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Pictorial Real, Historical Intermedial. Digital Aesthetics and the Representation of History in Eric Rohmer's *The Lady and the Duke*

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Abstract. In *The Lady and the Duke* (2001), Eric Rohmer provides an unusual and "conservative" account of the French Revolution by recurring to classical and yet "revolutionary" means. The interpolation between painting and film produces a visual surface which pursues a paradoxical effect of immediacy and verisimilitude. At the same time though, it underscores the represented nature of the images in a complex dynamic of "reality effect" and critical meta-discourse. The aim of this paper is the analysis of the main discursive strategies deployed by the film to disclose an intermedial effectiveness in the light of its original digital aesthetics. Furthermore, it focuses on the problematic relationship between image and reality, deliberately addressed by Rohmer through the dichotomy simulation/illusion. Finally, drawing on the works of Louis Marin, it deals with the representation of history and the related ideology, in order to point out the film's paradoxical nature, caught in an undecidability between past and present.

Keywords: Eric Rohmer, simulation, illusion, history and discourse, intermediality, *tableau vivant*.

The representation of the past is one of the domains, where the improvement of new technologies can effectively disclose its power in fulfilling our "thirst for reality." No more cardboard architectures nor polystyrene stones: virtual environments and motion capture succeed nowadays in conveying a truly believable reconstruction of distant times and worlds. In the last few years though, a different strategy has emerged producing a thread of intermedial discourses, which view history through its representations more than through its mere events. Many reasons can be adduced to explain this – economic, aesthetical, ideological – but perhaps the most important is the historicization of the "time of mechanical reproducibility" of the image. In the turn towards its "technical producibility," the cine-photographic image wholly becomes a

historical witness, paradoxically exploiting its (lost) indexicality, what Roland Barthes defines the "emanation of the referent" (1981, 80), or, with a formula better conveying a historical concern: *ça-a-été*.

But what if the reconstructed events took place before the age of mechanical reproducibility? Can painting play such a testimonial role within the filmic text? And if so, what space of the real do cinema and painting manage to construct, especially when their relation underscores "film's heterogeneity," as in the *tableau vivant* (Peucker 2007, 31)? What relation with the world does this strange hybrid disclose? What sort of testimonial discourse does their combination produce?

I will tackle these issues by analysing Eric Rohmer's *The Lady and the Duke* (*L'anglaise et le duc*, 2001), in order to outline the specific digital aesthetics deployed through a particular interplay between *simulation* and *illusion*, to conclude with some remarks about the representation of history and its ideology. Here, I argue, the interpolation between painting and cinema produces a visual surface tending to gain in verisimilitude, but at the same time highlighting the represented nature of the images, in a complex dynamic of "reality effect" and critical meta-discourse.[1] This dynamic partially recalls the double logic of remediation involving the concepts of *immediacy* and *hypermediacy* – as proposed by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin – which lead on the one hand to "the transparent presentation of the real" and on the other hand to "the enjoyment of opacity of media themselves" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 21). Or, tracing back a little further, it is also possible to make reference to Walter Benjamin's claim about the "equipment free aspect of reality" fostered by cinema (1969): that is the curious dialectic between, on the one hand, "the production of mechanical images, whose illusion is to be free of technological artifice" and, on the other hand, the inspiration for "the utopian longing for a reality free of technological mediation" (Rodowick 2001, 39).

This convergence has a particular name in the present time: transparency. According to the widespread use of this word, we can state – following Byung-Chul Han (2015) – that the ideology it produces is the hallmark of our society, with deep aesthetical and political implications. Through a close analysis of the filmic multiple layers, this paper will attempt to put into question such a concept,

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1   Ágnes Pethő has addressed this very issue by analyzing Jean-Luc Godard's, Agnès Varda's and Louis Guerin's works. Her analysis highlights the specific self-reflexive dimension of these films that, far beyond any playful attitude, propose a thorough reflection about topics such as memory, knowledge, and the present condition of cinema itself (Pethő 2009). However, as I will try to show, Rohmer's work pursues a slightly different strategy, whose original mechanisms is the main concern of this paper.

eventually to sketch few conclusions about the strategies of representation of history from a strictly visual point of view.

Pictorial Real and Historical Intermedial

At the age of 81, Eric Rohmer decides to confront himself for the first time with the digital technology to represent the quintessential event of French history, the Revolution and the beheading of Louis XVI. The plot is based on the diary of Grace Elliot, the Great Lady, and depicts the Age of Terror, lasting from 1790 and 1793. He focuses on Grace's friendly relationship with the Prince Philip, Duke of Orleans, and their different visions of the revolutionary process: whereas the hopes and illusions of the Duke are soon frustrated by Robespierre's taking of power, the Lady's worst premonitions come true. With the killing of the king all the symbolic boundaries shatter and all the aristocrats are endangered, included those having supported the revolution since then. The fall of Robespierre and the end of Terror establish a new order, but it is too late: in the meantime, the Duke has been beheaded. Once freed from imprisonment, Grace flees to England, her home country, never coming back to France any more. This simple plot finds a resonance in the *mise-en-scène*: twelve tableaux inspired by French genre painting represent the historical scenario of Eighteenth Century Paris, a steady and immutable plan on which the actions of the characters take place [Fig. 1]. The shots filmed in a studio with a green screen are digitally superimposed on the corresponding live view, controlling the conformity of gestures and settings. On the other hand, the interiors are completely reconstructed: these are mostly small spaces not allowing the actors or the camera a great freedom of movement, overtly stressing the tableau-effect [Fig. 2].

Keeping his stylistic features and his interest for the staging of History, as attested in works such as *The Marquise of O* (*Die Marquise von O...*, 1976) and *Perceval* (*Perceval le Gallois*, 1978), the French director thus provides an unusual and "conservative" account of the Revolution by recurring to classical and yet "revolutionary" means. Somehow, *The Lady and the Duke* seems to reach the highest point of Rohmer's idea of cinema as a continuation and a synthesis of the other arts, able to renew their lost classicism (Vancheri 2007, 55).[2] However, this film remains an isolated episode in his filmography, which will conclude ten years later with a "primitive" – in strictly aesthetical terms – work, *The Romance*

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2   This Hegelian conception evidently recalls Eisenstein's theoretical proposal as formulated in *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things* (1988).

of Astrea and Celadon (*Les amours d'Astrée et de Céladon*, 2007), trying to trace back to an originary time, both visual and historical.

The attempt to "accord" the time of the enunciation with the time of the enunciated, the representation with the represented, is what seems to lie at the basis of *The Lady and the Duke*. Rohmer himself indeed declares that the use of painted backgrounds works for a search for verisimilitude – that is, this very accord, we may say – which contemporary Paris is not able to supply any more. The impression of reality here does not affect the relationship between the film and its spectator, nor does it concern its ontological bound with the world, but rather it looks totally inscribed within the space of the representation. The link between cinema and painting is therefore developed in two directions. On the one hand, we can point out the creation of a pictorial environment in the interiors, which overlays cinema with painting. This is a pictorial effect that allows one medium (namely cinema) to encapsulate certain features of pertinence taken from another one (namely, painting); on the other hand, in the exteriors we can identify a juxtaposition of the two expressive systems in order to give birth to an intermedial synthesis.[3] In particular, this latter strategy enables cinema to fulfil a whole *sample* from painting (beyond the simple quotation of a single picture into one film), and at the same time it *inserts* the film into the pictures, therefore animating the painting's immobile surface and providing it with an own temporality.[4]

Between these two poles, the former classical and the latter more original, in the coach sequences we can also detect a third position that is able to put into relation interiors and exteriors and their respective strategies. On a functional level, the coach combines the antithetical features of inside and outside, thus becoming an element of junction between two spatial universes that the film depicts as ontologically different: we can define them respectively as *pictorial*

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3   Irina O. Rajewsky defines these two strategies respectively as "intermedial references" and "media combination" (Rajewsky 2005, 51–53). Whereas the former is very common in cinema (we can recall Bazin's defense of a "mixed cinema"), the latter is more problematic, at least in Rohmer's film: I will develop this issue in the next pages.

4   By analyzing the functions of library pictures in cinema, Marco Dinoi proposes an empirical taxonomy of the traces that the historical past could leave within the filmic text. Dinoi describes three types of this relationship: the *sample*, the *insert*, and the *graft*. The sample is the presence of an object belonging to extra-textual reality within the filmic text, as such supposed to be recognizable by the spectator. It is the concept of quotation in the narrow sense and it encompasses any media, from newspapers to films. The insert is a manipulation by filmic text of facts or events directly referable to official history; it discharges a metalinguistic function, especially when it connects texts related to different media, showing the difference among production systems. The graft – maybe the more frequent type – concerns every, more or less accurate scenic reconstruction of extra-textual objects, subjected to the economy of the diegetic mechanism (Dinoi 2008, 176).

real and as *historical intermedial.* Painting is the surface of inscription of the narrated events that surrounds the space of the real, its external limits, but also its frame of meaning. To move from one universe to another, both the Duke and the Lady have to first operate a "framing" – or a *mise-en-cadre* – of themselves, thus turning into real *tableaux-vivants* [Fig. 3]. And yet, if the *tableau vivant* is classically defined as the "staging of well-known paintings by human performers holding a pose" (Peucker 2007, 30), producing a tension towards movement and three-dimensionality,[5] in this case we assist to an opposite process, that is the transformation of a human performer into an image, defined as such by a frame, thus creating a tension towards stillness and two-dimensionality.

Simulation and Illusion: Digital Aesthetics

It is through this framing process that *The Lady and the Duke* manages to share features belonging to monadic realities. The figure of the monad has been extensively used to describe virtual environments. According to Gilles Deleuze, the monad is the autonomy of the interior, an interior without exterior, which, nevertheless, has a correlated exterior, one without interior. It has no empty holes but just different densities of matter: where the rarefaction is at the maximum level, there are windows and doors, exclusively opening onto the outside or from the outside (Deleuze 1992). *The Lady and the Duke* perfectly represents the peculiar nature of the monad. The exteriors propose a painted historical world, which does not presume any out-of-field: each tableau is a sort of virtual theatrical scene whose principle is rooted in a logic of *simulation*, granting an interaction between characters and scene [Fig. 4]. In contrast to this, the interiors are real environments, whose relation with a real outside is completely broken. From the few windows, only a painted world can be perceived, a subtle inversion of Western painting's fundamental postulate: *the window on the world is a picture.* However, one detail reshapes this framework: the walls of the rooms are decorated in *trompe-l'oeil.* This increases the tableau-effect provided by the diegetic choices, such as the minimal camera movements, the gestural linearity of the characters, and the chromatic uniformity, which flattens the depth of field. Thus, this is another coherent world with no out-of-field, whose principle is yet rooted in a logic of *illusion.*

Both strategies seem to tend towards a common aim, i.e. the creation of a hybrid representation, whose core is the anachronism as synthesis of different

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5   See, for instance, the famous coloured scenes in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La ricotta* (1963).

times.[6] This anachronistic and intermedial tension is effectively staged at the very beginning of the film. There, a series of still images works as a background for the voice over of an external narrator providing information in the past tense. The shifting from exteriors to interiors creates an illusion of material continuity between the spaces depicted: a painted world seems to unfold in front of our eyes creating the illusion of contemporaneity with fictional time. But when the story begins, transforming the past tense into a historical present tense through the indication of the date in which the events take place, the representation "comes to life," making us rethink our belief in the images just shown and in their temporal regime. This illusory strategy is not the result of a playful attitude; rather, it constructs the possibility for an account of the past to be disclosed by a specific aesthetic discourse.

Two episodes taken from the travelling coach push the limit of this analysis a little further. In the coach, the Lady is literally framed by the window, while behind her the other window frames the landscape. This squared structure deploys a succession of planes which define the out-of-field of the real as a painted world: an intermedial universe plunged into an anachronistic temporality. But suddenly something happens to shatter the symbolic surface which detaches the plane of the represented from the plane of the representation [Fig. 5]. From the painted historical background, two figures break into the space of the real, somehow reminding us the famous sequence of Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), where the characters move between the two sides of the screen. But in Rohmer's film, as we have seen, the complexity of its intermedial nature implies the negation of the limits between levels of representation, introducing a broader reflection involving different expressive devices, different regimes of time, different discursive strategies.[7] A solution that makes superficiality and depth, transitivity and intransitivity, transparency and opacity collapse, eventually questioning the opposition between simulation and illusion.[8]

In this way Rohmer points out the very contradictory tangle at the basis of the digital image in the present time: he exploits its technological potential for *representing* a virtual environment, which is nevertheless deliberately analogical. This results in a sort of "handcrafted digital landscape," where

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6   On this topic, see Didi-Huberman (2005).
7   Similar remarks in Pethő (2009, 60).
8   Moreover, drawing on Luc Vancheri's survey about cinema and painting (2007), this work with different representational layers encompasses three modalities of this elective relationship: the passage (e.g. the continuity between two different media), the sharing (e.g. the specific painting within the filmic image) and the presence (e.g. cinema's fascination for its illustrious ancestors).

the idea of intaglio or worked matter, peculiar of an analogical and modernist aesthetic (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 38; Pethő 2009, 50) is not only kept but even highlighted. Otherwise said, there is a separation between ontological dimension and production of meaning, characterizing the film at the same time as wholly digital and wholly analogical.

The Representation of History

At the beginning of this paper, I have posed the question whether painting can provide information about historical events or not. French theoretician Louis Marin has provided a convincingly positive answer, transposing onto the iconic enunciation the concepts of history and discourse proposed by Émile Benveniste. In short, we can say that historical enunciation is the account of past events not implying the direct intervention of a speaker (the events seem to narrate themselves), whereas discourse is marked by the presence of a speaker who attempts to influence a listener, determining the contemporaneity of the utterance and the instance of enunciation (Marin 1995; Benveniste 1971). In the former, there is a negation of the instance of the enunciation, which seems not to address a listener, a reader or a beholder directly; in the latter, two subjects share a dialogical horizon implying their simultaneous presence within the space created by the discourse.

In *The Lady and the Duke*, the creation of twelve tableaux inspired by French genre painting of the 17th century assigns the role of historical witness to painting: no authorship (an anonymous – or at least not directly recognizable – source), no subjectivity (negation of enunciation), realism (stylistic naturalism), that is, transparency and truth of the historical narrative. The verbal enunciation in the film, both written and oral, serve the same aim. At the very beginning the heterodiegetic narrator proposes a short contextualization in the past tense referring to actual historical facts. Through a temporal reference (namely, the frame stating "1790") the narration then shifts to a historical present, exploiting the role of eye-witness of Grace Elliot, whose diary is the main source for the narrative. This develops a continuous dialectic between effects creating distance and presence, and which contribute to the testimonial effectiveness of the film. But this surface of transparency is questioned by episodes and recurring details that produce opacity. In particular, three moments could be recalled to show this process.

Within the initial succession of still images, the two main characters are introduced by their portrait hung on a wall [Figs. 6–7]; the contextualized setting,

the historical reference and the pictorial impression suggest their value as a document, that is, a sample taken from the past, except revealing their present nature as the actors appear in a scene. Through this deceit the temporal relations are thus overturned, questioning the nature of the links of the representation with the represented. The central scene – the beheading of Louis XVI – pushes this opacification a step further. On a terrace, the Lady and her maid anxiously wait for the main event of the Revolution, hoping it could eventually not happen. However, they assume antithetical positions, the maid by looking with a telescope towards the painted background, the Lady by turning her head and refusing to watch [Figs. 8–9]. In the symbolic centre of the narration, the encounter of private memory and historical fact does not take place. The thematization of the different attitudes towards the regicide (the will to watch and the will not to watch) turns into an impossibility to watch for the spectator: someone is looking on behalf of us but she is not our delegate within the diegesis. We missed the show, what Michel Foucault called in a chapter of his book, *Discipline and Punish* (1979) the "spectacle of the scaffold:" the scene of the event is literally too far.

In both cases the intermedial editing is in charge of defining the limits of the real that we as spectators have access to. This epistemic relation with the historical reconstruction is filtered by the figure of Grace Elliot. In the guise of the painted portrait at the beginning, she invites us into a space where history and memory coincide through "an interpellation"[9] implying a dialogic contemporaneity of the screen's two sides (Casetti 1999, 23); her refusal to watch the king's beheading instead expels us from the space of the history, showing its impossible coincidence with memory. This leads us to the third moment, the very last sequence [Figs. 10–11]. There, a writing stating the Duke's death in the past tense is superimposed on his painted portrait: the history is definitively disjointed from memory. The objective value of the written word is for the first time not associated with excerpts from the diary, but assumes the same function of the heterodiegetical narrator in the beginning. Whereas the Duke remains in the history, the Lady moves into the domain of memory and then of discourse: her final appearance states another contemporaneity with the spectator but now in the present tense. Illusions preside over the representation no more: the theatrical ending – a filmic place that functions as an enunciative sign, allowing subjectivity to emerge within the surface of the discourse (Metz 2016, 11) – provides a second-degree frame which turns the narrated world marked by a transitive transparency into a commented world characterized by a reflexive opacity (Ricoeur 1986, 68).

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9   Casetti's term (cf. 1999, 48–49).

A Paradoxical Ideology?

The analysis presented here has aimed to outline the peculiar intermedial play presiding over the space of the filmic discourse. By exploiting old means within a new setting, *The Lady and the Duke* thus seems to question the transparency and immediacy of the representation of the past through the constant enhancement of new visual technologies, challenging innovation rather than nostalgic conservation. Still, the choice of staging a certain historical event with a specific and unusual point of view raises some questions and controversial issues. To this end, in this last section I will try to deepen the analysis so far proposed with further remarks involving both the narrative and figurative planes.

To begin with, the historical horizon of the story has to be taken into consideration. In fact, Rohmer does not deal with the whole revolutionary process, but he focuses only on the central part of it. By doing so, the beginning and the end of the Revolution are not encompassed within the space of the narration: the taking of the Bastille – the other main symbolic event together with the beheading of the king – is, for instance, never mentioned by the plot. This choice seems to soften the critical discourse proposed by the film, which actually does not involve the ideological basis inspiring the French Revolution, but rather focuses on the alleged degeneration of its principles. Here comes a second controversial point: this degeneration seems to lead directly to the "taking of power" of the people of Paris. As long as the Revolution was confined within institutional limits – Rohmer seems to claim – its disruptive force was under control and therefore the accord between ideas and deeds was kept. Not by chance, Robespierre is depicted as a radical yet reasonable figure, who appears to be overwhelmed by the angry stubbornness of the other revolutionaries.

This superficial observation is reinforced by the intertextual mechanism[10] and the topological distribution of values. As a matter of fact, the interiors and exteriors belong to different domains: the former to culture, the latter to nature. Every scene happening in the city streets or in the countryside deals with a state of danger dominated by passions, what Deleuze would call an "originary world" (1986), whereas every interior represents a kind of sanctuary, a space of inviolability where reason prevails, also the revolutionary one. This is particularly evident in the coach sequences. I have already pointed out how the

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10   By resorting to the term "intertextuality," I am suggesting that this concept can better underscore the specific semantic aspect of an intermedial chain; about this distinction, see also Rajewsky (2005).

coach assumes the antithetical features of inside and outside, depicted by the film as ontologically different: that is, what I have named pictorial real and historical intermedial. Beside a connective function, the coach also fulfils a second task, preserving the Lady from the blind and bloody desire embodied by the people. This immunizing function clearly recalls the most famous coach in the history of cinema, John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939); there we have the Indians, here the sans-culottes: in both cases, there is a challenge between reason and irrational drive, culture and nature. More than sixty years later, the effectiveness of the coach in preserving the passengers from the contact with the otherness radically changes: Ford's optimistic and organic view is replaced by Rohmer's disillusion about the heritage of Enlightenment.

According to Daniele Dottorini (2004), there is however another deep intertextual reference: that is, Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1954). Rossellini's film was a real turning point for the then young critic of the *Cahiers du cinéma*, who defined it "my own way to Damascus." In particular, Dottorini suggests, what Rohmer subtly recalls in *The Lady and the Duke* is Ingrid Bergman's trembling after the encounter with an octopus taken from the sea [Fig. 13]. This unbearable vision, anticipating the ancient ritual of the tuna fishing, makes the image go beyond the limits of an ingenuous realism, deeply affecting the French director's poetics. Likewise, the head of the Princess of Lamballe exposed on a pike is shown to Grace by a sans-culotte. [Figs. 14–15.] In spite of being safely on her coach, the Lady cannot hide her feelings, starting to cry and tremble in front of such an obscene spectacle, whose force could not be endured by her gaze.

But that head is also reminiscent of another visual configuration, particularly useful for the purposes of this analysis. The beheading is a recurrent topic in the ancient mythology and has been widely represented in the history of the Western art. However, its most striking figuration was probably created by Caravaggio with his well known the *Head of Medusa* [Fig. 12], a painted shield allegedly belonging to his early period. The thematic affinity between the two heads is clear,[11] but once again the film's relationship to painting is not limited to a simple quotation process. As a matter of fact, Rohmer redistributes the features of Caravaggio's *Medusa*, rendering explicit what was implicit in the painting, that is, the relation with the beholder within the space of the representation. In contrast to the Medusa, the Princess's head is still and inexpressive: but that missing cry – so

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11 Moreover, Medusa is a snake-headed figure, which evidently recalls the tentacles of the octopus. This detail reinforces the role of *Stromboli* as an "intercessor" between *The Lady and the Duke* and *The Head of Medusa*, even beyond Dottorini's remarks.

striking in the shield because of its expressive force – in fact migrates to the Lady's face, showing her disgust and horror in front of such an obscenity. If we take a close look at the two facial expressions and the perspective apparatuses, we may find that the similarity of the two images is striking [Figs. 12, 15]. From a certain point of view, painting and the real definitively blur their boundaries: indeed, the pictorial quotation deeply affects the space of the real, eventually completely transforming the Lady into a tableau, even if for a brief moment.

Marin, who extensively dealt with Caravaggio's *Medusa* in his book, *To Destroy Painting*, recalls some remarks proposed by Cesare Ripa and defines "the head of the Medusa as a symbol of the victory of reason over the senses, the natural foes of 'virtue,' which like [the political and] the physical enemies [in the myth of the 'origin'] are petrified when faced with the Medusa. The head of Medusa, then, is the defensive and offensive weapon wielded by wisdom in its war against the passions" (Marin 1995, 113). It is easy to understand – according to Rohmer's vision – why Grace turns herself into Medusa: her enemies are not her own internal passions, but rather those belonging to the external world, which flourish in the blind and bloody turmoil characterising the Terror. The apotropaic function of Medusa's head is fulfilled by the Great Lady, the diegetic delegate and the source of the (hi)story.[12]

But Marin pushes his analysis even further, concluding that the *Head of Medusa* is a historical painting. How is it possible? Because this painting – Marin argues – overlaps two different moments of the history. This creates a paradoxical situation where the painting is both the shield of Perseus (Medusa is self-petrified by looking at her own reflection in the mirror/shield), and therefore it is in a never-ending present tense, and a real painting, which represents in the past tense the mythological episode in the very moment of contraction of the time of the account, that is, the beheading of Medusa. The painter remains hidden, similarly to the speaker in a historical narrative: the image seems to present itself autonomously. Can these few remarks be transposed onto Rohmer's film?

If we agree that the Lady turns herself into a picture through an operation of *mise-en-cadre*, then the overlapping between the pictorial real and the historical

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12   On this very topic, see also Brigitte Peucker, who draws on Marin's work about Caravaggio to "focus on sculpture and painting in their relation to representational issues in Hitchcock's films" (2007, 69) in two chapters of her book *The Material Image*. These issues primarily concern the relationship between the film and its spectator involving the construction of the gaze and the illusion of reality produced. A pivotal element in this dialectic between art and the real is the *tableau vivant*, able to elicit a corporeal and emotional response from the spectator. However, I leave aside the Lacanian reading informing Peucker's analysis, to focus on the enunciative dimension that represents the core of Marin's approach.

intermedial finds in this very moment its point of highest condensation. The history is nothing but some curly hair (so close to the snake-headed Medusa) in front of a *tableau vivant*, plunged into an intermedial environment as a result of two heterogeneous times. If Caravaggio – I draw on Marin's analysis once again – disguises himself as Medusa,[13] Rohmer seems to recover this manoeuvre in order to instate his own vision within the space of the discourse without being recognized. And this operation of negation of the "I" of the enunciation is accomplished through figurative means, which properly configures *The Lady and the Duke* as historical cinema. But this enunciational strategy, as I have attempted to show in the previous section, is always floating and unstable because of the stratification of the surfaces of representation, which results in a paradoxical temporal regime of the images and a variable density of the enunciative relations between the film and its spectator.

As for Caravaggio's *Medusa*, history and discourse overlap, configuring "opacity" as a main topic of Rohmer's film, which proposes a resolutely anti-populistic version of the founding moment of European modernity and fulfils the director's vision of cinema as a classical art (Vancheri 2007, 53). And yet, this double outcome is obtained through an avant-garde employment of new technologies: once again, a paradoxical undecidability between past and present.

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13 The French theoretician reasonably argues that the self-portrait as a beheaded character is one of the most peculiar gestures of Caravaggio's work. In this case, the result is not only (self) satirical, but more properly it represents under pictorial means that "disguise" of the enunciation which is specific of the historical narrative (Marin 1995, 133).

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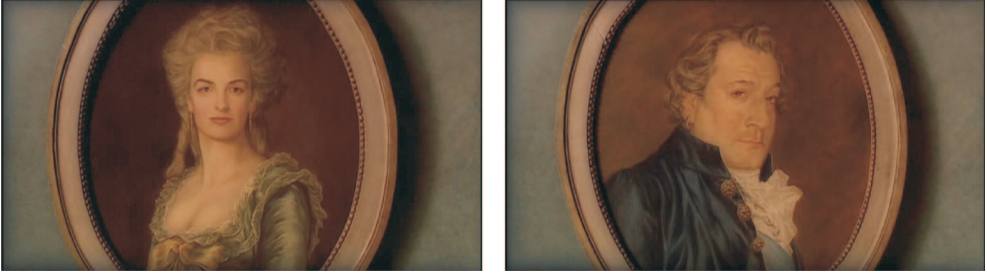
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