

Lyotard's Small Narratives in Art

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BA Paper

American English

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Part I
Research

Introduction

Jean-François Lyotard writes that postmodernism is the incredulity towards grand narratives (Browning 1-2). A meta or grand narrative is an encompassing theory that tries to validate all proceedings in a (large subsection) of society. Enlightenment thinking and Marxism are examples of such grand narratives. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard specifically discusses the grand narratives which claim to govern science and argues against the legitimizing power of these narratives. In his view, a grand narrative is unable to provide legitimation because it does not acknowledge the myriad of different softer voices that are present in society and replaces them with one thunderous voice. Within postmodernity, these voices are heard and given prominence.

The art world similarly faces a crisis of legitimation. No longer can the production of art be validated by a grand narrative which claims to speak for all art works. The main question of aesthetics is no longer “what is (the) beautiful?”, but “what can be considered art?” Lyotard does not speak of this crisis, but he does signal a threat in the return of realism posed to experimental avant garde at the end of the seventies. Though Lyotard does not address art in his theory on the end of the grand narratives, nor does he offer a solution to the crisis of legitimation faced by the art world, his theory can be applied to art as it can to science.

Lyotard's theory of narratives leans heavily on Ludwig Wittgenstein's "language games" (Lyotard 10). Wittgenstein sees the practice of language as a collection of different games, each with a set of rules governing what is allowed within that particular game. Lyotard considers these language games the smallest of narratives.¹ Lyotard argues that through playing these games a social bond is formed. Within this social bond the rules for the game are set. The consensus within the social group decides what is considered a correct move. These rules are among what Lyotard labels customary knowledge. This knowledge he sees as being propagated by narratives. He lists five properties of the narratives that convey customary knowledge.

There are differences between the narratives of art and the narratives of custom, most notably in the case of legitimation. The narratives of art often resist legitimation, while customary narratives legitimize themselves. This paper will apply the theory from *The Postmodern Condition* on aesthetics from the perspective of the social bond. Consensus between social partners decides the values of the person who looks at the work of art and in this way customary knowledge influences the appreciation of art. This does not legitimize the practice of art, but does help to explain which works of art are appreciated.

¹ In later works Lyotard refers to the language games as "phrases", but in *The Postmodern Condition* they are synonymous with small narratives. This paper will follow the latter definition.

The crisis of the legitimation within science is solved by Lyotard, not with a grand narrative, but with small narratives, which offer legitimation for parts, but not a whole. Legitimation by small narratives recognizes and validates the multitude of voices within a society, which are not heard by the grand narrative for various reasons, among them dissention from the grand narrative. Small narratives take the many language games that are played into account, while grand narratives ignore most of them in favor of a select few.

Lyotard claims art is the site of most resistance against grand narratives, but he does not follow this claim with a legitimation of art based on his theory. Instead, he points to a difference between realist or classicist art on the one hand and (post)modern art on the other. Realist art is, according to Lyotard, subject to concerns which lie outside the realm of art, like wealth, technology and politics, while modern art forms are driven by disinterested experimentation.

The main question of this paper will be whether Lyotard's theory on the end of the grand narratives offers a legitimation for art as it does for science. Firstly, language games, which underlie Lyotard's theory, will be discussed. Secondly, the properties of narrative according to Lyotard will be compared with the properties of artworks. Finally, the role of the social bond in the appreciation of art will be discussed.

This research is followed by a creative chapter, which aims to show a few of the possible voices and language games in the world of art. The chapter consists of fragments of narrative, centered around a fictional work of art. Each of these fragments serves to tell a story, but not *the* story. In this way the form of the creative chapter illustrates the idea of Lyotard's small narratives. The final chapter will be a reflection on the creative chapter in light of the research chapters.

Language games

To understand Lyotard's theory, an explanation of how he interprets Wittgenstein's language games is first required. Wittgenstein divided the effects of various types of utterances into different categories, which he named language games (Wittgenstein 8; sec: 7). "Each of these various categories can be defined in terms of rules specifying [the language games'] properties and the uses to which they can be put" (Lyotard 10). Just as in the game of chess, these rules determine in which manner pieces are allowed to move. Lyotard gives three examples of these categories, namely denotative, performative and prescriptive utterances, but there are many more.

Lyotard makes the following three observations about language games: firstly the rules do not legitimize themselves, but they "are object of a contract, explicit or not, between players" (10). However, this does not mean players invent the rules. Secondly, "if there are no rules, there is no game" (10). A change in the rules, no matter how small, will alter the state of the game. A move that does not comply with the rules does not belong to the game they define. Thirdly, "every utterance should be thought of as a move in a game" (10).

While the metaphor of a game seems to suggest each move is made in order to win a game, this is not a necessity. The pleasure of inventing a move can be sufficient reason to make it. “[W]hat else is involved in that labor of language harassment undertaken [...] by literature?”(Lyotard 10). Inventing turns of phrase words and meaning, “the process behind the evolution of language on the level of *parole*” (10) is a source of endless joy. Even this pleasure does however depend on the feeling that a success is won at the expense of an adversary: “at least one [...] and a formidable one: the accepted language, or connotation” (10).

When a move pertaining to a certain language partner is made, the person undergoes a “displacement” which affects them as an addressee, referent and sender. A move necessarily provokes a counter move and a merely reactionary move is not a good move, but an anticipated reaction in the strategy of the opponent. It is important to increase displacement by making unexpected moves: new statements (Lyotard 15). It is possible to view art history as a series of reactions on works of art that have come before. Ernst Gombrich is of this opinion (8-9). Lyotard’s own aesthetic theory sees the postmodern work of art as the work of art that makes the unexpected move (Readings 73).

In a society in which communication plays an increasingly prominent role, language becomes more and more important. The current information society demands more attention is paid to language than during previous eras. The proliferation of computers in the past decades increased the need for theories on language to facilitate their programming. Many of the great philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, like Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida and Lyotard, wrote about the functions and properties of language. According to Lyotard, “language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist” (15). In fact, Lyotard all but claims language games make up for the entirety of social relations. He signals that the end of the grand narratives has led some authors to claim the social bond is dissolving and people are turning into individual atoms. Lyotard disagrees with these claims and believes the grand narratives did not constitute the social bond.

Lyotard argues against the claims of atomization that “[a] self does not amount to much, but no self is an island, each exists in a fabric of relations [language games] that is now more complex than ever before. [...] [A] person is always located at “nodal points” of specific communication circuits” (15). Each person is assigned a “post” (sender, addressee, referent) by each of the diversity of the language games they are involved in. “The social bond is linguistic, but not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number of) language games, obeying different rules” (40).

Narrative

Next to language games, it is important to understand what Lyotard means when he talks about narratives. In *The Postmodern Condition*, he discusses the characteristics of knowledge and signals a relationship between knowledge and customs. Customs are passed on in a society by narrative. Lyotard lists five characteristics of narrative. The chapter will end with a discussion of works of art as narratives and the differences between art narratives and customary narratives.

According to Lyotard, “knowledge in general cannot be reduced to science” (18). Knowledge is a question of competence that goes beyond the determination and application of the criteria of truth. It also deals with the determination and application of the criteria of justice, beauty and efficiency. Knowledge is what makes someone capable of forming correct denotative utterances, correct prescriptive utterances, etc. Knowledge coincides with an array of competence building measures.

Another characteristic of knowledge is the relation between knowledge and custom. What determines an utterance as correct? “They are all judged to be ‘good’ because they conform to the relevant criteria [of justice, beauty, efficiency or truth] accepted in the social circle of the ‘knower’s’ interlocutors” (Lyotard 19). Knowledge prescribes what is considered a correct move in a language game, while customs inform why the utterance is considered a correct move. The quintessential form of customary knowledge is narration. Lyotard names five properties of narrative. The way narratives allow a society to define and evaluate its competences, the great variety of language games, the transmission of the narrative, its effects on time and the way it is authorized.

First of all, the narrative allows the society in which it is told to define the criteria of competence and evaluate according to the criteria what is or can be performed in the society. Secondly, the narrative form lends itself to a variety of language games (Lyotard 20). Thirdly, the narrative organizes its own narrative “posts” (sender, addressee, referent) (21).

Fourthly, narrative form follows a rhythm. “It is the synthesis of a meter beating time in regular periods and of accent modifying the length or amplitude of certain of those periods” (Lyotard 21). Society finds the basis of its social bonds in the meaning of the narrative. What is emphasized is the metric beat of the narrative, not each performance’s difference in accent (22). Finally, the narrative itself holds authority. The narratives define what has the right to be said and done in the culture of question and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated “by the simple fact that they do what they do” (23).

In Lyotard’s view, works of art are small narratives which displace each other. The narratives are small because they are short, because they refuse to become meta or grand narratives. Rather than telling *the* story, small narratives tell *a* story and invites new stories by how they displace preceding stories (Readings 68-69). In this way each work of art reacts to works that preceded and enables those that follow.

Though Lyotard labels works of art as narratives, there are several differences between what he defines as narratives through which societies gain knowledge of customs and narratives found in works of art. Modern and postmodern art does not give knowledge about customs of the larger society, but only the society of art itself, if it contains customary knowledge at all. In the narratives of art meter is less important than accent. Contrary to customary narratives which legitimize what is to be said and done in the society they are told in, including themselves, art has a hard time legitimizing itself. This chapter will end with a more in depth discussion of these three differences.

First of all, developments in the art world of the twentieth-century have made it difficult to gain knowledge about customs from art as Robert Hughes argues in his documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse*. Marcel Duchamps' readymade urinal *Fontaine* might inform about what is and is not able to pass as art, but it does not say anything about the society outside of the art world. Another genre of painting that is not a narrative is the still life. In this genre the object of the painting is almost trivial (Schopenhauer 202). Because the search for beauty has been halted, people are losing touch with society, which is increasingly becoming ugly, according to Roger Scruton in his documentary *Why Beauty Matters*. Within beauty customary knowledge can be found, which strengthens the social bonds of society. Both Scruton and Hughes point out the connection society and modern art have lost and how this is detrimental for all involved.

Secondly, since the Renaissance art has focused less on meter and more on accent. Contrary to the customary narrative, the subject matter of a work of art is often less important than the way (or by whom) it has been presented. In museums this effect is seen by people flocking around the famous masters, while less known painters are all but ignored, even when they portray the same subject matter. Frans Hals' *De Magere Companie* gets hardly any attention compared to the painting hanging across the room in the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum which depicts the same subject matter as Hals': Rembrandt *De Nachtwacht*. Contemporary artists like Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst often do not themselves create the actual work of art, or they have a team of assistants. For example, *For the Love of God* was constructed by a jeweler working on Hirst's orders (Silverman 402). The name of the artist has become a brand. This is not a new phenomenon, in the past many famous artists have signed works made by their students.

Thirdly, contrary to customary narratives, which are legitimized by providing the narrative culture with what has a right to be said and done in that culture and thus legitimizing themselves, art has become distant from this society, stopped offering customary knowledge, and lost its immediate "use". By trying to present what is unpresentable, (Lyotard 78, 81) modern art has lost touch with what is presentable: the customs of the society it is involved in. With the advent of technology that replaced master craftsmanship, like photography and film, technical expertise has lost its legitimating function. That is not to say that there are no contemporary artists who have tried to regain legitimation by reconnecting to society: both Scruton and Hughes visit such artists in their documentaries. These artistic efforts are however drowned out by the scandalous and outrageously expensive artworks which dominate the headlines.

Art

In this chapter the production of art will be analyzed with Lyotard's language games. Lyotard's own aesthetics place importance on these games, though he uses some of them to disqualify certain works of art. Realist works of art are not considered by Lyotard as playing the correct games, they are involved with the games of technology, wealth and politics. The final argument of this paper will focus on the public, people who judge works of art, and here language games take a prominent place.

Lyotard's own ideas on art are entwined with the language games he uses in *The Postmodern Condition*. He sees three different games at work within art: realism or classicism, modernism and postmodernism. The latter two games are closely related and their difference is small. Realism is a world apart and cannot count on a whole lot of sympathy from Lyotard. This is because realist works of art and realist artists play less the game of art and more other games, like those of technology, politics and wealth. (Post)modernist art on the other hand is, according to Lyotard, less concerned with the worldly games and more with the game of art. Lyotard's comments on realist art offer an insight in how he sees language games in practice.²

² These language games are larger than the ones discussed by Wittgenstein and which Lyotard in subsequent works labels as phrases. To avoid confusion, language has been omitted from the phrase 'language games'. These games also drive the pursuit of science, according to Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*. In art however, he views these games much more negatively than in science. In science they are the practical forces of the world, which Lyotard objectively describes, while in art they are a corrupting influence and the reason why realism cannot count on Lyotard's sympathy. This paper follows the scientific opinion of Lyotard on these games and not the artistic one, though it does discuss these games from the point of view that Lyotard uses.

Lyotard links realism to the *Académies* and the *Salons* of the nineteenth-century and all negative connotations they call to mind.³ These institutions functioned as purgation and awarded good artistic and literary conduct “under the guise of realism” (74). The task which academicism has assigned to realism was to preserve various consciousnesses from doubt. The challenge lay in the arrival of new technologies (photography and film) which could accomplish the result of narrative and pictorial realism “better, faster and with a circulation of a hundred times larger” (74). The game of technology does not pertain to the true, just or beautiful, but to efficiency: “a technical 'move' is 'good' when it does better and/or expends less energy than another” (44).

Realism can be used by political parties to glorify its goals. It is then the political apparatus which determines which works of art are correct. “Political academicism possesses and imposes a priori criteria of the beautiful” (Lyotard 75). First the idea of good art is formed and only those works that conform to this idea are considered correct, all others are slandered and banned.

³ After all, these institutions failed to recognize the artistic merit of the impressionists.

“Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonalds food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and ‘retro’ clothes in Hong Kong” (Lyotard 76). Rampant eclecticism has led to an attitude of “anything goes” among artists, gallery owners, critics and the public. “But this realism of ‘anything goes’ is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield” (76). Just like capital accommodates all needs, so does realism accommodate all tendencies, as long as those needs and tendencies have purchasing power.

Lyotard argued against what he perceived as realist tendencies and their disparaging of experimentation he saw in the artistic climate of the late seventies (Lyotard 71-73). His criticisms are still valid today. *For the Love of God*, Hirst’s diamond encrusted skull, is a realist work of art that plays not the game of art, but the game of wealth. Koons, with his giant kitsch statues and pornographic photography, is another example of a contemporary realist. The contemporary world of art plays games that center not around the beautiful or the unrepresentable, but around publicity and wealth. They make shocking and controversial works whose values go up exponentially as their publicity increases and when their values go up, their publicity increases.

Both Koons and Hirst realize the best way to increase the value of their work is to start at the base. They create works, and *For the Love of God* is a great example of this, which are of themselves already immensely valuable. By using diamonds or high quality (expensive) techniques for their works of art, the starting price is already much higher than a readymade by Duchamps or a Brillo box by Warhol, these being made with less expensive materials. In his documentary *The Mona Lisa Curse*, Hughes argues that in an art world where the best work is the work which sells for the highest bid at Sotheby's or Christie's, Koons and Hirst are giving themselves a head start.

As stated in the first chapter, Lyotard claims each person is involved in an indeterminate number of language games, each game obeying different rules. The rules of each game are often based on customary knowledge; the rules are based upon consensus of what is perceived as a correct move in the game. This consensus is reached by the social circle that plays the language game. In this way the social bond is created by language games, but the social bond also creates language games.

The appreciation of art is also tied up in language games. The work of art itself is a player in at least one (the game of art), but likely more games. The appreciator too is involved in any amount of different games. When these language games conflict, when what is considered a correct move in one game is not in another, the work of art will most likely be on the losing side. Some examples will illuminate this.

Hirst's *For the Love of God* will not likely be appreciated by a staunch Marxist. The rules of one game, which does not condone excessive wealth, conflicts with the move the artwork makes, namely showing excessive wealth. It is not amongst the socialists, but among the superrich hedge-fund managers where Hirst finds most of his supporters. Often vandalized *Piss Christ* by Andres Serrano plays a game Christians cannot approve of. This photograph shows a crucifix in a glass of urine. In the language game of Christianity, this is not considered a correct move and many have voiced their displeasure with Serrano.

More often than not however, a conflict in language games will lead to an indifference towards the artwork. People fail to find meaning in a work of art, because language games the work of art is involved in are different from the games the appreciator is. When the work of art does not make moves which are disparaged in games the onlooker plays, he or she will simply move on to the next work of art.

Within the game of art there are conflicts between different games played artworks which can cause certain works to be more or less popular than others. The impressionists challenged the rules of the game that the artists of the *Salons* played and were criticized for that (Gombrich 511-519). This same fate befell Duchamps and his *Fountain*. Rembrandt is considered to be a greater master in the game of art and thus receives more popularity than Hals.

Lyotard's language games are a far cry from the aesthetics of the eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer. Both argued that the aesthetic judgment is disinterested. According to Kant something is not beautiful because it is good, or good for something (133). Lyotard theory rejects such a judgment. People are part of the language games they play, which inform their judgments with the consensus of their social groups.

Conclusion

Lyotard's theory on the end of the grand narratives was written to find a legitimation of science, which it had lost after the grand narratives were delegitimated. He does not offer a legitimation of art, nor does he consider this necessary. Lyotard argues against realist art by pointing at the language games this art is involved in and subject to, while he points at these same games in science as a positive drive. This paper has argued that these games are not of influence only on realism, but are present in the creation of most, if not all, artworks.

In the appreciation of art, which Lyotard does not discuss, these games are even more prominent. According to Lyotard, people are nodal points in webs of different language games, which inform them of the customs of the society they are involved in. These customs, or rules, are based upon a consensus within a person's social circle. When judging a work of art, customs inform a person what is considered to be good, in this case, art.

In their recent documentaries Scruton and Hughes point to a lost connection between (post)modern art and society. They feel art should regain its place within the bounds of customary narrative. Art should not, according to them, exist for art's sake, but for the sake of people. The argument put forth in this paper supports this stance, which is contrary to Lyotard's thoughts on art. It is within the language games which people play that art gains its value. When art rejects these games, it loses its relevance.

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Part II

Creative

The Grand Narrative

19-05-'32

Dear Diary,

I've finally gone to see Jed Martin's girlfriend. She was everything I expected and more. I heard a lot about her, in my classes and from my friends. She was terribly charming in person. Pretty too! I saw her at Boijmans. She was definitively the most beautiful.

I've seen pictures of course, but those didn't prepare me for the real thing. I now know why some compare her to the Mona Lisa. She's got this same smile you know. Like she is daring you. Like she's flirting with you. Oh diary, I think I'm in love. In love! With Aimée! I know I'm not the only one. She's got a face that could launch a thousand ships!

I can't wait to see her again. She'll be in Rotterdam for another two months and I'll be sure to visit her! I close my eyes and still see her smiling at me.

*

Jed Martin goes through the photographs again. If he hadn't taken them himself, he would have a hard time distinguishing the two girls. He looks at the painting, more than half finished now, of the two girls rolled into one.

The second, who he only knows as Layla, is a Lebanese escort girl. He found her through Niamodel.com and after a couple of rendezvous she was more than happy to pose for him. Provided he'd pay a hundred Euros extra, of course.

He chose Layla because of her resemblance to the first girl; his first girlfriend, Geneviève, an ex-escort girl, who came from Madagascar. He doesn't have a lot of photos of Geneviève, which is why he contacted Layla, though he got some use out of her services as well.

Jed is happy with the smile he painted. It was from memory; he doesn't have photos of Geneviève smiling like she did at him and he couldn't get Layla to smile like that. Layla can fake anything, even being Geneviève, except a smile.

So he had painted from his memory. His gallery owner, Franz, will be pleased. Jed puts another fork of microwaved pasta in his mouth and decides its going to be the last. His plate is still half full, but he can't be bothered anymore. Eating bores him. Jed puts down his fork in favor of his brush. He swallows the pasta down and steps back in front of the canvas.

*

A Martin in Rotterdam

H. Remmerswaal

It is always a sensation when a work of Jed Martin is exhibited in Europe, let alone the Netherlands. The French painter is popular among private collectors, who often refuse to exhibit their collections and when they do it is in Dubai, Delhi or Beijing. Rotterdam museum Boijmans van Beuningen is, for the coming six months, host to one of the paintings out of Martin's series of simple professions: *Aimée, Escort Girl*. The painting, which depicts one of Martin's ex-girlfriends, is to be part of an exhibition showing works of the early twenty-first century realists. Next to Jed Martin, works by Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Tracey Emin will be shown. The exhibition runs until the 23rd of June 2032.

*

That anyone can look upon Jed Martin's *Aimée, Escort Girl* without a profound feeling of disgust is beyond me. The artwork, and I use the term in the most liberal of uses, displays a French-African prostitute undressing. It also shows a romanticized image of the oldest job in the world. Aimée, poor Aimée, smiles coyly at the viewer/customer. Her smile is paid for, without meaning or intent. It is not what the customer wants, but what he expects: service with a smile. No doubt her pimp (Martin?) demanded from Aimée the forced smile with the threat of violence. However, this is not what we seen in the painting. Instead Martin paints Aimée as the happy whore. She shows no sign of the abuse she undoubtedly suffers. To the uninformed, she might look like she derives pleasure from her job, that maybe these prostitutes don't have it so bad.

Like his mentor Michel Houellebecq, Martin not only turns a blind eye to the exploitation of women from the third world, he actively encourages it by portraying this exploitation in a favorable light. Houellebecq, who wrote the 2001 ode to sex tourism *Platform*, precedes Martin in this. In the novel, the protagonist, cleverly named Michel, travels first to Thailand to indulge in sexual pleasure. Upon his return to Europe, Michel gets involved with a 2 dimensional sex goddess, Valerie, who also happens to be an assistant (of course, not the boss) to a tour operator trying to revolutionize the tourism sector.

Michel's sordid idea, to let the poor Europeans (who have all, but intimacy) buy sexual favors from the pure and content third world population (who have nought, but intimacy to give), finds fertile ground with Jean-Yves, whose marriage is failing and who only finds sexual happiness in the arms of his underage babysitter. Michel and Valerie tour the third world in a rather explicit orgy to find the perfect tourist hot spots. On their travels they do not encounter the absolute poverty and squalor which lead to the women selling their bodies to fat and ugly Westerners, but they are greeted only by generous locals who are maybe a little shy, but ultimately more than happy to indulge in Michel's sexual fantasies.

This is the problem with men the likes of Houellebecq and Martin, they are twenty-first century pimps who propagate the lie that the sex industry is built on pleasure. Nothing could be further from the truth. The exploited, the women, are not in a position to find enjoyment in their shameful practices. They are often forced, either by men, or by poverty or addiction to sell their bodies, there is no choice involved. And let us not be mistaken about the men either: they may believe they find heaven in the arms of a whore, but in reality, great sadness drove them there. It is not the happy, well-adjusted gentleman who turns to prostitution, it is the depressed and the depraved who can find no other exit for their pent up frustration than to purchase a couple of hours of intimacy with a stranger.

*

“It says here that it’s his girlfriend.”

“He must have really liked her to paint her as a whore.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, she *is* pretty.”

“Hey.”

“But not as pretty as you of course, dear.”

“Thank you.”

“He’s got talent though, she might just step out of the painting.”

“It says here that he’s the first to return to figurative painting.”

“So he’s an avant garden then?”

“It doesn’t say.”

“She does seem happy.”

“It says here that he paints people working.”

“I guess she’s about done.”

“Working in a spirit of goodwill, what does that mean?”

“That she enjoys her job.”

“Oh. Well, take a picture, dear.”

“Yes, dear.”

“Look, it says here that this one was made by an American.”

When they got home several days later, Christine did not recognize the photo and accused her husband of photographing a prostitute in Amsterdam.

*

He briskly walked through the exhibition. Past Damien Hirst's formaldehyde shark, which the museum had bought at a liquidation sale after the economic crisis of 2020. The shark was slowly decaying; the museum may have paid a fraction of the original price, they had still bought a rotten fish. He walked past Jeff Koons' giant, ugly balloon animals. He walked past Robin Hörst's hyper realistic paintings of anime figures. Hörst's brother Syb's abstract works were much better. He stopped only to quickly admire *Luffy D. Monkey, Mighty Pirate*, Hörst's famous work. Syreetha Domen's *DIY Art Set #5*, the one with the bar of gold with the swastika stamp and the blood diamonds only received a derisive snort from him. He skipped the room with Tracey Emin's *My Bed* altogether.

He had heard a lot of good things about Jed Martin, but never seen a work in person. To be fair, he wasn't what you would call a fan of realism and the pictures of Martin's paintings hadn't seemed so special. Yet, he had to go see one in person, before he could go and give his uncensored opinion. Now he was searching through the museum, looking to get this over with.

He found *Aimée, Escort Girl* near the end of the exhibition. A small had gathered around the painting. The two paintings by Lies van Aelst were ignored. Of course these idiots only looked at Martin. They'd been told he's a contemporary master and they get a kick out of recognizing his name on the sign, congratulate themselves on their conformist taste. Maybe they'll take a picture or ask to have their picture taken, like it's some kind of attraction. These fucking tourists, he thought, these fucking tourists are worse than the snobs.

As for the painting itself, it was rather bland. Some half naked girl, nothing he hadn't seen before (at least in painting). Martin used techniques that the impressionists rightfully and successfully suppressed nearly two centuries ago. He shrugged his shoulders and left the museum, confident that his impeccable taste had not led him astray.

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Excerpt from *The Holy Escort Girl*, by dr. prof. Jessica Havelaar.

In the reception of the works by French artist Jed Martin (Raincy, 1976) much attention has been paid to his last painting: *Michel Houellebecq, Writer* (2015). The painter has not exhibited in fifteen years, nor has he shown the world what he has been producing, if anything, during his self imposed exile at Châtelus-le-Marcheix, a small village in the Creuse department of central France.

Michel Houellebecq, Writer is undoubtedly the most famous of Martin's works. Much of its fame comes of course from the hideous and violent murder of the subject of the portrait in 2016, French writer and personal friend of Martin, Michel Houellebecq (Réunion, 1956 – Souppes, 2016). The gruesome murder turned out to be a cover up, it was Martin himself who discovered that the painting of Houellebecq was stolen.⁴

⁴ C. Ferber, *Memories of a Gendarme*, trans: F. Wynne, Random House, London, 2025, P. 135.

When the painting turned up in the basement of serial killer and plastic surgeon Adolphe Petissaud, the painting was returned to Martin, who promptly sold it for six million Euros to Indian philanthropist Jazzy Lahoria who then lent it to the Delhi Museum of Modern Art, where it has been a permanent part of the Lahoria-wing. It is currently valued at fifty million Euros.

Critics agree that Martin's best work is *Bill Gates and Steve Jobs discussing the Future of Information Technology* (2014), which is subtitled *The Conversation at Palo Alto*. This work is currently in the hands of the heirs of Jobs, who, despite Gates' desperate pleas, have declined to exhibit it anywhere. Like many of Martin's paintings, the last time *The Conversation at Palo Alto* was shown to the public was the first time they were all revealed in 2015. Both Houellebecq, who wrote the exhibition catalogue for Martin's exhibition of the series of simple professions and business compositions, and Wong Xu Fin, whose essays on Martin continue to be the most authoritative source on the work of the French painter, spent many, rightfully deserved pages discussing Martin's masterpiece.

A work that has been largely ignored by Houellebecq, Xu Fin and subsequent writers on Martin is *Aimée, Escort Girl*. Houellebecq's appraisal of this work comes down to "nice tits".⁵ Xu Fin is less obtuse, but the three paragraphs the Chinese essayist dedicates to *Aimée* are mostly concerned with the model and not with the painting. Following Xu Fin, much has been made of the comparison between Aimée and Martin's first girlfriend, Geneviève Galaruzu, who died, unbeknownst to Martin, in the 9/11 terror attacks when her plane crashed into the south tower of the World Trade Center. Martin had met her while both were studying at the Académie de Beaux-Arts in Paris. When Martin knew her, Galaruzu worked as a high end escort girl and Xu Fin claims that with *Aimée, Escort Girl*, Martin painted a tribute to his former lover.⁶

⁵M. Houellebecq, *Series of Simple Professions and Business Compositions*, exhibition catalogue, 2015, P. 14.

⁶W. Xu Fin, *Essays on Jed Martin. Life and works*, trans: K. Lam, Blackwell, Oxford, 2022, P. 44.

The portrait itself, 3.25 meters by 2.5 meters, shows a young girl who sits on a bed in front of a window. The window looks out over a park, identified by Xu Fin as the square des Batignolles in Paris.⁷ The early morning light shines through the window on the back of Aimée. The details of the modern flat are obscured in the dark, but Aimée herself is bathed in light, giving her an aureole. Aimée faces the viewer with the satisfied smile of someone who takes pride in a job well done. Martin painted her skin a dark umber, which lead to the comparison with Galaruzu, who was of Malagasy-French descent. Aimée's shoulder length black hair springs back as she pulls her orange-yellow shirt down, the undersides of her breasts barely visible, which undoubtedly provoked Houellebecq's lewd comment. The black lines of a thong poke out above her white miniskirt near her hips. She wears a subtle navel ring.

Aimée, Escort Girl is an exception in Jed Martin's work, who has made no other works in which the erotic takes such a prominent place. At the same time, *Aimée* echoes the kind of spirituality that is more often attributed to those pious Catholic paintings of the Holy -

Virgin. Martin's modern rendition of the whore turned holy, Mary Magdalene, is often ignored by art historians, who have trouble placing this almost religious painting in Martin's oeuvre, which is concerned almost exclusively with more down-to-earth matters. Even one of Martin's early critics, Patrick Kéchichian of *Le Monde*, who sees an unusual amount of Christian spirituality in the works of Martin has overlooked the religious overtones in *Aimée, Escort Girl*.

⁷ . Xu Fin, *Essays on Jed Martin. Life and works*, trans: K. Lam, Blackwell, Oxford, 2022, P. 44.

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I was on the internet, surfing for some porn. I found this pic, right. Some French guy, a painter. He painted this gorgeous African slut. Real fucking sexy. Big tits, I love big tits. She was pulling her top off; you can just see her tits. Her belly though, with that piercing and her thong poking out of her skirt. And those legs going on for a million miles. She was *hot*. I right-clicked and saved as right away. It was a big picture too.

I took my cock in my hand and started massaging it while I scrolled up. Stopping at all the good bits. Her legs, uncovered. I thought how I would spread them; push her down on that bed. The edge of that skirt; hid her pussy from sight. I felt myself getting hard. My hand started making quicker movements when I scrolled over her belly. I paused at that glorious underboob. That Frog artist had talent I tell you what. He painted her right before those tits would fall out of her shirt, bouncing like two puddings. I could taste them; licking those big black titties while she bounced on my cock. I scrolled up, her armpits, shaven like her pussy; her soft neck. Her lips around my hard cock; my hands through her hair. I came on my screen; my cum right across her face.

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Jed Martin (1976)

Aimée, Escort Girl (2011)

3.25m x 2.5m

Oil on canvas

The work of French artist Jed Martin focuses on the world of work. His two famous series of simple professions and of business compositions show men and women practicing their profession in a spirit of goodwill. Martin was the first of the twenty-first century realists to return to figurative painting. This was a bold move when the dominant form of painting was abstract and the dominant form of art was sculpture. His paintings have inspired artists as varied as Robin Hörst, Syreetha Domen and Lies van Aelst. For *Aimée, Escort Girl*, Martin used his girlfriend as a model.

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Aimée was six years old when she lost her innocence. What should have been a precious memory to complete her journey to womanhood was turned into a violent affair by her uncle, one of the prominent men of her Nigerian village. Aimée's father gave his consent and acted like her pimp during her prepubescent years. After all, he didn't have any sons to offer the village and he had to find a use of his daughter. When Aimée was twelve years old, her father sold her for five hundred dollars to a group of human traffickers. She wasn't HIV positive; her father made a *killing*. For a while he was fabulously well to do in his village, but he blew his fortune on cheap booze. When the village caught him stealing for the last time, he was unceremoniously executed.

Aimée never knew what happened to her father. She was destined for Europe, though not before traveling through the African continent. The smugglers knew that she was still too young; if the police caught them, the penalty was too high. So they traveled up the west coast, the worst coast, of Africa, and slowly gathered a truckload of young women. To get a better deal from the village chiefs or the fathers, the smugglers offered a night with Aimée. She was the youngest girl on the truck and the object of the jealousy of the other girls. They knew Aimée would make more money for longer than they would before getting discarded with a head full of drugs on the side of some road. And so, when Aimée had her first period, there was nobody to comfort her and tell her everything was normal. Aimée thought she had been broken, that she finally took her last cock.

The smugglers were overjoyed when they found out. After a harrowing journey across the Mediterranean, Aimée set foot in Marseilles, fourteen years old. The smugglers sold their cargo to a mafia boss; they made a *killling*. The boss was head of a prostitution ring spanning across France and even into some of the neighboring countries. The women barely had a night to sleep before they were taken away, but the crime lord took Aimée for himself. He was an old man, nearly seventy years old; he used Viagra to get his cock hard enough to penetrate Aimée. His other concubines, the oldest mere weeks away from her eighteenth birthday, taught Aimée how to pleasure the boss. She was a quick learner; she quickly became his favorite. She had her first abortion when she was fifteen, two more before she turned eighteen. The boss kept her longer than most girls, Aimée was exceptional. She was now the one who taught new girls old tricks. When she turned nineteen, the boss had had her enough. In the night she was taken to Paris by a man.

In Paris she was locked in a room with a man in front of the door. The man took money from strangers and let them in. Aimée got two meals a day, often cold, and she never went outside. She had a small window, which wouldn't open and looked out on a blind wall. There were bars in front of the window. To keep Aimée willing and sedated, the man outside the door injected her with heroine. One day, a man came in. He paid a lot of money. He took pictures of Aimée and violently fucked her. Aimée forgot him quickly; just another dick. He painted a portrait of her, a painting Aimée would never see.

By thirty she was considered an old whore. The man outside the door gave her a larger dose of heroine, raped her and beat her for hours; he was a sadist. In the middle of the night he drove into a forest and left Aimée for dead in a ditch. When she came to, three or four days later, she was all alone. She was naked, hungry, bruised and felt a craving for a drug she didn't know. For the first time since her uncle raped her, Aimée started to cry.

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You stand in front of the painting. Something was troubling you. What was it? It is gone
now.

You stand in front of the painting. You see where the artist has labored. Where he put his
brush. Where the paint is thicker. Where it is thinner.

You stand in front of the painting. Incapable of moving, both you and the girl. She smiles
just for you. Breathe in slowly; afraid to disturb the
connection.

You stand in front of the painting. stand in front of the painting. in front of the painting.
front of the painting. of the painting. the painting. Painting.

You stand in front of the painting. You don't worry about what you should be. What you
want is no longer important.

You stand in front of the painting. It does not matter if you stand in a prison or a palace.
Whether you are a pauper or a prince.

You stand in front of the painting. There is so much to see, motionless you take it all in.
The painting fills your whole view, your eyes dart from end
to end.

You stand in front of the painting. Your thoughts and concerns have disappeared. So has
the painting.

There is only beauty.

Reflection

The creative chapter has been influenced by research that was done, but which not made it into the research chapters. For completeness sake, I will briefly comment on these influences, before turning my attention to the influence Lyotard and the end of the grand narratives have had upon the writing of the creative chapter. The forms I have tried to encapsulate are those of Michel Houellebecq, Jorge Luis Borges, Mark Z. Danielewski and to a certain extent H.P. Lovecraft. These authors have blended different styles in a way which have been emulated in the creative chapter.

First of all, Houellebecq is a writer I greatly admire and his works served as an inspiration for this paper. When I tried to come up with a work of art to center the creative chapter around, I often returned to a figurative painting. In *The Map and the Territory*, Houellebecq writes about a fictional artist who does return to the figurative. That artist is Jed Martin. I have chosen his *Aimée, Escort Girl* as the painting to center my original piece of fiction around for several reasons. It is not described in great detail by Houellebecq, which gave me freedom to create those details. For example, the holy aspect emphasized in the art history piece is not mentioned by Houellebecq. By choosing a work that exists, even if it is in the fiction of a different author, I am limiting myself. Now I cannot write about a work that exists solely for me to write about and is thus tailor made to the narrative I am writing. In this way the interaction with an artwork, which is part perceiver and part producer, is mimicked.

A second influence that was (mostly) omitted from the research chapters is Arthur Schopenhauer. His philosophy argues the aesthetic is what can lift us from the eternal suffering, which he viewed as ever present in life. In contemplating the beautiful, we are removed from our desires. These desires stem from the will, which is the underlying fundament of the world. Because we are always in a state of desire, according to Schopenhauer, we are always in a state of deficit, which leads to suffering. Schopenhauer was influenced by Eastern religions, which explains his Buddhist view on the world. The contemplation of art can be likened to meditation. This is a very idealist philosophy of art, based in Kant and the aesthetic judgment that is devoid of interest. In the final fragment of the creative chapter, I have tried to write down such an experience. I have used a mantra (“You stand in front of the painting”) to give the feeling of meditation.

The theory of Lyotard however, is the biggest influence on the creative chapter. The form I have chosen is directly inspired by Lyotard’s small narratives. Instead of telling one, grand narrative, several small ones have been written. None of these small ones are the authoritative narration. They all tell a story, but not *the* story. Nor do any of the small narratives claim any truthfulness beyond the narration itself. Small discrepancies have been put between narratives to reflect this. A large discrepancy is put into the story of Aimée. There never was a girl named Aimée (to be fair, there never really was a painting of her either). It does not correspond to the earlier stories, which claim that Martin’s ex-girlfriend Geneviève was the inspiration for the painting. This does not mean that this story is false, in the language game that views prostitution as exploitation (of which there is also a fragment earlier in the text) the fictionalized story of Aimée is a valid response to the painting.

To reflect the differences between narratives different subject matter and different lexis have been used for each one. Returning sentences have been used in some narratives to enhance the feeling of oneness within that fragment and difference from the other fragments. The final fragment, which was inspired by Schopenhauer is an example for this. Just as the dialogue fragment.

I have tried to show my own thoughts on the social bond within art appreciation in the narratives themselves. For almost each fragment a unique motivation for liking or disliking *Aimée, Escort Girl* is shown. These motivations are based upon the language games the person viewing the painting is involved in. For example, the narrator of *Aimée's* history does not agree with the practice of prostitution and sees it as exploitation. This person will not approve of the painting, while other characters do not share this apprehension.

The fragment featuring the man walking briskly through the exhibition, a different reason for disliking the painting is given. He views popularity of a work of art as a reason to judge more harshly. This fragment also reflects the comments on Frans Hals and Rembrandt in the research chapters. The dialogue fragment is the opposite; the couple appreciates the painting due to its popularity. The fragment of art history appreciates the painting due to its holy aspects, while the masturbatory fragment appreciates the sexual aspects. The diary fragment shows a more romantic view, while the fragment featuring Martin himself is more concerned with practical matters. The journalistic and exhibition fragments are concerned with objectivity, though these fragments tell little about the painting itself, and they offer misinformation. These are places where discrepancies have been put.

Both research and creative chapters have taught me a lot about myself and my thoughts on art. I turned out to be more sympathetic towards realist art than I expected, for one. The final fragment turned out to be the hardest to write, because of its ethereal, non-material nature. Writing the research chapters allowed me to work out some intuitions I have had about art, but never closely examined. Lyotard, a thinker I have always admired from a distance, turned out to be a friendly, but uncompromising ally who led me down some paths which turned out to be dead ends, but overall offered supports upon which I could rest my own aesthetic ideas.