lui's difficulty to recognize the space where he was before the performance. Baldine Saint Girons sees a possibility of analogy between the experience of the sublime and the dream state,⁹⁵ which would associate the sublime with an unconscious and uncontrolled imagination. By means of his body and mute performances, Lui is able to go beyond language and create that which is unrepresentable and inimitable. Moi is astounded by Lui's work of genius – his miming performance. The lack of creativity in Lui's musical productions in real life is the driving force that propels him to create an entire orchestra in pantomime. His artistic success in this endeavor attests to his power of imagination, and vindicates earlier failures. It is his uninhibited imagination, which transgresses the limits of normative artistic expression that prompts the emergence of the sublime. If the source of the sublime emanates from a “lack” – be it darkness as a lack of light for Burke, or

⁹⁴ Article “Passions” in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers*, etc, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2014 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>
The author of this article is unknown. Passions are defined as strong desires that can take away the use of freedom, a state in which the soul is rendered passive.

⁹⁵ In *Fiat Lux: Une philosophie du sublime*, Saint Girons asks herself how the experience of the sublime (if the sublime can be thought of as an experience) can be fixed and how it can give itself form (301).

mediocrity in artistic productions as a lack of innate brilliance for Diderot, then the sublime becomes “l’espace conditionnel du faire-sens dans les domaines de l’art et de la littérature” (Marot 27-28). The pantomime itself, as an artistic performance devoid of speech, bears the potentialities to transport the mime and the spectator outside of their respective realities. As a literary text, *Le Neveu de Rameau* also conveys a sense of lack for the reader who cannot directly see Lui’s performance and who must rely on Moi’s ekphrasis.

Witnessing the pantomime of the one-man band, Moi-narrator supplies his subjective understanding of Lui’s gestures. The incompatibility between the mime’s gestures and the Moi-narrator’s ekphrasis of Lui’s performance demonstrates the complexity of this text. The narrator describes Lui’s gestures as if the mime were a “tableau mouvant,” an aesthetic experience under study. Instead of making a palimpsest as Diderot the art critic does in the *Salons*, erasing the artist’s original painting and painting a new one with words in its place, Moi-narrator takes the liberty of interpreting Lui’s gestures as he pleases. When the narrator describes Lui miming “un temple qui s’élève” (85), for instance, the reader realizes that it is the narrator’s own interpretation of the gestures of the mime, but not what Lui is actually miming. He may be miming a movement upward, but the temple is the interpretation of the narrator himself. The temple that rises into view may be interpreted as the representation of a harmonious architectural building, or of a mountain, but either natural or man-made, it cannot be unambiguously represented through gestures. The narrator is therefore using his imagination as well to go beyond the mimetic art. The image of the temple represents a

congruous entity that the reader can visualize in its totality, thus grasping, in Diderot's words, "l'unité du tout."

Diderot's sublime is based on the interplay between Lui's freedom of imagination, on the one hand, and, on the other, Moi's subjective interpretation of Lui's mimetic performance. In the one-man band pantomime, Lui's creativity in miming an entire orchestra shows his genius in producing an inimitable performance. While Lui transitions from one instrument to the next, his dynamic performance is somewhat hampered by Diderot's ekphrasis, which does not allow for the fluidity and continuity of the actions of the mime. The fragmented syntax and use of semicolons surely convey the rapid motions of the mime, but they also leave the reader with nothing other than disconnected images. The totality of the aesthetic experience can be recreated by assembling all the different fragmented parts, which the reader seizes from language. Diderot's sublime can therefore be described as a result of an experience that attempts to portray the idea of totality.

The experience of the sublime, moreover, is transmitted from Lui to the spectator. Moi experiences the sublime, but he seems to need Lui's presence to mediate it (Coleman 224). While Moi witnesses the mime's bodily contortions during the one-man band pantomime, he claims that Lui "s'[est emparé] de [son] ame, et [l'a tenue] suspendue dans la situation la plus singuliere qu' [il] ai[t] jamais éprouvée" (84). Moi's experience of the sublime, felt as the suspension of his soul, is in accordance with Jaucourt's definition of the sublime in the *Encyclopédie*: "Le sublime en général, ... est tout ce qui

nous élève au-dessus de ce que nous étions, et qui nous fait sentir en même temps cette élévation.”⁹⁶

The pantomime of the one-man band dazzles Moi, who feels transported into a unique state of mind in which he can tolerate Lui because the latter restores a portion of Moi’s “individualité naturelle” (5). In the quest for his self, Moi is presented in the introductory paragraph of *Le Neveu de Rameau* as being alone, and talking to himself about politics, love, taste and philosophy. The image of his thoughts represented as wenchés shows the freedom with which his mind can wander and follow any idea that emerges. If we assume that this philosophical dialogue happens in Diderot-narrator’s mind,⁹⁷ then Lui’s pantomimes represent an exteriorization of Moi’s individuality, and a chance for his mind to transcend sensation.

Moi will succeed in understanding his self through inner reflections which take place during rare moments of silence, a temporary speechlessness often associated with the sublime: “[T]he sublime emphasizes the isolation and individuality of human experience” (Wilson 576-577). Two stories that stand in opposition – one illustrating virtue, and the other, vice – will help illustrate Moi’s search for his self through the sublime. The first one told by Moi, deals with a virtuous man disinherited by his parents and forced to run away to Cartagena. He comes to the rescue of his parents who got stripped of their money and dwelling by the first-born brother. It is under these

⁹⁶ Article “Sublime” in *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers*, etc, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d’Alembert. University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project (Spring 2014 Edition), Robert Morrissey (ed), <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>

⁹⁷ The critics disagree on the identity of Moi and Lui. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel makes a clear distinction between the two protagonists by identifying Moi as having a “noble consciousness” and Lui as representing an “ignoble consciousness” (316). On the other hand, Daniel Mornet in “La véritable signification du *Neveu de Rameau*” claims that Lui and Moi are in reality Moi and Moi: “c’est un Diderot qui bataille, âprement, contre un autre Diderot” (883).

circumstances that Moi is rendered mute: “et moi, je sens, en vous faisant ce recit, mon cœur se troubler de joie, et le plaisir me couper la parole” (43). Moi suggests that goodness makes him feel a sense of pleasure that he cannot describe in words. On the contrary, Lui cannot understand the relationship set up by Moi between virtue and happiness. In order to illustrate his vision on morality, Lui tells the story of the Renegade of Avignon, which also relates the sublime to ethical considerations, but inverts the bond: “S’il importe d’être sublime en quelque genre,” Lui claims, “c’est surtout en mal” (72). The sublime is here linked to immorality and specifically to evil. When Lui realizes that he has lost Moi’s attention, Lui asks, “A quoi revez-vous?” (74). Disturbed by the modulations of Lui’s tone of voice, Moi answers: “Je reve a l’inegalité de votre ton; tantot haut, tantot bas” (74). Lui reports the story by acting out the dialogue between the Jewish man and the Renegade, and he celebrates his art of imitation by miming a song. Moi is horrified by the incongruity between the reporting of an evil act and Lui’s performance. Lui sees Moi’s struggle and asks: “Vous avez l’air soucieux d’un homme tracassé de quelqu’idée facheuse” (77). After Moi agrees, a brief period of silence follows (“après un moment de silence de sa part et de la mienne” [77]), before Moi resumes the dialogue once more.

Moi’s silence shows that he is experiencing the sublime, but it is mediated by Lui’s presence. Silence signals that Moi is reflecting on the inadequacy of the transition between an ethics of immorality and the song of triumph. Moi tries to rise above the senses and reach his reason for a higher understanding of the incongruities that Lui incarnates. It is because of Lui’s strange relationship with art and his unconventional outlook in ethics that Moi can experience the gap between aesthetic pleasure and ethical

actions. The incongruities represent a deliberate technique of discourse as a catalyst for experiencing the sublime, which, according to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, is an operation of the mind: "the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which, shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of Sense" (47).

With *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot creates a masterpiece in which art and morality are intertwined into a network of incongruous relationships through the opposition of the two protagonists, Moi, the representative of the ideal philosophy, and Lui, a grotesque character who stands in contradiction to Moi's views. The transition throughout the dialogue from ethics to aesthetics does not follow a logical path since, according to Diderot, it is difficult to discover the imperceptible links that hold these incongruous ideas together. It is the experience of the sublime that provides the missing link to harmonize the discordant ideas. Through the sublime, the subject's mind rises above sensation and attempts to understand the seemingly dissonant ideas by focusing on the whole. As the sublime transports Lui into a sensory trance and Moi into philosophical contemplation, the reader is also elevated to think beyond incongruities permeating the text. The sublime opens the mind to perceive that which is unrepresentable – connections between the senses and reason, good and evil, ethics and aesthetics.

The Limits of Analogy: Incongruities in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*

Je dis *extravagances*; car quel
autre nom donner à cet
enchaînement de conjectures
fondées sur des oppositions ou des
ressemblances si éloignées, si
imperceptibles, que les rêves d'un
malade ne paraissent ni plus
bizarres, ni plus décousus?

Diderot, *De l'interprétation de la nature*⁹⁸

Written during the summer of 1769, and published posthumously in 1830, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* explores the idea of a fluctuating nature that Diderot analyzed in the *Salons*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *Lettre sur les aveugles* and *De l'interprétation de la nature*. In all of these diverse works – each distinguished by its genre – Diderot places nature at the center of his thought, and weaves different networks of ideas to uncover a higher order amidst the apparent disorder. By focusing on nature, Diderot echoes the scientific and philosophical discourse of his time. Yet he brings new insights to the subject as he studies analogies and disparities in the scientific views and conclusions of his contemporaries.

While working on the *Encyclopédie*, the *Salons* and *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot wrote another satirical work, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. Unsited for publication at the time of its composition, since the text included real historical figures as the main characters – the mathematician Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, Mlle Julie de L'Espinasse, and Doctor

⁹⁸DPV 9: 49

Théophile de Bordeu – *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* was never published during Diderot’s life. His close friends, however, read the manuscripts. In fact, d’Alembert and Mlle de L’Espinasse were outraged at the views attributed to them in the dialogue and asked Diderot to burn the work (Georges May, *Quatre visages* 149).

Le Rêve de d’Alembert is a trilogy, composed of three *entretiens* in which Diderot presents his philosophy of nature in an original way. Different from a treatise, an essay or a collection of fragmented thoughts, the *entretiens* take the form of organized dialogues in which Diderot’s materialist ideas reverberate from interlocutor to interlocutor. Universal sensitivity (*la sensibilité universelle*) is the overarching concept that constitutes the thread of thought in all three parts of the dialogue. Diderot maintains that matter, even inanimate, can become sensitive, and therefore capable of feeling. The first conversation, entitled *La Suite d’un entretien entre M. d’Alembert et M. Diderot*, which explains the potential passage from inanimate matter to life, is a dialogue between the mathematician d’Alembert and Diderot. When d’Alembert announces his desire to go to sleep, Diderot warns him that he will be dreaming about the subjects that they have just discussed. The second dialogue, entitled *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, is precisely the dream that d’Alembert is having in the presence of Mlle de L’Espinasse, his actual mistress. While d’Alembert is dreaming and speaking out loud about the organization of life, Mlle de L’Espinasse writes down notes of this somniloquy. Worried about d’Alembert’s apparent delusions, she calls Doctor Théophile de Bordeu to examine the patient. Mlle de L’Espinasse tells Dr. Bordeu that “cela avait tout l’air du délire.

C'était...un galimatias de cordes vibrantes et de fibres sensibles."⁹⁹ Finding d'Alembert in perfect health, Dr. Bordeu analyzes the mathematician's reflections and develops the ideas that Mlle de L'Espinasse has written down. Soon, Dr. Bordeu carries on the conversation, and even guesses the content of d'Alembert's dream. In the last dialogue, entitled *Suite de l'entretien précédent*, Mlle de L'Espinasse and the doctor examine the subject of the crossbreeding between species from a moral perspective, and contemplate the possibility of a goat-man. Even though Diderot is absent in the second and third *entretiens*, his thoughts are present in d'Alembert's mind, which provide a springboard for Mlle de L'Espinasse and Dr. Bordeu to continue the conversation that Diderot and d'Alembert first started.

It is interesting to note that *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* was first thought of as *Le Rêve de Démocrite*,¹⁰⁰ with interlocutors borrowed from antiquity. In a letter to his mistress Sophie Volland, Diderot expresses his motive for using contemporary interlocutors:

Si j'avois voulu sacrifier la richesse du fond à la noblesse du ton, Démocrite, Hippocrate et Leucippe auroient été mes personnages; mais la vraisemblance m'auroit renfermé dans les bornes étroites de la philosophie ancienne, et j'y aurois trop perdu.¹⁰¹

The switch from characters inspired by antiquity¹⁰² to actual figures from his own time allowed Diderot to use the latest scientific thought and manipulate it to fit his own

⁹⁹ Denis Diderot, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 17 (Paris: Hermann, 1981) 116. Future references to this text will be indicated with the abbreviation "DPV 17."

¹⁰⁰ Jacques André Naigeon, *Mémoires historiques et philosophiques sur la vie et les ouvrages de D. Diderot* (Paris: Brière, 1821). "Diderot avait d'abord vu la chose bien plus en grand: c'était le *Rêve de Démocrite*, et les interlocuteurs, Démocrite, Hippocrate, et la maîtresse de Démocrite; mais il eût fallu se renfermer dans la sphère de la philosophie ancienne, et son dialogue y aurait trop perdu" (213).

¹⁰¹ Letter of 31 August 1769 to Sophie Volland, Corr 9: 126.

¹⁰² In *Quatre visages de Diderot*, (Paris: Boivin, 1951), Georges May notes the surprising mention of Leucippe as one of the interlocutors of the dialogue. Leucippe was Démocrite's master, and May suspects that Diderot might have wanted to write a dialogue between Démocrite and his master, before he decided to include a woman (138).

materialist views. Diderot's choice of Dr. Bordeu as one of the interlocutors in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, is deliberate. Bordeu wrote about sensitivity in his student thesis *Dissertatio Physiologica de Sensu Generice Considerato* (1742). His *Recherches anatomiques sur la position des glandes et sur leur action* (1751), and his *Recherches sur l'histoire de la médecine* (1768) prepared the way for Diderot's *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*.¹⁰³ In his *Recherches anatomiques*, Bordeu used the metaphor of the bee swarm to explain the interrelationship between the parts and the whole in a living organism (Bordeu, 452),¹⁰⁴ a metaphor that will be used and manipulated by Diderot, as we shall examine later. In his *Recherches sur l'histoire de la médecine*, Bordeu explains that the functions of life are contingent on animal or sensitive fiber, the fundamental element that governs physiological functions: "il semble qu'on doive suivre les fonctions de la vie, qui se tiennent les unes aux autres d'une manière admirable, et qui dépendent toutes de l'influence ou de l'action de la fibre animale ou sensible" (260).¹⁰⁵ Historian of science Jacques Roger insightfully remarks that, without the doctors from the Montpellier medical school, such as Bordeu, Fouquet, and Ménuret de Chambaud, Diderot would not have written *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*.¹⁰⁶

Le Rêve de d'Alembert develops Diderot's ideas on nature within scientific and philosophical domains. The field of inquiry is not literary and aesthetic as in the *Salons*,

¹⁰³ In "Les protagonistes du 'Rêve de d'Alembert,'" *Diderot Studies* 3 (Geneva: Droz, 1961), Yvon Belaval mentions G. Cuvier (*Histoire des sciences naturelles* (Paris: 1841), 3: 199-202) who attributes the first usage of the word "sensibilité" in physiology to Bordeu (36).

¹⁰⁴ According to Georges May, Herbert Dieckmann had found this image in Bordeu's works. See May, *Quatre visages de Diderot*, 140.

¹⁰⁵ For a detailed historicization of the term "sensibilité" and the influence of the doctors of the Montpellier medical school, see François Duchesneau, "Diderot et la physiologie de la sensibilité," *Dix-Huitième siècle* 31 (1999): 195-216. On the action of the animal or sensitive fiber, see 202.

¹⁰⁶ On Bordeu's influence on Diderot, see Jacques Roger, *Les sciences de la vie dans la pensée française du XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Colin, 1971) 618-630.

or musical and ethical as in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, but rather physical and biological. This work demonstrates Diderot's materialism,¹⁰⁷ and as Jean-Claude Bourdin explains, it is centered on the speculation that matter as first principle, can explain "the origin, the formation and conservation of things, independently of finality or transcendental intelligence" (*Diderot: le matérialisme* 15, my translation). According to Diderot's materialism, the organizing principle of the world is not viewed in terms of God as presented in the Old Testament. Instead, Diderot believes that matter alone can explain the workings of nature. Influenced by Bordeu's physiological writings from 1742 onward, Diderot considers sensitivity as "a general and essential quality of matter" (DPV 17: 90, my translation). Diderot's originality lies in the ways in which he creates a philosophical discussion around the concept of sensitivity of matter, using contemporary philosophers, including himself. Diderot's intention is not to put in place a system of nature, such as Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) had done with his *Elementa Physiologiae Corporis Humani* (1757), but rather to present a vision of the potentialities of nature that lie beyond man's observations. In order to achieve his goal, Diderot conducts many imaginary experiments based on analogical reasoning.

Therefore, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* contains the application of the metaphysics that Diderot developed simultaneously in the *Encyclopédie*, *Pensées philosophiques* and in *De l'interprétation de la nature*, through the concept of analogy. This concept is defined in the *Encyclopédie* by César Chesneau Dumarsais and the abbé Yvon as "la relation, le rapport ou la proportion que plusieurs choses ont les unes avec les autres, quoique

¹⁰⁷ Many critics have studied Diderot's materialism, such as Elizabeth de Fontenay, *Diderot ou le matérialisme enchanté* (Paris: Grasset, 1981); Jean-Claude Bourdin, *Diderot: Le Matérialisme* (Paris: PUF, 1998); Roland Desné, *Les matérialistes français de 1750 à 1800* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1965); Yvon Belaval, *Études sur Diderot* (Paris: PUF, 2003), 159-169; Colas Duflo, *Diderot philosophe* (Paris: Champion, 2003), 189-197.

d’ailleurs différentes par des qualités qui leur sont propres” (“Analogie”). In *De l’interprétation de la nature*, Diderot differentiates between two types of philosophies, an experimental one that functions by trial and error, and a rational one that uses analogies as a process for creativity: “L’expérience multiplie ses mouvements à l’infini; elle est sans cesse en action; elle met à chercher des phénomènes, tout le temps que la raison emploie à chercher des analogies” (DPV 9: 43). Diderot’s thought process is evident in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, in which he associates an empirical approach, which would explain phenomena a posteriori, and an intuitive methodology, which functions through analogies. In the first dialogue of this triptych work, entitled *La Suite d’un entretien entre M. d’Alembert et M. Diderot*, the mathematician asks Diderot to define the concept of analogy, which he does in the following terms:

L’analogie, . . . n’est qu’une règle de trois qui s’exécute dans l’instrument sensible. Si tel phénomène connu en nature est suivi de tel autre phénomène connu en nature, quel sera le quatrième phénomène conséquent à un troisième, ou donné par la nature, ou imaginé à l’imitation de la nature? [...] C’est une quatrième corde harmonique et proportionnelle à trois autres dont l’animal attend la résonance qui se fait toujours en lui-même, mais qui ne se fait pas toujours en nature. [...] il faut qu[e] [le philosophe] interroge ensuite la nature qui, lui donnant souvent un phénomène tout à fait différent de celui qu’il avait présumé, alors il s’aperçoit que l’analogie l’a séduit. (DPV 17: 110-111)

For Diderot, analogy is a method of reasoning by which known phenomena in nature are compared to unknown phenomena. Identified as the rule-of-three, borrowed from the domain of mathematics, the analogy functions as a mechanism that seeks to make deductions about unknown events. As Diderot continues, he shifts his thought from mathematics to music. He then explains analogy in terms of a network of strings that resonate in the sensitive instrument, can possibly be any sensitive being, in this case a human being. This analogy between harmonious vibrating strings of a harpsichord and

the thinking being is particularly incongruous, as it would ultimately lead to the creation of literary monsters, which we shall examine later.

Ironically, Diderot defines analogy by making two different analogies, one with mathematics, and another with music. This tautological design is not the least accidental; it underlines Diderot's desire to create aporetic explanations of a single concept such as analogy. The redundancy of the same idea presented in a different form shows the circularity of Diderot's demonstration. He does not untangle the demonstration of analogical reasoning; he will instead lead the reader into a philosophical journey or "excursion" (DPV 17: 140) in which the demonstration will eventually turn into derision. While Diderot resists defining this term in this philosophical dialogue, he resorts to explaining the workings of an organic nature through a series of analogies borrowed from the scientific domain in general, and more specifically from the biological and medical fields.

The principal incongruity in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* lies in the voluntary trap of circularity in the demonstration. Even if Diderot builds his metaphysics on analogies, his aversion to a systematic definition of analogy underscores his suspicion of the use of this form of reasoning. Indeed, he advises the philosopher in general to be wary of analogical reasoning because nature will present a different event than the one that the philosopher had conjectured. As Diderot nevertheless takes refuge in analogies, we witness his efforts to popularize the scientific ideas of his time by appropriating contemporary scientific research, and mixing scientific language with his own philosophical views. As we shall see in this chapter, the analogy will seduce Diderot because he will use it as a universal tool to explain natural phenomena. In *L'Analogie et le probable: Pensée et*

écriture chez Denis Diderot, Anne Maurseth calls analogy “un déguisement littéraire” (102), which will have the effect of disclosing natural events only in appearance, but not in reality. This literary disguise of analogy, according to Maurseth, shapes the scientific mind (102). Even though Diderot did not receive the education and training of a scientist, he borrows biological paradigms to explain his materialist concept of sensitivity.

The scientific models that Diderot chooses, operate inherently as a network or as “réseau,” a term used multiple times in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*. For Eric Letonturier, the “réseau” is in itself an analogy implicitly exposed in Diderot’s philosophy of science.¹⁰⁸ While Letonturier believes that the repetition of the analogies in observed phenomena functions as a heuristic device, I argue that the tautological circularity and the cumulative use of analogies result in the potential creation of alternate forms of beings, such as monsters. Based on these networks, which elucidate the relationship of the parts of a living organism to the whole being, many incongruities present themselves on both the scientific and the philosophical levels. Diderot’s innovation lies in the ways in which he appropriates the scientific paradigms of his time and contrives his own imaginary experiments to advance his claim of sensitive matter.

Many critics have examined *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* in terms of its structure, its materialism and, most importantly, the different analogies it borrows from a scientific domain. Herbert Dieckmann suggests that the “metaphor and the metaphoric image are the literary means by which the analogical and conjectural relationships between causation and laws in the different domains of nature and in the corresponding

¹⁰⁸ In “Le réseau mis en oeuvre: le Rêve de Diderot,” Eric Letonturier states that he found thirty occurrences of the term “réseau” in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* (9; 18 note 1).

sciences...are established” (“The Metaphoric Structure” 20-21). He explains further the term metaphor as “transference” of ideas from one domain of knowledge to another (“Discussion” 70). Indeed, by means of analogical reasoning, Diderot transfers the idea of matter endowed with potential energy – which lies in the physical domain – into the biological domain of active sensitivity by means of absorption of inert matter by a living animal.

In *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, the mathematician staged by Diderot seeks to find a relationship between movement and sensitivity. He reasons by analogy and arrives at the deduction that inert and active sensitivities function similarly to inert and active energies:

Mais quel rapport y a-t-il entre le mouvement et la sensibilité? Serait-ce par hasard que vous reconnaîtriez une sensibilité active et une sensibilité inerte, comme il y a une force vive et une force morte? Une force vive qui se manifeste par la translation, une force morte qui se manifeste par la pression; une sensibilité active qui se caractérise par certaines actions remarquables dans l’animal et peut-être dans la plante; et une sensibilité inerte dont on serait assuré par le passage à l’état de sensibilité active. (DPV 17: 92)

From this analogy, in which d’Alembert explains inert and active sensitivities functioning similarly to latent and active energies, the discussions will be geared beyond the visible and into a series of conjectures. As Jacques Roger postulated, “il faut savoir aller au-delà de ce qu’on voit” (619): Diderot’s accumulation of analogies creates an imaginary world in which the collapse of meaning leads to an atmosphere of derision.

Anne Maurseth claims that Diderot uses “hypotheses, conjecture and analogy” (*L’Analogie et le probable* 79) as tools to interpret nature, and as organizing principles of both his thought process and his writing (101). While Dieckmann and Maurseth examine the use of analogies as a tool for the formulation of Diderot’s thoughts, I will focus on the incongruity of Diderot’s manipulations, which indicate the limits of analogies, but at the

same time foster our understanding of the workings of nature. In the tension between philosophical and scientific language, Diderot constructs imaginary scientific experiments – carried out in his writing, and not in a laboratory – which allow him to draw analogies between the speculated results and the workings of the human body and mind. His conjectural boldness and his free association of ideas enable him to fill in the gaps in scientific research or empirical data, and to increase his understanding of the physical world. Indeed, by endowing matter with sensitivity, Diderot invites one of the characters in the dialogue, d’Alembert, and the reader to think differently. The mathematician recognizes that “[c]ette façon de voir est nouvelle” (DPV 17: 91), but the author, Diderot, points out in his letter to Sophie Volland that *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* “est de la plus haute extravagance et tout à la fois de la philosophie la plus profonde” (Corr 9: 126). Diderot’s “art of philosophizing”¹⁰⁹ about nature, and his crafting of imaginary experiments on scientific models could aid scientific speculation at a time when the scientists could not conceive of other ways of interpreting nature’s mysteries. Simultaneously, the scientific models, proposed and conceptually manipulated by Diderot, help anchor his materialist views and will explain the eventual monstrosities as a natural process, and not as the outcome of transcendental forces.

All the ideas developed in the *Salons* and in *Le Neveu de Rameau* about nature and humanity’s place in it converge and culminate in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, in which they take on a new form. The free association of ideas between philosophical and scientific language allows Diderot to imagine that all matter – dead or living – is

¹⁰⁹ I am borrowing this expression from Daniel Brewer’s book *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France. Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

sensitive. Scientifically, nature will be thought of as the subject of laboratory experiments in which different trials will be conducted. Philosophically, nature also functions as a text that will be discussed and analyzed by the four interlocutors of the conversations. In order to show that nature is in ceaseless movement, Diderot constructs a series of analogies that erupt in every direction. His thinking follows a complex multidirectional network that intentionally avoids offering definite answers. It is thus the thought process and the interpretative freedom that matter to Diderot. His analogical reasoning, which methodically pursues potential “rapports” between different biological systems and a human organism, will lead him to a fantastic world, beyond space and time, made up of baby harpsichords, human polyps, and goat-men. Derision and incongruities within the discourse that further develops these analogies shed light on Diderot’s innovative thinking about nature in the context of the natural sciences in the eighteenth century: Diderot’s stance on the issue of sensitive matter explains his move from deductive reasoning that sought to classify and categorize, into inductive reasoning based on potential analogies. The first analogy, the myth of Pygmalion, shows how Diderot goes into fantastical and aporetic inductions based on his imaginary manipulations of analogies.

The natural sciences in the eighteenth century

Before we investigate the different analogies and the resulting incongruities caused by Diderot’s imaginary scientific engineering, it is paramount that we discuss the state of the natural sciences in the eighteenth century. Natural science left its imprint on French intellectuals when Jean-Baptiste Colbert founded the Académie des sciences in

1666, a forum where scientific knowledge in the Cartesian tradition was diffused. Descartes's natural philosophy was at the root of the scientific naturalism that Diderot espoused in the following century. According to Aram Vartanian, the *philosophes* however, would not recognize Descartes as the precursor of natural philosophy because he was "assimilat[ed]... to the rigid position of the Church" (*Diderot and Descartes* 38), and was considered "a powerful ally in the struggle against the deistic, materialistic, and atheistic tendencies of the Encyclopedist group" (39).¹¹⁰ Consequently, Descartes' rationalist ideas were being pushed aside, and the newly developed science of Newtonianism emerged as prevalent especially since its popularization in France by Voltaire in his *Eléments de la philosophie de Newton* (1738).

In the first half of the eighteenth century, Newtonian science dominated scientific thought, and this mechanical philosophy of nature, based on mathematical reasoning, strove to explain natural phenomena (Reill 5). While Newton gained much respect for his *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687), he aroused a certain kind of curiosity in many intellectuals' minds because "he transform[ed] contingent knowledge into certain truth, ... reduce[d] the manifold appearances of nature to simple principles" (Reill 5). As Newtonian cosmology described a stable and ordered universe through experiments and mathematical principles, nature was compared to a mechanism.

Illustrated in his *Pensées philosophiques*, published in 1746, Diderot's early view of nature embraces Newtonian mechanism. He described the world as a machine, referring to bodies as systems of pulleys, levers and tubes: "c'est une machine qui a ses

¹¹⁰Aram Vartanian considers Descartes, and not the English philosophers (such as Locke and Bacon), as the one who influenced Diderot and his contemporaries into a new ideology of scientific naturalism (16). For an exhaustive discussion of Descartes' influence on Diderot, see Chapter 1: "An Aspect of the Cartesian Heritage" (3-43).

roues, ses cordes, ses poulies, ses ressorts et ses poids” (DPV 2: 25). At this time, in his career as a writer, Diderot wanted to understand the universe through the laws of nature, and Newton’s law of gravity seemed rational to him. However, Diderot did not agree with the mechanist view, which defined matter as “homogeneous, extended, hard, impenetrable, movable, and inert” because he thought that it could not adequately explain nature in all its diversity (Reill 5). Reill explains that the result of this “streamlined and simplified” vision of matter led to the unpleasant belief that “Nature lost every vestige of vital independent existence, all value of its own. It became dead matter – a heap of things.”¹¹¹

Unsatisfied with the mechanists’ explanation of life, Diderot seeks to explore the truth of nature by breaking the boundaries of mechanistic philosophy, leaving behind deductive reasoning. This shift in Diderot’s thought is clearly expressed in *De l’interprétation de la nature*. He states in fragment IV that “[n]ous touchons au moment d’une grande révolution dans les sciences” (DPV 9: 30). Diderot suggests that this branch of science will cease to exist because knowledge of truth expressed through mathematical conventions cannot be achieved. He prophesizes that mathematics will be replaced by natural philosophy, a science based on observation. In *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer acknowledges that Diderot’s *De l’interprétation de la nature* is a major work that contributed to the turning point in eighteenth-century scientific thought:

With this observation the ideal of mathematical natural science, which dominated all eighteenth-century physics, begins to fade; and in its place a new ideal arises, the demand for a purely descriptive science of nature. Diderot had grasped and

¹¹¹ Max Horkheimer, “Reason Against Itself” 361; cited in Peter Reill’s *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* 5.

described this ideal in its general outlines long before it was realized in detail.
(74-75)

Diderot understood the need for a descriptive philosophical discussion of nature and of the origin of the world. His goal was to distance himself from the systematic disciplines which focused on theorems and axioms, and think about natural philosophy as a means to reach the truth of nature by describing it as a process, and by deconstructing and constructing anew natural phenomena in order to analyze them. The eighteenth century in general and Diderot in particular seek “a clear line of demarcation between the mathematical and the philosophical spirit” (Cassirer 15).

By doubting that the mechanists’ vision of nature and the “esprit de système” could explain life, Diderot aligned himself with the Enlightenment vitalist Georges Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788). In his work *Histoire naturelle: De la manière d’étudier et de traiter l’histoire naturelle*, Buffon criticized the principles of mechanical philosophy and strove to construct a new language of nature that transcended abstraction. The theory of vitalism that Buffon developed in the 1740’s is based on a more concrete and dynamic philosophy. He proposed that nature was not only made of dead matter, but also living matter, as one of the important elements that contributed to a new vitalist vision of natural philosophy. This organic property of matter brought into the equation the principle of dynamism, which satisfied Diderot. Diderot’s innovation is marked by a progression beyond Buffon’s concept of vitalism, and distinguished by the radical premise of sensitive matter, which allowed him, in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, to advance the incongruous claim that even a rock can feel.

While Buffon established a distinction between two types of matter, dead and living, Diderot instead saw a distinction between two different physical states. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot explains the difference in the state of matter from birth to death: “Naître, vivre et passer, c’est changer de formes” (DPV 17:139). The form of the individual, according to Diderot, changes from being a mass of matter when he is alive to scattered molecules when he is dead (Corr 2: 283). For Diderot, all matter is sensitive: living matter can be thought of as active sensitivity, and dead matter could be considered latent sensitivity that had not yet been activated. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, the mathematician conjectures that if sensitivity is a universal principle of matter, then “il faut que la pierre sente” (DPV 17: 90). When d’Alembert shows his skepticism toward such a hypothesis – “cela est dur à croire” (DPV 17: 90) – Diderot seeks to prove it. But as we shall see next, the concrete example that Diderot uses to demonstrate by analogy the conversion of dead matter into living matter contains its own incongruity, and shows Diderot’s materialist dogmatism.

Prototypical Analogy – Pygmalion’s myth or the passage from dead matter to living matter

As an atheist, Diderot seeks to explain natural phenomena without God’s intervention. He suggests instead that matter alone can explain the organization of the world. In order to advance such a claim, he makes the character d’Alembert express his rejection of God, articulated by means of contradictions, at the beginning of the work:

D’Alembert: J’avoue qu’un être qui existe quelque part et qui ne correspond à aucun point de l’espace; un être qui est inétendu et qui occupe de l’étendue; qui est tout entier sous chaque partie de cette étendue; [...] un être dont je n’ai pas la moindre idée; un être d’une nature aussi contradictoire est difficile à admettre. [...]; car enfin cette sensibilité que vous lui substituez, si c’est une qualité générale et essentielle de la matière, il faut que la pierre sente. (DPV 17: 89-90)

The substitution of God with sensitive matter represents the pillar of Diderot's materialism. Throughout *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot seeks to prove his hypothesis that matter is sensitive. The first analogy that Diderot develops – located in *La Suite d'un entretien entre M. d'Alembert et M. Diderot* – links the myth of Pygmalion to the transformation of matter. In order to prove that an inanimate object such as a rock is sentient, Diderot uses Falconet's sculpture, *Pygmalion et Galatée*,¹¹² to illustrate the passage from dead matter – marble – to living matter – flesh.

Diderot proposes to imaginatively destroy Falconet's statue “dans un mortier, et à grands coups de pilon” (DPV 17: 93) in order to show the conversion of inert matter (marble) to live matter. Once the statue is pulverized into a “poudre impalpable” (DPV 17: 94), Diderot begins his experiment in which he combines the powder with “humus,” or earth. He suggests letting this mixture combine a year or a century, after which he plants in it a garden of vegetables. He concludes that since the plants get nourishment from the earth, and man gets nourishment from the plants, then man endows the marble with active sensitivity through digestion of the plants. Diderot's objective is to show “[le] passage du marbre à l'humus, de l'humus au règne végétal, et du règne végétal au règne animal, à la chair” (DPV 17: 95). These successive conversions from one state to another show not only the potential continuity of the metamorphosis from inert matter to active matter, but also the potential reorganization of matter from a shapeless, non-organized powdery rock to a highly organized being, such as a man.

¹¹² Anne Maurseth identified Falconet's statue as *Pygmalion et Galatée* in *L'Analogie et le probable: Pensée et écriture chez Denis Diderot* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2007) 108. Other critics designated it as “Pygmalion aux pieds de sa statue qui s'anime.” See Herbert Dieckmann, Georges May, John Pappas, Aram Vartanian, Frederick Spear, “Discussion Edited with an Introduction,” *Diderot Studies* 17 (1973): 83-84; and Suzanne Pucci, *Diderot and a Poetics of Science* (New York: Lang, 1986) 133.

As one is shocked by the idea that a rock can feel, one can also be surprised by Diderot's demonstration of it. The process of conversion from rock to man is performed by rendering marble edible, which can be seen as a miracle in itself, an extravagance accomplished by Diderot's use of analogy. We can only assume that Diderot provokes us and places us in a phantasmagoric space. Even though the use of the statue is a perfect analogy with the myth of Pygmalion, Diderot goes beyond the limits of analogy, and the network of ideas that he is trying to construct loses its meaning. In his apparently logical reasoning from dead matter to living matter, Diderot uses a logic that collapses onto itself. The disintegration of reason yields to an alternative mode of thinking and interpreting nature, which lies for Diderot in all potentialities that his imagination can foresee.

Diderot's choice to utilize Falconet's statue is not gratuitous. In fact, he already reviewed this sculpture in the *Salon de 1763*, and praised it profusely:

La vie se décèle en elle par un souris léger qui effleure sa lèvre supérieure. Quelle innocence elle a! Elle en est à sa première pensée. Son cœur commence à s'émouvoir; mais il ne tardera pas à lui palpiter. [...] Non, ce n'est pas du marbre. Appuyez-y votre doigt, et la matière qui a perdu sa dureté, cédera à votre impression. (*Salon de 1763*, 409)

O Falconet, comment as-tu fait pour mettre dans un morceau de pierre blanche la surprise, la joie, et l'amour fondus ensemble. Emule des dieux, s'ils ont animé la statue, tu en as renouvelé le miracle en animant le statuaire. (*Salon de 1763*, 410)

For Diderot, Falconet's artisanal manipulation of the marble enlivened the statue, to the point that the material itself had transformed into a softer substance, as malleable as flesh. Endowing Falconet's production with life and thought, Diderot underscores that Falconet (1716-1791) successfully used the myth of Pygmalion to construct a sculpture that represented the image of life.

The myth of Pygmalion was known in eighteenth-century France through Ovid's *Métamorphoses*. Henri Coulet reminds us that there was a trend in using the motif of Pygmalion, as indicated by Boureau-Deslandes's philosophical novel *Pygmalion* (1741)¹¹³ and Rousseau's dramatic work *Pygmalion* (1762), based on the story of a sculptor who falls in love with the statue that he just created. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion, the creator of the statue, does not make Galatée come alive, but rather she is animated by the goddess Venus. Since Diderot can hardly accept Venus' intervention, Coulet claims that the goddess's act can only be regarded for an eighteenth century thinker as a symbol, an artifice or a mystification (13). Diderot's meddling with the statue can be seen as an artifice as well. First, he destroys the statue to erase any divine intervention, and then posits that matter alone can explain the transformation from inert matter to active matter.

As Suzanne Pucci has noticed in *Diderot and a Poetics of Science*, the statue by Falconet that Diderot uses as an illustration of the myth is an artifact and not a natural stone (137). Pucci's remark reminds us of the ways in which Diderot uses eighteenth-century productions and reconfigures them to prove his materialist belief, just as he does in his reviews of contemporary paintings in the *Salons* for ethical and aesthetic goals. In the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot conceptually destroys Falconet's statue in order to reconfigure matter with a different organization. Diderot's experiment cannot begin until the statue is first destroyed and reduced to its rudimentary state. Likewise, throughout *Le*

¹¹³ Diderot probably adopted André-François Boureau-Deslandes' ideas in his *Pygmalion ou la Statue animée* (1741), and Coulet rightfully states that Boureau-Deslandes's *Pygmalion* "exprime une philosophie matérialiste et épicurienne et avance, sur le passage de la matière inanimée à la matière mouvante, sentante et pensante, des idées, ou des hypothèses, qu'on retrouve chez Diderot et les matérialistes de son siècle" (23).

Rêve de d'Alembert, Diderot insists on returning to first principles, and seeks to understand matter not in its organized state, but rather as an amorphous mass. After all, it is only from the indeterminate form of matter that Diderot can construct it anew.

The passage from marble to flesh shows Diderot's intention of hinting at an ideal in the continuity of the chain of beings. Diderot follows Buffon's vitalist conception of nature by considering the world a dynamic universe in which matter is in the process of developing. Buffon's *Histoire naturelle* (1749) underlines the impossibility of separating the chain of beings: "nous ne sommes pas sûrs qu'on puisse tirer une ligne de séparation entre le règne animal et le règne végétal, ou bien entre le végétal et le minéral" (43).

Influenced by Buffon, Diderot stresses in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* the idea of continuity in the chain of beings:

Tous les êtres circulent les uns dans les autres, par conséquent toutes les espèces... tout est en un flux perpétuel... Tout animal est plus ou moins homme; tout minéral est plus ou moins plante; toute plante est plus ou moins animal. Il n'y a rien de précis en nature... (DPV 17: 138)¹¹⁴

Diderot's conception of nature is based on a world in which matter is constantly in motion. Matter, in nature, does not exist in a definite form, but is rather depicted through a mixture made of "more or less" different forms, human, animal and mineral. Nature is therefore a dynamic composite of the three kingdoms that intertwine and undergo a process of conversion by means of living matter. In *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Ernst Cassirer suggests that the impossibility of "crystallization" (90) in Diderot's thought on nature shows the necessity of avoiding classification, and thereby a static state, even in the chain of beings. His opposition to a system of classification of

¹¹⁴The ellipses are part of Diderot's text.

beings, such as the one that Linnaeus (1707-1778) had developed in his *Systema Naturæ* (1735, 1758), allowed Diderot to ponder the potentialities of hybrids, as we shall see later.

The Pygmalion myth not only represents the classical prototype of transformation from inert matter to sensitive matter, but also exemplifies Diderot's inductive thought process. After Falconet revives the myth by producing a sculpture of Pygmalion and Galatée, Diderot in turn uses it by means of the statue, and designs a series of analogies that exemplify repeatedly his most important premise, which is that matter can be converted from one kingdom into another. If his materialist claim is supported by a myth, what can be said about the subsequent analogies?

Epigenesis theory: the transition from sensitive matter to thinking matter

Through the Pygmalion statue experiment, Diderot showed the conversion of inert matter into sensitive matter by means of digestion. Even though d'Alembert – the character in the dialogue – agrees with Diderot on the transition from marble to flesh, he remarks that the philosopher has failed to show that the once inert matter could think: “l'être sensible n'est pas encore l'être pensant” (DPV 17: 95). At this juncture, Diderot does not provide a direct explanation, but leads the conversation in another direction. In order to show the passage from a sensitive being to a thinking being, he chooses to take a detour, and discuss the conception and birth of d'Alembert himself:

Diderot: Avant que de faire un pas en avant, permettez-moi de vous faire l'histoire d'un des plus grands géomètres de l'Europe. Qu'était-ce d'abord que cet être merveilleux? Rien.

D'Alembert: Comment rien! On ne fait rien de rien. (DPV 17: 95)

The word “rien” echoed three times places d’Alembert in a defensive stance. As a mathematician and a learned man, he is well aware of the general axiom that “nothing can come of nothing.” Diderot cautions him not to understand the term “rien” too literally, and expounds his position on the origin of life. D’Alembert is chosen to represent the example that will explain “epigenesis,” the embryological theory that “organs...are progressively formed from, or emerge from, an originally undifferentiated, homogeneous [material]” (Smith 264). Siding with Buffon on epigenesis, Diderot denies the mechanist’s theory of preformation, which views the inception of a human embryo as an already “fully formed organism [that is] encased in the germ of a ... person and then develops into the adult stage” (Gregory 53).¹¹⁵

Diderot takes d’Alembert as the “exemplary specimen” (Starobinski, “Le philosophe” 9) to conceive a thinking being philosophically. He repeats the same strategy that he used to demonstrate the passage from dead matter to living matter with Falconet’s statue, and returns to elemental principles. Indeed, the pulverization of the statue into powder is mirrored by the reduction of d’Alembert into molecules:

Diderot: avant que sa mère, la belle chanoinesse Tencin, eût atteint l’âge de puberté, avant que le militaire La Touche fût adolescent, les molécules qui devaient former les premiers rudiments de mon géomètre étaient éparses dans les jeunes et frêles machines de l’une et de l’autre, se filtrèrent avec la lymphe, circulèrent avec le sang, jusqu’à ce qu’enfin elles se rendissent dans les réservoirs destinés à leur coalition, les testicules de sa mère et de son père. Voilà ce germe rare formé; le voilà, comme c’est l’opinion commune, amené par les trompes de Fallope dans la matrice; le voilà attaché à la matrice par un long pédicule; le voilà,

¹¹⁵ According to Robert Darnton, epigenesis was proven in 1828, and until then, the two opposing philosophical tendencies, epigenesis and preformation had each their supporters (*Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France* 13). Diderot, Buffon and Maupertuis were partisans of the theory of epigenesis; Haller and Bonnet adhered to the theory of preformation.

s'accroissant successivement et s'avancant à l'état de fœtus; voilà le moment de sa sortie de l'obscur prison arrivé; le voilà né. (DPV 17: 95-96)

Diderot's whimsical account of d'Alembert's genesis does not only take the reader into the microscopic world of biological formation of beings, it is also an opportunity to posit himself as a defender of epigenesis, and to trace surprisingly the "natural history" (Starobinski, "Le philosophe" 9) of d'Alembert, highlighting his illegitimacy.¹¹⁶ Starobinski notes the incongruity of channeling the theory of epigenesis through the personal story of d'Alembert, born as an illegitimate child (21) and left on the stairs of the church Saint-Jean-le-Rond in Paris. Illegitimacy is a social construct that carries significant repercussions in eighteenth-century France. This crude detail about d'Alembert's origin points to Diderot's sadistic side as he reveals the most intimate and shameful piece of information that he should have kept unsaid. However, the d'Alembert that he is recreating anew represents the sample of the thinking being in Diderot's laboratory, which will allow him to prove that molecules combine randomly to form an embryo regardless of societal rules, or any transcendental forces.

The disintegration of d'Alembert to an embryological substance – at a textual level – allows Diderot to reconstruct him anew, but not without an additional artifice. Diderot associates d'Alembert's formation with epigenesis, which is, in turn, connected with a philosophical doctrine based on the sensitivity of matter – modern spinozism. In his *Encyclopédie* article "Spinosiste," Diderot explains the theory of epigenesis using the image of the egg and its development into a new organic being. Simultaneously, he

¹¹⁶For a discussion of the motif of illegitimacy, see David Anderson, "The Stigma of Illegitimacy Resolved, or Life Is an Alimentary Dream," *Diderot Studies* 25 (1993): 11-26.

differentiates traditional spinozists from modern ones by claiming that the latter acknowledge the sensitivity of matter:

Il ne faut pas confondre les Spinosistes anciens avec les Spinosistes modernes. Le principe général de ceux-ci, c'est que la matière est sensible, ce qu'ils démontrent par le développement de l'œuf, corps inerte, qui par le seul instrument de la chaleur graduée passe à l'état d'être sentant & vivant, & par l'accroissement de tout animal qui dans son principe n'est qu'un point, & qui par l'assimilation nutritive des plantes, en un mot, de toutes les substances qui servent à la nutrition, devient un grand corps sentant & vivant dans un grand espace. De-là ils concluent qu'il n'y a que de la matière, & qu'elle suffit pour tout expliquer. (DPV 8: 328-329)

Similarly to Diderot, the real d'Alembert is a partisan of epigenesis, but he opposes the concepts of material monism¹¹⁷ and the sensitivity of matter. Paul Vernière notes that d'Alembert rejected Spinoza's materialism, which based the workings of the world on matter,¹¹⁸ while Diderot shared it. Diderot's concept of sensitive matter was in fact more radical, and must have disconcerted d'Alembert: going beyond even the modern spinozists who believed in the sensitivity of matter, Diderot wanted to prove the existence of a thinking matter. The association of epigenesis with d'Alembert and with the *Encyclopédie* article "Spinosiste," alludes to the divide between the moderate strand of the Enlightenment presided over by Voltaire, and the radical one led by the Baron d'Holbach¹¹⁹ and Diderot.

¹¹⁷ Material monism can be traced back to Spinoza. See Paul Vernière, *Spinoza et la pensée française avant la révolution* (Paris: PUF, 1954) 2: 529.

¹¹⁸ In *Œuvres philosophiques*, the editor Paul Vernière mentions a letter from d'Alembert to Voltaire written in 1769 on the subject of Spinoza's materialism: "Toute sa métaphysique ne signifie rien ou elle signifie que la matière est la seule chose existante et que c'est dans elle qu'il faut chercher ou supposer la raison de tout. Je sais que ce sentiment est abominable" (269-270 note 1).

¹¹⁹ In 1770, the Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789) wrote his *Système de la nature*, in which he reveals his atheism and materialism. He held a prominent salon at his home in Paris, which attracted the French Encyclopedists and British philosophers such as David Hume.

But what, we may still ask, was Diderot's motive in choosing d'Alembert as a model for the thinking being? We know that since *De l'interprétation de la nature* (1753), Diderot foresaw a great revolution in the sciences, a radical change in which the natural sciences would supplant mathematics:

j'oserais presque assurer qu'avant qu'il soit cent ans, on ne comptera pas trois grands géomètres en Europe. Cette science s'arrêtera tout court où l'auront laissée les Bernouilli, les Euler, les Maupertuis, les Clairaut, les Fontaine et les d'Alembert. Ils auront posé les colonnes d'Hercule. On n'ira point au-delà. (DPV 9: 30-31)

In his *Correspondance*, the same idea is articulated in a letter to Voltaire in 1758:

Le règne des mathématiques n'est plus. Le goût a changé. C'est celui de l'histoire naturelle et des lettres qui domine. D'Alembert ne se jettera pas, à l'âge qu'il a, dans l'étude de l'histoire naturelle et il est bien difficile qu'il fasse un ouvrage de littérature qui réponde à la célébrité de son nom. (Corr 2: 38)

Diderot writes to Voltaire about the rapid changes occurring in the eighteenth-century thought, and intuitively remarks that d'Alembert will not adapt to these changes. The trajectory of d'Alembert that Diderot traces from his birth to his eventual death does not reveal the mathematician's ability to think further in his field. Aware of d'Alembert's skepticism toward the sensitivity of matter, Diderot tries in the first *entretien* to convince him otherwise, through the theory of epigenesis, which proposes that molecules come together at random to form a germ that will develop through a series of steps.

Once Diderot has imaginatively conceived d'Alembert by illustrating the link between sensitivity of matter and the theory of epigenesis, he reconstructs him artificially as the sample of the thinking being. Diderot explains d'Alembert's path to becoming a great mathematician as a digestive process:

...attaché à la mamelle de la bonne vitrière, mad^{me} Rousseau; allaité, devenu grand de corps et d'esprit, littérateur, mécanicien, géomètre. Comment cela s'est-il fait? En mangeant, et par d'autres opérations purement mécaniques. Voici en quatre mots la formule générale: Mangez, digérez, distillez *in vasi licito, et fiat homo secundum artem*. Et celui qui exposerait à l'Académie le progrès de la formation d'un homme ou d'un animal n'emploierait que des agents matériels dont les effets successifs seraient un être inerte, un être sentant, un être pensant, un être résolvant le problème de la précession des équinoxes, un être sublime, un être merveilleux, un être vieillissant, dépérissant, mourant, dissous et rendu à la terre végétale. (DPV 17: 96)

The artificial reconstruction of d'Alembert is reduced to a formula: "Mangez, digérez, distillez *in vasi licito, et fiat homo secundum artem*" (DPV 17: 96). In "The stigma of illegitimacy resolved, or life is an alimentary dream," David Anderson translates these few words as "Eat, digest, distill *in licit vessel, and let man be made according to art*" (14). This recipe for the creation of the thinking being "legitimate[s] what appears to be illegitimate" (11). Anderson examines the purpose of eating in d'Alembert's genesis and claims that it renders the discourse on his illegitimacy "positive" and "poetic" (12). On the one hand, I agree with Anderson to the extent that Diderot artificially creates a new d'Alembert after having reduced him to molecules. We could say that the sub-story about his illegitimacy is compensated for by the poetic and mimetic discourse that Diderot presents by taking the reader into the microscopic world of molecules. On the other hand, I disagree with Anderson to the extent that Diderot ironically reduces d'Alembert's genesis, and his career as a renowned geometer, to the mundane action of eating. When Diderot chooses d'Alembert as the exemplar of the thinking being, he does not prove the passage from sensitive matter to thinking matter. He only succeeds in deriding d'Alembert by stating that his origins as a geometer and as a man of letters can be reduced to the mechanical process of eating.

The consumption of food, however, is a recurrent image that Diderot uses to explain the conversion from inert matter to sensitive matter, as we already observed with the block of marble. Diderot explains that “...en mangeant, que faites-vous? Vous levez les obstacles qui s’opposaient à la sensibilité active de l’aliment; vous l’assimilez avec vous-même; vous en faites de la chair, vous l’animalisez; vous le rendez sensible” (DPV 17: 93). In other words, the chemical process of “distilling” allows the conversion of inert molecules into active ones; the sensitive molecules can now recognize an “affinity”¹²⁰ for other molecules, and become mutually attracted. This type of assimilation, interpreted as ingestion into our body, cannot be merely a digestive process, “a mechanical and chemical operation of breaking down matter,” as Paul Vernière has claimed (OP 265, note 3), but serves to free the potential sensitivity of matter (Pépin 60): “un contact qui assimile; de la sensibilité active ici, inerte là, qui se communique comme le mouvement” (DPV 17: 119). Beyond a digestive relationship between organisms, the passage from inert matter to sensitive and thinking matter is possible only if it is considered a material reorganization as Diderot presented it through the universal sensitivity of matter.

The notion of assimilation by contact can be conceptualized through the attraction, or affinity, that molecules have for each other. D’Alembert wonders how the heterogeneous molecules in our organism create the unity of the organic being. As we shall see later, Diderot explains the unity of our organism by comparing our organs to bees, and our whole organism to the “grappe d’abeilles.” The experiment that Diderot

¹²⁰ In “Diderot’s Laboratory of Sensibility,” Wilda Anderson explains how the affinity theory allowed Pierre-Joseph Macquer (*Dictionnaire de chimie*) and Diderot (*Le Rêve de d’Alembert*) to discuss the material universe and to create “a new type of scientific thought” (72).

effectuates on the bees hints at his intuitive mind, but the logical argument on the relationship between the whole and the parts of our organism degenerates into another incongruous construction. In his attempt to explain the sensitivity of matter, and to conceptualize and visualize the network of communication that occurs in our organic body, Diderot will use three analogies. As we shall now examine, the images used are not original to Diderot, but the manipulations that he performs on them are ingenious and result in incongruous creations.

The harpsichord effect: Beyond thinking matter or d'Alembert's feigned defense of analogy

The first one is the image of the harpsichord, conjured by Diderot in the first dialogue, when d'Alembert reminds the *philosophe* that he has not yet proved the passage from a sentient being to a thinking being. Diderot achieves this transmutation by claiming that the memory of a sentient being's own actions serves as the basis for consciousness, and consequently for one's ability to think. D'Alembert's remark that the thinking being cannot just think one idea at a time prompts Diderot to resort to yet another analogy in order to explain the simultaneity of ideas awakened: the thinking being is compared to a harpsichord:

La corde vibrante sensible oscille, résonne longtemps encore après qu'on l'a pincée. C'est cette oscillation, cette espèce de résonance nécessaire qui tient l'objet présent, tandis que l'entendement s'occupe de la qualité qui lui convient. Mais les cordes vibrantes ont encore une autre propriété, c'est d'en faire frémir d'autres; et c'est ainsi qu'une première idée en rappelle une seconde, ces deux-là une troisième, toutes les trois une quatrième, et ainsi de suite, sans qu'on puisse fixer la limite des idées réveillées, enchaînées, du philosophe qui médite ou qui s'écoute dans le silence et l'obscurité. Cet instrument a des sauts étonnants, et une idée réveillée va faire quelquefois frémir une harmonique qui en est à un intervalle incompréhensible. (DPV 17: 101)

The harpsichord is an instrument that conveys the idea of communication. Diderot explains that when one plucks the string of a harpsichord, not only does it create sound that lasts even after the plucking, but it also creates a network through which communication is transmitted to other strings in the harpsichord. Diderot endows the instrument with sensitivity and memory in order to explain the processes of thought and understanding in the thinking being: “Supposez au clavecin de la sensibilité et de la mémoire, et dites-moi s’il ne saura pas, s’il ne se répétera pas de lui-même les airs que vous aurez exécutés sur ses touches” (DPV 17: 102). In *Success in Circuit Lies*, Rosalina de la Carrera suggests that the circuit of communication in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* “takes place not through reason but through sensibility” (150). Indeed it is the sound perceived that first drives our memory and our mind to create the “rapport” between the different sensations. The emphasis on sensitivity motivates Diderot to compare our sensory perceptions to a musical instrument’s keys that are pressed or, as Diderot states, pinched by the surrounding nature. Once Diderot makes the connection between the harpsichord and man by suggesting that both he and d’Alembert are organized harpsichords, the mathematician pushes the analogy further and conjectures about the potential reproduction of the instrument:

...si ce clavecin sensible et animé était encore doué de la faculté de se nourrir et de se reproduire, il vivrait et engendrerait de lui-même ou avec sa femelle de petits clavecins vivants et résonnants. (DPV 17: 103)

Beyond even the role of a thinking being, d’Alembert takes on the role of a speculating being. While he pretends to accept the equivalency between body and soul for the sake of Diderot’s argument, d’Alembert succeeds in conveying the ridiculousness of endowing

all matter with sensitivity. In his simulated attempt to defend Diderot's analogy, d'Alembert shows clearly the incongruity of certain analogical potentialities.

Diderot's literary innovation with respect to the manipulations of the analogies, along with the incongruities that result from this process of engineering, corresponds to a revolutionary rhetorical and intellectual shift, which conveys, in Daniel Brewer's words, the "Enlightenment's desire to free itself from the constraints and limits of classicism" (75). Brewer emphasizes the shift from the idealism of seventeenth-century Cartesian reasoning to the more materially-oriented empiricism and sensationalism¹²¹ of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. He claims that "Diderot's art of philosophizing" entails the creation of a new discourse by means of an experimental philosophy, which has the potential to reveal the workings of nature that cannot be explained by rational thinking alone. Diderot's use of this new language or this new art of philosophizing in dealing with his theory of matter, which for Diderot is based on sensory perception, will lead to an important debate between Descartes' followers who believed in the rigid distinction between mind and matter, and the materialists, such as Diderot, who did not differentiate between these two substances.

In Diderot's materialist beliefs, mind and body are not distinct, as he asserts in the *Entretien entre d'Alembert et Diderot*:

D'Alembert: Vous en voulez à la distinction des deux substances.
Diderot: Je ne m'en cache pas. (DPV 17: 102)

Carrera explains that if Diderot does not distinguish between mind and matter, then "understanding takes place materially" (150). Once Diderot complicates the image of the harpsichord by endowing it with sensitivity and memory, d'Alembert has no choice but to

¹²¹ Sensationalism, as opposed to rationalism, is the theory that ideas are derived solely from sensation.

follow the *philosophe* in his argument. A believer in the separation of mind and matter, d'Alembert brings the opposing argument to a surprising conclusion: the sensitivity of the harpsichord not only allows the instrument to produce sound, but also to procreate. The sensitive harpsichord, the image of a monster that can feed itself and reproduce¹²² is jarring to say the least. D'Alembert's hypothesis about the formation of baby harpsichords represents a pivotal moment in the conversation, as it degenerates into derision.

The image of the harpsichord also suggests the boundless number of ideas that can be awakened, and then linked to one another by harmony. Diderot recognizes that an idea can awaken another unexpectedly, and create a hiatus in our understanding because of a surprising gap in the ideas presented. D'Alembert's leap in reasoning shows that he is also able to think similarly to Diderot, by using analogies. Extending the concept of analogy too far in his desire to maintain that sensitivity is a general quality of matter, as well as to negate Descartes's body – soul dualism, Diderot succeeds in creating literary monsters such as these baby harpsichords and the goat-men we will see later. These poetic monsters obfuscate this philosophical-scientific dialogue, and justify the aporetic discourse that emerges through the text. The incongruous thought in the production of baby harpsichords illustrates the limits of analogical reasoning. Diderot's wild imagination shows that the disconnection between ideas exhibits missing links. Diderot's desire to transmit his materialist views repeatedly incites him to appeal to two different biological systems. He first analyzes how sensitivity gets transmitted to a whole

¹²² In the article "Analogie" in *L'Encyclopédie du Rêve de d'Alembert et de Diderot*, Anne Beate Maurseth calls the sensitive clavichord a monster (45).

organism by using the image of a cluster of bees, and then he investigates that transmission from a physiological viewpoint by using the image of the spider and its web.

The bee swarm: the microcosm of the organization of living matter

When understanding is envisioned as a material process, then the driving force toward building a network of speculative ideas lies in the repetitive use of analogies. The literary image of the bee swarm¹²³ functions as an explanation for the organization and workings of living matter. This analogy is based on the idea of continuity in the chain of beings that we have examined earlier, which was illustrated through the conversion of matter from marble to man. In the bee swarm image, Diderot asks what happens when the sensitive molecules unite to become one organism. In an example borrowed from chemistry, Diderot claims that two drops of mercury assimilated after contact and became one drop¹²⁴ because of the affinity of each for the other. Likewise, he utilizes the example of bees to show that “la sensibilité devient commune à la masse commune” (DPV 17: 118). Diderot explains that if one bee pinches the contiguous one, the perception will travel along the swarm, and the whole unit will react to that pinch. As in the harpsichord example, every action or a pinch, triggers a reaction – the rearrangement of each bee in the cluster.

The microcosmic world of bees shows an intricately organized living system sharing a highly complex hive that is compared to the entire world: “Le monde, ou la

¹²³ According to Paul Vernière and Annie Ibrahim, the image of the bee swarm was borrowed from Maupertuis. See OP 227, note 1; Annie Ibrahim, “Maupertuis dans Le Rêve de d’Alembert: l’essaim d’abeilles et le polype,” *Recherches sur Diderot et sur l’Encyclopédie* 34 (Apr 2003): 73.

¹²⁴ “Comme une goutte de mercure se fond dans une autre goutte de mercure, une molécule sensible et vivante se fond dans une molécule sensible et vivante... D’abord il y avait deux gouttes, après le contact il n’y en a plus qu’une... Avant l’assimilation il y avait deux molécules, après l’assimilation il n’y en a plus qu’une...” (DPV 17: 118; the ellipses are part of Diderot’s text).

masse générale de la matière, est la grande ruche” (DPV 17: 120). The *Encyclopédie* article “Abeille” explains the regulated work of each type of bee, inside and outside of the hive. Surprisingly, in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, Diderot does not mention the productive work of the bees, which is based on the worker bee entering the hive with wax and then transforming that wax into honeycomb through a digestive process. Diderot focuses instead on the bees’ behavioral development at the time when the bee swarm leaves the hive, and forms a contiguous cluster of bees grasping onto each other by their feet. The transformation of the bee swarm (essaim) to a “grappe d’abeilles” underscores a change in the state of matter.

In *L’Encyclopédie du Rêve de d’Alembert de Diderot*, Dominique Boury explains that the word “essaim” and the word “grappe” did not have the same meaning in the eighteenth century (203). While the word “essaim” was associated with the flight of bees out of the hive, the word “grappe” indicated how the combined actions of each particular bee produced the harmony of the whole (203). Diderot borrows this word from Théophile de Bordeu who used the image of the “grappe d’abeilles” in his *Recherches anatomiques sur la position des glandes et leur action* (1751), in order to explain the relationship of the actions of each organ of the body:

pour suivre la comparaison de la grappe d’abeilles, elle est un *tout* colé [*sic*] à une branche d’arbre, par l’action de bien des abeilles qui doivent agir ensemble, pour se bien tenir; il y en a qui sont attachées aux premières, & ainsi de suite; toutes concourent à former un corps assez solide, & chacune cependant a son action particulière à part. (452-453)

In his medical treatise, Bordeu analogizes the diverse parts of the body to the sensibility of each bee and their harmonized actions, in order to elucidate the actions of different glands on the whole organism. For Bordeu, the workings of the body are contingent on

the function of the different glands. If the actions of the different parts are harmonized, the organism will be in good health; otherwise, it will suffer some illness:

les organes du corps sont liés les uns avec les autres; ils ont chacun leur district et leur action; les rapports de ces actions, l'harmonie qui en résulte, font la santé; si cette harmonie se déränge, soit qu'une partie se relâche, soit qu'une autre l'emporte sur celle qui lui sert d'antagoniste, si elles ne suivent pas l'ordre naturel; ces changements constitueront des maladies plus ou moins graves. (453)

Diderot appropriates the image of the “grappe d’abeilles” used by Bordeu, and thus helps circulate the scientific knowledge from a purely medical treatise to a mixture of “biology” and philosophy.

Diderot however goes beyond Bordeu, and manipulates the image of the “grappe d’abeilles” by conducting imaginary experiments on the insects. While Diderot considers the *grappe d’abeilles* “un animal à cinq ou six cent têtes et à mille ou douze cent ailes” (DPV 17:121), he shows how the contiguous bees can form one animal. In his desire to show that the aggregate of bees can be conceptualized as a whole animal, Diderot imagines a first experiment, which is based on softening the bees’ feet so that the contiguous cluster of bees with individual sensitivity, become one animal made up of continuous bees with a general sensitivity. As Jacques Chouillet explains, “l’action d’amollir les pattes [...] ne fait que préciser et accélérer une évolution qui précipite les êtres semblables vers les êtres semblables” (*Diderot, poète de l’énergie* 233). Chouillet’s explanation coincides with François Pépins’s definition of “Assimilation” in *Encyclopédie du Rêve de d’Alembert de Diderot*: “se dit de l’action par laquelle des choses sont rendues semblables, ou ce qui fait qu’une chose devient semblable à une autre” (57). Diderot manages to show that similar beings that share similar goals, such as forming a single “grappe d’abeilles,” will work together to ensure the objective of the

whole population. Once he has artificially constructed the whole organism, Diderot decides to destroy it. The second experiment lies in cutting the locus where their feet had conceptually assimilated to form one continuous animal. Consequently, the *grappe d'abeilles* was destroyed, but the bees then reconstituted themselves, Diderot claims, one by one, two by two, three by three. Diderot continues the imaginary division of matter ad infinitum until the point when the bees are too small to be seen and finally become a polyp that can be destroyed only by crushing. When Diderot imagines cutting the bees' legs, he claims that he creates imperceptible links through which communication could be transmitted. The individual sensitivity of each bee becomes a general sensitivity perceived by the whole animal. After cutting the bees at the place where they supposedly assimilated, Diderot finds that "ce tout, formé d'abeilles imperceptibles" is a polyp (DPV 17:123).

Diderot was familiar with Abraham Trembley's research on the "polypes d'eau douce" performed in 1741. In *Encyclopédie du Rêve de d'Alembert de Diderot*, Gilles Barroux explains that "[l]es polypes expriment l'ordre de la contiguïté, se développant et se régénérant par boutures, comme des plantes; les hommes expriment celui de la continuité" (317). The polyp's ability to regenerate itself sheds light onto the self-regulating activity of living matter, according to Jacques Roger (396). It is more specifically the material sensitivity, an unknown marker that can be detected only in nature's movement of action and reaction, which is responsible for the rebuilding. The effect of Diderot's experiment on the polyp is to show the power of its renewal through sensitivity of matter. Considered as "l'archétype simplifié du vivant" (Martin-Haag 45), the polyp is for Diderot the prototype for higher organized beings, such as man. He

makes d'Alembert speculate in his dream about a human polyp, an extravagant conjecture to which the mathematician responds: "Mais la nature ne nous en offre point" (DPV 17:124).

In his *Recherches anatomiques sur la position des glandes et sur leur action*, Bordeu calls polyps "végétaux animalisés" (381) and he explains that "les polypes sont pour ainsi dire des êtres intermédiaires entre les végétaux et les animaux" (382). Bordeu's definition prompts Andrew Clark to call them "in-betweens" (66) in his work *Diderot's Part*. Diderot's desire to develop a "discourse of the in-between" (Clark 63) with polyps, will lead to a discussion on other monstrous organisms such as cyclopes, hermaphrodites, and goat-men.

Diderot's imaginary manipulations of the bees result in the transformation of the *grappe d'abeilles* into a polyp. These incongruities intensify in the transition from a polyp to a human polyp. As an illustration of human polyps, the Bordeu character in the dialogue gives the example of Siamese twin girls who only lived for twenty-two years. The connection between water polyps and Siamese twins, even though remote, allows Diderot to argue even more decisively against preformationism, and for epigenesis. Diderot declares that only the theory of epigenesis, based on "particles gather[ing] together in order to form a germ which then needs only to develop" (Gregory 63) can account for all the diversity of nature, monsters included. The delirium of the thought of human polyps continues and reaches its climax when the discussion leads us to a whole society of extra-terrestrials in planets such as Jupiter and Saturn: "une société d'hommes formée, une province entière peuplée des débris d'un seul, cela est tout à fait agréable à imaginer" (DPV 17: 125-126).

In “Autour du *Rêve de d’Alembert*: Réflexions sur l’esthétique de Diderot,” Georges Daniel remarks that the reflection on the polyp reproduces Diderot’s intellectual approach (18). Indeed, Diderot compiles analogies, and it is the task of the staged characters to link them. The harpsichord and the bee swarm constitute images that illustrate redundancy. The tautological design of the analogies offers the reader a discourse devoid of reflection, and confirms the idea that thought is being materialized through the agency of the text itself. If we already understood that communication happens through the vibrating strings of the harpsichord, do we need subsequent analogies that repeat the same idea? The first pinch applied on one bee, triggers a vibration communicated to the contiguous bee, and so on. As we shall see next, Diderot uses the image of the spider to show that communication occurs through the vibrations of its web. This image does not say anything new about the way communication gets transmitted in the three systems. Nevertheless, the tautological design of the text allows Diderot to present a plurality of images that offer the possibility of incongruous monstrous creations.

Physiological disturbances or potentiality of monstrosity

In the second dialogue entitled *Le Rêve de d’Alembert*, Dr. Bordeu and Mlle de L’Espinasse discuss her conception, and it begins similarly to the discussion that Diderot and d’Alembert had in the first dialogue. Dr. Bordeu says to Mlle de L’Espinasse: “D’abord, vous n’étiez rien” (DPV17: 145). The repetitiveness of Diderot’s text does not result in a difference, but it rather stretches the potentialities of monstrous creations. The last “entretien” allows Diderot to take on the subject of epigenesis once again, but through a different configuration and different interlocutors. Dr. Bordeu and Mlle de

L'Espinasse's conversation about epigenesis becomes more physiological with a vocabulary such as "brin" and "faisceau." Each thread, Dr. Bordeu claims, engenders an organ, located in the interior or in the exterior of the body. From this point on, the two interlocutors contemplate the creation of hermaphrodites, cyclopes and "toutes les sortes de monstres imaginables" (DPV17: 150) if the threads are disturbed.

The physiological disturbances are explained through the analogy between the spider with its web and the human brain with the nervous system. The spider located in the center of its web is recognized to be the thinking matter. According to Isabelle Moreau, the image of the spider in its web is associated in the seventeenth century with "the soul of the world" (199). She argues that this image as a fictional construct allows the configuration of hypotheses that could not have been possible otherwise: "les fictions permettent ... de donner corps à des hypothèses qui seraient autrement inconcevables" (199). Diderot uses many analogies to concretize his philosophical thought on matter through visualized biological and mechanical systems. The physiological aspect of matter visualized through fibers and threads helps locate human thoughts in the "méninges." Bordeu makes the analogy between the spider and humans because it is in the méninges that sensations are felt by the excitation of the nerve fibers.

Teratology is at the heart of Diderot's use of imaginary disturbances in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*. The image of the spider and its web helps to show that monsters are due to physical damage to the web or the organized network, when threads become tangled, crushed or broken. Diderot imagines physiological malfunctions that can occur along the thread, and his imagined imperfections of nature, can give us insights into his boundless creativity, and most importantly into the diversity of nature. "Faites par la pensée ce que

nature fait quelquefois,” says Dr. Bordeu to Mlle de L’Espinasse (DPV 17:149). First, their imaginary experiment is based on the elimination of different threads that would make different organs. Once the thread is suppressed, the organ will not be produced. Dr. Bordeu explains that if the thread in the bundle that forms the eyes is cut away, either the creature won’t have any eyes or will be a cyclops. “Continuez la suppression des brins, et l’animal sera sans tête, sans pieds, sans mains,” adds Dr. Bordeu (DPV 17:149). While Mlle de L’Espinasse calls these creatures abnormal, Dr. Bordeu calls them monstrous. Second, the experiment is based on doubling the threads, and the being will have two heads, four eyes etc. They also contemplate the thought of having an organ situated in a different locus than its usual site: the head could be located in the middle of the chest, for example, if the thread that would make the head was displaced. Diderot hints at the infinite number of monsters in his *Éléments de physiologie*:

Il y a autant de monstres qu’il y a d’organes dans l’homme, et de fonctions: des monstres d’yeux, d’oreilles, de nez qui vivent tandis que les autres ne vivent pas; des monstres de position des parties, des monstres par superfétation, des monstres par défaut. (DPV 17: 444-445)

Defined as “un être dont la durée est incompatible avec l’ordre subsistant” (DPV 17: 444), the monster is short-lived according to Diderot. It is nevertheless considered part of nature as Diderot claims in the *Encyclopédie*: “il n’y a rien d’imparfait dans la nature, pas même les monstres. Tout y est enchaîné, et le monstre y est un effet aussi nécessaire que l’animal parfait” (“Imparfait”). The monster allows Diderot to decipher the obscure phenomena of nature. It attests to Diderot’s belief in the dynamism of nature and its transformative power to evolve over time. Matter converts itself in order to exterminate the anomalies of nature. The freaks of nature, as Mlle de L’Espinasse calls them, are

necessary for the development of a species that will perfect itself and persevere over time. Indeed, Diderot calls the human body a machine, which evolves toward perfection through countless successive individuals. It is through these stages that monstrosities are created and destroyed in order to perfect the species, and allow it to live for a duration that will permit the propagation of future generations.

The discussion of monstrosities between Dr. Bordeu and Mlle de L'Espinasse reaches its climax when she addresses the possibility of mixtures between various species. This question of crossbreeding was in vogue since the French scientist René Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur (1683-1757) claimed to have bred a rabbit and a hen (Duflo, "Chèvre-pied" 90). The two interlocutors in the last conversation entitled *Suite de l'entretien précédent* speculate on the poetic creation of a goat-man: "l'art de créer des êtres qui ne sont pas, à l'imitation de ceux qui sont est de la vraie poésie" (DPV 17:197). Bordeu claims that in order to crossbreed a man and a goat, "il faudrait ... travailler d'abord à rapprocher les animaux par un régime analogue" (DPV 17:205). Whereas Mlle de L'Espinasse observes that it will be difficult to reduce men to graze, Dr. Bordeu claims that men could drink goat milk, and goats could easily eat bread. Underneath the veneer of comedy, this conversation degenerates into mockery of reason itself as Dr. Bordeu, the representative of scientific knowledge, falls into delirium.

In his examination of this text, Stéphane Lojkine declares that "faire copuler des hommes et des chèvres après avoir fait manger du fromage aux premiers, du pain aux secondes, ce n'est plus de la farce, c'est du grand Guignol!" (Lojkine 33). Horrific creations that belong only to the fantastic realm, goat-men are described as males, and adulterous servants who could multiply indefinitely. If these creatures are all "[des]

effrénés dissolus” (DPV 17: 206), or unrestrained libertine men, then Diderot subjects “les femmes honnêtes” (DPV 17: 206) to the crime of bestiality, a crime punished by fire: “Ce crime se punit par le feu: on brûle même l’animal qui a été l’instrument du crime” (“Bestialité”). This crossbreeding between species is Diderot’s last attempt to ridicule the preformationists and argue for the theory of epigenesis as the only philosophical tenet that explains the origin of life. Since “[t]he fixity of preformationism did not allow for any new species to arise since Creation” (Gregory 53), any deviations from the ideal man could not be explained under this theory.

Once the moral question of crossbreeding a man with an animal is pushed aside by Mlle de L’Espinasse, the goat-man, an imaginary and literary construct is envisioned to serve a utilitarian purpose. According to Dr. Bordeu, this creature could be bred to ease the hardships of French colonists by becoming their servants or even slaves: “nous en tirerions une race vigoureuse, intelligente, infatigable et véloce dont nous ferions d’excellents domestiques” (DPV 17:205). The creation of the goat-man serves to produce sub-species of men used for demeaning occupations. While Diderot did not believe in a hierarchy of nature’s productions, the goat-man shows how colonization and societies with high power structures can create monsters for their own advantage. As Erita Hill suggests, because of the randomness of the process of creation, “[m]an, like the universe, may beget monsters” (187). But the deliberate invented monster is for Diderot a way to allude to France’s treatment of its colonies, a subject that will be developed in the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*.

Diderot’s materialist discourse in *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* takes the reader on a circuitous course, in which he defends the concept of sensitivity of matter through

epigenesis. Utilizing analogies, Diderot experiments with the nascent scientific research, and creates incongruous monstrosities that can only live in his text. Diderot's vision of nature as a system in dynamic flux, in which matter is destroyed and constructed anew, evokes the characteristics of a nature in constant transformation. The incongruities of monstrosities show Diderot's unrestrained imagination and his continuous desire to use analogies with the goal of explaining the workings of nature. Diderot's philosophical thought was described as "un métissage de rationnel et d'irrationnel" (Vissière 57), and it is precisely this unconventional way of thinking that allowed Enlightenment thought to thrive.

Conclusion

Throughout his *œuvre*, Diderot declares that his writing follows the order of his thoughts, quite distinct from the rational order. Pursuing unexpected paths of free associations, triggered by his wild imagination and inspired by scientific discoveries as well as new artistic trends in music and visual arts, Diderot builds his own philosophical system, according to the principle of incongruity. By juxtaposing ideas of art and morality, philosophy and science, and by adopting an active role of agent rather than dispassionate observer, Diderot uncovers new potentialities of interdisciplinary couplings and thereby creates original ideas. It is thus not surprising that he was criticized as a philosopher for his outlandish ideas by some of his contemporaries, and even by nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers. They have refused to accept Diderot's idiosyncratic approach as a philosophical method because of its apparent lack of order and its intellectually revolutionary qualities.

The three works examined in this study, the *Salons*, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, and *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* exemplify how the principle of incongruity functions within the Diderotian system. In the *Salons*, the confluence between art and morality creates a dynamic interaction of incongruities, which range from the beholder conversing with a painted figure, to his entry into paintings. Diderot's imagined narrative or literary *tableau* serves to emphasize the importance of morality in works of art. Not only does this interaction call for the reader's active participation, it also modifies the meaning of the beautiful. In his exploration of the relationship between art and morality in *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Diderot stages a grotesque character endowed with the gift of mimesis. The

Nephew uses pantomime as an alternative language to evoke a response from the beholder or reader. The language of gestures, which illustrates the mime's power of imagination leads to an expression of the sublime. This experience brings Diderot to the harmonization of discordant ideas, bringing forth transcendental knowledge. In *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, Diderot lets his imagination wander the farthest, as his intellectual journey takes the reader from the conjecture that a rock can feel to the creation of a goat man. A mixture of philosophy and science, this text shows Diderot's materialism taken to the extreme. Diderot's imagined manipulations of matter in nature result in the conception of a prototype, which allows him to demonstrate how dead matter can transform into sentient matter. Based on the scientific theory of epigenesis, matter in nature goes through countless transformations in order to achieve this change. The incongruity of Diderot's monstrous creations illustrates the dynamics of his intellectual thought process by which he challenges the status quo in scientific knowledge.

In 1932, surrealist author René Crevel (1900-1935) wrote *Le clavecin de Diderot*, borrowing Diderot's image of the harpsichord found in *Le Rêve de d'Alembert* to describe a gamut of different topics in a variety of different literary forms. Diderot's unrestrained imagination and the apparent disorder of his thoughts resonated well with the surrealist spirit. The echoes of Diderot's heuristic method and his principle of incongruity seem to reverberate with surrealism and every aficionado of non-linearity and unconventionality.

Eccentric poet the Comte de Lautréamont (1846-1870) defines beauty in *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-1869) as a highly incongruous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table: "beau comme ... la

rencontre fortuite d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie sur une table de dissection" (306). André Breton uses this same phrase to define surrealism in the twentieth century. This vision of beautiful potentialities pays homage to the Diderotian imaginative jolt, which propelled his literary and philosophical legacy from the eighteenth century to today.

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