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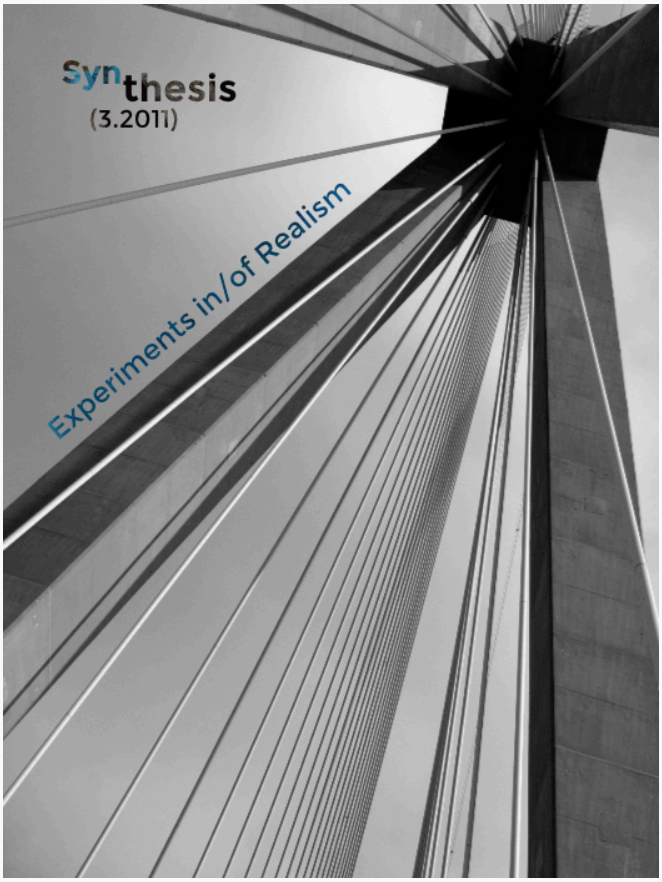

Capitalist Realism and the Refrain: The Libidinal Economies of Degas

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Dougal Phillips

Abstract
This article looks to the work of Degas as an exemplar of a kind of Capitalist Realism, a kind of second generation realism following on from the earlier work of Courbet and Manet. It is posited here that Degas took up the mantle of a 'corporeal' realism distinguished from the Impressionists by its nuanced approach to the realism of the body, in particular to its place in the Parisian network of capital and desire. Degas's paintings and his experiments with photography mapped two spaces: the space of the libidinal and capitalist exchange (theatre, café, stock-exchange) and the space of the production of painting. Further, Degas attempts to represent his *own* disappearance into both these spaces. Degas continued the politicised social project of realism but with a personalised, modernised vision that prefigures the realisms of the twentieth century.

Introduction

Among the realist painters of the later nineteenth century, the work of Hilaire-Germaine-Edgar Degas stands out as singularly concerned with the multi-layered spaces of the social field. These layers might be thought of as both layers of presentation (in the social world of the theatre and the boulevard) and layers of representation (in his practice of faceted, disjunctive representational painting). Degas's realism is predicated on the ambivalence of this dual layering, and it is this regime of representation that he imposes on the world around him—the world of late nineteenth-century Paris, the world of the café-concerts and the Opera, the racetrack and the stock-exchange, the family home and the brothel.
Degas's work cannot be read outside of two interwoven economies: the economy of capitalism and the economy of desire (or what we might call, after Jean-François Lyotard, libidinal economy). What he turned his gaze and brush to was the question of how people present themselves to the interwoven worlds of capitalism and of desire; and, perhaps more unconsciously, he folded his practice in on itself as a reflexive critique of realist painting.

Carol Armstrong has explored this intersection of selfhood and artistic production in her comprehensive account of the politics and psychology of Degas's practice, and in the light of Armstrong's reading and with regard to the work of Donald Kuspit and others, it can be seen that Degas's treatment of the scenes of the social field—whether theatre, café or stock exchange—has a complexity that matches the complex economies he seeks to represent.

It should be noted at the outset that this paper is written as an exploration of desire in Degas outside the frame of the feminist critique of the desiring gaze in his work. This is not in the slightest to avoid this line of inquiry but rather to consider a desiring selfhood *a priori* to the gendered gaze. By exploring the matrix of desire, space and the image in Degas's 'world,' I hope to illuminate the economies of theatre and concealment in an emerging capitalist reality, upon which the complex *differends* of gender then play out, as shown in depth by scholars such as Anthea Callen.

What is proposed here is that Degas's paintings, his pastels, sketches, and experiments with photography map two spaces: the space of the libidinal and capitalist exchange (the theatre, the café, the stock-exchange) and, self-reflexively, the space of the production of the image. Further, included in this process is Degas's attempt to represent his *own* disappearance into both these spaces, to become both there and not-there.

The engine driving this production is, put simply, desire. Desire is housed in the theatre, the café and the brothel, in the magnetism of the female body in performance and at rest, and Degas is driven to image the complexities of the desiring gaze within the spaces of libidinal consumption, both in the real world and in the painting. As such, the complex structures of Degas's work can only be fully understood when approached using the conceptual frameworks of two poststructuralist theorists of desire. In the work of Lyotard, we find the concept of libidinal economy as a way of mapping the

representation of desire and its intersection with the figural structures of capitalism, the ambiguities of social and staged space.

Similarly, in order to understand the commonalities between Degas's images of the world, we look to an organisational, territorial motif developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—the refrain. The concept of the refrain as a structural figure reveals hereto unforseen analogues in various spaces of social interaction and exchange—in the economies of desire and capital; in the presentation of the body in the social field; and the imaging of those economies and the artist/viewer's participation in them.

The underlying theme here is the role of the artist and the role of artistic production as a critical but complacent practice within the reality of capital—the claim to realism being the most problematic space for the complacency/criticality dialectic to be played out. The *engagement* of the artist is central, and in Degas we see a multiplicity of desires intersecting with networks of capital, a process which demands artistic collusion with the economic 'refrains' of exchange, staging, and screening.

Degas and the Staging of Economy

To begin, a description of a photograph, from Paul Valéry: "Near a large mirror we see Mallarmé leaning against the wall, and Renoir seated on a sofa facing us. In the mirror, in the state of phantoms, Degas and his apparatus, Mme and Mlle Mallarmé can be made out" (*Degas Danse Dessin*, cited in Armstrong 239). This photograph, taken of his two close friends, Pierre-Auguste Renoir the painter and Stéphane Mallarmé the poet, tells in an instant the complex story of Degas's phantasmic realism, a realism produced using photographs, drawings, and pastels, but above all, using the apparatus of painting. Degas uses the painting to map the political and libidinal economies of his world (the world of the bourgeoisie), and of the other world, the lower depths to which Camille Lemonnier refers (cited in Clark 259). The *dispositif* [1] of painting is used to mediate his own relation to that world, as both desiring-subject and as artist.

Armstrong suggests that Degas shows himself in his photographs in a way that reveals how he doesn't show himself in his paintings. In command of the apparatus, he attempts to vanish into the work, to produce a realist image that is ultimately an image of his 'real,' but without him, as artist, producer, or director, in it. Armstrong observes that, in the photograph, *Self-portrait with Zoe Closier*, "[Degas] looks away from the camera, refusing to confront, and thus seeming to exclude his other, directorial self—he is there, but not here" (62). There but not here: this is the exact definition of the spectre put forward by Derrida (6-7), and it must be seen that Degas deals with the problems of the production of a realist image by implicating himself not only as a spectator but also as a *spectral* presence within the image. This manoeuvre is a profoundly sophisticated self-reflexive critique of the realist image itself, as it reveals realism to be a game of impossible presence, an always-incomplete attempt to capture the real. In this way Degas's photographs tell the story of his paintings.

In the Renoir photo, Degas is present as a flash, the image-maker simultaneously appearing and disappearing. This is the mode of Degas and this is his contribution to the realist project. In essence, Degas produces a series of works that seek to represent relations in the social spaces of capital, relations of desire interwoven with commercial exchange. Consider three images, one photo (the Renoir and Mallarmé image), and two paintings: *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (1873) and (as an exemplar of the theatre pictures) *The Orchestra of the Opéra* (1870). These paintings picture, respectively, the world of business and the world of high culture (with a hint of the *demi-monde*) and we see in them a common interest in the social grouping around spaces of exchange, whether commercial transactions or cultural spectacles (with libidinal undertones). This equivalence runs throughout Degas's treatment of the economies of the social field.

In his painting practice Degas takes up what can only be described as an indeterminate position: he places himself very much within the economies pictured (including at the stock exchange, backstage and in the brothel) but also withdraws from them by muting his critical gaze. His fascination with the social economies leads, somewhat strangely, to ambivalence, and perhaps this ambivalence marks the profound *equivalence* Degas saw in these ostensibly distinct social fields. He was unable to critique them individually because he was too fascinated with their commonality, just as he was unable to critique them objectively because he could not immunise himself against the seduction of the scene.
In formal terms, Degas works in the fragmentary style of nineteenth-century realism developed by Courbet and Manet, but in Degas (as in those artists), the tendency toward fragmentation and ambivalence need not be considered a negative, dissolute state of production. Rather, it might be seen that this tendency stems from a process of giving over to desire, in reaching toward a kind of Bataillean totality. In "The Object of Desire and the Totality of the Real," Georges Bataille writes that

> in the embrace of the object of desire is always the totality of being, the totality in which we lose ourselves insofar as we take ourselves for a strictly separate entity (for the pure abstraction that the isolated individual is, or thinks he is). In a word, the object of desire is the universe, in the form of she who in the embrace is its mirror, where we ourselves are reflected. At the most intense moment of fusion, the pure blaze of light, like a sudden flash, illuminates the fields of possibility, on which these lovers are subtilised, annihilated, submissive in their excitement to a rarefaction which they desired. (267)

In the Renoir photo, the sudden flash illuminates the fields of possibility—in the attempt to image the real, the artist opens up both the image and the real into an unstable and ambivalent relationship founded on desire. In the Bataillean coupling, the object of desire is the image around which the universe is structured and toward which the energetic intensities (as Lyotard would term them) of the desirer are drawn.

As in Lacan's structural formulation of the desiring gaze, the image is produced between both spectator and object, with agency on both sides. Degas's gaze, crucially, turns not to the singular object but to the scene—his phenomenology is theatrical rather than reductive. In the theatre, the scene presents itself, a constellation of objects rushing forward toward the viewer, demanding attention and concealing its production in pure spectacle. Theatre is a type of power. Indeed, in painting theatre, how can the painter ever be in control of the scene? What is clear is that Degas's artistic gaze (indeed, his practice of representation) cannot escape the structural trap of ambivalence immanent in the theatrical scene.

This structural ambivalence resonates across Degas's mapping of the spaces of exchange, where we see balanced, harmonious compositions working to an internal logic that joins together disjointed social figures in the political, cultural and libidinal economies of Paris. What Degas also recognises, in a further Bataillean move, is that there is always excess in these economies. He shows the wastage of the libidinal economy: the labouring, waiting ballerinas, bored prostitutes; and, of course, the artist himself contributes to this excess by producing canvas after canvas of meditations on and mediations of the same recurring motif, and there are several key motifs within Degas. These motifs are the group, the refrain, and exchange, and they resonate across the different spaces the artist inhabits: the world of capital, the world of sex, and the world of the theatre.

Theatre/Theory

Degas's oeuvre seems predestined toward the theatre, and we can see this as he moves from the early history painting to a typology of modern life—to realism. This trajectory begins with works produced shortly after his return from studying in Florence, where he copied the work of Poussin, amongst others. His interest in classicism flows though his depiction of mythology: from *Young Spartan Girls Practicing for Battle* (1859-60) and the *Daughter of Jephtha* (1859-60), to classicism in the performance of myth as ballet, in *Mlle Fiocre in the Ballet "La Source"* (1866-68). The crucial turn comes as Degas's interest moves from these classical motifs peopled by contemporary *artistes* to a

lasting fascination with the contemporary production of the ballet, the performative and ancillary labour of the theatre. A key shift is the 1876 work *The Ballet of "Robert le Diable."* In this work we see an almost photographic shift in focus: from the performers, dancing wildly as spectral nuns in a moonlit cloister, to the orchestra members in the foreground, who are in a completely distinct space from the stage. This anti-staging of the scene of the dance is characteristic of Degas's realist project, with its emphasis on the support players who themselves are operating as a kind of assemblage distinct from yet vital to the staging of the performance. Painting the theatre, Degas refuses to merely transcribe the text of the ballet and the audience; instead he incorporates the multiple layers of staging and screening that occur in the complex economy of the ballet theatre. What we see is the artist working to reproduce the theatrical space of a libidinal economy within the scene of the theatre. So why does Degas paint the theatre? In his backstage views of shadowy figures and dancers in non-performative modes (waiting, rehearsal) he seems to be driven by a desire to interrogate the proscenium frame, the classical staging device of theatrical production. Lyotard argues, in his essay "Presence," that in realism the scene's production is advertised in front of what is represented, is staged rather than shown, "staged" being a term that, for Lyotard unites the "operational vocabulary of war or the stock exchange, of the theatre or the cinema" (12).

Indeed, if we continue to follow Lyotard, Degas's imaging of the theatre is, in a way, an image of Theory itself, as the theatre serves as Lyotard's metaphor for theory *per se*: the theatrical space has an inside and an outside, a this and not-this. As Ashley Woodward notes, Lyotard's image of theory as theatre is based on the Greek etymological root *theasthai*, to look at, to behold, to contemplate, and the theorist is "like a spectator who views the representation of the world (outside the theatre) on the stage (inside the theatre)" (Woodward). In this sense, Degas's practice is ironic and involuted. In turning his gaze to the theatre and to the world outside in equal measure, he shows the outside, 'real' world to be fundamentally theatrical, both visually and in terms of a theory of the real—any concept of the real being 'staged' as nothing more than a theory. This revelation then folds back in on his own 'realism' in a complex manoeuvre, the realist painter demonstrating the ultimate lack at the heart of the mode of realism—the inability to present anything other than a staged reality. Degas captures in his works the more general economies of desire and capital involving all the inhabitants of his beloved city. His gaze turns to the bodily stresses of labour in these spaces of leisure and erotic investment, producing a corporeal realism where bodies and faces are indeterminate sites of pleasure and suffering, of dislocation and of erotic connection, or performance and surveillance. One question remains: how might we characterise the politics of such a realism?

Armstrong draws a contrast between Degas's realism and that of Manet and Courbet, who sought maximum exposure and spun up monumental (*Burial at Ornans*) or direct and aggressive (*Olympia*) realist pictures. Armstrong suggests Degas's practice of producing paintings in series, as opposed to larger singular canvases, is a point of departure from the dogmatic realism of the mid-century, and there is no doubt that this is true. However, it might also be suggested that what Degas offers is a different engagement with spectacle: an investigation of bodily and political relations in both the spectacular and the screened-off dimensions of the real, including his own relations to capital and to the libidinal network of Paris.

In fact, it is the figural space of the market which underpins Degas's 'capitalist' realism, for as we will see, it is the figural structures shared by the theatre and the market which binds his many pictures together as a typology of modern life. Degas's relations to capital are well documented. He was one of the heirs to a centuries-old banking business on the wane, and it was his family's cotton business that brought him to New Orleans (his main work produced there documenting the goings-on in the family office). As a painter he shunned market enterprise, although he did take a leading role in the organisation and administration of the Impressionist group shows (he was, however, frustrated by the fervent promotion of the event by his colleague, the wealthy painter and successful businessman Gustave Caillebotte), and he chose to dissimulate his relations to old money and confirm his status as a working painter through a name change: from De Gas he became Degas.[2]

Armstrong suggests that Degas "rarely" painted the arena of finance and commerce that was his professional heritage, but one could argue that his most acute realist imagery was produced using these spaces of exchange and economy as motif. His mapping of capital (and its Lyotardian double, desire) underpins his realism. In the representation of these points of exchange, these transactional nodes in the network of Paris—even in scenes without such overt libidinal economy, such as Degas's markets (Cotton and Equity)—we see a map of capital and desire drawn out in a complex web of staging, framing, and screening. To consider in more depth how this fragmented corporeality is formed into realist texts let us look to the spaces and motifs that captured Degas's attention.

Disjunction and the Group

Charles Harrison, in his 2006 book *Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art*, writes of Degas's uneasy 'presence' in his own work—one that is accepted both now *and then* to be the artist's tenuous position: "As the supposed author…Degas might be conceived of as standing outside its world looking in. This was indeed the Degas whom many of his contemporaries likened to the misogynistic scientist, whose cynical disengagement from the human tragicomedy ensures the realism of his findings" (99). It is from this sort of standpoint that the complexities of Degas's brothel monotypes can unwind into a problematized, gendered, even anthropological gaze (Callen 85-89). Total detachment of this kind—this scientific objectivity—is of course impossible. The artist is always part of what he turns his mind and body to. Harrison confirms this centrality of the reflexive gaze in Degas's work. The paintings are, ultimately, empathetic; about joining with the other in some disjointed, partially unconscious way across a chasm between figures. Degas is driven, writes Harrison, "by a curiosity which is neither academic nor self-preserving. 'What is it like?' they ask. 'What is it like to look like this?'" (103). Or as he later poses it: "To look down on the body of another as if within its own imagined self-consciousness. What would it feel like to look like that? (125). It would seem that Degas's works are determined not by his remove, as is sometimes suggested, but by his *joining-in*, his empathetic attempts at bridging. But this, as we will see is not always an easy process.

There are two interconnected operations of figuration at play in Degas's imaging of the social field. There is the figuration of aloneness within the crowd (or isolation within the group); and there is the coming-together of distinct figures and groups within the social space, connected by a figural form: the refrain.

The treatment of the group distinguishes Degas's pictures from other famous realist groups, such as Courbet's *Burial* or Manet's *Music in the Tuileries* (1862). Indeed, the family portrait is an interesting example of a private group-form that has proven rich ground for scholars of Degas. Charles Harrison, Donald Kuspit, and Linda Nochlin have all focused on Degas's *The Bellelli Family* (c. 1859-1860) as a painting that embodies his deconstructive approach to the simultaneous presence of intimacy and aloneness both within the group and within the psychic life of each figure (including Degas himself, as painter of the group). In the Bellelli portrait the presence of touch and interaction is countered by a melancholy self-possession on the part of each figure. Kuspit asserts that in this work Degas reveals his fascination with disequilibrium. He notes that "each figure is self-contained, if not exactly self-possessed—only the woman seems so—but their togetherness is doubtful, or at least ambiguous and endangered." Furthermore, this disequilibrium within the familial grouping is a kind of meta-text which speaks to a generalised psychical and social alienation. "The abandonment of pictorial unity is in a sense the stylistic point of his art," writes Kuspit: "It corresponds to his recognition of the inevitable lack of harmony in life" (60).

Kuspit (whose art historical analysis is deeply informed by psychoanalytic theory) writes of Degas as capturing of "the essential aloneness of the human being," while still preserving an element of indeterminacy with regard to togetherness versus psychical solitude. Degas, he suggests, captures the "subtle despair of ambivalently accepted aloneness while giving interpersonal togetherness full

descriptive and conceptual recognition" (Kuspit 60). In the images of the orchestras at work we can see that Degas has the same mastery over what Kuspit calls "the physiognomy of the interpersonal" as he does over "the workings of the intrapsychic." "The orchestra works," for Kuspit,

are brilliant articulations of the aloneness of human beings even as they are together, in quasi-intimate situations in which they must cooperate and coordinate to social effect. The musicians are seated facing the same way, but are clearly very distinct and separate individuals. Each is in symbiotic, introspective, deeply emotional relation to the music he plays, but emotionally uninvolved with the other musicians. Each is locked in a peculiarly narcissistic relationship with his music, just as the female dancers are with their dancing. (61)

For the most part Kuspit provides an accurate and poetic reading of the indeterminate connections of the figure and group in Degas, and he astutely points out that this indeterminacy has a formal dimension. His idea is that Degas's realism moves from "objective realism" to "subjective realism," from the depiction of the external to a projection of an "internal reality" narcissistic relationship with his music, just as the female dancers are with their dancing (61). Crucially, it is in the materiality of painting that this psychic slippage is worked out.

For Kuspit, Degas's move into primarily producing monotypes and pastels after 1880 is a symptom of the acceleration of this internal projection, a movement toward immediacy, and the blurring of the image found in the later pastels and prints is the mark of this immediacy. The gradual internalisation of the project of realism leads to the production of what Kuspit terms "borderline" pictures: pictures which render the "unfixed, shifting boundary between external and internal reality—that strange zone between the neurotic and psychotic sense of reality." The strangeness of these pictures derives from "the fact that in [them] internalised and external objects cannot be separated. It is the zone of hallucination," a narcissistic relationship with his music, just as the female dancers are with their dancing (Kuspit 61).

Here we again meet Degas the photographer. This is the same Degas who produces figures as monads at odds with the increasingly indeterminate space they inhabit; the presentation of these figures in Degas tends toward the logic of the photographic, a transient presentness, an occlusion of the real in the momentary putting-forward of an image. The image is the implication of a real moment, an event with a past and a future, but simultaneously the occlusion of that event, the attempted exclusion of the eruptive potential of the event. The Renoir-Mallarmé photograph serves as an exemplar of the uncanny state, one which implicates the artist-photographer in the phenomenological disjunction of the image.

Kuspit writes of a "doubled reality" in disjunction that Degas constituted for himself, by both producing the "radical disjunctiveness" as a mark of his own "incommensurateness" with everyone and everything, and by being vital to the scene and thus belonging in it, as transcriber. In the Renoir-Mallarmé photograph, Degas
shows himself in a blur/blaze of light in the mirror behind them—ironically immediatised into an apparition by the technical means (the camera) of "realizing" their reality. It is the climax of his self-portraits—the one in which he is most clearly the artist. This unity also bespeaks the non-relationality—too real to be idealised—of modern life, that failure of intimacy within the interpersonal situation that leads the individual to feel that he or she does not exist, is not real but an illusion. (Kuspit 62)

There is also, notes Kuspit, a temporal element to this illusory reality:

> It also makes everyone and everything seem passé, as though they had already happened, and that perception of them is a form of recollection, which itself is illusory. Degas's solid, external objects end up

> as phantoms in an opera of unplaceable past experience, which may not have happened—may be conjecture or fantasy. (62)

Kuspit refers to the psychic problematic of some of Degas's scenes, rendering the emotion that comes before the event, in the case of his Interior (1868-69), a scene which is often read as the precursor to a rape.

His reading of experience as temporally and spatially unfixed is key here, as is his reference to radical disjunction in the realisation of experience in pictorial form. Degas himself contributes to this disjunctive experience, appearing as an apparition in his picturing of the world. In the flash of the photograph, he performs a dis-apparition rather than a disappearance, and it is thus fair to consider this photo as a spectrogenic "metapicture": Degas becomes spectral in the very production of the image itself. But what can we conclude about this becoming-spectral?

The answer is that it evidences the functioning of the realist canvas as a *screen* in the sense of both Lacan and Lyotard—as a site for the projection of the desiring gaze. What we see in Degas is a mapping of the relation of the desiring-subject to the real: he (Degas) and we (the viewers, who fall into the position of the client in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* [1881-1882], that is, of simultaneously viewing and being active in the picture) are united as viewer and producer of the image, and are captured incompletely in the painting, as a phantasm on the screen of the canvas.
The Renoir-Mallarmé photograph points us toward the conclusion (one which intersects with both Armstrong and Kuspit) that Degas's own practice as an image-maker is an extension of his own experience (as a kind of desiring-subject) of the phenomenological economies of the real. But the specter of Degas is not simply his own neuroses and alienation in pictorial form. Both Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari would assert that the becoming-specter is in fact not a process of alienation but is an affirmative position. This is, admittedly, a disjunctive position, for he is simultaneously there and not there, but this disjunction need not be alienation or neuroses, but more simply, as I am suggesting here, as a giving-over to the screen-function of the image.

Both Armstrong's and Kuspit's reading of Degas move towards an analysis of subjecthood, towards psychobiography, and this is problematic, for it assumes that the desiring-subject's experience of the real is restricted to neuroses regarding his libidinal investment in the real. A full exploration of the phenomenology of selfhood and art production and its relation to the porous boundary between the psychic and the external requires more. It requires the conceptual depth in which Deleuze and Guattari propose a "micropolitics" of the intersection of self and society. The structural novelty of their micropolitics makes sense of the group, the gaze, and the territory as an interwoven psychic and social assemblage.

The Refrain: Libidinal Economy and Brokerage

There are two themes at work in Degas's pictures of the social field. First, there is imbalance or disequilibrium, both in compositional and spatial terms and in economies of viewing (often with a gendered dimension, as in Degas's images of women bathing, where the male painter's gaze from above firmly establishes the balance of power). Second, there is the theme of indeterminacy. There is indeterminacy in the constitution of the self; in the experience of space and time; and in corporeal and visual connection. However, there is a counterpoint to this overarching theme in Degas's work, a notion of exchange that may be indeterminate but is not necessarily imbalanced. This is the notion of the refrain.

To explore this we turn to Degas's musical pictures. A precedent for these might be Manet's *Music in the Tuileries* (1862), his first major work depicting modern city life. In this work, there is a logic to the grouping that is based on the connectivity of music in the air. The fashionable crowd (which includes portraits of Manet's friends and family) has gathered to listen to the band, and the group is shown as a

functioning social assemblage, linked by the common attention to the music. In Degas's works this connectivity is even more pronounced, and it resonates across the different motifs of the social and business worlds. The refrain is an operative compositional form in Degas's paintings of the ballet schools, of the ballet stage and the orchestra pit, and in his pictures of the exchanges of cotton and stocks. The groups are shown to be a functioning assemblage operating around the refrains of music and around more abstract refrains: refrains of information, of material affect, and, inevitably, of libidinal economy.

The refrains of Degas have not gone unnoticed, but they tend to be identified as poetic, Baudelairean refrains. As a "historian of modern times," writes Armstrong,

> Degas mapped the elements: Sickliness and deformity, cruelty, precocious vice and viciousness, the combination of hideousness and beauty, the pain and the pleasure of spectacle, the death's-head grimace beneath the cosmetic mask of female beauty, fragmentation, "disconcerting the bourgeois," the theme of prostitution implied in the reference to the "gros monsieur." (40)

These are refrains of Baudelaire read onto Degas, but Degas has his own refrains within which these poetics resonate: broader refrains of desire, capitalism, information, music, and dance intertwined in the complex economy of contemporary Paris.

What the figure of the refrain offers is a different perspective on Degas's gaze, suggesting that the themes of interaction and exchange in Degas are not simply inhibited social groups and voyeuristic surveillance. In the ballet works, in the orchestra, and in the commercial and speculative works (the *Cotton Exchange* of 1873 and *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* of 1878-79), we are presented with scenes of varying types of interaction, which share a common logic of transactional exchange and the refrain (furthermore, the refrain operates doubly: as the figure of corporeal and informational economy within the painting, and also as a refrain in the *series*, Degas's favoured format). The key function of the refrain is to bring together the assemblage—the group—in a way that allows for it to operate yet preserve disjunction and indeterminacy. These disjunctive groups come together as orchestra, as *corps de ballet*, and as commercial players around economies of refrains. Apropos painting and music, Deleuze and Guattari write:

> The "problem" within which painting is inscribed is that of the *face-landscape*. That of music is entirely different: it is the problem of the *refrain*. Each arises at a certain moment, under certain conditions, on the line of its problem; but there is no possible structural or symbolic correspondence between the two, unless one translates them into punctual systems. (311)

Deleuze and Guattari categorically distinguish between painting and music as two distinct 'lines' of desiring-production, each with their own problem to figure. But Degas emphasises the body and movement over the presentation of the face-landscape and thus moves painting away from the ontological core of the face-landscape towards a mapping of the deterritorialising refrain. In the Ballet and Opera works, bodies are organised, staged, are brought together by music and present themselves according to a musical score. That is to say, they are brought together by a refrain, and this refrain intersects and resonates with other refrains: that of the figural composition, the rhythms of balancing-out, interweaving and countering in the space of the painting, and that of the economy of desire in the territorial spaces of the Ballet—onstage, in front of the stage, and backstage.

Deleuze and Guattari intersect with Nochlin's reading of the Bellelli portrait in terms of the artifice of constructing a "home." Home, they write, "does not pre-exist." Rather, it is "necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space." This marking off of territory is performed, they note—for birds, for children—by the performance of a refrain. The refrain both marks out a territory and provides for a line of escape ("improvisation") from that territory, a joining of the world through a venturing out along "sonorous, gestural, motor lines…'lines of drift' with different loops, knots, speeds, movements, gestures and sonorities." The role of the refrain is

territorial. There is always a connection to land or earth in the refrain, but it may assume many guises: "amorous, professional or social, liturgical or cosmic" (Deleuze and Guattari 311-12).

Deleuze and Guattari develop the notions of milieu and rhythm out of the refrain, both of which share an in-between status in the mediation or organisation of chaos. In summary, the refrain is a rhizomatic form, which moves into organising assemblages and intra-assemblages in a mediation of otherwise chaotic flows. It is a form of pulsional convergence as a type of territorialisation that, as in the ballet, is an act of rhythm become expressive.

Music and Dance

Degas's dancer pictures are images of work, but also of desire, and the spaces between work and desire. Openly voyeuristic (from the space of the darkened theatre or opera box), they are paranoid by definition. As Hal Foster has pointed out, citing both Norman Bryson ("Gaze In an Expanded Field") and Leo Bersani ("Pynchon, Paranoia and Literature"), "there is a paranoid aspect to [some] models of visuality—the male gaze, surveillance, spectacle, simulation. What produces this paranoia, and what might it serve—that is, besides this strange in/security of the subject?" (34n). Paranoia is produced by exposure of the self into an economy of spectacle and desire. This is the same unbalanced gaze of which Kuspit writes, and in the ballet pictures the in/security of the subject (the female dancer) is absolutely clear, trapped as she is into extreme physical labour in service of a spectacle. She is likewise trapped between the gaze of the audience and shadowy figures in *les coulisses*—the upper-class men who wait in the wings to procure the services of ballerinas for the satisfaction of their libidinal needs. *Les coulisseurs* can be translated as both 'wingmen,' and 'brokers,' and Degas himself never neglected this element in his ballet pictures.

Degas produced many paintings and sketches where his friends and peers (including his close friend the author Ludovic Halevy) are pictured loitering backstage or in conversation with the older women in charge of the dancers, or with the ballerinas themselves. The perfect example of how much Degas incorporated this motif is the well-known pastel *L'etoile* (*La danseuse sur la scène*) of 1878. In his diagonally contrapuntal composition he manages to show both the figure of the star rushing toward the viewer in full flight, and half-hidden behind the scenery, the other dancers, and an obscured gentleman in evening dress. The star stages herself to be under surveillance from both sides—from us, as audience/viewer/painter, and from our tuxedoed mirror, who, it must be said, conforms exactly to "visor effect" Jacques Derrida identifies in the Ghost of King Hamlet (48): we see him but we cannot see that he sees us. That we cannot look at the double of our own viewing in the face adds to the psycho-libidinal weight of this image.

This complex economy of staged/screened viewing forms a kind of territorial assemblage, with subsets of infra and intra assemblages. The territories and access points are marked out: audience, stage, orchestra pit, wings. They all operate around interwoven refrains: the musical score, the choreography, the rhythms of applause and the movement of libidinal investment in the interaction of the dancers' bodies (in spectacular and private form) with the men in the wings. We return to Deleuze and Guattari:

> So just what is the refrain? *Glass Harmonica:* the refrain is a prism, a crystal of space-time. It acts upon that which surrounds it, sound or light, extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or transformations. The refrain also has a catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity, and thereby to form organised masses. The refrain is therefore of the crystal or protein type. (348)

Degas's territorial economy of spectacle and sexuality conforms to this form of the refrain, which is always an operation of deterritorialisation. The movement of deterritorialisation with regard to

sexuality underscores, for Deleuze and Guattari, that sexuality is always fluid, is staged (performed), and transformed in both visible and elusive forms:

> In the intra-assemblage, sexuality may appear as a deterritorialised function, but it can just as easily draw a line of deterritorialisation that describes another assemblage; there are therefore quite variable relations between sexuality and the territory, as if sexuality were keeping "its distance." Profession, trade, and speciality imply territorialised activities, but they can also take wing from the territory, building a new assemblage around themselves, and between professions. (325)

In Degas, the staging and the screening of the economy of the dance does in fact "take wing" from its classical strictures, connecting to the larger social "dances" of exchange, withdrawal and transaction. As such, the rhizomatic theatrical space is the archetypal for a modern practice of realist painting, a practice in which the pictorial speed and disjunctive composition of the work mirrors the energy of the dance. Here the dance takes over from its representation in a classical structural format; here it operates not through an arboreal, symmetrical logic—a logic of structural (compositional) integrity—but follows the rhizomatic logic of the refrain.

Commerce and Exchange

This sort of multi-faceted libidinal exchange is comparable to Degas's other images of exchange: his paintings of commerce. As in the theatre, exchange in these pictures is simultaneously a staging and a screening. In *Portraits at the Stock Exchange* we see the financier and collector, Ernest May, in the midst of his labour at the Paris Stock Exchange. The economy Degas maps here is one of private information circulating in a public space, and this dictates the bodily relation between the two figures. May's fellow broker places a hand on his shoulder and gently peers over at the document that has just been handed to him by another associate, and may well be whispering his response to it, as May's head is cocked back to listen. Behind the monumental column in the background two other men speak conspiratorially. This is the basic economy of the stock exchange, of loudly verbalised and whispered refrains of information, of the circulation of documents, material information about the status of larger economies of materials, goods and debts. These are the refrains of the market, of capital, endlessly circulating and being modulated, and the intersecting bodies and voices in Degas's assemblage follow the logic of these refrains.

The same operation is seen in Degas's other main portrait of commercial exchange, *A Cotton Office in New Orleans* (1873), a group portrait of fourteen men at work in his uncle's office. Michael Musson is sitting in the foreground, checking the cotton; René de Gas is reading the paper; Achille de Gas is leaning by the window; Musson's partner James Prestridge is on a stool, discussing a deal with a client. Musson's son-in-law, William Bell, is offering the wares to a client, to inspect the quality. In the cotton exchange, *material information* is again the refrain: the feel of the cotton, the information printed on the newspaper, the exchange of glances and the transactional dialogue. The contrapuntal compositional balance of this work is famous, and it is notably one of Degas's least disjunctive figural groupings. The "relaxed" atmosphere is determined, for Armstrong, by the nature of the exchange—the cotton office is marked by fixity and privacy. She suggests that the space of the office is a means of separating work from the market: what we witness is private labour in commercial work, a private moment of group production and consumption, protected from the "fluid and seemingly open domain of the exchange of capital" (Armstrong 34).

Pulling the commodity out of the world of capital flow, safe in the harmony of transactions, is, suggests Armstrong, a result of Degas's domestication and privatisation of the practice of realism—it mirrors his personal search for a secret private market for his art (Armstrong 34-5). But Armstrong is compelled by the existence of other images of exchange to note that this neutralisation of the image of commercial exchange is subverted by the *Stock Exchange* image, which is itself an image of private transactions. She concedes that the *Stock Exchange* picture gives this narrative a "neurotic twist by

pushing privacy to the limit and paradoxically *expanding* the possibilities of reading-in" (Armstrong 36). This 'neurotics' (poetics of anxiety) is the neurotics of becoming indistinct from a capitalistic libidinal economy. Exchange is the key motif: people coming together around points of exchange, people *becoming* one with the commodities, whether they be cotton or objects of libidinal investment (in the realm of the dancers and *les coulisseurs*), or whether that commodity be nothing more than whispered information. The presence or absence of *exchange* between figures in these works is found in the internal engagements between family members posing for a portrait, between musicians in an orchestra, between café patrons, or between ballerinas and the shadowy *coulisseurs*—in the interdependent exchange of gaze and touch as played out in Degas's warped spaces.

In the case of the *Cotton Office* and the *Stock Exchange*, there is a doubling: of the imagery of exchange and the exchange in the image. The representation of capital is most obvious in these works that deal with places of business or trade, but we can also move beyond the iconography of the men of capital (hats, ledgers), to a reading of the work that takes in the essential figural relations contained therein and expands upon them in more abstract, less iconic terms.
Brendan Prendeville notes that "[i]n the market, and by virtue of the operations of capital as an information system, the individual is caught in a network of exchanges through which value is determined" (376). He reads the "mutual indifference of the figures and their dispersal across the space" in the *Cotton Office* as referential to social atomisation, similar to the reading of other Degas works by Kuspit as discussed above. However, like the ballet pictures, the figures within the group are able to stabilise themselves as both separate and connected by conforming to the refrain of the economy of exchange taking place around them. The space is determined by the movement of the beholder's gaze, led by the architectural forms and the repeating black and white motifs. The men are alike yet distinct, in pursuit of their own ends. This is, Prendeville notes, a milieu, a space one is in the middle of, and (similar to Marx's conception of the operation of money) the milieu mediates the operation of exchange. The milieu is itself comprised of variations on material information, not money, but another type of "alien materiality: matter as commodity" (Prendeville 378). The cotton is felt, the newspaper studied. Like the downcast banker in *Sulking (The Banker)* of 1875, leaning towards the piled papers, these men are connected to the refrain of material information that determines their interaction and social constitution.

For Prendeville, Degas's skewed perspectives of scenes of rehearsal and backstage views "deliberately accentuated the social and economic ordering of human relationships; in his choice and staging of themes, he opened his paintings into the matrices of economic and professional striving and competition" (380). And yet there is room for intimacy, whether between bodies or with regard to the self-awareness of labouring in a complex economy, libidinal and capitalist: the awareness of one's relation to material of exchange and the material's—the refrain's—part in mediating that exchange. This is the very definition of the role of the commodity, and, as Prendeville notes, "in [the *Cotton Office*], where black-coated men feel the paint-cotton, a commodity comes voluptuously into bloom" (380).

Conclusion
Foster notes that Baudelaire purposefully engaged in a kind of "commodity empathy," which Foster describes as a "homoeopathic procedure by which bits of commodity culture were used to inoculate poetry against complete infection by market capitalism" (123). In Degas's Cotton Office we are on different, less self-conscious terrain. Here we are in the mindset of the broker, and we do not take up a protective, ironic position, but instead participate in a seduction; a tactile, libidinal engagement with the commodity-object. Perhaps the key distinction here is between Baudelaire as poet and the De Gas family as businessmen. What does this then mean for Degas as painter? He is clearly suspended between both, between empathy for the economies of capital and libido and an artistic distance from these economies; and this uncertain position is the same one identified by Kuspit in relation to the social group. It is a position that Degas attempts to mediate in the incorporation of blur, in the

acknowledgment of spectral uncertainty in bodily presence within the image, both for himself and for the others who circulate in the economies of the real.

It has been put forward by Clark that the moment of great French realism—the "Painting of Modern Life"—was born because the petit-bourgeoisie and the avant-garde were for a brief period in the same position in urban life, and Degas's realism is one of the most complex mediations of that historical moment. He also makes the point that the Painting of Modern Life ended with that historical and economic contingency (Clark 258). But capitalism goes on and so does painting, so we cannot leave capitalist realism at this moment of the splitting of the middle-class and the avant-garde. In Degas's representations of capitalist and libidinal economies we see the exchange of material and information in terms of the flow of spectacular interaction (the interaction between brokers on the level of market exchanges) and screened interaction (the internal economies of information and brokerage). This, as Armstrong comprehensively shows (along with Kuspit), is a kind of projective perlaboration, a way of mediating his own painting practice and his neuroses within these economies. This is a profound psychobiographical reading of Degas, one that underscores the point that the ballet pictures and other images of *demi-monde* female performers are fundamentally the same as the transactional images.

The libidinal economy of Degas is comprehensively woven throughout both the paintings he produces and his being as an artist. This relation of the artist to the commodity is key: his own practice as a producer of artworks is mediated through the experience of the social economies of capitalism and desire, and this determines the ontological status of the surface of the painting and the vicissitudes of the objects and events from the real when brought to that surface. In Degas we see the painter become one with the businessman, the prostitute, and the commodity itself, and ultimately his great legacy is that this state of affairs paves the way for twentieth century practices of artmaking in showing how the artist can play a unique role, however ambivalent, within the social and psychic fields of modern capitalism.

Notes

[1] In translations of Lyotard, *dispositif* is usually rendered as 'set-up' or 'apparatus,' and describes a conceptual or figural agglomeration of some sort that operates within the social field. I use the term here to broaden the idea of the painting from simply a crafted object to a working social apparatus with its own internal and external systems and disjunctions.

[2] "Dans la noblesse, on n'a pas l'habitude de travailler. Puisque je veux travailler, je porterai donc un nom roturier" (cited in Armstrong 2). ['In the nobility one is not used to working. Since I want to work, I should therefore have a commoner's name'.]

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