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The Kafkaesque in Susan Scott's Series *Description of a Struggle*: Identity, the Other and an Amenable Interaction

Joanne Latimer

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Abstract

The Kafkaesque in Susan Scott's *Description of a Struggle*: Identity, the Other and an Amenable Interaction

Joanne Latimer

Susan Scott's series of eleven painted canvases called *Description of a Struggle* takes its title from a short story by Kafka. Like Kafka, Scott lays bare the mechanics of identity and gender, questioning how gender roles are informed and conditioned by popular culture. This thesis will investigate how gender roles are at play in *Description of a Struggle*, while examining how Scott's art relates to its literary source. At discussion will be how Scott has created a series of paintings that is predisposed to a multidimensional viewing process with various "readings" of the artwork: a literary reading of the Kafkaian source, a psychological reading and a mass-media reading of the pop cultural influences. The convergence of these standpoints, or positions, complicates the act of viewing and creates the critique of gender roles and identity formation that is at the heart of Scott's *Description of a Struggle*.

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Introduction

> *Kafka's unchanging problem was one of presentation: how to organize the totality of his experience...in such a way that individual moments are both intensely "lived" and totally abstract, detached from their context by the process of writing.*
>
> James Rolleston, *Kafka's Narrative Theatre*

Rolleston's observation about Kafka's writing echoes the artistic intentions of Susan Scott. In the mid 1980s, Scott painted narrative cycles that combine images and text to present discontinuous, annotated "snapshots" of daily life. At times intimate and at times banal, the scenes capture specific events or actions. Yet, they are "emptied of normal meaning by their articulation as art", as Rolleston says of Kafka's prose.[1] This "emptying" of the specific in Scott's work is achieved through her use of expressionistic figuration and de-individualized images. Her series strive beyond the particular, revealing the psychological power-politics behind interpersonal relationships.

This thesis will focus on Scott's *Description of a Struggle* (1983), her first narrative series which finds its inspiration and title in a short story by Kafka. Using eleven large-scale canvases, Scott recounts a bitter tale of failed romance. A blond heroine copes with her despair in the face of rejection, her lover's infidelity and her dark-haired rival. The white border around each scene mimes the format of a Polaroid photograph and provides the space for Scott's hand-written captions. The captions are not culled from Kafka's story, as the title of the

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[1] James Rolleston, *Kafka's Narrative Theatre* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 1974), 14.

series might suggest. Rather, the text is a cool, almost clinical, commentary that jars with the heated emotions portrayed in each painting. The measured tone of the text recalls the literary voice of Kafka, with its unsettling reserve and precision.

Description of a Struggle is a subversive body of work. Implicit in her series is a critique of gender construction. She questions how roles are informed by popular culture, where conditioned responses are continually re-taught and notions of masculinity and feminity are entrenched. As in Kafka's *Description of a Struggle,* Scott lays bare the mechanics of identity, which are constituted in the eyes of a validating and recognizing "other". As Freud's theories on the narcissistic ego and love explain, self-image and identity do not evolve in a personal vacuum, but are contingent on the influence of other people:

> When the subject falls in love, the ego invests libido in its privileged love-object, depleting its 'reserves' of ego-libido. The process of falling in love risks the safety of the ego in order to (over-)estimate the beloved. In those fortunate circumstances when the relation is reciprocated, the deplete ego is, in its turn, reinvested with cathexes proceeding from the beloved. Being loved provides libidinal nourishment for the ego and thus an elevation of its self-esteem...However, more frequently, where such a reciprocal desire is not sustained, the unrequited love for the other severely lovers feelings of self-regard or self-worth.[2]

Fear of an *absent* other is at the heart of Scott's heroine's plight and causes the trauma for Kafka's hero. Scott's narrative, like Kafka's, is driven by eros. But the players are panicking at the prospect of solitude. Identity, therefore, is problematized. It is in fact the fundamental question at play in the series.

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[1] Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 29-30.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the construction of identity, focusing more specifically on the play of gender in *Description of a Struggle*, while examining how Scott's art relates to its literary source -- the Kafka story and Kafkaesque storytelling. In Scott's series, constructions of gender are notable in that they unfold at what could be called the level of the "personal", one that results from Scott's construction of a narrativee "self", an intimate "I", speaking in the first person. This use of the first-person narrator is a story-telling device which invokes intimate modes of discourse, such as the confessional mode and the diaristic mode. Secrets are shared. Both Scott's heroine and Kafka's narrator(s) strive for an identity among the socially prescribed roles available -- the spurned lover, the lonely bachelor, or the envious rival. But in Scott's work, the construction of the personal "I" has to be understood as a strategy of gendered identity formation. This is what needs to be addressed if we are to grasp the unique complexity of *Description of a Struggle*.

This "personal" approach to artmaking also raises the important question of the relationship between the artwork and the spectator. To investigate the construction of identity in Scott's work is to be attentive to the fact that the spectator is addressed in such a way that he or she is part of that construction. Who is the "I" that speaks to the audience in *Description of a Struggle*? Is the heroine in the story Scott herself, a fictional character, or a composite of media clichés? Is this a make-believe history, or an accurate account? Because the "I" blurs the distinction between fantasy, fiction and (auto)biography, Scott

undermines the author(ity) of her text: the precise identity of the "I" is not fixed, nor is the story-line. Scott obfuscates the art through her use of discontinuous scenes and cryptic script. This way, the authority of the art is foiled: the plot is linear, but not uninterrupted. The narrator is in the first-person, but *which* person?

Ambiguities like these invite viewers to project their private, parallel histories onto the art work. Such an interactive art experience narrows the gap between the spectator and the art. The lack of closure, or resolution, in the story leaves "cracks" for the viewers to fill with their own imaginations or autobiographical projections. Art that is amenable to this kind of interaction dislodges traditional presumptions about the artist's/narrator's sole control over the one-way exchange of ideas flowing from the images and text. The story is purposefully left unfixed to facilitate the viewers' entrance, or engagement, with the work, favouring an interactivity which is supported by Scott's subversion of the medium of "serious" painting by "contaminating" it with references to cinema, photography, pulp fiction, melodrama and advertising storyboards. These visual associations with mass media are part of Scott's strategy to heighten audience interaction with the work; Polaroid-style canvases propel the intimate subject matter into the public arena and the series is a photo album of heart ache for all to see. The effect is what Judith Butler calls "subversive parody", because it mimes and displaces the hegemony of specific conventions which we will attempt to

define.[3]

The first chapter of this thesis will examine how Scott's series speaks to its literary namesake. Kafka's story will be briefly outlined in order to illustrate how identity and constructions of gender are key ties between both *Description of a Struggles*, through their "I" narrators. Despite Scott's regular exhibition history, sources on her oeuvre are limited to two solo catalogues, two group catalogues, press releases from the galleries, newspaper reviews and approximately five art journal reviews.[4] The print-press reviews stress the "story" in the narrative of *Description*, as well as her expressionistic brush work. The Kafka connection has been given short shrift.

As an exception, Bella Rabinovitch's review for *Vanguard* invokes the importance of the literary source, as does Jane Young's exhibit's catalogue.[5] *Description of a Struggle* toured Canada in 1984-1985 as part of a mid-career retrospective entitled *Susan Scott: Works from 1974 to 1983*, organized by the Surrey Art Gallery. Curator Jane Young wrote the catalogue, which focused on *Description*. Young stresses:

> Like Kafka, Scott experiments with public statements about personal emotions, exposing and exploiting the incongruity of socially prescribed

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[3] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., 1990), 32.

[4] A separate bibliography on Scott is provided in Appendix 1.

[5] R. Bella Rabinovitch, "Susan Scott", *Vanguard* No.9 (November, 1984), 36.

behaviour that excludes the expression of our most deeply felt emotions.[6] This theme is presented as Scott's main tie to Kafka's story. However, there are other weighty thematic links between the art work and its literary source of inspiration.

Our own analysis of Scott's heroine and of Kafka's will show how gender role-playing is at work. Both Kafka's story and Scott's series take as their main topic insecurity about gender and identity. But how are these insecurities aired in the work? Both employ an alter-ego, an "other" with whom they identify, speak of self-reflexively and project their feelings onto. But how does this other interact with the protagonist in such a way as to reveal the insecurities about identity? What event(s) put the protagonists' self-image in peril? When viewed psychoanalytically, what do the confessions and fantasies of the protagonists say about the make-up of their identities? There is an uneasiness surrounding the gender-posturing, as the hero and the heroine grope for identities that deserves examination. For this examination, I will be discussing how the "other" operates in Scott and Kafka's work -- a Lacanian-defined other, that incorporates his theories about the dialectic of recognition.

As well as analysing thematic ties between Scott and Kafka's work, Chapter 1 will also consider stylistic links. There is a semantic unease common to both pieces. Inner monologues show the omnipotence of thought, and the inner monologues share a tone of detached craftsmanship. Feelings sound detached

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[6] Jane Young, *Susan Scott: Works from 1974 to 1983* (Victoria: Exhibition catalogue by the Surrey Art Gallery, 1984), 9.

from narration, which in turn, sounds cool and analytic compared to the action at hand.

Chapter Two will consider how Scott has created an interactive art experience that is amenable to audience interaction. Scott's confiding "I" forges, and forces, a relationship with the viewer and erodes psychological distance between the art and its appreciator. The "I" draws in the spectator, but other aspects also contribute to the artwork's accessability. References to cinema, photography, pulp fiction and advertising are formal strategies that further this effect. With these engaging pop-culture references, *Description* is an "amenable object", to borrow a term from Toronto-based art critic Jeanne Randolph. Randolph's amenable object is an art object that validates the viewers' aim to interact using their own imaginations and life experiences.[7] An amenable object comes from the artist's subjective experience, but also "belongs to the experience of relating to it...with its perceptual plasticity."[8] Randolph's paradigm has been brought forth as a model on which to examine *Description*'s "amenable" traits. What are the series' amenable characteristics? How does the reference to Polaroid photographs encourage viewer interaction? What effect does the storyboard presentation have? How does the dramatic colour scheme and the script speak to the viewer? And how does the viewers' interaction effect the construction of identity, mediated through the "I" in the narrative?

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[7] Jeanne Randolph, "The Amenable Object", *Vanguard* (Summer 1983), 32.

[8] Ibid., 33.

Judith Butler's strategy of "subversive parody" in art relates to the amenable character of *Description*. Butler's "subversive parody" means, in a word, mimicry. Characters mimic their gender ideals and in doing so, they expose them as untenable and unfixed. Butler states that identity is based on role-playing within gender categories that are available. In other words, to become gendered involves impersonating ideal profiles that nobody actually inhabits.[9] *Description of a Struggle* will be considered as an art that employs "subversive parody" in its construction of gendered identity.

In short, the interdisciplinary nature of *Description*, with its literary and pop culture sourcing, allows different possibilities of ways of reading the artwork. The series is predisposed to a multidimentional viewing, composed of a literary standpoint, a cinematic standpoint, a photographic and a psychological standpoint. These standpoints converge during the act of viewing, but for our purposes, will be discussed separately. Dividing the literary component and the psychological component from the pop cultural components is not ideal. However, it allows us to deal with the issues of identity in Scott's work from the base of a "psychological viewer" who is also obliged to be a "literary viewer" and a "mass-media viewer". These aspects of viewing must be separated at one point, for purposes of discussion.

[9] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 28-33.

Chapter One: Struggle for Existence: Kafka's Story and Scott's Series

i) The Kafkaesque

The adjective "Kafkaesque" is becoming increasingly commonplace. As it is used more frequently, it is also used with less precision. "Kafkaesque" has become a popular label for all that is remotely obscure or nonsequitur. When used generously by those with only a passing acquaintance with Kafka's work, "Kafkaesque" has been reduced to a buzz word for alienation, bureaucratic frustration, or farcical judicial procedures. "Orwellian" is a close cousin. The vernacular use of either term, with its questionable catholicity, threatens to drown its meaning in vagueness. It users, then, seem suspect -- pretentious bluffers.

Susan Scott cannot be accused of making such superficial references. Her painted series *Description of a Struggle* takes more than its title from Kafka's short story. Unlike the "bluffers" described above, Scott does not rely on her literary source as a time-saving device to evoke an overall mood. The associations between *Description of a Struggle* and Kafka's story are stylistic and thematic. An unnerving formality laces the text in both works, while themes of identity construction are a common anchor. Before these shared characteristics can be delineated further, a brief outline of Kafka's story is necessary to avoid the trap of vagueness outlined above.

Beschreibung eines Kampfes (Description of a Struggle) was written in 1904-1905, when Kafka was in his early twenties and living in Prague. It is his first

preserved fictional "novella", of which he wrote two versions. After Kafka had published sections of the first version in the bi-monthly journal *Hyperion*, he was convinced that the story suffered from excessive disjointedness. While comparing the two manuscripts, Ramon G. Mendoza concluded that in the remodelled novella of 1908-1910,

> Kafka had succeeded in giving the story the unity and coherence it initially lacked, eliminating much of the rhetorical, florid style of some passages of the first version, adopting a more stringent principle of narrative perspective, and giving primary importance to gesture and mimicry.[10]

When Max Brod, Kafka's confidant and literary executor, first published the novella in 1936, he wasn't shy with the editing scalpel. There is a nine page discrepancy after the edit, with Brod's copy being the lighter of the two. Consequently the unabridged, 1969 publication of *Description* is the version that will be referred to in this thesis, with the translation by Tania and James Stern.[11]

In this version, Part I opens with a young man enjoying a glass of benedictine, in contented solitude, at a house party. He is approached by an "acquaintance" who insists on relaying details of his amorous entanglement. The narrator suggests they go for a walk outdoors, since a crowd was slowly gathering around their table to hear the details. During this stroll, they exchange cryptic comments, while the narrator silently muses on the impression he is making on

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[10] Ramon G. Mendoza, *Outside Humanity: A Study of Kafka's Fiction* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 165.

[11] Franz Kafka, "Description of a Struggle" in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Tania and James Stern, with a foreward by John Updike (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1971), 9-51.

his new consort. Despite the brevity of their relationship, the narrator imagines he is being held in high esteem. When he fears he has fallen in his acquaintance's estimation, irrationally, he fashions a more amenable *imaginary* acquaintance in his mind. There is an air of paranoia throughout the text, and self-created peril. The narrator then concocts a fantasy that he is about to be assassinated by his "real" companion. Injuring his knee during his "escape", the narrator pretends he is swimming in mid-air and remains with the acquaintance.

Part II, called "Diversions or Proof that it's Impossible to Live", has three "I" narrators that tend to blur together. The section is a typical example of Kafka's aptitude for convergence, where characters tend to merge into an all-pervasive Kafka Hero.[12] The original narrator has jumped on his acquaintance's back for a ride and retreats into a psychological fantasy where he has supernatural powers that will flatten mountains and elevate the moon.

The narrator meets The Fat Man, a naked guru being carried across the river on a wooden litter. There is a dream-like quality to the meeting, as they seem to be able to control the forces of nature. When the Fat Man tells his story, "Beginning of a Conversation with the Supplicant", it is delivered like a parable with a higher meaning: he recalls spying on a girl in a church one day and being distracted by The Praying Man, or the Supplicant. The Praying Man was an exhibitionist, making a spectacle of his strenuous spiritual rituals.

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[12] Walter H. Sokel, "Kafka's Beginnings: Narcissism, Magic, and the Function of Narration in "Description of a Struggle", in *Kafka and the Contemporary Critical Performance*, ed. Alan Udoff (Bloomington: Indianna Univ. Press, 1987), 106-107. James Rolleston (*Kafka's Narrative Threatre*) also discusses this element in Kafka's work at length.

"The Supplicant's Story" follows, which is about how the Praying Man tries to impress guests at a party by saying he could play the piano. Expelled from the party, he confronts a drunk in the street and inquires if the drunk has seen the splendours of the hight court of France. In the next section, The Praying Man and the Fat Man talk *past* each other, using disjointed speeches. Their is no acknowledgment of this miscommunication. No one notices. They seem to agree on the illusory nature of existence. The "action" shifts back to the river and The Fat Man drowns, in a voluntary act of suicide. The original narrator imagines his own body to be growing, then shrinking in relation to the surrounding countryside.

Part III ends the story with the acquaintance expressing doubts about embarking upon a romantic liaison with Annie, his new girlfriend. He fears it will disrupt the appearance of his orderly life in society. The dialogue is couched in confessional tones, with the acquaintance showing deference to the narrator. There are no more internal monologues about their power dynamic. The acquaintance stabs himself in the arm after the narrator confesses/lies, smugly, that he is engaged. First-aid is administered and the two hobble off together.

By choosing Kafka as the source of inspiration for her series of paintings, Susan Scott has summoned some ponderous literary baggage that needs careful labelling. What she takes from Kafka is the title of his story, *Description of a Struggle*, therefore evoking a parallel between the structure and themes of both works of art. The Kafka story is, as the idiom says, a tough act to follow.

Paintings which claim to have a symbiotic relationship with Kafka's work risk eclipse. Scott has avoided this risk of eclipse by evading straight depiction of the Kafka story, keeping links with the story thematic.

Description is a reflection on the Kafka story, in which the gender of the "I" narrator is switched to female. Any attempt at formulating a literal correlation between Scott's images and Kafka's will end in frustration, since the series in not a mere depiction of the story's scenes. Instead, the link is thematic: the viewer is presented with an anxiety-ridden counterpart to the neurotic story. Both Kafka's story and Scott's series play up insecurities about gender and identity. But how are these insecurities aired in the work? Both employ an alter-ego, an "other" with whom they identify, speak of self-reflexively and project their feelings onto. But how does this other interact with the protagonist in such a way as to reveal the insecurities about identity? What event(s) put the protagonists' self-image in peril? When viewed psychoanalytically, what do the confessions and fantasies of the protagonists say about the make-up of their identities?

It is my hypothesis that the lead protagonists are grappling with their reliance on an other for their identity. They resent this reliance, or dependency, and struggle for freedom. Their affirmation of self-worth comes through the adoring eyes of Lacanian other. As Lacan says about the debelopment of self-image, the other is its foundation and support, as well as what destabilizes or annihilates it.[13] Scott's heroine, as we will see, is lost without her lover because

[13] Grosz, 41.

she cannot see herself as worthy without his validation. The appearance of a rival traumatizes her self-worth, then the rival becomes the second other with which the heroine is entangled in her quest for identity. It will also become apparent that Kafka's hero, the narrator, is bound to an other for his identity. Envious that his acquaintance has a girlfriend, the hero is eager to appear worthy of love in the acquaintance's eyes. Kafka uses a series of "I" narrators who struggle for an identity -- in the public realm and in the dyad with the other. All of the protagonists, Scott's and Kafka's, are locked in bitter dyads/triads. Dreams and fantasies reveal how traumatized their egos are, as they struggle to secure an identity of their own. Kafka's text will be examined, but first, Scott's series will be considering.

ii) The Heroine Undressed

In the series' dream imagery, it becomes apparent that Scott's heroine is in psychological peril. Her heterosexual relationship begins to unravel and she is struggling to maintain a sense of self in the presence of a female rival and in the absence of her lover. In the series' first canvas, *They would not let go of each other, somehow I was in the middle* (Figure 1), the heroine begins her story with a dream, or fantasy image, using the first-person in the text. Yet, she does not provide a visual representation of herself; this is the first clue that her identity is in jeopardy. The rival and the lover are hanging by their feet from the livingroom ceiling, bound separately. The female rival is nude, facing the audience fully exposed, legs ajar, and hands hanging. The man (who we will call the boyfriend)

is wearing a blue shirt, his knees are bent awkwardly, and his hands clasp at his neck. There is a television in the back corner that can be seen through the space between the hanging figures. All facial features and anatomy is inexact, painted with an impersonal, slightly abstract brush stroke.

This dream image establishes an air of alarm. The colour scheme, to begin with, is discordant: the floor is an acerbic green, the curtain on the window is bright orange, the walls are a jarring yellow, while the flesh is an odd pallor. The nude and semi-nude figures create a feeling of vulnerability, heightened by the open doorway leading to the public staircase. The two bound figures twist uncomfortably, while the low ceiling and titled floor make the figures look cramped. The television in the room's back corner completes a tense, triangular composition, connecting the two hanging figures with the off-centred screen. The television contains an ambiguous scene from an old, black and white movie in which a couple, in profile, are about to either embrace or attack.

If, as Freud stated, dreams are the *via regia* to the unconscious, then *They would not let go...* has much to say about the heroine's psychological panic: she has imagined a violent, disturbing scene that arrests the actions of the new lovers. There is a resonance between Freudian and Lacanian theory and Scott's series and its literary source. Psychoanalysis is a suitable approach for considering *Description* because the series shares with psychoanalysis a proccupation with the ego, the self, identity, narcissism, dreams, desire and the unconscious. The heroine (and, as we will see, the Kafkian narrator) reveals private thoughts and

fantasies that lend themselves will to a psychoanalytic interpretation.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud discusses distortions in dreams and concludes that, "a dream is a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish...Everyone has wishes that he would prefer not to disclose to other people, and wishes that he will not admit even to himself."[14] Furthermore, as Jacques Lacan states, dreams are texts of the unconscious, which is the only location of truth. While conscious knowledge is ignorant, the apparently unknown knowledge in the unconscious speaks wisely.[15] The unconscious, then, is the language through which knowledge about truth is always and exclusively represented. Lacan's term "La Linguisterie" refers to the language of the unconscious, spoken at moments when ordinary language structure is interrupted, or breaks down as in jokes, dreams and parapraxes. La Linguisterie speaks about what cannot be consciously known, often appearing as unpleasant, unexplainable or unacceptable fragments of thought, phrases or dreams.[16]

Scott's *They would not let go...* is a construction of Lacan's La Linguisterie. The heroine, while panicking at the possibility of an unwanted break-up, fulfils a not-so repressed wish: she has imagined the new lovers kept apart, by physical restraint, and held at her mercy. The rival is stripped bare and vulnerable, while

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[14] Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, ed., "The Interpretation of Dreams" Vol. 4 and 5, p. 160.

[15] Bice Benvenuto and Roger Kennedy, *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 166.

[16] Ibid., 167.

the boyfriend is allowed more modesty and decency -- he wears a shirt and his genitals are not exposed. Even though the heroine is not in the scene explicitly, there is a feeling of a third presence, suggested by the working television set. Is she watching it, off-side? Or is the TV a stand-in for the heroine? Either way, the dream scene reflects the heroine's desperate desire to control new and painful events in her life, and the people who are causing them.

The dyad/triad of the canvas's composition and the narrative brings forth an important element in the series: the presence of an other, the boyfriend, and *another* other, the rival. The role of an other is crucial in identity formation and establishing the locus of desire. As Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen states in *The Freudian Subject*,

> ... to say *who* I am -- who thinks, who wishes, who fantasizes in me -- is no longer in *my* power. That question draws me immediately beyond myself, beyond my representations, toward where I am another, the other who gives me my identity.[17]

Borch-Jacobsen expresses it more bluntly when he says, "the relation to the other is the key to the relation to external reality, and that madness begins where commerce with the other breaks off."[18] In this entanglement, there would appear to be a conflict between the ego of the smitten party and the other. However, as Freud describes in *On Narcissism*, the logic of erotic self-sacrifice quickly transcends opposition: the lover loves himself/herself in the object (the other), stressing that "object libido" (or attraction to another thing or person) is never

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[17] Mikkel borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 9.

[18] Ibid., 64.

anything but a vicissitude of "ego libido" within an economy of the self.[19] In this way, the ego is active, yet detours its satisfaction through an other.

This question of ontology, the study of "being" and "non-being", for Lacan cannot be separated from the relation of the subject to the other. In *Ecrits*, he writes,

> There where it was just now, there where it was for a while, between an extinction that is still glowing and a birth that is retarded, "I" can come into being and disappear from what I say."[20]

In the Lacanian view, the unconscious revolves around the question of a "lack of being" that results from the subject's dependence on the other.[21] Lacan sees human relations as aspiring towards an unobtainable union or unity. To use Grosz's paraphrase of Lacan's position,

> The two can never become One. The desire for the One is the desire of the Other, the Other beyond the other...The Other always intervenes between the subject and the other. The obstacle to love isn't external, but it is an internal condition of human subjectivity and sexuality, constituted as they are by a rift governed by the Other.[22]

The Other here, with an upper-case "O", refers to Lacan's "domain of the Other" -- a socio-symbolic network regulated according to language-like rules, the internalized locus of law, language and the symbolic which assigns value to things and governs desire.[23] People attempt to put their amourous relations in place of

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[19] Ibid., 97.

[20] Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock Productions, 1977), 300.

[21] Benvenuto and Kennedy, 168.

[22] Grosz, 137.

[23] Ibid.

their relation to the Other, therefore we get knowledge about who we are according to Lacan's "dialectic of recognition", from how the "other" (lower-case "o") responds to us. Thus, identity and self-knowledge of that identity depend on recognition by the other.[24]

For Scott's heroine, the "dialect of recognition" is destabilized. She is accustomed to securing her identity and sense of self-worth through the presence of her male mate. Thus, when the relationship is broken off, the heroine's sense of self is thrown into question, since she is used to acquiring value as the female her mate finds desirable. In *The kingpin hold's firm* (Figure 4), we see the heroine, undersized and naked, clinging to the boyfriend. He's fully clothed and looking toward the open door and the alluringly lit hallway. Her desperation is clear, as is her shame and his indifference. With down-cast eyes, she straddles his leg like a child and grabs at his neck. The strong diagonal line in the composition draws attention to the open door, but the architectural details in the room are not detailed because they should not distract from the scene's most important content -- the emotional moment of desperation when the heroine's other, the boyfriend, is leaving her.

A similar moment of anxiety occurs in the next canvas, *Obsessive love knows no bounds* (Figure 5). The boyfriend has left, and the heroine sits alone in a bedroom. The bedspread looks like the kind frequently used by hotel chains, with a big geometric pattern from the 1970s. Only one side of the bed turned

[24] Ibid, 138.

down and the heroine sits at the end of the bed, legs crossed, dialling the phone. She is wearing an orange evening dress and a single strand of pearls. Again, her eyes are down-cast and her shoulders are haunched slightly, giving the impression of shame, defeat and or weariness. The strong diagonal lines lead to the telephone, where the heroine is focusing her efforts to contact, we presume from the title, her old lover. Both *The kingpin holds firm* and *Obsessive love knows no bounds* impart this sense of psychological instability in the face of the absent other.

But why does the heroine feel at such a loss? How do mainstream gender roles lead to this power imbalance? Jessica Benjamin, a psychoanalytic feminist, offers a theory that helps to further the reading of gender relations at play in images like *The kingpin holds firm*. Benjamin notes that the glorification of male individualism has lead society to idealize men as the active care-takers of abstract, universal causes. Women idealize men who represent and gave them vicarious access to transcendence, consequently de-valuing women's traditional tasks of childrearing and homemaking.[25] This idealization has fostered submission, passivity and hero worship on the part of women, who "are trapped in immanence while men could heroically struggle for transcendence, for the personal glory that comes with sacrifice and valor."[26] Benjamin criticizes the privilege of the one-sided, male, autonomous personality -- a personality that is achieved when men

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[25] Jessica Benjamin, "A Desire of One's Own: Psychoanalytic Feminism and Intersubjective Space", *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, (Bloomington: Indianna University Press, 1986), 79.

[26] Ibid.

repudiate their primary identification with and dependency on their mother -- the same privileged personality that constitutes the Western profile of the rational, thinking subject. Benjamin claims that toddlers of both sexes want to identify with the father because he is perceived at the representative of the outside world, will, agency and desire. Benjamin argues that psychoanalysis has not assigned enough importance to the little girl's early love for her father:

> This early love for the father is an ideal love; that is, it is full of the idealization that such a little child forms not merely because the father is big, but because the father appears to be the solution to a series of conflicts that occur at this point in development. *This idealization becomes the basis for future relationships of ideal love, the submission to a powerful other who seems to embody the agency and desire one lacks in oneself...*[27]

Benjamin provides insights into the psyche of Scott's heroine. Is she not the idealizing girl/woman here? Particularly when the heroine is presented as a naked, clinging child in *The kingpin holds firm*, holding onto the other?[28]

The other not only informs identity, but it also articulates the locus of desire in relationships. Within the power dynamic of the three-way relationship in *Description of a Struggle*, the rival (the *other* other) is more important as an flagship for signalling the heroine's desire. Lacan's theories on desire echo how the heroine articulates her wishes through the dream imagery. But first, Hegel's theories on desire are the progenitors of Lacan's:

> Desire...is something essentially different from the desired thing. It is

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[27] Ibid., 86.

[28] Benjamin's solution to the cycle that derogates feminity is a solution that calls for the articulation of a mother who is a sexual subject, an agent who expresses desire, as the father is allowed to. Benjamin calls for a breaking down of the taboo on maternal sexual agency.

> human only if one desires not the body but the Desire of the other; that is to say, if one wants to be desired or, rather "recognized" in one's human value. All Desire is desire for a value. To desire the Desire of another is really to desire recognition.[29]

There is not a simple relation between desire and an object that will satisfy it, but instead desire is linked with the desire of the Other. Desire, for Lacan, is a fundamental lack that can only be satisfied by what another desires:

> Desire begins to take shape in the margin in which demand becomes separated from need: this margin begins that which is opened up by demand, the appeal of which can be unconditional only in regard to the Other...A margin which, linear as it may be, reveals a vertigo, even if it is not prampled by the elephantine feet of the Other's whim. Nevertheless, it is this whim that inytroduces the phantom of the Omnipotence, not of the subject, but of the Other in which his demand is installed...[30]

This insatiable desire of Lacan's is always an effect of the Other, an 'other' with whom we cannot engage in so far as the Other is not a person, but a metaphoric "place". Lacan made these observations when interpreting the Oedipus Complex, claiming that the infant tries to identify itself with the mother's object of desire, while simultaneously *having* desire for her.[31] The phallus designates the object of desire, signifying the desire of the (m)other, which is always organized in reference to the Other.[32] After separating from the mother, the subject is always conceived of as "lacking" and desire, then, is the futile search for "wholeness", the

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[29] A. Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 21.

[30] Lacan, 311.

[31] Benvenuto and Kennedy, p. 130.

[32] Grosz, 126.

lost complement.

In light of this backdrop of psychoanalytic theories on the machinations of desire, Scott's second canvas in the series, *My first mistake: I would get to know my rival* (Figure 2), demands a detailed consideration. In the canvas we see the dark-haired rival sitting at a restaurant table in a strapless, black evening dress. Her nails are painted red and she smokes a cigarette. In the pink smoke cloud from her cigarette is a dream-image of a physical struggle between the rival and the heroine. The heroine is present at the restaurant table, but only her forearm and hand are visible. She holds a wine glass, with her nails not showing. The colour scheme is harmonious, with a blush-pink skin tone and a rich green background.

At one level, *My first mistake...* could simply be the heroine's dream-image of the threatening rival. The rival sits with poise, looking sophisticated in an sexy black dress. The "thought cloud", containing the sketch of the physical fight, could be indicating that the rival is also threatened by the heroine, and hostile. The anonymous arm holding the glass of wine could be that of the heroine's. According to the text/title, the meeting between the two women actually occurred, yet the painting is presented in dream-like fashion, with a subtext in the cloud of smoke.

But is the dark-haired woman *really* the rival? Another reading of the dream-image is possible: the heroine could have projected herself into the image of the more-powerful rival. If, as Freud claim, the nature of fantasy is not about merely hallucinating the object of desire (the boyfriend), then wish-fulfilment is

not about having the object, but it's about being the one who possesses it (the rival):

> Every dream deals with the dreamer himself. Dreams are completely egoistical. Whenever my own ego does not appear in the content of the dream, but only some extraneous person, I may safely assume that my own ego lies concealed, by identification, behind this other person....On other occasions, when my own ego *does* appear in the dream, the situation in which it occurs may teach me that some other person lies concealed, by identification, behind my ego. In that case the dream should warn me to transfer on to myself...the concealed common element attached to this person....Identification [with the other] should then make it possible for me to bring into contact with my ego certain ideas whose acceptance has been forbidden by [internal] censorship.[33]

So, to achieve its own pleasure, the ego takes a detour, passing through another.

Borch-Jacobsen stresses the violence inherent in Freud's theories of dream identification -- a violence that operates in *My first mistake...* and, as we will see later, other canvases in the series. Challenging Freud's attention to the sexual underpinnings of dreams and fantasies, Borch-Jacobsen claims that pleasure-seeking is not as important in dreams as Freud asserts. Instead, mimesis is the true guiding principle behind dreams.[34] Sexuality is not at the root of all fantasies, but jealousy, envy, rivalry, violence and ambition are, all of which are "passions aroused by the mimesis of another whom one wishes to equal, to replace, to *be*."[35] Borch-Jacobsen stresses the "altrucidal" nature of dreams, in that dreams allow people to annihilate the threatening interloper by appropriating

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[33] Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 322-323.

[34] Borch-Jacobsen, 34.

[35] Ibid., 28.

his/her identity.[36]

The heroine in *My first mistake* is not without altrucidal tendencies. This seemingly civilized meeting in a restaurant is frought with aggression. The canvas' colour scheme may be harmonious, especially when viewed after *They would not let go of eachother....*, but there is a sub-plot of violence. The most obvious element of danger is easy to detect in the "thought cloud", which clearly depicts a physical struggle between the women, but the threat is not contained solely by this cloud. More complex violence emerges, recalling Freud's and Borch-Jacobsen's theories of dream identification outlined above. The heroine is projecting her hostile feelings into the rival's thought cloud, therefore fantasizing that the rival finds her threatening in return and wishes her harm. Additionally, through this projection the heroine can also act out the self-loathing she has felt since the break-up, which stems from her sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. She acts on this self-loathing in the thought cloud by imagining a struggle in which she is just as much "the attacked" as "the attacker". By staging this struggle in the thought cloud, the heroine can lash out at *herself* through the rival.

Further lashing out is more surreptitious: the heroine identifies with the rival, appropriating her identity in the dream and thus annihilating her. By mimicing the identity of the menacing rival, the heroine pre-empts the threat. Why play the pathetic ex-girlfriend -- a demeaning role the heroine hates seeing herself play in "real life"? Why not co-opt the rival's role? The heroine is barely in

[36] Ibid., 20

the dream, represented by only her arm, perhaps suggesting that her real presence lies elsewhere, in a better "part" -- in the rival. If she refracts herself through the role of the rival, the heroine tidily annihilates her emeny through appropriation.

In summary, Scott presents a complicated situation of Lacanian-defined identification in *My first mistake...* The heroine's identity used to be grounded in her attachment to her lover and the value she accrued from his attentions, but her identity is now in peril with the advent of a female rival. Facing her rival in this canvas, she fantasizes about stabelizing her identity: she desires the object of her lover's affections (the rival), wanting to gain her sense of self back by renewing her priviledged place in his esteem.

The altrucidal nature of her dreams about the rival suggest that the heroine is willing to usurp another's identity to win back that privileged place. We have seen how the heroine could be projecting herself into the role of the rival, appropriating her position to acquire the upper hand in the love triangle and decrease her sense of vulnerability. Identity is shown as contingent on other(s), the boyfriend and the rival, whose actions and absences disrupt the heroine's sense of self. We will return to other canvases in Scott's series, after noting how the machinations of identity formation are at play in Kafka's *Description of a Struggle.*

iii) Kafka, Identity and the Kafkaesque in Scott: An Aura of Disquiet[37]

Where is the struggle in Kafka's *Description of a Struggle*? The bulk of the story's prose is composed of inner dialogue. When characters *do* address each other directly, they often talk at cross-purposes, in oblivion. Furthermore the "action" is limited to an evening stroll around Prague and a jaunt up a hill side. It is difficult to imagine how the story's title warrants its urgent, active tone. Yet, Kafka scholar Judith Ryan succinctly puts this point to rest when she says, "The very possibility of being an individual is here at stake -- not just the development of individuality in conflict with an external world."[38] The struggle is for identity and existence. Ryan's remark about *Description of a Struggle* has it own pressing tone -- a tone that implores one to look carefully at the psychological underpinnings of the characters in the text. Kafka's hero(s) seek to establish a world hoping thereby to guarantee an existence for himself.[39] Thus, the struggle is with and against other "himselves" to secure a self.

Whereas Scott's series focuses on a female character's struggle for identity, Kafka's *Description of a Struggle* is about male "protagonists'" -- who are protagonists only in that their private thoughts provide most of the plot's momentum. The main narrator (unnamed) interacts with an acquaintance, then

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[37] R. Bella Rabinovitch used the phrase "an aura of disquiet" to describe Scott's *Description of a Struggle* is her review of the exhibit for *Vanguard* in November, 1984. I feel the phrase is equally applicable to Kafka's story, if not his entire body of work. I borrow Ms. Rabinovitch's phrase to tie Scott's artwork to tis literary source.

[38] Judith Ryan, "The Two Protagonists in "Description of a Struggle", *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft* (Trans. T. Stern) vol. 14 (1970), 556.

[39] Rolleston, 2.

The Fat Man, who relates conversations with The Praying Man, who in turn relates some personal escapades. Each, with varying degrees of insecurity, grapple to secure their identity. Following W.H. Auden's analogy that all of Kafka's *oeuvre* is akin to the oldest literary genres, The Quest, *Description of a Struggle* could be called a quest for selfhood.[40]

In *The Divided Self*, the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst R.D. Lang states that,

> A firm sense of one's own autonomous identity is required in order that one may be related as one human being to another. Otherwise, any and every relationship threatens the individual with loss of identity.[41]

Similarly, in *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis*, Charles Rycroft defines identity as "the sense of one's continuous being as an entity distinguishable from all others."[42] Both state that interaction is a recurrent and necessary affirmation of identity, for identity depends upon contrast, and contrast demands that there should be at least one other person with whom to compare. We have seen how Lacan's "dialectic of recognition", based on the same theories, was helpful when discussing the heroine in Scott's series, and it is equally helpful for Kafka's story.

The narrator's "dialect of recognition" is destabilized. It is not thrown askew by the departure of an other, as in the case of Scott's heroine; instead, it is destabilized by the *appearance* of a new, same-sex acquaintance. The narrator was,

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[40] W.H. Auden, "Kafka's Quest", *The Kafka Problem*, Ed. Angel Flores (New York: American Book-Stratford Press, 1946), 47.

[41] Ronald D. Laing, *The Divided Self* (London: 1960), 45.

[42] Charles Rycroft, *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (London: 1968), 68.

hitherto, perfectly content being alone. Once shaken from complacency at a party by a love-sick acquaintance, the narrator re-evaluates his standing as a bachelor. His self-assuredness falters when the two leave the party to take a walk. Faced with the life-affirming eros embodied by the acquaintance, the narrator reconsiders his lonely life, and suddenly needs affirmation from the acquaintance. The first hint of the narrator's discombobulation comes as soon as he leaves the party with the acquaintance and they begin walking along the Ferdinandstrasse. The narrator becomes annoyed because he finds himself taking stock of this unexpected entanglement:

> ..I realized that my acquaintance had begun to hum a melody from *The Dollar Princess*...What did this mean? Was he trying to insult me? As for me, I was ready to do without not only this music, but the walk as well. Why wasn't he speaking to me, anyway? And if he didn't need me, why hadn't he left me in peace in the warm room with the benedictine and the pastry? It certainly wasn't I who had insisted on this walk. Besides, I could have gone for a walk on my own. I had merely been at a party, had saved an ungrateful young man from disgrace, and was now wandering about in the moonlight. That was all right, too. All day in the office, evenings at a party, at night in the streets, and nothing to excess. A way of life so natural that it borders on the excess.[43]

Why should he care if this rude stranger is ignoring him? Nevertheless, he no longer speaks with an air of condescension regarding the acquaintance. Earlier at the party, the acquaintance was in the deferential position, requesting that the narrator suspend conventions of familiarity and listen to the story of his latest romantic conquest -- an inappropriate topic for strangers. Then, once outdoors, the power dynamic within the relationship shifts.

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[43] Kafka, 12.

For no apparent reason, the narrator becomes concerned about the impression he is making on the acquaintance:

> I imagined that my acquaintance suspected in me something which, although it wasn't there, made me nevertheless rise in his expectation by his suspecting it...Who knows, this man -- thinking of housemaid affairs while walking beside me, his mouth steaming with cold -- might be capable of bestowing on me in the eyes of the world a value without my having to work for it.[44]

He seeks to draw the acquaintance's eros to himself. His relation to the acquaintance becomes an appeal, a supplication for being admitted into a genuinely human life. The narrator is the first of Kafka's many supplicant figures, and the acquaintance becomes for him what the doorkeeper in *The Trial* is for the man before the law.

The narrator's reliance on the acquaintance for an ersatz identity grows with alarming speed. He muses to himself,

> Let's pray the girls won't spoil him! by all means let them kiss and hug him, that's their duty and his right, but they mustn't carry him off. After all, when they kiss him they also kiss me a little...But if they carry him off, then they steal him from me. And th must always remain with me, always....Suppose some jealous man appears from the Postgasse and attacks him? What will happen to me? Am I to be just kicked out of the world?[45]

Not only does the acquaintance provide an ersatz identity, but he grants the narrator vicarious passage into an erotic life. He dreams of being an important topic of conversation between the acquaintance and the new girlfriend, dwelling on second-hand kisses. His self-consciousness increases, as he tries to make a

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[44] Ibid., 13.

[45] Ibid., 14.

good impression on the acquaintance.

As suddenly as this self-effacement begins, it turns to violent fantasy involving the acquaintance, whose "life became dearer to [him] than [his] own." Suspecting that the acquaintance had lost interest in their new-found friendship, the narrator irrationally concludes,

> Obviously, this is the time for the murder. I'll stay with him and slowly he'll draw the dagger...and then plunge it into me. It's unlikely that he'll be surprised at the simplicity of it all -- yet maybe he will, who knows? I won't scream, I'll just stare at him as long as my eyes can stand it...I realize that whether I allowed myself to be stabbed or ran away, my end had come.[46]

Meaning, he ceases to exist if he cannot see his own reflection in the validating eyes of the acquaintance. The acquaintance kills him, metaphorically, by ignoring him, then the narrator projects this death into a literal dream-scene of murder.

Does the narrator annihilate the acquaintance by appropriating his position in the fantasy, as we saw Scott's heroine do to her rival in *My first mistake...*? If so, the narrator is also committing a pre-emptive murder: he wants to kill the person who will cut him off from existence. Acting on fear and hurt feelings, the narrator acts out his aggression in disguise, as the acquaintance. As Borch-Jacobsen notes:

> The statement "I hate him", for example, in no way represses the statement "I love him": delusions, far from concealing desire, reveal it as clearly as possible...The same must be said of the persecutional statement "he hates me": this does not hide the hate-filled love that "I" feel for him; on the contrary, it declares straightforwardly that "he" is an "I", and that to hate *him* is equally to hate *me* in him, to persecute *myself*. Since the relation to the double is perfectly symmetrical, all that "I": do (to him), "he" does just

[46] Ibid., 17.

as well (to me).[47]

In other words, the narrator's love for the acquaintance could be laced with hatred. If the narrator appropriates the acquaintance's role in the fantasy, he satiates his need to annihilate the hurtful acquaintance while, like Scott's heroine, he can act out the self-loathing he feels for occupying such a passive power-position within the relationship. Borch-Jacobsen could have been speaking directly about the narrator's murder fantasy when he says,

> Since the struggle with the double has no other object, no other stake but the struggle itself, it necessarily exhausts itself in a fratricidal struggle for power -- "power" being in this instance the name of that place from which I must forcible remove the double in order to be myself.[48]

The narrator's murder fantasy is consonant with Scott's *A recurring image: I often thought of killing him* (Figure 9). In this canvas, the heroine stabs her ex-boyfriend in the chest. Unable to win back his heart, she retreats into fantasy the same way that Kafka's narrator does. There is no blood in the image, and he is not resisting. She is wearing a white evening dress with pearls. They are alone, in an undefined, bleak, industrial setting. Perhaps the blue area in the background is a river. Their facial features, especially their eyes, are obscured, thus depersonalizing the act somewhat for the heroine. Nevertheless, it's a murder. Resentful of the psychological impact her old lover has had, the heroine takes violent action. But keeping Borch-Jacobsen's words in mind, we must consider the close proximity between love and hate. The heroine's recurring desire to kill the

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[47] Borch-Jacobsen, 91.

[48] Ibid., 94.

ex-boyfriend in no way represses her recurring love for him. As Jung notes about emotional dependency:

> If the libido displayed too strong an attraction or need for love, hate would soon appear by way of compensation...I think this is the basis for the immense self-assertion that appears later on in obsessional neurosis: the patient is always afraid of losing his ego, must take revenge for every act of love, and gives up the sexually destructive obsessional system only with the greatest reluctance...[49]

There is "immense self-assertion" by the heroine and Kafka's narrator, as they dream of committing pre-emptive murders. They pre-empt their own "deaths", before their dialect of recognition is disrupted by the absent other.

Kafka presents one main narrator, but there are several narrative voices operating in his text -- each struggling to secure an identity. However, the separation of the characters becomes less clear as the story proceeds. A kind of convergence occurs among the personalities.[50] As the plot progresses, the superficial oddities of each character tend to recede in significance, leaving the unmistakeable voice of the "Kafka hero". The reader soon asks, "Who is telling this story?", and "Who is having that experience? The narrator or The Praying Man?" But "who" becomes inconsequential: readers soon stop fighting the convergence, as Kafka designed by obscuring their differences. It's difficult to keep the voices separate, since they share an insecurity about their own existence that makes them amenable to convergence.

Like the narrator's sense of self, The Praying Man's identity is provisional.

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[49] Ibid., 67.

[50] Rolleston, 15.

The narrator meets an imaginary Fat Man, who relays the story of The Praying Man. After following a pretty girl into a church one day, The Fat Man is distracted by the antics of an exhibitionist who prays with enthusiasm. Flinging himself on the church floor, the Praying Man clutches his skull, moaning and beating his palms on the ground. Before these zealous outbursts, he glances at the congregation to see how many on-lookers he has attracted. When confronted by The Fat Man (in an oblique conversation resembling those shared by the narrator and the acquaintance) the Praying Man claims that, "Oh, I just get fun out of people watching me, out of occasionally casting a shadow on the altar, so to speak." He explains further, when pressed, finally admitting, "Don't be angry with me for expressing it wrongly. It's not fun, *for me it's a need; a need to let myself be nailed down for a brief hour by those eyes*...[italics mine]"[51] Clearly, the Praying Man, like the narrator and Scott's heroine, needs the affirmation of an other -- be it a congregation, a new acquaintance, or an old lover. The Praying Man admits further,

> One fears a number of things -- that one's body could vanish... that it might be a good idea to go to church and pray at the top of one's voice in order to be looked at and acquire a body.[52]

This admission recalls Judith Ryan's statement about *Description*, that the possibility of being an individual is a stake here. Clearly it is at stake. An early draft of *Description* makes the point conclusively, in which The Praying Man says,

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[51] Kafka, 33.

[52] Ibid., 44.

"There has never been a time in which I have been convinced from within myself that I am alive."[53]

The "I" narrators in *Description* and Scott's series find that their identities are contingent -- that they need to gain a standing in humanity through another person. In Scott's series, female gender construction is qualified by male affirmation. Whereas in Kafka's story, the male protagonists may be discussing the opposite sex, but they're preoccupied by how they appeal to each other. In *Outside Humanity: A Study of Kafka's Fiction*, Ramon Mendoza argues that *Description of a Struggle* is the ultimate example of the "homoerotic tug-of-war-between-bachelors theme that runs through Kafka's entire narrative work."[54] Mendoza states that the story is "one of the most sophisticated and intense homoerotic matches ever described in fictional literature."[55]

As overstated as this may be, sexual tension does exist. The narrator's obsessive self-consciousness is built up of thoughts and fantasies about the acquaintance that can be interpreted as having sexual connotations. The narrator and the acquaintance are locked in a cryptic struggle where the winner is the one most cherished, and punishment takes the form of withheld affection and boasting

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[53] Anthony Storr, "Kafka's Sense of Identity", *Paths and Labyrinths* (London: Institute of Germanic Studies, 1985), 3.

[54] Ramon Mendoza, "Surrender" *Outside Humanity: A Study of Kafka's Fiction* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 163.

[55] Ibid., 164.

about outside attachments. For example:

> My acquaintance was not surprised that I had stood up. "You are engaged?" He really looked weak there, supported only by the back of the bench. Then he took off his hat, and I saw his hair, perfumed and handsomely combed -- it fell in a sharp rounded line on the flesh of the neck completing the round shape of the head..."Please," he said, "just lay your hand a little on my forehead. I beg you." Because I didn't do it right away, he folded his hands.[56]

By flaunting an alleged fianeée, the narrator keeps up the charade that the male protagonists prefer to be pre-occupied with thoughts of female attention, when, in fact, they put more importance on the same-sex relationship at hand. Their gender construction is informed by, and parodies, the conventional trappings of masculinity, such as desiring a female fiancée, stealing a kiss from the housemaid at the party and boasting about the fiancée's beauty. Yet there is an air of falsehood about this competitive banter about women. It is only a pretext. The male protagonists want affirmation in *each other's* eyes -- not their fiancées'.

This is the flip-side of Scott's heterosexual gender arrangement. Both arrangements, however, are qualified by outside affirmation from the other, thus destabilizing the protagonist's sense of identity when their other is absent or indifferent. The lead protagonists gain self-esteem through attention from their others, and eventually grow to resent this dependency when the cosy dyad is in jeopardy. According to Lacan's dialect of recognition, we get knowledge about who we are from how others respond to us. Kafka's narrator and The Praying Man fear for their dialect of recognition, as does Scott's heroine. Kafka's narrator

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[56] Kafka, 51.

is extremely self-conscious, worrying about what the acquaintance thinks of him, while Scott's heroine flounders without the boyfriend who gave her vicarious access to male spheres of influence. The narrator idealized his other and ended up with a traumatized identity, as did Scott's heroine.

So how else has Scott used the Kafkaesque? Traumatized identity is not the only theme linking Scott's series to its literary namesake. Scott's *Description of a Struggle* and Kafka's provide a terrain where the psyche is staged. Freud said,

> In only a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art. Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that what he does in play produces emotional effects -- thanks to artistic illusion -- just as though it were something real.[57]

Not all art is driven by an omnipotent psyche, but in both Scott's series and Kafka's story, events in the plot are only marginally guided by external fate. Instead, the narrators' psyches are the major catalyses. Inner monologues and fictitious dialogues facilitate the omnipotence of thought. The heroine dreams and imagines revenge, while Kafka's narrator conjures up a Fat Man and repeals the laws of nature during the walk by flattening a steep road, raising mountains and controlling the moon. This propensity towards psyche omnipotence is rooted in the characters' feeling of powerlessness and vulnerability -- they retreat into fantasy where they reign unchallenged.

In these fantasy lands, the characters in Scott and Kafka's work share a

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[57] Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *Standard Edition*, 90.

similar way of speaking: the famous tone of detached craftsmanship that imbues Kafka's obsessional stories is present in Scott's text. They postulate a narrative voice grounded in absolute *division* between feeling and action. Consider a short exert from Kafka's story:

> So I had already got as far as that. He could tell me [mundane] things like that and at the same time smile and look at me with big eyes. And I -- I had to restrain myself from putting my arm around his shoulders and kiss him on the eyes as a reward for having absolutely no use for me. But the worst was that even that could no longer do any harm because it couldn't change anything...[58]

This passage is typical in that it is full of the frustrated action -- a common source of tension in Kafka's work. "Saying" evades "doing", and the "saying" is always cool and economical. Writing in a style that Rolleston compares to the reserved precision of Flaubert, Kafka's clipped and conservative prose create a semantic unease that has become his trademark.

This semantic unease is present in Scott's series. The text, handwritten below the images, has an uncanny Kafkaian quality. Consider some of the canvases' text, or titles: *My first mistake: I would not get to know my rival*; *Five years later, while in a foreign city, I took a lover who spoke another language*; *A salmon arrives by mail*; *A recurring image: I often thought of killing him* and *I arrive in a village and am surprised to discover there are people there who know me*. The distant, even tone of the texts jars with the emotional context of the story, as it often does in Kafka's work. Furthermore, the use of the colon lends a mechanical,

[58] Kafka, 15.

grammatically "correct" look to the prose, while the prose themselves are in a studied, controlled style of handwriting. The visual presentation of the words, plus the tone of the text creates a mood that is familiar to Kafka readers -- that mood being one of a distanced observation from a character who is actually entwined in the events.

One Kafka reader, John Updike, claims that Kafka's work epitomizes an important aspect of the modern mind-set: a sensation of anxiety and shame whose centre cannot be located and therefore cannot be placated.[59] We will come across this mood of angst laster, in relation to *film noir* and melodrama. In relation to Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* most clearly demonstrates this, as Gregor Samsa must become an insect to adequately display his anxiety and shame. The same sensation of anxiety and shame is laced throughout *Description of a Struggle*, as the narrator and the Praying Man grapple for identity. But the story's strongest moment of shame occurs when the narrator abandons the wounded acquaintance and embarks on a surreal walk through an imaginary, anthropomorphized landscape. During the walk, a mysterious voice begins to disturb the narrator -- a voice that assumes the function of the eliminated other. The voice will not grant the narrator peace, acting, in Freudian terms, as "the return of the repressed".[60] This Freudian term describes something (or someone) which has once been familiar and shameful in the ego's past, buried and forgotten, comes back in a

[59] John Updike, Introduction in *Franz Kafka: The Complete Stories*, xi.

[60] Sokel, 105.

strange and frightening disguise to haunt the present. If, as Walter Benjamin says, "shame is [Kafka's] strongest gesture"[61], then this gesture is echoed with equal strength in Scott's work. What else could be behind *A salmon arrives by mail* (Figure 8)? The heroine, in her white dress, is under-sized again. She occupies a small space in the bottom left corner of the canvas. She is reaching into an enormous pizza box, trying to lift out a huge plate of food. A well-garnished salmon lies on the plate, its eye looking in her direction. The heroine's eyes, however, are not visible. Here, the "repressed" returns by mail and it's a salmon. What is the heroine ashamed of? What has she repressed?

Perhaps the answer lies in the preceding canvas. In *I returned to the Capital, nothing had changed* (Figure 7), the heroine spies on her ex-lover and her rival. She sees them walking their dog (a symbol of domesticity), looking at each other happily. The heroine's guilt could be regarding her covert spying, but more convincing is the suggestion that old feelings of self-loathing and shame resurfaced regarding the manner of the break-up and the existence of a female rival. Ashamed at herself for dredging up the episode, the heroine is flooded with old pain from the soured romance -- thus triggering the arrival of the salmon. The salmon may not be an arbitrary arrival, considering that salmon has a symbolic connection with knowledge.[62] Maybe the mail is providing some self-knowledge for the heroine.

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[61] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 129.

[62] Juan Eduardo Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1971), 108.

Another way that Scott's series speaks to its literary namesake is in its inclination toward abstraction and universalization. Recall the opening quotation in this thesis' Introduction:

> Kafka's unchanging problem was one of presentation: how to organize the totality of his experience...in such a way that individual moments are both intensely "lived" and totally abstract, detached from their context by the process of writing.[63]

Kafka outlined his literary goal more clearly when he wrote in an early letter to his confidant Max Brod:

> I went over the wishes that I wanted to realize in life. I found that the most important...was the wish to attain a view of life...in which life, while still retaining its natural full-bodied rise and fall, would simultaneously be recognized no less clearly as a nothing, a dream, a dim hovering...Somewhat as if one were to hammer together a table with painful and methodical technical efficiency, and simultaneously do nothing at all...and not in such a way that people could say: "Hammering a table together is nothing to him," but rather "Hammering a table together is really hammering a table together to him, but at the same time nothing," whereby certainly the hammering would have become still bolder, still surer, still more real and, if you will, still more senseless.[64]

Kafka's goal, outlined here, is to rescue banalities with intense scrutiny. This echoes the artistic intentions of Scott in her *Description* series. Scott's discontinuous narrative story is intimate and specific on one level, then universally applicable on another level. The tale of failed romance is about the heroine, but she is an Everywoman. Neither the text nor the imagery gives the viewers enough information to construct unique individuals to occupy the characters presented in *Description*. All the players remain unnamed, as in Kafka's story, and their

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[63] Rolleston, 15.

[64] Max Brod, *Franz Kafka* (New York: Schocken Books Inc., 1963), 116.

physiognomy is vague, almost abstract. The clothes are not detailed, nor are the geographical locations: rooms are sparse, cities and countries are generic, and ages are ambiguous. Scott has employed a loose, expressionistic style of figuration for this ends.

The missing information in the story allows individual moments to be "intensely "lived", while they are totally abstract." We don't know how long the heroine was with her ex-boyfriend, if they were married, or if, in fact, the rival is really his wife. Without these narrative details, the viewers can read the story as more of a parable. Hardly a unique tale, Scott counts on the *viewers'* histories, not the characters', to carry the meaning of the series beyond the particular -- into private, parallel dramas in the audience's pasts.

Chapter Two: An Amenable Interaction

Scott's *Description of a Struggle* invites the audience to participate in its narrative cycle. The series' abstract qualities that were outlined in the preceding chapter are employed as one of the strategies to create an interactive art experience, while Scott's confiding "I" forges a specific relationship with the viewer. So what other formal strategies does Scott use to create an interactive artwork? How does the process of interaction contribute to identity construction in the series? And isn't the artwork a manifestation of how identity is shaped by mass media in our culture? Scott's "I", with its confessional and diaristic tone, draws in the spectator, while other aspects contribute to the artwork's receptability -- other aspects such as references to cinema, photography, comic books, television and advertising. With its engaging pop culture references and non-specific imagery, *Description* is an "amenable object", to borrow a term from Toronto-based art critic Jeanne Randolph. Randolph's paradigm of an art object agreeable to audience interaction has been brought forward as a model on which to examine *Description's* "amenable" traits.

Scott taps her audiences' parallel, personal narratives by breaking down the barrier between an inaccessible, elevated art and an objective, distanced, art-viewing public. Her main strategy to achieve this is through visual references to pop culture, which favours an identification of the spectator with the artwork. She

also uses a confessional, first-person: the "I" invites dialogue with the art, undermining the authority of the text with its stated subjectivity. The discontinuous scenes in the series create irresistible "cracks", into which viewers can fill in their own narratives, whether biographical, autobiographical or fantasy, which will be addressed later.

Returning to the pop cultural element of Scott's series, one of the work's most obvious pop reference is to cinema. It is not surprising to learn that Scott worked as an assistant film editor in New York for several years in the 1970s. There, she became familiar with the cinematic techniques of stop-action and freeze-frame that are apparent in *Description.* Not only do Scott's canvases resembles the story-boards used during pre-production in filmmaking, but a *film noir* aesthetic pervades many of the images. *Film noir* is a particular type of film made by the Hollywood studios during the late 1940s and early 1950s that presents a dark, brutal and violent urban world of crime and corruption, peopled by sordid and neurotic figures. Technical advancements gave rise to faster film stock which allows for highter visual contrasts and *chiaroscuro* lighting, emphasizing bleak settings, heavy shadows and sharp contrasts of light and dark.[65] In film classics such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1945) and Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), the tenets of *film noir* become apparent: dramatic lighting; tilted shots with oblique lines of perspective; close-ups during crucial

[65] Ira Konigsberg, *The Complete Film Dictionary* (New York: New American Libraries Books, 1981), 122.

emotional moments; compositional tension predominating over physical action; an enthusiasm for romantic narration; complex chronology reinforcing the protagonist's feeling of hopelessness; the protagonist's burden by a feeling of inadequacy and alienation; and disturbing dream sequences raising the overall mood of anxiety.[66]

We can see this *noir* aesthetic in Scott's canvas *They would not let go...*, with its stark, violent scene of a symbolic, emotional hostage-taking. And *Escape over water* (Figure 10) has a pervasive mood of *noir* peril, as a helicopter leaving Manhattan by night. It's shadow falls over a displaced Statue of Liberty, while the Manhattan skyline is crowded, dark and menacingly, in the top left corner. *Noir* characteristics are also prevalent in *A recurring image: I often thought of killing him*, and *My first mistake:...*, with the bleak industrial cityscape behind the struggling figures. *A recurring image...*, in particular, could be a still from almost any *noir* film because its urban milieu is presented as a dark cityscape in which shadows are emphasized as much as the characters they envelope. When the heroine raises the knife and stabs the ex-lover, we are reminded of a cinematic personae called *la femme noire*. Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Crawford, Rity Hayworth and Lauren Bacall were popular actresses for these parts, playing "sultry seductresses who prey upon the hero and whose motives and allegiances are in doubt"[67] *La femme noire* is a betraying temptress and, here, our heroine is

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[66] Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System*. (New York: Random House, 1981), 116

[67] Ibid., 114.

dreaming of being the vengeful "black widow", like Phyllis (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Double Indemnity* or Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon*. The rival, we should note, also takes a *femme noire* stance in *My first mistake...*, simply by her sexually threatening presence.

But discussion of *la femme noire* should not overshadow the fact that *film noir* is a genre that focuses on the plights of its male characters. Scott's series, as in many examples of *film noir*, has a narrative voice-over, but it is the voice of a woman. In cinema, the typical *noir* hero is a solitary male re-telling his misadventure, like Kafka's heros. What *does* connect our heroine's voice-over with those of protagonists in *noir* films is a shared tone on emotional exhaustion and world-weariness. In this sence, our heroine narrates as Phillip Marlowe (Dick Powell) does in *Murder, My Sweet*, or as Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) does in *The Maltese Falcon*.

Scott uses this *film noir* sensibility to connect her artwork with other familiar dramatic narratives people have seen on the big screen, as well as in pulp fiction and soap operas. Inherent in these venues of pop culture is a shared element that we find in Scott's work -- melodrama. With melodrama's "excessive imagery, cloying sentiments and clear-cut moral codes,"[68] Kate Linker observes that it met the demands of low literacy and limited taste in the 19th-century. Linker states that

Melodrama's formulaic character, which stems from its restricted rhetoric

[68] Kate Linker, "Melodramatic Tactics", *Artforum* Vol, 21, #1 (September, 1982), 12.

> and accounts for its aesthetic impoverishment, has historically provided its social power. Generally organized by antithesis and hyperbole, melodrama presumes a clear and reliable relation to its audience, encouraging it to be absorbed in, and engaged by, the flow of events. It does this both through stereotyped characters and standardized plots, to whose lineaments we immediately "relate", and through exaggerated effects, produced by settings, lighting, pose, and paint, whose expressionistic distortions cue sympathy.[69]

Like *film noir*, melodrama is frequently employed in B-movies, horror films, espionage thrillers and telefilm romances. Pulp fiction magazines from the turn of the century, *Black Mask* for example, were the popular venues for writers such as Raymond Chandler, Mickey Spillane and James M. Cain, who provided a wealth of lurid, sensational scenarios that rely on some strong, old-fashioned motives: lust, greed and jealousy. Melodrama is based on wholesale plots and personae from the repertory of character types, thus calling attention to rules, or, as Linker says, to a universe underwritten by laws.

The first canvas in Scott's series makes specific reference to cinematic melodrama. In *They would not let go...*, the television screen in the corner shows an ambiguous confrontation between a man and a woman. Scott cites her source for this image as the cinema of Douglas Sirk, a famous director of big screen melodramas, and the "premier narrator of 'female weepies' in the 1950s."[70] Sirk, and other melodramatic directors such as Vincente Minnelli and Eli Kazan, deal with romantic fiction that depicts a virtuous individual(s) victimized by repressive and inequitable social circumstances -- particularly those involving marriage. But

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Schatz, 247.

as Sirk himself pointed out, "the structure of society in which this happening of love is embedded is just as important as the love itself."[71] Sirk always resolves the love story in his films, but leaves unresolved the contradictory social conditions in which the story unravels. His "resolution" is unsatisfactory, and ultimatley challenges the status quo supporting these social conditions. Sirk's attention to the social and political plight of women, best illustrated in *Imitation of Life* (1959) or *The Tarnished Angels* (1958), has been noted by critic/filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder:

> In [Sirk's] ironic resolutions, then, he brings the lovers together even as he acknowledges the pervasive, dehumanizing, and ultimately destructive power of American middle-class ideology, of those entrenched values and attitudes which both sustain and suppress the society's 'silent majority'." [72]

In *Imitation of Life*, for example, we see Lana Turner struggle for self-reliance, then eventually become reduced to her clichéd role in society to facilitate the artificial ending.

Scott's series engages in melodrama's central tenets of extravagant and reductive representation. We are presented with an overblown, emotional situation that is all too common: "The Other Woman" in a vampy black dress, the distraught wife facing abandonment (wearing pearls), and the stoic man guilty of infidelity. This lampooning is underlined by the canvases' dramatic compositional set-ups and in the mannerist gestures of the figures, for example how the rival holds her cigarette in *My first mistake...*, how the heroine is fixated on the

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[71] Michael Stern, "Interview with Douglas Sirk", *Bright Lights* (Spring, 1977), 35.

[72] Rainer Werner Fassbinder, "Fassbinder on Sirk," *Film Comment* (November-December, 1975), 16.

telephone in *Obsessive love knows no bounds*, or how the heroine clings to the boyfriend in *The kingpin holds firm*. Yet, despite the series' narrative structure, it is still a reductive representation: the figures are generalized and we learn surprisingly few details about the protagonists' lives. Thus we see what Linker, and Fassbinder, do in the role of melodrama as,

> ...making available, and legible, social codes... It is broadly social, inscribing, through particularities of gesture, action, and dress, the norms of behaviour that are common to any period...[It] naturalizes, as reality, an inherently fictional construct. In melodrama, then, the dominant codes within a culture are both inscribed and enforced...anticipating and conditioning responses so that we imitate and learn proper conduct.[73]

Scott's work speaks to a spectatorship "educated" in this way by television, advertising and film -- to a spectatorship receptive to mass media. One way to address this audience and favour their identification with the artwork, then, is to reach them through melodrama, a language of pop culture.

By concerning themselves with strategies that favour identification, Scott's canvases lend themselves well to Jeanne Randolph's schema of an amenable object. Randolph, dissatisfied with Freud's conceptual model of "art-as-neurosis", offers a paradigm in which the art audience is allowed more active contribution during the interpretive process. Freud claims that the generative source of art is the artist's subconscious, thus making art an intrapsychic experience that has been externalized through socially acceptable channels, such as sculpture and painting. For Freud, art uses imagery determined in the subconscious by primary processes

[73] Ibid.

that disregard logic and practicality to rearrange traits and relationships into symbols.[74] In Freudian terms, by "expressing" the artist's psyche, art is a relief of libidinal excitation through forming symbols, and it is a discharge of any accumulated erotic or aggressive arousals. Symbols, then, displace the built-up drives and offer relief.

However, Freud's interpretive process is only concerned with *how* the artist creates the art. What of the art's viewers? What of the artist's *intentional* symbolism, operating at a more surface level than the drives. Do the drives always win? Randolph is dissatisfied with Freud's theories on art-making because it posits the artist's work as reactionary, therefore down-playing its exploratory and revolutionizing nature. Freud's "primary process", Randolph points outs, strives to restore equilibrium in the intrapsychic status-quo. This kind of striving is not in accord with art's often iconoclastic aim.

Randolph is more sympathetic with the psychoanalytic work of D. W. Winnicott's, which raises the possibility that art gets its unique psychological validity from the ambiguity between the objective and the subjective.[75] Winnicott's model of the art object is of an object amenable to an interaction with the viewer, not a reactionary by-product of the subconscious creative process. Randolph has expanded Winnicott's ideas on art and come up with a "view of the art object once the artist has left it in public". Randolph's amenable object rests

[74] Jeanne Randolph, 31.

[75] Ibid., 32.

on her claim that

> [Art], already public, is like any other "found object", whatever is already known becomes a wonder when it is re-used in a subjective way. It is in this sense that one characteristic of the amenable object is that it is both a found object and a symbol of the artist's subjective experience. It partakes of both, and the ambiguity that is revealed about the familiar object (or idea or image) cannot ever quite be distinguished from the artist's idiosyncratic perception of the object.[76]

Furthermore, the amenable object is not a disavowal of the real world, but belongs "to the experience of relating to it." It has perceptual plasticity (defying perspective, scale, gravity, time, local colour...) that operates apart from art precedents for "the sake of more intense or extensive perceptual experiences."

The final two characteristics of Randolph's amenable object validate the viewer's creative impulses even further. These characteristics are 1) the amenable object's ability to sustain an unsettling response because 2) it lacks resolution. There is an absence of solution in, for our purposes, the narrative. The viewer realizes that there is no interpretation that will authorize retreat into self-assuredness -- no "right answer" to be gleaned by only gifted minds. This lack of resolution in the amenable object means that it retains ambiguous elements that allow leeway for the viewer's impulse to personally engage the illusion before them. As Randolph says, "the viewer's subjective notions can find in this object an external form through which to elaborate their own existence."

Scott's series can be seen as one such amenable object. Its amenable disposition takes its shape through its formal references to pop culture -- cinema,

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[76] Ibid., 33.

photography, television, advertising and pulp fiction. *Description*'s formal references to cinema and, as we will see, photography help ensure that the work "belongs to the experience of relating to it", as Randolph says. Like film, photography is an arm of pop culture that Scott has commandeered in her strategy of amenability. Consider the format of Scott's canvases. They mime the format of instant Polaroid snap-shots: a clean-edge white border, with twice as much white space along the bottom edge. But why a photographic format? Because photography has always been "below" painting in the traditional hierarchy of the arts. It is more populist, widely practised, considered by some to be more technical than artistic. Polaroids, specifically, are even more removed from high-art standards than other kinds of photographs because there is no technical manipulation involved in the developing process. Polaroids are the public's instant, accessible record-keepers of social interaction. The series is, in a sense, a photo-essay of the heroine's emotional ordeal, on display for all to see. The photographic format, in effect, authorizes on-looking.

Polaroids also enjoy a cultural association with "truth" and documentation because of their automatic developing process. Their spontaneous creation elides photo-manipulation, so their imagery is presumed more truthful. Although he was not speaking specifically about Polaroids, John Tagg has commented on photography's potential power as "evidence, record, and Truth."[77] Tagg takes up the case of Leeds, England, where photos of slum districts were used to convince

[77] John Tagg, "The Proof of the Picture", *Afterimage* Vol. 15, # 6 (January, 1988), 11.

the government to tear down the area for gentrification in the nineteenth century. Tagg notes about the role of photography in this scenario,

> The photographs were certainly part of a strategy in which the East-End of town [the slums] and its occupants were to be brought under control, spoken for, positioned, defined as Other. Within this strategy, photography operated as a means of surveillance, intruding, looking, searching out, but also a means of evidence or incrimination...[78]

The legacy continues; television court-rooms dramas tell us that photos are "admissible evidence". Furthermore, television commercials tell us that important events in our lives should be documented -- true "Kodac moments" to be cherished and photographed as proof of experience. Since Polaroids are part of the public domain, Scott's canvases, with their photographic formats, encourage audiences to view the heroine's "Kodac moments", as atypical as they are.

One such atypical moment is *I dreamed she would watch us sleeping...* (Figure 3). Scott's rival is off-side, with only an extended forearm in the frame -- the opposite compositional set-up to the previous canvas, *My first mistake...*, where the heroine's arm was in the scene. The rival's nails are still red, and she is holding an instamatic camera. She is photographing a intertwined, naked couple in bed who are, presumably, the heroine and her boyfriend. Scott's figures are Matisse-like line drawings, with very few anatomical details sketched in. The palette is softened with warmer flesh tones, compared to *My first mistake:...*, but a menacing air still prevails that recalls the "unsettling" quality of Randolph's amenable object. There is an unnerving vulnerability about the naked, sleeping

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[78] Joanne Lukitsh, "Practicing Theories: An Interview with John Tagg", *Afterimage* Vol. 15, #6 (January, 1988), 8.

couple; the rival's voyeurism seems threatening. Our on-looking, however, is sanctioned by the public context of the photo format.

I dreamed she would watch us sleeping..., like the other canvases, gives weight to Douglas Crimp's assertion that much art that has broken with the modernist tradition since the end of the 1960s resides between established mediums.[79] Photography and cinema bleed into each other throughout Scott's series. Her canvases are closely related to film stills, operating in the melodramatic mode outlined above. Crimp states without lamentation that art now shatters the integrity of established categories such as painting and sculpture. Using the staged photographs of Cindy Sherman as an example, Crimp describes her work as

> .. syntagmatic quotations, that is, of a conventional, segmented temporality. They are like quotations from the sequence of frames that constitutes the narrative flow of film. Their sense of narrative is one of its simultaneous presence and absence, a narrative ambience stated but not fulfilled.[80]

Scott's canvases, like Sherman's photographs, are like film stills that constitute the narrative flow of film. They have a segmented temporality, or syntagmatic sequence that is not of the natural continuum. The heroine's tale is not complete, told as it is by discontinuous scenes. When the narrative is broken down into its various scenes, the canvases operate like photos and film stills. Consider *I dreamed she would watch us sleeping*: the overall framing devise for the scene is

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[79] Douglas Crimp, "Pictures", *Art After Modernism* ed. Brian Wallis (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), 176.

[80] Ibid., 181

the Polaroid, then there is the "snap-within-the-snap", taken by the rival, followed by the audience's *imagined* image of what the rival's photo will prove. Will her photo document the endangered relationship, or will it capture some enduring bond between them? The freeze-frame look of the canvas heightens the narrative drama, but suspends it at the same time. It is a typical filmic fragment, as Barthes says, "whose existence never exceeds the fragment."[81]

Crimp observes that our relationship to photographs is mediated by our "desire to make the picture yield a reality that it pretends to contain."[82] Layers of "pretending" are present in Scott's *I dreamed she would watch us sleeping*. The canvas problematizes concepts of photographic or documentary "truth". On the one hand, Scott presents photographic images as objects bearing evidential weight for the protagonists: the rival is taking a photo of the sleeping couple to obtain some sort of record, or proof, of their triangular romantic entanglement. But what would the photo really show? It would, in fact, document a lie. The rival's photo would show a nude couple sleeping in an intimate position with no signs of restless agitation. Their apparent happiness in the image is misleading. Scott questions naive faith in the documentary truth of photographic and filmic images.

Her questioning is consistent with the postmodern awareness that there is "no objective observation of truth but always an interested participation in its

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[81] Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Stills" in *Image-Music-Text* (New York: Hill and Wong, 1977), 67.

[82] Crimp, 183.

construction."[83] Postmodernity has, as Linda Williams notes, lead to the loss of faith in the objectivity of the photographic images and their close cinematic cousins, documentary films -- to the "brute and cynical disregard of ultimate truths."[84] She states,

> It has become an axiom of the new documentary that films cannot reveal the truth of events, but only the ideologies and consciousness that construct competing truths -- the fictional master narratives by which we make sense of events.[85]

The "new documentary" Williams refers to is the popular *vérité* genre of amateur video that we see in television programs about unsolved crimes and investigative reports into social dilemmas. These programs are striving for some new, postmodern form of "truth", a truth chosen from and composed of a horizon of relative and contingent truths.[86] The photodramatization of "truth" in *Description* is also strives for a contingent truth -- with its discontinuous narrative segments and lack of resolution, or features that mark the amenable object.

Now that photography and cinema have been discussed in relation to *Description*'s formal structure, we must ask "Why, then, did Scott chose to *paint* the images?" Perhaps because the physical process of painting, made visible in the obvious brush strokes, has a deliberate effect on "time": painting belies the speed of mechanical reproduction implicit in photo and cinema. Viewers' eyes that are

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[83] Ibid., 16.

[84] Linda Williams, "Mirrors Without Memories," *Film Quarterly*. Vol 3 (summer 1993), 10.

[85] Ibid., 16.

[86] Ibid.

used to skimming over the slick surface of cinema, photography and advertising illustrations are maybe delayed, or stalled, by the painted image. Mechanically reproduced images that swamp pop culture and the mass media are easy to consume in a speedy fashion, like flipping through a glossy magaine or "channel surfing", so Scott confounds this process of consumption by using a more laborious technique -- painting. Because the canvas's figuration is not highly realistic, the process of painting is laid bare. Each canvas has obviously taken longer to create than a "Kodac moment". If more time has been spent on the creation of an image, it does not necessarily mean that the image deserves more serious study by an audience, or that it's subject matter has higher personal value to the artist. However, the hand-made quality of the images does give the impression that a sort of *personal care* has been taken. Scott chose to paint the images, calling attention to their own artiface, and puzzling the dimension of time in the series.

Scott's photo-based, painted and filmic format encourages the spectators to be "interested participants", as Williams would say. *Description of a Struggle* is like Randolph's amenable object in that it "belongs to the experience of relating to it". Scott's freeze-frame images of discontinuous scenes, abstract figuration and undetailed settings have "perceptual plasticity" in their universality. Examine the amenable character of *Five years later, while in a foreign city, I took a lover who spoke another language* (Figure 6): The heroine sits to the left with her back to the viewer, in profile, looking at the foreign lover at her right. She is given no

anatomical details, and is painted all yellow. He wears a baseball cap and a white shirt, but his face is only an outline -- he is invisible. They are either on the deck of a boat, or they are on a patio overlooking water. But where? The location is unnamed and the lover is barely presented as an existing individual. And what did the heroine do for the last five years before the affair? Certainly the narrative leaves room for other, projected stories and interpretations.

The series' lack of resolution is typified in its last canvas. *I arrive in a village and am surprised to discover there are people there who know me* (Figure 11). This Kafkaesque text gives away nothing. The heroine, who has just "escaped" from Manhattan by helicopter, is now seen on a large ocean-steamer. Her size is to scale, and there are the usual lack of details about geographic location. But the style of representation has changed. This canvas looks more like an August Macke, or a Guigan in Tahiti than the previous canvases. There is an idyllic feel to the landscape and the *film noir* atmosphere has dissipated. The text implies that the heroine might find peace with herself in this land, but nothing is explained or confirmed.

Randolph's paradigm suggests that we can posit Scott's series as an interactive piece of art, however, the references to pop culture do more than taint the pure act of painting. By encouraging viewer interaction and evoking parallel media-generated narratives, they add to the commentary on identity formation. The series is a manifestation of how identity is shaped by mass media. How? Gender identity, for example, has a close relationship with media-generated

imagery: the media perpetuate gendered stereotypes of feminity and masculinity, while social conditioning confirms the continuation of these gender ideals. By lampooning romance comic books and melodramatic, big-screen love stories, Scott reveals how untenable and constructed gender ideals can be. For example, the rival is the archetypal Other Woman, while the heroine (especially in *Obsessive love....*), is a lampoon version of a desperate spurned lover that is typical of melodrama and pulp fiction. By integrating painting and pop culture, Scott reaches a spectatorship that is receptive to mass media. Making visual references to every-day materials (such as Polaroids, melodrama, soap operas and cinema) is a strategy of Scott's to favour identification with the protagonists in her artwork -- an amenable exchange -- which could lead to the subversion of traditional gender roles aped in the artwork.

Scott is interested in subversive gender role playing, wondering to what extent identity is a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience. This subversive dimension is being produced here by the strategy of parodic repetition. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler notes the subject only becomes intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable, regulated standards of gender intelligibly. She states that gender is absolutely unfixed; it is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender, arguing that there is no gender identity *behind* the expression of gender -- it's all affectation. Commenting on the stereotypical homosexual "butch and femme" roles, Butler states,

> ...the replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into reality the utterly constructed status of the so-called hetero-original..."[87]

So, the parodic repetition of "the original" reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of a belief in a natural ideal. What, then, constitutes the possibility of effective subversion within the terms of a constructed identity? Butler encourages feminists to,

> Think through the possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexual power. To make gender trouble by mobilizing those categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusion of identity...[88]

Thus, the parodic repetition of gender exposes the illusion of gender identity as an intractable, inner substance or an essence.

Does *Description of a Struggle* contest the untenable categories of gender? How is "subversive parody" at play? Scott's characters are culled from heterosexual gender norms often represented in pop culture: the spurned girlfriend, the Other Woman, the lover, the foreign lover. Scott lampoons her characters' situation as the kind of melodrama often seen on soap operas and in romance novels. Butler would call this "displacement through hyperbole". Scott does this by using a high-key colour palette, dislocation of scale, and bold diagonal compositions. These formal elements signal to the viewer that perhaps the narrative is a blown-up parable about the assigned roles people play in

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[87] Ibid., 31.

[88] Ibid., 34.

relationships. Then, Scott reveals that the passive impersonation of the female ideal is bogus. For example, *My first mistake...* is clearly parodic: the blond heroine, pure in her white dress and pearls, has played by all of the gender "rules", trying to live up to the ideal of feminity; the rival, a typical representation of a vampy brunette, is little more than a comic-book character of a woman who seems to be impersonating her role as the threatening vixen. Scott's women are specular models of feminity projected by the media to encourage imitation, identification. As Crimp says of Sherman's photographs, the women in Scott's series "are tropes...that deconstruct the supposed innocence of the images of women projected by the media...by *re*constructing those images so painstakingly."[89] Scott lampoons the very roles she culls from pop culture's melodramatic vocabulary -- the same vocabulary that perpetuates untenable or uninhabitable gender ideals and the illusion of a natural, fixed, gendered identity. The parody is subversive because the obvious act of repetition and lampoon reveals gender constructs.

A recurring image: I often though of killing him is also dominated by parodic elements. Recall that in the canvas the heroine lunges forward to stab the boyfriend in the chest, as he reels backwards, with his arms extended over his head in shock. What is she, if not the image of the crazed, jilted woman? Scott is parodying the recent spate of commercial films that play on fears in a patriarchial society of strong, single women who can disrupt "family values." Lonely and

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[89] Crimp, 233.

desparate women are the threatening elements in psycho-thrillers such as *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne), in which a jilted mistress stalks her ex-lover's family. *Fatal Attraction* started off a string of similar films from Hollywood, including *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder), *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson), *Presumed Innocent* (Alan J. Pakula) and *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven). The female antagonists in these films are portrayed as deviants, the contemporary *femme noire*, whose thirst for love from the "hero" endangers nuclear families. As Amelia Jones notes, "these narratives produce the necessity of annihilating the non-domesticated contemporary woman in bloody orgies of human destruction, or reinscribing her into the family structure."[90] Jones sees these films, and photography as, throught their claims to truth,

> ...obediently serving the consumerist, patriarchal and heterosexist directives of the postfeminist logic at work in news magazine essays and advertisements....As many photography historians -- from John Tagg to Abigail Solomon-Godeau -- have pointed out, it is the photographic in western capitalist culture that is most often called upon to play this ideological role; the photographic functions certrally in the construction of bourgeois identities, determining norms of western subjectivity that subordinate people along the lines of gender, class, sexual and racial difference.[91]

Scott's heroine dreams of disrupting the passive role assigned to her by culture; she dreams of stabbing her ex-lover. With the canvas's *film noir* aesthetic (its bleak industrial city-scape) and its melodrama (strong and simple emotional enactment, and strong diagonal compositional lines), *A recurring image...* apes

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[90] Amelia Jones, "Feminism, Incorporated: Reading 'Postfeminism' in an Anti-Feminist Age", *Afterimage*, Vol. 20, #5 (December, 1992), 12.

[91] Ibid., 9.

violent occurances frequently depicted in commercial cinema, soap operas and pulp fiction about irrational, threatening, jilted women.

Parody is evidenced in other canvases in the series. *Escape over water* spoofs the trauma of a fleeing woman, driven away from her surroundings by the emotional upheaval of a persoanl crisis. Earlier, in *I returned to the capital, nothing had changed*, the heroine watches in despair as her ex-lover walks with the rival and their dog. The heroine pines for him, from afar, thus mocking depictions of love-lorn protagonists wallowing in sarrow. Parody operates like the cinematic melodrama of Sirk and Minnelli, in that it plays upon the gradual erosion of our cultural confidence in the nuclear family and traditional sex roles.

Conclusion

> The "problem" confronted in *film noir* is the necessary alienation, misdirected ambition and sexual confusion of contemporary urban life. The answer it proposes, in essence, is a stoic detachment which enables one to survive and maintain one's self-respect.[92]

The thematic and psychological underpinnings of *film noir* summarized in this quotation are at play in the Kafkaesque and Scott's *Description of a Struggle*. The alienation felt by the Kafka hero and Scott's heroine is apparent in their aloof, precise voice within the text, which brings to mind the detached voice-overs heard often in the *film noir* genre. Couldn't it be argued that the Kafka hero is a progenitor for the private detective in *film noir* thrillers who has been "framed" for a crime he did not commit? Isn't Scott's heroine a *femme noire* lead from one of Douglas Sirk's "female weepies"? Scott's sources conflate, sharing a mood of impending doom and emotional trial.

We have seen the multidisciplinary nature of Scott's series and how that nature predisposes *Description of a Struggle* to various "readings" of the artwork -- a literary reading of the Kafkaian source, a psychological reading and a mass-media reading of pop cultural influences. The convergence of the standpoints leads to the complication of the act of viewing, and leads to the condition for the critique of the ideology that supports the context of the drama unfolding at hand.

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[92] Schatz, 136.

As we saw in melodrama, and in the theories of Judith Butler, parody is an effective tool to remind viewers that they are watching a contrived reality. In this contrived reality the social problems and stereotypes are presented in such an artificial manner that the *vérité* of "the original" is cast in doubt.

What Scott casts in doubt are the gender roles assigned in the prevailing sexual order. Within this order, identity and self-image are closely tied to gender ideals and conventions. Scott's series is subversive because it parodies how these conventions dictate a passive, powerless role for women in society. The heroine is as powerless as she is conventional. She has few alternative role models, and her cultural currency as a dutiful, clinging girlfriend/wife is low. Emotional trauma resulted because the social order let her down: she feels abandoned and cheated because she acted in accord with the rules of femininity, yet lost her "reward" of a dutiful husband. The heroine's trauma is not really abated in the series' last canvas; she simply runs away. As in Sirk's melodrama, Scott has left unchanged the inequitable social conditions in which the trauma is rooted.

But the heroine is not an only an merely our analysand. Scott has made an artwork so amenable to audience interaction that the heroine becomes Everywoman. Cryptic information and de-individualized renderings in the series allows a loose interpretation of the details of the heroine's plight, thus *discouraging* one "correct" way of reading the series and simultaneously *encouraging* the viewers to project their own, private histories onto the canvases. These personal histories, plus reverberations from scenarios in pop culture, make

the series ring familiar. *Description of a Struggle* is open to multidimensional viewing, due to the breadth of its sourcing, but from each standpoint the gender ideal is challenged.

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Figure 1

Figure 2

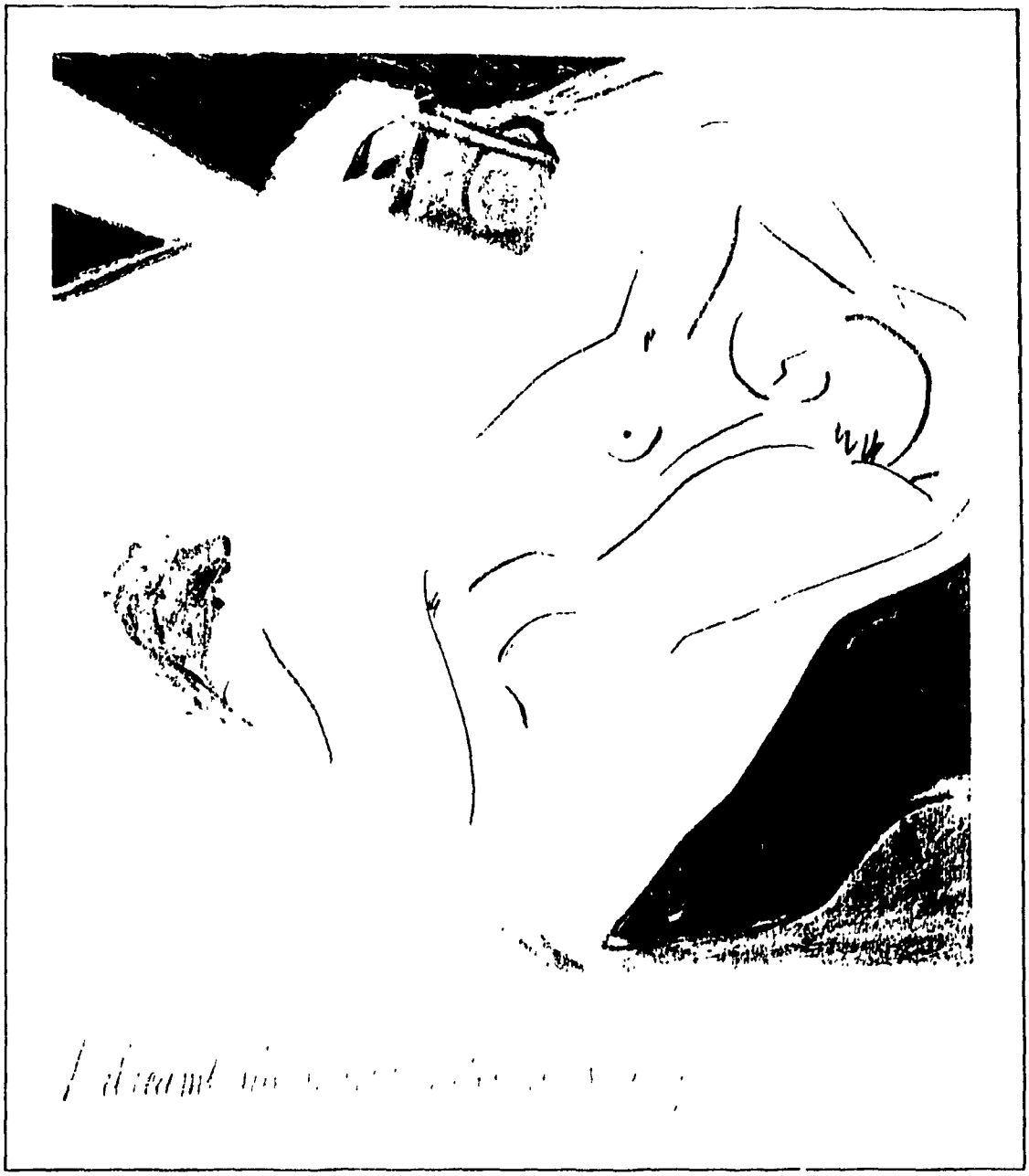

Figure 3

Figure 4

Obsessive love knows no bounds.

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

[illegible]

Figure 9

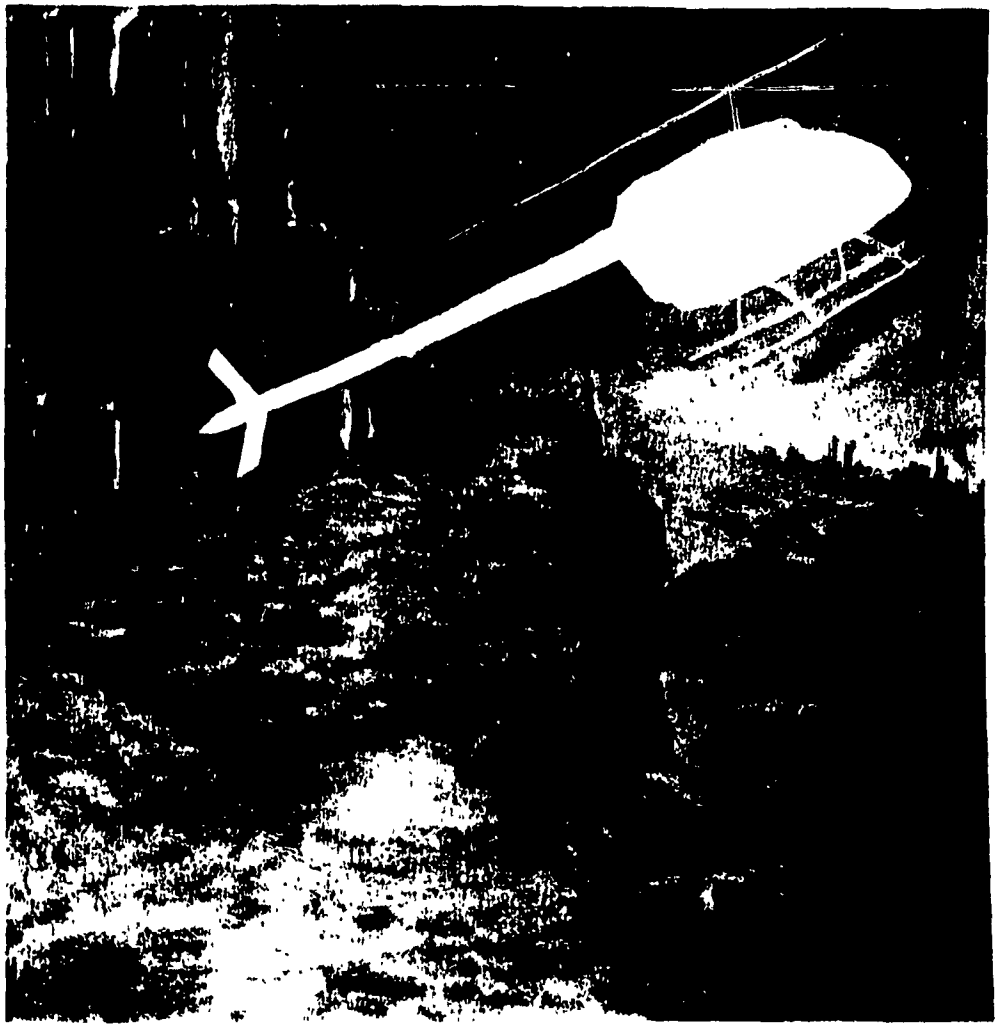

Figure 10

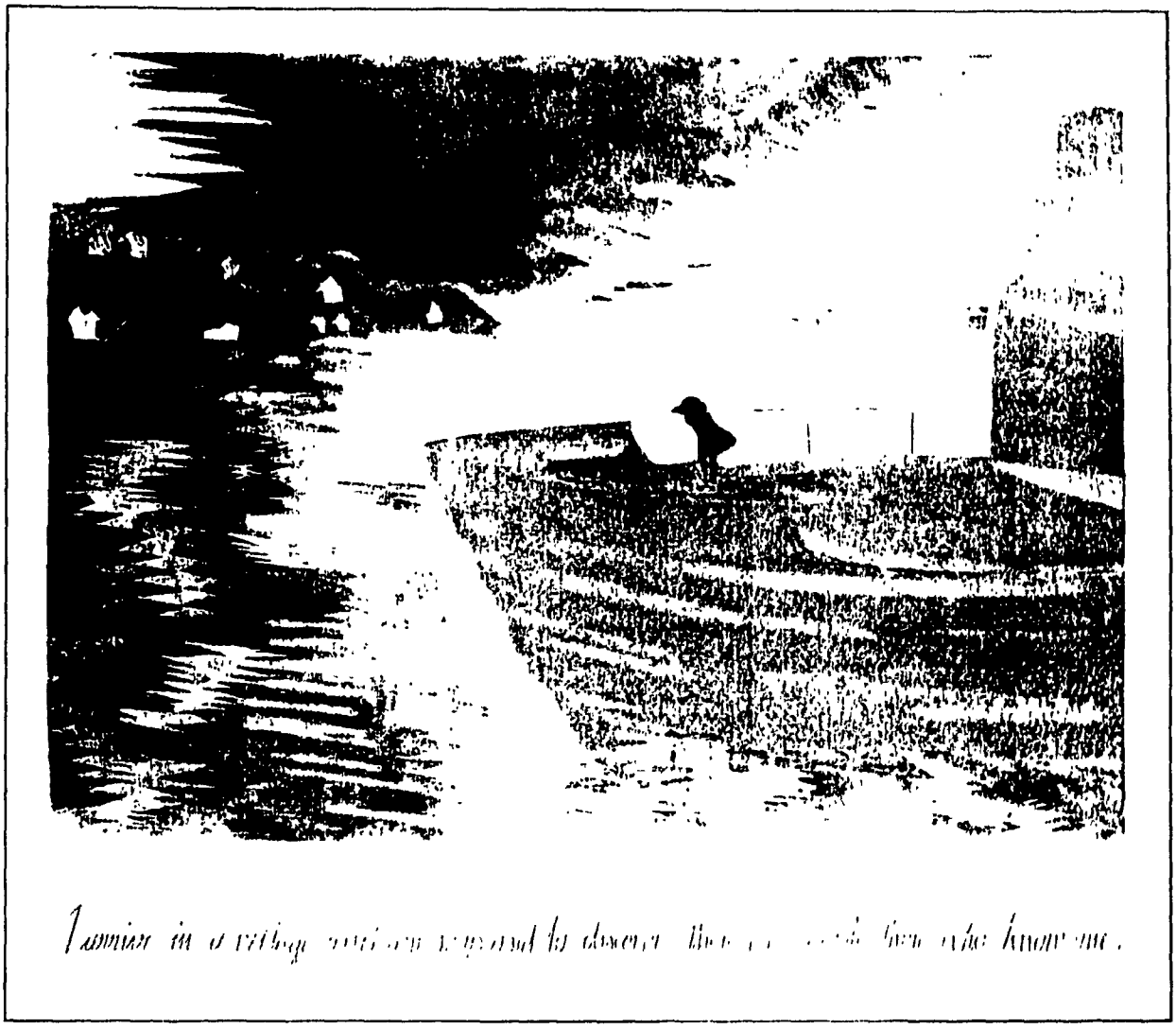

Figure 11