STILL LIFES AND SUBLIME VISTAS

ON THE NON-MODERNITY OF DIDEROT'S APPROACH TO GENRE PAINTING

The most oft-cited and beloved entries in Diderots *Salons* must be those that deal with Chardin and Verner, two painters working in the traditionally less prestigious genres of still life and landscape. The passages are familiar ones: Diderot sticking an imaginary knife in the painted pâté of Chardins *Le Bocal d'olives* (in the 1763 *Salon*; VS, IV: 265), or fantasizing a walk around Verner's landscapes (1767; VS, IV: 594-635[1])- And many like to locate in them something particularly *modern*—compared, that is, to Diderot's effulgent praise for a painter like Greuze, whose middlebrow canvases drip with a now-dated hymn to Virtue: "Few art historians have concealed their discomfort with [Greuze's] paintings themselves or their disapproval of the audience who went into raptures before them," writes Michael Fried.[2] Notwithstanding Fried's efforts to rehabilitate Diderot's taste for edifyingly domestic themes, that taste can still leave critics wondering, in the words of Christopher Braider, "what someone otherwise so shrewd and forward-looking could possibly have seen in some of the paintings he championed."[3] How much safer, then, those passages on the non-moralistic Verner and Chardin, whose paintings provoke in Diderot more properly "aesthetic" musings on the very ontology of painting. "On

1 Since all references to Diderot s writings will be drawn from this same edition and volume, parentheses will supply page numbers alone, along with the year of the *Salon* if not evident from the text.

2 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1980, p. 10.

3 Christopher Braider, "Groping in the Dark: Aesthetics and Ontology in Diderot and Kant," *Word and Image 29 A* (2013), p. 105-6.

touche ici," writes Stéphane Lojkine, "à ce qui, des *Salons*, paraît le plus contemporain de notre expérience de l'art."[4]

A good deal of the difficulty, here, is Diderot's relation to the traditional "hierarchy of the genres"—the indexing of artistic worth to the perceived importance of the subject matter depicted. In this view, whose roots reach back to Antiquity, works with living subjects are superior to "still life"; and similarly, works featuring historical or mythological heroes outclass those depicting prosaic nobodies such as tavern-goers. By Diderots "neoclassical" time, rather than falling into decay, the hierarchy of the genres may have been actually increasing its hegemony. Classifications became more dogmatic,[5] scorn for the "lower" genres more shrill.[6] Given this context, Diderot's art-historical writings can well appear revolutionary—as when, in his *Essai sur la peinture,* supplement to the 1765 *Salon,* he drastically simplifies the hierarchy by promoting scenes of contemporary bourgeois life, and even Verner's landscapes, to the ranks of history painting (506). And Diderot might be said to go further still in his attention to Chardin, which for Harriet Stone—and many others—"upends" the old generic hierarchy and the royalist ideology that went along with it, thereby clearing a path from the Dutch Golden Age to modern theories of art in which "the unremarkable becomes remarkable."[7] If other scholars have not failed to point out that plenty of passages in the *Salons* betray Diderot's ongoing devotion to the hierarchy of the genres,[8] for the critics I will be engaging, those passages are misleading: the essential Diderot is elsewhere, in what Régis Michel calls the "aspiration confuse à la modernité" visible in the Chardin and Verner entries.[9] Why not, then, follow Braider in positing

4 Stéphane Lojkine, *L'Œil révolté: Les Salons de Diderot*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2007, p. 448.

5 See Emmanuelle Hénin, "Les Enfants de Piraïcos: L'Ambivalence des genres mineurs au XVIIe siècle," in *Subversion des hiérarchies et séduction des genres mineurs*, ed. Cécile
Gauthier, Emmanuelle Hénin, and Virginie Leroux, Paris, Peeters, 2016, p. 76.

6 Thus, according to René Démoris, the Abbé Du Bos's *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et*
sur la peinture (1719) goes further than any text to date in "la condemnation des genres mineurs" (René Démoris, *Chardin: La Chair et l'objet,* Paris, Olbia, 1999, p. 24).

7 Harriet Stone, *Crowning Glories: Netherlandish Realism and the French Imagination during the Reign ofLouis XIV,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019, p. 219 and 210.

8 Roland Mortier, *Diderot and the "Grand Goût": The Prestige of History Painting in the*
Eighteenth Century, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1982.

9 Régis Michel, "Diderot et la modernité", in *Diderot et l'art de Boucher à David: Les*

two Diderots, one characterized by a “residual conservatism” and a second harboring “a decidedly non-traditional commitment to lower forms”?[10] Diderot, it would seem, may not know which of his tastes have a future, diluting as he does his Modernity in too many parts Tradition. But are even his passages on the lower genres of landscape and still life *modern* in the first place? My argument is no: Diderot’s immersive theorizations of still life and landscape, I will show, are much better understood as a flamboyant late-stage development of an old paradigm rather than the foundation of a new one.

Let me start by recalling briefly some of the well-known passages.

The opening feint in the 1767 *Salons* presentation of Verner is justifiably famous. “VERNET. J’avais écrit le nom de cet artiste au haut de ma page, et j’allais vous entretenir de ses ouvrages, lorsque je suis parti pour une campagne voisine de la mer et renommée par la beauté de ses sites” (594). But there was no trip to the seaside: after narrating a tour of six such sites taken in the company of a lay priest—punctuated by cries of admiration, and dilated by repeated discussions about the proper relation between Nature and Art—Diderot reveals to the reader that he has been talking about Verner’s canvases all along. “J ai oublié que je vous ai fait un conte à présent et que je m’étais supposé devant la nature (et l’illusion était bien facile), puis tout à coup je me suis retrouvé de la campagne au Salon” (625-26).

Diderot’s extraordinary *conte*, since known as the *promenade Vernet,* would appear to realize for the reader a type of immersion that the critic had already explored more than once. Indeed, Diderot’s interest in *entering* paintings—especially but not exclusively landscape paintings—is clear by 1763. Describing a Loutherbourg, Diderot plays the tour guide by putting readers within the depicted space: “En sortant de ce bois, et vous avançant vers la droite, voyez ces masses de rochers [...]” (267); “Ah, mon ami, que la nature est belle dans ce petit canton! Arrêtons-nous-y” (268). Similarly, a Vernet invites us to forget its frame and to react to it as we would react to the spectacle of nature itself: “Regardez le *Port de La Rochelle* avec une

Salons 1759'1781, Paris: Réunion des Musées nationaux, 1985, p. 110.

10 Christopher Braider, art. cit., p. 110. Similarly, Katalin Kovacs concludes that Diderot “recule au moment où l’on s’attendrait justement a une énonciation allant au-delà d’une hiérarchie traditionnelle des genres” (Katalin Kovâcs, “La couleur et le sentiment de la chair dans les premiers ‘Salons’ de Diderot”, *Diderot Studies* 30 [2007], p. 141).

lunette qui embrasse le champ du tableau, et qui exclut la bordure; et oubliant tout-à-coup que vous examinez un morceau de peinture, vous vous écrierez, comme si vous étiez placé au haut d'une montagne, spectateur de la nature même: 'O le beau point de vue!'" (271). Thus, the *promenade Vernet* of 1767 is the endpoint of a multi-year experience with landscapes, one that finally leads Diderot in that very *Salon* to an explicit descriptive protocol: "C'est une assez bonne méthode pour décrire des tableaux, surtout champêtres, que d'entrer sur le lieu de la scène par le côté droit ou par le côté gauche, et s'avançant sur la bordure d'en bas, de décrire les objets à mesure qu'il se présentent. Je suis bien fâché de ne m'en être pas avisé plus tôt" (677). Landscape appears to have as phantasmatic ideal the total absorption of the viewer into the representation. And Verner's mastery allows him to "produire toutes les illusions possibles" (1763; 237).

If landscape invites the imaginary promenade, Chardin's still lifes have their own effects. Chardin comes up in the first *Salon,* of 1759, where Diderot briefly mentions six of his paintings—four still lifes and two with human figures engaged in what Fried has taught us to recognize as "absorptive" activities (drawing, crocheting). Pace Fried, it is the objects, not the humans, that call to Diderot: "Vous prendriez les bouteilles par le goulot, si vous aviez soif; les pêches éveillent l'appétit et appellent la main" (197).[11] If one *wanders* in Verner's landscapes, one *touches* Chardin's still lifes, and this haptic dimension carries over to the most famous Chardin entry, the 1763 discussion of *Le Bocal d'olives* and *La Raie dépouillée. Le Bocal* presents objects so convincing that "il n'y a qu'à prendre ces biscuits et les manger; cette bigarade, l'ouvrir et la presser, ce verre de vin, et le boire; ces fruits, et les peler; ce pâté, et y mettre le couteau" (265). The solicitation of the image comes from what would seem to be its perfect transparency or equivalency: "C'est que ce vase de porcelaine est de la porcelaine" (264). Similarly, looking at the *Raie dépouillée* is like, well, looking at a *raie dépouillée,* an eviscerated skate: "c'est la chair même du poisson. C'est la

11 Significantly if surprisingly, Michel Fried, *op. cit.,y* is interested in a Chardin that Diderot never comments on—the painter of "genre scenes" featuring absorbed humans. In the rest of this article, I will set aside Fried's classic study, focused as it is not on the problem of generic hierarchy frequently raised by critics, but on the supposed invention of a new relationship between painting and beholder. Despite its distinctiveness, in my view Fried's modernity narrative is no less compromised than those I will be dealing with here.

peau. C'est son sang" (265). Six years later, Chardin is still as perfectly and tautologically transparent: "Qu'est-ce que cette perdrix? Ne le voyez-vous pas? C'est une perdrix. Et celle-là? C'en est une encore" (844).

No doubt it is this peculiar self-evidence that stills the critic himself, far less loquacious in his Chardin bulletins than in his evocations of Verner (or Greuze). Indeed, what is there to say about perfect limpidity?[12] In his longest entry on Chardin, in the *Salon* of 1765, Diderot imagines a descriptive conceit parallel to the one used to describe landscapes: "Je ne vous dirai de Chardin qu'un seul mot, et le voici: Choisissez son site, disposez sur ce site les objets comme je vous les indique, et soyez sûr que vous aurez vu ses tableaux" (346). In the eight descriptions of still lifes that follow, Diderot makes this his method, multiplying the imperatives addressed to the reader: "Placez dans l'intérieur de la fenêtre un verre plein de vin"; "Suspendez par la patte un oiseau de rivière"; "Placez sur un banc de pierre un panier d'osier plein de prunes" (347-48). And returning again and again in all the Chardin entries is the same praise for the illusory qualities of the paintings, for the thingyness of Chardin's things: "C'est toujours la nature et la vérité" (1759; 197); "C'est la nature même" (1765; 346); "Chardin est si vrai, si vrai" (1765; 345), "d'une vérité à tromper les yeux" (1763; 264). Only in one late Chardin does Diderot signal a painted statue of Mercury "qui ne fait pas toute l'illusion possible" (1769; 843), in a phrase that recalls almost verbatim, in negative, his praise for Verner. But by 1771—the last *Salon* to contain an entry on Chardin of any significance—the painter has again found his groove: "l'illusion y est de la plus grande force" (895).

On the face of things, Diderot's treatments ofVernet and Chardin should appear old-school—specifically in their repeated recourse to traditional tropes about art as imitation of nature. Indeed, my argument will be that notwithstanding the winningness of Diderot's prose, his treatments really are, at bottom, traditional. But I have to argue the obvious because a long line of critics have repeatedly detected here something else, something in fact subversive of inherited commonplaces. It is not every time the same something, but it is always enough to make Diderot properly or at least presciently modern.

12 "La nature morte semble prendre pour acte fondateur le rejet du discours" (Philippe Déan, *Diderot devant 1"image*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2000, p. 87).

One tack consists of saying that Diderot *evolves*, which is to say leaves behind the classical premises that are his starting point. Perhaps the best example of this reading is Norman Brysons chapter in his 1983 book *Word and Imaged* Bryson's general argument is "Saussurian": there are proper and improper ways of understanding how signs function, with the latter taking them for transparent windows on the world and the former acknowledging the material presence of the signifier. And the unfolding *Salons* track Diderots semiotic education: at first "written from within the configuration of transparency," around 1765 the *Salons* start to change as Diderot takes increasing interest in "the technical side of painting."[13] [14] Bryson sets this transition up as a shift from Verner to Chardin. The formers landscapes—and those of Loutherbourg as well—score very high for "hallucinability"; they are what Bryson calls *hieroglyphic* signs, which promise "sensory presence and plenitude."[15] But Chardin poses a "threat" to "the hieroglyphic system" by foregrounding "the materiality of painting" and the labor of the painter.[16] Diderots first instinct is to treat Chardin as if he were Verner by insisting that his painted objects are "*hors de [la] toile*—off the canvas, existing in an imaginary three-dimensional space behind the signifying plane."[17] While this appreciation of Chardin as "the master of trompe 1'oeil" is genuinely felt on Diderots part, at the same time it is a "terrible distortion" and "misunderstanding" of Chardin, arrived at by "repressing part of [the critics] visual experience."[18] That experience, Bryson claims, is the experience of the signifier, which is to say the canvas, the pigment, the work of the brush.

Reading the *Salons* as "critical narrative," Daniel Brewer has advanced a similarly evolutionary argument.[19] For Brewer, the descriptive conceit that lies at the heart of the *Salons*—that is, the conceit that Diderot can describe

13 "Diderot and the Image", in Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime*$_y$ Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 179-203.

14 Norman Bryson, *op. cit.,* p. 189 and 194.

15 Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 190 and 189.

16 Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 192.

17 Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 193.

18 Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 193 and 194.

19 Daniel Brewer, "Critical Narratives: Diderots *Salons*in *The Discourse of Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century France: Diderot and the Art of Philosophizing,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 132-67.

paintings for the far-flung readers of the *Correspondance littéraire*—goes hand in hand with the mimetic theory of painting that Diderot initially embraces. Diderot, however, comes to realize that his descriptive abilities are limited: only seeing Verner's canvases will do. As the ideal of *utpicture poesis* crumbles, Diderot "slowly disengages himself" from "the ancient view of pictorial representation as the artful double of an absent model."[20] This is why "simple delight in mimetic illusion becomes harder to come by in the course of the *Salons*," and why Chardins star starts to dim: "eventually Diderot wearies of the very predictability of a Chardin still life," writes Brewer, and soon his paintings produce only "boredom."[21] In place of the mimetic topoi he discards, Diderot elaborates a model of artistic reception that foregrounds the libidinal investment and "phantasmic projection" of the viewer, thereby undoing the ideology of classicism he started with.[22]

Thus, for Bryson and Brewer, the *Salon* passages that display Diderot's mimetic enthrallment before the paintings of Verner and Chardin are misleading: at bottom, Diderot works to arrive at very different—much less "naïve," no doubt—understandings of the artwork. Yet even on an empirical level, the chronology of the *Salons* does not support any idea of an evolution. Bryson detects a change in 1765, but choosing this year as a pivot works against his from-Vernet-to-Chardin argument: the undeniably "hallucinatory" *promenade Vernet* dates of course from 1767, while attention to Chardins celebrated *faire*—"un faire rude et comme heurté" (218) that becomes illusion-producing only when viewed from afar—is visible three *Salons* earlier, in 1761. To say that the *Salons* "mov[e] to the banishing of illusion through attention to technics"[23] by 1769 is doubly wrong: first, because the attention to technics is present from early on; second, because many of the passages praising Chardin's illusionism come from the later *Salons.* "Il n'y a rien en lui qui sente la palette," writes Diderot in 1769, just before dismissing the detail that "ne fait pas toute l'illusion possible" (843) and telling us that Chardin's partridge is partridge (844). Similarly, Brewer's remark that "simple delight in mimetic illusion" diminishes over time is backed up by no demonstration; and his

20 Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 144.
21 Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 144, 157, 158.
22 Daniel Brewer, *ibid.,* p. 167.
23 Norman Bryson, *op. cit.,* p. 197.

contention that Diderot becomes "bored" with Chardin's illusionistic canvases is well-nigh inexplicable in the face of the later entries themselves.

Inexplicable—but at the same time easily comprehensible in the context of a common critical determination to spy modernity emerging out from under Diderots retrograde illusionist discourse. Brysons version of modernity is the most resonant. For in claiming that Chardin unseats Verner through his ability to make the critic "aware of the sheet of pigment worked by the brush," Bryson is not only giving us a semiotically aware, proto-Saussurian Diderot. More crucially, he is also giving us a proto-Greenbergian Diderot: the lesson must be that the vocation of the painter is to meditate on the specificity of the medium, and thus that (modern) paintings destiny is the exploration of paint and the quadrilateral surface of the canvas. This explains why Bryson finishes his analysis with Diderot's attention to the *harmony* of Chardins paintings, an attention he claims is distinct from the *philosophé*s celebration of the painters *trompe-l'oeil* magic. For harmony is a "formal" matter involving the "internal relations" of the canvas—"a purely painterly reorganization, occurring exclusively on the picture-plane."[24] "Purely painterly": the Greenbergian idiom is clear if unavowed, and it is fully compatible with Brysons Saussurian reference to "the plane of signifiers."[25]

It is certainly true that Diderot is aware of brushstrokes and often speaks of harmony. Doubtful, though, is the proposition that his attention to the canvas of a Chardin signals Diderot's break with a classical paradigm and foundation of the Modernist lineage. Bryson concedes that harmony in Diderots usage can serve the cause of traditional mimetic theory: "In one sense it refers to the harmony of light that is already present in nature, to those elusive effects of radiation and reflection which are the province of the realist and the hyper-realist painter."[26] Bryson is probably thinking of passages such as the 1765 entry, where *harmonie* is yoked together with "l imitation de la nature" and "la science de la couleur" in the production of the simulacrum: "Comme Fair circule autour de ces objets! La lumière du soleil ne sauve pas mieux les disparates des êtres qu'elle éclaire" (345).

24 Norman Bryson, *op. cit.,y* p. 202.

25 *Ibid.* Space constraints keep me from taking up the similarly Greenbergian argument of Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Tache aveugle: Essai sur les relations de la peinture et de la sculpture à l'âge moderne.,* Paris, Gallimard, 2003, p. 110-11.

26 *Ibid.*

We do indeed seem far, in such passages, from “a new, purely aesthetic harmony that is introduced into nature from the outside.”[27] But where are we to find the harmony of the more purely—“purely,” again—aesthetic sort? Bryson quotes from one sentence from 1769,[28] [29] occurring just after the one previously cited about Chardin not smelling of the palette: “C’est une harmonie au-delà de laquelle on ne songe pas à désirer; elle serpente imperceptiblement dans sa composition, toute sous chaque partie de l’étendue de sa toile” (843). It’s true that here, *harmonie* does appear to apply to the painting itself, rather than the space represented. But it is also true that the sentence hardly amounts to an explicit theory, and comes drowned in any case in standard-issue classical mimetic discourse. “Tous voient la nature, mais Chardin la voit bien et s’épuise à la rendre comme il la voit,” begins the description of *Les Attributs des arts* in which the sentence on harmony occurs (842); the sentence is immediately followed by the criticism of Chardin’s treatment of the Mercury sculpture, the one that “ne fait pas toute l’illusion possible”; and describing the next canvas, Diderot returns to painterly harmony as the reproduction of a pre-existing natural harmony: “Il est ici également harmonieux, c’est la même entente des reflets, la même vérité des effets” (843). So the flaw lies not only with Bryson’s view of Diderot’s purported progress, which would consist in moving from a love of Verner ’s hallucinatory landscapes and Chardin’s *trompe-l’oeil* magic to a proper understanding of Chardin as “master of *harmonie."*[13] The deeper problem is that the *Salons* do not contain two distinct Chardins: it is only by selective quotation and teleological thinking that Diderot’s remarks on harmony can possibly be trumpeted as a discovery (or even just intuition) of the modern autonomy of the picture-plane.[30]

Harmony aside, however, might Diderot’s undeniable attention to Chardin’s technique presage a modernist attention to the medium? Bryson gives us little sustained close reading, but the passages in which

27 *Ibid.*

28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid. y* p. 200.

30 Admittedly, Bryson does not try to push Diderot toward full semiotic disenchantment, but has him finding a charmed “point of balance” where signifier and signified are simultaneously experienced (Norman Bryson, *ibid.,* p. 203). Nonetheless, Brysons overall modernity narrative is patent.

Diderot tries to reckon with Chardin's *faire* are indeed some of the most interesting. Both at the beginning of the *Salons* and toward the end, Chardin is distinguished for the unfinishedness of his canvases. Thus, in 1761: "Il y a longtemps que ce peintre ne finit plus rien" (218); while in 1771: "ce morceau est beaucoup moins fini que ses ouvrages précédents" (895). And as we've seen, the word *heurté* makes a series of appearances—in the 1761 mention of th*e faire* "rude et comme heurté"; in the 1763 reference to Chardins "genre heurté," composed of "une infinité de chocs fiers et vigoureux" (269); and again in 1765 s "manière heurtée" (349). On the face of it, this attention-getting style would seem at odds with the characterization of Chardin as "simple et vrai" (1763; 237), and indeed each time he mentions Chardins *faire,* Diderot works the paradox himself. After all, how can what the viewer recognizes up close as "des couches épaisses de couleur, appliquées les unes sur les autres" (1763; 265), "un tas informe de couleurs grossièrement appliquées" (1763; 268), end up producing from afar the sought-after mimetic transparency, whereby "l'objet se crée et finit par être celui de la nature" (1765; 349)?

Each reappearance of this paradox in the *Salons* ends up reaffirming Diderot's ideological commitment to the hierarchy of genres. It's no accident that it's the *virility* of Chardin's style—"[des] chocs fiers et vigoureux"—that "sauve l'ouvrage de la petitesse de forme" (1763; 269) and makes for an admiration that by all rights such low subjects should not possess. "Ne croyez pas que cette harmonie soit le résultat d'une manière faible, douce et léchée," warns Diderot, anxious that his taste for Chardin's still fifes might come across as too feminine: "Point du tout, c'est partout la touche la plus vigoureuse" (1765; 348). It makes sense, then, that the *heurté* style is not actually specific to Chardin's canvases. The phrasing in the 1765 entry is significant. "Le faire de Chardin est particulier. *Il a de commun avec la manière heurtée* que de près on ne sait ce que c'est" (349, my emphasis): Chardin's style *resembles* the valorized "manière heurtée" practiced by masters of other, less debased genres—the landscapes of Loutherbourg, the battles of Casanove, the domestic drama of Greuze, and then Rubens himself (1763; 265, 269). But even the painter's reassuring *touche vigoureuse* can't forestall the concession that he is working with inanimate matter, and thus aims at a too easy of a target: "il est vrai que ces objets ne changent pas sous les yeux de l'artiste" (348). Diderot concludes: "Si le sublime du technique n'y était pas, l'idéal de Chardin

serait misérable" (342). Talking up Chardin's technique inevitably leads to pondering the worthlessness and facility of painting inanimate objects.

Certainly, it is curious that Chardin can both be praised for his illusionism and at the same time give us canvases whos*e faire* marks them as unmistakably his own. But is the classical mimetic ideal crumbling under the weight of this contradiction? Bryson himself gestures in this direction, certainly, and another proponent of the thesis is Marian Hobson. In her 1982 *The Object of Art,* Hobson points to Diderots entries on Chardin as the first sign of a sea-change in the theorized relation of the art object and nature. While a contemporary such as La Font de Saint-Yenne could certainly recognize Chardins "vérité d'illusion," "it is with Diderot that the problem posed by Chardin precipitates an aesthetic mutation."[31] Like Bryson's, Hobson's Chardin forces Diderot "to recognize that art is mediation and not transparency," thus exposing "the central problem in the relation between 'illusion,' 'faire' and the low genres."[32] As such, Diderot become representative of what will be the paradigm of the second half of the century, and which is still that of our own time: "The whole notion of the relation between art object and nature is changing from that of reference to that of replica."[33]

What Hobson means by these terms is unfortunately not obvious.[34] Be that as it may the place of Chardin and Diderot is starting to seem familiar: it's the place of a crisis in Western representation. The crisis occurs within the mimetic paradigm; its outcome is the invention of the aesthetic, which is to say things like the autonomy of the artwork, the specificity of the medium, and non-referential, legitimately fictive play. Space constraints prevent me from situating these readings of Diderot's *Salons* specifically within a larger set of arguments—within what seems very nearly a consensus—about a broader shift from poetics, understood as a body of compositional rules for artists, to aesthetics, understood as a

31 • Marian Hobson, *The Object of Art: The Theory of Illusion in Eighteenth-Century France.,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982, p. 77. La Font de Saint-Yenne s expression, quoted by Hobson, occurs in his 1754 *Sentiments sur quelques ouvrages de peinture.*

32. Marian Hobson, *ibid.,y* p. 77-78 and 79-80.

33. Marian Hobson, *ibid.,* p. 61.

34. Hobson redefines her terms and restates her narrative in ways that are, for this reader, barely coherent.

phenomenology of the percipient's experience of the artwork.[35] Instead, in the remainder of this article I would like to establish that the above interpretations of Diderots novelty inexcusably skirt the profound commonalities between his reasoning and longstanding formulations regarding mimesis (especially the representation of base subject matter).

As I just pointed out, each time Diderot praises Chardins technique, he concedes the worthlessness of the object imitated. Yet similar concessions are not necessary in the case of Vernet: in theory, landscape is a lesser genre too, but Diderot has no problem arguing for its inclusion within the rubric of history painting. Grosso modo this is because Vernet creates not mere scenery but *scenes*—scenes of people doing things of sufficient drama. Diderot compares his landscapes to Loutherbourg's, whose technique is nearly the equal, he feels, of Verner's. Unfortunately, Loutherbourg introduces into his paintings only shepherds and animals—"toujours des pâtres et des animaux," complains Diderot (1767; 742). Vernet, by contrast, "y sème des personnages et des incidents de toute espèce, et ces personnages et ces incidents, quoique vrais, ne sont pas la nature commune des champs" (742). Vernet might do still better: he could be Poussin, whose landscapes tell metaphysical tales of doom that are ultimately productive of *crainte* and *pitié*—obviously, the very emotions that characterize that highest of the genres, tragedy. Perhaps this is why as laudatory as the *promenade Vernet* is, Diderot crowns it with a fantasy marine of his own confection. This is the dream supposedly provoked by Verner's seven canvases—a dream full of *terribles, pathétiques*, and *touchantes* scenes that make the dreamer shed "des larmes réelles" (631). At its best, landscape—and *a fortiori* marines—can rise to the level of good Aristotelian mimesis, which is the imitation of people doing important—which is to say life-or-death—things.

Still life, however, cannot be elevated in such a manner. The well-known passage from the 1765 *Essai sur la peinture* where Diderot opens up the privileged category of history painting to the lower genres merits recalling. He starts by dividing genre painting into two categories, one of nature and one of domestic scenes. In this wide sense, Diderot continues,

35 See for example the narrative of Pierre Frantz, *L'Esthétique du tableau dans le théâtre du XVIIIe siècle,* Paris, PUF, 1998, who holds moreover that the *philosophes* fascination with Chardins magic "parachève le protocole de la représentation en instillant en son cœur *une crise*' (p. 251, my emphasis).

"Teniers, Wouwerman, Greuze, Chardin, Loutherbourg, Verner même sont des peintres de genre" (506). But only two of these six are named as examples of Diderots expanded definition of history painting: Greuze and Verner, whose paintings "offrent toutes sortes d'incidents et de scènes." Loutherbourg, with his shepherds and animals, fails to make the cut, as do the two Dutch painters, and Chardin: the line between animate and inanimate, Diderot would seem to concede, is hard and fast. The Salon of 1765 contains a similar passage that at first couples Vernet and Chardin, only to drop the latter. "Chardin et Vernet, mon ami, sont deux grands magiciens," writes Diderot, and then proceeds to compare Vernet—but only Vernet—to Jupiter in his ability to "peuple[r] sa toile comme on peuple une colonie" and then afflict his humans with "le temps, le ciel, la saison, le bonheur, le malheur qui lui plaît" (356). And in this sense, Diderots recourse to the new discourse of the sublime, rather than being the "modernizing" gesture so often claimed, merely allows him to invest landscape with the metaphysical seriousness demanded by the old hierarchies. "Si le peintre de ruines ne me ramène pas aux vicissitudes de la vie et à la vanité des travaux de l'homme, il n'a fait qu'un amas informe de pierres" (1023). Chardin's genre scenes—even when he works with humans—cannot possibly aspire to conjuring such lofty thoughts.

No doubt still life too can be redeemed by metaphysical messaging: scholarship on Netherlandish genre painting has long been divided over whether its objects invite Christian meditation on the transience of worldly pleasure, or whether they are simply set before a leveling, non-judgmental gaze that one might qualify as *avant la lettre* aesthetic.[36] Yet Chardin is never the occasion for Diderot to brood over life's vicissitudes; the flesh of the famous skate is not the occasion for ashes-to-ashes thoughts on the perishability of all flesh.[37] But nor is the "it's-the-very-thing" mode that Diderot does adopt anything like a dispassionate gaze upon the real: instead, he is drawn into the commonplaces of early modern discourse on

36 See Eric J. Sluijter, "Didactic and Disguised Meanings? Several Seventeenth-Century Texts on Painting and the Iconographical Approach to Northern Dutch Paintings of This Period", in *Art in History, History in Art: Studies in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Culture*, ed. David Freedberg and Jan de Vries, Los Angeles, Getty Center, 1991, p. 175-207.

37 Psychoanalytically disposed critics, however, have detected in *La Raie* a preoccupation with bodies and sex; see, e.g., René Démoris, *op. cit.*, p. 31-38.

the arts and their effect. According to such commonplaces, the hierarchy of artistic subject matter merely repeats the hierarchy inscribed in nature itself. We admire heroes in reality and therefore also in representation, whereas the reason we are not deeply affected by pictures of fruit is that real fruit is not interesting, and the reason painters should not paint ugly objects is that their paintings of them will be, by definition, ugly.

Yet, for some reason, not quite: "Quelle vanité que la peinture, qui attire notre admiration par la ressemblance des choses dont on n'admire point les originaux."[38] [39] While not following Pascal in taking the paradox as proof of mankind's perversity, theorists routinely allowed, as did he, for some sort of pleasure in representation of the low. "We enjoy looking at the most exact portrayals of things we do not like to see in real life, the lowest animals, for instance, or corpses," observed Aristotle in the *Poetics, '"* and while he didn't explain the source of the pleasure, his seventeenth-century followers did. It's a pleasurable reaction to human handiwork itself, one that implies that the illusion is always transparent. Boileau's formulation is the most famous: "Il n est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux / Qui par l'art imité ne puisse plaire aux yeux / D'un pinceau délicat l'artifice agréable / Du plus affreux objet fait un objet aimable."[40] But it is far from the only one. Lamy, to cite but one other example: "Ce qui plait n'est pas la vue d'un serpent qui est peint; [...] mais ce qui fait plaisir c'est l'esprit du peintre qui a su atteindre la fin de son art."[41] Surely, then, Jacqueline Lichtenstein is right not only to say that eighteenth-century theorists "s'efforcent de montrer [...] que l'illusion picturale [...] n'est pas une véritable illusion," but also that when they do so, they are prolonging a line of thought present since the Renaissance.[42]

38 Blaise Pascal, *Les Pensées,* ed. Michel Le Guern, Paris, Gallimard, 1977, p. 75-76.

39 *Poetics* 1448b, in *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations,* ed. D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 94.

40 Nicolas Boileau, *Art poétique,* ed. Sylvain Menant, Paris, GF Flammarion, 1969, p. 98 (III, 1-4).

41 Bernard Lamy, *La rhétorique ou Tart de parler* (1675), ed. Christine Noille-Clauzade, Paris, Champion, 1998, p. 114.

42 Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *op. cit*., p. 80 and 235. Such a concession—essential, in my view—works not only against Marion Hobsons thesis *(op. cité),* but also against Lichtensteins own arguments for seeing Roger de Pile's work on *coloris* as an aesthetic watershed; see Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La Couleur éloquente: Rhétorique et peinture à T âge classique,* Paris, Flammarion, 1989.

It is in this context that we should reread the passage on *La Raie dépouillée.*

> L'objet est dégoûtant; mais c'est la chair même du poisson. C'est la peau. C'est son sang; l'aspect même de la chose n'affecterait pas autrement. M. Pierre, regardez bien ce morceau [...] et apprenez, si vous pouvez, le secret de sauver par le talent le dégoût de certaines natures. (265)

The articulations are not always explicit: for example, what work is the *mais* doing here?[43] Still, the basic idea of talent somehow "secret[ly]" redeeming our disgust before the accurately represented object is such a commonplace that there's little call to kick into hermeneutic overdrive. And the fact that it's at this point that Diderot starts cooing over Chardin's brushwork ("Ce sont des couches épaisses [...]") confirms that the basic argumentative infrastructure is standard-issue for the period: anyone familiar with passages such as Boileau's and Lamy's will find that Diderot attends to paint and the canvas exactly when one would expect him to. Meanwhile, we've already seen the verb *sauver* come up in the context of subject matter of doubtful interest, as when the *manière heurtée* of Loutherbourg, Casanove, and Chardin "sauve l'ouvrage de la petitesse de forme" (1763; 269). Yet the transgression of generic hierarchy entails effects that can be *mitigated* by technical magic, but never overcome. "Celui [...] qui se négligera sur le choix du sujet se privera de la meilleure partie de son avantage; c'est un magicien maladroit qui casse en deux sa baguette" (1767; 611). And so Diderot dreams more than once of an artist capable of combining worthy subject matter ("des idées intéressantes") and perfect technique ("un faire étonnant" [1765; 342]).

Are Diderot's entries on Chardin and Verner ambiguous and rich in ways that the works of predecessors and contemporaries are not? Of course. But this does not mean that Diderot's *Salons* do anything particularly momentous in the history of aesthetic discourse. Characterizing his attention to Chardin's redemptive *faire* as a new attention to the medium and an epochal recognition of the barrenness of the western mimetic tradition is simply wishful thinking. No less wishful is the idea that his

43 See Kate E. Tunstall, "Diderot, Chardin et la matière sensible", *Dix-Huitième Siècle* 39 (2007), p. 586-87. As stimulating as her reading of the Chardin passages is, Tunstall too is ultimately committed to Diderot's subversion of the hierarchy of the genres (p. 593).

admiration for Verner and Chardin breaks down the hierarchy of the genres, whose premise—the interest of a represented object or person is the same as that of a real object or person—is instead *everywhere* restated and reaffirmed. Diderot does certainly turn over the paradox that this premise leads to: even though art's effects depend on us taking the thing depicted for a real thing, we always know that we are looking at art. But the paradox was nothing new, and exploring it is not the same as setting it aside in order to develop a competing discourse on art's functioning. Competing discourses would come: the passages on Dutch painting in Hegel's *Aesthetics*—to take one example—are a good place to observe the tried-and-true commonplaces on subject matter mixing with legitimately non-Aristotelian categories such as "liveliness" *(Lebendigkeit)* and "intimacy" *(Innigkeit).* ' ' Hegel read the *Essai sur la peinture* in Goethe's translation, and this fact may tempt us into suspecting that Diderot may deserve some credit for initiating these very different ways of speaking. Yet the evidence simply does not bear this out. In his *Salons*, Diderot is just giving his own riff—inimitable, but nevertheless not "modern"—on the thoroughly Aristotelian commonplaces that in his age still dominated the way people talked about art.

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44. See for instance chapter 2 of Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts,* Cambridge,

Cambridge University Press, 2010.