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Et in Arcadia Video: Poussin' the Image of Culture With Marin and Kuntzel



Timothy Murray

When considering an object by itself and on its own terms, without considering what it might represent, one has an idea of a thing, like the idea of the earth and of the sun. But when reflecting on a certain object only as it represents an other, one has an idea of a sign, and this initial object is called a sign. This, then, is how one ordinarily considers maps and paintings. The sign thus includes two concepts: one, the thing representing; the other, the thing represented; and the nature of the sign consists of prompting the latter by the former.

—Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole,
La Logique ou l'art de penser

Those readers familiar with Louis Marin's extensive writings on the semiology of art will recognize my title's pun on one of his favorite images, Nicolas Poussin's pastoral elegy, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, a painting which Marin analyzes in detail in *To Destroy Painting* and throughout his extensive oeuvre. Marin is partial to this painting of the signs of death because its tombstone materializes the powerful role of the sign by representing the two things, death and utopia, that are never perceptible as anything other than representations. Arcadia and death can be known only through the signs of their ephemerality, through representations of infinity and finality, whether of the

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ultimate future or the idealized past. Put in other terms, Poussin's memorable painting performs the twofold function of the sign as theorized by Arnauld and Nicole in the 1683 edition of *La logique ou l'art de penser*. *Et in Arcadia Ego* embodies in one picture plane the thing represented and the thing representing. Poussin's painting of the display of the tomb and its inscription, "Et in Arcadia Ego," thus functions as the doubled representation of representation, the deictic showing of the thing that can only be represented virtually as representation.

Just where might we locate such poststructural concerns with representation, semiology, and virtuality within the context of the contemporary study of culture, not to mention within the discourse of what has come to be known as the discipline of "cultural studies?" Do such reflections on death and utopia preclude their conceptual usefulness to cultural studies which tends to be more at home, more comfortable, with the critical markers of realism, materialism, facticity, and "history?" Judging from the extensive bibliography of *Cultural Studies*, the 788 page Routledge reader edited by Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler, the answer would seem to be simple. This bibliography includes not a single reference to such a figure as influential as Marin, whose interrelated writings on semiotics, psychoanalysis, and Continental philosophy helped to forge the discourse of poststructural approaches to the cultural. Also symptomatic is the volume's lack of bibliographic reference to other influential French theoreticians of text and image, such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, Herbert Damisch, Hélène Cixous, Raymond Bellour, Cathérine Clément, Christian Metz, Guy Rosolato, Thierry Kuntzel, and J.-B. Pontalis, whose work dialogues insistently with earlier traditions of German philosophy, psychoanalysis, and cultural theory to map an ideological approach to culture and its vicissitudes. Indeed, the same absence is true of significant contemporary figures in Germany such as Alexander Kluge and Oscar Negt who insist that the role of fantasy be included in any discussion or production of the media. It is notable that this volume's encyclopedic attempt to delineate a critical terrain of the cultural remains strikingly indifferent to, if not in defensive disavowal of, the extensive Continental discourse on representation and its cultural work. Many adherents of cultural studies no doubt would attribute this absence or entombment of the discourse on representation to what they perceive as the muted response of semio-psycho-philosophical analyses to the imperatives of identity politics and the attendant realistic, materialist

issues of race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and colonialism. While such an Anglo-American spin on the poststructural (in)sensitivity to cultural identity helps to foreground many political issues which are crucial to any theorization of culture, it tends to be inscribed in a pragmatic notion of difference which itself remains insensitive to the muted differences and differends of representational hybridity that constitute the vibrant fabric of the cultural.¹ It is in this latter context of the hybridity of cultural representation that I here propose to reopen the discursive crypts of death and utopia. I propose to establish an imaginary dialogue of sorts between two thoughtful proponents of poststructural practice, Louis Marin and Thierry Kuntzel, whose prescient views and images enhance the study of the cultural.

Affective Space

It is not insignificant to Louis Marin that Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole chose to collapse the many factual distinctions between paintings and maps, *tableaux* and *cartes*, in considering the semiological role of the sign. Readers of Marin know that his texts are especially fond of contemplating the common relation of cartography and painting. For example, in one essay on the topic, entitled "The City in Map and Portrait," Marin provides a detailed reading of how the 1542 and 1578 maps of Strasbourg exemplify the two dimensions, transitive and intransitive, that maps share with all representational devices.² That is, maps represent something—their object—while at the same time demonstratively showing themselves as their own subject, as representing themselves to be representing place. Put simply, cartography simultaneously signifies place and shows itself representing space.

Note Marin's stress on the distinction between the signification of place and the representation of space (a distinction which was developed by Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*³). In

¹ I discuss these issues in greater detail in "The Mise-en-Scene of the Cultural," the Introduction to my collection of French critical essays on representation, *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Ann Arbor 1977, and in "Ideological Fantasy in Reverse Projection," the Introduction to *Like a Film: Ideological Fantasy on Screen, Camera, and Canvas*, London/New York 1993.

² Marin, "La ville dans sa carte et son portrait," *De la représentation*, Paris 1994, pp. 204–18.

³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley 1984.

response to his question, “what is place?”, Marin suggests that any local sequence of things, property, value, and beings-there constitute a synchronic order of position or place. Such synchronic ordering provides the material for systems, tables, or maps. Place should thus be understood as the site of the configuration of stability and the production of law. While place is the term Marin reserves for “the conclusions of an action, for the accomplishment of process . . . the contract, the treatise, the alliance,” space signifies the more fluid field of enunciation, action, and the processes of history and its movements.⁴ “There is space,” writes Marin, “when one takes into consideration direction vectors, speed quantities, temporal variables, movements. Space,” he adds, “is animated by movements within it, or, more precisely, spaces are effects of these movements. Space is the effect produced by operations of orientation which, by the same token, ‘temporalize’ it.”⁵ In the context of Marin’s interest in seventeenth-century sovereign historiography, space plays out conflicts, conquests, and the representation of movement in space, whose effects are themselves spaces. Speaking of a tapestry depicting Louis XIV entering Dunkirk, Marin notes how the King looks at the spectator while gesturing with his commanding cane to Dunkirk, the city he is about to occupy which is represented topographically in the background of the tapestry. The movement whose effect is space is thus the act of the historical subject whose gesture enacts power through effect.

I should add that Marin initially developed this distinction between place and space as representation-effect in his work on Renaissance and baroque cartographic utopias.⁶ The cartographic pictorialization of utopia, an extensive practice of the period ranging from maps to engravings in epic novels, particularly interested Marin since its Renaissance and seventeenth-century practices frequently collapsed the realism of cartographic place and the fantasies of utopic space. Like the text and image of Poussin’s Arcadian tomb, early modern cartography was just as much a powerful projection of imaged spaces and social movements, as it was a practiced charting of known cities, landscapes, and places.

⁴ Marin, “Classical, Baroque: Versailles, or the Architecture of the Prince,” *Yale French Studies*, 80 (1991), p. 171.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Readers of Marin’s later books, *De la représentation*, Paris 1994, *Des pouvoirs de l’image: Gloses*, Paris 1993, and *Lectures traversières*, Paris 1992, will note the lasting influence of the utopic reflections he developed much earlier in *Utopics: Spatial Play*, trans. Robert A. Vollrath, Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1984.

Marin derived much of his complicated theory of “the powers of the image” from his keen semiological understanding of how cartographic practice demonstrates the method of charting place while simultaneously representing the procedures of the projection of representation as effect. This theory of power—what I would qualify as power projected—maintains that representational systems, both visual and textual, both artistic and cartographic, always function as apparati that position the subject as “a power of theory or a desire of representation”⁷ (72). Marin’s concept of subjectivity relies on the critical acceptance of two related contingencies which he was careful to distinguish: 1) that power is defined “as desire bound by and caught in representation,” (what I understand as the combined procedures of projection and incorporation, that is, the effects of representation) and, 2) that the Cartesian subject of enunciation is not only a “theoretical” subject but also “a will, a desire” (72), that is, a space of affect.⁸ Through elaborate close readings of texts and images, Marin consistently demonstrates how the will is the stuff of desire and how power is contingent on desire’s manifestation as representation. In both cases, the exterior images of power/desire and theory/representation always bear the phantasmatic marks and traces of the inside just as the subliminal representation of the inside is always sustained by incorporated forms and supports of text and image, which representational devices he terms “text or tissue.”⁹

One way of conceptualizing space, in this baroque context, might be as the affective fold of the voluminous motions of inside-out, outside-in. A trademark of Louis Marin’s exceptional contributions to the understanding of early-modern culture is his appreciation of how the fold and trace conjoin the *différance* of deconstruction, the interpellations and symptomatic enfoldings of Lacan, and the critical legacies and semiotic specificities of classical French philosophy, art, and letters.¹⁰ What Marin appreciates of the philosophical Arcadia of early-modern culture is less an unproblematic, neoclassical utopia than those uncanny “games of space” that both dissemble and present the historical and ideological contradictions of representation

⁷ Marin, “Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin’s *The Arcadian Shepherds*, in *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson, Cambridge, p. 72.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Marin, “La ville dans sa carte et son portrait,” p. 207.

¹⁰ See the development of the baroque investment in the affect and the fold in Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, Minneapolis 1993, and Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *La folie du voir: de l’esthétique baroque*, Paris 1986.

and its subjects. As he so forcefully reads the playful scene of Poussin's Arcadia, there lie the playful spaces of identity and alterity, will and desire, as well as theory and representation.

White Lights

Having laid out the groundwork of Marin's passion for cultures of cartography, I wish to note that I have charted these investments primarily to project the space of Marin's early-modern concerns into the future. My task here, returning once again to Poussin's painting, *Et in Arcadia Ego*, will be to discuss the critical shift that occurs, if any, when the semiotic subject of early modern painting or cartography, Ego, gives way to the spatially diffuse subject of postmodern installation, Video. How might Marin's concept of the powers of the neoclassical image impact contemporary video culture and its museum arcades? Given that artistic form and subject matter shift through time and practice, what might we expect from the video transformation of the interpellations of desire and subjectivity common to the age of Poussin?

When I first heard of plans to exhibit Thierry Kuntzel's video installation, *Four Seasons minus one*, as part of his retrospective at the Jeu de Paume in the spring of 1993, I had hopes of viewing this electronic appropriation of Poussin in the pleasurable company of Louis Marin, a groundbreaking reader of French neoclassical painting. I was wondering what Marin would make of Kuntzel's technological rendition of Poussin's pastoral passage from the pleasures of spring to the death masks of winter. But since this scenario was disrupted by the too sudden arrival of death at Marin's own door, I found myself visiting the Kuntzel exhibition armed with thoughts from his text, "The being of the image and its efficacy," the preface of *Des pouvoirs de l'image*, the book on which Marin was working at the time of his death. The result of my visit to the Kuntzel exhibition was the unfolding of what Marin calls in his preface "a theoretical fiction," that is, a theoretical questioning of the interval between the possibilities of the apparition of Poussin's Arcadian subject and what Marin might have termed the "arcanian" effects of its video manifestation.

In order best to elaborate on this difference, I would like to begin by clarifying the conceptual apparatus I took into my viewing of Kuntzel's installation. For I continue to appreciate how the powers of the image, as so aptly theorized by Marin, are forcefully displayed by Kuntzel's dazzling technological representation of *The Four Seasons*,

the sobering Arcadian cycle which Poussin painted at the end of his life. Had Marin been able to enjoy the delights of the Kuntzel rendition, he might well have included a still from the central panel of the triptych wall projection, *Winter (The Death of Robert Walser)* to illustrate his point of departure. This still would depict a crisp video close-up of the sparkling white fabric of a translucent death shroud whose elegant folds simultaneously veil and display a dark body lying motionless beneath. In reflecting on the Occidental tendency to diminish the image to the secondary status of a dead copy, a mediating screen, or a mirroring specter of a living presence, Marin would have displayed this still to illustrate his point that the image derives its force from just such an embodiment of re-presentation. Like the writing to which he always compares it, the image always already figures a substitutional absence in space or time. Yet it is the excess of visual displacement, condensation, and secondary revision that lends to the image an undeniable enunciational force. Whether in viewings of Poussin or in readings of Montaigne, Marin insists that the making present of imagined absence fuels the autobiographical energy sustaining all theoretical fictions. Regarding Kuntzel's *Winter*, he might well have repeated his remarks about the representational force of death in Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*. Poussin's "representation of death," he writes, "refers to the process of representation *as* death, which writing (and painting as a writing process) tames and neutralizes among the living people who read and contemplate it."¹¹

As if writing in the echo of Montaigne's famous prescription, "To Philosophize, Is to Learn How to Die," Marin describes the "primitive" force of representation as an image-effect of death and its drive: "it makes present the absent, as if what returned were the same and sometimes better, more intense, stronger than if it were the same."¹² "Sometimes better, more intense, stronger," that is, in as much as the representation-effects of "force" are understood in the context of the powers of the image. *Force is here the representation-effect of the visual projection (or as J.-B. Pontalis would say, the transference)¹³ of the imaginary accomplishments of desire in the insurmountable gap of temporality, in the insuperable différance of desire's realization.* Marin stresses his punning emphasis on the Real when he adds: "In representation which is power, in power which is representation, the real [*le réel*]¹⁴—if by "real"

¹¹ Marin, "Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts," p. 86.

¹² Marin, "L'être de l'image et son efficace," *Des pouvoirs de l'image*, p. 11.

¹³ J. B. Pontalis, *La force d'attraction*, Paris 1990.

we understand the always deferred fulfillment of this desire—the real is nothing more than the fantasy image in which the subject contemplates itself as absolute.”¹⁴ These words bear the full weight of Marin’s acknowledgment of their accomplished precedent in the practice of philosophical painting. It was Louis Marin, after all, who wrote that excellence in painting meant to Poussin a kind of learning how to die: “knowing how to tell the story of the dead through images.”¹⁵

It is in the context of such a fantastically absolute image of self staring at the specter of death, like the one projected by Kuntzel’s enshrouded figure who at one point opens his eyes to stare up at the camera in *Winter*, that the subject interpellated by painting can be said only to be merely inferred and presupposed by the specific configurations of history and culture. The powers of the image constitute something like a virtual forcefield conjoining absolute subject and dissolute history. Marin understands such conjunction to figure the representational efficacy of the image. “If it is the essence of all force to aspire to the absolute,” he writes in a lengthy passage,

it is the “reality” of its subject never to be consoled not to be absolute. The representation-effects that constitute powers and that powers permit and authorize in return would be the modalities (historical, anthropological, sociological . . .) of a work of mourning—although infinite in space and time—of the absolutism of force, of the real fulfillment of the desire of absolutism of its subject. The image in its powers would work the transformation of the infinity of a loss . . . without alterity or exteriority from an imaginary in which the absolute would have its space.¹⁶

The ultimate force of visual history is thus relegated to the powerful space of absolute desire which conjoins the gazing procedures of subjectivity and the latency of the subject-caught-in-sight. The modalities of history, anthropology, and sociology, it is crucial to note in the context of a theorization of the cultural, have a representational place here only as the fraught reworkings of the mourning of spatial absolutism.

Curiously, Thierry Kuntzel attributes analogous image-effects to the force particular to cinema. He distinguishes between two types of return which are characteristic of cinema. The first involves what Marin would call the exterior modalities of representation: those repetitive elements that permit, through the means of *Nachträglichkeit*,

¹⁴ Marin, “L’être de l’image et son efficace,” p. 16.

¹⁵ Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort, Chicago 1995, p. 4.

¹⁶ Marin, “L’être de l’image et son efficace,” pp. 16–17.

spectatorial recognition of the secondary references of the cinematic image—the visibility of the places, characters, actions, and gestures of diagesis. The second aspect of cinematic repetition fuels the repetitive “force” of cinema that seizes spectators in the web of obscure impressions. This “demonic power” paralyzes spectators in view of the return of the trace through which they are marked as cinematic effects; the cause of such power can be verbalized only in terms of the traces of misrecognition, “the stroke effect (*l’effet de sidération*),” writes Kuntzel, “that the film produces in me”¹⁷ (32). The positioning of the spectators inside, rather than outside, the fantasy effect is what both Kuntzel and Marin identify as the force of the image.

Marin and Kuntzel also share a deep interest in how visual arrestation occurs in structural relation to the scopic drive, “*la Lumière*” (“the Light”). This reader finds that Kuntzel’s description of his video work as an “outline of light” emits an uncanny shadow of the figure sustaining Marin’s theoretical fiction of the powers of the image. Marin relates imagistic power to the force of “the light”: “the white of light or the black of shadow which is its necessary reverse—the light is untenable to sight. The transcendental sphere of “see as seen” (“*voir-être vu*”) is impenetrable to the gaze.”¹⁸ Marin here refers, no doubt, to Lacan’s visualization of the scopic drive in terms of “*la Lumière*,” that burst of light through which Lacan was rendered immobile by the luminous presence of a discarded tin can. “This is something,” Lacan writes of “*la Lumière*,” “that introduces what was elided in the geometral relation—the depth of field, with all its ambiguity and variability, which is in no way mastered by me. It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture.”¹⁹ Lacan’s reference to the pictorial tradition of landscape works to link his interests in perspective and geometry to the aesthetic legacy of “*la Lumière*” which is so crucial to Marin’s sensitivity to the powers of the image.

In Marin’s neoclassical period, “*la Lumière*” embodied the distinguishing, sublime features of neoclassical painting and theory, as well as the trope of its extended force in the centralizing ideology of the Sun King and his geometrical representation. Marin is quick to link

¹⁷ Thierry Kuntzel, “Notes sur *La Jélée*,” in *Thierry Kuntzel*, ed. Anne-Marie Duguët, Paris 1993, p. 32.

¹⁸ Marin, “L’être de l’image et son efficace,” p. 19.

¹⁹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York 1978, p. 96.

the visual force of the neoclassical investment in “la Lumière” to the biblical legacy of Christ’s sublime transfiguration on the mountain top, as reported in *Matthew* 17, 1–2: “And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James, and John his brother, and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart, And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”²⁰ The whitening of Christ in garment and portrait is embellished further in *Mark*, 9, 3: “And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them.” In noting how white light here functions as a trope in excess of any representable figure, Marin then relates the extreme of light to its opposite: “the sight of the figure-Light, the dazzling whiteness of the Image has something to do,” he suggests, “with death, with the ‘gustatory’ experience of its peacefulness, as if the sight of the extreme, ultimate image, that of the absolutely white figure, could only anticipate the delight of an exquisite death.”²¹

A visual depiction of such a transfigured conjunction of shining white fabric and exquisite light of an impenetrable sublimity is also evident in the neoclassical paintings called to mind by Kuntzel’s loose appropriation of Poussin’s *Winter*. I refer not only to the whitening effect of Philippe de Champaigne’s painting, *The Dead Christ*, which hangs adjacent to *Winter* in the Louvre, but also to the 1521 painting of the same title by Holbein, which literary theoreticians might most readily recognize as the subject of extensive discussion in Julia Kristeva’s book, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholy*. Kristeva’s description of the Holbein painting’s pictorial achievement echoes Marin’s poignant analysis of the effects of “la Lumière.” Kristeva suggests that the painting

gives form and color to the unrepresentable, understood not as erotic profusion but conceived as the eclipse of the means of representation on the brink of their extinction in death. The chromatic and compositional ascetism of Holbein translates this competition of form and death . . . in the liminal manifestation constitutive of mourning and melancholy.²²

Thinking again of Kuntzel’s video, might his *Winter* effect the projection of just such an Arcadian impenetrability of light, one visualized by the legacy of aesthetics as the form of death, as the

²⁰ Biblical citations are from *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, Cleveland n.d.

²¹ Marin, *Des pouvoirs de l’image*, p. 239.

²² Julia Kristeva, *Soleil noir: dépression et mélancolie*, Paris 1987, p. 134.

monochromatic fold of inside-out?²³ Might not this typify the sublime feature of Kuntzel's work that links it, in more than a casual way, to the forceful philosophical contemplation of Ego which was praised by neoclassical aestheticians as having been enlivened by the painting of Poussin?

Referring, in *To Destroy Painting*, to Poussin's definition of painting as "an imitation made on the surface with lines and colors of all that is visible under the sun,"²⁴ Marin describes the arcadian space of Poussin as the white space, "la lumière," of Descartes through which objects are said to take shape. In situating Poussin's work in relation to the French philosophical dialogue surrounding and often responding to it, Marin cites the fifth part of the *Discourse on Method* and the first "Discourse" of the *Dioptrique* where Descartes clarifies the visual impact of light. What catches Marin's critical eye is the philosophical grounding of the metaphysical characteristics of light in the material embodiment of light as color. "La lumière," writes Marin, "is defined as immediate physical contact at a distance and color is defined as the reflection of light on bodies. White is a pure reflection while red, yellow, and blue are modified in various ways. It follows that a body's color is nothing more than the effect on an eye that has been touched by light reflected by that body's surface. White light ("Le blanc-lumière") reflecting as color on the surfaces of bodies defines these surfaces for the gaze."²⁵

Just such a touch of colors abounds in Kuntzel's triptych installation, *Spring (Dance of spring/No spring) (Printemps [Pas de printemps])*. The viewer enters a darkened room to face a tripartite field of large scale video colors emitting from laser projectors mounted on the opposite wall. Framed by the modified light of monochromatic blue colorfields, whose form is repeated in *Winter*, a central panel tracks the video camera's slowly gyrating movements around a nude couple enclosed in a lush Provençal bower. Following the female's poignant placement of her hand on the male's rigid biceps, the camera zooms closer to capture tight shots of the female breast, male shoulder blades, and buttocks. Kuntzel boldly departs from the composition of

²³ In "Video Writing," in *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Doug Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, San Francisco 1990, p. 423, Raymond Bellour discusses how white light in Kuntzel "accentuates what one sees, but at the same time it makes it unreal, while making one believe all the more in that very unreality."

²⁴ In his letter to Chambray, 1 March, 1665, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, Paris 1964, p. 163, Poussin concludes this definition by adding that the aim of painting is "la délectation."

²⁵ Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, p. 161.

the source picture, Poussin's *Spring or the Terrestrial Paradise*, by shortening the depth of field of the Poussin landscape with something like the bravado of pictorial disavowal ("yes, Poussin's landscape, but nevertheless some fetishism"). That is, Kuntzel limits his vision to the magnification of the couple in the extreme lower left-hand corner of Poussin's picture. Even the uninitiated viewer of Poussin may be struck by the transformational effect of Kuntzel's displacement of video eye from the ordered place of Poussin's landscape to the fluid space of supple bodies caught in motion. Kuntzel both effaces the white region of the heavenly lord looking down from the upper right of *The Terrestrial Paradise* and blots out the painting's pastoral pond whose calm waters double as the pictorial ground of minute white brushstrokes—crafted by Poussin to represent the reflection of sunlight and its eclipse of vision. But since such too strong a stress on the blotting out of Poussin's blue waters might misrepresent the pictorial framework of Kuntzel's bower, which is bordered by blue monochromatic projections on the wings to either side, I simply wish, for now, to emphasize how Kuntzel re-positions corporeal body parts of *Terrestrial Paradise* to catch and reflect the pastoral colors in a way that sets them in enlivening motion.

Just how brilliantly Kuntzel transforms Poussin's geometrical application of the whiteness of landscape into the sublime corporeal motion of all that is lit might be better appreciated by pausing a moment to consider *Calm Weather*, a landscape by Poussin preceding *The Four Seasons*. This painting, singled out by Marin for its exemplary depiction of the rigorous cartography of landscape geometry, greets the spectator with a foreground grouping of pastoral shepherd and flock and, in the distant background, a typically Poussinian Italianate village whose bright lighting brings it foreword in the picture plane. In between lies the wide expansion of a lake whose mirroring surface contributes to the effect of bringing the distant civilized village closer to the pastoral foreground. In a stunning essay on the "Evidence of Time in Painted Representation," Marin notes, in particular, how wonderfully the serene blue of the lake captures not only the most subtle illuminations of the painting but also maintains through reflection the synchronic configuration of all places surrounding it, as if a map showing itself showing the perspectival balance of city and landscape, civilization and nature. What I find fascinating is how Poussin's later painting, *Spring*, disrupts the serenity of this surface of blue by a kind of anamorphic distortion: it decenters the lake by pulling it off to the left; it disturbs the calm of reflection with the

interpellation of shining light (indeed, Lacan could have cited the flash of light in Poussin's painting just as easily as he notes the shining tin can that blinds the youthful fisherman); and it unsettles its talismanic waters with the charged motions of unfolding passion. What's somewhat weird about Poussin's *Spring* is how its "derangements" of the artist's own conventions of landscape seem to approximate the motions of the pictorial sequel to *Calm Weather*, Poussin's canvas, *The Tempest* (the theme which Poussin repeats in his *Four Seasons'* painting, *Winter*). I suggest this to be weird, or uncanny, because *Spring* hyperbolizes the two features of sublime irruption that Marin singles out in *The Tempest* for disrupting the mirrorial tranquility of *Calm Weather*. The first is the irruption of light, "la lumière," that negates, through the arresting brightness of reflection, the lake's ability to gauge perspective, near and far. Here perspective is neutralized or "medusé" by light and its punctum.²⁶ Second is how the corporeal figures express effects of passion—fear in *The Tempest*, desire in *Spring*—whose exaggerations exceed the temporal containment of pictorial contemplation. Put otherwise, the dramatic display of light and body ("l'effet de sidération") in the *Terrestrial Paradise* shifts the terms of representation from the predictable orders of geometrical reflection to the arresting accidents and passionate motions of *Spring*.

Kuntzel accentuates this shift in *Spring* by staging the body itself as the source and depth of field of passionate light. If read in the context of Marin's reference to Descartes, the light of *Spring* ("le blanc-lumière") provides the screen or space for the perilous gaze by reflecting itself in colors only on the surface of the two characters' bodies. The play of light joins this couple in a stunning videomatic *pas de deux* in a way that foregrounds while negating their sexual difference in a primal mise-en-scene. Kuntzel's adjacent installation, *Summer*, seems to emphasize this point by juxtaposing two video scenes, one evoking something akin to more traditional diagesis and the other enacting the figural display of light on body. A small monitor inset in the wall on one side of the room depicts a naked

²⁶ The punctum is, of course, Roland Barthes's term, in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York 1981, for the primal element of visibility that confronts the spectator with the image's unnameable, untouchable elements that wound, pierce, and touch the viewer, very much like the solicitous and disarming effect of Lacan's scopic "light." I discuss the *punctum* and how Barthes offers it to his readers while taking it away in "Photo-Medusa: Roland Barthes Incorporated," *Like a Film*, pp. 65–97.

black man who leafs through a book on Poussin as he sits in a neoclassical drawing room while another androgynous figure wanders out into the garden and back into the room, suggesting a kind of mysterious diagesis which is never resolved. Catching the eye of the spectator on the opposite wall is a computer enhanced blow-up of the traces of light touching and highlighting the reader's porous, nude body. Put otherwise, the subject of the diegetic vision (of Poussin) becomes the object of the arresting light (of Video). Similarly, the spectators of Kuntzel's installation are literally caught between these scenes of sight and light to the extent that they act out and embody the interval between narrative and affect—the interval identified by Marin as site of the powers of the image. The interval, writes Kuntzel, "between a memory and the other . . . the place of difference, a place without place (blank/white, silence, void) conjoining, superimposing, comparing two images."²⁷ It is easy to imagine the delighted response of Louis Marin had he had access to the digitalized purity of the interval in both *Spring* and *Summer*, the interval conjoining white light and reflective skin as well as the difference between character and video spectator. For the play of Kuntzel's light certainly projects the visual force that Marin likens to the transcendental a priori conditions of the apparition of the image and its Arcadian efficacy "through which are accomplished the *exit* of 'seeing' and 'being seen' from the field of 'in-sight,' of invisibility, of inaccessibility to the gaze."²⁸

As the camera of *Spring* continues the first of its two deliberate revolutions around the primal couple, it combines touch and look in recording the embrace of the actors' eyes in a mutual gaze. The female's subsequent turn away from their gaze is finally embodied by the camera after a second slow revolution as it suddenly and quickly veers upward to track the white light of the invisible heavens, "inaccessible to the gaze." It is this gesture of controlled visual technology suddenly careening off-course toward the inaccessible sky that shifts the emphasis of the Arcadian dance to the zigzag of its luminous other, "no Spring." As if evoking the Cartesian paradigm that the transcendental sphere of "seeing-to be seen is impenetrable by the gaze," Kuntzel's video inscribes the iconic gesture of Poussin's Eve in the inaccessible whiteness of the ethereal space. The spirit of such an "Et in Arcadia Video" may well be reflected by Kuntzel's enigmatic citation of Marguerite Duras that concludes his catalogue

²⁷ Kuntzel, "Memory/notes," in *Thierry Kuntzel*, p. 49.

²⁸ Marin, *Des pouvoirs de l'image*, p. 18.

note on *Spring*, “It was the blossoming cherry tree, this excessive springtime that the mother said she could no longer tolerate, would no longer wish to see. What tormented her was that the springtime could return.” Might not we say, following Duras, that the eternal return of light here illuminates the transcendental tensions, the excessive differences, that fuel the force of Kuntzel’s spectacular imagery? *Pas de printemps*: spring dance / no spring.

Blue-Black Jouissance

In foregrounding Kuntzel’s mimicry of the transcendental orderings of the aesthetic legacy of Poussin (“the exact negative of the present project”²⁹), I wish to emphasize how much the tensions and differences framing his video installation contrast with the Arcadian formalism of Poussin’s pastoral series, *The Four Seasons*. In the final section of this essay, I wish to speak in broad terms about the cycle’s promise of an eternal return as represented by the overall schema of Kuntzel’s installation, about the contrast of colors ultimately sustaining his video work, and about the subsequent linkage of its colorful overlays of corporeal positions with the historical modalities of body, race, and sexuality that impinge on the universality of “*la Lumière*” and its imagistic space. My aim is not so much to dispute the legacy of the transcendental condition which is evident in the conjunction of psychoanalysis and phenomenology informing the work of both Kuntzel and Marin. Rather I wish to emphasize *how this very legacy under erasure frames the forceful representation of the image of Otherness*. I mean to insist that *the study of the historical modalities of material culture is framed by the eternal return of the ideational constructs informing it*.³⁰ As made evident by Kuntzel’s video appropriation of Poussin’s Arcadian series, it is impossible to imagine, to re-present, one legacy without the other.

To begin with the matter of appropriation, Kuntzel’s undertaking of a video adaptation of Poussin’s pastoral series seems to have

²⁹ In his catalogue notes on *Summer*, in *Thierry Kuntzel*, p. 126, Kuntzel makes this assertion in response to Diderot’s praise of the ordering principles of single-point perspective.

³⁰ I have in mind the eternal return of the ideational simulacra whose “chaoserrancy” is theorized by Gilles Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, New York 1994, and whose baroque visual corollaries are emphasized by Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. Tom Conley, Minneapolis 1993. I develop this point in “You Are How You Read: Baroque Chao-Errancy in Greenaway and Deleuze,” *Iris* 23, “Gilles Deleuze, philosopher of cinema” (Spring 1997).

stemmed from his fascination with the incompleteness of the cycle when considered in terms of the momentary reception of its individual canvases: *Spring or the Terrestrial Paradise*, *Summer or Ruth and Boaz*, *Autumn or grapes brought back to the Promised Land*, and *Winter or the Flood*. Rather than accept the neoclassical allegory of the teleology of such a pastoral cycle, which always promises to return the viewer from “the flood” to “the promised land,” Kuntzel exaggerates the violence of the interval to evoke the allegorical “minus one.” Disjunction of “the always deferred—hope, regret” is what Kuntzel describes in his catalogue notes as the common link of the separate installations. So too is “the always deferred” reflected by the light of Kuntzel’s video installations. For the “white space” of Poussin is prefigured by the total darkness of an empty installation chamber, the one entitled, “Minus one (Autobiography of an other).” The exhibition is designed so that spectators should have to pass through this black chamber when moving from the installation of one season to another. It is in this darkened, autobiographical space, the space of the Other, that spectators are assaulted by the loud musical lyrics of Lou Reed: “I don’t like opera and I don’t like ballet . . . Deep down inside I’ve gotta, I’ve gotta rock n’ roll heart.” It is with this forceful beat of desire and will, of performative negation and affirmation, that the spectator moves from one darkened space to another only to be confronted by the wonder of what Kuntzel calls the “paralysis” of his video light. But rather than mollify viewers disoriented by the loud darkness of the Other, Kuntzel’s “four seasons” provide the illusion of a colored space that contrasts significantly with the white lights of Poussin. Kuntzel’s darkened installations present a visual environment much more akin, say, to that of Caravaggio whom neoclassical theory was quick to compare with Poussin. As Marin patiently rehearses the neoclassical argument over “le coloris” (the art of color, of brilliance) in *To Destroy Painting*, Caravaggio was praised and blamed for providing an alternative to the white Arcadian space of Poussin.³¹ Caravaggio’s was the “black space” of a closed cell, crypt, or tomb which Marin describes as “an arcanian space.” In this mysteriously arcane space, light is projected from a unique source at

³¹ In “The Image of Art in Video,” in *Resolutions: Contemporary Video Practices*, eds. Michael Renov and Erika Suderburg, Minneapolis 1996, pp. 36–40, Maureen Turim presents a fascinating discussion of the visual paradox of Kuntzel’s “colorist” appropriation of Poussin. The debate over “le coloris” is discussed in detail by Bernard Teyssède in *Roger de Piles et les débats sur le coloris au siècle de Louis XIV*, Paris 1957, and also summarized by Svetlana Alpers in “Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation,” *New Literary History* 8, 1 (Autumn 1976).

maximum intensity to provoke, in Marin's terms, a Medusa-effect, an effect of paralysis. In a striking respect, Caravaggio's arcanian space thus can be said to have prefigured Kuntzel's conjoined space of Ego and Video, whose self-representations are always already poised on the darkened, deadly screen of deferral, positioned, that is, on the cartographic site, sign, or portrait of the autobiography of an Other.

This screening of internalized otherness foregrounds in Kuntzel's installation significant historicized modalities whose encrypted motions rise forth as phantoms more disturbing than arresting, more ambivalently fluid than certainly contained by the cartographic synchronies of law and culture. It is highly significant, in this context, that the contrasts important to the formal concerns of color theory give rise to consideration of the weight of the particularly charged historical modalities whose sado-masochistic introjection tempers any lightness of their transcendental properties. Returning to Marin's notion of the powers of the image, I wonder whether it is possible, especially today in light of the France of Le Pen, to overlook questions of racial and sexual miscegenation posed by the color and gender contrasts of Kuntzel's models? What is designated in *Spring*, for instance, by the outstretched arm of the black male model whose quivering hand attests to its inability to rest on the arm of the white other? Can it help but point to the black man's historical failure to share in the white female's willful touch of his skin? Just how does such an historical modality as the racialization of difference figure in the installation's "always deferred—hope, regret"? While I would argue that we understand the aesthetic role of Kuntzel's staging of the black body as a vibrant spatial receptacle of the lightness of being, and that we appreciate Kuntzel's complex dialogue with the visual tradition from which it derives, I cannot help but think that this lightness of being may be unbearable to some for remaining hopeful to others.

Consider, for just a moment, the compulsive denial of race by the psycho-phenomenological tradition that so informs the French projects here under consideration. From Descartes and Nicole to Lacan and Marin, the enigmatic question of race too frequently has been bracketed or framed, sometimes necessarily, by strategic consideration of both local and transcultural questions of signification, power, essence, and desire.³² What merits added critical pressure is how the

³² Note for example how, in "Intermittances du corp," in *Thierry Kuntzel*, pp. 56–57, Laurence Louppe fails to acknowledge the difference posed by Ken Moody's race while he engages in an otherwise subtle discussion of the tactile dimensions of Moody's body in *Four Seasons minus one*.

discourse of racial (and frequently sexual) denial almost always already seems to creep into the work of even the most politicized of writers, past and present, them and us. A paradigmatic example can be cited from Sartre's compelling chapter on mapping "The Body" in *Being and Nothingness*. Permit me to cite a brief passage to emphasize how the contingencies of historical modalities impinge on the purity of Sartre's philosophical discourse. Speaking of the body of the Other, Sartre writes:

This body of the Other as I encounter it is the revelation as object-for-me of the contingent form assumed by the necessity of this contingency. Every Other must have sense organs but not necessarily these sense organs, not any particular face and finally not this face. But face, sense organs, presence—all that is nothing but the contingent form of the Other's necessity to *exist* himself as belonging to a race, a class, an environment, etc., in so far as this contingent form is surpassed by a transcendence which does not have to exist it. What for the Other is his taste of himself becomes for me the Other's flesh. The flesh is the pure contingency of presence. It is ordinarily hidden by clothes, make-up, the cut of the hair or beard, the expression, etc. But in the course of long acquaintance with a person there always comes an instant when all these disguises are thrown off and when I find myself in the presence of the pure contingency of his presence.³³

Just how are we to respond to such a phenomenological collapsing, by such a politicized philosopher, of the differences, or perhaps we should say after Lyotard, the *differends* of race, class, not to mention gender and sexual difference for the sake of the pure contingency of presence?

When *Spring* was displayed in San Francisco a few years ago, some dismissed it outright for lightening the weight of the psychic contingencies and historical modalities of skin. Criticism was aimed at Kuntzel's seeming indifference to the racialized subject position of his male model, Ken Moody, whose apparitions circulate in the photographic fantasies of Robert Mapplethorpe's controversial project, *Black Book*. Might not Kuntzel's installation, so the challenge goes, contribute to the demonized fetishization of the nude black male for which Mapplethorpe has been loudly criticized?³⁴ But rather than

³³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York 1956, pp. 343.

³⁴ This critique of Mapplethorpe's iteration of the terms of colonialist fantasy, by serving the fetishistic expectations of white desire, is made most cogently by Kobena Mercer in "Imagining the Black man's sex," in *Photography Politics: Two*, ed. Patricia Holland, London 1987. Mercer has since mollified his position in response to the

map a place for universal presence, *Four Seasons (minus one)* works just as easily, in my estimation, to deconstruct the purity of its own cultural cartography through the heightened representation of contingency. Consider the open question of what is figured by the subject position of Ken Moody. How might Thierry Kuntzel's *Four Seasons minus one* be understood as carrying the ambivalent and traumatically retroactive fantasy of this model's racialized and homographic trace? I wish to suggest that the figure of Ken Moody lends to the installation an alternative vision of sexual representation and politics that may well challenge the colonial and heterosexual economies of the gaze and its contingent "lumière."

I arrive at this conclusion through a close reading of Kuntzel's piece, *Summer—double vision*.³⁵ This piece, you will recall, includes a video-projected close-up scan of a lounging Black man who is shown in the small monitor installed in the opposite wall to be naked, except for a bright red cloth covering his lap. The cloth is appropriated from Poussin's *Summer, or Landscape with Ruth and Boaz*—a reproduction of which is semi-visible in a book sitting on the subject's lap. Or, more precisely, the book sits on the piece of appropriated cloth which is made poignantly enigmatic by its purloined status. How might we read Kuntzel's reference to Poussin through this piece of borrowed loincloth? While Kuntzel's double vision of summer suggests an obvious revision of landscape's depth of field and light in the age of video, its reference to the sexual thematics of Poussin's painting is much less clear. Poussin's depiction of the meeting of Ruth and Boaz leaves unchallenged the *Book of Ruth's* biblical narrative of magnanimous paternalism sustained by phallogentric threats and domination (*Book of Ruth*, 2: 1–4). In granting Ruth's request to gather the remains of wheat left by his reapers, Boaz sets in motion a sequence of events that leaves Ruth willing to be his wife by purchase. This all begins when he enriches his initial gesture of generosity by declaring his fields something of a "sex-free zone" where Ruth can be safe from the threat of molestation by his and his neighbor's men. She is warned that she would be vulnerable, were she to leave his fields, to

ambivalence of a black, homosexual gaze, in "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homoerotic Imaginary," in *Bad Object Choices, How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, Seattle 1991, and with Isaac Julien, "True Confessions," in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*, ed. Thelma Golden, New York: Whitney Museum of Art, 1994.

³⁵ I initially presented this reading in my Introduction to *Like a Film*, pp. 11–13.

the sexual threat always already troubling the pastoral scene. What, then, can be made of Kuntzel's allusions to the narrative of Ruth's willed slavery as a defense against more frightful phallic aggression? Given Kuntzel's quiet reference to this story—made quiet, that is, by his titular censorship of Poussin's Ruth and Boaz subtitle—it could be argued that this silence aligns his piece with the complex artistic tradition celebrating the patriarchal entrapment of women. This is the convention so violently displayed by one of Poussin's more memorable paintings—*Rape of the Sabine Women*.

But such a feasible reading is complicated by the installation's double vision. For the spectator is made aware of the visual strategies of this tradition when shown computer-guided close-ups of enlarged fragments of the model's objectified black body—fingers, toes, lips, the line of a thigh. In describing the installation, Christopher Phillips writes that Poussin's "classical perspectival frame is shattered by the modernist close-up view. The twist here is that Kuntzel wholly identifies this modernist vision with an erotic gaze that is fetishizing and obsessively calculating."³⁶ To render even more complex Kuntzel's reference to the fetishizing gaze of the black male, Phillips could also turn to the source picture, *Summer, or Landscape with Ruth and Boaz*. In addition to the sizable scarlet robe lying on a handcart to the left of the painting, a red Phrygian cap rests on the head of the lute player sitting on the right. In this context, Kuntzel's citation of one piece of red cloth calls to mind yet another, the Phrygian cap, analyzed by Neil Hertz as representing the inscription of patriarchy in the threat of its impotence or castration.³⁷ The trace of red, here removed by Kuntzel from player's cap to reader's lap, thus works to display or deconstruct the history of the fetishistic, racialized gaze on which it depends.

But this represents only one view of the sexual economy of *Summer-double vision*, let's call it the transcultural desire for Kuntzel's close-up to deconstruct the pure contingency of fetishized vision. What of the fact that the Phrygian cap is an attribute of two competing sexual economies, not only that of Paris but also, as suggested by Hertz, that of Ganymede? It could well suggest that "the fetishizing gaze" and its psycho-political contingencies may register differently for the sons of Paris than for the lovers of Ganymede. This distinction may pertain especially well to the viewers who actually recognize Kuntzel's close-

³⁶ Christopher Phillips, "Between Pictures," *Art in America* 79, 11 (November 1991), p. 110.

³⁷ Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line*, New York 1985, pp. 179–91.

ups to be pictures of Ken Moody. Otherwise put, it is of considerable importance that not all viewers are likely to know Moody and that those who do will position him differently within the intermixed references of White/Black, homosocial/homosexual identities that have made Mapplethorpe's *Black Book* such a controversial source of cultural cartography. Indeed, these video close-ups of Moody and their appeal to homosexual desire will joyfully dispel for some, while defensively strengthening for others, the calculating, heterosexual logic of the fetish. Traces of the cap which can only weaken some are placed by Kuntzel on the very lap that can only harden others.

Finally, in view of these and similar challenges posed by the weight of this installation's historical modalities of race and sexuality, what might be signified by the projection of the figure of Ken Moody as the enshrouded body stretched out for public viewing in the darkened crypt of *Winter*? Yes, it certainly triggers the many phantoms of death which Kuntzel aligns with the disturbed figures of form that lie entombed by video in the past of aesthetics: "we had to completely forget the codes, let them fall, one after the other, dead skins, deadly boredom, because we had to create the void, take the risk of the void, the risk of death."³⁸ Yet, I wonder what happens when we situate this video crypt in the historical modality of its age of AIDS? Attesting to the powers of Kuntzel's imagery, I find it difficult to play back the memory of this dazzling video installation without recalling Robert Mapplethorpe's chilling reference to the impact of AIDS on his black models, friends, and lovers: "If I go through my *Black Book*, half of them are dead." And, since, so too is he.

Add to these chilling words the uncanny description of *Winter* provided in a press release by The Museum of Modern Art: "*Winter* is inspired by the early writings of Swiss author Robert Walser that foretold his death in the snow and Nicolas Poussin's paintings of the four seasons. . . . A computer controlled camera pans the entire body in the path of an infinity symbol. Slowly repeating the same movement four times, the camera progressively moves in closer to the figure, which gradually emerges from a sheer white veil. This relief-like image is flanked by two projections of identical color fields—a cobalt blue which fades in and out to gray and white and creates a tension with the image of the almost entombed body." In the context of contemporary French aesthetics, one could read this blue in

³⁸ Kuntzel, "Video/notes," in *Thierry Kuntzel*, p. 72.

relation to that described by the painter Jacques Monory, in *Document bleu* (1970), “the color of the approach of *jouissance*, of the color of the drives.”³⁹ Again calling forth the distant memory of Holbein and Champaigne, it is significant that the pulsating *jouissance* of such cobalt blue grounds the ethereal transcendence of absolutist white through the deictic charge of its visceral intensity. Playing constantly between life and loss, the video of Thierry Kuntzel is described similarly by Anne-Marie Duguet as “contributing to an opening of a space of *jouissance* in which the spectator might enter, wander, and produce her own reading.”⁴⁰

But what really verges on the uncanny *jouissance* of the drives, at least of the death drive, is how the monochromatic variations of these color fields project the image of Moody’s death into the haunting frame of the cobalt present. Can we, of either the cinematic or homosexual communities, now view this modulating cobalt space without experiencing the shock of its memorialization of the baroque gay filmmaker whose final effort was the monochromatic moving picture rightly entitled, *Blue*? I invite you now to imagine witnessing the cobalt blue borders of Kuntzel’s *Winter* as if surrounded by echoes from the *Blue* crypt of Derek Jarman, that marvel of cinematic space whose baroque sensibilities often make him sound like an imaginary interlocutor of Kuntzel and Marin:

Blue protects white from innocence / Blue drags black with it / Blue is darkness made visible / Blue protects white from innocence / Blue drags black with it / Blue is darkness made visible . . . For Blue there are no boundaries or solutions. / How did my friends cross the cobalt river, with what did they pay the ferryman? As they set out for the indigo shore under this jet-black sky—some died on their feet with a backward glance. Did they see Death with the hell hounds pulling a dark chariot, bruised blue-black, growing dark in the absence of light?⁴¹

What more need be said, to return to the point about culture made earlier on, but that the modalities of history, sexuality, and sociology here again have their place only as fraught reworkings of death and Arcadia, finality and infinity, only as the mourning of spatial absolutism?

³⁹ Cited by Jean-François Lyotard, “Contribution des tableaux de Jacques Monory,” *Figurations 1960/1973*, Paris 1973, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Anne-Marie Duguet, “Le vitesses de l’immobile,” in *Thierry Kuntzel*, p. 12.

⁴¹ Derek Jarman, *Blue*, Woodstock, N.Y. 1994, pp. 15–16.

These last sounds and images, then, are only some of the specters adding melancholic weight to my consideration of Thierry Kuntzel as read through the arcanian light of Louis Marin and, now, the cobalt traces of his brother in Arcadia, Derek Jarman. These are the phantom colors of culture inscribed in my titular epitaph, *Et in Arcadia Video*.

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