DOLLS AFTER THE AVANT-GARDE:
LACANIAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE END OF THE
UNCANNY

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Jacques Lacan’s *discourse of the capitalist* and recent discussions on the *sinthome*, this thesis offers an art-historical and critical account of the prominence acquired by the figure of the doll in European and American visual culture since 1989. A paradigmatic figure of the historical avant-gardes, and of Surrealist photography in particular, the life-size doll has been typically associated to the Freudian *uncanny* as return of the repressed and its connections to castration and lack. This thesis argues that this theoretical framework has become inadequate, both to account for the aesthetic and formal qualities of the contemporary forms of the doll, and to relate to the new subjective structures of the current discourse of civilisation. The thesis discusses recent photographic and cinematic works that can be seen to register an aesthetic and psychological shift in the way the life-size doll is put at work. There are case studies on Olivier Rebufa’s photographic series *Bimbeloterie* (1989-2016), Stephan Gladieu’s photographic documentary *Silicone Love* (2009), about the life of men living with *sex dolls*, Laurie Simmons’s large-scale, pictorial photographic project *The Love Doll* (2009-11) and *Lars and the Real Girl* (2007, Gillespie), featuring a life-size doll as a non-human actor. Articulating psychoanalytic aesthetic theory with a cultural history of dolls, I start this project through an analysis of the modernist treatment of inanimate human replicas, mapping its traditional theoretical links to the notions of *mimicry*, the *informe*, the *uncanny*, the *punctum* and the (Lacanian) *picture* as field of the *gaze*.

Working through a consideration of the historicity of the unconscious and of the particular organisation of *jouissance* within the *discourse of the capitalist*, in the subsequent chapters I offer close formal analyses of works that explore the figure of the doll in its implications with a condition of visuality and a structure of subjectivity unconcerned with lack and desire. The heightened hybridity of these art forms is analysed through a consideration of the doll’s traditional implications with doubling, narcissism and the maternal, in view of the post-Oedipal ramifications of the *capitalist’s discourse*. Trying to think aesthetically through the new clinical and theoretical territories opened by recent Lacanian debates about *new symptoms*, *ordinary psychosis* and the *sinthome*, this thesis problematises a traditional understanding of the doll as emblem of a traumatic encounter with the repressed and of visuality as field of the *gaze*. The doll emerges in this study as a narcissistic supplement, rather than a cypher of anamorphosis. In conclusion, the thesis argues that the contemporary doll is a device allied to the effort of creating a modicum of psychic consistence, at a time when the crisis of desire, as an effect of what has been called the ‘evaporation of the Father’, imposes an individual creative solution to the problem of the Real.
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Dolls, mannequins and other inanimate human forms have made a remarkable return in European and American visual culture in the last three decades. They appear in a variety of media and registers in the work of Amber Hawk Swanson, John Miller, Isa Genzken, Rachel Harrison, Laurie Simmons, Eugenio Merino, Thomas Hirschhorn, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Cathy Wilkes, Cindy Sherman and Charles Ray, among many others. With a long-standing tradition within Romanticism and the historical avant-gardes, inanimate human forms still inspire cultural fascination and conflicting affective reactions. The complex cultural history of these figures, with their anthropological ties to child play, funerary rituals, mechanical reproduction and seriality, can be seen to be the foundation, today as in the past, of the fundamental semiotic ambiguity that makes them an invaluable rhetorical device in artistic production.

Through a focus on the photographic and cinematic forms of the contemporary life-size doll, this thesis offers a new critical understanding of this classical aesthetic motif by

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drawing on recent Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. I propose an exploration of the ways in which a traditional theoretical understanding of the doll through the legacy of the historical avant-gardes and the Freudian uncanny may be considered inadequate. Challenging the consideration of the photographic forms of the doll as a post-Surrealist topos, the thesis will argue that a Freudian reading of the doll as a figure of the return of the repressed is unable to capture the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the works here analysed and to relate to recently observed changes in the structure of Western subjectivity.

The Freudian notion of the uncanny, as is well known, is grounded on the split of subjectivity and the return of the repressed, whereby anxiety points to the space between primary narcissism and castration. It is a concept that impinges on a variety of psychoanalytic constructs – castration, repression, narcissism, death drive, anxiety, psychosis. “One could simply say”, as Mladen Dolar has put it, “that [the uncanny] is the pivotal point around which psychoanalytic concepts revolve, the point that Lacan calls object small a”. The uncanny is the Lacanian extimacy of objet a, the “excluded interior” around which subjective life revolves, which is the paradox of a something, originally excluded by the action of the signifier, as a nothing, an empty space at the core of the symbolic order. It is an encounter with the remainder of the alienation of the subject in the Other, with a presence (objet a) paradoxically incarnating the negative referent of the subject, its being a lack of being. In this sense, the uncanny is any manifestation of the fact that the unconscious – the most intimate – is an effect of exteriority, of the subject’s coming into being in the realm of the Other. If this psychic constellation is at the foundation of a traditional theoretical understanding of the doll in its aesthetic forms, this thesis explores the ways in which, on the contrary, the contemporary forms of this figure can be seen to exceed it.

Dolls and other human doubles are usually de facto seen as figures of the uncanny, without considering how the structural implications of the Freudian notion – rather than its mere ‘content’ – might be historically determined. In her recent genealogy of the Freudian

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3 As is well known, Freud describes “two classes of the uncanny”, one in connection to the return of repressed beliefs and the other related to the “primitive beliefs” recapitulated in infantile complexes. See Freud, “The Uncanny”, 249.


6 In Marxism and Form (Princeton University Press, 1971), Fredric Jameson considers how the Surrealist force of an object depends on the “uneffaced mark of human labour” (104) deposited in it, thus connecting the uncanny to early capitalism’s commodity fetishism. This line of thinking can be traced back to Walter Benjamin who wrote of the Surrealist’s recuperation of the outmoded as an instance of “revolutionary nihilism”, unsettling for its ability to
concept, Anneleen Masschelein for instance has underlined how “a recurring element of the uncanny in the [contemporary] visual arts is the importance of the (human) figure”, with the traditional motifs of the double “joined by new figures like the cyborg, or the technologically-enhanced human being”. The Freudian notion has in fact been deployed within recent art-historical and critical accounts engaged in an interpretation of this motif’s resurgence in post-1989 art, often through a direct filiation from the historical avant-gardes, particularly from Surrealism. Mike Kelley’s exhibition *The Uncanny*, in 1993, can be seen as the first of various interventions that have taken recourse to the Freudian notion in order to frame the return of the human figure in recent art. By exposing sculptural and photographic works by Cindy Sherman, John Miller, Paul McCarthy, Duane Hanson, Tony Oursler and others, in which replicas are perceived at human scale, Kelley’s show aimed to reveal the “belief in the power of the object”. The physical presence of these objects and images, and the uncertainty between animate and inanimate that they were seen to foreground, opened up reflections about artistic illusionism and suspension of disbelief in relation to a mediatic context increasingly dominated by virtual-reality simulations and digital image-making technologies.

Similarly, the uncanny has been a rationale for Hal Foster, albeit through the lens of Lacan’s *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964), as a traumatic encounter with the Real – the beyond signification – to understand the literalism of dolls and mannequins in the arts of the 1990s. Within a discussion on the legacy of realism and

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illusionism, Foster considers Cindy Sherman’s *Sex Pictures* (1992), for instance, as revealing the dimension of a ‘real’ conceived as trauma, with the signifier of the doll standing for a subject “obliterated by the gaze”. The figures of Charles Ray, Mike Kelley and Robert Gober, too, are seen to “push illusionism to the point of the real”, playing on the infantilism of a “mimesis of regression” in order to “mock the paternal law”. The literalness of these works is considered a direct filiation from Surrealism, with the surface of the simulacrum entangled with the presentation and repetition of traumatic effects as a (always failed) way to screen them. Foster has in fact spoken of “traumatic realism” and “traumatic illusionism” to describe how trauma is encrypted in the image and, through technique and thematic suggestions, is able to exceed the surface and puncture the viewer. Within this context, the use of repetition and image manipulation – by which the image is smeared, bleached, enlarged, pixelated and so on – the recourse to infantilist figures (clowns, puppets, dolls), and the appeal to the excremental and the damaged or diseased body are seen as means through which trauma is at once screened and produced, once again, for the viewer. However, this thesis challenges the suitability of this framework for a general understanding of the return of the doll since the 1990s, which, particularly in its most recent visual manifestations, appears often disentangled both from an oppositional stance and any sense of menace, and often connected to a preoccupation with the aesthetic and the pleasure of looking.

From a broader cultural perspective, the 1990s’ recourse to the return of the repressed can be seen as a way to oppose a post-structuralist notion of the simulacral, as a surface devoid of referential and subjective depth, within a discussion on the conventions of post-1960 realism. Hal Foster wanted to oppose a dominant conception of the simulacral as desymbolisation of the object and negation of subjective interiority and authorial

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11 *iv*, 149. I discuss the details of this reading in Chapter 1.

12 *iv*, 152, 159.

13 *iv*, 144. For this direct connection between postmodern dolls and Surrealism, see also Rosalind Krauss, “Cindy Sherman: Untitled, in *id.*, *Bachelors* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999” [1993]). Krauss affirms that “Sherman can continue to call these works *Sex Pictures Untitled* but they nevertheless produce their own reading through a connection to the *Poupées de Bellmer*” (*iv*, 156).

14 In its original Platonic definition, the simulacrum, or *phantasma*, is a copy without original, as opposed to the likeness of an accurate copy. See Plato, “The Sophist” in *Plato: Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University), 957-1017. In the 1960s, the notion became central within French philosophical theory on the crisis of representation, particularly in the work of Pierre Klossowski, Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard.
intention. Fredric Jameson, notably, had characterised postmodernity as marked by an essential "waning of affect", opposing postmodern "flatness" to high modernism as "the age of anxiety" and of an "aesthetic of expression", which "presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and the outside". In *Postmodernism*, Jameson writes that concepts such as "anxiety and alienation [...] are no longer appropriate in the world of the postmodern" as the "depthlessness" of the simulacrum conjoins structures of subjectivity and aesthetics. Jean Baudrillard, similarly, had earlier spoken of the era of simulation as that of "a civilization without secrets", where "God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence". In this sense, the critical reappraisal of the Freudian notion in the late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen as a direct reaction against what seemed a "postmodern apocalypse".

Nevertheless, the antagonism between affect and the simulacral is a central motif of the artistic and cultural debates of the 1990s. If Foster’s traumatic realism attempts a complication of simulacral flatness by consigning it to the "Real that lies below", a similar fissure between a model of affect and one of lack of affect in relation to illusionism can be seen in the opposition between Mike Kelley’s show and Jeffrey Deitch’s *Post Human*, which one year earlier, in 1992, had proposed interpreting the return of the figure in post-humanist, simulacral terms. With many of the same artworks exposed in the various exhibitions, these shows appear engaged in a critical battle for a new definition of ‘realism’. In opposition to Deitch’s suggestion that the contemporary aesthetic tinkering with the simulacrum might be read in connection with a newly emergent post-human personality, “drained of all emotion and affect”, Kelley’s proposal connected the same

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17 *i.e.*, 14, 12.


19 Brian Massumi, "Realer Than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari", *Copyright*, no. 1, 1987, 90. In relation to this, John Welchman has observed how the flattening of memory, body perception and of a sense of the sacred implied by these formulations would "precipitat[e] the occlusion of the uncanny, which is dependent for many of its effects on the relations between bodies, recall and repression" (John C. Welchman, "On the Uncanny in Visual Culture", in Kelley, *The Uncanny* (2004), 49).


21 Works by Robert Gober, Duane Hanson, Martin Kippenberger, Jeff Koons, Paul McCarthy, John Miller, Dennis Oppenheim, Tony Oursler, Nam June Paik, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, Kiki Smith and Paul Thek, for instance, were all present in the various exhibitions.
phenomenon precisely to a maximum of emotion and affect. The uncanny emerges in this debate as a classical construct that could be mobilised to insist on the persistence of something ‘old’ in the ‘newness’ proclaimed by Deitch, and of something ‘deep’ in the flatness of Jameson’s postmodern. However, what I will argue in this thesis is that this opposition – affect and flatness, depth and surface – may have become unsatisfactory to describe the contemporary aesthetic and subjective forms of the doll.

Certainly, we will find that speaking about dolls is still today a means to engage with the problem of a critical definition of artistic realism in its relation to new forms of subjective experience and aesthetic engagement, in the context of recent changes brought about by digital technologies. Post Human and The Uncanny were animated by the same questions three decades ago, albeit defining a binary oppositional field that might be untenable today. Looking at the artificial figures in the arts of the period, Deitch saw illusionist means engaged as a way to mark “the end of realism rather than its revival”. The ‘real’ interrogated by Deitch is a dimension disintegrating “through an acceptance of the multiplicity of reality models and through the embrace of artificiality”. For the art critic, this meant the opening to a new ontological dimension that would render the Freudian subject obsolete. “The Freudian model of the ‘psychological person’”, he writes in the exhibition catalogue, “is dissolving into a new model that encourages individuals to dispense with the anguished analysis of how subconscious childhood experiences moulded their behaviour”. By contrast, Kelley, while agreeing with Deitch on the need to trouble standard notions of ‘reality’, emphasised the dimension of split and otherness that he saw intrinsic to it, naming it through the classical structure of the return of the repressed. This thesis will run on the edge of this oxymoron between a conception of ‘reality’ as – simultaneously – unaccountable excess and simulacral flatness, and ask how the contemporary doll can be seen to overcome it. What could it mean to speak of an image for which affect emerges as a dimension lacking in depth, inhabiting a surface?

Speaking about dolls and their artistic forms today also means connecting the threads between long past and more recent practices interested in a reflection on aesthetic engagement through the notion of performativity. As we shall see in Chapter 1, the doll

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25 ibidem.
26 ibidem.
27 The notion of the performative originally emerged in linguistic theory in the 1950s through the work of British philosopher John Langshaw Austin to point to language’s reality-producing effects, as opposed to the reality-describing character of constative utterances. See Austin, How to Do Things with Words: The William James
invites interactivity, as an image that is also an object of play, and its presence in an artwork brings into perspective the reality-producing effect of art, particularly in its relational dimension to the viewer. Kelley’s exhibition can be seen as an early attempt to update a Minimalist-conceptualist focus on performativity in the light of a broader cultural turn towards subjectivism and affect. The Freudian uncanny, in this context, allowed a performative move to expose a traumatic depth in the simulacral surfaces foregrounded by the period’s return to realism.

A connection to Minimalism has been recently emphasised in relation to the return of the human figure since the 1990s, complicating a more classical reference to the historical avant-gardes. The recent insistence of dolls and mannequins in Western art can in fact be contextualised by taking into consideration how the representation of the human figure has had a very limited incidence in post-1945 European and American art – primarily in Pop Art, photorealism, and some appropriation art. For the conceptualist neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s and 1970s, the figure was stained with multiple negative associations that made of it a retrograde form of art, resonating with the academism of monumental neoclassical statuary and its use by totalitarian regimes, as well as with the post-war neo-expressionist use of it as a site of affliction and artistic ‘self-expression’. Dolls and mannequins, in particular, only make rare appearances in this period, mostly within a post-Surrealist register, in connection with childhood and memory, or in works engaged with a critique of Pop Art and the privilege accorded therein to visuality, the stereotype and the commodity object. When dolls and mannequins, with the figure, became ubiquitous again in the 1990s, the lessons of conceptual art appeared to have been internalised. Speaking of the centrality of these figures in the recent work of artists such as Rachel Harrison, Isa Genzken, John Miller and Thomas Hirschhorn, art historian Isabelle Shaw has underlined how these artworks seem to push objects’ “flirtation with subjecthood to the extreme”, as

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29 See e.g. Isabelle Graw (ed.), *Art and Subjecthood: The Return of the Figure in Semiocapitalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011); and Ralph Rugoff (ed.), *The Human Factor: The Figure in Contemporary Sculpture*, Ralph Rugoff ed. (London: Hayward Publishing, 2014).

30 We might consider Arman’s installation *Le Village Des Damnés* (1962) and Bernard Fauccon’s photographs series *Summer Holidays* (1978) for the first genealogy; and, for the second lineage, Yayoi Kusama’s installation *Driving Image Show* (1959-64) or Paul McCarthy’s 1977 performance *Grand Pop*.
objects appear like “quasi-subjects”. This effect of presence, Shaw has suggested, can be seen as an extremisation of Minimalist sculpture’s latent anthropomorphism. As such, she has connected the literalist presence of these artificial figures to the critical debate around modernist and postmodernist aesthetics, opened by Michael Fried’s well-known critique of Minimalism in *Art and Objecthood* in 1967. Fried, notably, defined the effect of “presence” that the Minimalist sculpture provoked as “anthropomorphic”, since it would challenge the viewer to recognise his or her position in front of the object, as opposed to a “true” work of art which in its ‘self-sufficiency’ would absorb the viewer in its internal elements, making him or her escape the fact of beholding. In a move to despise the Minimalist object, Fried used the term “theatricality” to describe the way it calls for physical and conceptual completion. Against the “disquieting” presence of the Minimalist object, aware of its audience, Fried opposed the autonomy – elsewhere called ‘absorption’ – of the modernist object, able to overcome its condition of objecthood through a series of conventions that would exclude the beholder as a point of reference for its semiosis. This opposition between openness and closure will be one of the reference points of this thesis, with the domain of the image-doll as one in which the ‘performative’ and the ‘absorptive’ might be hybridised in new ways.

Thus, the visual analysis of the contemporary forms of the doll becomes also a way to engage with recent discussions on pictorial and digital photography, which have recently been reviving this old debate between ‘theatricality’ and ‘absorption’. For Fried, the contemporary trend for pictorial photography – its often staged, constructed, manipulated quality and attention to surface values – is a reactualisation of modernist ‘autonomy’, whereby the artist fully bears the intention of the work, thus closed to the beholder’s intervention. In pictorial photography, the crafted aspect of the image would therefore affirm the intentionality that is seen to be intrinsically lacking in the index-photograph, and therefore allow the medium to really become art. This is certainly symptomatic of an antipathy for the photographic index that traditionally runs across Western culture, starting with Charles Baudelaire’s famous abjure of photography, in 1859, as refuge for “peintres

31 Isabelle Graw, "Introduction: When Objecthood Turns into Subjecthood", in *Art and Subjecthood*, 14.
33 *ivi.*
34 *ivi.*
However, is Fried completely mistaken in identifying an element of closure in the contemporary photographic image? What could it mean to speak of an image-doll which at once includes and excludes the beholder?

On one side, there is the issue of historicising the performative potential of the doll, and asking how this is materialised in contemporary works, beyond the traditional means of the uncanny. If the presence of the doll in the image certainly points to a post-Minimalist focus on the structural terms of the artwork, how are we to understand an image-doll that does something for the viewer, as opposed to what it did in modernism and postmodernism? If not working through the return of the repressed, how does the doll create effects in its contemporary aesthetic forms? On the flip side, there is the question of interrogating the pictorial means and the hybridity at work in these recent images of dolls, which may suggest elements of closure, an ‘anti-theatrical’ feature of sorts. I believe we can find a theoretical tool to describe this composite of antinomies in the aesthetics of the contemporary doll in recent Lacanian theory. In particular, I will refer to Lacan’s _discourse of the capitalist_ and his theory of the _sinthome_, which, introduced in the 1970s, have since been developed in recent interventions within the Lacanian School preoccupied with new forms of the symptom. Lacan’s seminar on Joyce (1975-76) can be seen to have opened the path to a new, stimulating direction in psychoanalysis, in which an attention to the individual subject’s singular approach to the problem of naming the Real is foregrounded against traditional clinical categories. The term ‘ordinary psychosis’ was introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller in 1998 to disrupt the classical clinical binary between neurosis and psychosis, as well as to displace the privilege given in early Lacanian theory to the symbolic over the imaginary and real dimensions of human experience.

Based on recent clinical observations of a growing number of cases that are “impossible to classify” within the classical neurosis-psychosis binary, a call for a “continuist” clinical approach has been emerging in psychoanalytic practice, based on a “generalisation from the singular psychotic effort to the clinical field as a whole”. Far from implying that everyone is psychotic in a clinical sense, this formulation points to the fact that every and...
each individual needs to find a way to treat the Real in an epoch characterised by the
decline of the belief in the Other.\textsuperscript{40} In this sense, all discourses, that is to say all forms of
the social bond, are "defences against the real", as Jacques-Alain Miller has put it.\textsuperscript{41} The
contemporary disbelief in the authority and power of traditional symbolic structures that
guaranteed a stable symbolic identity to the modern subject urges each individual subject to
find a solution to the fundamental problem of managing \textit{jouissance}. In the wake of Lévi-
Strauss, psychoanalysis considers the curbing of \textit{jouissance} as the fundamental tenet of
civilisation, and the repression of \textit{jouissance} has traditionally been the way the Social has
constituted itself. \textit{Objet a}, within this context, has been a term used in Lacanian
psychoanalysis to describe the remainder of the primordial Real in the Symbolic, the leftover
of the necessary symbolic alienation requested to the subject. This is the structure that
Lacan has called \textit{discourse of the master}, with the Name-of-the-Father as the master
signifier through which the subject would transition from a disorganised and fragmented
existence, subjected to the drive, towards the sphere of meaning and desire in the Other.\textsuperscript{42}
In this scheme of things, a portion of \textit{jouissance} would be forbidden and become
unconscious through the workings of repression.

Against this standard solution to the problem of the Real, the contemporary "decline
of the Oedipus" opens to new forms of subjectivity whereby the subject is no longer
"integrated into the paternal Law through symbolic castration".\textsuperscript{43} This new organisation is
reflected in Lacan’s 1972 formulation of the \textit{discourse of the capitalist}, which postulates an
unprecedented proximity between the libidinal object and the subject, in turn disconnected
from the Law of prohibition that characterises the post-Victorian social bond of the
\textit{discourse of the master}.\textsuperscript{44} In this situation, new symptoms emerge as a response to the
weakness of the belief in the Other and its traditional structure of repression. The \textit{sinthome}
is the means by which the subject can curb \textit{jouissance} through a "formal envelope", rather

\textsuperscript{40} Contemporary experience is one based on the notion that the ‘Other does not exist’. See Lacan, \textit{Encore} (1972-
73), transl. in \textit{The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: On

\textsuperscript{41} Jacques-Alain Miller, "Ironic Clinic", \textit{Psychoanalytical Notebooks}, no. 7 (2001), 9. In this thesis I will use the
Lacanian notion of discourse as a description of the way \textit{jouissance} circulates in a given social form. Lacan defined
its structure in a \textit{matheme}, a formula that shows the relationship between split subject ($S$), knowledge ($S^2$), a
master signifier ($S^1$) and \textit{jouissance} ($a$). See Jacques Lacan, "Production of the Four Discourses" in \textit{id.}, \textit{The Other

\textsuperscript{42} See Lacan, \textit{The Other Side}. See also Justin Clemens and Russell Grigg (eds.), \textit{Jacques Lacan and the Other Side

\textsuperscript{43} Slavoj Žižek, \textit{The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology} (London: Verso, 2000), 248.

\textsuperscript{44} See Lacan, "Discours à l'Université de Milan", 32-55.
than through the workings of repression.\textsuperscript{45} The \textit{sinthome} opens to different modes of enjoyment not based on prohibition – on the Name-of-the-Father – which becomes only one way for a subject to form a social bond. The path opened by this new clinic is one in which discourse is a form to be assembled in order to “clasp a real”, as Yves Vanderveken has put it, “a real in which one can believe without adhering to it, a real that does not carry any meaning, that is indifferent to meaning, and which cannot be any different from how it is”.\textsuperscript{46} I see in this construction an issue of presence as well as distance, calling for an effort to understand a contemporary way of speaking without recourse to the traditional ways of repression. The challenge of this thesis, in terms of methodology, is to explore the relevance of this new theoretical apparatus in relation to the specific formal qualities of the practices engaging with the figure of the doll that form my series of case studies. Probing the reasons why the uncanny may prove inadequate to account for the contemporary forms of the doll, this project ventures into testing the ways in which the model of the \textit{sinthome} may transcend its clinical application to become an effective tool of aesthetic analysis.

The hybrid condition of the photographic and cinematic works considered here may be in itself an invitation to experiment with a theoretical framework able to challenge established categories and traditional binary oppositions. All the works examined in the following chapters cross-contaminate the staged with the straight, photography with painting, sculpture and performance, as well as interbreeding different narrative genres. The notions of the simulacral, the affective, the absorptive and the theatrical, explored in this \textit{Introduction}, will circulate throughout this thesis, in search of a different intercoordination and synthesis. I will start, in \textit{Chapter 1}, with a personal synthetic account of the theoretical links at the basis of the modernist deployment of the doll as a figure of the return of the repressed, through an interweaving of psychoanalytic aesthetic theory with a cultural history of dolls. I will take as a starting point Rosalind Krauss’s reading of Bellmer’s dolls in \textit{Corpus Delicti} to explore the theoretical knot that ties the modern photographic forms of the doll to primary narcissism and lack.\textsuperscript{47} The chapter will engage with classic, memorable literary texts on dolls as well as with Surrealist photography, as the \textit{locus} where the doll appears as a paradigmatic platform for the interconnections between the doubling of subjectivity, mechanical reproduction and aesthetic engagement. Linking the notion of the uncanny to Lacan’s theory of the gaze, I will finally introduce Lacan’s theory of discourses as a way to bring the notion of the historicity of the organisation of \textit{jouissance} in


\textsuperscript{47} See Rosalind Krauss, “Corpus Delicti”, \textit{October}, vol. 33 (Summer, 1985).
relation to the artistic deployment of the doll, and to challenge, on a broader level, the currency of the Freudian uncanny.

In *Chapter 2* I introduce the work of Olivier Rebufa (1958), a French artist who is relatively unknown in the Anglo-American world, and who has been working with Barbie dolls to hybridise photography with painting, sculpture and performance 'since 1989'. Rebufa’s *Self-Portraits with Dolls: Since 1989* (1989-2016) may be considered an early example of an attempt to engage with dolls beyond a traditional Freudian register. In this chapter I will also introduce the Lacanian formula of the *capitalist’s discourse* and recent discussions on narcissism, in order to read Rebufa’s photographic narrative portraits as *tableaux* imbued with post-neurotic actuality. Engaging Jameson’s famous diagnosis of late capitalism as the era of a “waning of historicity”, the chapter will ask if an engagement with visual and psychic flatness can produce cultural-political insight while declaring its complicity to capitalist simulacral quality.48

The hyper-realistic, life-size doll emerged as a popular signifier for artists working with human replicas in the early 2000s. In *Chapter 3* I introduce this marvel of rubber technology, investigating its reception in popular culture through an analysis of Stephan Gladieu’s (1969) pictorialist photo-reportage *Silicone Love* (2009) on the life of men who live with sex dolls. Coupling pictorialist means with the informative mission of photo-journalism, Gladieu’s reportage challenges a traditional binary between aestheticisation and documentary value, interrogating the merging of ordinary reality and fantasy at the basis of a passion for the doll. Is the erotic doll a form of adult play or a fetish, an object of ‘perversion’? The chapter interconnects close formal analysis, psychoanalytic and play theory to ask what the role of the doll in the lives of the men depicted might be, and what Gladieu’s image suggests about the doll’s implication with *jouissance*.

From the documentary forms of *Chapter 3*, the love doll moves to the sphere of artistic production in the subsequent two chapters. *Chapter 4* is a provocative critical appraisal of Laurie Simmons’s (1949) *Love Doll* photographic series (2009-11), which presents sumptuous pictorial images of a Japanese life-size doll, set in the elegant interiors of the artist’s own house in Connecticut (US). In the chapter, I trace the artist’s deployment of the figure of the doll from the miniature, black-and-white works of the 1970s-1980s to these recent large-scale, pictorial images of life-size dolls by drawing on the new articulation between the Symbolic and the Real described by Lacan in the *capitalist’s discourse*. The lavish pictorialism of Simmons’s series is the ideal platform to explore the combination of openness and closure that I discussed earlier in relation to Michael Fried. How is the intrinsic performative structure of the doll integrated with the pictorial, highly-constructed visual field of this photography? Does this articulation of opposites challenge Lacan’s

traditional theory of visuality as field of the gaze? Adventuring in the uncharted ground of a post-Oedipal psychoanalytic aesthetic theory, the chapter will also probe into the problem of the apparent lack of political preoccupation with *The Love Dolls* evident exploitation of the female forms.

Finally, *Chapter 5* will consider *Lars and the Real Girl* (Gillespie, 2007), a *dramedy* film that succeeds in making a life-size doll into a non-human protagonist through flatness and abstraction, without the recourse to fantastic animation. I will focus on the narrative structure of the film and the role of the doll therein, drawing on the generic conventions of the fairy tale in a way that will challenge conventional readings of the film, as well as romantic expectations and traditional identificatory dynamics based in the Oedipal norm. By what means can the film mobilise flatness and be engaging at the same time? Analysing the way in which the film uproots the figure of the doll from its historical connection with female initiation rituals and its fairy-tale associations with the maternal, the chapter asks how the film manages to make it a central signifier in a tale on fatherhood and masculinity. Taken together, these chapters will challenge a traditional characterisation of the doll as a figure of the uncanny, and of the image as a platform for its revelation. By analysing the ways in which the contemporary forms of the doll coordinate the affective and the simulacral, performative openness and formal closure, this thesis will interrogate past and present paradigms of visuality and subjectivity. Taking as a starting point the oxymoron between *Post Human* and *The Uncanny*, the thesis asks: how can a flat and yet simultaneously effective image be theorised, beyond an aesthetics of the uncanny? And what does the doll tell us about a contemporary subject at once devoid of depth and traversed by an affective excess?
I opened my Introduction by taking Mike Kelley's The Uncanny and Hal Foster's The Return of the Real as two instances where the figure of the doll emerges in contemporary art-historical criticism in continuity with the Surrealist tradition and the Freudian uncanny. Although an appraisal of the discursive context created by previous works and their theoretical interpretation is indispensable for the understanding of more recent engagements with the doll, I shall argue that a reading of the contemporary forms of this figure through a Surrealist lens may be unsatisfactory. As we have seen, Hal Foster's incorporation of the 1990s forms of the doll within a Surrealist legacy is based on his concept of traumatic realism, as a form of art "in the service of the real". Lacan's gaze and Barthes's punctum can be considered Foster's main theoretical coordinates here, to describe an image where the indexical (what is in the image) and the subjective (what is added to the image) meet, "in a confusion of subject and world, inside and outside". "[I]t may be this confusion that is traumatic", Foster adds, that which unmistakably points to the standard Surrealist association between mimicry and a loss of 'self-possession', as we shall see. We can already find this link in Rosalind Krauss's ground-breaking analysis of Hans Bellmer's Poupées in her 1985 Corpus Delicti, with its central reference to Roger Caillois's Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia (1939). Before commenting on Foster's use of these constructs for the art of the 1990s, I will start this chapter by taking a closer look at Krauss's text, where we find a theoretical knot on which much subsequent critical theory on the relationship between dolls and the photographic image is based.

1 Particularly between the 1920s and the 1940s, dolls, mannequins, wax figures, automata and the like are almost ubiquitous in avant-garde circles, where they often carry contradictory associations and meanings. On the modern doll see Kenneth Gross (ed.), On dolls; Hal Foster, Compulsive Beauty; Alberto Castoldi, Clérambault.
2 Foster, The Return, 152.
3 Ibid, 134.
4 Ibidem, emphasis in the original.
This theoretical knot is one that links Roger Caillois’s *mimicry*, George Bataille’s *informe*, Sigmund Freud’s *uncanny*, Jacques Lacan’s *picture* and Roland Barthes’s *punctum*. This conceptual ensemble pertains to a precise theoretical constellation that cuts across the historical lineage of a certain notion of photography, from the Surrealists to Barthes’s *La Chambre Claire* and beyond. It is the idea of a kind of photography which constructs a ‘wound’ for the subject who looks, as Krauss underlines in reading Bellmer’s staging of the “construction and dismemberment” of the *Poupées* as “*tableaux vivants* of the figure of castration”. Thus Krauss ties Bellmer’s “connection of the doll, the wound, the double, the photograph” to Barthes’s *punctum*, as a way to define a general condition not only of Surrealist photography but of photography as such: “[t]he automaton, the double of life who is death, is a figure for the wound that every photograph has the power to deliver, for each one is also a double and a death”. I am immensely indebted to this essay, and my own fascination with dolls in photography and visual culture here finds its own origins, in this entanglement of the indexical trace with that *something* beyond pleasure, “that combination of madness and love, released by the doll and by the essence of photography”. This may sound like a primary scene for those who have affection for photography, or a certain use of photography, where the doubling of the analogue reveals the uncanny doubling of subjectivity, the subject’s split between (ideal) image and unconscious truth. But this is a condensed way to say it, almost in the form of a riddle, before the discussion I propose in this chapter. My theoretical exploration will follow Krauss’s argument in *Corpus Delicti* rather closely, for this is a text that I consider to be *the* foundational reading for the association between dolls and the photographic image through the concept of the ‘wound’. I will then move on, adding in the second part of the chapter a few considerations that I think may open Krauss’s reading to the possibility of its own obsolescence, *vis à vis* the contemporary visual forms of the doll explored in the following chapters.

1.1. DOLLS, MIMICRY AND ‘SUBJECTIVE DETUMESCENCE’

In order to unravel the theoretical associations implied in my brief and dense preamble, we might consider the original Latin and Greek words for ‘doll’, *pūpa* and *kūre*. These terms refer to the toy doll and, at the same time, to a young woman and to the miniaturised image

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6 See e.g. Margaret Iversen, *Photography, Trace and Trauma* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).


9 *ibidem.*
of the onlooker reflected in another’s pupil in a situation of reciprocal gaze. As philologist Maurizio Bettini has underlined, by doubling the features of a young woman, the *pūpa* is an icon, but also, for its ability to denote features like sound, mobility and a ‘double’ surface – the naked and dressed body – an object that exceeds the limits of representation to approximate the living nature of its referent, touching on the limit with personhood.\(^\text{10}\) The doll’s movable limbs stimulate manipulability, that is to say the interaction of play, turning it into a performative object. In this sense, the doll is cast aside from every other type of simulacrum since one plays with a doll, as opposed to the contemplation required by a statue, as noted by Juri Lotman.\(^\text{11}\) This structural peculiarity – whereby a doll can be manoeuvred, dressed, undressed and styled – is the foundation of the doll’s semiotic liminality, as a thing existing at the verge between objects and images, between the mobility of a living person and the fixity of a simulacrum. In being performed, the doll exceeds its iconic immobility to approximate the living nature of its referent.

The performative dimension of the doll leads to games of make-believe, of made-up worlds in which ordinary reality’s usual coordinates are deconstructed and constructed anew. Make-believe implies doubling and projection, a space *in between* self and other, a dynamics of reflection in the eyes of the other which is suggested in the etymology of *pūpa*-pupil. In his anthropologically-oriented theory of play, Roger Caillois includes the game of the doll within the category of *mimicry*; together with games of illusion, travesty and the broader field of the performing arts. In the case of dolls, a will to believe in the fiction is the only rule, Caillois observes.\(^\text{12}\) In playing with dolls, the “chief attraction” rests in “the pleasure of playing a role”, as Caillois put it, of acting *as if one were someone or something else*.\(^\text{13}\) Either *being* or *being for* a doll, the player is thus afforded the pleasure of “being or passing for another.”\(^\text{14}\)

This opening to doubling, fantasy and make believe, and more broadly to semiotic liminality and the performative, has traditionally made of the doll a central device for artists. It proved to be central for the historical avant-gardes in their attempt to dismantle naturalism in literature, theatre and the visual arts, and in the possibility of hybridisation and deconstruction of the automaton and the mannequin, icons of the mechanisation and commodification of experience at work in the period.\(^\text{15}\) Through the doll, a text could be ‘opened’ beyond representation through the implication of something more than what was

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\(^{13}\) ibidem.

\(^{14}\) ibid., 21.

represented, that is to say the primary process, the viewer’s effort of completion and extra-artistic spheres of image making.

In particular, the doll’s structure of play and its implications with semiotic blurring can be considered essential features that have made this object an associate of the photographic medium, whose own semiotic indecisiveness has animated the discussions on the medium’s relations to the fine arts since its origins. At a basic, pragmatic level, taken in their social use and their materiality, photographs can be considered, like dolls, very peculiar things whereby the boundary between image, persons and objects overlap. Even in our present ultra-digitised world, dominated by the ‘incorporeality’ of cloud storage, a family photograph still inspires this affection, which is ultimately an affection for what in the photograph is more than image, what in it is trace. From a semiotic point of view, this is photography’s implication with indexicality, its relation of continuity with the referent. On the fact that “someone has seen the referent”, that something ought to be in front of the lens to be captured, Barthes famously based the noeme of photography as ça a été, that has been.16

This principle translates the documentary value traditionally attributed to the photographic image and its fundamental entanglement with presence and time – the mortality of “the absolute past of the pose”, that which nails the subject to a death which is at once going to be and has already been.17 Margaret Iversen has put it poignantly, underlining how with photography we are faced “with past presence, which is to say, the hollowed-out presence of an absence”.18

The proximity to the referent marks the medium’s conceptuality, which has historically complicated the consideration of its artistic status within the context of a definition of art as techne, manual intervention. As an index, in fact, the photographic analogue presents the paradox of a “message without a code”, a message for which an interpretative code is not needed since the referent is re-presented in its integrity, without the “transformation” involved in the other semiotic categories identified by Charles Sanders Peirce, the icon and the symbol.19 Due to this principle of analogy, photography has historically been accused of being ‘unable to lie’, unable to transfigure ordinary reality, in opposition to a conception of art as an intentional cultural act, as cultivation, manipulation of ordinary reality – and of a notion of the artist as ‘author-God’ in full control of the executional mise en forme. Since Charles Baudelaire’s famous abjuration at the 1859 Salon, accusations of excessive realism and lack of authorial intervention – seen as a lack of creative intervention – have been the

16 Barthes, Camera, 80.
17 Ivi, 3.
18 Margaret Iversen, Photography, Trace, 6-7.
crux of photography in its attempt to achieve artistic status. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin, speaking of the existence of a hard, residual kernel intrinsic to the photographic image, further delineated the idea that what “in the effigy is still real” might limit the author’s control and her attempt to give form. However, precisely for this automatism, this opening into the realm of chance and contingency came to be valued by the historical avant-gardes, in opposition to pictorialist strategies that focused on photography’s iconic power as a way to define a specific photographic language and the medium’s aesthetic value. Within this context, the presence of dolls in 1920s and 1930s’ avant-garde photography can be seen to reflect a notion of art as a sphere implicated with fantasy and the unconscious, with what is beyond image, more than image. Particularly within Surrealism, the photographic form of the doll becomes the emblem for a kind of representation which bears its efficacy from a strict connection with life, with what is brought into the picture by the beholder’s associations.

A foundational Surrealist text in this sense is Roger Caillois’s *Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia*, published in *Minotaure* in 1935. Krauss’s analogy in *Corpus Delicti* between the doll and photography is founded on a link between Caillois’s mimicry, the Bataillan informe and the Freudian uncanny. At the foundation of her argument, Krauss charts a double analysis of Surrealist photography, following the Freudian reading of the double as connected, on one side, to primary narcissism and, on the other, to the castration complex. She writes, on the one hand, of a photographic practice preoccupied with blurring boundaries and showing a subject “invaded by space”, and, on the other, of a kind of photography eager to puncture the viewer with anxiety, through the image of “what one fears.”

Raoul Ubac’s *Mannequin d’André Masson*, a photograph of the head of the mannequin presented by André Masson at the 1938 *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*, and Bellmer’s *Poupées* appear in Krauss’s text as instances of the first and the second ‘type’ of the Freudian uncanny respectively. As such, they are posited as the two poles of an aesthetic and psychoanalytical spectrum defined by the entanglements of Eros and Thanatos in representation.

In *Mannequin* the Surrealist theme of the woman-mantis is signified through the cage, a cautionary measure that suggests female sexual voracity, evidenced by the directness of the figure’s look, which Ubac emphasises in its penetrating capacity by fixing it centrally in the camera (Fig. 1.1). For Krauss, this is the image of a subject which “possesses” while

20 See Baudelaire, “The Modern Public”.
23 Krauss, “Corpus Delicti”, 64.
being “simultaneously possessed by the mesh of space”, connecting this double bind to the sense Caillois gives to animal mimicry as an organism’s “assimilation to the surroundings”, a “temptation by space”, namely a “disturbance in the perception of space” whereby the subject-insect “no longer knows where to place itself”.24 This is the context from which Caillois’s later definition of the game of the doll as mimicry derives, and to which it is to be understood.

Here mimicry is a version of legendary psychasthenia, theorised by Pierre Janet in the terms of a disturbance of the relationship between personality and space. In late nineteenth-century psychiatric theory psychasthenia defined “a drop in the level of psychic energy, a kind of subjective detumescence, a loss of ego substance”, of self-possession in relation to the environment.25 Reworking this concept, mimicry is defined by Caillois as “depersonalisation by assimilation to space”, expression of a “decline in the feeling of personality and life”, in which “life takes a step backwards”.26 These are terms which we cannot fail to recognise in their proximity to Freud’s later theory of the regressive tendency of the drives. In his 1920 Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud had described the death drive as the ultimate instinct of life, one headed to the restoration of “an earlier state of things, which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces”, and “to which it is striving to return”.27 This is a fundamental theoretical point that will be central in my analysis of the contemporary visual forms of the doll. Through its association with psychosis, mimicry is here associated with a collapse of the distinction between subject and its surroundings: the subject is assimilated to his environment as its double. In this preoccupation with a fusion between subject and space, the central question is one of breaking boundaries, also essential in the Bataillean notion of the informe as a ‘device’ whose ‘task’ is “to undo formal categories, to deny that each thing has its ‘proper’ form, to imagine meaning as gone shapeless”.28 For Krauss, Ubac’s association between mannequin, feminine sexuality and photography around the issue of the inscription of space on the body is a primary example of photography of the informe, of doubling as a “disarticulation of the self”, and of visuality as the sphere of such dispossession.29 In Ubac’s analogue, the subject is mirrored and invaded by space, while the

24 ibid, 50; Caillois, “Mimicry”, 27, 28.
viewer is also viewed by the penetrating look of the woman-doll-mantis as in a play of mirrors.

Caillois’s connection of mimicry to the field of representation, which Lacan would develop in his 1964 seminar on the gaze, is the fundamental tenet sustaining Krauss’s theoretical construction of Surrealist photography as informe and uncanny. Caillois underlines that “it is with represented space that the drama becomes clear: for the living being, the organism, is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but is one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and, in the strongest sense of the term, no longer knows where to put itself”. These terms then recur and are developed in Lacan’s theory of the gaze, described as “a point of annihilation” for the subject in the field of vision, the “field of the reduction of the subject”, set against “the privileges of the consciousness”, that is the Ego. The notion of the gaze is central here, since this is the point where the Freudian concept of the uncanny impinges on the Lacanian field, and as such is employed in recent psychoanalytic aesthetics. While Krauss seems to be interested in the imaginary and symbolic implications of the gaze, the Lacanian notion is also connected to the Real of objet a, to lack. Instead of turning to Freud’s uncanny to describe photography as the experience of a “shock mixed with the sudden appearance of fate” which “engulfs the subject”, one could have just pointed to the gaze as an instance of the Real, of “lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration” (Fig. 1.2). Besides referring to the battery of images and representations ordered within discourse (the Imaginary), and to the properly symbolic stance of “the presence of others as such” (Symbolic), the gaze is a hole in the picture (Real). In the Lacanian diagram, the subject is firstly the point from which the representation is mastered, as in the classical scheme of Albertian perspective, and a ‘picture’ herself, “photographed” from the “point of light” of the gaze. If this point of light describes the field of the symbolic Other from which the subject is seen, it also indicates, as in the third figure in the diagram, the field of objet a. The entire Lacanian project, and of psychoanalysis as a whole, could be read in this diagram, around the position of objet a as a turning point for the articulation of the different orders of psychic experience.

31 Lacan, The Four, 82.
32 Accordingly, Krauss only reproduces the first two figures of the diagram. Krauss’s focus here seems to be on the schism of seeing-being seen as suggested by few phrases: “a mastery from without, imposed on the subject who is trapped in a cat’s cradle of representation”, “labyrinthine doubling”, “play of reflections”, “seen from the vantage of another” (ivi, 53).
35 ivi, 94.
In this structure, which can be seen to correspond to Lacan’s *discourse of the master* that I recalled in the *Introduction*, objet a is a leftover of symbolic alienation. The signifier’s coming into play in symbolic alienation implies the imposition of a “distance between jouissance and the body”, the restriction of “absolute jouissance”, meaning a loss for the subject, but one that simultaneously creates the possibility of her access to the “inverse scale of the Law of desire”, to the plus-de-jouir (*surplus jouissance*) of objet a.36 The subject is thus socialised through the lack instituted by desire, for she will be directed towards the Other of social relationships to search for that missing x forever haunting her. On the human misery of lack, fantasy is instituted as an impossible *mise en scène* of the recollection of the object, of a possible sense of wholeness for the split subject. It follows that visuality in the Lacanian sense is in a fundamental relationship with this dimension of objet a as lack.

The relation of the subject to the image-screen, in the final dihedron of the diagram, is thus also explicative of the dynamics that Lacan had earlier described through the model of the mirror. From the 1930s to the 1950s the model of the mirror explained a process whereby the subject is seen to be constituted in her identity through an external, precedent, image, made available and ratified by the (gaze of the) Other.37 A central point to consider is that, ultimately, the image, albeit illusive and alienating – cause of *méconnaissance* – has a prophylactic value, for it affords a sense of stability against (Real) inadequacy. As such, the image is essential for the subject to be able to take a place in the world. We can see in the diagram of the gaze, similarly, the image-screen imbued with a *bullet-proof* quality, as it were. It is an instance of the battery of signifiers available to the subject for her Other-directed *masquerade*, which is functioning as a mediating layer between the gaze and the subject, enabling the latter to be in the world without being totally caught and dissolved in the Real.38 In brief, we may say that the image-screen is in a necessary relation to the Real and at the same time a screen from it.

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38 In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan describes the screen as “the locus of mediation” (107) between the subject-as-picture and the gaze. The screen is “opaque” (96) and the subject has to mould herself in the image that it offers. As Lacan put it, “if I am anything in the picture, it is always in the form of the screen, which earlier I called the stain, the spot (97).” In these terms, here, we can recognise the same knot between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary characteristic of the mirror stage.
From a Lacanian point of view, images define their status precisely in their relationship to this dimension. A picture is for Lacan “a trap for the gaze”, where in contrast to the field of representation “there is something whose absence can always be observed”, a “central field” that “cannot but be absent and replaced by a hole”. In the picture the subject can take interest in her own split, an interest in “some self-mutilation”, that is to say in objet a, which is another way to say the annihilation of the subject in an experience of death that Freud describes in relation to the uncanny. The Freudian uncanny is the Lacanian extime, what “join[s] the intimate to the radical exteriority”, what the early Lacan would call “the Thing”, at once “the primordial real which suffers the signifier” – the “mythical mother’s body” – and “the signifier” itself in its fundamental “emptiness”. The uncanny is the emergence of objet a into the field of vision.

In Corpus Delicti, however, we leave the theory of the gaze to turn to Freud’s notion of the uncanny the moment Krauss aims to describe Ubac’s use of mimicry and its blurring of boundaries between figure and space, image and viewer. Mimicry is here seen as uncanny for its ability to point to a realm in which things, images and persons are not distinguished, to resume the “earlier states of being” that Freud ascribes to primary narcissism:

The collapse of the distinction between imagination and reality – an effect devoutly wished by surrealism, but one which Freud analyzes as the primitive belief in magic – animism, narcissistic omnipotence, all are potential triggers of that metaphysical shudder which is the uncanny. For they represent the breakthrough into consciousness of earlier states of being, and in this breakthrough, itself the evidence of a compulsion to repeat, the subject is stabbed, wounded by the experience of death.

In this famous passage, Krauss connects the return of surpassed narcissistic beliefs to Surrealism’s search of convulsive beauty, as an experience that can disrupt the subject’s self-possession. Narcissism is one element of the Freudian uncanny which aligns dolls with the photographic image. As instances of the double they both concur in Surrealism towards the creation of a world in which boundaries between the animate and the inanimate, imagination and reality, self and other, subject and object are blurred. As is well known, Freud has tied the uncanny to the emergence of “remnants” of an archaic “phase” of the human subject, “when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world.

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40 *Av*, 83.
and from other people". The Surrealist use of artificial replicas in photography, as Krauss points out, was aimed at the conjuration of the manifestation of the double in this ghostly capacity, as "harbinger of death". That is to say the death of the subject of consciousness, as an effect of the emergence of a "primitive" "animistic conception" that Freud saw to be characterising the ontogenetic and phylogenetic origins of the human subject. Following Otto Rank, Freud considered the projection of "spirits of human beings" over the environment, perceived as incomprehensible and hostile, as a way to guarantee to the "primitive man" and the child a control over it. 

"[E]verything which now strikes us as 'uncanny', Freud writes, "fulfils the condition of stirring those vestiges of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression". Once a prosthesis of the I, the double returns for the adult, castrated and civilised man described by Freud as an unheimlich menace.

If Ubac's image of the mannequin conjures mimicry as an uncanny loss of ego substance for its connection to primary narcissism, Krauss describes Bellmer's dolls, with their foregrounding of dismemberment and duplication, as producing uncanny effects in relation to castration anxiety. For Krauss the narrative obsessive staging and repetition of the same, the opacity of the image, the phallic character of the doll, are all elements that conjure the experience of the primary processes of dream and fantasy and their strategy of doubling, as a paradoxical defence against castration through the multiplication of symbols of castration. The double here is not only concerned with liminality – the informé's dismissal of categories – but closely saturated with loss. This is where Bellmer's construction of the photographic uncanny is tied to Barthes's punctum: the image becomes a wound in its staging, repeating and advancing the experience of a loss. This is, however, an experience that can only exist on a subjective level, for the punctum is an "accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" and not to anybody else, as Barthes put it. Between the two poles presented by Ubac and Bellmer, the doll of the Surrealist tradition appears then to sit on, before and beyond a moment of loss, inherent to the presence and absence of the object, between primary narcissism and castration. Fundamentally, the doll in this tradition stands as the impossible presence of the object before its loss, as a fetish erected against the inexorability of loss and as a substitute for the lost object.

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43 Freud, "The Uncanny", 236.
45 Freud, "The Uncanny", 240-41.
46 ibidem. See also Rank, The Double, 83-84.
47 Freud, "The Uncanny", 241.
48 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 27. As opposed to the "cultural", "rational", "polite" and "general interest" we take in photography, the studium, as the field of the operator's intentions (ivi, 26-27).
Loss is indeed central to this traditional theoretical edifice and a fundamental concern within a contemporary appraisal of the figure of the doll. It is that which is lost that returns to haunt the subject, as Freud underlines in his definition of the uncanny as "something which is familiar and old established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression". In his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's Der Sandmann, the female automaton Olympia is seen as an instance of castration in presenting an image of dismemberment – the doll being dismembered and Nathaniel himself being assembled and disassembled like a doll – as a "castration equivalent", analogous to the fear of being stripped of the eyes. Commenting on Nathaniel's relationship with Olympia, Freud connects the anxiety related to a lack of physical integration – the loss of the eyes, the body in pieces – to a male fixation to the castration complex, a lack of resolution of the Oedipus complex. The doll in this account is considered "a dissociated complex of Nathaniel's which confronts him as a person", a figure of the male subject's fixation to the father that renders him "incapable of loving a woman". The doll therefore becomes a trait d'union in the association between narcissism, psychosis and homosexuality that Otto Rank had already proposed in his study on the double, and to which Freud refers, speaking of the double as a "rival in sexual love", a figure of "narcissistic self-love". The Freudian association of the
dismembered doll to castration is based on the relevance of an image of pieces being cut out from the body, as imaginary translation of that foundational moment of subjectivisation based on the concept of a loss, demanded from the subject in order to enter discourse. As we have seen, this becomes a symbolic coupure in the Lacanian account, which similarly develops in both sexes. It can then be said that to speak about the uncanny, of surpassed and repressed beliefs around the issue of symbolic alienation, is ultimately to speak about jouissance and the loss that the subject is called to endure to enter discourse. Within this framework, the trope of the love for the doll, a topos that finds its birth in Romantic literature and becomes a photographic emblem with Surrealism, embodies an attempt to evade the imperative of symbolic alienation – the object is present, is not lost – one that brings the subject to indifferenciation, where distinctions between human and non-human, self and other, interior and exterior, masculine and feminine, are obliterated. In Hoffmann’s tale, this destiny is in proper names: in gaining Olympia – we might think of the Olympus, the abode of gods – Nathaniel loses Clara, whose etymology derives from clarity, as a world of coherent reality, one wherein reigns castration, psychic boundaries and sexual difference. The neurotic subject is pierced by anxiety for the sudden appearance of the object – which signals that “lack is lacking”, as Lacan put it – an event that shutters ordinary reality and that can signify death as disappearance in an all-encompassing jouissance.53

The love for the doll, for its association with narcissism and the question of sexual difference, is also a trope centrally employed by the Surrealists for the subversive articulation of non-normative desire.54 Subversion in relation to jouissance appears as an essential attribute of the Surrealist doll and is often considered a default characterisation for the figure of the doll more broadly. As Foster put it, Bellmer’s dolls instance “a jouissance that defies the phallic privilege of the paternal”, for they are figures of an “incestuous transgression” with which to identify, a “disavowal of [the father’s] genital monopoly and a challenge to his preemptive law”.55 For Therese Lichtenstein, similarly, the sexual androgyny of Bellmer’s dolls reflects a “reversion to the preoedipal phase”, a “merging with the mother” as a way to stage a struggle against the “paternal law”.56 As an instance of a “fragmentary, fluid, feminine’’ self, the doll in the Surrealist tradition is a device to contest dominant

55 Foster, Compulsive Beauty, 118. For a reading of Bellmer’s dolls as a fetishistic avowal/disavowal of castration and its subversive stance against Nazism see also Therese Lichtenstein, Behind Closed Doors (Berkeley, Calif/New York: University of California Press, 2001), 101-103, 127-138.
56 Lichtenstein, Behind Closed Doors, 72.
discursive constructions of gender, sexuality, and citizenship, and of masculinity as ‘fascist armour’. A figure emerging now in the guise of the maternal *Thing*, of an object recaptured narcissistically, now in relation to a frightening father-*jouissance*, the doll in this tradition fundamentally appears as a cypher of *jouissance* as what is opposed to the Law of prohibition. An instance of death for the Ego, a disturbance of sexual love and of heterosexuality, these dolls are objects in the presence of which the subject of consciousness is annihilated. Bellmer’s self-portrait as a ghost before his doll is possibly the most eloquent incarnation of this uncanny valence – the doll, the man: an *either/or* relationship, with the photographic analogue as the impossible *trait d’union* (Fig. 1.3). The association that Foster and Lichtenstein draw between the doll and the maternal is a fundamental aspect of nineteenth and early twentieth-century culture, particularly relevant where the doll is evoked through the moods of nostalgia and mourning. There is a dimension of decadent morbidity in the works considered by Krauss in *Corpus delicti* that might be further understood through some associations with the broader cultural history of the doll and to other seminal literary texts preoccupied, in the same period, with this figure. This will lead us to consider the historical discursivity of *jouissance* in modernity and introduce a frame through which the more recent works proposed in the following chapters can be analysed.

1.2. *PŪPA AS PUPPA*: THE DOLL AS A MATERNAL THING

The association of the doll with the maternal can be considered a typical Romantic *topos*, often played in the terms of nostalgia for lost mythical origins, as in Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* (1861). Hugo’s story of Cosette’s doll is the first, in high culture, to mobilise the toy doll as a figure imbued with some psychological complexity. Here the doll emerges as an ideal image of wholeness, a signifier of a loving and caring Other and a physical presence able to comfort the child. The doll appears, initially, as a chimera of plenitude and splendour behind the glass of a shop window, a “vision” of “paradise”, in contrast with the real experience of the child, Euphrasie, nicknamed Cosette, who lives in fear and neglect, exploited by her custodians with whom the mother Fantine had been forced to leave her.58

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57 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 119. There is also the dolls’ connection to feminine subjectivity, the hysterical body and the social construct of the Aryan woman in Bellmer’s work. See Lichtenstein, *Behind Closed Doors*, 87-96, 108-138. Women artists involved in Dada, such as Sophie Tauber, Emmy Hennings and Hannah Hoch explored models of femininity through the interaction with marionettes, puppets and dolls of their own making. See, e.g. Ruth Hemus, *Dada’s Women* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2009) and Hal Foster, “Philosophical Toys and Psychoanalytic Travesties: Anthropomorphic Avatars in Dada and at the Bauhaus”, in Graw, *Art and Subjecthood*, 21-33.

The doll arrives in this story as a gift from Jean Valjean, sent by the mother before her death. It becomes thus a sign of presence, of an Other who at the apex of the child’s absolute helplessness appears to answer her cry and translate it into a demand – a demand for love. For toy historian Michel Manson, Valjean’s gift of the magnificent doll to Cosette is the event of the protagonist’s birth as father. However, it could be argued that the role of the man in the narrative development appears more attuned to that of an original Other of hospitality, that is a (m)Other. The man’s investiture deriving from the child’s mother and his logical function in the narrative as the agency of a foundational “symbolic adoption of life” approximate the maternal Other’s function of introducing a subject’s “bare life” to the “sentiment of life”. Within this relationship, the doll signifies a promise of presence which initiates the subject to the experience of being seen, of an acquired visibility in the field of the Other. By describing, finally, the way the child cuddles and treats her doll, bringing it to bed with her, Hugo also highlights the doll’s role in terms of physical affection, pointing to yet another nuance of the maternal character of the doll. As a material thing to cuddle, the doll is reminiscent of – and a substitute for – the child’s union with the lost body of the mother. We can see this proximity between the doll and the maternal body exposed in the Latin etymology, whereby *pūpa* maintains a relation to *puppa* and *poppea*, derivatives of *puppus*, female breast. This gives the sense of a tactile embrace, of warmth and softness afforded by the doll as a libidinal object, an aspect valorised in post-Freudian psychoanalysis, as in Donald Winnicott’s theory of the *transitional object*.

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60 Massimo Recalcati, *Le Mani della Madre* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2015), 24. The doll is bought by Valjean but his intervention is derived from Cosette’s mother, Fantine, to whom he promises to save the child. Valjean in this sense is a proxy for Cosette’s mother. As underlined by Massimo Recalcati, while the role of parents is the transmission of a “desire not anonymous” (*ivi*, 75), the paternal function is related to the demonstration of the possibility of desire within symbolic alienation, and the maternal to embodying desire for the irreducible particularity of the child as well as exposing desire as lack (*ivi*, 78).


62 Donald Woods Winnicott "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession", *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, no. 34 (1953), 89-97. Often a simple piece of cloth, the transitional object is defined as an object neither internal or external, nor subjective or objective, but an object specifically “at the border” (89), pivot of a potential space on which the infant’s path towards independence from maternal care is founded. For an account of the relationship between the *transitional object* and Lacan’s *objet a*, see Alain Vanier, "Winnicott and Lacan: A Missed Encounter?", *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, Vvl. LXXXI, no. 2 (2012), 279-303.
Hugo’s text is significant within a cultural history of dolls, chiefly because this literary association of the doll with maternal origins is based on a cultural recuperation of the doll’s anthropological and historical complexity. The tropes of the poor orphan girl and the gift of a doll found in Hugo replay in the field of high culture a series of associations deriving from an ancient European folk tradition, namely from the tale of ‘the biting doll’, and through this they connect to the cultural history of Classical antiquity. In the folk tradition, the doll is a magic object originating from a maternal figure able to comfort a female child, to free her from a condition of misery and to create the premise for her final marriage to a powerful man.63 As underlined by Michel Manson, Hugo's story marks a fundamental turning point in nineteenth-century literature, since it connects the aesthetic use of the doll to its historical function within classical antiquity’s rituals of passage, preserved in folk culture within the sphere of magic.64

In the fairy tale, the doll has to be inherited and then lost for the young woman to realise her marriage and sexual ‘maturation’. The doll is a figure of mediation – a vanishing mediator, we could say – the support of a dialectic progress in the subjective path of sexual development. In this dynamics one can find the ritualistic aspect of the doll of the Classical period, that of an object of play that pertains to the sphere of the sacred as well, being dedicated to the altar of Aphrodite-Venus by young maidens at the eve of their marriage.65

The ṭūpā was at the centre of a rite of separation that dramatised the detachment of the woman-to-be from her childhood self and pastimes. The doll mediated the offer of a virgin to a virgin – from the child to the goddess – and, as such, becomes a signifier of female virginity, an object found in the tombs of female children and adult virgins alike. Bettini has underlined how the doll is not only there as an object of the virgins’ in-life personal equipment – something they had used in life – but how it appears as a veritable “virginal equivalent”, a double of the living virgin:

63 The tale is categorised as the type AT 571 C (Hans-Jörg Uther, The Types of International Folktales (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2004). One of its earlier versions is found in Le Piaciovoli Noti de Gian Francesco Straparola (The Nights of Straparola, 1550) with the story of an orphan young girl living in miserable conditions who, after receiving a doll from an old lady, discovers that it expels gold during the night. After a series of adventures, the doll bites the king on his buttocks and the girl, after freeing him, will marry him, to live happy ever after. Michel Manson has underlined how the elements of the poor, orphaned young girl living in misery, the unexpected gift of a doll, the magic appearance of gold in the night and the final union of the girl with a rich and powerful man-saviour, coincident with the final disappearance of the doll, are all features that recur in Hugo’s story. See Manson "La Poupée de Cosette”.
64 Manson, *ivi*.
Thus consecrated to the goddess, the pūpa or kōre becomes the simulacrum of a time (and a person) which once existed but that has irremediably gone away [...]. The pūpa is now the simulacrum of an absence – the virgin has disappeared, the doll is transformed into a kolossós [...], the rigid equivalent of a physical and cultural age irremediably lost. [...] Now one discovers that its eyes were desperately blank and that they reveal melancholy.66

Bettini compares the doll to the kolossós as a sign imbued with the impossible task of giving form to absence, to signify absence as the effect of a loss.67 Jean-Pierre Vernant has famously described the kolossós within the context of ancient Greek funerary rituals and oath binding ceremonies, as an “idol” used to fix and evoke the psūkhē – the immortal soul of the dead – in a material form.68 The kolossós fixes the double of the dead to one place, “relegating him forever to his underground resting place” in an attempt to defuse its persecutory power, while simultaneously manifesting the dead to the living as a “peculiar and ambiguous presence that is, at the same time, a sign of absence”.69 The doll, as a virginal equivalent, can be seen as the kolossós of the virgin, an object full of the past, a dimension of absence retroactively created through the mark of a loss.

Hugo’s doll, however, is all comfort, care and narcissistic reassurance, untouched by any uncanny disturbance. Everything is realised on the level of a heartening, cosy maternal dimension that ultimately positions the doll, and the world of childhood, on a mythical register – Romanticism’s child as innocent, free from social conventions, closer to nature and to the world of imagination and so forth. Charles Baudelaire, on the contrary, in the same period inaugurates a very different figure of the ‘child with toy’, one that loses its seraphic innocence to approximate what Freud would later describe as the “polymorphous perverse” “aptitude” of childhood.70 Whereas Hugo’s appropriation of the tale of the biting doll shows the period’s recuperation of cultural and psychological complexity for the doll, in speaking more broadly about toys, in his influential 1853 essay Morale du joujou, Baudelaire outlines a series of links between toys and libidinal enjoyment that will be central to Surrealism’s association of the doll to a ‘pre-Oedipal’ jouissance.71 The subversive cultural potential that Surrealists – as well as Dadaists – will later attach to this figure is ultimately based on the

66 Bettini, Il Ritratto, 254, my translation.
67 I will return to the kolossós in Chapter 5.
68 See Jean Pierre Vernant, Myth and Thought among the Greeks (London: Routledge, 1983), 308. The kolossós and the psūkhē are for Vernant manifestations of the eidolon, associated with dream-images, shadows and supernatural apparitions, phenomena related to the psychological category of the double (309).
69 ivi, 307.
association between art, child’s play and the realm of the irrational, of freedom and loss of control, as opposed to the rationalism of the bourgeoisie. We find precisely such a link in this eclectic text by Baudelaire. The “barbaric simplicity” of the means of child’s play is here a metaphor for beauty tout court – which anticipates Baudelaire’s own later definition of beauty as the “naively bizarre”, the “involuntary, unconscious”.

He speaks of the child’s relationship to toys to underline the “poetry” of childhood as terminus a quo of the “imaginative impotence” of “our blasé public”: the child with a toy is a figure of a sensual and aesthetic experience, set against the sterility of the “class of ultra-reasonable and anti-poetic people”. However, there is more, in this text, suggested between the lines:

1) The facility for gratifying contenter one’s imagination is evidence of the spirituality of childhood in its artistic conceptions. The toy joujou is the child’s earliest initiation into art, or rather it is for him the first realisation; and when maturity intervenes, the most accomplished realisations will not give his mind the same warmth chaleurs, the same enthusiasm, nor the same belief croyance.

Morale du Joujou emerges as a disquisition on aesthetic enjoyment and a statement on enjoyment tout court, if we consider the abundance of terms characterised by a strong erotic charge, such as, in this passage, ‘contenter’ and ‘chaleurs’, the latter being highly ambiguous for its double meaning as ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘sexual excitement’. It is to be noted that joujou is ill-translated into the English ‘toy’, for joujou is a diminutive, a word based on the repetition of the same syllable typical of infantile speech, of children’s lallation prior to a full mastery of language. A child with his joujou is the figure of a satisfaction that for the adult is irretrievable, but of which the toy, nevertheless, remains the sign and as such becomes the archetype of the artwork.

That the joujou is a libidinal object is shown in the opening of the essay, through the remarkable, supposedly personal memory of Mme Panckoucke, a lady in “velvet and fur”, whose offer to take a “souvenir of her” from her sumptuous “treasure” of toys clearly appears as an encounter with jouissance. Baudelaire describes it as a moment in which “desire, deliberation and action are so to speak compacted into a single faculty”, that is a moment of inhibition, “admirable” in children. The text is punctuated with the word ‘desir’, and it is indeed a phenomenology of desire that Baudelaire seems to offer in this text through a varied series of children with their toys. We can read the scene with Mme Panckoucke as a veritable original fantasy, one describing the metonymy of desire, where

73 Baudelaire, "Morale", 583.
74 ibidem.
75 ivi, 581.
76 ivi, 582.
the toy stands for the lady in velvet and fur, a reading suggested by Baudelaire himself when he refers to this event as to the “cause” of his adult “abiding affection” for colourful and bizarrely shaped toys, in which he recognises the value of a “statuaire singulière” (peculiar statuary). Baudelaire’s phenomenology concludes with the “mania” of children who break toys, under the force of a “metaphysical stirring” – “they want to see the soul of their toys” – which finally ends in frustration, “stupor and melancholy” at the discovery of the toy’s lack of “soul”.78

This moment of despair on which Baudelaire’s text finds its end, almost abruptly, can be seen to be ideally resumed as a starting point by Rainer Maria Rilke’s melancholic essay On the dolls of Lotte Pritzel (1913). More than in Baudelaire, the relationship with the toy is underpinned in Rilke by an experience of loss and mourning, closely bordering on the Freudian description of the death drive. Pritzel’s emaciated and sensual miniature dolls, well known in the 1910s and 1920s German avant-garde circles, are seen by Rilke as an image of Eros as Thanatos (Fig. 1.4).79 “[S]exless like our childhood dolls”, they are an image of a “permanent sensuality, into which nothing flows and from which nothing escapes”, Rilke writes, a formulation that we may see echoing Freud’s definition of nirvana as a state of plenitude and nothingness, alien to excitation.80

Rilke’s doll inhabits a childhood marked by loneliness, between misery and affection – “silence”, “border”, “hollowness”, “death”, “abyss” are all words used by Rilke to describe the world shared by the doll and the child.81 The figure of the doll emerges here as a cypher of the attraction for an Eros boarding on self-annihilation, for its proximity is a primeval confrontation with the “border” of existence, the border between the Ego and “the amorphous world pouring into us”.82 Here we find another specification of the frustration that Baudelaire describes as the disappointment of the investment in the “soul” of the toy: the doll, “would almost enrage us by its horrible dense forgetfulness”, writes Rilke, “and the hatred which must always have been an unconscious part of our connection with it would burst to the surface”.83 Hence the doll is, on one side, able to stimulate the creation of

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78 Baudelaire, “Morale”, 587.

79 The doll-maker was a point of reference for both Kokoschka and Bellmer. See Peter Webb, Hans Bellmer (London/New York: Quartet Books, 1985), 57. On Pritzel’s dolls see also Von Boehn, Dolls, 220.


82 iv, 55.

83 iv, 54.
1.4. Lotte Pritzel, *Doll*, 1920s.
“twofold inspirations” in the dimension of play, with the child “split” into “opposing parts”, playing the self and the other, to compensate for the doll’s being “devoid of imagination”.84 On the other side, the doll is guilty for not being responsive enough to the child’s affective investment — “stolid” and “mute”, the doll is a “monster”, indifferent to the “riches” of the child’s affection.85 It is clear that this ambivalence towards the doll is the ambivalence towards the primordial Other. We have seen the doll at once being a vision of “paradise”, in Hugo, a figure of “abiding affection” in Baudelaire and of “horrible dense forgetfulness” and hatred in Rilke.86 From the texts and cultural traditions that we have briefly recounted here, the doll emerges as the battle ground where the first articulations of absence and presence are played out. It is the first image of a world which does not give “reassuring answers”, in this sense like and unlike the mother, this Janus-faced Other, at once the Other of care and presence and the Other of absence, of the most primordial lack. 87

This connection between narcissism, the death drive and the maternal found in the period’s cultural imagery is paramount in understanding the centrality of the figure of the doll in Surrealism. A very early text of Lacan, whose proximity to the group is well known, may serve here to link between this cultural history of the doll and the psychoanalytically-oriented Surrealist deployment of it.88 In his 1938 The Family Complexes, Lacan writes of the maternal imago as an “unconscious representation” of the weaning complex, which “fixes the feeding relationship in the psyche in the parasitic form that the needs of the human infant being demand”.89 Being “entirely dominated by cultural factors”, Lacan argues, weaning is “often a psychic trauma”, leaving in the psyche a “permanent trace”.90 The breast-feeding mother-child relationship is seen to be characterised by “cannibalism”: with the breast, “the being who absorbs is completely absorbed” in a “cannibalistic” oral fusion, “at once active and passive”.91 This longing for fusion “still survives in games and in

84 ibidem.
85 iv, 55-56.
90 iv, 16.
91 iv, 18. This phase for Lacan precedes narcissistic auto-eroticism and narcissism, “since the ego is not yet constituted” (ibidem).
symbolic words and [...] in the most highly developed love recalls the desire of the larva". Even once sublimated, Lacan adds, the maternal imago maintains a central place “in the depths of the psyche” and in the culture at large: the “most abstract form in which it is found” can be defined as “a perfect assimilation of totality to being”, a “nostalgia for wholeness”, in which “will be recognised the nostalgias of humanity”. In this concept of larval desire we find another possible reference to supplement the associations that we have seen at work in the Surrealist photographic instances of the doll after its alignment with mimicry, the informe, the picture, the uncanny and the punctum. The nostalgic larval desire of this Lacanian description of the breast further exposes the decadent, regressive edge of the artistic uses of the figure of the doll between nineteenth and twentieth century. The question “why is it a woman who embodies most fully the paradoxical combination of pleasure and anguish that characterises transgression” in twentieth-century avant-garde art may find an answer here.

It is the body of a very specific woman that is the locus of that ambivalence, that is the body of the (m)Other, whose enjoyment by the child is affected by the desire of the woman, being ultimately dependent on it for its presence or absence. Where once was the mother, there is the doll. Playing with the doll is an effect of the mother’s choice to create the possibility of her absence.

Significantly, Lacan’s text on the maternal imago ties libidinal suppression to the figure of the maternal Other, offering a psychoanalytical rationale for the cultural tradition of the pūpa as a feminine, ritualistic object signifying a foundational moment of loss. In this text, Lacan takes issue with Freud’s primacy of the castration complex, affirming that the “prototype of oedipal suppression” lies further back, in the loss of the breast during the weaning process. It is the mother’s “refusal of weaning” that gives to the weaning complex its critical importance, as the crisis from which a first dialectical moment is instituted in play, in which the subject “assumes the reproduction of this misery [of weaning] and in that way sublimates and overcomes it”. It is from the loss of the maternal object that the faculty of hallucinating what is lacking, in other words the symbol, arises. To play is playing with the symbol, that is to say creatively treating the “unpleasurable” experience of loss, as Freud

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92 *ibidem*. This text may add another theoretical reference to the suggestion that the basis of the Surrealist *amour fou* is to be found in narcissism, as suggested by David Lomas in *Narcissus Reflected*.


97 *iv*, 17, 28.
had put it upon observing his nephew Ernst’s game of the *fort-da*.

Staging the coming and going of the mother through a game of disappearance and return, the child is seen by Freud to be dramatising his “great cultural achievement”, “the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction”. If one of the feminist objections to psychoanalysis is the exclusion of women from the process of symbolisation, in this early Lacanian text we already find the nucleus of the suggestion that it is the maternal function – anticipating that which Lacan would later call the *paternal metaphor* – to create the first conditions for that fundamental absence on which the child can institute her access to the Symbolic. In the ‘refusal of weaning’ we may see the fundamental role of the desire of the mother, of the woman beyond the mother, as a fundamental element for the installation of the subject as lack.

It is the relationship with the (m)Other and the loss of that *mythical* first satisfaction with the *Thing*, that creates the symbol, indeed permits the symbol, as the hallucination of satisfaction in fantasy. The psychic ambiguity of the figure of the doll is wholly dependent from this dialectic between a moment of presence of the object and one of absence, since the doll lives at the boundary that inaugurates the split of subjectivity and the access to fantasy, central to the process of creative sublimation as we know it. From a psychoanalytic point of view, in fantasy, as in play and art, the subject deals with a lack of object, hallucinating the possibility of inhabiting that lack. For Lacan the artistic object is an object raised to “the Dignity of the Thing”, an object implicated with *jouissance* as lack. It is precisely by inhabiting this liminal space defined by loss – as occupying the space *before, on* and *beyond* the fundamental loss – that the doll has traditionally found in culture its uncanny valence as well as its centrality within considerations on the artistic process. What is left of this role of the doll once lack and dissatisfaction do not define the horizon of subjectivity?

Fundamentally, the uncanny potential of the double ultimately rests on the historicity of the modern discontent of civilisation. In his engaging account of the notion of the uncanny in Lacanian terms, Mladen Dolar has underlined how the *unheimlich* irruption of the Real into ordinary reality depends on a precise historical intersection between object and discourse: *objet a* “is most intimately linked with and produced by the rise of modernity”.

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99 Jiv, 9.
100 However, Lacan’s attention to the maternal role in the process of suppression (“the discipline of weaning and of sphincter control”), is followed by an emphasis on the centrality of the Oedipus complex in the subject’s ability to go “beyond its narcissistic form” (*id.*, *The Family Complexes*, 46). I understand this to be the passage from a dual to a triangular structure, the installation of a *third term*, anticipated by the installation of dissatisfaction by the mother’s ‘refusal of weaning’.
102 ibidem.
This is defined, on one side, by the Enlightenment’s rationalism and its efforts to triumph over the sacred, turning “the privileged and excluded place” that had founded society in something “unplaceable”, that is uncanny; and, on the other, by psychoanalysis, in its mission to give voice to the excluded place, on the side of the unconscious.103 My own personal contribution to this debate on psychoanalytic aesthetics, vis à vis the muted aesthetic qualities of the doll within the case studies analysed, is the question of the destiny of the uncanny within the structural changes in the discursivity of jouissance registered in the contemporary moment. This is a different preoccupation from a possible “occlusion of the uncanny” due to a “generalised alienation” in the flattened surface of the simulacrum.104 Affect is alive and well in hypermodernity, and it is precisely on an appraisal of its organised forms in the current discourse of civilisation that my analysis of case studies in the following chapters will be founded.

The uncanny is dependent from a precise discursive structure, related to the restriction of jouissance through the alienating dynamics of the signifier that Lacan has described as the master’s discourse, as we saw in the Introduction.105 As recently underlined by Jacques-Alain Miller, “psychoanalysis was invented to respond to the discontent in civilization”, which is the discontent of “a subject plunged into a civilization that can be stated like this: in order to give existence to the sexual relation, jouissance must be hampered, inhibited, repressed”.106 This is the loss of jouissance that has traditionally been a foundational tenet for a psychoanalytic notion of the social bond, but which does not describes today’s “hypermodern” discourse of civilisation.107 The objet a has in this discourse risen “to the social zenith”, since it “prevails upon the disorientated subject”, as Miller put it, “invit[ing] him to get past his inhibitions”.108 Today’s discourse of civilisation is not opposite to the place of jouissance, like in the post-Victorian era, but coincides with it. In my analyses, I will refer to the terms of the capitalist’s discourse, which I shall develop in some detail in Chapter 2, following Lacan’s indication, in the early 1970s, that this organisation may be seen to have replaced the master’s discourse, as its contemporary variant.109 With all the overlaps that are traditionally posited between the doll, the maternal and jouissance, it will be most fascinating to see what happens once the object is moved from its place of excess and subversion. If the object of enjoyment finds a new place in hypermodernity, I

104 Welchman, “The Uncanny”, 49.
105 See Lacan, The Other Side, and id., Discours à l’Université de Milan.
107 iv, 6.
108 iv, 11, 6.
109 See Lacan, Discours à l’Université de Milan.
will follow the readjustments of the discursive network of correspondences and associations around the figure of the doll. An emblem of jouissance in its modernist form, the doll can be traced back in contemporary visual culture as a figure revealing an epochal cultural shift, reflecting broader issues circling around the capitalist subject-object relationship, recent developments in photography and the role of the image in hypermodernity.

This brings me back to Hal Foster’s reading of Cindy Sherman’s 1992 disjointed mannequins in Sex Pictures as figures of the dissolution of the subject in the Real, which we saw in the Introduction. In conclusion, before moving to analyse my chosen case studies in the following chapters, I want to pause on this moment of the early 1990s, a turning point in which old and new visual paradigms seem to collide. Foster’s account of post-1960s realism as traumatic realism can be traced back in the associations between mimicry and ‘subjective detumescence’ that we have explored throughout this chapter. Completing that transition from the Freudian uncanny to the Lacanian theory of the gaze that Krauss had started in 1985, Foster’s traumatic realism is built on the Real dimension of the gaze. Sherman’s fairy tales and disaster images of the late 1980s, with their focus on (simulated) organic waste and the blurring of figure and ground, are seen by Foster as a paradigmatic revelation of the object-gaze, “as if there were no scene to stage it, no frame of representation to contain it, no screen”. The artist’s later introduction of artificial body parts and medical models in place of her own body, in Sex Pictures, is then read in terms of substantial continuity with the previous series, as an effect of the erosion of the subject that, “invaded by the gaze”, “only return[s] as disjunct doll”. This return to realism is for Foster a “thing of trauma”, one that wants to “feed the gaze”, as if it “wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition”. “To this end”, Foster adds, this is an art that “moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn”. Foster is well aware that the Real cannot be evoked as a positive presence but only as a negative magnitude of absence, as a hole in the representation, and yet his theorisation of traumatic realism is based on a positive textualisation of the Real, on its imaginarisation in representation. Playing with the imaginary of abjection will never ‘expose’ the Real as the intrinsic limit of the Symbolic. What is repressed can only be evoked in a signifying formation

110 Foster, The Return, 152, 149.
111 iv, 149
112 iv, 146, 140, emphasis in the original.
113 iv, p. 140.
114 Recalcati, similarly, albeit within a negative judgement, has written of abject art and Body Art as art of the Real whereby the aesthetic field would be destroyed through a display of a “Real devoid of veil [velatura]”, a Real “not sublimated but exhibited as object of pure horror”. See Massimo Recalcati, Il Miracolo della Forma: Per un’Estetica Psicoanalitica (Milano: Mondadori, 2007), XIII.
such as the work of art as something beyond representation. The problem is partly exposed
by Foster in relation to the question of the cultural-political deployment of abject art,
insinuating the doubt that the attempt to display the Real might result in a pornographic,
voyeuristic representation of it.\textsuperscript{115} Notwithstanding the recognition of the oxymoron, Foster
does not seem to work through its consequences, remaining bridled in what is a Surrealist
critique of contemporary art.

My interpretation of the return of realism in contemporary art differs from Foster's,
however, on a more structural level, in relation to the understanding of the aesthetic effects
of the decline of the Oedipal norm. Foster underlines that the key for the appraisal of the
possible subversive potential of a flaunting of the Real lies in its relationship with the
symbolic order. He notices that for there to be a transgressive potential "the condition of
image-screen and symbolic order is all important", since if it is considered to be "intact",
"the attack on the image-screen might retain a transgressive value", otherwise, if considered
"torn", "such transgression might be beside the point, and this old vocation of the avant-
garde might be at an end."\textsuperscript{116} Nevertheless, for Foster what emerges from a decline of the
Symbolic is by default a "crisis of the image-screen as well":

\begin{quote}
[a]t one point, in \textit{Powers of Horror}, Kristeva suggests that a cultural shift has occurred in recent
decades. "In a world in which the Other has collapsed", she states enigmatically, the task of the
artist is no longer to sublimate the abject but to plumb it – to fathom "the bottomless 'primacy'
constituted by primal repression". [...] Kristeva implies that the paternal law that underwrites
the social order has fallen into crisis. This suggests a crisis of the image-screen as well, and, as
I intimated with Sherman, some artists of this period did attack it, while others, under the
assumption that it was already torn, probed behind it as though to touch the real.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

The 'decline of the Symbolic' is coincident here with a 'crisis of the image-screen', which
implies that its effects shall be registered in terms of a return of a "repressed" Real.\textsuperscript{118} In
this passage we find Foster's theoretical foundation for his interpretation of post-1960s
realism – and for the place held by human replicas in Sherman, Kelley and McCarthy's work
– as \textit{traumatic realism}, as an art 'in the service of the Real'. Within this framework, mimicry
holds the place it had for Caillois and the Surrealists in the 1930s: a loss of Ego boundaries
as effect of the invasion of deathly \textit{jouissance}. As for Surrealism, avant-garde artistic

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Ivi}, 156.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Ivi}, 157
\textsuperscript{117} \textit{Ivi}, 156.
\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Ivi}, 145. In the note relative to the cited passage, Foster argues against a structural understanding of the
'collapse of the Other' instead suggested by Kristeva. For Foster the symbolic order is always in crisis, which reads
as an assimilation of the Lacanian Symbolic to the actual material socio-political order to which it surely connects
but should not be reduced (\textit{Ivi}, 270, note 56).
practices are seen advocating a liberation of _jouissance_ against the strictures of ‘paternal law’. What I propose to consider, instead, starting with Olivier Rebufa’s work in the following chapter, is how a collapse of symbolic efficiency may translate visually in very different ways than as an ‘attack on the screen’ via uncanny, abject, obscene and _informe_ means. The central question is to understand how the traditional alliance between the doll, the image and _jouissance_ has come to be interpreted in the work of the artists considered and what this might reveal of a general condition of visuality in the hypermodern discourse of civilisation.
Olivier Rebufa (1958) worked as a fashion photographer before turning to art photography in the late 1980s, when he started to take pictures of miniature mannequins, namely Barbie dolls. His first image of the project, which he would later title *Self-Portraits With Dolls (Since 1989)*, portrays him as Ken, standing on a *gâteau de mariage* at the side of that most famous of fashion dolls, Barbie Millicent Roberts (Fig. 2.1). With hindsight, considering how constant Rebufa has shown to be in this artistic formula, we may indeed say that on that day he married Barbie, the most eternal among all cultural icons in the West.\(^1\) That period in France, like elsewhere, saw the boundaries between the cultural industries and fine art becoming more porous, with commercial and art photography starting to overlap. In photography, conceptualism and formalism, art and market, ‘fiction’ and ‘realism’, started to appear as non-antagonist. Hybrid figures of artist-photographers or photographer-artists came not to be considered an exception, after the chasm between a conceptualist and a technical use of the medium that had characterised the central decades of the century.\(^2\) Venice Biennale’s international exhibition *Aperto 80*, in 1980, had been shaken by the return of the figure and of traditional forms of art making, styles and conventions of earlier periods within a post-conceptual digestion. The traditional avant-garde refusal of ‘self-expression’ and pictorialism found itself overrun by a flow of figures, neo-expressionist gestures and decorativism. There was the sense that, free from the ideological pressures of the previous decades, artists now could freely choose their *modus operandi* without feeling like reactionaries.

However, this return of the figure and of subjective authoriality is to be considered in relation to a cultural shift, registered in the period’s debates. In the opening of his 1981 *Simulacra and Simulation*, Jean Baudrillard had defined the simulacrum as “the truth which

\(^1\) M.G. Lord has called Barbie “the most potent icon of American popular culture”, with the advantage over flesh-and-bones icons of never ‘rotting’, since perpetually reinvented by her designers. Lord, *Forever Barbie*: the Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll (New York: Morrow and Co, c1994), 7.

\(^2\) Hybridity can mean the conjunction of pictorial and conceptual values, as in Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman’s work, for instance, or the inextricability of artistic and commercial work in the case of Helmut Newton, or the cross-contamination of sculpture and photography in the work of Sandy Skoglund.
conceals that there is none”, as a sign devoid of the depth of meaning. Like for Fredric Jameson writing few years later on postmodernism, the simulacrum is for Baudrillard immanent in the logic of capital, inaugurated by the seriality of the copy. Gilles Lipovetsky, in the same years, spoke in his popular The Era of Emptiness of a new version of individualism, founded in “hedonism, respect of differences, cult of personal expression, humour and sincerity”, which he saw supplanting “abnegation” as the foundation of the Social. Lipovetsky recalls Christopher Lasch’s American bestseller Culture of Narcissism, published in 1979, as an antecedent for his own claim of a radical “anthropological mutation”, whereby capitalism is seen to disconnect from its original Protestant ethics to be founded, instead, on “hedonism” and “permissiveness”, on a narcissistic type of individualism. This is individualism purged of the transcendence and inner-directedness described for the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century “homo oeconomicus”, whose action was based on individual initiative and responsibility before his own inner conscience and God, to be instead invested in the pure personal level of wellbeing, self-care and self-realisation.

Hybridity, simulation, capitalism and narcissism are key themes, briefly recalled here, exuding rather blatantly from Rebufa’s photographic work. For Rebufa combines photography with self-portraiture, performance and sculpture, to shape a phantasmagoria of the self in the guise of a reified doll inhabiting a world dominated by all things Barbie, the most imperishable icon of capitalist ‘Americanness’ in Western culture. Specifically, his version of the self-portrait takes the form of a bidimensional object, integrated in a complex maquette made of toys and Barbie dolls which is destroyed after the shoot. The resulting image is a second-grade portrait – a photograph of a photograph. With the final black-and-white print the viewer is presented with a strong narrative textuality, with the pleasure of

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1 Jean Baudrillard, Simulations, 5.
3 *Ivi*, 56.
4 *Ibidem*. Two classical texts on the downfall of Protestant ethics appeared earlier in the U.S.: David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd (1950) and William Whyte’s The Organization Man (1956), which focused on the passage between a self-directed to an other-directed individual, in correspondence with the development between early capitalism to corporate capitalism. In Culture of Narcissism, Lasch, then followed by Lipovetsky, added a third stage to this process, describing a narcissistic type in correspondence of the onset of post-industrial capitalism.
5 Scenarios are first sketched on a carnet de note, then made in sculptural form using cardboard, dolls and miniature equipment, and lastly photographed, destroying the model (but keeping the toys) after the shoot. This is an extremely labour-intensive photographic practice, starting from the design of the set and its construction, followed by the self-portrait being taken in the right pose and then printed to the right scale. Once the artist’s figure has been cut out, it is inserted in the sculptural scenario from which the negative is taken and finally printed in black and white. While Bimbeloterie (1989-2017), on which I will focus in this chapter, is usually printed in a 60x80 cm format, in recent years Rebufa has also used Lambda printing, Photoshop and other digital technologies, as in Les Avatars de Mam (2007) and Mes Ancêtres (2007).
reading sustained by a vast array of details and a serial organisation. I will take ‘hybridity’, ‘simulation’, ‘capitalism’ and ‘narcissism’ as headings for my exploration of Rebufa’s work in this chapter, trying to map the interconnectedness of these concepts at the visual level and the way in which the doll is employed and connected to its rich cultural tradition.

2.1. **BIMBELOTERIE: FLATNESS AND THE MITHOLOGIES OF TOYS**

Rebufa’s artistic career in the late 1980s started in Marseille, at a period in which the genre of self-representation had made a return, after modernism had devalued it for most of the century. Rebufa defines his work primarily as *autoportrait*, a term that in France is connected to a literary discussion on self-representation as associative *bricolage*, metaphoric and poetic in structure, as opposed to the linear reconstruction of the narrative of the self of the classical *autobiographie*. Topological and discontinuous rather than chronological, open-ended and intertextual instead of conclusive, the *autoportrait* is seen to translate subjectivity as something disseminated in historical and cultural codes as well as on the surface of the text. Engaging with this discussion, Rebufa’s self-portrait emerges as an effect of theatrical construction, with various implications, both on an aesthetic and cultural level.

In terms of genre, miniaturising his photographic self-portrait to the size of a Barbie doll, the artist reinvents self-portrait in sculptural terms. Self-portrait emerges as constructedness, which is first and foremost the effect of a creative appetite in a world-building process, in the ideation and construction of a fictive set in which the artist is the star protagonist, moved around as a paper doll amidst an array of Barbies, tiny furniture and accessories. Rebufa’s photography is theatrical, in this sense, as a tridimensional staging, a sculptural form of photography. His work can be approximated to that of other photographer-sculptors active in the 1980s, such as Patrick Raynaud’s images of cut-out *tableaux* made of paper and wood, James Casabere’s photographs of miniaturised spaces built from cardboard and Laurie Simmons’s photographic staging of dolls and doll houses. However, in contrast to these artists, Rebufa is present as a figure in his images, inhabiting his spaces and animating his narrative world. More than anything else, Rebufa’s theatricality points to his work’s development in the 1990s towards other essential formal characteristics: narrativity, performance and flatness.

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9 Furthermore, in Rebufa’s miniature world we do not find Raynaud’s harsh caricature impulse, nor Casabere’s oneiric sublimity or the overt ideological critique implied in Laurie Simmons’s feminist-inflected work of the period.
With regard to the first aspect, we might see his work as a form of storytelling by images, where a strong narrative implant, both at the level of the series and of the single frame, tends to collapse a clear separation between photographic and cinematic language, almost converting the single photograph into a still. A good example of this cinematic quality is *L’anniversaire* (*The Birthday*, Fig. 2.2) from 1995, where time is spatialised by the merging of multiple moments in the image, while the richness of detail-clues offered to the viewer plays on the edge between the pleasure of reading and the blatant stereotyped nature of the story to be read. However, with Rebufa presenting the first and last act of this romantic scene, with the middle moments missing, the viewer is engaged in an interactive play of deconstructing cultural references and constructing possible meanings. There are gaps in the narrative that need filling, an effort of animation.

As for the work’s performative quality, it is clear that the pleasure of the maquette and the narrative implant update the early photographic tradition of the *tableau vivant*. One of the latest additions to *Bimbeloterie* is a homage to Hippolyte Bayard’s 1840 *Le Noyé*, in which the out-of-frame artist is redoubled by a Barbie photographer (Fig. 2.3). With Bayard, Rebufa reminds us that at the very origins of photography we find not only the medium of scientific transcription of facts and objective reality, but a machine able to give form to the pleasures of the *mise en scène*. This tradition, pioneered between the nineteenth and early twentieth century by figures such as Julia Margaret Cameron and Lewis Carroll, and revived starting from the 1960s by artists such Luigi Ontani, Yasumasa Morimura and Cindy Sherman, is one for which the photograph is a paradoxical document of fiction, taken between the analogue of the trace and illusion. Through literary, mythological and cinematic references, the body is transfigured to reveal its phantasmatic matter. However, the ‘fictions’ of Rebufa do not appear to be “evasion from reality”, “dreams come true”, as is often remarked in regard to this cultural form, as much as a consideration of how fiction structures ordinary reality. This is because, before all else, stereotype plays an important part in these constructed images. Rebufa’s performance is in fact based on a never-ending series of stereotyped roles – Adam chased from paradise, New York *yuppie*, psychoanalyst, analysand, porn film spectator, acrobat, toy figure, Tarzan, sculpture, Centurion, film noir detective, celebrity signing autographs, cowboy, hairdresser for ladies, and so on. We may see in this focus on the stereotype the first element of flatness, as psychological flatness. It seems that all is needed to embody the various roles is a change of dress, just like Barbie herself, that is to say, all that changes is the attire, with affective inflection kept to a minimum.

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2.3. Olivier Rebufa, *Colère (Bimbeloterie)*, 2016.

2.4. Olivier Rebufa, *Balade Sur la Corniche (Bimbeloterie)*, 1990.

But evidently, Rebufa’s image is also and especially visually flat. Works such as the
aforementioned *Anniversaire, Balade sur la Corniche* (1990) or *Panoplie* (1994) all
foreground an aesthetic of flatness, as we shall see (Fig. 2.4-2.5). *Panoplie* and *Balade*,
juxtaposed, almost redouble the artist’s own artmaking process, with the cut-out figures and
props of the first mounted in the scene of the second. This farfetched luxury of the Nineties
in toy version takes the form of a Basquiat-inspired geometrical patterned shirt for him and
a leopard print coat for her, giving a flavour of the decade's taste for excess. However, this
is not child’s play, as signalled not so much by the gun – children have plenty of miniature
guns in their toy chests – but by the dildo in Barbie’s accessories. We find here an excess of
inappropriateness typical of parody, which corrects Barbie’s sex-less design, while making
clear that the world depicted here involves an adult version of an adult fantasy.

This sexualisation emerges, primarily, as a reclamation of the history of this icon of child’s play,
of her pre-American German descent. Before being redesigned by Mattel and launched in
1959, Barbie had been *Bild Lilli*, a "pornographic caricature", originally a gag-gift sold in bars
and tobacco shops for men, not certainly a toy for children. Bild Lilli was a miniature version
of a post-war, sexually-liberated and fashion-obsessed young secretary, born as a comic
character for the German newspaper BILD Zeitung. Re-sexualised, Barbie here rediscovers
her own origins, as it were, as an adult caricature. In this sense, Rebufa’s engagement with
dolls differs substantially from that of Bernard Faucon for instance, a central reference for
the aesthetics of dolls in the post-war French photographic tradition, where the world
created in the photograph is suggestive of childhood and pre-adolescent fantasies (Fig. 2.6).

In *Summer Holidays* (1978), Faucon is engaged in an exquisitely crafted pictorialist
recreation of pre-adolescent ambiences, suffused with a nostalgic, elegiac mood that is
hardly found in Rebufa’s often sarcastic disposition. The inappropriateness of Barbie’s
sexualisation found here and elsewhere in *Bimbeloterie* draws, instead, a connection to
David Levinthal’s 1972 series *Bad Barbie*, in which the doll is pictured in a series of sexual
poses with boyfriend Ken and an African-American G.I. Joe (Fig. 2.7). Here Levinthal
engages with the format of X-rated materials in a decade of newly sexually-liberated culture,
using cropping, viewing angle and black and white towards this aim. But while Levinthal’s
image attempts to achieve an erotically-charged atmosphere, Rebufa’s sexualisation of
Barbie plays on the juxtaposition of the adult content on the child-centric format of the
paper-cut game, creating a satirical effect. In this sense, the black-and-white format works
in opposite directions in the two bodies of work. Black and white certainly speaks of the
past, of memory, emphasising a Barthian *that has been* which, if it animates Levinthal’s
image with a document-effect, could not be more out of place in Rebufa’s blatantly
constructed world of toys. Rebufa’s use of black and white plays with the codes of authorial

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art photography, historically a means to distance it from commercial, amatorial and journalistic photographic traditions. The filter that the black-and-white format creates from a full-color, sensually and emotively perceived experience, in Rebufa ultimately might point to detachment, a signifying gap in which an (authorial) comment and a reading may take place.

The evidence of montage also foregrounds the presence of meaning. Rebufa’s aim is not the creation of a fully credible fictitious world, otherwise digital photography or a more refined and pictorialist surface, like that used by Laurie Simmons in her recent series The Love Doll, would have been more appropriate. Here there is the interest in maintaining visual signs of the manual construction of the set, evident in the fact that the artist leaves obvious traces of its constructedness. While Panoplie thematises the construction process as a cut-out game, Balade Sur La Cornice combines props and figures in a way that avoids the erection of a seamless, organic whole. The car is more in front of a bidimensional scene than in a livable space, with the projected backdrop narrowing the space, refusing perspective and repelling depth, similar to an early cinema feature. As in the early films of George Méliès – to whom Rebufa has recently paid homage – here space and action emerge as a series of flat, cut out figures and effects, more akin to a stage performance set in front of the viewer than to an immersive tri-dimensional classic cinematic space.12

Montage is not only declared through the deployment of a flat space, but sometimes emphatically overstated, as in the already mentioned L’anniversaire, where twodimensionality becomes fragmentation – the image barely keeps itself together. The space is not only (dis)organised on multiple perspectives and sequential temporality but the seams of the flat backdrop used for the floor are clearly evident. This focus on the seams of the various elements and materials forces attention onto the surface of the image. The viewer is both invited to ‘interact’ and to maintain a distance from the image, a foot out of the door as it were. In contrast to the high production values deployed by other contemporary art photographers engaging with fictions, where illusionism and credibility play an important role, Rebufa’s laborious photographic process self-consciously foregrounds a simplicity-effect. This can be read as the attempt to maintain a naivety of the image, which connects culturally to nineteenth-century forms of mass entertainment like early cinema and, affectively, to the artist’s own childhood pastimes – Rebufa confided his father would “pass him” silent films in 8mm and early Disney cartoons in black and white.13

12 See Rebufa’s Harold Méliès (Autoportrait série cinéma) 2016. On the flatness of early cinema, see Antonia Lant, “Haptic Cinema”, October, vol. 74 (Autumn, 1995), 45-73. Balade can also be seen in reference to the classical use of rear projection in Hollywood cinema’s driving scenes, and to its citation in 1970s and 1980s feminist-oriented works such as Cindy Sherman’s Film Stills and Laurie Simmons’s Color Coordinated Interiors.

13 Rebufa, email correspondence with the author, 2.4.2017.
The planning, building, dismantling and playing involved in Rebufa’s artmaking reveals a form of affection for the sources he borrows from which is hardly found in previous deconstructionist appropriation art. Sherrie Levine’s *President’s Collages* from 1979, for instance, which present images of women from magazines scissored-out and mounted in silhouette-portraits of American presidents, are customarily read as a disillusioned statement on the demise of originality and individual expression, as much as a critique of mass-media culture from which they borrow, distanced both emotionally and aesthetically. Albeit engaged in a similar analysis of the discursive structure of subjectivity, Rebufa’s work does not distance itself from the sources of mass-entertainment he appropriates, thus revealing how the artwork shares in, rather than rejects, a broader mass-media context and its capitalist ideological condition. In Rebufa’s work this type of engagement with forms of popular entertainment is central: we find not only early cinema and Barbie among these sources, but also the modern traditions of the bibelot and the images d’Epinal. These are popular cultural sources that are both strongly ideologically charged and affectively, positively played with in Rebufa’s work. They express a cultural history mobilised through an aesthetic of flatness, opening to a whole array of contradictions, some of which we come to see: high art and mass culture, conceptualism and manual intervention, engagement and distance. However, the chief contradiction might involve the use of the simulacrum within a claim of historicity that the deployment of nineteenth-century sources seems to belie. Speaking of the fashion for the rétro, Jameson has written of the simulacrum as the end of history, whereby “the past as ‘referent’ finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts”.  

If we can agree with Jameson that in the cultural recuperation of the past the risk is one of political flattening, of a-historical stylisation, of false historical depth, how are we then to understand Rebufa’s engagement with the cultural history of toys and images? How can affective engagement be more than ‘style’? In what ways can the artwork still make space for a critical voice once it declares its own flirtation with the world of capitalist spectacle?

With *Bimbeloterie* we are reminded that there is a historic and adult history of play, as the same title suggests in the word’s etymology from the French bibelot. Bibelots were decorative objects devoid of practical utility – trinkets, knick-knacks, curiosities – indicating an adult taste, in modern Europe, for miniature replicas such as ingenious complexes of houses, interiors and fittings. Originating in the ancien régime, bibelots would live a golden age in the nineteenth century, when they would be typically found among the paraphernalia

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displayed in the **drawing room**, or the French **salon**, dedicated to social gatherings and the entertainment of guests. These miniature objects would be displayed in a case, out of children’s reach, but children would also play with them, testifying to the lack of clear social boundaries between adulthood and childhood before the nineteenth century.\(^\text{16}\) Walter Benjamin saw **bibelots**, in the late nineteenth century, as middle-class remnants of a previous art of the people, proceeding from the German house and the Neapolitan crib. Like the Surrealists, he saw in “objects that have come to be extinct” the “symbols of the desire of the previous century”, uncanny “ruins of the bourgeoisie”, objects with a revolutionary potential for their ability to galvanise historic consciousness.\(^\text{17}\) There is a historical dimension inherent in play and toys, a stratification of earlier religious, social and economic structures. Giorgio Agamben has spoken of toys as a manifestation of “the Historical at its purest”, for toys “belonged — *once, now no more* — to the sacred or to the practical and economic spheres”, maintaining as such something of human temporality.\(^\text{18}\)

It is to this socio-anthropological dimension of toys and to the value of play as a historically socialised practice, as a space of mediation between subject and discourse, that it is crucial to refer in order to explore the significance of these sources in Rebufa’s work. The space between the individual and discourse is the space that Jameson, following Lacan, attributes to ideology, as what coordinates between individuals and the Other.\(^\text{19}\) By miniaturising his figure to Barbie-size, Rebufa invites the viewer to delve into the sphere of a representation where the apparent naivety of baubles for children reveals a complex network of texts, rhetorics and codes as the fabric that weaves together subject and discourse. Toys have in fact always been ideological tools, miniature “mythologies”.\(^\text{20}\) Rebufa certainly recuperates this ideological and pedagogical level of toys and play, and after the **bibelot** another cultural source recaptured from the past is the **imagerie d’Epinal**, a very popular form of mass entertainment in eighteenth and nineteenth-century France. The

\(^\text{16}\) Ariès "A Modest Contribution", 69.
\(^\text{18}\) Giorgio Agamben, "Il Paese dei Balocchi: Riflessioni sulla Storia e sul Gioco", in M. Niola (ed.) *Lévi-Strauss: Fuori di Sé*, (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008), 243-244, italics in the original, my translation. Similarly, Caillois sees games as rites ‘without myth’, rituals which, unbound from their sacred origins, have been reduced to a mere profane dimension. See Caillois, *Man*, 57-58. See also Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*, 68-69.
\(^\text{19}\) Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 53.
\(^\text{20}\) Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Noonday Press, 1991). In Barthes’s own words: “French toys *always mean something*, and this something is always entirely socialized, constituted by the myths or the techniques of modern adult life” (53, emphasis in the original). Barthes’s view leaves little space for creativity, with play conceived as the mere repetition of discursive codes: “The fact that French toys *literally prefigure* the world of adult functions obviously cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen and Vespas” (*ibidem*).
images d’Epinal comprised printed divertissements – such as paper theatres, architectural forms and dolls to cut out and assemble or to animate with pull strings – but also stories for children, folk traditions, simplified accounts of political events and religious culture (Fig. 2.8-2.9). They were an educational form of play, conveying themes and literary topos of moral, Manichean simplicity to educate children to adult mores, in line with the era’s progressive conception of play as a tool for education.21 In particular, we may approximate the richness of detail in the Rebufian tableau and its invitation to play to the devinettes d’Epinal, image-enigmas where viewers were asked to find a character or an object hidden in the meanders of the image.

In terms of ideology, Barbie is, perhaps, among all contemporary toys, the most popular icon of the American dream, at the centre of all sorts of ideological commentary and criticism since its launch in 1959.22 Barbie is the most iconic fashion-doll in the West, a doll-model, reproducing the details of a social type, a doll strictly connected to the realm of the ideal, what art historian Michel Manson would call a "poupée-model".23 Like all other toys, dolls introduce a child into a particular discourse, to those conducts and beliefs whose apprenticeship guides an individual to ‘fit in’. Dolls, however, are different from all other toys since they are a double of a human body, and therefore able to be engaged as a mirror image. Doll-models like Barbie, in particular, always express an image of success in relation to dominant socio-cultural values, displaying the most desirable attributes within a given context. As such, they offer a conciliatory model of the self, able to relieve the child from the contradictions of lived experience. Psychologist Jeanne Danos, who has made a central contribution to the post-1945 cultural history of dolls with her 1967 La Poupée Myth Vivant, has described this aspect of doll play as a “ritual of expectation”, in which the child engages with the “norms of good and evil”, as defined in her socio-cultural context.24 Like in the Lacanian mirror, where the image is in advance of reality, the doll-model accords to the child a narcissistic satisfaction, a “purification”, that is an imaginary compensation for the humiliations and failures of real life.25

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24 Danos, La Poupée, 82.
25 ibidem.
2.8. Le Petit Costumier (Uniformes d'infanterie), Pellerin & Cie Épinal, 1863.
2.9. Devinettes d'Epinal, ca. 1900.
The way Rebufa plays with his own miniaturised self-portrait, arranged in multiple guises and set-up scenarios, borrows the modality of that particular form of doll play that is role play. This can be described, primarily, as an exercise of mimicry which sets out “to imitate adult processes, while reducing them to [the children’s] own scale”, and that as such can be seen to promote the exploration of the discursive components of the Other.26 However, engaging with Barbie means not only engaging with general processes of imaginary identification, but also with those fantasies of the good life to which she is so typically associated, of the dream that we find as a compulsory epithet of all things Barbie (and often American): Barbie’s dream house, dream life, dream castle, dream camper, dream car and so on and so forth. Rebufa’s photography presents narratives deeply steeped in the stereotyped imagery of a Barbie cartoon. When Barbie emerged in the 1950s, she was an immediate success, as this feminine icon represented an independent, single and beautiful professional young woman oriented towards a leisure-led lifestyle that many women at the time could only dream of. Nevertheless, Barbie represents a model of subjectivity whose essentialism resides, fundamentally, in the need for perpetual renovation through consumption.27 Besides overtly marketing branded items such as in the Barbie Loves McDonald’s doll series, Barbie’s narratives have worked as a fantasy machine built on the desirability of a highly-commoditised world of incessant leisure – skiing, camping, swimming, skating, cycling, boating, dancing and shopping – whereby Barbie’s dream life is a time of unrelenting satisfaction based on consumption. Without any form of parental bond or any binding commitment – Barbie only has younger siblings (seven, to date) – Barbie’s is a world where children and young adolescents, hyper-busy in a life of uninterrupted leisure, are born from themselves, “with neither history nor authority figures to restrict [their] actions”.28 We are in a fantasy world where life coincides with leisure and a fundamental freedom from authority, and where intersubjectivity emerges as horizontal homogeneity. If authority figures are absent, Barbie is nonetheless an authority in her world, she is a celeb, mild as a girl next door and ultimately cruel as only an idealised image can be. She is an unattainable model, inspiring adoration or resentment, at any rate centred on a purely narcissistic dimension.

Barbie reflects the American dream as representative of a conception of subjectivity as something that one can make. An individual creation, subjectivity is, in this frame, the effect of a personal effort, of a movement of perpetual renovation of which one is actively in

26 Ariès “A Modest Contribution”, 68.
27 The structural need for accessories, as a way to develop Barbie’s personality, is at the basis of Mattel’s astounding commercial success, as well as an expression of child play’s commercialisation. See Dan Fleming, Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).
28 Rand, Barbie’s Queer, 65.
charge. Barbie’s motto ‘I can be whatever I want to be’ is the toy version of the capitalist belief that one can choose one’s own destiny, make oneself like a mythical self-begotten being. However, psychoanalysis would define such a prospect as psychotic – as Žižek put it “the subject who thinks he can avoid this paradox and really have a free choice is a psychotic subject, one who retains a kind of distance from the symbolic order - who is not really caught in the signifying network”.29 By surrounding his own portrait with Barbie dolls and Barbie dream-accessories, Rebufa inhabits a hyper-commercialised, super-accessorised world, reveling in the realm of the imaginary ideal. As the quintessential Barbie-type, his version of subjectivity is seductive, pleased with his own appearance and success, however occasionally seemingly apathetic. Barbie’s world guarantees the entrance into the shallowness of a subjective and intersubjective space built on the imaginary promise of satisfaction and sustained by celebrity adoration. On the level of the signified, narcissistic satisfaction is often a theme: as leisure (Balade sur la Corniche), wealth and sexual abundance (Et Passe..., 1995, Fig. 2.10), sexual bravado (Le Coffre à Jouets, 1994, Fig. 2.11), celebrity (Autographes, 1994, Fig. 2.12). On a par, scenes of failure also abound: apathy, as a failure to enjoy (Amour à Marseille, 1990, Fig. 2.13), submission, as a failure to dominate (Travaux d’Eté, 1995, Fig. 2.14), plain defeat (K.O., 1994, Fig. 2.15). How is this polarised complexity to be understood?

I believe that the focus on the historical and the ideological that the cultural references of Rebufa’s work suggest implies actuality, as well as a level of discursivity that is hardly understood in the terms of narcissism as dream. Rebufa’s work is often read through the classical Freudian construction of dream as wish fulfillment and of the artwork as one of its equivalents. French critic Paul Ardenne, for instance, speaks of Rebufa’s work as “cathartic”, since “stepping into the world of dolls makes it possible to reconfigure one’s life”, “to overcome frustration and replay one’s life, turning around episodes of actual failure or half-success, inventing scenes hoped for but never lived”.30 This is clearly an orthodox Freudian reading, and one of psycho-biography, in which narcissism is an attribute of the artist himself. Even if that were true, it would not really contribute to an understanding of this particular project in its cultural and art-historical significance. The artist as immortal hero is a classic trope of Freudian aesthetics: art is a narcissistic exercise to transfigure reality in a dimension dominated by the pleasure principle, and as such an equally cathartic experience for the viewer.

Certainly the Ego takes centre stage in Rebufa’s Lilliputian world, but rather than dreaming and wishing this image seems to engage in a meditation on narcissism in relation


2.10. Olivier Rebufa, *Et passe... (Bimbeloterie)*, 1995.


to our present historical conditions, ‘since 1989’. This date, added in brackets to the title of his series of self-portraits, hints to historical time, to a moment, moreover, that many have associated with the onset of global capitalism, which accelerated after the end of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of communism. I propose to read Rebufa’s narrative self-portraits as an engagement with the very (volatile) matter of ordinary experience, with the imaginary fabric on which discourse is founded. In this sense, Rebufa seems to depart from the modernist tradition of the tableau vivant as escape into the realm of the ‘irrational’. The photographic tableaux of artists such as Margaret Cameron, Hans Bellmer and Claude Cahun expose subversive and often uncanny scenarios of an other possible world, one that could disrupt and rebel against the austere confines of modern patriarchal mores, which repressed the truth of the subject and her libidinal satisfaction. Bimbeloterie, on the contrary, seems to epitomise the very ordinary imaginary alienation at the basis of the perception of ordinary reality.

As seen in Chapter 1, fantasy can be seen as a mise en scène of desire, whose fundamental discursivity derives from its being an effect of symbolic alienation. Fantasy is the result of the subject’s alienation in the signifier and her consequent loss of jouissance. The inhibition of jouissance has historically defined the Social, with discourse working through the offer of a series of alternative, regulated, partial forms of enjoyment, of surplus-jouissance, as the product of structural impossibilities that make a discourse a fundamentally “open-ended structure”. Inhabited by lack, discourse has traditionally been characterised as the impossibility of satisfaction, as an effect of which a never-ending attempt on the part of the subject to realise her desire follows. This intrinsic failure to enjoy is what has traditionally protected the subject from disappearing in an all-encompassing jouissance and what has allowed for fantasy, the hallucination of that satisfaction. I see the central question arising from Rebufa’s phantasmagoria concerning the problem of fantasy and desire in their relation to capitalism and the status of the commodity object therein. This is not a sociological problem, however, since the definition of the photographic image and the social function of art are wholly dependent on subject-object relations and on the connections of jouissance with the Symbolic order. What is desire in a world of plastic? What is photography and what is art in a world overflowing with stuff and idealised self-images?

2.2. THAT HAS NEVER BEEN

If Bimbeloterie were to be retitled, it could be called ‘mirrors’. The mirror is a central feature of Rebufa’s world. It is a literal presence in many works in the series as well as a structural

element, as it appears from works such as *Coiffeur Pour Dames* (1994), *Le Psy* (1995) or *De l’Autre Coté du Miroir* (1995), all of which show the realm of the visible as a mirror reflection. Overall, the mirror in these works defines the ways in which the codes of self-representation coalesce with those of photography and psychoanalysis. In *Coiffeur Pour Dames* Rebufa plays the role of the hairdresser, holding a pair of scissors over Barbie’s head, while Barbie sits on the chair and looks straight into the camera, at the viewer, clearly positioned on the other side of the mirror (Fig. 2.16). The camera-viewer is the mirror in which Barbie contemplates herself, a mirror that is in fact invisible and yet the locus of what is seen. In *Le Psy*, the psychoanalytical setting, and the depth of photography with it, is seemingly reduced to a symmetrical fold-and-cut papercut, with the image almost perfectly folding into itself along its middle axis, like a mirrored image (Fig. 2.17). This is also another example of temporal conflation, with Rebufa playing both the analysand and the analyst in the same frame, engaging with the process of image manipulation with analogue means – one cannot really know, at first glance, if this is a digital or analogue montage.

However, the most remarkable image in terms of mirroring is *De l’Autre Coté du Miroir*, emblematic both in presenting a doubling of the process at work in Rebufa’s artmaking and in offering one of the few instances where the artist’s life-size body makes an appearance (Fig. 2.18). The image shows Rebufa with two attractive blond women looking at the miniaturised figure of the artist entering a small octagonal mirror, while two Barbie dolls appear to wait for him on the other side. While revealing the downsizing move at the basis of his artistic process, Rebufa here plays with the concept of the mirror psychoanalytically and photographically. The image is in fact built on the juxtaposition of two mirrors, a smaller octagonal one, posited as the ‘door’ to *Barbie-land*, and a bigger one, whose frame is invisible, on which the first leans, creating the gap in which the two Barbie dolls are located. There is a politically incorrect equivalence set here between the two sexualised female figures and the Barbie dolls, as if asking: are they a replica of Barbie’s standards of beauty or is Barbie a replica of them? Simulation indeed defines the visual field: a direct index of a pre-photographic reality – the artist and the women – is already in itself a mirror reflection. All that exists – the self, the other, the photograph – is a play of mirrors.

This connection between the subjective and the photographic is made even more flagrant in *X-Rays* (Fig 2.19). Here we find such a well concentrated pasticcio that psychoanalysis, subjectivity, dolls and photography appear as a conundrum whereby a statement on one reveals something of the other, albeit in very different ways than in its

traditional Surrealist variant. There is a whole visual and theoretical tradition condensed in this 80x60cm construction, as we shall see, from Man Ray's *rayographs* and Freud's theory of analysis to Barthes's *punctum* and the 1930s fascist *Gläserne Mensch*. The artist is having an x-ray examination in what looks like a waiting room, a public space. A blond doctor Barbie performs the radiography, with her profile doubling a printed x-ray image of a Barbie on the wall. Self-portrait, as an art-historical genre of subjective introspection, is here recalled through the literalisation of its classical analogy with anatomy. Self-portrait has traditionally meant self-analysis, often regarded as a practice whereby the artist turns himself into an object of knowledge, in a movement of dis-identification from his mirrored image. Self-analysis, in turn, has classically emerged as anatomical examination. Freud, for instance, remembering one of his own dreams during self-analysis, interprets anatomic dissection as equivalent to psychoanalytical analysis, which also implies a concept of psychoanalysis as movement from surface to depth. Similarly, modern anatomy theatres and treatises, handling more literal human *interiors*, traditionally presented the inscription *nosce te ipsum* (know yourself), which transfigured the spectacle of the finitude of the human body to an edifying lecture on mortality, while exposing the perfection of the internal ‘functioning’ of that same body as a revelation of the divine Other.

These associations impinge on this image in a way that defines the radiography, primarily, as radiography on the history of photography. Mortality hints in fact to the theoretical attempt to isolate photography from other media through an intrinsic essence, a

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32 I use the term ‘pasticcio’ here not to mean “pastiche” in the way Richard Dyer employs it, although the latter derives etymologically from the former. In Italian ‘pasticcio’ is a dish which combines different ingredients, often roughly. The term here helps to indicate the way Rebufa’s combination maintains the character of its original component parts. See Richard Dyer, *Pastiche* (London/New York: Routledge, 2006), 9-21.

33 The historical art genre of portrait and anatomy are strictly interconnected. Renaissance painters such as Leonardo da Vinci, Raffaello and Michelangelo had *compositio*, anatomical study, regularly performed on cadavers. On the other hand, in anatomy treatises such as Andreas Vesalius's *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), one can find an attempt to aestheticise anatomic investigation, through a theatricalisation of the *écorché*, for instance, often represented in the poses of a living body, among natural backgrounds or historic settings. See Sara Ugolini, *Nel Segno del Corpo: Origini e Forme del Ritratto Ferito* (Napoli: Liguori Edizioni, 2009).

34 Stefano Ferrari has written of self-portrait as “psychic acrobatics”, seen to emerge as a reverse move from the dynamics of identification with the image described by Lacan in the mirror stage. See Stefano Ferrari, *Lo Specchio dell’Io: Autoritratto e Psicologia* (Bari/Roma: Laterza, 2002), 177.

35 Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900], eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 224. In the dream, dating to around 1899, he is in the lab working on the dissection of his own lower body, being both dissector and dissected, an operation which he takes to signify his own self-analysis as a ‘psychic dissection’. Freud, moreover, often describes the decoding of dreams as ‘dissection’ of their manifest content into smaller constituents, according to a backward movement along the chain of associations through which the latent content had been condensed and displaced.

noeme, which Barthes famously identified in the ça a été, in time past.\textsuperscript{37} That we may be toying with the punctum here is suggested by the insertion of a literal encounter with death, a skeleton holding a scythe, posited almost at the exact intersection of the image’s diagonals, not immediately recognisable, confounded in the shadow cast by the artist’s figure. Death is hidden in the image, like in a devinette d’Epinal, where the viewer would be challenged to find an enigmatic object. Are we not similarly confronted with a visual enigma here? Where is the punctum in the picture? Surely death in ‘person’ is there, with all the attributes of a classical vanitas – the scythe, the clock, human bones – with the clock hanging over the artist’s head in the form of a tiny black spot. However, if the skull only emerges after close inspection, maybe as a surprise, we are more likely to be amused than “annihilated” like the viewer described by Lacan before the anamorphosis of Hans Holbein’s The Ambassadors.\textsuperscript{38} In the same seminar on the gaze analysed in Chapter 1, just before discussing his diagram of visuality Lacan speaks of the anamorphic moment as the subject’s encounter with her own castration, an encounter with the Real as that which is irreducible to the signifying chain. I think we are here faced more with a question than with an answer as to what is the destiny of such a dimension in a universe of simulacral hall of mirrors. There is certainly studium in Rebufa’s photography, as every aspect of the image is the meticulous result of the artist’s composition. The body of the artist, the only thing once alive that could speak of time past and death – the artist’s own body which does age along the series ‘since 1989’– is itself a copy, the photograph of a photograph. Rebufa’s self-portraits are flat in this sense, also because they have their referent in always yet another image, with the self reduced to the “dusty spectacle” of a “multitudinous photographic simulacrum”.\textsuperscript{39} But does this mean that this work is devoid of affect and historicity?

The use of historical cultural sources and the issue of subjective introspection points to a depth but we have started to see how this is in tension with the shallowness suggested by formal treatment and the centrality of the mirror surface. This conflation of flatness and depth in Rebufa’s work seems to speculate on Jameson’s diagnosis of late capitalism as the era of the simulacrum not only in terms of ‘waning of affect’ but also in terms of “waning of historicity”.\textsuperscript{40} For Jameson the “art language of the simulacrum” flattens the representation of the past as well as that of the present, reducing it to style, to a “glossy mirage”, with the effect of hindering “our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way”.\textsuperscript{41} Glossy

\textsuperscript{37} Barthes, Camera Lucida, 85.

\textsuperscript{38} Lacan, The Four Fundamental, 88. Commenting on Hans Holbein the Younger’s The Ambassadors (1533), Lacan has described the anamorphic skeleton’s head in the painting as the stain with the power “to catch in its trap the observer”, literally called into the picture, and “represented here as caught” (\textit{ivi}, 92).

\textsuperscript{39} Jameson, Postmodernism, 18.

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Ivi}, 21.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibidem.
mirages are indeed all that we have with Rebufa but the contradictions exposed seem to ask if we are condemned, as producers and viewers, to a ‘schizophrenic’, ‘addictive’ attitude towards them.\footnote{ivi, 26-28. Jameson develops his analysis of the simulacrum hand in hand with a Lacanian account of schizophrenia. I return to this in Chapter 4.}

Certainly, that particular pose recorded by Rebufa’s photography \emph{has never been} in the Barthian sense, not being extrapolated from mortal time, but a pose created in fantasy and then cut and pasted onto a \emph{maquette} before being photographed (Fig. 2.20-2.22). The portrait is a recreation of a precedent fictional scene which is printed, cut out and re-photographed again within a three-dimensional \emph{mise en scène}. What is left of the subject in this second-grade photograph? The beauty and pleasure of Rebufa’s work might be closer to cinema’s fictionality than to the still photograph that Barthes has in mind in \emph{Camera Lucida}. The poignancy of the frozen still so literally embodied by the artist in the making of the initial photograph is diluted in the final image, where the viewer is \emph{caught} by the richness of intellectual and cultural references emblazoned on it, rather than by an uncanny gaze. We are caught in a network of signifiers that travels on the surface of the image rather than pointing to a psychic ‘depth’.

The doll, from being the avant-garde \emph{topos par excellence} of the emergence of \emph{jouissance}, is here engaged with a lack of depth and \emph{lack of death}. Instead of the axis between the subject, the \emph{punctum} and the Real that we saw in Chapter 1 characterising the presence of the doll in Surrealist photography, here the doll is taken between a bi-dimensional subject and a constructed photograph which overtly exposes its own constructedness. It is a photography whose shallowness seems to thematise the medium’s myth as document of reality, through the recuperation of a long tradition of visual trickery, from Méliès to the \emph{devinettes} d’Epinal. Particularly, this is a photographic practice whose hybridity with sculpture, performance and cinema complicates the attempt to define the medium’s specificity, \emph{the} photographic. The radiographed images of Barbie as posters hanging on the wall in \emph{X-Rays} are a direct engagement with Man Ray’s 1920s experiments with camera-less photography and, like \emph{rayographs}, they linger undecidedly between icon and index, painting and photography.\footnote{On the conflictive narratives surrounding Man Ray’s \emph{rayographs} in the 1920s and 1930s and their relations with Dadaism and Surrealism, see Susan Laxton, "Flou: Rayographs and the Dada Automatic", \emph{October} (Winter 2009), 25–48.} These images are the miniature version of Rebufa’s own photographic experimentations with x-rays in a 1996 series, \emph{Inherences} (Fig. 2.23). Like the rayographs, these radiographs both have the appearance of an abstract representation and the essential quality of the index, of being a direct, automatic emanation from a material object. As a redoubling of the artist’s choice of constructed photography, they
foreground a conception of the medium that instead of fulfilling its promise of faithful reproduction leans towards a version of the visual as what is ultimately ambiguous, whose denotative meaning is elusive. The inclusion of these pictorialist radiographs in X-Rays suggests once again the essential undecidability of this photography between icon and index, image and body.

Barbie radiographs on the wall can also be seen to point, ideologically, to a normative ideal that the Rebufian subject under x-ray is called to match. When coupled to the ostentatious public character of this display of interiors-interiority, we may think of visibility as transparency and of its early twentieth-century model, the Gläserne Mensch, the Transparent Man. We may this way enter a rather dystopian version of the visible and of subjectivity. The 1930s preoccupation with public health, personal hygiene and sanitation promoted the ideal of a ‘transparent citizen’, devoid of any self-determination but the diligent willingness to be observed, as through x-rays, by the intrusive gaze of the State. The Glass Man is the totalitarian epitome of a body built on compulsory health and fitness, a body-machine to be maintained in the name of productivity, fertility and military strength. It is the model of “regimented ideals of collective individuality, stripped of corporeal or psychic anomalies and aligned with the values of science” that, mutatis mutandis, we may see returning in the hypermodern ideology of wellness and fitness of which Barbie, with her thinness and improbable body measurements, is the obvious toy version. Barbie is an icon of will-power, of beauty as discipline of the body. Adopting Barbie as a signifier surely means thematising the contemporary worshipping of body fitness and the way the image of the self – the selfie, the self as brand – has become crucial in the definition of individual worth in the last few decades. The subject has become a beautiful image to be achieved, with digital enhancement alongside the more traditional self-disciplinary practices of fitness and dieting as a tool to live up to the ideals of the self as promoted by science, fashion and advertising. Social media platforms have become an ersatz-agorà where a relationship between images – constructed, ‘airbrushed’ – have substituted relationships between subjects. We could evoke Barthes’s remark on the photographic portrait as a “statue” of oneself, as “Total Image”, or Benjamin’s note on fashion as the manifestation of “the rights of the corpse” over the living to describe the deathly and coercive aspects of the ideal along

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44 Exhibited for the first time within the First International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden in 1911 and in 1930, the Gläserne Mensch was accompanied by the Gläserne Frau (Transparent Woman). They were transparent life-size models of a male and female body that allowed an inspection of internal organs. See Jeffrey. T. Schnapp, “Crystalline Bodies: Fragments of a Cultural History of Glass”, West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture, vol. 20, no. 2 (2013), 173 – 194.

45 Ivi, 184.

46 Barbie’s disproportioned body has regularly been at the centre of a controversy in relation to adolescent eating disorders. See Lord, Forever Barbie, 226.
the line of which we find united persons, dolls and pictures. However, where the old fascist imperative of wellness and fitness of the Glass Man is to be seen as an emanation of the State, of ‘paternal authority’, in Rebufa’s world of Barbie dolls the question arises as to whom is the Other who makes the judging. For what kind of gaze is that image of the self exposed?

2.3. NARCISSUS AND THE ECHO OF CAPITAL

If there is a constant in Rebufa’s world, it might be the dependence of the subject on another’s look, either diegetically or extradiegetically. If the mirror is a fundamental structure in this work, it is so also as a mode of apperception of the image itself. The subject is the doubling of an image which offers itself as a spectacle to be enjoyed. Amour à Marseille is exemplary in this sense, since it is an image of enjoyment as something completely externalised. It depicts a sexual act between the dollified form of the artist and a brunette Barbie in the context of what resembles a snow-globe souvenir, with the profile of the most popular landmark of Marseille in the background, Notre Dame de la Garde (Our Lady of the Guard). If earlier I mentioned this work as an instance of a failure to enjoy, it is because through a cool, apathetic look, Rebufa presents a sexual enjoyment as cold as snow and shallow as the layered montage of flat cut-out figures suggests. Like an early film, what exists is taken between the bi-dimensionality of the frame and the theatricality of a stage performance. Rebufa’s somewhat demonstrative attitude finds a resonance in the phallic tower in the background, again a sign that the artist is engaging a well-read viewer in a network of shared cultural references. We are presented with the Freudian Interpretation of Dreams’ most cliché example of displacement in the tower as symbol of phallic grandeur.

The visual axis created between the dominating tower in the background, the artist’s look and that of the beholder travels along the line of a display of enjoyment, while the prominent stance of the tower, dedicated to the Marian Guard – nicknamed by local inhabitants La Bonne Mère (the Good Mother) – defines the space of existence in terms of absolute visibility as well as maternal protection.

What we find here is another rich cultural pastiche. In the most improbable of all locations, a miniature city-skyline snow globe, we are presented with the conflation of an exhibition of sexual enjoyment with the instance of a godly maternal protection and a tower-

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panopticon. After the Glass Man, the panopticon is another topos of permanent visibility that hints to the fact that, traditionally, the agency of control is non-existent, and properly functioning as such, for it is internalised. Foucault has described it as the instance of an “automatic functioning of power”, able to induce in the observed a state of constant auto-surveillance as “a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers.” That is to say, the prisoners, unable to see if they are being seen at any given moment, must assume they might be and therefore behave accordingly. However, as for the Gläserne Mensch, the panopticon relates to a ‘top-down’ identification model that seems ill-fitting with the horizontal, idealised world of Barbie, where no authority whatsoever is present to hinder individual satisfaction. If the mirror is central here, it seems not to be in relation to an Other of the gaze, as in the Lacanian mirror, where the ideal Ego is connected to the ego Ideal, the Imaginary to the Symbolic. In that classic dynamic of alienation, the subject would recognise herself in the mirror image thanks to the symbolic inscription of that image in the field of the Other, in the network of discursive socio-symbolic norms and ideals. There is such a flaunting of enjoyment and defeat in Rebufa’s world to suggest that its interminable procession of mirror images might not be read in the terms of a classical Oedipal identificatory dynamic.

Rebufa’s coupling of Ego grandeur, other-directed displays of enjoyment and formal shallowness in Bimbeloterie might be seen as a form of conte philosophique revising narcissism and jouissance for the 1990s. The subject reduced to a paper template, a cut-out model adaptable to the most variable scenarios, all reunited under the common banner of a demonstrative display of enjoyment, seems to literalise an existential thinning of subjectivity that has been recently described in relation to the socio-cultural conditions of post-industrial capitalism. What Lacan has suggestively called the “evaporation of the Father”, the historic demise of authority and symbolic efficiency in Western societies, is a central turning point for the curtailing of the central impossibilities that had historically characterised the circulation of jouissance in the social bond. As we have seen, after introducing his theory of the discourses in 1968, Lacan later added a fifth discourse, the capitalist’s discourse, as a form of social bond that he considered to be in the process of supplanting the traditional discourse of the master. In the matheme of the capitalist’s discourse we find an inversion

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48 This system of control, proposed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1791, presented a space conceived as a circular array of inward-pointing cells at the centre of which would stand an observation tower with special shutters to prevent the prisoners from seeing the guards.


51 See Lacan, Discours à l’Université de Milan.
between the subject and the master signifier (the arrow going from $ to S1), which indicates that the subject is not submitted to the alienating action of the signifier. The subject is here seemingly free to directly manoeuvre the fabrication of the signifiers and determine the modalities to access jouissance (Fig. 2.24). At the lower level of the formula, the obliteration of the blockage between the object (a) and the subject ($), which is instead found in the master’s discourse, appears as a fundamental distortion of the formula of fantasy, where the subject would be in a contradictory relationship – attraction and repulsion – with the object.\textsuperscript{52} As Lacan has put it, in the capitalist economy “surplus jouissance is no longer surplus jouissance but is inscribed simply as a value to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulating”, that is to say that jouissance is put at work, changing its nature, becoming an “imitation surplus jouissance”.\textsuperscript{53} What previously was an unaccountable excess – jouissance as waste-product – becomes in the capitalist’s discourse a value incorporated into the system, a calculated and consumable pleasure. What we find here is the negation of lack, with the object present to the subject that, precisely for this lack of blockage, ends up being engulfed by it. This is a situation which, on one side, is antagonist to desire as the nothing at the core of the subject, always object-less.\textsuperscript{54} As Žižek has argued, the problem of the “‘permissive’ ‘consumer society’”, is that “with the constant flood of new consumer items and the provocation of demands”, there emerges a “saturated field” where the “impossible desire can no longer be articulated”.\textsuperscript{55} On the other side, this lack of distance from the object causes a state of permanent anxiety, as an effect of the denial of lack.

These aspects advance a new discursive organisation of jouissance and of subjectivity that psychoanalysts have been discussing, in the last decade, in relation to so-called ‘new symptoms’ – contemporary forms of the symptom such as eating disorders, process and substance addictions, anxiety and depression. These symptoms’ ‘newness’ is their resistance to signify, and therefore to be treated through the traditional Freudian clinic of interpretation, where the symptom is interrogated as a metaphor, as a signifier of the...
repressed. This means a failure of symbolic mediation and the inefficacy of the old binomial repression-return of the repressed configuring the traditional character of the symptom as an index of the subject’s unconscious desire, substituted by new structures founded on an absence of desire. 56 Colourful neologisms such as “subject without unconscious” or “subject without gravity” attempt to address a situation where the symbolic mediation offered by the classical neurotic symptom seems to be substituted by a compulsion to enjoy unconcerned with a dialectic with the Other. 57 Massimo Recalcati has spoken of an “urgent need to enjoy which bypasses any principle of symbolic mediation” and of a “narcissistic reinforcement of the ego” as two forms of this contemporary clinic. 58 On the one side, there is a subject who submits to a superegoic injunction to enjoy, out of a symbolic dialectics, and, on the other, a subject whose “solid identification” to the social mask emerges via a disconnection from the unconscious split of the subject. 59 I think the narcissistic problem of identity and its connection to the capitalist’s discourse can shed some interesting light on Rebufa’s focus on self-images and, more broadly, on the evident abundance of artificial human figures in contemporary visual culture. The theoretical challenge is to find a way in which these psychoanalytical descriptions can be employed in the analysis of our case studies beyond a mere narrative description. What can these constructs tell us about the structuring of the visual in these works?

For Rebufa, the problem of the mask is central. The mask as veil has been classically connected to hysteria and to the veiling of desire, an instance of the subject’s difficulty in subjectifying her unconscious truth, of discarding repression. In contrast to this classical description, Rebufa’s formal focus on lack of depth seems to connect with a more recent reconceptualisation of the mask in non-neurotic terms. Recalcati has spoken of a “clinic of the mask” to underline how a new binomial between mask and anxiety might describe the contemporary subject’s main concern to defend from a type of anxiety which is alien to the traditional problem of repressed desire. 60 Žižek, similarly, has written of ‘Pathological Narcissus’ as a subject which gives the “unsettling impression that ‘there is nothing behind the mask’”, that is the impression of speaking to a “puppet”, as if what is hiding behind the mask is something “dialectically not mediated” by it. 61 An anticipation of these accounts is to

56 See Massimo Recalcati, L’Uomo Senza Inconscio: Figure della Nuova Clinica Psicanalitica (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 2010), 180. As a practicing psychoanalyst Recalcati specialises in ‘new symptoms’, particularly anorexia, bulimia, and toxicomania.

57 These are the titles of Massimo Recalcati and Charles Melman’s books. See Recalcati, L’Uomo and Charles Melman, L’Homme Sans Gravité: Jouir à Tout Prix (Paris: Denoël c2002).

58 Recalcati, L’Uomo, x.

59 Ivì, 22, 182.

60 Recalcati, L’Uomo, 179.

61 Žižek, “Pathological Narcissus”, 252.
be found in Helene Deutsch’s 1930s theory of the *als-ob* (as-if) personality type, a
description of a type of imaginary identification beyond the dynamics of symbolic mediation.
Deutsch has written of *als-ob* subjects’ “highly plastic readiness” to reflect and adapt to a
given environment, coupled with the inability to derive an authentic inward transformation.  
These discussions can be framed within the notions of ‘untriggered psychosis’ and ‘ordinary
psychosis’ which presuppose a psychotic structure as different from the actual triggering of
psychosis and its classical extraordinary phenomena, such as delirium and hallucinations.
‘Imaginary compensation’ and ‘substitution’ through the *sinthome* are two ways in which
stabilisation is achieved without the aid of the Name-of-the-Father. While the *sinthome* is a
signifying task, effectively substituting the signifier of the Name-of-the-Father, as in the case
of Joyce that Lacan takes as a paradigmatic example in his 1972 seminar, imaginary
compensation is a strategy based on the imaginary level of a specular identification.

This is the sphere of the *as-if* type that Žižek described in his 1986 “Pathological
Narcissus” as a Socially Mandatory Form of Subjectivity” in relation to post-industrial
capitalism, where we may find the most accurate phenomenological description for Rebufa’s
capitalist flattened subjective type. Published originally as an introduction for the Slovenian
edition of Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism*, this essay gives a Marxist-Lacanian
spin to the connection between narcissism and post-industrial capitalism operated by Lasch.
*Pathological Narcissus* refers to a subjective structure that relies on primary defence
mechanisms such as splitting, projection and denial, instead of repression through the
paternal metaphor. In the slightly literal terms of this early description of the phenomenon,
Žižek underlines how this is a subject who “has failed to ‘internalise’ paternal law, which is
the only path to transformation […] of the cruel, ‘anal’ sadistic Superego into the pacifying
‘inner law’ of the ideal Ego”.  

In the place of the Name-of-the-Father, this subject often
displays a *big Ego*, which blends the real Ego, the ideal Ego and the ideal object, as a
supplementary imaginary formation that compensates for the missing symbolic agency. The
other is thus split between an ideal other – which functions as an extension of the subject,
in the guise of an idealised other that “loses all negative characteristics and appears as an
omnipotent ‘good other’” providing narcissistic satisfaction – and a Real other, which “takes

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64 Žižek, “’Pathological narcissus’”, 240.
a ‘degenerate’ form of the horrifying, blind, cruel, paranoid and threatening force of the Superego, as an ‘evil fate’ embodied in the ‘enemy’ into whom the subject projects his own aggression”.65 As-if subjects can thus conceive of an internal critical agency only in terms of a cruel, sadistic Superego, as opposed to a neurotic structure where the pre-Oedipal split of the Other (as either good or bad) would be surpassed and integrated through the interiorised symbolic agency of the Name-of-the-Father. The ideal Ego is thus directly subjected to the sadistic pressures of the Superego, with the subject exposed to unbearable anxiety, perpetually crushed between the attempt to attain narcissistic satisfaction and self-humiliation in the face of failure.

If it is obvious how Rebufa’s insistence on the simulacrum, and on doubling and mirroring, exposes his work as deeply engaged with the narcissistic problem of identity, it is the structural significance of flatness and the adoption of the capitalist mythology of Barbie that render this account ‘contemporary’, ‘post-Oedipal’. On the level of the signified, Rebufa’s narrative of the self-as-Barbie manages to deeply conjoin capitalism with narcissism, indeed exposing capitalism as narcissism. His bi-dimensional man, morphing into an interminable series of types and stretching the codes of social success, seems the perfect incarnation of a consumeristic “abnormally normal” subject affected by a pathologically conventional behaviour.66 By linking this subjective shallowness to Barbie’s capitalist mythology, Rebufa seems to echo Žižek’s definition of the as-if’s pathological narcissism as “the prevalent libidinal constitution of late bourgeois ‘permissive’ society”.67 Narcissus, in the context of the injunction to enjoy of the capitalist’s discourse, is far from being revolutionary, in this sense not the same Narcissus that has traditionally been seen as a figure of subversion in relation to a liberation of jouissance, from Surrealism to a classic work such as Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization. The double, the mirror and the doll, as correlate to Narcissus and classical tropes of anti-authoritarian cultural resistance, are here associated with conformist compliance.

In Rebufa’s world, enjoyment appears to be conflated not only with conspicuous consumption and narcissistic pleasure but with a sense of enforcement and duty, as seen in Amour à Marseille. We find this connection between enjoyment and duty thematised in other works such as Tiré par les Cheveux (1995), J’Ai la Pigne (1997) and Travaux d’Été (1995, Fig. 2.14), where Rebufa plays the role of an instrument for the enjoyment of the Other-Barbie. The social bond with an other-as-doll emerges as either narcissistic satisfaction in social success or masochistic self-humiliation. At this point the link to the fascist Glass Man appears more emblematic. Thomas Elsaesser wrote of the “pleasure of fascism” of the

65 ibidem.
67 Žižek, “Pathological Narcissus”, 251.
modern petit-bourgeois subject as the pleasure of “making a public spectacle of [one’s] good behaviour and conformism” in view of the “all-seeing eye of the State”. 68 To this landscape we might have connected in the past the transparency of the Glass Man and the absolute visibility of a tower-panopticon like that of Amour à Marseille. How far are we from this modernist constellation? The imaginary exhibitionism exposed by Rebufa is certainly engaging with conformism but both the ‘good behaviour’ and the ‘State’ as Other who might punish self-indulgence have left the place to the conformism of enjoyment and to an Other who enjoys. If the as-if subject cannot conceive of the Social but as a ‘game’, a play of puppets, Rebufa could not find a better stand-in for this Other of enjoyment than the ever-enjoying Barbie, a friendly and kind mistress of consumeristic imitation jouissance steadily and actively ensuring that everyone enjoys at all times. Barbie’s iconic power as the quintessential image of the Western liberal ‘way of life’ and her ideal authority over others might be seen here as a metaphor for the transfiguration of the Freudian Law of libidinal repression in the contemporary return of the Law in the Real – Law as the necessity to enjoy which irremediably spoils any actual possibility of enjoyment. Barbie has been classically read as a cultural text based on the parental and societal demands imposed on children as the convenience of being ‘good’. 69 Then play, in contrast to conformism, is typically associated with transgression, with the expression of a subjective “concealed inner chamber”, a place of evasion from “the ascetic pretence demanded to children by the adult world”. 70 Therefore, Rebufa’s association of Barbie, play and a narcissistic display of enjoyment with conformism and an atmosphere of duty leads to the question of what is transgression once the Law prescribes enjoyment.

One is tempted to read the accord between Barbie, the Bonne Mère’s benevolent look and the menacing panopticon-like aspect of the tower in Amour à Marseille as the embodiment of the Žižekian maternal superego, one of several baroque formulations the philosopher has accorded over time to Superego enjoyment. 71 There is enough self-humiliation side by side with an idealised display of narcissistic success in the narrative between Rebufa’s puppet-self and an imperturbably smiling Barbie to suggest this sadomasochistic constellation. Interestingly, Rebufa constructs the subject as image, exposing it as an object of the enjoyment of the Other, not only on the level of the signified.

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69 See e.g. Fleming, Powerplay, and Alice Miller, The Drama of Being a Child: the Search For the True Self (London: Virago, 1995).
70 Miller, The Drama, 42; Fleming, Powerplay, 73.
He plays the part of the ‘puppet’ working hard to satisfy the Other thematically, as clearly in *Travaux d'Été* and *J'ai la Pigne*, and structurally, on the visual plan with the beholder. The viewer is invited to enjoy the puppet‐self’s display of enjoyment, interpellated as a Barbie‐Other who enjoys, as it were, in a jubilee of global visual consumption. The gaze that this subject‐image seems to call for is one who might enjoy rather than repress such a display of enjoyment.

On a structural level, the subject is image as much as the image is subject. This image must produce an affect, it seems, it must be able to produce *jouissance* for the gaze of the Other in a way that foregrounds the coincidence between the personality of the artist‐as‐brand and that of the artwork, both put to work in a market‐oriented field of existence. Rebufa’s bi‐dimensional figure is the artist as a “corporate façade”, a “casing” for a “disembodied screen‐cathected labouring brain”.72 The “soul” is “at work” in contemporary capitalism, as suggested by Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, echoing Lacan’s view of capitalism as a system wherein “surplus pleasure” has become “calculable”, “counted”.73 As Brian Massumi has pointed out, this poses questions for cultural politics:

Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus‐value, [...] to intensify profit potential. It literally valorises affect. The capitalist logic of surplus‐value production starts to take over the relational field that is the domain of political ecology, the ethical field of resistance to identity and predictable paths. It’s very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there’s been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamics of capitalist power and the dynamics of resistance.74

This is another way to speak about the valorising of *surplus jouissance* within the Lacanian capitalist’s discourse, where *objet a* is accounted for and, as such, stripped of its unaccountable quality, its element of hindrance of the discourse, that is the death drive, the repetition of *nothing*. Everything runs smoothly in the capitalist’s discourse – “it runs as if going on casters, it could not run better, but in fact it goes so fast that it consumes itself” – with imitation surplus jouissance obscuring the impossibility of jouissance.75 Massumi’s convergence between power and resistance points to frustration and impotence as the effects of a discourse that in its globalism is everywhere and nowhere, whose alienating effects are invisible. This also means, as Zupančič has underlined, that if enjoyment is a

75 Lacan, Discours à l’Université de Milan, 42.
duty, the onus of it lies on the individual’s ability to attain it, “with the subject deactivated in any right to complain about the system, disabled in his antagonistic ability, if in the end he is unsatisfied”.\(^6\) This is ‘troubling’, as Massumi puts it, because desire feeds into the system instead of opening the field of ‘resistance’ to the ‘predictable path’ of the dominant discourse. What is left of the subject once the Real is textualised? The skull that we encountered in X-Rays (Fig. 2.19) thus not only appears as an ersatz-punctum, as I said, but also as this fundamental imaginarisation of objet a, as a gap always reabsorbed in the capitalist system. Death is an image without trauma. By creating a montage between the consumeristic world of Barbie and a normative display of enjoyment – of imitation enjoyment – Rebufa not only thematises a general condition of subjectivity within capitalism but exposes the inefficacy of a modernist conception of art as a field alien and opposed to the machinery of capitalist spectacle. What does an artwork do differently to capitalist production, Rebufa seems to ask, in a system where everything is transformed into a value?

2.4. SIMULACRUM INTERRUPTUS

With his Barbie-narrative of the self, Rebufa does not offer the catharsis predicated on narcissistic identification that Freud described as in opposition to the reality principle – and the capitalist’s discourse seems to provide plenty of narcissistic mirages anyway. Neither does he offer an anamorphic aesthetic, where the image would emerge as a limit of representation and the subject would be ‘punctured’ by a sudden apparition of lack. Rebufa appears to have chosen the path of complicity, of a valorisation of the image as mass divertissement, offering enjoyment as ersatz jouissance, a commercialised, spectacularised jouissance, plastic as the iconic Barbie: the beholder is invited to the visual banquet.\(^7\) This image does not ask viewers to maintain the detached ironic distance so typical of earlier postmodern exercises of appropriation, as Rebufa’s fascination and positive engagement with popular visual culture is tangible and inviting for the viewer. The beholder is invited to play, to be amused, entertained, to engage with the image, and we have seen how much of the historical tradition of image-games is enclosed in it. The suggestion might be that the artistic image is not different from its commercial counterpart, its pleasures not different from the edulcorated narratives of mass media and mass entertainment. At the same time, this image is different, because it is aware of its own constructedness. With the foregrounding of the seams and gaps of montage, achieved through a sculptural

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\(^6\) Zupančič, “When Surplus Enjoyment”, 176.

contamination of photography, Rebufa’s photographic image emerges as the space for the exposure of a *seamed*, rather than *seamless*, reality.

However, I have emphasised throughout this chapter how Rebufa’s subjective and photographic world appears depthless. The question that seems to be raised is then whether we can have critical distance without depth, or distance with absorption, immersion in the illusion. Rebufa’s aesthetic solution seems to point to the sphere of play, and the recuperation of the figure of the doll might in itself hint towards this direction: for in play one has to be fully immersed for enjoyment but at the same time to never forget that one is playing to actually enjoy it. Jameson has suggested that one possible way out from the addictive logic of the simulacrum might be “an aesthetic of cognitive mapping” through which one can map the coordinates of her world and her position within it while being immersed in it.78 This is a cultural form that for Jameson is an expression of a “new radical cultural politics” in which we may “grasp our position as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle”.79 I think Rebufa gives us a description of how ‘cognitive mapping’ might look, suggesting play and world-building as its equivalents.

Rebufa’s work is clearly not ‘subversion’, nor blind immersion, visual ‘addiction’, as much as it is reliant on a *magic circle* through play.80 The viewer is invited to play but also to keep in mind that she is playing. There is the pleasure of playing in the activity of integrating the incongruent levels of what is represented into a meaningful whole, of finding ‘hidden objects’, of reading a story, but at the same time the exposure of the trickery, acting as a signal ‘this is play’.81 There is an illusion which is at all times aware of its devices. Miniature is traditionally regarded as a deconstructionist device, a means to ‘make sense’ – Lévi-Strauss defined it as the replacement of empirical dimensions with ‘intelligible’ ones, which closely approximates Jameson’s effects of cognitive mapping.82 Working in miniature implies world-building, which is a complex form of play implying mimicry of what already exists but

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79 *Ivi*, 50, 54.
also analysis of the connections between events and a form of synthetic knowledge through construction of novel patterns and configurations.⁸³

This double edge of Rebufa’s image – both illusive and aware of its illusion – seems to attempt a historicisation of ‘natural’, seamless ordinary reality. Each image of the series can be seen as the construction-deconstruction of the way contemporary mythologies are built and naturalised, offering a miniature Barthian-style analysis of cultural phenomena without however its negative critical edge. If Barthes has-defined myth as the establishment of “a historical intention as nature, a contingency as eternity”, Rebufa’s foregrounding of constructedness might be seen as an attempt to expose historicity.⁸⁴ If ordinary reality and fantasy emerge as interchangeable, nevertheless their machinations are exposed. This would make Rebufa’s image a paradoxical historical simulacrum, a simulacrum which foregrounds historicity against its flattening in a sequence of spectacles. In this sense Bimbeloterie might be seen as a spectacular theatricalisation of the challenge opened by Jameson for new aesthetic ways to resurrect the “retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future” that he saw disappearing, precisely as an effect of the “multitudinous photographic simulacrum” – a homeopathic cure, as it were, with the poison as a treatment.⁸⁵

But what exactly is historicity here? I have mentioned the cultural stratification of the sources, affectively appropriated, and the valorisation of the gaps within the image. However, any attempt to historicise must take into account the subjective structures implicated in a given discourse. As I have spoken of the capitalist’s discourse and of a narcissistic sado-masochistic visual dynamic replicated through the image, this would exclude the possibility of play, of a (symbolic) creative engagement with the image. If the image is inserted within the capitalist discourse and thus implies a capitalist subject, then historicisation here is actualised as hystericisation. Hystericisation is a synonym of subjectivisation if, as Žižek put it, “subjectivity as such is hysterical, in so far as it emerges through questioning the interpelling call of the Other”.⁸⁶ If the capitalist subject, like an as-if pathological Narcissus, is “saturated with answers without questions”, being shown incessantly “what he really wants” in the form of always-new gadgets as a way to fill the lack; if the “petrified subject” is one who “lives and acts, but doesn’t think about him or


⁸⁴ Barthes, Mythologies, 222.

⁸⁵ Jameson, Postmodernism, 18.

⁸⁶ Slavoj Žižek, For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment As a Political Factor (London: Verso, 2008[1991]), XLV.
herself”, one “who has no questions about himself”, then Rebufa’s pausing on the gaps may be a metaphor for a question.\textsuperscript{87} Besides, transfiguring the world into a \textit{maquette} can be seen, from a psychoanalytical point of view, as an exercise of explorative analysis and reconfiguration of the coordinates of one’s world, not far from a definition of a psychoanalytic experience. With psychoanalysis recurring at many levels in Rebufa’s work, we may now take the \textit{Traversée du Miroir} as an auspice, certainly in the form of a \textit{boutade}, of traversing the phantasm, the psychoanalytical equivalent of enlightenment: the clarification of one’s personal formula, the disarticulation of the imaginary prestiges of the I.

However, this is the point where we should exceed the level of the single image to look at \textit{Bimbeloterie} in its fundamental serial format, in its interminability ‘since 1989’. It is the serialisation of Rebufa’s parade of simulacra that might lead more strongly to a point of hystericisation and thus historicity. The illusions of this narcissistic Barbie world, of these capitalist mirages of a possible satisfaction of desire, ultimately deflate in the metonymic movement of an inconclusive narrative in which the ultimate inconsistency of desire appears as a desire for \textit{nothing}. It is exactly this “running empty” in the serial metonymy that I see to be creating an effect of ‘knowledge’ in Rebufa’s work, rather than any precise imaginary content on the level of the signified.\textsuperscript{88} The capitalist exploitation of desire and fantasy is exposed as a never-ending, sado-masochistic up and down ‘since 1989’. Turning narration into an atemporal space in which everything changes and everything is always the same, flattening the capitalist promise of the realisation of desire in the circularity of the series, we play the ‘game of the capitalist’ with a view on the point at which its machinations lie: in an ever-returning \textit{nothing}. Temporality here seems to appear, ultimately, as the atemporality of the drive. The drive is “what remains of desire after the image of realization has been stripped away”, it is “desire without the hope of obtaining the object, desire that has become indifferent to its object”.\textsuperscript{89} In this sense Rebufa’s work has ‘no future’, as Castanet has suggested, but certainly not because of an alleged inaptitude as a ‘Lacanian artist’ in showing a precise ‘progressive’ content, rather because it shows desire as that which has no possibility to realise itself in the future.

Olivier Rebufa re-reads this classical trope of the Freudian uncanny, the doll in photographic form, for the era of global capitalism. With it, a concept of art as an antagonistic cultural practice is put under discussion, opening to a notion of aesthetic


\textsuperscript{88} Hervé Castanet has argued that “the risk” correlative to Rebufa’s “narcissistic love chasing its own tail might end up being a body of work that, likewise driven solely by the motor of the beloved mirrored image, would be running on empty”. See Hervé Castanet, “Olivier Rebufa: Du Stéréotype Comme Style”, \textit{Art Presse}, no. 257 (2000), 39.

\textsuperscript{89} McGowan, \textit{The End}, 28.
production and reception in terms of complicity and to an exploration of alternative modes of cultural politics not based on an oppositional negative critique. Through the signifier of the gap and of serial interminability, the image still manages to work ‘indexically’ even without punctum, even in its simulacral forms. It can offer insight even if it is declaring its complicit allegiance to the system of cultural mass-consumption. That is why I would like to call Rebufa’s project an exercise of simulacrum interruptus: we enjoy, up to a point. As artists and viewers we are not outside the observed world but we are in a position to see its machinations. I consider Bimbeloterie an attempt to strike an equilibrium between indexicality-openness and iconicity-intentionality in the way in which photography is contaminated through pictorial values, sculpture and performance. And I suggest to look at this formal research as an analogon of a quest towards an equilibrium between the ideal and the Real, which ultimately emerges as metonymy, series. For this reason Rebufa’s ‘Self-Portraits With Dolls (Since 1989)’ may never be finished. Playing with the conventions of the mask and playing with the conventions of the photograph appear as the two edges of a contemporary double impasse: what is a subject? What is a photograph?
After Rebufa has shown how to imbue the age-old appeal of a cultural icon such as Barbie with fresh aesthetic and critical force, in this chapter we encounter a new paradigmatic figure which has emerged within the twenty-first century as a valuable device for artists to explore conventions and issues surrounding photography and subjectivity: the hyper-realistic love doll. This is a highly sophisticated, human-scale life-like doll principally designed for sex, a wonder of technological advancement featuring cyber-skin – high quality artificial skin used in transplant surgery – an anatomically-correct body and a fully articulated posable skeleton.¹ With prices ranging from three to thirty thousand dollars, love dolls have interchangeable faces and offer countless options for customisation, ranging from breast measurements and skin tone to eyeliner colour and pubic hair style. They are popular not only with iDollators – people, mostly men, who own love dolls for sex and companionship – but also with artists, filmmakers, amateur and professional photographers who may use them as models, as in the case of Laurie Simmons’s 2009 Love Doll series (Chapter 4), or as non-human actors, as in Lars and the Real Girl (Gillespie, 2007, Chapter 5).²

The love doll can be seen as the new avant-garde of mimetic representation thanks to the technological advancements in silicone materials and Artificial Intelligence that have allowed an unprecedented degree of realism in the representation of the human figure.³ To the touch, silicone is the closest material to the effect of human skin; it also allows the meticulous reproduction of every tiny detail of a human body, from the marks on the palm of the hand.

² A recent survey has defined the identikit of the Western iDollator as predominantly white, male, middle-aged, single, heterosexual, employed, and with a high school or higher degree. See Sarah Hatheway Valverde, “The Modern Sex Doll Owner: A Descriptive Analysis” (California State Polytechnic University, 2012).
³ The ‘doll-quality’ of the love doll (achieved through the attribution of larger, rounder eyes and more symmetrical faces, for instance) is still considered central among producers. They follow robot scientist Masahiro Mori’s cybernetic theory of the ‘uncanny valley’ (1970) which states that although empathy to robots increases with their human likeness, beyond a certain level of similitude repulsion is activated, unless technological advancements can achieve a perfectly ‘fully human’ appearance.
of hands to the consistency of female breasts. Besides physical likeness, emotional verisimilitude also defines the new frontier of mimesis. State-of-the-art love dolls are enhanced through robotics and humanoid software technologies, not only to give movement to the body but also to animate the face and offer more human-like ‘emotional interaction’. Emotional reciprocity is a central narrative surrounding love dolls and their owners. At a basic level, emotional engagement is dependent on the dolls’ material structure, since their heavy silicone-and-steel skeletons make these figures a decidedly persistent presence in the living space of their owners, refractory to disappearing under a bed or being enclosed in a small box, unlike their old vinyl inflatable antecedents. The work of projection these dolls invite gives body to complex emotional environments and diverse, often conflicting, narratives. Broadly speaking, love dolls seem to offer a simplified version of human interaction, guaranteeing on one side ‘24/7 sexual availability’ and, on the other, a domestic sense of belonging. On the one hand, they seem to cater to a need to evade the emotional, social and financial commitment and obligations ascribed to committed relationships, a motive also often found in commercial sex; on the other, they are frequently associated with the emotional security customarily referred to marriage – as one iDollator put it, owning a doll is the reassuring fantasy of “coming home to someone”.

This chapter is concerned with a visual analysis of how the phenomenon of the life-size dolls and their owners has been represented in European and American culture, with a focus on the photographic documentary work of French photojournalist Stéphan Gladieu (1969), *Silicone Love* (2009). I have chosen to centre my analysis on Gladieu’s reportage, circulated widely in different forms in Europe and the United States, since here formal photographic preoccupations, sociological sensibility, and psychological subtlety acquire a

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4 See e.g. Abyss’s Realbotix (www.realbotix.systems), launched in 2017, which presents animated head and facial features, with an Android app allowing users to create a number of personalised avatars with customisable voices, moods, and personality.


6 Appeared first in 2009 as a photo-essay with text by journalist Anne Segnès as “Real Dolls and iDollators”, the reportage has been published both in print and online in European and American newspapers and magazines. Other documentaries on the love doll include: The Mechanical Bride (Allison de Fren, 2012); My Strange Addiction, “Married to a Doll” (TLC, 26.1.2011); Taboo, “Strange Love” (National Geographic, 2010), Guys and Dolls (Nick Holt, BBC, 2006), Eves de Slicones (Elisabeth Alexandre, France 3, 2002).
compelling and complex cypher which is exceptional among similar material. In the course of my analysis I will also refer to other media sources and particularly to another significant photographic documentary work on the theme by American photographer Elena Dorfman, *Still Lovers* (2005), which with Gladieu’s reportage remains one of the first, more in-depth visual enquiries into the doll lovers’ phenomenon after the first *Real Doll* was launched by *Abyss* in 1997. My preoccupation in this chapter is to explore the visual representation of the love doll and the doll lover found in these reportages through the terms of the capitalist’s discourse and the post-neurotic implications that it carries. We saw in the previous chapter how the liberation of jouissance promised by this discourse, through a demise of paternal authority, has caused an unprecedented direct relationship between subject and object, that is to say a denial of lack and new symptomatic formations that overcome the traditional binary between psychosis and neurosis. What could this theory bring to an understanding of Gladieu’s documentary and its aesthetics of the love doll?

In current debates, love dolls are usually considered a transgressive fetish, an object of perversion or a misogynistic choice. In Lacanian terms, this means they are considered actors within a dynamics of transgression against the prohibition of the paternal Law. However, once we move to consider the historicity of the formations of jouissance, we may find that the love doll could be better understood as an object inhabiting a situation beyond the problem of the split of subjectivity and symbolic substitution. The benefit of using the theoretical framework of the capitalist’s discourse lies precisely in the possibility to problematise the structure of the return of the repressed and the notion of fetishism, traditionally associated with loss, which in psychoanalysis is the original loss of jouissance that the subject is called to forego in order to enter the social bond. As I started to consider in Chapter 2, the fetish, like the return of the repressed, presupposes an original moment in which the Law of prohibition initiates – or attempts to initiate – lack. If the uncanny is an anxiety-effect related to the emergence of jouissance within a successful neurotic alienation, the fetish is a reassuring illusion of wholeness in the face of an Other attempting to ‘castrate’ the subject, to alienate her symbolically by depriving her of jouissance. What happens to the fetish once there is not an Other to do the prohibition, substituted by an

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7 I must also admit a level of serendipity informing my choice to focus on Gladieu, a sort of affective attachment of my own, as it was precisely my encounter with these images on an Italian magazine in 2010 (Andrea Scarano, “E L’Uomo Creò la Bambola” and Maddalena Oliva, “Povero Maschio”, *IL Magazine: Il Sole 24 ore*, 21 June 2010, 63-72) that sparked my curiosity in the topic and drove my decision to dedicate my postgraduate degree dissertation and later my Ph.D project to the figure of the contemporary doll.

8 Initially commissioned by French women’s magazine *Marie Claire*, *Still Lovers* has appeared in international publications such as *Artweek*, *The New York Times*, and the *International Herald Tribune*, besides being shown in museums and galleries and published as a monography with an introduction by Elisabeth Alexandre, author of *Des Poupées et des Hommes: Dolls and Men: Investigation into Artificial Love* (La Paris: Musardine, 2005), in turn illustrated with Dorfman’s images. See Elena Dorfman, *Still Lovers* (New York: Channel Photographics, 2005).
Other who instead demands enjoyment, as in the *discourse of the capitalist*? What is its role once it has lost its transgressive value, and how, as a concept, can it still be useful in the reading of the visual presence of the doll?

With its complex visual and thematic world, *Silicone Love* exposes the complications related to these notions in relation to popular assumptions surrounding the figure of the erotic doll and the men who live with them. One particularly persistent perception sees the doll as a woman-substitute, as emerges for instance in *Guys and Dolls* (Holt, 2006), which opens with the consideration that "there are now three thousand Real Dolls in the world providing love and companionship that real women *cannot*". Often such a direct comparison between dolls and women is followed by the implication that iDollators are ‘haters’ of women, as suggested by French journalist and psychologist Elisabeth Alexandre, who collaborated with Elena Dorfman in *Still Lovers*, after producing one of the first documentaries on the phenomenon, *Eves de Silicon* (2002). Alexandre sees doll owners as a "direct line of a fundamental mythological group […] interested in woman creation", Pygmalion-like misogynists only able to deal with an “artificial woman” who is “‘perfect’ and agrees to whatever her man desires”. A reference to the old tale of Pygmalion and its possible misogynistic implications is still vigorous and popular in the media, explaining the opposition the phenomenon receives in public opinion, particularly from women. The love doll appears, in this view, as an ameliorated woman embodying a reassuring and submissive feminine subject, a beautiful and docile instrument without self-determination, as an alternative to sexually active and liberal contemporary ‘real women’.

What distinguishes Gladieu’s *Silicone Love* is the suggestion that the doll might in fact be something different to a woman-substitute, as well as a reflexive focus on the role of the image in constructing ‘reality’. With its formal devices and rich network of cultural citations, *Silicone Love* puts a frame around a ‘subculture’ as much as around the act of producing its image, avoiding exploitation while revealing a personal voice about the world observed. As we shall see, there is in Gladieu’s documentary a play between the attempt to reveal a portion of the world and the exposure of a personal lens on that world that challenges

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9 *Guys and Dolls* (Holt, 2006), my emphasis.


11 For an anthropological-historical reading of the myth of Pygmalion as a tale engaging with a complex network of cultural traditions – the practice of *theogamy* and the figure of the *kolossós*, among others – see Michel Manson, “Y a-t-il un Mythe de la Poupée?”, in *id.*, *Etats Généraux de la Poupée*.

12 Sometimes this reading is coupled with a feminist appraisal of the figure of the male demiurge, as in *The Mechanical Bride* (De Fren, 2012), where doll creation is seen as a cultural symptom of a historical and cultural passage from a “gynocentric” to a “patrocentric” civilisation.
traditional conventions of documentary photography and its orthodox pretences to offer a faithful representation of an unmediated ‘reality’.

3.1. DOCUMENTARY AS ‘PURPOSEFUL’ PICTORIALISM

_Silicone Love_ is a pictorialist photo-reportage. This is not only a purely formal issue since it reflects broader trends in documentary photography. The reportage’s appearance in various combinations of image and text across different media platforms reflects a current condition of documentary photography, with the dominance of stock agencies such as Getty Images which collect and distribute archive images, selling image rights worldwide to news organisations through monthly subscription.\(^{13}\) While until the 1970s printed magazines such as _Time, Life_, and _Paris Match_ had the financial capacity to pay various photographers to work on the ground, in recent decades, with the disappearance of those traditional printed forums and the rise of social media as an alternative source for news images – so called ‘citizen journalism’ – documentary photography has struggled to find suitable avenues for publication. At the same time, it has found new audiences in art galleries and museums and, through this hybridisation with the field of art photography, formal and aesthetic qualities have come to define more recent documentary work, with the idea of photographers being “not just people who are be able to break the news” but story-tellers.\(^{14}\)

Gladieu’s own trajectory as a photojournalist, which began in the 1980s documenting the lives of people in areas of conflict and has only recently gravitated towards the production of ‘sociological’ stories, is paradigmatic of such mutated conditions in the field. _Silicone Love_ certainly features among Gladieu’s more sociological works, a field of production which in recent years has included pieces on American polygamous communities, Afghan opium producers and brothel prostitutes in Nevada. Riveting in its offering of non-mainstream content, _Silicone Love_ at the same time appears distinctly sophisticated in form, paradigmatically emerging in this sense as a documentary photographic practice that seems to strive for a balance between marketability and social critique, factual representation and pictorialist aestheticisation, artistic appeal and documentary value.

We can observe how in Gladieu’s documentary there is an attempt to expose complexity in the choice of articulating the love doll’s spaces of consumption with those of production and, in terms of style, the coupling of varied representational strategies. As we

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\(^{13}\) Gladieu’s documentary is on sale on the Getty Images’ website and some of the images used in this chapter present the agency’s mark, a transparent square placard which is removed once the image is bought.

shall see in some detail, a seemingly unmediated documentary representational mode, typically associated with the foregrounding of the dolls’ ordinariness as mere objects, is interweaved with a more aestheticised style of representation used to suggest the dimension of fantasy, fundamental to understand a world gravitating around the possibility to animate the dolls in imaginary scenarios. Around the issue of animation, the question of fetishism becomes relevant. The field of production is exposed in a group of images depicting a world of men and de-fetishised commodities. In the images of the factory – whose captions inform us is the Californian Abyss – the doll emerges as a mere object within a network of material relationships (Fig. 3.1-3.3). Male workers are depicted at work, never directly looking at the camera, absorbed in manufacturing silicone female bodies: a man is painting one doll’s nipple areola, another is trimming excess material from a doll’s hand, others are carefully checking on ankles of half-formed dolls hanging from chains. Emphasis is put on the men’s careful, concentrated attitude and the sheer multitude of headless, big-busted female forms which surround them, often visually intruding in the foreground. Through a conventional, seemingly un-posed documentary visual style, Gladieu offers visibility to material production and ordinary working conditions, counteracting what Buchloh has described as a general condition of Western “self-declared post-industrial and post-working class society”, namely the “(im)possibility of an iconography of labour” in contemporary visual culture.\(^\text{15}\) If commodity fetishism is traditionally defined as the displacement of social relations into relations between objects, here dolls appear as objects languishing rather than “abounding in metaphysical subtleties”, with their insertion in a precise system of production pre-empting them of any possibility of fetishisation.\(^\text{16}\) This is significant when we compare the depiction of the factory in Silicone Love with that of other documentaries such as Elena Dorfman’s Still Lovers, where the same subject of female forms hanging from chains is rendered abstract from the action of production, with the effect of turning the factory into a desolate scene of objectification, spectralised through the absence of human life. By contrast, Gladieu’s choice to display human labour, when articulated with other images in the series, exposes the dolls as uncomplicated trivial artefacts, deprived of “a life of their own”.\(^\text{17}\) If labour is shown, the dolls’ sexual ‘apparatus’ is emphatically on display for the viewer, suggesting that such a gained visibility of labour is in need of its own ‘tricks’ – would these workers be equally ‘interesting’ were they operating on engine parts or transistors? Here then we find not only an affirmation on the lack of fetishistic autonomy for the doll but a question relative to authorial intentionality within a rather plain realistic depiction of ‘facts’:

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\(^{17}\) \textit{Ibid}, 165.
the information does not pre-exist the act of looking, which is thus exposed as an act of “purposeful discrimination”, as Joel Snyder has put it.\textsuperscript{18}

When engaging with the arena of consumption of the dolls, the visual field of \textit{Silicone Love} becomes even more contradictory. We can discern three main categories of images: un-posed images of men in action with their dolls; pictorialist and posed domestic \textit{tableaux} of men with dolls; portraits of dolls, alone within the frame. Taken together, these different typologies suggest ‘awkwardness’ and ‘simulacral perfection’, opening to the suggestion of an ambiguous existential dimension, as I shall establish. The photographs of men in action with their dolls appear candid, and as such they are an exception in a series in which the majority of the images are staged. The image of a man carrying a doll and of another undressing a doll lying on a bed, for instance, manage to capture body movement in action and expose something of the (un-orchestrated) lived moment of the subjects, with the body escaping the intentional grid of imaginary self-presentation and releasing some of its Real, affective and existential dimension (Fig. 3.4-3.5). Awkwardness transpires from the way these men handle the dead weight of the dolls. In the first case, clumsiness is registered as the man’s neck bends unnaturally backwards and the relative inability to see in front of him due to the obtrusive physicality of the doll, with artificial light at his back reinforcing this sense of a truncated directionality. In the second, the effort of the man is again evident in the way all his body is engaged in the action of undressing the doll, which, in contrast, is lying heavily on the bed. Light concurs to create an ambience, with its flat, uniform quality generating an almost dull visual field through which the dolls are exposed in their mere factuality.

In other instances, in contrast, photography becomes a tool to elevate reality beyond its stale facticity and ordinariness, indeed to construct imaginary scenarios and narratives. The image of a man dancing with his doll, for example, emerges as a fantasy \textit{tableau}, whose constructedness, however, is exposed (Fig. 3.6). That we might find ourselves in a different dimension of reality is signalled by the blaring acidity of the orange wall, as artificial as candy and saccharine as the indulgence in the fantasy that the beloved character embodied in the doll might be able to dance standing on her own feet. On the one hand, it is as if the viewer is allowed into the man’s fantasy space, while, on the other, the white cord reminds the viewer of the machinery needed to lift a forty-plus-kilogram dead weight, which is largely left out of frame. In this sense, the cord holds the doll on a de-fetishised ‘objective’ plane, while signalling an emergence of ‘subjectivity’, for in it one can sense the photographer’s authorial intervention, as interpreter of what is seen. There Gladieu is clearly indicating his presence – a pointing finger, as it were – to the constructedness of the fantasy: the doll is ‘alive’ and a mere thing at the same time.

\textsuperscript{18} Joel Snyder, “Picturing vision”, \textit{Critical Inquiry}, vol. 6, no. 3 (Spring, 1980), 509.
STEPHAN GLADIEU’S *SILICONE LOVE*

A similar strategy can be found in a third group of images, where the doll is isolated and ‘animated’ in a vignette, as in the portrayal of a doll in black night gown holding a glass of wine while sitting on a chair (Fig. 3.7). The photograph gives body to a fantasy space in which the viewer is invited to invent a personality for this character or to speculate about the story the owner has invented for her – is she a Bond-girl, a killer in disguise, or maybe a bored alcoholic housewife? Light and colours, albeit enhanced, are aridly cold despite the natural light source – one of the few instances in the series, usually shot during night hours under artificial, flat light. At the same time, here too, we are reminded of the fabricated nature of the *ensemble*, with the doll’s portrait on the table working as an additional simulacral *mise en abyme*. The doll is the copy of a copy, whose lips may replicate those of a certain actress, the eyes of another – those actresses in turn might themselves be surgically remodelled, as is often the case, to abide by old and new standards of beauty to be found in glossy fashion magazines and social media and so on and so forth *ad infinitum*. *Silicone love* thus seems to suggest contradictory thematic and narrative possibilities through the coordination of different and opposed formal strategies, those of a dry documentary image and a more pictorialist, crafted one. In terms of style, Gladieu’s fluctuation between different photographic conventions suggests that to ‘document’ this reality of men and dolls might mean working through – and with – the commingling of fantasy and ordinary reality that the constant presence of these dolls in the men’s everyday lives implies.

Furthermore, in this alternation between different conventions and levels of reality we can read not only the double binary between indexical and iconic values that has traditionally defined photography *tout court*, but current formal and technological preoccupations in the context of post-Internet photojournalism. *Silicone Love* exposes the attempt to strike a balance between a tendency towards an aestheticising formalism and the traditional critical vocation of documentary, also as a response to an over-competitive and difficult media market. There is hence the exposure of a contradiction: that between the documentary and artistic values of the image, between the photographic document as testimony to an exact situation that leads to an exact interpretation and the artwork as a text able to allow diverse interpretations. Within photojournalism in particular, this dynamic is also between openness, in the commitment towards a presentation of facts open to different interpretations, and closure, in which we sense the authorial presence of the photographer as someone who offers a possible key for the interpretation of a complex, often chaotic and meaningless, reality.19 Here, we touch on the image of the doll as a reflexive tool able to expose the problem of the ethics of information, and on the possible

role of authoriality to sustain it, with the photographer thus recognised for her role in interpreting what is seen through the camera lens. As with the doll, the question of fantasy as a screen is central here, with the eye of the photographer becoming a mediatory screen through which the viewer can attend to the incongruences and horrors of reality in a meaningful way, outside of visual pornography, with photography as language and the photographic image as always an interpretation of reality. Through the appeal to form, dolls and photography can both veil – and thus expose – or cover over ordinary reality. In this tension around the role of fantasy, I see *Silicone Love* prompting interesting questions both on the role of the dolls in the lives of iDollators and of photography as a documentary practice.

Notwithstanding its formalism, *Silicone Love* seems to avoid the trap of an over-the-top pictorialism which would exhaust its subject matter and commodify it through the transfiguration of a document of social reality into pure image, a sheer formal aesthetic object. There is an aestheticisation at work in the series, but one that seems to emerge as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself or a mere tool for marketability and curb appeal. There is style but not “mannerism”, authoriality but not “auteurism”. The pictorialism at work here appears not fetishistically independent from its subject matter, but instrumental in revealing something of the socio-historical complexity at hand. I shall argue that it is precisely with Gladieu’s use of pictorialist means that we can touch on the core of the photographer’s ‘purposeful looking’ and his interpretation of the observed social reality.

A paradigm of Gladieu’s purposeful pictorialism is the remarkable image of a naked, perlaceous doll lying on a bed under a print of Alexandre Cabanel’s *Birth of Venus* (Fig. 3.8). The composition constructs a self-contained simulacral world whose horizon is redoubled along the line of the two female reclining figures, the doll and the Venus. Symmetry and perspective are maximally emphasised to guide the viewer’s eye in the image and lose it to its hyper-formalised order. This is an image constructed to the maximum degree for the triumph it accords to the play between different visual pyramids, doubled between the image and the image within the image which is the Cabanel. The vanishing point of the former is prolonged in that of the latter, so that the eye finds itself imbricated in a simulacral *ad infinitum* movement. The idealised virginal purity of the lethargic, remissive posture of the nineteenth-century Venus is doubled, as if turned awry, in the extreme hygienism of the bloodless allure of its twenty-first-century counterpart, pointing to a cultural-historical

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continuity of the ‘problem’ of female beauty, its relationship to jouissance and representation.

The art of Cabanel is considered the apex of academism, of Western art’s preoccupation with a mimetic representation of reality, at a stage where Romanticism, Naturalism and the new medium of photography advanced different versions of ‘reality’. In the period’s debate the representation of the female body appears as a mirror for the preoccupations regarding the status of the image itself, as the discussions around the various Venuses presented at the Salons testify. At the 1865 Salon, Cabanel’s Venus was present with Manet’s Olympia, firing debate on verisimilitude, taste and the role of myth in veiling the ‘unrepresentable’. Olympia prompted public scandal since it reconfigured the genre of the recumbent female figure through a debunking of the traditional mythologisation, the same at work in the academism of Cabanel. Manet represented a woman, namely a cocotte, instead of a goddess, looking aloof and impertinent at the same time, for her direct look confronted the (male bourgeois) viewer as if inhabiting the same space.\(^{21}\) While for Cabanel’s Venus-image the viewer can be said to be non-existent, with the artwork declaring its autonomy, Manet’s Olympia-image is facing the viewer, acknowledging his presence in the gallery. Crucially, in the debate of the time, the woman-as-prostitute corresponds to the image-as-prostitute, as an image that gives itself ‘away’ too overtly to the viewer, to be enjoyed without the screen of allegory, still (although barely) keeping a veil of ‘decency’ in Cabanel’s Venus. On the other hand, from a different point of view, the mimetic realism of Cabanel was also seen to ‘give away’, deemed “cloying” by connoisseurs, a judgement that Gombrich has explained as an intellectualistic, bourgeois defence against the ‘obviousness’ of the image, too close to the exact likeness of photographic representation.\(^ {22}\) Therefore, although not ‘true’, in the sense that Manet’s Naturalism purported to be – close to the ‘real’ social condition of what is represented – Cabanel’s Venus was judged too ‘real’, too exact, therefore ‘dull’ as an aesthetic experience, appealing to a “childish gratification” since the image would not stimulate an adequate effort of integration on the part of the viewer.\(^ {23}\) At the same time, Cabanel’s Venus, while widely acclaimed, was also criticised for being not ‘real enough’, expression of a form of beauty too abstracted from the “attraction of reality” (of real women): too ‘real’ or too ‘abstract’, the (male painter’s) image never manages to find a way to represent the quid of reality, of which the female body is the measure.\(^ {24}\)

\(^ {23}\) ibidem. Gombrich speaks of nineteenth-century academism, of Cabanel and the school of Bouguereau in particular, as exponents of a regressive aesthetic taste that encourages “oral satisfaction”, using the language of gastronomy to define it as a penchant for soft food as opposed to more “mature” crunchy pleasures (ibidem).
\(^ {24}\) Théophile Thoré, “Le Salon de 1863”, in id., Salons de W. Bürger: 1861 à 1868, I, 373, cit. in Reff, Manet, 54.
What we can derive from these debates is the way the female body has traditionally signified the discrepancy that exists between the level of fantasy and its Real enigma, between the surfaces of representation and the depths of unrepresentability. From the perspective of my argument here, the interesting point is not much relative to the debate on the socially determined modalities of the construction of ‘woman’, but to the relationship between a phantasmatic construction and its Real core. At the centre of the epistemological congruence between the (image of) woman, the doll, and the photograph is posited the problem of fantasy and its relationship with the unfathomability of the Real. Inherent to this entanglement is the place of the codes of beauty and their role in enabling the (impossible) visibility of the Real. This is a concern doubly relevant here for, as I have suggested earlier, it relates both to the role of the love doll and to the photographic image. On one side, there is the question of how the doll is connected to the Real and, on the other, the issue of how photography mediates the raw material of the social reality it purports to show.

Gladieu’s image emerges as iconically coherent in its hyperbolic symmetries, maximally constructed, and at the same time indexical, in line with Peirce’s description of the index as a sign which requires the beholder’s observation to be interpreted. Art historian Kris Paulsen has underlined how Pierce’s definition of the index is concerned with doubt rather than with epistemological certainty, with interpretation rather than with self-evidence, since it is a sign which ‘points’ to something that has happened, but which, for a lack of likeness to the referent, always needs interpretation.25 Gladieu introduces for his viewers a network of references that require an effort of interpretation, exposing photography’s iconic coherence and indexicality. In Gladieu’s image, therefore, we find a decisive authorial intentionality together with – rather than in binary opposition to – a sense of openness to

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25 See Kris Paulsen, “The Index and the Interface”, *Representations*, vol. 122, no. 1 (Spring 2013). The anomaly of photography is to be an index that also presents a likeness to the referent, as an icon. Paulsen cites Peirce from *Philosophical Writings*: “Anything which startles us is an index, insofar as it marks the juncture of two portions of experience. Thus a tremendous thunderbolt indicates something considerable has happened, though we may not know precisely what the event was” (Charles Sanders Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 108–9, cit. in Paulsen, "The Index", 95). Recent debates surrounding digital technology have sparked rhetoric of a ‘death of the index’ in photographic discourse for the assumed ability of digital images to eliminate the indexical connection between referent and sign. These interpretations are often based on a conflation between photography (which is an anomalous index, due to its iconic values) and the index, as well as a misleading interpretation of the ‘immateriality’ of the digital photographic camera (the electronic light sensors of the CPD still function analogously and electrons are indeed material entities). More fundamentally, Peirce’s index is concerned with a principle of contextuality, “physical connection” rather than material causality (the index as physical trace), with the presentness of an “existential relationship” between the referent and the sign rather than historicity (a sense of pastness) and doubt rather than proof (epistemological certainty), as Paulsen underlines (Peirce, *Philosophical*, 106).
the viewer, in opposition to the recent definition of digital photography as an ontologically 'fully intentional' practice, closed to the viewer's intervention.26

However, closure is a central aspect of *Silicone Love*. Citing the conventions of the traditional pictorial canon through a paroxystic internal formalism, Gladieu's image reconnects to a visual tradition focused on surface values for which the image is an expression of self-contained perfection. Symmetry and perspectival geometry are rhetorical choices that are emphasised in this series, and employed within a conceptual framework able to also deliver thematic suggestions on what role the dolls may play in these men's lives. In one image, a man is on a sofa, reading a newspaper with two big-busted dolls beside him (Fig. 3.9). The newspaper covers the man's face, hidden behind it, a precaution which, if is related to the will to protect anonymity, reveals a need for protection. Even without this gesture of hiding, the issue of protection would transpire from this image all the same, since the man appears to be flanked by these robust dolls as if they were bodyguards. The fully closed blinds give the impression of a house-bunker where the closest semblance of the external world is a stuffed pigeon hanging on the wall, a double of the birds represented in the landscape painting, but also an instance of symmetry, with the man sitting below on a perfectly aligned vertical axis.

The same closure to the external world can be read in the image of the same man, again flanked by the doll-bodyguards, shot from the back while sitting before a computer screen (Fig. 3.10). The glass window here contradicts its promise of visibility by being thickly dark, doubling the black screen of the computer which, together with the usual insistence on perspective – with the vanishing point this time converging in the corner, coinciding on the axis uniting the screen and the man – suggests the self-containment of a firmly sealed world. In all these images we can find a short-circuit between an ideal of form, exposed through a heightened use of classical composition, and the dimension of sex to which the dolls refer with their explicit offer and sexualised forms. Gladieu chooses to highlight symmetry and perspective, with its associated dream of a "fully rational – infinite, unchanging and homogenous – space" to tell a story about dolls, traditionally associated through play to the instance of a liberation of *jouissance*, as we saw in Chapter 1. Rather than in relation to Eros as subversion and revolt, this doll appears in fact more preoccupied with a containment and rationalisation of it.27

Perspective and composition, in this sense, convey an aspiration to stillness. Gladieu's paroxystic use of central perspective may be seen to point to the contradiction intrinsic in

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26 As in Fried, "Without a Trace" and *id.*, *Why Photography Matters*.

27 Such is Surrealism's eroticism, and Bellmer's dolls within its discourse. Alice Mahon speaks of the "politics of Eros" for Surrealism to describe the way Eros is conjugated with politics and put at work in the movement towards revolutionary ends. See Mahon, *Surrealism*, 16.
STEPHAN GLADIEU’S SILICONE LOVE

perspective itself: on one side a device of opening, with the concept of the framed painting as a ‘window on the world’; on the other a means of closure, expressing the need to encase the world in a grid, a ‘cage’, in the effort to dominate it. Writing on Paolo Uccello’s exaggerated use of perspective between the Trecento and Quattrocento, still far from the ‘mature humanism’ of High Renaissance, art historian Federico Zeri has described it as a style that, twisting on its own mathematical rationality, has “produced images of abstract, even de-humanising, unreality”.28 Commenting on the same issue, Vasari had earlier underlined how perspective, in excess, becomes a determination to “grind things too meticulously”, to reduce them to a formula, with the consequence of “strain[ing] nature” and making things “sterile and difficult”.29 But Zeri also sees in such a use of mathematical composition a cypher of a broader cultural historical moment; of the liminality of a period characterised by the demise of the Mediaeval faith in a divine Law as something able to provide the ultimate sense of the world, while the humanist confidence and ability to create a new order of meaning was yet to come.30 This melancholic supra-signification of geometry suggested by Zeri may be resumed to analyse Silicone Love, which similarly associates formal constructedness with a sense of closure. Images are usually taken indoors, under artificial light, with the level of the frame either very low, which instigates a sense of tightness, or opening onto a simulacral space, such as a wall with a stuffed bird or a TV screen. There is a compression of the visual field that creates an association between the space of the doll and a too-full, a horror vacui. Artificial perfection – of the doll as well as of the image – is entwined with a sense of subjective vulnerability. Thus, associating an insisted use of classical composition with self-enclosed internal spaces, acidity of colours and dull artificial light, Gladieu seems to suggest a sense of seclusion, as well as revealing a certain existential rigidity, a subjective intent to detach from an external, threatening reality. In the following section, I turn to psychoanalysis to see how this visual proposition might be read in relation to contemporary structures of subjectivity. I will compare Gladieu’s formal devices with those of Elena Dorfman’s Still Lovers and attempt to read them through an account of narcissism contextualised within the terms of the capitalist’s discourse.

3.2. DIET PINK LEMONADE

Gladieu’s dolls are often phallic, assertive presences. They are portrayed sitting at the table while men wash the dishes or taking hold of the TV controller, one of the traditional insignia

30 Zeri, “Rinascimento”, 555.
of the old patriarchal householder (Fig. 3.11-3.12). In one image, a brunette doll is sitting on a sofa with the TV controller in her right hand while a man gives her a shoulder massage and watches Pamela Anderson fill the TV screen (Fig. 3.12). Literally beheaded by the frame, the man, with a Mickey Mouse looming large on his jumper, is infantilised by the all-pervasive presence of monumental, hyper-sexualised female effigies. In *Silicone Love* dolls appear to stand for gallant and charming female figures in opposition to the men’s sense of closure and vulnerability. However, dolls also embody vulnerability since their very structure – their sheer passive presence and dead weight – before any particular content, epitomises a demand for care. Literally, dolls function as a helpless ‘taker’ that is dependent on a competent ‘caretaker’: as one of the men said, “living with a doll is a lot like taking care of an invalid, you have to do everything for her”.

It is not only *Silicone Love* to foreground questions of dependency, caretaking and vulnerability, as these acquire a rather compelling form in Elena Dorfman’s *Still Lovers*, another in-depth analysis of the world of love dolls that utilises, however, very different visual strategies and thematic accents. Dorfman uses the conventions of classic portraiture to ‘animate’ the dolls and subjectivise them, while the issue of vulnerability is narrativised through a clear-cut gender divide whereby the dolls emerge as helpless female victims and the men as dominant masters. Dorfman’s dolls are either ‘rescued’ by, or submissive to, dominant men. Commenting on her image of a big man carrying a voluptuous half-naked doll (Fig. 3.13), Dorfman has adopted a rescue fantasy to frame the doll’s inertia: “to me he looks like this big bear of a guy rescuing a helpless woman, and you don’t quite know what’s going on. […] You think he shouldn’t be with this woman. It doesn’t make sense, yet there he is, in his bedroom, and she’s totally giving herself over to him”. Compared to a similar image by Gladieu – the image of a man carrying a doll that I read in terms of visual dullness and existential awkwardness (Fig. 3.4) – the man here, in slightly low angle, is in control, monumental in his size and relatively at ease sustaining the weight of the doll. There is here a whole new dimension of added drama due to the contrast of natural light and shade in the room, with light converging on the white body of the doll, pointing to a fundamental aspect emerging in Dorfman’s series, that is to say a focus on the dolls and their ‘aliveness’ as well as their victimisation.

As if trying to replicate an iDollator’s mindset, for some of whom dolls may be both alive and an instrument of sexual pleasure, Dorfman’s camera oscillates between subjectivising portraits (Fig. 3.14) and objectifying, fragmented extreme close-ups (Fig.

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While the first strategy creates a familiar, intimate closeness between the doll-as-subject and the beholder, the second can be seen to fragment the doll, offering it as a sexual object through a fixation on erotic details or through erotically-charged scenes voyeuristically enjoyed, fragmented as if caught through a peep-hole. In medium and close-up, the doll-as-subject is portrayed as if returning the look of the viewer, a strategy which opens onto the dynamics of intersubjectivity and desire: ‘what does the doll want?’. Through the fragmented extreme close-ups, instead, the doll appears as an object of sexual enjoyment, with the viewer absorbed in the frame, as it were, either towards a direct erotic interaction with the doll, or as a spectator-voyeur within an erotic scene.

In Still Lovers there are so many instances suggesting dominance and submission that it is impossible to miss the series’ eroticisation. One photograph shows a doll in the foreground while the blurred figure of a man in the background is tinkering with her wrist, possibly tying her to the bed, causing the doll’s arm to briskly twist backward, in a somewhat ‘unnatural’ manner (Fig. 3.18). The focus on the doll conveys a subjective investment in ‘her’, while her look falling downwards expresses passivity which, added to the detail of the twisted arm, seems to suggest a narrative of abuse. In another image, a young-looking doll is portrayed in a chaste bridal dress before showing her submissively sat on the bed with a man holding her, contained by the man’s gesture (Fig. 3.15). These images read as fantasies of abuse within a traditional heterosexual male-to-female domination dynamic, all the more remarkable for their publication in the self-declared feminist-oriented magazine Marie Claire. If the essay accompanying the images pathologises doll owners as perverse “misogynists” who want to be in control of women, these images can be seen to offer the same sexual fantasy of dominance and submission to readers who, through a deferral of enjoyment to the other – it is the iDollator who animates the doll and objectifies women – can freely indulge in it. The viewer is left to manage this fantasy of helplessness and dominance in her own terms, either sharing in the sexual fantasy by assuming one of the two positions in the scene, or rejecting it through a pathologisation of the men’s “obvious deviancy”. Overall, Dorfman’s visual strategies appear to work towards the construction of a fundamentally masochistic identificatory point of entry for the viewer, with the focus firmly kept on the doll as a ‘subject’ acted upon by men, in turn essentialised as dominant masters.

33 Dorfman has declared: “Sometimes I forget that the dolls are dolls. At first I was just playing along, out of respect for the owners, but ultimately it’s become almost like the dolls are alive, and I apologize to them if I step on their feet. I think that’s why this work is not about people having sex with their dolls. It’s about their emotional lives” (Dorfman, quoted in Borsook, “Wired for Sex”). This is restated in Still Lovers: “I came to believe, as many owners do, that the silicon lovers can communicate, and even offer a sublime, sustained sort-of passion”. See Dorfman, Still Lovers, 5.
34 Alexandre, “The Men”. See also Dorfman, Still Lovers.
The paradigmatic case for such an identification dynamic is the image of a doll lying on a bed with the image’s point of view constructed to coincide with that of the doll: the viewer-doll obliquely contemplates the disintegration of her own body in fragments in an apotheosis of self-abandonment (Fig. 3.19). Here the severed arm and leg disturbingly appear as if belonging to the viewer, while further apprehension is suggested by the heavy artificial light and the darkness lurking beyond the two doors.

An investment in the aliveness of the dolls through the means of photography, conceived as an enabler of fantasy, is a rather typical feature of the representation of the phenomenon in recent photography. Besides Dorfman’s treatment of the dolls as “seemingly active participants”, Benita Marcussen, for instance, also humanises the dolls in her photo-reportage *Men and Dolls* (2011-2015). Here however, in distinct contrast to Dorfman’s dramatic and sinister tone, the use of pastel colours, natural light and frequent outdoor staging points to the codes of the fairy tale, with men appearing as a jolly group of naïve boys innocently playing dolls (Fig. 3.20-3.21). Gladieu’s approach is more ambiguous, as we have seen, offering the doll through the lens of fantasy as if alive, and at the same time always disabling that fantasy potential through an exposure of the constructedness of the illusion or a focus on its simulacral qualities. Gladieu creates a contradiction between the animation of the doll in fantasy and its objective inertness, whereas Marcussen and Dorfman’s use of the medium offers viewers a more consistent platform for a traditional projection of aliveness onto the dolls.

As for vulnerability, if Dorfman focuses on the depicted men’s will to mastery, Gladieu offers a more paradoxical dynamic between men and dolls, as we have started to see: the doll is both the vulnerable other, requiring the men’s mastery as caretakers, and a figure lending its body to carry ideal self-images of ‘wholeness’, as a gallant, assertive presence. Gladieu advances the idea that the doll *is* and at the same time *is not* the vulnerable party, offering both a screen of projection for the subject’s perceived vulnerability and a protective bulwark against external threats as an idealised personification of perfection, autonomy, and assertiveness. We have seen how the photographer uses his *studium*, particularly through acidity of colours, artificial light and a heightened use of composition, to suggest how the world of the love doll might pertain to an edulcorated realm of artificiality, interdependent with the men’s suggested self-enclosure and vulnerability. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the love doll here emerges as a platform for the projection of a narcissistic composite *mélange* of vulnerability and reassurance in which the subject’s actual (vulnerable) ego, his ideal (assertive, perfect) ego, and his ideal (‘good’, satisfactory, unthreatening) other seem

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to blend. It seems that what is excluded from this *mélange* are the symbolic and real dimension of the other, its critical and threatening dimension omitted from the frame.

It can be said that a narcissistic structure is consubstantial to the game of the doll, in which projection and identification are central, as seen in *Chapter I*. If the doll as projection of vulnerability offers to the player the possibility of self-care through the care of the other, on an ideal level the doll always embodies a self-image of success, as well as an idealised other. The doll is a “domesticated other”, that is to say, the other as nice, kind, unassuming, always approving, easily bullied or pushed around, in the reassurance that no hurt or retaliation will be suffered as a consequence. The doll-as-other embodies, as psychologist Jeanne Danos has underlined, the perfect fantasy of “power for oneself and docility and receptiveness for the other”, an ideal imaginary relationship which is not only fully reciprocal but also one “of sovereign to vassal”, of master to slave. However, when transposed onto the adult level of the love doll, the play analogy becomes somehow insufficient, since it is not an infantile narcissistic dimension that is at stake here. Gladieu’s pairing of perfection and self-enclosure with vulnerability can be read through the construct of a *reactive* narcissistic subjective dimension. These men appear in these images as subjects preoccupied with protecting themselves, while the doll as body-guard might be seen as an “ideal object” set against an “aggressive uncontrollable environment”, left out of frame.

On one side, the love doll can be seen as the commodification of a maternal structure of love and care, one where “(what traditional ethics regarded as) the highest expression of your humanity – the compassionate need to take care of another living being – is treated as a dirty idiosyncratic pathology which should be satisfied in private, without bothering your actual fellow beings.” In this way, the love doll recuperates the ultimate of all comforting experiences, that of mothering, as a value to be circulated in the market. Cuteness is a valuable commodity, as Lori Merish has underlined, one that entails the commodification of “the ritualized performance of maternal feeling”. ‘Mothering’ and ‘being mothered’ – which define an existential space of absolute love and care, indeed the apotheosis of authenticity.

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37 Danos has described dynamics of “protection” and “purification” in relation to the doll as a vulnerable self-other. See Danos, *La Poupée*, 230, my translation from French.
38 Žižek, “Pathological Narcissus”, 240.
traditionally been thought to be the means to subvert capitalism's instrumentalisation – are here offered as the ultimate commodity.

From another point of view, the issue of formal control, and its exposure of a need to defend, points to the role of the doll as a device of idealised otherness set against the intrusion of an Other of desire and jouissance. Gladieu seems to suggest that the doll might assist the subject in the mission to avoid the enjoyment of the Other, the (symbolic and Real) 'intrusion' of an Other of sex and love. Far from the avant-garde doll as a figure of the emergence of jouissance, as a 'harbinger of death', the doll here appears as a shield against jouissance, a device able to maintain the Ego in a dimension of ideal purity. As opposed to the experience of "attending to one's own absence" as a way to "worship one's own dissolution", consorting with the doll is here a version of consorting with an object devoid of otherness.\(^{43}\) If love is an experience of the world "lived from the point of view of difference and not identity", as Badiou put it, a bond where difference emerges as the (Real of the) other's singularity as a sexed being, then the phrase 'love doll' is a clamorous oxymoron, expression of a capitalist discourse of safety that in its circumvention of risk and difference is clearly a negation of love.\(^{45}\)

Gladieu’s love doll seems to work according to a logic of subtraction, with sharp geometrical coherence and aseptic beauty finding a resonance with the "style" of paranoia, which, as Recalcati put it,

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\text{is to split the Same from the Other, by making the Other the place of a malevolent enjoyment from which the Same is required to protect itself. The defence [difesa] of the Same takes place thus through a hardening of its boundary, while ambivalence reveals that the boundaries (between friend and enemy) are necessarily intricate. In paranoia there is not ambivalence, in fact, but obliteration [risoluzione] of the ambivalence without any symbolisation; an obliteration of ambivalence through unilateral denial.}^{46}
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We may relate this passage to the issue of boundary that we encountered in Chapter 1 in relation to the uncanny and photography. Krauss’s theoretical argument on the uncanny structural conditions of photography – with its discursive knot linking Bataille’s informe, Caillois’s mimicry, Lacan’s theory of the gaze and Barthes’s punctum – revolves around the concept of obliteration of boundaries, as a strategy able to create a disturbance of the

\(^{43}\) Alberto Castoldi, Clerambault: Stoffe e Manichini (Bergamo: Moretti e Vitali, 1994), 16.

\(^{44}\) See Recalcati, "Le Nuove Forme del Sintomo", in id., L’Uomo, 141-60. I will consider the issue of the ‘inhuman partner’ from a different perspective in Chapter 4.

\(^{45}\) See Alain Badiou, In Praise of Love (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2012), 22.

\(^{46}\) Recalcati, L’Uomo, 245.
symbolic order. Instead of the liquefaction of boundaries as the ‘style’ of the modern doll and the uncanny, the hypermodern doll appears with Gladieu in relation to a hardening of boundaries, which can be seen as a non-Oedipal solution to the contemporary problem of the Real. *Silicone Love’s* mathematical rationality seems to work along this axis, *squeezing* the life out of the picture, with the doll enabling the formation of an idealised dimension of pure beauty, as a defence against any possible contamination with the Real, left outside. Gladieu can be seen to expose the love doll as beauty without abyss, an exorcism of the Real, as opposed to a classical concept of beauty as the encircling of the Real, as its possible declination in form.\(^47\) The visual and existential field of the love doll emerges here as that of ‘the Same’, as opposed to that of the Other which, from being the place of libidinal renunciation, becomes the place of a malignant enjoyment, ‘out there’, from which the subject is compelled to defend itself.

Shielding from the Other as the place of a malignant *jouissance*, left outside the frame, the doll can be seen as an object purged from ambivalence. This makes of it a haven of safety, as an object of love impossibly unconcerned with enjoyment. A cypher of this movement towards *de-Realisation* may be the image of a doll associated to a sugar-free *Diet Pink Lemonade*, where what conjoins the two might be their shared mission as hypermodern commodities to administer pleasure without the destructive potential of *jouissance* (Fig. 3.11). The love doll, in this sense, can be seen as a commodity delivering the promise of a “hedonist-utilitarian ‘permissive’ society” in which “enjoyment is tolerated, solicited even”, as Žižek put it, “but on condition that it is healthy, that it doesn’t threaten our psychic or biological stability”.\(^48\) Between enjoyment and pleasure, the love doll seems more attuned to the calculated, safe pleasures of the “enlightened hedonist” consumer, rather than to the mortiferous excess that is instead the jurisdiction of the “*jouisseur* propre”, “bent on self-destruction”.\(^49\) In opposition to the standard view of iDollators as men who objectify women as objects for sex, sex might in fact be the least pertinent argument to understand the phenomenon – as Gladieu observes in his website, “sex is fairly infrequent”.\(^50\) Against the messiness of *jouissance*, the doll seems here to emerge as an instrument to sustain and endure the exclusion of sexed human beings through an affirmation of imaginary narcissistic wholeness, of that very privileged relationship which is the one with oneself.

\(^{47}\) In this sense a Lacanian definition of beauty as what veils the Real is Nietzschean. The philosopher defined it as a dialectic with the “horror of the abysses”. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Opere Complete: Frammenti Postumi 1869-1874* (Milano: Adelphi, 1989), 161.


\(^{49}\) ibidem.

3.3. AN ORDINARY FETISH

We may consider the love doll in terms of inter-passivity, as a ‘pre-recorded’ fantasy of sexual rapport. It would allow in this sense the realisation of a life unhindered by the sexual relationship with the Other, while at the same time affording these men to pass as chauvinist gritty individuals who ‘only care about sex’. The doll in this case would emerge not as a substitute for a woman, as it is often said, but for the (impossibility of the) sexual relationship as such.\(^{51}\) We may in fact consider the love doll as the best possible realisation of the romantic fantasy of complementarity, which in the sexual relationship always covers over the insuperable incongruence between masculine and feminine modes of jouissance.\(^{52}\) If Lacan has described the relationship between the sexes as non-existent – ‘il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel’, being one of his most famous aphorisms – then the relationship with the love doll is one which exists. Human intersubjectivity can be considered an effect of an ongoing failure – as Verhaeghe put it, “communication is always a failure […] and that’s the reason why we keep on talking”.\(^{53}\) The silence of the love doll is an indication that the problem of communication is past, that total knowledge and total understanding is achieved in the form of a non-speaking anthropomorphous being. In this sense the love doll can be seen as the realisation of what Verhaeghe has called “le dimanche de la vie”, the ‘Sunday of life’, “where the dreamt-of perfect communication and sexual relationship would be possible”.\(^{54}\) In that case “the truth would find a complete expression in the desire of the agent for the other, thus realizing the perfect relationship between those two with, as a product, the definite satisfaction which embraces the truth”.\(^{55}\) Here Verhaeghe is picturing the resolution of the impossibilities that characterise discourse in the Lacanian definition that we saw in Chapter 1 – discourse as a structure of the social bond in which the agent never realises her truth in the place of the other, as a structure inhabited by lack. Silent and reciprocal, the ‘love’ of the doll can be seen as the ultimate commodity, whereby the


\(^{52}\) If masculine jouissance is phallic jouissance, to be achieved through the other’s body, and always a solitary jouissance, feminine jouissance is for Lacan to be found beyond phallic dynamics. While phallic jouissance substantiates subjective identity, feminine jouissance is seen as destabilising of identity. Phallic jouissance is not to be intended as an exclusive male requisite since it defines the reign of a logic of ‘having’, of a jouissance which can be accumulated, capitalised, and which is not precluded to – and today expected, even required from – women. On the absence of sexual relationship see Jacques Lacan, L’étourdit [1972], The Letter, no. 41 (2009), 31-80; Colette Soler, What Lacan Said About Women: A Psychoanalytic Study (New York/London: Eurospan distributor, 2006), 39-42, 242-243.

\(^{53}\) Verhaeghe, “From Possibility”, 94.

\(^{54}\) Ivi, 96.

\(^{55}\) Ibidem.
impossibility at the foundation of discourse, which is the impossibility for the subject to communicate her desire and to realise it, is sidestepped. The closure and lack of space that Gladieu suggests through heightened symmetry and composition in this sense might suggest – but not realise phantasmatically – such a mirage of perfect symbiosis with the other.

Conversely, on the same issue Dorfman’s documentary can be seen to ultimately transfigure the inhuman quality of the doll into a phallic dimension of desire, with photography fully realising a romantic scenario. The construction of the doll as an utterly humanised ‘she’, who ‘gives herself’ to the other’s desire, in fact turns the narrative of domination-submission into the very ordinary play of semblances of courtly love, which makes up for the non-existence of the rapport between the sexes. Subjectivising the doll through the photographic strategies that we have seen, Dorfman makes a Thing out of the doll’s objectual idiocy, turning its inhuman essential character into a loving subject. Instead of a repudiation of human love, dolls here appear as objects and subjects of love, instantiating the reversal from loved object to loving subject that can be seen at the basis of the event of love, where the other-as-object answers the call of the desiring subject – consents to the Other – thus finally subjectivising her position. Becoming a phallic object, Dorfman’s dolls appear to hide an unfathomable kernel of desire beyond their silicone surface-veil. Through this change, the figure of the iDollator, which from a psychoanalytical point of view could be considered a “bachelor”, someone whose libidinal position implies an asexual object, is transformed into a conventional heterosexual man: someone who makes a woman into his ‘symptom’, his object-cause of desire. Through the transfiguration of the doll into a woman, Dorfman’s reportage might be seen as an attempt to normalise these practices, whereby the man-doll relationship demands to be seen as analogous to a heterosexual couple, as a very ordinary imaginary comedy of the sexes.

When considered jointly, Gladieu and Dorfman’s contrasting views on the figure of the doll and its lovers become instructive, since on one side there is the depiction of the doll as an inhuman partner and on the other a fantasy of ordinary heterosexual coupledom. Focusing formally on devices of control, as well as thematically on fantasies of vulnerability and wholeness, Gladieu’s reportage points to the fetishistic problem of avoiding the desire of the Other (lack), to a psychotic avoidance of a threatening Real Other, and to a narcissistic

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56 Soler, *What Lacan Said*, 231-244. It is not that woman is the phallus but that she must resemble it if she wants to be loved (*id*, 31-34). Dorfman’s analogy between dolls and women, however, might have the advantage of highlighting a (psychoanalytical) fundamental truth: that in order to be loved, woman, like the subject as such, can enter the other’s fantasy frame only as an object – in love I am an object for the other and the other is an object for me. To enter the heterosexual game, woman, like the doll in Dorfman’s account, elevated to the rank of the Thing, must take a phallic semblance, masquerading as that which can fill the lack in the other.

57 For Dorfman these are “love affairs” of “intimate and playful” couples, in which “only one of [the participants] is human”. See Dorfman, *Still Lovers*, 5.
functioning of the object as a supplement for a labile sense of identity. Although nothing can be said on the sociological and existential reality of doll lovers per se, Gladieu’s photographic representation has the merit of suggesting complexity as opposed to a self-evident clear-cut definition of the phenomenon. Gladieu’s aesthetics of the doll, as an object inhabiting a space of self-enclosed de-sexualised perfection, to me points to a post-neurotic libidinal economy, a landscape that I think we can read through the terms of the discourse of the capitalist. In Chapter 2 I observed how this discourse allows a framework to analyse the place that the enjoyment object has come to assume in our hypermodern civilisation, the place of “the compass”, as Miller put it, in complete reversal from the modern prohibition of enjoyment as consubstantial to the Law. It is a discourse which sidesteps lack, promising wholeness rather than threatening separation, in line with a fetishistic strategy of negating symbolic alienation in favour of imaginary belief.

However, what it means to speak of fetishism in relation to the love doll? Is the love doll a “modern fetish”, as Marquard Smith has suggested in his monography on the theme, just contemporary example of a traditional fetishist strategy? Through a reference to Pietz’s anthropological notion of the fetish as a “material embodiment” rather than a “signifier referring beyond itself”, Smith underlines how the contemporary erotic doll might be a thing enjoyed in its own materiality, and therefore something different to a (second-rate) substitute for a woman, a conclusion with which my argument converges. However, Smith seems to individuate a subversive core in the love doll as an erotic thing that is at odds with the issues of vulnerability that we have seen exposed in both Gladieu and Dorfman’s reportages. He frames the doll within a classical account of male auto-eroticism, attributing the doll to the “perversion of masturbation”, seeing it as a “dangerous supplement” able to supplant the “reproductive imperatives of nature”. The doll for Smith is an aid for “solitary pleasure” that might be “dangerous because as a perversion it replaces heterogenital coitus with a plethora of non-procreative practices and behaviours”. This declination of auto-eroticism as subversive is still a modernist one, Bataillan even (notwithstanding Smith’s declared aversion to Surrealism), and I see it missing the point of the historicity of the paradigms of jouissance. Within Smith’s account the doll would be associated with a figure of ‘the pervert’ that seems to be a lost specimen of past eras: the pervert as an almost mythical character in Western culture, a cypher of sublime damnation,

61 Ibid, 104.
62 Ibid, 246.
63 Ibid, 137, 346, note 5.
of someone who radically contests the bourgeois social order and the Oedipal family model. If what we have seen so far instead points to the love doll as a figure more implicated with conformism than with subversion, with the desire to be ‘normal’ rather than to be exceptional, with closure and safety rather than opening and danger. Both Gladieu and Dorfman’s very different accounts converge on the ascription of the love doll to a rather conformist scenario. May this point to the fact that fetishism has become something ordinary in the capitalist’s discourse?

The issue becomes one of asking what the situational value of the doll-fetish is, once the dominant discourse itself sustains the illusion that the object is not lost, that the plenitude of satisfaction is possible. These are the terms of the discourse of the capitalist, the discourse of “the end of dissatisfaction” that the contemporary figure of the doll helps to address in order to understand how the role of the fetish object has mutated from modernity to hypermodernity. Where does the creative potential of the fetish lie once its terms – “projection of affective values, fantasmatic inversion between subjects and objects, symbolic substitution, fantasmagoria, permanent hallucination of a sentimental nature, spectralisation” as Massimo Fusillo put it – might be considered basic features of the dominant capitalist discourse? With the subject manoeuvring her own signifiers, the symbiotic attachment between the object and the subject, the object’s substitution of the authority of the old paternal metaphor, and a generalised imaginarisation of experience as an effect of the dismantling of the Symbolic – what Žižek has evocatively called “the plague of fantasies” – there is enough dematerialisation and imaginary belief in our everyday experience to feel that the fetish might be further needed in this sense. The discourse of the capitalist can be seen to give body to “the fetishist’s magic and artful universe” described by Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel as a dimension “giving us, for a while, the feeling that a world not ruled by our common laws does exist”.

The Oedipal rules of the master’s discourse setting the subject as lack of being, in turn an effect of the renunciation of satisfaction, are precisely sidestepped in the capitalist’s discourse, where the superego injunction points towards the ‘more’, the “want-to-enjoy”, with its curse against the actual

65 This is the title of the 2004 book by Todd McGowan.
67 This is the title of a 1997 book by Slavoj Žižek. See id., The Plague of Fantasies (London: Verso, 2008[1997]).
possibility to enjoy. How then are we to think of the creative potential of the fetish in this situation? In this sense the fate of the doll, of the fetish, and the uncanny are inextricably linked and my observations on this question animate my enquiry in this thesis as a whole.

There is not an answer here but a question, with Gladieu’s formal choices pointing to a movement of total closure and protection against jouissance as one possible solution – neither good or bad, constructive or destructive, right or wrong, which would all imply a moral judgement – to the impasse of the capitalist’s discourse and its inability to regulate jouissance. The love doll as protective screen can be seen as a possible answer to the problem of knotting the Real in a context in which the decline of symbolic efficiency, once guaranteed by the paternal metaphor, has failed to name it. As Éric Laurent has underlined, soon “the word ‘psychosis’ will be so out of sync with the spirit of the times that instead we will be speaking in terms of ordinary delusions”. The “psychotic effort” is generalised in the attempt of each singular subject to treat jouissance through the construction of a symptom able to localise it. If in neurosis the Name-of-the-Father is such a symptom, limiting jouissance and mobilising it through petit a in the dynamics of desire, in a non-neurotic structure – such as that implied by the discourse of the capitalist – jouissance is to be administered by a symptom working as a “formal envelope”. The closure and protection suggested by Gladieu for this world of men and dolls may be read as a subjective movement of enveloping the unbearable, an act of exclusion of the Real by a radicalisation of the boundary which creates a reassuring framed reality.

If the love doll is a fetish, it has emerged here as a purely protective function, not against an implacable castration but against a threatening jouissance, therefore emerging as a substitute of castration in its function to sustain a minimal sense of reality. In this chapter protection has emerged as a fundamental signifier in relation to love dolls. If with Rebufa the doll appeared as a figure of capitalist jouissance, steeped in the superegoic pressures of enjoyment-as-Law, Gladieu’s dolls have emerged within a narrative of safety, self-enclosure and protection against a Real chirurgically suppressed, left out of frame. Gladieu’s foregrounding of the theme of vulnerability through a formal focus on order and control might be seen to expose subjectivity as an intent to protect through an act of will, as in an anorexic gesture. If the law of the anorexic is total divestment as the apotheosis of a “domination of the will”, to separate, to be independent from the Other, Gladieu’s dolls appear similarly as an instrument enabling the subject to shield herself from the intrusion of

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70 Laurent, “Psychosis, or a Radical Belief”, n.p.
71 ibidem.
72 ibidem.
an Other who enjoys (sex and love). In a complete reversal from its modernist declination as a figure of liberated jouissance and cultural-political antagonism against the prohibition of the Law, the doll here is a device of separation from the enjoyment of the Other, which might afford a microcosm of security and control through an anorexic-like logic of subtraction.

In command of a very manageable private world, thoroughly devoid of any hint of undecidability, Gladieu’s doll lover might be seen as someone in charge of all outcomes. The aesthetics of Silicone Love has exposed a reassuring valence of the love doll as animating a dimension of experience whereby the subject seems able to ‘sterilise’ ordinary reality and de-activate its threatening potential implied in its (Real) contingency. A reference to the sphere of play might be instructive to draw conclusions through a further complication of the scene. If in play the subject is always “encapsulated in a kind of psychological bubble”, as play theorist Michael Apter has suggested, feeling “secure and unthreatened” and overall “ultimately in charge of things” which are “freely chosen rather than an obligation or duty”, play is also generally considered an arena of unlimited possibility. Is the love doll adult play? While in play there is always a dialogue with the contingency of ordinary life, albeit within the safe boundaries of a protective frame, how are we to consider a phenomenon that seems to make the avoidance of risk and contingency one of its main features?

If the capitalist’s discourse offers enjoyment as an oppressive duty to fulfil, the love doll may be seen as an apotropaic object able to screen the subject from the anxiety this injunction produces. Gladieu’s reportage ultimately seems to expose the doll as a heimlich crutch of the Ego, a device set as a bastion against the Real of sex, thus emerging as a highly compensative and protective, rather than subversive, figure. Far from its modernist role as a tool of deconstruction of “the privileges of the consciousness” through its connection to unconscious desire and political subversion, the doll here can be seen as an enhancement of the Ego.

Gladieu’s association of the doll with composition and artificial perfection suggests how the value of this figure lays in the construction of narcissistic

74 Valverde’s sociological study has underlined the “adaptive features” of sex doll-ownership through evidence of dolls bringing “relief, security, and happiness to their owners.” See Valverde, “The Modern Sex Doll”, 35.
75 Kerr and Apter, Adult Play, 14.
76 Recent debates on play and games, especially as a consequence of changes brought about by virtual reality, have overcome the twentieth-century conceptualisation of play, at the core of previous major contributions by Huizinga and Caillois, as ‘free’, ‘pleasurable’ and ‘safe’ activity, ‘separated’ from ordinary life. Play remains, however, a relatively-separate sphere of activity. For Thomas Malaby, for instance, games are “socially legitimate arenas for contingency”, semi-bounded cultural practices which replicate the contingency of ordinary life, from which the compelling nature of play derives. See Thomas Malaby “Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games”, Games and Culture, vol. 2, no. 2 (2007), 107.
77 Lacan, The Four, 82.
imaginary wholeness, as a reassuring *doppelgänger*, a narcissistic prosthesis, beyond the classic dynamics of the Oedipal norm.

From what has emerged so far in this enquiry, the doll thus seems to have found a new place within civilisation, one of construction rather than deconstruction, in the guise of an imaginary protective screen which may enable the subject to find a modicum of psychic consistency in a world where symbolic efficiency has ceased to guarantee it. In this sense, Gladieu’s image of the iDollator might, in a paradigmatic form, expose a general condition of subjectivity within hypermodern civilisation, that is to say the generalisation of the effort that is required by all in order to construct a modicum of reality. A sense of ‘reality’ is something that needs fabrication, an act of creation, which is a notion that Gladieu has imbued in photographic form, whereby the effort of offering information on a social reality has taken the form of contrivance, citation and artificiality. Documentary value is disentangled from the conventions of authenticity, and from a conception of unmediated photographic ‘truth’ as some mythical unequivocal essence inherent in the medium. On the contrary, the photographic document has emerged as a fabricated vision, mediated by the ‘purposeful looking’ of the photographer, as a route towards producing a meaningful insight into a social phenomenon. The dolls and photographs in *Silicone Love* speak of an image that, before the chaos of the Real, allows a modicum of meaning, of inhabiting the inhabitable of the world.
In the previous chapters we encountered photographic practices that in their diversity of functions and codes presented a decidedly hybrid character. After Rebufa’s sculptural photographic performances and Gladieu’s pictorialist documentary, in this chapter Laurie Simmons (1949) will present us with yet another version of contemporary photography as a post-conceptualist and pictorialist practice, in this case highly concerned with the codes of the fashion image. Simmons emerged in the 1970s within the ‘Pictures Generation’ presenting conceptualist, black-and-white photography which attempted to defy a formal, modernist definition of photography, alongside artists such as Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman.¹ That was a post-conceptualist generation of artists variously engaging with, and appropriating, images from media culture as a way to analyse and deconstruct the political and cultural strategies that make any picture a construction. Besides being part of the first generation to have emerged in post-war consumer culture, like many of her peers working in commercial media at the time, Simmons developed first-hand experience of the codes and conventions of commercial photography, the laboratory where the dreams and hopes of capitalism were constructed together with new forms of subjectivities to match them.²

As we shall see in the first section of this chapter, through her career the artist has cultivated a long-standing engagement with fashion photography, both working on commercial assignments in the industry and adopting its codes, themes and atmospheres to her own work. Following Simmons’s engagement with dolls – from the early 4-by-5 inches Black and White (1976-78) and Early Color Interiors (1978-79) to the more recent larger scale images of Underneath (1998), Color Pictures (2007-2009), The Love Doll (2009-2011)

² Simmons was at the time editing covers for the fashion magazine Mademoiselle. See Marvin Heiferman, "Conversation with Laurie Simmons", Art in America (April 2009), 112.
and *How We See* (2015) – it is evident how the new technological possibilities of image-making developed since the 1990s have opened novel aesthetic directions both conceptually and formally in the artist’s practice. This direction reflects a trend towards pictorialism which is observable on a broader scale in the field of art photography. Simmons’s most recent large scale, digital and lavishly coloured images foreground high-production values in the past associated with the culture industry, thus not only showing new relationships between different fields of image production, but also a demise of the rhetorical oppositional strategies that so strongly characterised modernist and post-modernist aesthetics. One notices a visual chasm – from low to high definition images, from dark to light and coloured spaces, from gloomy and sinister atmospheres to a more luminous, albeit always complex, ambience – but also a conceptual one, which the artist herself underlines in relation to the mid-1990s, defining it as a moment of “closing the door to thirty years of work” and the conclusion of an era in her career.³

My interest in this chapter is to trace the change of this ‘era’ in its formal and conceptual terms through an analysis of how the figure of the doll, a trope that has been largely at the centre of Simmons’s career, has been put to work. In order to track these developments in the formal and rhetorical valences of the doll, while also taking the opportunity to reflect on wider trends in contemporary photography, I will focus on the 2007-2009 series *The Love Doll*, which features sumptuously coloured *tableaux* of a human-scale Japanese doll portrayed in the opulent interiors of the artist’s own house in Connecticut. I will start this enquiry by mapping the transition, in the following section, between Simmons’s early series and the most recent engagement with the figure of the doll before moving to consider the narrative suggestions and structural implications of *The Love Doll* series.

### 4.1. FROM ‘PICTURE ENVY’ TO ‘THE MAGIC OF THE HOLLYWOOD STYLE AT ITS BEST’

When Simmons emerged in the 1970s, the boundaries between art, advertising and fashion photography had started to become more permeable, with the new relevance of hybrid figures of artist-photographers such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Helmut Newton as well as fashion photographers beginning to borrow styles and codes from art, documentary and portrait photography.⁴ We may consider Guy Bourdin, for instance, who in 1976 shot a

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³ Simmons, in Nels P. Heighberg, “Laurie Simmons’s Role Plays: Love, Sex, Desire”, *Spot Magazine* (Autumn 2012), 12. The reference is to *The music of regret* (1994), featuring black-and-white images of the artist’s own replica in the form of a ventriloquist dummy, as the *ad quem* term.

⁴ Mapplethorpe collaborated extensively with *Italian Vogue, French Vogue* and *L.A. Style* in the 1980s, while Newton’s work in fashion photography from the 1950s to the 1990s for magazines such as *Vogue, Vanity*
historic commercial campaign, *Sighs and Whispers*, for the lingerie catalogue of an upmarket New York department store, with figures of women set against flowery wallpaper and suffused in dramatic, evocative atmospheres. That would have had a lasting impression on young photographers like Simmons who, as we shall see, would adopt some of those motifs for her own work. However, the relationship between these different fields of photographic practice remained uncertain for decades, with the art world still influenced by a traditional concept of art as being opposed to the commercial dynamics of the culture industry. At the same time, before works such as Bourdin’s, artists felt a sort of "picture envy", as Simmons put it, since the level of artifice and skill attainable by the industry's financial and technological resources were still unavailable to artists working with photography. This would eventually change in the 1990s, with the popularisation (and lower costs) of digital image processing technology and the possibilities of creating and modifying images through digital camera systems and computer-based post-production tools like *Photoshop*, on the one side, and new visibility and market space for art photography on the other.

Manoeuvring dolls in a dollhouse-space, Simmons’s work has always engaged with the pleasures of composition. Colour emerged as early as 1978 in her *Early Color Interiors* and later in *Color Coordinated Interiors* (1982-83) which, with their miniature figures inhabiting dramatically-lit spaces and set against bold patterned surfaces, are in strikingly clear visual conversation both with the period’s more experimental fashion photography and feminist ideological concerns on subjectivity and the representation of women in mass media (Fig 4.1-4.3). In these early series the high-production values of fashion photography are mimicked in *low-fi*, using cardboard sets, wallpaper fragments and rear projection – instead of the cut-and-paste technologies available to ad agencies – in order to create ambiences. Fashion’s visual codes are put to work with a clear deconstructionist approach, particularly in relation to the use of the female figure as an element in a composition aimed at creating an atmosphere. Fashion editorials such as Deborah Turbeville's *Bathhouse* for Vogue in 1975 and Guy Bourdin’s above-mentioned 1976 advertising campaign *Sighs and Whispers*, can be seen fashion editorials to have played an active role, with their Surrealist-influenced, theatrical and dark moods, intense colour saturation and cropped compositions, in shaping Simmons’s early style (Fig. 4.4-4.5). We may see quite punctual references between

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*Fair, Elle and Playboy*, highly influenced by film noir, expressionist cinema and Surrealism, has been exhibited worldwide, including a large-scale exhibition, *Work*, at the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin in 2000.

5 Heiferman, "Conversation", 118.

6 The value of one of the images of Cindy Sherman’s *Film Stills*, for instance, was worth $1500 in 1987 in contrast to the $25000 in 1997, with MoMa paying $1m dollars for the complete set in 1996. See Carol Squiers, "Market Report", *American Photo* (April 1997), 73.

7 Simmons has recently spoken of Turbeville’s *Bathhouse* pictures as what ‘changed her world’ in David Sims, “The New Look: Art and Fashion Photography”, *Artforum International*, vol. 54, no. 9 (2016), 272.
4.1. Laurie Simmons, *Blue Tile Reception Area (Color Coordinated Interiors)*, 1983.

4.2. Laurie Simmons, *Purple Woman/ Gray Chair/ Green Rug/ Painting (Early Color Interiors)*, 1978.
4.3. Laurie Simmons, *Yellow and Green Teen Room (Color Coordinated Interiors)*, 1983.
Turberville’s elegant ambiances and *Tile Reception Area* (1983; Fig 4.1) for instance, with its grandiose architectural features and similarly decorative tiles; or between Bourdin’s fetishistic use of patterns and voyeuristic implant in *Purple Woman* (1978), among others, where the female figure is similarly set against flowery wallpaper and ostensibly ‘seen’, as the aerial view suggests (Fig. 4.2).

There is a strong feminist theoretical edge in the way Simmons engages with the doll in these early series. Like fashion mannequins, these female figurines are exposed as just another element of a scenography within a play of coordinated palettes, but the result ‘does not match’. In works such as *Blue Tile Reception Area* or *Yellow and Green Teen Room* (1983) the figures, over-imposed on a rear screen projected slide of a glamorous interior, of the kind found in home design magazines, appear at once subsumed by the place and cut off from it. This is also achieved through a dramatic use of light whose sources are multiple and disconnected, which at once makes the figures stand out and veils the composition with a somewhat disquieting atmosphere. These images can be said to be post-Surrealist, for they convey a concept of mimicry whereby “blending”, as Simmons has suggested, is conceived as “an ultimately desirable state”, in accordance with the terms of the death drive that we saw in Chapter 1: camouflage as a function of the gaze and its disaggregating force on the Ego.\(^8\) These images play on ambivalence, with the figure mobilised between appearance and disappearance. The ‘domestic hearth’, itself reduced to an interior design image of artificial perfection, is exposed as a cage where the female figure is trapped in a play of semblances from which, however, it has started to disjoin, as a *corpus alienum* in the process of being expelled. As Simmons has pointed out, the “feeling of artifice” in these early series served to “point out the darker subtext lurking beneath the whiteshed presentation of [that] time period” as a counterpart, that is, to media images of post-war America as young, affluent and happy.\(^9\)

From these early *tableaux*, photography emerges as a conceptual tool for a critical scrutiny of the politics of visuality through a deconstruction of mass media imagery, in which Simmons’s generation had been raised and educated. Like many artists of the period, Simmons did not study photography but identified as an ‘artist using photography’, in a phase wherein the medium was largely associated with Land, Body and Performance Art, as a supplement for recording art forms involving process and ephemeral events. Ephemerality is also exposed in the sculptural forms of Simmons’s early photography, where the ‘magic’ of the medium was to create a credible ambience, a tangible atmosphere out of cardboard backgrounds and little dolls kept together by tape and extemporaneous props. From this

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point of view, Simmons’s sculptural photography resonates with the work of James Casabere, who was working in the same period with miniature architectural spaces animated by intricate lighting effects and equally evocative of memory, both on an individual and collective level. But while Casabere would later move towards more decidedly three-dimensional model constructions and a consideration of identity in relation to public spaces, Simmons instead developed a more intimate dimension of analysis, in part as an effect of the lasting presence of the human forms.¹⁰

By appropriating toys from the 1950s, Simmons’s early images convey ambivalent affects. If, from the point of view of the counterculture to which Simmons belonged, these girl toys were seen as tools for indoctrination into the discourse of the authoritarian nuclear family, these represented at the same time affective remnants of childhood, of a personal cherished space of imagination and make-believe play, a dimension not typically found in the work of the Pictures group. The psychological effects of these images arise precisely in the gap between these two levels, between alienation and desire. For a post-conceptual generation of artists who grew up consuming cartoons, movies, comics and commercials, subjectivity was not the unmediated locus of selfhood that it was for the previous generation. In line with the deconstructionist approaches of Baudrillard, Barthes, Foucault and Kristeva that were starting to disseminate in the United States at the time, subjectivity was considered at this point as an artificial, inauthentic aggregate of socio-political and cultural signifiers. Simmons’s use of miniature dolls is in line with a reflection on the self as stereotype that colleagues such as Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince would take on, similarly, by recurring to television drama, cinema and advertising imagery to expose what in the subject is simulacrum, that is to say, the subject as an infinite regress into representation.

Simmons’s female toy figures in dollhouses from this period are typically read as stand-ins for feminine subjectivity. An image such as Purple Woman/ Gray Chair/ Green Rug/ Painting (1978) appears as much a statement about photography as about Woman, with the title itself suggesting the equivalence between doll and woman (Fig. 4.2). This is a kind of photography which is highly conceptual, foregrounding low definition and a seemingly amateurish *mise-en-scène*. Through the exposure of technical flaws, such as inconsistencies of light and focus, this image takes distance both from the sophisticated image-making of modernist photography and its commercial counterpart. Although carrying references to painting – to the flatness of Matisse or the Nabis, for instance, in the way that...

¹⁰ Consider, for instance, Casabere’s 1982 *Subdivision with Spotlight*, a black-and-white photograph showing an aerial view of a uniformly white-painted model of an American suburban street, with the spotlight mentioned in the title creating a sense of volume, but also a sinister mood. The image is both an intervention of social critique, where the dull monotony of the built environment, the spotlight and aerial view suggest architecture as a social dispositif of homogenisation and control, and a questioning of photography as a document of reality.
different printed surfaces are associated to flatten the visual field – the photography here is all but pictorialist. The flaws and inconsistencies of scale between different patterns and objects in the image can be also seen to work in a Surrealist tradition, where the space acquires the aura of fantasy and dream, in which incongruent elements are condensed together. With its visual incompleteness, furthermore, a sense of narrative is suggested, and the viewer is invited to project motives and storylines, in search of an elusive meaning.

Shot directly from above and injected with a flat, dusky light, the image suggests, however, a rather claustrophobic, sinister mood with a not-so-elusive political spin: the figure is an icon among other icons, pinned down by the camera lens to a place of stillness and aloneness. The observer would not miss the richness of cultural references, particularly to Laura Mulvey’s coeval concept of the ‘male gaze’ to describe the way Hollywood cinema constructed visual pleasure on the exploitation of the image of the woman as spectacle – the woman as passive “image to be looked at” by a male “bearer of the look”. In this context, the foregrounding of the photographic image’s constructedness acquired a subversive reverberation while simultaneously maintaining a critical ironic distance, both towards the texts of popular culture that were appropriated and towards the more rigorous political verve of a previous generation of women artists.

Regardless of how lightened it may be through the naiveté of children’s toys, the subversive anti-patriarchal strength of Simmons’s early work is evident, sometimes more overtly amusingly, as in Untitled (Woman Standing on Head) from 1976 (Fig. 4.6). Here the woman-doll, standing phallically upside down in a messed-up kitchen, dialogues with the phallic tumescence of Bellmer dolls as well as with the political anti-patriarchal force of Martha Rosler’s Semiotics of the Kitchen, now a classic of conceptualist feminist work from the previous year (Fig. 4.7). Like in Bellmer, the adoption of a black-and-white format and a dramatic use of light, with space characterised by extensive dark and out-of-focus areas, suggests the ambivalent visual quality of dream, while the doll becomes an “erectile doll”, hinting to castration as a phallic proxy. Like in Rosler’s video piece, where an automaton-like housewife-figure going through the motions of her subjugation to kitchen work seems to suggest an alternative, castrating potential for the most ordinary kitchen utensils, here too the grimly-lit kitchen space becomes the stage for the woman-doll’s random act of insurrection.

11 Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” [1975], in id., Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 19. Sherman, in her 1975 black-and-white video Doll clothes, had played on a similar vein, with the bidimensional photographic cut-out doll of her figure shot as it tries to gain independence by choosing her outfit, before being put back in the sleeve of the book by a large human hand entering the frame from above.

4.6. Laurie Simmons, Untitled (Woman Standing on Head) (Early Black And White), 1976.
In these early series there is the attempt to foreground simplicity of means, an anti-pictorial visual field at a stage where visual pleasure was associated with female reification and patriarchal domination and, as such, to be “attacked”, “left behind”. Here, photography, in this sense, is certainly accepting the challenge launched by Mulvey in “daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire”. A look of 1968 revolution is superimposed on toys belonging to the previous generation of the 1950s, that of women who, like Simmons, came of age in the Summer of Love. Simmons’s image at this point seems to attempt at the conceptualisation of a ‘female gaze’, one that we could define as insurrectional in its enjoyment of disruption: the feminine as a ‘bone in the throat’ of patriarchal discourse, one that questions the interpellation of the Other. The image creates a libidinal contradiction, suggesting the presence of the otherness of desire lurking beyond the veil of simulacral fabrications. There is the thematisation of the availability of the woman-image as a text to be filled with the meaning of the onlooker and the proposition of a space for transgression. The image is ambiguous, palpably incomplete with its low definition and abundance of dark spots and blurred shapes, calling for interpretation, almost as a riddle to be worked through: ‘what does the image mean?’, a correlative to ‘what does the woman want?’.

The 2009-2011 Love Doll series is certainly a continuation of the artist’s life-long interest in engaging with the trope of the ‘figure in interior’, now grown full scale and inhabiting airy real-space interiors, as much as the photograph has become larger than life – all images are printed in a format of 52.5 by 70 inches, as opposed to the earlier 4 by 5 inches, making the figure slightly bigger than the viewer in the gallery space (Fig 4.8). However, what we find is not only a life-size, digital re-adaptation of the early tableaux with dolls, since with opposite stylistic treatment come completely different aesthetic effects and muted political import. What immediately strikes the viewer is the visual exquisiteness of this new exercise of colour-coordinated interiors. Consider for instance The Love Doll/Day 11 (Yellow), displaying a beautiful Japanese-looking doll lying on the ground among colour-coded clothes and accessories, or The Love Doll/Day 9 (Shiso Soda), where the same doll is shown sitting on the ground enjoying a beverage as green as her blouse while sunbathing in front of a window (Fig. 4.9-4.10). Here we find indeed what Mulvey would have called in 1975 “the magic of the Hollywood style at its best”, namely a “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure”: the picture is a fine accord of hues, volumes and light before anything else. Natural light can be seen to serve a central role in this series, with

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14 ibidem.
15 ibidem. The artist has underlined how the book in Yellow is ‘only’ a yellow book, and the fact that it is a monography on minimalist Donald Judd should not be taken for “more of that it really is”, a color component. See Laurie Simmons, The Love Doll (New York: Salon 94, 2012) 31.
4.9. Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 11 (Yellow)*, 2010
plays of light and shadows animating the space and the figure in a dramatically different way than in the past. In *Shiso Soda* we find the same trope of neatly defined shadows projected on the female forms that we could have found in a Surrealist photograph at its best – we may think of Raoul Ubac’s *Mannequin* (1937) or Man Ray’s *Retour à la raison* (1923) for instance, where a nude female torso is similarly caught before a window – traditionally read as an instance of an uncanny “possession by space”, of a subject dispossessed of its (Ego) boundaries by the emergence of *jouissance* (Fig. 4.11).

Similarly, *Yellow* can be seen to dialogue with Cindy Sherman’s 1981 *Centerfolds*, an image such as *Untitled#96* for example, in which the horizontality of the image’s format has been associated with the desublimatory effects of *base materialism*, of the *bassesse* of “carnal instincts”, that is the Real (Fig. 4.12). However, the shadows and horizontality in Simmons’s images could not be further removed from an impression of threat and dissolution in an all-encompassing *jouissance* for, on the contrary, they manage to catch that stillness of some sunny early afternoons in a domestic space in which everything is calm and reassuring. It seems that the tropes are present, but not their traditional psychological and political effects.

The political scope of *The Love Doll* is separated by an abyssal distance from that of the dolls of the 1970s and 1980s. A striking example of this new situation can be considered in *The Love Doll/Day 4 (Red Dog)*, where one notices many of the signifiers already present in 1978’s *Purple Woman* – a doll on a chair and a picture on the wall (Fig. 4.13). What emerges from the juxtaposition of these works is *Red Dog*’s pictorial amplification and hyper-definition insisting in the absence of the political gravity and oppositional strategies of the earlier work. The golden-brown colour of the table and floor is seductively combined with the complementary purple of the chair’s upholstery, in turn revived by the adjacent analogous red of the dog. The light is atmospheric, textured, while the oblique cut across the table creates a sense of motion in the scene which gently animates the doll.

What is left of the old oppositional discourse has become text, a signifier to be pastiched in the internal references of the image. Like the Donald Judd book in *Yellow* – ‘only’ a yellow book – here the dog, a classical signifier of the fidelity of the woman-Lady in many Renaissance

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16 Krauss, “Corpus Delicti”, 50. For the theoretical knot between the *informe*, mimicry and the emergence of *jouissance* see my Chapter 1.

17 See Krauss, “Cindy Sherman”, 130.

18 The atmospheric effect is heightened in the print version of the images through the use of matte paper, whose textured surface decreases the dynamic range of colours, particularly of the darkest areas, with the effect of visually diluting the contrast of the image, which was conversely one of the means by which the dramatic effect of the earlier series was achieved. To heighten this effect, *The Love Doll* book is printed on textured paper, according to the rationale given by the artist “to evoke the touch of a love doll’s skin”. See Simmons, *The Love Doll*, back cover.
painting of bourgeois interiors, is a distant remnant of patriarchal power, reduced to cute
fluffiness in its toy version.19

A close contemporary reference of the red toy dog might be the phallic inflection of
the dinosaur-toys that typically surround the young geishas in Nobuyoshi Araki’s
photographs, renowned for their erotic and provocative edge and exquisite pictorialism. In
the series Kaori (1990-2004), dinosaur-toys presentify excrescences of male libido launched
to attack the perlaceous splendour of a young woman, often enshrined in bloody hues of red
and immobilised by the camera-phallus (as much as by the recurrent bondage) at the centre
of tightly perspectival spaces (Fig 4.14). While I see Simmons’s beautiful dolls as decidedly
unconcerned with the often hard-core erotic charge of Araki’s flesh-and-blood geishas and
from a use of the lens as an intensifier of sexual libido, it is evident that The Love Doll
images are enthralling too. The distance from Araki is even more evident considering
Simmons’s own version of the geisha motif, which, nevertheless, is no less hypnotic (Fig.
4.15-4.18). Organised chronologically in the form of a diary, with the progression of the
days in which the ‘relationship’ between artist and doll has developed, the series closes with
the doll adorned with the most exquisite Japanese attire in the traditional geisha style.
These final images can be seen to expose retroactively a condition of the whole series, its
sheer appeal to visual pleasure combined with a guilt-free exploitation of a classical trope of
female objectification (from our Western point of view at least), voyeuristically exposed. In
contrast with Araki’s geishas, often pointing their inflammatory gaze towards the viewer,
here there is the idea of quietly entering this creature’s world, usually coy in expression and
yet incognisant of the viewer, who can see her from a very close distance without being
acknowledged.20 Simmons has pointed out how she wanted to organise the series like “the
secret life of a lonely doll”, a character wandering around an empty house, trying out a
human existence”.21 Building on this suggestion that these images engage with categories of
human/non-human and animate/inanimate, will also require stressing how they do so in a
different way than through a traditionally Freudian uncanny atmosphere; however, the
uncanny, as we saw in Chapter 1, is certainly not only an atmosphere.

Before moving on to discuss these ideas more fully, I will conclude this section by
remarking how these images emerge with a certain haptic quality, whereby they seem to
instigate a fascinum for a visuality-turned-thing. If voyeurism presupposes a distance, a
sense of separation from what is observed – looking without been seen as a version of
controlling the other reduced to an object, out of a symbolic exchange – the pleasure of
looking is here, instead, built on the proximity with the object observed, which seems to

19 It, 31.
20 The exception in the series is The Love Doll/Day 30/Day 2 (Meeting), the only instance where two dolls are
present in the frame, with both set to look into the camera.
21 Simmons, The Love Doll, 82.

4.16. Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 34 (Blue Geisha, Dressing Room)*, 2011.

4.18 Laurie Simmons, *The Love Doll/Day 31 (Geisha Close-up)*, 2011.
expose a lack of separation. At the same time, the alien quality of this Japanese doll appears to frustrate the viewer’s narcissistic identification as well as a sexualised look. If there is visual pleasure here, it does not seem to me to be the same pleasure Mulvey recounted in her classical reading of Hollywood cinema, where the woman-image is seen as an object of scopophilic sexual satisfaction, as an alternative to the ego-reinforcing effects implied in narrative and identification processes. What kind of pleasure is constructed here, then? What exactly is implied if we say that this image-doll lacks in uncanny quality? How are we to understand what we might call an *image-turned-thing*, an image hinting at beyond a purely visual level? In what follows in the next two sections I propose a theoretical reading of these aspects, which appear rather eccentric from modern and postmodern visual accounts, starting with a consideration of the series’ thematic suggestions before adventuring on the structural level of a possible definition of this image.

4.2. *KAWAII*

It would be a mistake to consider Simmons’s love doll as a signifier of woman. If this were the case, these images, and particularly the focus on the doll-geisha, would point to the problem of femininity as a *masquerade*, to the issue of a cosmetic *façade* concealing another *façade*, as an act of resistance in the act of feigning a *nothing* as a secret. In such an orthodox reading the doll-geisha would become a figure of the feminine subject as a subject of desire beyond the accoutrements of a male-oriented performative mask. This is the move at the foundation of the equivalence between doll and woman that we saw at work in Dorfman’s *Still Lovers* in Chapter 3, but one that is also keyed into Lynn Hershman Leeson’s use of a love doll for her installation *Olympia: Fictive Projections and the Myth of the Real Woman* and its twin photographic work *Found Objects* (2007-2008). In the installation Leeson projects an image of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia*, which we have already seen engaged by Stéphan Gladieu, on the naked body of a love doll designed to replicate the former’s posture and physiognomic features in order to suggest “society’s ongoing...

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23 This would be a Lacanian reading of the notion of masquerade, whereby the nothing behind the mask is a way to depict the inexistence of a ‘feminine’ (or masculine) pre-discursive ‘being’. Following Lacan, Žižek has underlined that the feminine masquerade proves that woman is “more subject than man”, for it implies woman’s awareness of the nothing concealed behind the mask, the “nothing” of her freedom, [that the mask keeps] out of reach of man’s possessive love”. See Slavoj Žižek, “Woman is One of the Names-of-the-Father, or How to Misread Lacan’s Formulas of Sexuation”, *Lacanian ink*, no. 10 (1995), available at <http://www.lacan.com/ziwomant.htm>, last accessed 17.11.2017. In this reading deception appears as a defence of freedom, an act of resistance. On femininity as masquerade, see also Jean Rivière, “Womanliness as a Masquerade’ [1929]), in Athol Hughes (ed.), *The Inner World of Jean Rivière: Collected Papers 1920-1958* (London: Karnac Books, 1991), 90-101.
objectification of women” (Fig. 4.19-4.20). The photographic series, focusing on the uncovering of the doll from its shipping crate, similarly capitalises on the doll’s emotional ‘humanness’, and her feminine vulnerability. The doll, photographed according to the codes of portraiture, with her look interrogated by the camera lens, according to Leeson looks “terrified, frightened and vulnerable”. If that gesture of the hand is posed as if urging an intervention on the part of the viewer, the light is equally dramatic, animating the doll with human emotional quality.

In contrast, Simmons’s engagement with the doll seems to emerge as an attempt to go beyond the classical theme of the doll as a ‘representation of woman’, beyond the doll as a screen onto which (male) fantasies and desires are projected. It is precisely the ‘secret behind the mask’ as the nothing of desire, that which would make of the doll an object-cause of desire, that seems to be absent here. This is particularly evident in the images of the geisha, whose grace offered in hyper-definition seems to incite but also, paradoxically, to soothe the look. On one side, the doll is so realistic, available and consumable through the image’s hyper-resolution that its visual enjoyment seems to become the most insistent issue. Who would linger here on the question ‘what does this mean?’. This image is so blatantly magnificent that one is compelled to revel in a fetishistic passion for its beauty, to lose themselves in a sensuous abandonment to its visual experience, to become unconcerned with the political import of its possible commodification. The use of light, rendering these interiors as radiant and open as they could possibly be, works perfectly to detach the atmosphere from the claustrophobic space of the earlier 1980s Interiors. When considering Blue Geisha, with its close-up of the geisha-doll, shoulders-up, filling the frame, or Mirror, where the viewing angle instigates ‘nipple voyeurism’ in the mirrored doll, it is clear that these are images that want to seduce, to instigate pleasure through a self-conscious foregrounding of artifice (Fig. 4.15-4.16). In contrast to Gladieu’s choice of acidity of colour and monotony of light, among other means utilised to exercise an authorial reserve on the pretences of an animating fantasy, Simmons’s opting for the setting of the most exquisite Japanese doll in airy interiors animated by a warm, natural light and sapiently coordinated colours, constitutes a resolute hymn to the seduction of beauty and the pleasures of illusion. There is clearly an appreciation for this marvel of contemporary popular culture, exceptionally crafted in every minute detail, that Simmons imbues with a sense of aliveness, although not of human, let alone ‘feminine’, life.

My preoccupation here, however, is to understand the exact nature of the pleasures and seductions offered to the viewer. If this doll is erotic, it is certainly an instance of a

25 ibidem.
delicate, rather unthreatening eroticism. This is different to what we saw in Chapter 3, where I read in Gladieu’s focus on heightened perspective and symmetry a characterisation of the love doll as an idealised self-other ultimately unconcerned with Eros and love. The theme of purity, which emerged in Gladieu’s hyper-hygienic vision as a cold artificiality that I read as exclusion of jouissance, does emerge here in Simmons, but as an attribute of the erotic charge of the doll, exposed by a sensuous treatment that glorifies the sophistication of this formally exquisite Japanese doll. Simmons has declared her ‘disinterest’ in engaging with the “creepy sexual side” of the love doll, a statement we read as a diary entry in relation to Shiso Pepsi Green, in which, as I noticed earlier, there is an interrupted formal reference to the Surrealist use of shadow as invasion by space, by the informe of jouissance. However, I think there is more to Simmons’s declaration than (what would be a hypocritical) denial of the ‘actual’ sexual function of the doll, displaced by a ‘maternal’ gaze which would simply turn the doll from being a sexual object in a “chaste”, “adolescent”, “virginal” and “innocent” subject. Might we read Simmons’s geisha-doll as a version of the “Apollonian”, a term that Lacan has used to describe an image that appeals to the eye and pacifies the gaze? We saw in Chapter 1 how the scopic dimension for Lacan relates to the gaze, as the emergence of objet a as a “hole” in the picture, as opposed to the eye, a “form of vision that is satisfied with itself in imagining itself as consciousness”. Playing in this opposition between the eye and the gaze, geometral vision and anamorphosis, the field of the Ego and of unconscious desire, for Lacan art is the arena where either “something is given” to the gaze or not, where either the gaze is satisfied or not. Are we to conceive Simmons’s polished image as the instance of a kind of visuality that is not concerned with the anamorphosis of jouissance? If this were to be confirmed, it would set the geisha-doll on the side of the plenitude of contemplation, as opposed to the function of the gaze.

To start this discussion I suggest considering the ‘Easternness’ of Simmons’s doll, since here the code of purity emerges in a dialogue between Western and Eastern cultural tropes. Japanese culture is particularly relevant for this photographic series, something suggested retroactively by Simmons’s most recent engagement with cosplay culture in the 2014-15 series Kigurumi, Dollers and How We See. If the geisha is the Western stereotype

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26 Simmons, The Love Doll, 29.
29 Ivi, 108, 74. See also Chapter 1.
30 Ivi, 101. I return to this question later in this chapter. See also Chapter 1 for an introduction on the theory.
31 Ivi, 74.
32 Cosplay is the abbreviation of ‘costume play’, a popular cultural practice where participants wear costumes, often portraying anime characters. Kigurumi is a subset practice of cosplay that implies the use of masks and bodysuits.
for a sophisticated, exotic and sensual eroticism, in *The Love Doll* series Simmons combines it with another Japanese *topos*, that of the *shoujo*, the Japanese teenage girl in school uniform typically signified by the same white, loose socks worn by the doll in *Red Dog* (Fig. 4.13). However, unlike the *shoujo* that haunted 1920s and 1930s Japanese culture, with her threatening instability making her a figure on the edge between infantile and adult sexuality, Simmons’s adolescent-looking doll is suffused with the domestication more proper to *kawaii*, a taste for infantilised, naïve prepubescent figures that can be seen as the contemporary version of the *shoujo*. Smallness, naïvety, youth and dependency are some of the qualities that contemporary Japanese love dolls share with *kawaii* and that Simmons has chosen to differentiate her figure from the more overtly sexualised Western counterparts, like the Abyss-branded *Real Dolls* portrayed by Gladieu. However, *kawaii* ultimately suggests a figure of “unthreatening vulnerability” – the verb *kawaigaru* means ‘providing loving care’ – able to elicit a response of care in the beholder, an affective dimension that similarly recurs in Gladieu’s depiction of the love doll.

Nonetheless, here innocence and naïvety are not only eroticised by Simmons’s treatment but also coded as exotic and unfamiliar, in dialectical opposition with signs of ‘Westernness’. The signifiers of the ‘foreignness’ and ‘innocence’ of the Japanese doll are coupled with the American middle-class standards of living materialised in the artist’s house, sometimes with an accent on commodification, implied by the presence of amasses of ‘stuff’ – whether fashion accessories, as in *20 Pounds of Jewelry* and *Shoes*, or food, as in *Candies*, everything is rigorously *faux*, plastic or plastic-looking (Fig. 4.21-4.23). If the doll, often physically burdened or encircled by commodities, can be seen to “enac[t] and indulg[e] fantasies of unnecessary excess in Western culture”, as Simmons put it, it also appears to act like a child who plays at being an adult, dressing up with mommy’s fashion accessories.

The naïvety that Simmons has chosen for the design of her doll’s facial expression is intensified by the particular architecture of the images, with the doll presented at a very close distance from the objects she is shown to carefully observe, as if these were things she had never seen before. Her childish, almost alien, characterisation creates an antithesis with the specimens of Western consumer culture she faces, where everything, from shoes to food, is ostentatiously eye-catching, colourful, sumptuous as well as artificial. The doll’s ethereal Far Eastern characterisation seems to frame this encounter as the ballast of...
Western commodity versus the Zen-quality of Asian abstraction – this is somewhat reinforced in 20 Pounds of Jewelry by the half-lotus position of the doll sitting on the sofa (Fig 4.21).

This coding of the doll as antithetical to Western capitalist culture in part resonates with the Japanese cultural history of dolls and their association, during Japan’s modernisation through Western models in the late nineteenth century, with a fascination for “objects which represented quiet and innocence, or sometimes ‘immaturity’”. Japanese scholar Akiyoshi Suzuki has argued that the naivety characteristic of traditional Japanese dolls testifies to a national symbolic struggle against “the modern Western subject”, seen as “ugly and unclean because it seemed to have staunch desire and will”. Against this model of subjectivity, the object would emerge as what is “clean because it seemed to have no desire of gain and never to cause conflict”. In the same vein, the innocence of the object can be seen as a cultural trope to signify an “anti-western kind of agency”, an instrument to “eradicate uncleanness”. This perspective historically enriches a cultural codification that can be seen at work in Simmons’s doll, whose rather ethereal appearance seems to emerge as a version of Zen-like distance from worldly things – from Western consumerism in particular. Since these things, at the same time, are eye-catching and conspicuous, there seems to be a play here between attachment and distance, attraction and repulsion.

Through this reference to the cultural history of Japanese dolls, we can find in Simmons’s love doll the paradox of a thing presented as a way to create a distance from another thing. On the one hand, this is a similar strategy to what we observed in Gladieu’s Silicone Love, where the doll emerged as an object of ersatz enjoyment as a defence from a more threatening enjoyment, that of the sexual relationship with the Other. In Shoes (2010) – and similarly in Candies and 20 Pounds of Jewelry – the amorphous amass of female footwear, itself an item of the most standard male fetishism, when coupled with the doll’s horizontal, animalesque posture, can be seen to pastiche the Bataillan conceptualisation of the informe as a desublimatory force able to disaggregate the symbolic verticality of the subject of language and its categories. Where a Bataillan notion of a four-legged human,

37 ibid. 117.
38 ibidem.
39 ibid., 119, 117.
40 In a caustic move, here one might recall Žižek’s sourly sharp designation of Western Buddhism as “the paradigmatic ideology of late capitalism”, a “pop-cultural phenomenon preaching inner distance and indifference toward the frantic pace of market competition” and, as such, “arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity”. What Žižek is describing here is the typical split between knowledge and belief of fetishism. See Slavoj Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2003), 26.
with its re-established mouth-anus axis, would be a way to re-affirm the force of a jouissance transgressive of language, the formless here appears in the amass of shoes as a capitalist imitation – not jouissance but imitation jouissance, not excess as waste but an accountable value. The doll’s purity, itself an object of capitalist jouissance, can be seen here as if raised like a shield against the ersatz-formless of imitation jouissance. This dialectic between a type of enjoyment as a protective barrier against another type of enjoyment, when read on a more structural level, can open interesting questions about the way this image-geisha works in relationship with the viewer. What could it mean to read an image as a doll that protects against the threat of the Other? And how does this connect to the image-geisha as what I earlier tentatively called an image-turned-thing?

4.3. BEYOND THE LACANIAN GAZE: THE IMAGE-THING

Interviewed on her 1980s work, Simmons has underlined the importance of her early choice for low-production values as a strategy aimed at the creation of a maximally “dumb-looking” image, as a way to valorise the viewer’s ability to project her own world onto the doll and the image. We have seen how photographic series, such as Early Black and White and Color Coordinated Interiors, create absences in the visual field, pointing to a lack to be filled by the viewer. However, as I have started to argue, the choice of hyper-definition, both in the use of a hyper-realistic human scale doll and of high production values, in The Love Doll series seems to work in the exact opposite direction, creating a strong scopophilic regime where the image’s ‘fullness’ satiates the viewer, apparently giving an answer rather than suggesting a question. This Japanese doll, in the hyper-definition and proximity of her seductiveness, fills the frame and the look with such an immediate satisfaction to render any other consideration – political or psychological – redundant. The series is constructed in a diaristic form over thirty-three days as an account of the artist’s relationship with the doll, positioned in different scenarios with details suggesting a narrative. However, I see the inhuman beauty of the doll and the polished pictorial quality of the image, with its gigantic presence on the wall, absorbing all the attention as something to be enjoyed, before any other consideration, narrative or political. The image seems to affirm an aesthetic status not dependent on an external conceptual discourse, or showing signs of irony, like a

41 In Chapter 2, we saw how the capitalist’s discourse can be seen to mobilise jouissance as a value “to be inscribed in or deducted from the totality of whatever it is that is accumulating” (Lacan, The Other Side, 96). Capitalist imitation jouissance is deprived of the condition proper to jouissance, its being an uncountable hindrance to language, as an instance of the death drive.

42 Simmons, in Linda Yablonsky and Laurie Simmons, BOMB, no. 57 (Autumn 1996), 21.
postmodernist representation would do as a way to deconstruct dominant conceptual assumptions.

In interviews the artist seems interested in emphasising the importance of freezing life through her set-up photography, whereby artifice emerges as the possibility, for the artist as well as for the viewer, to enter a place where “time stands still”.\(^{43}\) Reality in this dimension is something “pristine and still and quiet and beautiful”, and since it is also a dimension “devoid of people”, where people are synonymous with chaos, conceptually we are not far from the existential dimension of the iDollator that we come to see in Chapter 3.\(^{44}\) For Simmons this aspiration is connected to the ‘picture perfectness’ of the family photographic practice of her childhood, in the 1950s and 1960s, when “everybody was dressed up and ready to go out, or when the house was particularly clean” and she would have a “Kodak moment”, framing the ordinary at its ideal and aestheticised best.\(^{45}\) Elsewhere, Simmons has also spoken of her artistic preference for photographing dolls over human beings, since with the latter she can never “arrest the kind of emotion that [she] can from a doll”, as from humans she would always “get too much emotion, too much response.”\(^{46}\) What Simmons seems to be interested in, on the contrary, is artificiality as “a kind of repose, a kind of permanence”, as a formal construction of the figure within a controllable set of light and colour.\(^{47}\) In this sense, we might see this search for artificiality as the very \textit{trait d’union} between the set-up photography of the early series and the more recent work with life-size figures. The issues of \textit{kawaii} innocence and unthreatening eroticism on which I reflected earlier resonate with this issue of ‘repose’, but then how could we speak of these images as delivering repose and an immediate satisfaction, a form of enjoyment, at the same time? If the visual field, as Lacan argued, is always in relation to the gaze as \textit{objet a}, either as a way to “trap” it or to abandon it, these images seem to challenge us with a question about how beauty, measure and repose, traditionally allied to contemplation, come to be associated with the excess of enjoyment.\(^{48}\)

To explore this question I will introduce philologist Raoul Eshelman’s notion of “beauty-as-closure”, an aesthetic manoeuvre that he sees actualised particularly in the work of a generation of artists come to prominence in the mid-1990s, such as Vanessa Beecroft,


\(^{44}\) \textit{iibidem}.

\(^{45}\) \textit{iibidem}.


\(^{47}\) \textit{iibidem}.

\(^{48}\) Lacan, \textit{The Ethics}, 89.
Andreas Gursky and Thomas Demand. Strategies of closure in Eshelman’s terms are defined as devices that limit the conceptual slippage typical of postmodernism, in which the meaning of the artwork is forever deferred in a signifying regress, ultimately leading to theoretical undecidability. Eshelman recapitulates a well-established diagnosis of contemporary visuality, speaking of the diffusion of digital manipulation as the source of a new type of undecidability, one that is between what is ‘real’ and what is artificially manipulated. He has suggested that through the offering of hyperbolic, artificially-created beauty, in some contemporary works a new relationship between the artist-author and the viewer is negotiated, one which enthral the viewer within the bounds of a “constructed, closed, and categorically organized artificial field”.

For Eshelman, the viewer is “manipulated” into a riveting visual experience, into an alluring invitation to believe, fully knowing the artificiality of what is proposed. A new type of accord would then seem to emerge between author and viewer, based on a deliberate act of will, to overwhelm through – and to be overwhelmed by – the work’s beauty.

This argument bears strict connections with Michael Fried’s characterisation of contemporary photography as strong in intentionality, with artists such as Thomas Demand or Jeff Wall seen to foreground a “completeness” of the image, a “structural indifference” to the presence of the viewer. The provocation of such a judgement is connected to the fact that these features appear as a re-proposition of strategies that Fried previously associated with the ‘absorption’ and ‘autonomy’ of modernist art, as opposed to the ‘theatrical’ approach of Minimalism. However, Eshelman’s concept of beauty-as-closure can be seen to emphasise a “coercive” aspect of the work, as well as focusing on the beholder’s self-awareness, in a way that seems at odds with the self-sufficiency of a modernist object. There is the sense of coercion in Eshelman’s idea of a power in the artwork to “cut us [viewers] off, at least temporarily, from the context around […] and force us back into the work”:

[o]n the one hand, you’re practically forced to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame – to believe in spite of yourself – but on the other, you still feel

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50 ibidem.

51 Fried, ”Without a Trace”, 101, 102. For an alternative reading of Demand’s art as a form of storytelling, see Margaret Iversen ”Invisible Traces: Postscript on Thomas Demand”, in id., Photography, Trace, 100-109.

52 For a detailed engagement with Fried’s position see the essays collected in Diarmund Costello and Margaret Iversen (eds.), Photography after Conceptual Art (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
the coercive force causing this identification to take place, and intellectually you remain aware of the particularity of the argument at hand.53

Here Eshelman seems to synthesise a modernist conception of the artwork as complete in itself – closed in its beauty – and a post-conceptual one, whereby the art form is imbued with the phenomenological ability to make the beholder conscious of her own existence. The artwork appears in its ability, on the one hand, to absorb the viewer in its internal relations and, on the other, to maintain her separate, in an ‘intellectual’ distance. There are three aspects emerging from this line of thought that I am going to discuss and gradually weave in my own analysis of Simmons’s work, namely the issues of coercion, belief and intellectual awareness. I find the argument of coercion stimulating since it brings to mind the compulsion of addictive behaviours, another name of the contemporary subject’s relation to what Recalcati has called inhuman partners, a notion I adopted in Chapter 3. Inhuman partners can be objects of enjoyment whose consumption has bypassed symbolic elaboration, compelling the subject into an autistic subjective space in which she is indeed ‘cut off’ from a relationship to the Other.54 Interestingly, the association between image and addiction has already been developed by Jameson in his description of the simulacrum, as its proper form of “passion”, where addiction is the name given to “consumers’ appetite for a world transformed into sheer images of itself and for pseudo-events and ‘spectacles’”.55 Instead of a sense of history, Jameson argues, the simulacrum randomly cannibalises the styles of the past in order to overstimulate and fascinate the viewer, indeed to “intoxicate” her with “hallucinogenic intensity”.56 In his influential essay, Jameson also individuates in capitalist visuality an all-full situation, in line with what we found implied in the Lacanian matheme of the capitalist’s discourse, where the abolition of the distance between object and subject can certainly be read in the terms of an addictive position. In Chapter 2 I described the capitalist subject-object relationship as one of blockage of the constitutive lack of the neurotic subject, as an effect of what Žižek has called the “saturated field” of the continuous offer of novel consumer items.57 Similarly, for Recalcati addictive subjectivity is “a social product of the capitalist’s discourse” which, by “dissolving the belief in the orientative function of the Ideal”, imposes never-ending consumption as the only possible pathway for

53 Eshelman, Performatism, 2, emphasis in the original.
55 Jameson, Postmodernism, 18.
56 Ivi, 28.
57 Žižek, “Pathological Narcissus”, 252.
satisfaction: the belief in the Other is surpassed by the belief in the object.\textsuperscript{58} We saw in Chapter 2 how by precisely bypassing the Other, satisfaction in the capitalist’s discourse is not surplus jouissance as an effect of the metonymy of desire, but a direct shortcut between subject and object, symbiotically curled on themselves, as it were.

Translating this in aesthetic terms, we could read this saturation of lack as analogous to the ‘totalising closure’ of the viewer-artwork-artist relationship suggested by Eshelman, an aesthetics corresponding to the capitalist transformation of the subject from a non-autonomous (lack of) being – traversed by a lack which would open her to the Other – into a self-sufficient “monad of enjoyment”, ‘cut off’ from context and ‘forced back’ into a direct relationship with the object.\textsuperscript{59} Eshelman does address the link between ‘beauty-as-closure’ and capitalism, affirming how this aesthetic strategy emerges as one able to “captur[e] globalization pictorially in its own terms, as a total phenomenon”.\textsuperscript{60} Commenting on Gursky’s digitally manipulated pictorialist photography, he describes its devices of closure – an imposition of internal, totalising order on a complex architecture of details, sharply defined through digital manipulation – as a means to “experience the totalizing, dynamic, overwhelming effect peculiar to globalization itself”.\textsuperscript{61} We can (again) trace this argument about the ‘totalising’ character of capitalist experience – what he calls “sublime totalization” – back to Jameson and his concept of the “postmodern sublime”, as the sense of the “impossible totality of the contemporary world system”, “enormous and threatening, yet only dimly perceivable”.\textsuperscript{62} Eshelman can be seen to expand on Jameson’s (overall less neutral) consideration of capitalism as a dialectics of “catastrophe and progress”, for which culture would be called to “do the impossible”, to achieve “a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamics simultaneously within a single thought”.\textsuperscript{63} There is here the suggestion that any contemporary cultural project, willing to understand the present historical moment, cannot avoid engaging with what is compelling and alluring about the capitalist subjective experience.

Neither Eshelman nor Jameson, however, consider how this new paradoxical condition of the image, alluring and threatening, is as much entangled with anxiety as it is with the terms of overwhelming beauty, euphoria or exhilaration that they both apply to it. As I noted

\textsuperscript{59} Recalcati, \textit{L’Uomo}, 201.
\textsuperscript{60} Eshelman, “Performatism”, n.p.
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{idem}.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{idem}; Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism}, 28, 27.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ivi}, 47.
in *Chapter 1*, Jameson reads the simulacrum as the expression of a *waning of affect*, where affect is conceived in terms of anxiety, linked to "alienation", the experience of "hysterics and neurotics", and the "bourgeois monad or ego", that is to say to lack and castration. Anxiety, however, as Lacan underlined in his 1962 seminar, is also an effect of an overwhelming presence of the object, of its proximity, arising "when there is no possibility of lack". If Freud had defined anxiety as an effect of a traumatic loss or danger of loss, for Lacan anxiety is mainly connected to an excess of presence, to the emergence of objet a in the visual field. Recent psychoanalytic discussions on anxiety have focused on its connection with the *capitalist’s discourse* and its imposition of the object’s overproximity. This attachment is seen to favour a type of anxiety which is not in symbolic mediation with the problem of unconscious desire (as for a classical neurotic subject), but rather is related to the presence of the Real, from which the subject is compelled to defend in order not to decompensate in psychosis. Contemporary addictions can be seen, in this sense, as a response to this situation, a possible treatment of the anxiety provoked by the overproximity of the object in the *capitalist’s discourse*. This excessive enjoyment is not related with objet a *qua* object-cause of desire, with desire as lack, but rather with a *too-full* whereby “the distance separating a from reality gets lost”, as Žižek put it, and “a falls into reality”. The Real here does not describe a repressed trauma in Freudian terms, but the external “ontological condition of reality as such”. I understand this all to express the contemporary structural inability of the Symbolic to limit the threatening excess of the Real, with the effect that the subject must develop new strategies to make up for this symbolic inefficiency, among which is a special relationship with *inhuman partners*.

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64 *ivi*, 14, 15. On the contrary, the contemporary subject is linked to “a liberation from anxiety [and] from every other kind of feeling as well, since there is not a self present to do the feeling” (*ivi*, 15).


67 Recalcati, *L’Uomo*, 210. This is a direction already present in Lacan’s 1956 seminar (titled *The Object Relation*) where phobia, fetishism and subjective formations in general are seen as a remedy to anxiety. There Lacan speaks of Little Hans as developing a phobia (of horses) as a substitute for a failed symbolic alienation. Castration is here what can ‘save’ the subject from anxiety, rather than what causes it, as for Freud. Later, castration – that is repression via the paternal metaphor – becomes only one among other ways the subject can manage *jouissance* (See Lacan, *The Sinthome*).


How can these clinical observations and theoretical apparatus be employed to better understand Simmons’s photographic series on the love doll? On a general level, what I have observed so far in this series can be seen to transcend a postmodernist aesthetics and resonate with Eshelman’s description of *beauty-as-closure* – the foregrounding of beauty and pictorialist values, the affirmation of authoriality, a lack of manifest irony and a certain closure towards external arguments – which I have so far addressed as a lack of traditional feminist concerns, replaced by an appeal for the viewer to enjoy in the immediacy of the image. Hyper-definition, large format, textured print and an exquisite play of colours and light can be seen to attempt to ‘win over’ the viewer, offering her an experience of immediate satisfaction. Simmons’s pictorialist treatment of the love doll’s tantalising beauty can be seen as a consideration of contemporary visibility as a saturated space into which the viewer is enticed to plunge without questions. We could read Simmons’s image-geisha as a kind of presence without demand, which is also a possible definition of virtual reality. People, products, information, communication are ‘virtual’ because they are “constantly at our disposal”, as Perniola put it, thus pointing to virtuality as a form of constant availability, as an excess of presence, rather than absence. Similarly, Žižek has suggested that virtual reality is best described in terms of “fullness”, not merely as information overload but as textual realisation of the phantasmatic under-text which has traditionally characterised the ‘virtuality’ of a fully functioning symbolic order, traditionally based on a gap between what is said – the “textual surface”, at the level of the signifying chain – and what is implied at the level of the unconscious – the underlying fantasy. Likewise, Simmons’s image may be seen to point to a lack of ‘secret’, of repressed under-text, that is to say a lack of phantasm.

I propose to read the visual fullness of Simmons’s gigantic doll-image as the proposition of a failure of distance, the same posited by Žižek as the essence of virtual reality and by Lacan as the foundation of the capitalist’s discourse. Like the virtual and capitalist object, which reigns over a subject and is thus able to cut off the Other in a mirage of self-sufficiency, this image-doll is so satisfying and beautiful that I do not desire anything else. Simmons’s doll-image would thus emerge not as an empty space on which a phantasmatic content could be projected, as in the Surrealist tradition and in Simmons’s early series, but as an available presence, overwhelming in its *present-ness*. As such, it could be defined as an image at once ‘theatrical’ and ‘absorptive’ since the image both engages the viewer beyond semiosis and closes her off from the Other, instantiating a *theatrical closure*, as it were. The hyperbole of visual satisfaction in this series seems to propose a condition of visuality where the image almost becomes a substance, whose

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enjoyment is not an effect of the Other and the unconscious phantasm but proceeds directly from the Real. Saying that this image suggests a lack of phantasm would imply that the image-doll is not a metaphor for something else, as in the early Interiors, but pointing to the offer of a Real experience for the viewer. I think Simmons manages to suggest, here, how an image can become a substance, an *inhuman partner*, working more on the level of enjoyment than on the level of the Symbolic, like in many contemporary process addictions. When translated on this level, what I previously tentatively called *image-thing* emerges in striking opposition to what psychoanalysis has traditionally called the *Thing*, lost *jouissance*, another name of the object-cause of desire. This image might present a different way to relate to the Real, beyond the neurotic dynamics of repression – a *limitation* of the Real – and instead speaking of a symptom as form, a *management* of the Real.

As if loosely connected to the symbolic level, this image-doll inspires belief, as suggested by Eshelman in relation to performativist art. However, belief is a term that invites a certain caution, and consequently I suggest amending the generic use adopted by Eshelman in the abovementioned passage. Simmons’s image can be seen to relate to a different kind of belief than the one that has traditionally characterised the Other as a ‘virtual entity’. The latter would pertain to a ‘virtualisation’ intrinsic to subjectivity, which is one working within the Other, operative on a symbolic level, a plane historically fundamental to grounding the subject’s socio-symbolic position in the world. The Other is virtual in this sense as an illusionary agency, non-existent but effective, a fiction with performative efficiency. The historical tendency of the last few decades has been, instead, one of a loss of efficacy of this fiction, as a loss of the subject’s will to believe the fiction of the Other in a non-reflexive act of faith. Most recently, in the media there have been several discussions on ‘post-truth’, a trending term adopted to designate a fundamental lack of influence of objective facts in shaping contemporary public opinion in favour of “appeals to emotion and personal belief”. What I am pointing to here, then, is the difference between symbolic belief (or faith, the dimension proper of the big Other) and imaginary belief, the former rooted in the efficiency of a shared symbolic fiction, the latter based on the imaginary

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72 With this, I do not mean that the artwork *is* Real. Art is always a framed event. What could an image less grounded in the Symbolic and more in a knot between the Real and the Imaginary might mean would be an interesting question to pose for future research.


75 The term entered the Oxford Dictionary in 2016, after a registered increase of its usage by 2000% between 2015 and 2016, particularly in relation to Donald Trump’s election to the American Presidency and the debates on Brexit in the UK.
fascination for the simulacrum. In relation to Simmons, The Love Doll series’ compelling image – an image-thing, an image-substance – can be seen, in this sense, to engage with the contemporary Western cynic unavailability to believe the Other’s word – be it the Nation, the Party or God – substituted by a unprecedented fascination with the direct reality of what one can see, out of the old philosophical question of the truth or untruth of what is seen. Simmons’s love doll may be considered as a passion for (imaginary) presence, unconcerned with (symbolic) absence.

However, Simmons’s simulacral offer of present-ness, as the availability of an unmediated jouissance, is here connected with an effect of repose, as I touched on earlier, and a suggestion of protection. We found the issue of protection in the visual world of Stéphan Gladieu, where it appeared in terms of an anorexic logic of subtraction – the doll as a device chirurgically excluding the Real in a paranoiac movement of distillation, and the image regimented through the rationalisation of geometry. Here, instead, protection is attuned to what I have described in terms of addiction, and also as a logic of addition, whereby something is added rather than subtracted. Where Gladieu links the image-doll to a will to de-eroticise and master – the Other, its desire, its enjoyment, ultimately what in the Other is uncontrollable – Simmons presents an image-substance that one is compelled to crave, to be ‘dependent’ on, without any of the formal devices of control and restraint seen in Gladieu’s authorial choices to counteract the doll-image’s simulacral fascination. The rationale of addiction, thus, may have the advantage to conceive what I see in Simmons’s work as a visual paradox of enjoyment as repose. Within an addictive logic, an object of enjoyment becomes a measure adopted by the subject to separate and defend from the Other – either by the desire of the Other (neurosis) or the enjoyment of the Other (psychosis).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, dependence from inhuman partners, as we have seen, is to be considered a new organisation of jouissance, which compensates for the current symbolic inefficacy in regulating jouissance (and the anxiety its overproximity provokes). In this sense we might read Simmons’s offering of visual satisfaction as the exposure of the contemporary image as a form of enjoyment with analgesic effects, a solution to the offenses of ordinary reality in which a has ‘fallen into reality’. This doll-image might advance the experience of an all-full as a way to obtain a separation from jouissance, equivalent to an anesthetisation, a paradoxical obliteration of affect via an affective hyper-stimulation. On a visual level, we would thus find the paradox of an enjoyment forming a barrier against another enjoyment, which on the narrative level sees the doll as a Zen-like

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76 This recapitulates Žižek’s differentiation between symbolic fiction and imaginary simulacrum, as the two ways the (fetishistic) disavowal (‘je sais bien...mais quand meme’) is seen to work. In the first case, I disavow what I see in favour of the belief in the symbolic fiction of the other as Other, while, in the second, I disavow what I know in order to believe what I see. See Žižek, The Ticklish, 324-325.

bastion against capitalist imitation jouissance. It would be the experience of an enjoyment not in the form of a return to a mythical pre-Oedipal jouissance, played on a fantasy of fusion, as for the modern doll seen in Chapter 1, but as a form of separation from the Real without the aid of the Symbolic.

Craving and addiction, in relationship to visuality and virtual reality, are issues that Simmons addressed explicitly in her later series Two Boys, produced in 2013, right after The Love Doll project. Two Boys is a body of work born as a response to Nico Muhly’s opera of the same name, presented at the New York Metropolitan Opera House in autumn 2013, which explored issues of identity in the world of the Internet taking its inspiration from a real-life event. Like in the opera, the mood in the pictures is dark, with life-size male medical dummies depicted as if transfixed on a laptop’s screen, their faces showing eyes closed and the mouth open, rendered even more disquieting by the brilliant cold light emanating from a laptop screen (Fig. 4.24-4.25). In Boy I, Corner, we find the same accord of hues between golden-browns, purples and reds found in The Love Doll/Day 4 (Red Dog), albeit in an evidently mortiferous re-edition. For Simmons the story of the two boys "involves the vastness, seduction and perils of the online world — something I think about often".

The artist specified that she wanted the images to "describe visually both the isolation and the focus a young boy might feel when completely immersed in the mental space of the web". Virtually becomes a "buzz", as the real boy of the story put it, something like "satisfying a craving – you had to be on there, you had to be doing it". While Two Boys works visually in a more traditional way, with mannequins standing for (representing) young boys in the throes of the contradictory aspects of virtual reality, what I have tried to describe in The Love Doll series may suggest the ‘isolation and focus’ of the contemporary simulacrum on a more complex structural level.

Simmons’s latest work How We See (2014-15) also deals with the problem of a visual excess (Fig. 4.26-4.27). In this series the artist engages with the human figure, an exception within a career predominantly preoccupied with inanimate human forms, finding the

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78 The true story at the basis of the plot involved a fourteen-year-old boy from Manchester (UK) who engineered his own death through manoeuvring a sixteen-year-old boy, met in a MSN chat room, into killing him, thanks to an intricate narrative sustained by multiple characters impersonated online. The older boy was initially charged for stabbing the younger boy, who was eventually prosecuted for incitement to murder his own person. See Judy Bachrach, "U Want Me 2 Kill Him?", Vanity Fair (February 2005), available at <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2005/02/bachrach200502>, last accessed 17.11.2017.


80 ibidem.

81 Bachrach, "U Want 2 Kill Him?".

4.25 Laurie Simmons, *Boy II/Silver Desk/Profile*, 2013.
4.26. Laurie Simmons, *How We See/Lindsay (Gold)*, 2015.
4.27. Laurie Simmons, *How We See/Ajak (Turquoise)*, 2015.
realisation of the fantasy of a human-doll in the contemporary dollers' subculture.\textsuperscript{82} The series presents pictorialist, big-scale photographic portraits of female models who reproduce a particular anime-related Japanese practice, that of painting eyes on closed eyelids. In these contexts, these are often found in conjunction with other strategies of dollification, such as the surgery modifications enacted by so-called living dolls.\textsuperscript{83} Compared to \textit{The Love Doll}'s focus on naturally-lit immersive spaces, here the figure is set against an artificial background of acid colours, whose tone is registered in the title, together with the name of the models. The image is vibrant, thanks to hallucinogenic hues, the extraordinary beauty of the models and the use of a lateral light source, which, creating zones of shade on the body of the models, works haptically, almost guiding the viewer's sense of touch over them. \textit{How We See} can be read as the literalisation of a lack of gaze in the image. Like in \textit{The Love Doll} series, the polished photographic effects of high-end advertising are put at work within a recovery of a concept of beauty that seems to bypass the sublime, the uncanny and the abject, with their confrontational presence as puncture, as gaze. The models become Greek statues, lacking the "light of the eye", for the eye here is reduced to a surface, not opening into the abyss of the 'soul', on the \textit{other scene} of the unconscious.\textsuperscript{84} However, this does not seem to be classic beauty, as what represses the disgusting formlessness of the Real, or modern beauty, as what veils it with the sublime or the uncanny. Retrospectively, \textit{How We See} might suggest that \textit{The Love Doll} series' hyperbolic beauty is similarly concerned with an image which has bypassed the 'old' problem of unconscious desire, of something lurking 'under' the skin of the semblant, to be instead what can substitute for it. I previously said that Simmons's \textit{image-thing} may be read as an image that does not repress jouissance but knots it in a different way. The image does not \textit{prick} the viewer, does not offer the gaze as what can 'annihilate' or 'reduce' her Ego, but can be seen, instead, as what reinforces the Ego, cementing it.\textsuperscript{85} The scopophilic pleasure of this image is not a loss of Ego, as an alternative to the ego-reinforcing effects of narrative, as it was for Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure", but, on the contrary, emerges as a strengthening of the Ego.\textsuperscript{86} The image-doll, like a hyper-modern substance, seems to solidify identity, where identity has become otherwise unstable through a lack of symbolic efficacy. Delivering an immediate enjoyment

\textsuperscript{82} Simmons: "I feel like I have finally got to this place that I really want to be. The place where, in my fantasy, the characters just get up and walk around – this interstitial place between humans and dolls". See Sheila Heti, "Laurie Simmons", \textit{Interview Magazine}, available at \url{<www.interviewmagazine.com/art(laurie-simmons#_,>}, last accessed 30/07/17.

\textsuperscript{83} One famous example is Valeria Lukyanova.

\textsuperscript{84} Hegel, \textit{Aesthetics}, 520, in Slavoj Žižek, \textit{Disparités} (London/New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 152.

\textsuperscript{85} Lacan, \textit{The Four Fundamental}, 82.

\textsuperscript{86} Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure", 18.
unconcerned with the Other – with meaning – the *image-as-substance* would emerge, at the same time, as a screen from an excess found in ordinary reality.

The figure of the doll thus can be seen to emerge not as a symptom, a figure of the unconscious as it was for the Surrealists, but as a paradoxical non-signifying sign. If we return to the Lacanian diagram of the scopic register that I discussed in *Chapter 1*, problematically this condition seems to escape the triangular systems included therein, both that of ‘representation’ and that of the ‘picture’. If we say that this image is unconcerned with lack and desire, then it cannot be considered a ‘picture’ in the Lacanian sense, since there is no ‘secret’ that “reflects our own nothingness”.[87] With a foregrounding of immediate satisfaction, I have pointed to the fact that we might be a long way from the function of the veil, from that which “incites [the viewer] to ask what is behind it”, from an image indicating “something other than what it is”, that is objet a as lack.[88] However, since this image is not unconcerned with enjoyment, it cannot be considered ‘only representation’, as in the geometrical field described in the first Lacanian triangular figure. Saying that this image may be *Apollonian*, that it gives “not to so much to the gaze as to the eye”, as “something that involves the abandonment, that laying down, of the gaze”, risks missing the intrinsic level of the ‘appetite’ here, a craving for an image which does offer a certain satisfaction on the level of *jouissance*.[89] There seems to be here a ‘trap’, a ‘capture’, a loss of ‘mastery’, to use the Lacanian terms for the gaze, but seemingly not in relationship with unconscious desire. This image may describe a new situation in which the subject is captured by the image in a way that is not ‘opaque’, nor ‘ambiguous’, so much as functional to achieve a certain mastery, not against but through *jouissance*.[90] We would then find the paradox of a loss of mastery (the addictive level implied in the *image-as-substance*) functional to mastery, and as such quite at odds with the Lacanian classical paradigm of the visual field as field of the gaze. The section on the gaze in Lacan’s *Seminar XI* concludes with a consideration of the gaze as “evil eye”, in its being a “fascinum”, “that which has the effect of arresting movement and literally, of killing life”, that is to say the effect of ‘separating’ the subject emerging there as lack of being.[91] Lacan there underlines how, in culture, “there is no trace anywhere of a good eye, of an eye that blesses”, “beneficent” instead of “maleficent”.[92] May we read Simmons’s beautiful eyes with no gaze as an instance of a ‘good eye’, one which does not ‘separate’ the subject who sees? The *fascinum* offered by *The Love Doll* could then emerge not as one that provokes castration, but one that, in fact, attempts to substitute it, as a

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88 *Ivi*, 112.
89 *Ivi*, 101.
90 This is what is implied in the Lacanian *sintrohome*, to which I return in *Chapter 5*.
remedy to the disruption of the knot between the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic characteristic of contemporary experience.

In his renowned argument on postmodernism, Jameson attempts to describe the logic of the simulacrum as something different from the problem of castration, but he recurs to a more traditional (early Lacanian) account of schizophrenia. Arguing about the simulacrum as *waning of historicity*, Jameson interprets meaning, in a Lacanian sense described as an effect of the slippage between signifiers in the signifying chain, as a “temporary unification of past and future with one’s present”.93 In this sense, for Jameson schizophrenia becomes analogous with the simulacrum: a “breakdown of temporality [which] suddenly releases the present of time from all the activities and intentionalities that might focus it and make it a space of praxis”.94 With this, he attempts to underline a material dimension of the present – we could say its Real dimension – as isolated from context and history, from the Symbolic.

What Jameson calls ‘schizophrenic aesthetic’ could be referred, in its fundamental excessive character, to what I have tried to describe in this chapter in terms of immediate satisfaction: “vastness, brilliant light, and the gloss and smoothness of material things”.95 This, which for him describes a “materiality of perception properly overwhelming”, might also relate to the astounding character of the big scale, shiny surfaces foregrounded by Simmons’s *Love Doll*.96 However, what I have been trying to describe in this chapter is not understandable through a classical account of psychosis, which Jameson uses for his argument on the simulacrum, and its traditionally negative connotation, but goes beyond a classical neurosis-psychosis binary. Jameson describes the abovementioned effect of “heightened intensity” as the workings of a “signifier in isolation”, of a series of signifiers unrelated between them, whose effect on subjective experience is one of (psychotic) “fragmentation”.97 Conversely, the heightened formalism and harmonious whole of the image ‘without a secret’ that I have described in Simmons’s work may be better defined as an enunciation disconnected from a signified, a series of signifiers without a signified.98 Its effect would be rather one of reintegration, closure, instead of fragmentation, with the closing effects of the *image-substance*, in fact, as a possible treatment of the disintegration of the signifying chain that would lead to a full-blown psychosis (Jameson’s ‘schizophrenia’). The closed beauty of Simmons’s simulacrum, as opposed to Jameson’s *schizophrenic aesthetic* is what in fact may

94 *ivi*, 27.
96 *ibidem*.
97 *ivi*, 27, 28.
98 This would be analogous to the formula of the capitalist’s discourse, where the ongoing circularity between the four positions of the discourse and the inversion of the arrow between agent ($) and truth (S) translates a lack of repressed truth.
protect from psychotic decompensation. In other words, the simulacrum would become, at once, effect and cure of the disintegrating effects of the capitalist’s discourse.

Another fundamental aspect takes my argument further from Jameson’s postmodern simulacrum. Whereas Jameson describes its affect as intolerable “euphoria”, as opposed to (Oedipal) anxiety, I am looking to describe the visual experience of an excess at once pacificatory and closely aligned with anxiety, namely as a defence against anxiety. This is not the anxiety connected to alienation, that is to say to lack, to which Jameson still refers, as I have argued, but the anxiety effected by a lack of distance from the object of jouissance, from a presence of a in ordinary reality that is characteristic of the contemporary capitalist’s discourse. With Simmons’s Love Doll, then, we may find the problem of an image at once alternative to the apotropaic function of beauty as amulet that we found in Gladieu, then alternative to the beauty-as-tyche veiling the Real of lack that is typical of an aesthetics of anamorphosis and also alternative to a schizophrenic aesthetic, which would let the horror of the Real emerge without veil (if this could ever be possible). Between the two traditional poles of form and formless, Apollonian and Dionysian, Simmons’s image might suggest a different organisation of the visual field, in which the Real is entangled through a different knot. The image has emerged not as conflict, internal contradiction between the Ideal and the Real, but as an attempt at repose, in which it is a certain form of jouissance itself that seems to work as limit of the unbearability of an unscreened Real, ‘fallen’ into ordinary reality.

Dolls and photography have a long history of interconnection, with one typically used to say something about the other. If modernism affirmed the subversive potential of the doll-image as an uncanny double against capitalism’s de-subjectivising machinations, Simmons’s doll and image can be seen to self-consciously acknowledge their alignment with mass culture values, rather than signalling opposition through the hyper-polished virtuoso means of high-end advertising and its ‘politically-incorrect’ use of female forms. There seems to be the affirmation of the ability of art to compete with the high-production values of fashion and commercial images, while overcoming a postmodernist, intellectually-distanced critical position from mainstream culture. The artwork is formally indistinguishable from its commercial counterparts, as it had been for Pop Art and its derivatives, but there is now an overt admission of similarity and complicity.

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the issue of ‘awareness’ raised by Eshelman in the passage cited earlier, where he uses it as a counterpart to the structure of belief inherent in the concept of beauty-as-closure. As it follows from my argument, I shall

99 *ivi*, 28.
100 *ivi*, 27–28, 29.
remark that awareness is not the same as “resistance”, as Eshelman seems to imply.\textsuperscript{101} It seems to me that affirming the ability of the capitalist subject to be “critical”, to experience “ambivalence” and to “develop an intuitive resistance” to the simulated beauty of global capitalism, is to affirm that this subject is ultimately unaffected by it, that she still works ‘Oedipally’.\textsuperscript{102} However, Eshelman’s combination of belief in the simulacral quality of the image and ‘intellectual awareness’ “of the particularity of the argument at hand”, might retain some value for understanding Simmons’s use of the simulacrum. The image here does not foreground the interruption of the simulacrum, as it seems to be the case in Rebufa and Gladieu, in their different formal strategies. Rather, I have argued that here we are presented with the truly mesmerising fascination of the simulacrum, into which we are allowed to go all the way.

With \textit{The Love Doll} we seem to be confronted with the suggestion that we are not resisting, that art cannot conceive itself outside of the capitalist game, speaking from a place of externality to what it purports to resist or subvert. As American media theorist Johanna Drucker has recently observed, artists, for the most part, have been working since the 1990s “in recognition of their relations of compromise and contradiction, their more self-consciously positive – or nuanced and complex – engagements with the culture industry”, in a way that renders a critical approach tuned on the modernist terms of opposition and negativity obsolete.\textsuperscript{103} This is a change, Drucker underlines, from modernist and postmodernist artistic practices, whose appropriation of mass culture objects still emerged as a way to authenticate high culture against popular culture, albeit often following the same logics of marketing and celebrity. Following Drucker, we could argue that there is value in the simple acknowledgement of the non-difference of art from the workings of capitalist commerce, a chasm that has so often been approached with hypocrisy in the art world.

Moreover, similarity and complicity suggest that something is mimicked, which again raises the issue of mimicry as an aesthetic practice central to contemporary art, to which we should connect the current renewed fascination for dolls and replicas on a broader level. Mimicry is a device capable of creating new knowledge, as Rebufa shows with his exercise of world-building, a function connected to play as a form of synthetic knowledge. Interestingly, Hal Foster has recently described mimicry as the principal mode of contemporary avant-

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{101} Taking Gursky’s work as representative of the performatist art form, he states: “While not ‘critical’ in the postmodern sense that requires us to take the position of a peripheral victim, Gursky’s work forces us to experience a distinct sort of ambivalence regarding the activities or things portrayed. Because totalization imposes beauty and order on us, and because we remain aware of this circumstance in spite of our enjoying its details, we are also encouraged to develop an intuitive resistance towards it”. See Eshelman, “Performatism”, n.p.

\textsuperscript{102} \textit{ibidem}.

\textsuperscript{103} Drucker, \textit{Sweet Dreams}, 8.
\end{footnotesize}
garde – albeit more *garde* than *avant*, he has suggested. In *Bad New Days*, he has written of “mimetic exacerbation” as a “heightened, even exacerbated” strategy of “mimesis of the given” that can achieve distance, albeit one attained not “through withdrawal but through excess”. This logic of an excess as distance resonates with my overall argument in this chapter, however I would specify 'distance' as something different than an effect of a symbolic act of sublimation. May the *enjoyment-as-repose* of (what I have proposed to call) an *image-substance* point to another type of distance, one implying going through an excess to achieve a modicum of subjective stability? Opening to these questions, my position clearly differs from Foster’s, who sees a general substantial continuity between contemporary art’s use of mimicry and the historical avant-gardes, particularly the parodic imitations of Dada. On the contrary, I am less inclined to believe so, since, particularly in the case of Simmons – but one could extend this thought to many others, like Jeff Wall or Vanessa Beecroft – we would struggle to find traces of negativity, so central in Dada and the historical avant-gardes. Neither would I speak of “capitalist nihilism”, of exultation in degradation, as the only alternative position, for someone like Simmons who rose to prominence within a generation of art-makers with a high conceptualist approach to the problem of representation. Neither critical nor celebratory of capitalist conditions, *The Love Doll* can be seen as an operation able to put a frame around a present condition of visuality with the view of understanding before anything else. It presents an image that aims to overwhelm the viewer, exposing the peculiar character of capitalist experience in its most fascinating and mesmerising aspects. Simmons presents an image with the power to charm the beholder, and as such interrogates a viewer willing to take the time to observe it. The artwork always installs a frame around what it presents and represents. It is always reflexive on a fundamental level: even when it replicates the codes of mainstream visuality, it is a ‘bracketing’ operation. It presupposes time on the part of the artist, and time on the part of a viewer-turned-observer. Taking the time to interrogate an image in an era of incessant consumption can itself be considered an ethical act, even if what is observed reflects the very impossibility of making space for a question.

105 *Ivi*, 78, 92.
106 Foster, *Bad New*, 96.
The recent popularity of the life-size doll is evidenced by its sustained presence in the photographic moving image, where it has gained the relevance of a protagonist in films such as *Monique* (2002, Valérie Guignabodet), *Love Object* (Robert Parigi, 2003), *Lars and the Real Girl* (Craig Gillespie, 2007) and *Air Doll* (Hirokazu Koreeda, 2009). These films are in dialogue with a longstanding cinematic tradition in which inanimate life-size replicas such as mannequins, statues and dolls often embody a fetish that the protagonists, customarily male, are required to abandon to make space for a flesh-and-bone, less domesticated female other, or else they end up mad and dead. We find men losing their sanity, dying, or both, as a consequence of their fetishistic choice in Arne Mattsson’s fantasy-drama *The Doll* (1962), Mario Bava’s *Hatchet for the Honeymoon* (1964), Luis García Berlanga’s *Life Size* (1974), among others. In line with the modernist tradition I discussed in Chapter 1, the doll in these films is a figure of *jouissance* that hinders the subject’s access to the Symbolic and the sexual relationship, a situation often crystallised in the figure of a protagonist fixated on a maternal object. The doll is an impediment to coupledom, keeping men out of a social bond with the Other.

We have seen in this thesis so far how this association between the doll and *jouissance*, as opposed to Law and discourse, has been recently contradicted. Rebufa’s Barbie emerged as a figure of capitalist ersatz *jouissance*, that is a *jouissance* not in opposition to the Law; while Gladieu and Simmons, albeit through very different strategies, forwarded the figure of the doll in a defensive and protective role against the problem of *jouissance*. In this chapter, I focus on *Lars and the Real Girl* as another notable example of a contemporary employment of the doll that challenges traditional cultural and psychoanalytical associations. The film, usually categorised as a romantic comedy-drama, tells the story of an emotionally-withdrawn 27-year-old man, Lars Lindstrom (Ryan Gosling), who is diagnosed with a ‘delusional disorder’ when he introduces a hyper-realistic sex doll.

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1 We also find the inanimate human replica – separate from science fiction’s technologically ‘animated’ replicas – playing central roles in *The Doll* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1919), *House of Wax* (André de Toth, 1953), *The Green Room* (François Truffaut, 1978), among others.
5.1. The US poster for *Lars and The Real Girl* (Gillespie, 2007).
that he calls Bianca to his family as his real girlfriend, treating her as a sentient living being (Fig. 5.1).1

Interestingly, the critical debate on the film appears polarised, with reviews either celebrating or despising it. It is seen either as an accurate psychological character study, ”grounded in reality”2 and delivering a heart-warming ”life-affirming statement of hope”3 or, inversely, considered a ”smarmy little number […], trafficking shamelessly in heartland stereotypy”,4 lacking in credibility5 and “emotionally deflated”.6 Academic readings have usually focused on the film’s psychological implications, referring often to Donald Winnicott’s notion of the transitional object — an object in-between the subject’s body and external reality — to underline the ‘healing’ implications of the doll.7 The standard critical line on the role of the doll in the film sees it as a maternal double that needs to be abandoned, together with Lars’ tics and asocial behaviours (he does not tolerate being touched by others), in order for Lars to entertain a ‘mature’ social relationship with a ‘real girl’.8 In many of these readings, the film’s particular visual style and subtle humour are often lost, thus becoming a more or less straightforward illustration of psychoanalytical concepts. In my own reading, I aim to bring together the film’s peculiar visual character, its quirky flair, with its wide-ranging cultural and psychoanalytical references, while at the same time leaving room for semantic ambiguity. In order to highlight and appreciate the film’s distinctive style, I will use

1 The film premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in 2007. Nancy Oliver's screenplay was winner of National Board of Review's Original Screenplay Award (2007) and nominated for an Oscar and a BAFTA in the same year.
8 The exception is Claire Sisco King and Isaac West, "This Could Be the Place: Queer Acceptance in Lars and the Real Girl", QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking, vol. 1, no. 3 (2014). The authors underline how "little learning Lars does in this film —at least as it pertains to Bianca" (75). However the essay maintains the orthodox interpretation of the doll as a maternal object: it is seen to signify "a backward gesture emanating from [Lars's] refusal to let go of his lost maternal bond" (70).
structural elements of the fairy tale genre, mainly undetected in readings. I will then draw on the Lacanian theory of the *sinthome*, as well as on contemporary discussions of ‘responsible fatherhood’, in order to demonstrate how Lars’s adoption of the figure of the doll suggests more than a conventional association with the maternal sphere. My reading will expose how the film plays skilfully not only with the complex cultural history of the doll, but also with the romantic genre and conventional representations of gender, coupledom, fatherhood and mental health. Through an analysis of the film’s rich network of references and narrative implications, I will show how it exceeds the traditional Surrealist coding of the doll as a figure of the uncanny as a traumatic encounter with the Real.

5.1. FROM OBJECT TO SUBJECT, FROM SYMPTOM TO SINTHOME

The film’s narrative is set within the fervently Christian community of a generic small town of the American Midwest. The film opens with a depiction of Lars’s lonely life: split between his work in an office-cubicle, surrounded by colleagues preoccupied with action figures, online porn, and teddy bears; and his home, a converted garage on the side of the family house, where older brother Gus (Paul Schneider) and pregnant sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer) have recently moved after the death of their elderly father. Preoccupied by Lars’s avoidant behaviour, Karin tries to convince an unconcerned Gus that his younger brother needs help, while at the same time making efforts to involve recalcitrant Lars in their family life. Lars, however, avoids her invitations as well as fleeing from Margo (Kelly Garner), a new office colleague who shows some romantic interest in him. When Lars announces that he has met a Danish-Brazilian girl on the Internet, the couple rush to prepare the guest room in excitement but they have a chilling surprise when they encounter Bianca, a custom-made, life-size sex doll that Lars treats as a living person. Following Karin’s suggestion, they visit the family doctor with the excuse to check that Bianca is well after a long trip from Brazil, and Dagmar (Patricia Clarkson), who is also a psychologist, diagnoses Lars with a ‘delusional disorder’. She advises the couple to go along with Lars’s delusion and proposes to have weekly checks on Bianca, as a way to monitor the situation. The couple asks the church board members for help, who, after some feeble opposition, accept Bianca into the community, thus opening the whole village onto a collective make-believe in order to sustain Lars’s conviction that Bianca is a living person. Thanks to Bianca being soon engaged in the community, volunteering with children and working part-time as a model in a department store, Lars finds himself interacting more with people. Through his weekly check-in with Doctor Dagmar, he starts recounting his personal history, marked by the death of her mother during labour, and he is helped to overcome his fear of being touched. After, finally,
developing an attraction for Margo and going out with her, one morning Lars finds Bianca ‘unconscious’ and she is rushed to the hospital by ambulance. There, Lars announces that she is very ill and she is brought home, dying few days later while on a short trip to the nearby lake, after Lars had kissed her for the first time. Bianca is given a funeral, which all the townspeople attend, and is buried in the cemetery. There Lars, finally alone with Margo, asks her to take a walk with him, an invitation that she happily accepts.

The improbable charitable engagement of the whole community in Lars’s belief that Bianca is a living person is the central motive for why the film is often labelled a feel-good movie – an “idealistic view of small-town life”, “a study in conviction and Christian love” – with the happy ending assumed to imply that Lars has managed to successfully get rid of the doll-hindrance and find a real girl. The film, in effect, couples the improbability of its premises with other aspects, often disparaged as lack of realism and credibility. These include the predictability of its narrative, the abstraction regarding time and location, the accentuated stylisation of the décor, and the psychological flatness of the characters. It is precisely these elements, which can be referred to the genre of the fairy tale, that are, in fact, central to the film’s own aesthetic and the pleasures it offers.

*Lars* emerges as a male initiation story, showing the vicissitudes of a young(ish) man’s passage into adult life and his growth from naivety to maturity, from a ‘lower’ to a ‘higher’ level of existence, according to developmental logics typical of fairy tales. Many of the building blocks of the predictable plot can be seen to derive from the fairy tale genre. The death of the mother and the hero’s orphan condition, the rivalry among siblings, the motif of the ‘magic’ doll and the presence of typified characters – the colleague-helper who introduces Lars to love dolls online, the girl-princess conquered at the end of the quest, the doctor-fairy godmother, ethereal and stately in her blond long hair in the final scene, where she is seen to depart at the view of the successful match – are all elements characteristic of a fairy tale plot. The polarisation of good and bad, often at the basis of fairy tale, is here detectable in Lars’s opposition to his older brother Gus, who, like the two brothers of many tales, embody opposite characteristics: the former is a ‘simpleton’, single and afraid of women, the latter a successful business owner, tenant of the family house, doting husband and father-to-be. However, while Lars is (over)sensitive, Gus is indifferent and rude, and the viewer’s sympathies may likely converge, initially, on the immature and awkward Lars, rather than on his distant brother. While Lars lacks virility and a romantic companion, Gus lacks empathy and compassion, and the obvious development of the story will solve this

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initial lack for both of them. Despite this polarity, we are not presented with a clear opposition between good and evil, like in a moral fable that is often cautionary in its message. Lars is in fact closer to those fairy tales that give “the hope that even the meekest can succeed in life”, the reassurance that, “however outcast and abandoned [one may feel] in the world, groping in the dark”, s/he is ultimately capable of achieving “rewarding relations with the world around him” or her.\(^\text{10}\) This is the consoling aspect of the story, but it should not be dismissed as plainly saccharine, since the narrative development and the ending will offer a humorous, thought-provoking twist, as we shall see.\(^\text{11}\)

Besides combining familiar tropes and standard characters, the film achieves fairy-tale flatness and abstraction through a warping of its spatio-temporal dimension to the \textit{far-away}. The film’s leap into abstraction, sometimes recognised, is deemed to be a lack of accuracy, of realism and seriousness – as one critic observed, Lars is “so removed from the larger world, from Iraq, Hillary, Rush and Britney, it might as well be in deep space”.\(^\text{12}\) We can recognise a contemporary world – mobile phones and love dolls have recently appeared, signalling that we might be in the late 1990s – but this is certainly a secondary world, where husbands always cook for their wives, the Church welcomes a sex doll among its parishioners and everyone in the community does their best to make Lars feel accepted and loved, because this is “what Jesus would do”, as suggested by the Reverend Bock.

The \textit{mise en scène}, a geeky version of Upper Midwestern Scandinavian style, to which the protagonist’s Swedish surname Lindstrom alludes, is central to achieve distance from what is represented, to mark the film’s world as not commanding serious allegiance to a factual plane. Like witches and charming princes of fairy tales, this devoted Christian community, albeit described realistically, can only exist in the story. The set could be a visual adaptation of the agrarian Upper Midwest described by Garrison Keillor in his celebrated tales of Lake Wobegon, inhabited by people of hardy Scandinavian and German stock, who do their work, go to church, help each other and dress with high rise blue jeans, patterned jumpers and a whole array of knitted accessories.\(^\text{13}\) It is this vision of the Upper Midwest that we will see as an important reference for Lars in other respects, that vision of people speaking in a Scandinavian-esque accent and being overly-nice, polite, and always willing to help others, which was memorably exploited in Fargo (Cohen, 1996). Given the popularity of


\(^{12}\) Dargis, "A Lonely Guy".

\(^{13}\) See e.g. Garrison Keillor, \textit{Lake Wobegone Days} (New York: Viking Press, 1985).
Keillor’s mythical and gently satirical rendition of the Midwest, Lars’s audience, at least in the U.S., would not have failed to recognise, and enjoy, many of the elements connecting the two worlds. Keillor’s affective satire of regional details, local manners, speech and folklore, as well as his description of Lake Wobegon as a place of timelessness and unchanging characters, scepticism towards progress and technology, are here mobilised to tell a story about change and progressive gender and sexual mores. The irony is that the lake of the film, clearly a homage to Lake Wobegon, “the symbol of permanence in a world of change”, is here precisely the locus of change, a gateway between the past (childhood and its games) and the personal development of the protagonist, a place of rebirth.\footnote{Stephen Wilbers, “Lake Wobegon: Mythical Place and the American Imagination”, American Studies, vol. 30, no. 1 (spring 1989), 14.} The lake is the set of Bianca’s death in a scene which is a witty appropriation of the Christological iconography of water baptism, closing a series of doubling between Lars and Bianca: where the doll dies, the ‘new’ Lars is reborn, like Jesus arising from the waters of the Jordan, after being baptised by John (Fig. 5.2.). It has been observed how, in his tales of Lake Wobegon, Keillor “delights in walking that thin line between imagination and reality”, with the blurring of imagined and real space “mak[ing] it difficult to distinguish fantasy from reality, subjective perception from objective truth and mythical place from actual place”.\footnote{Ivi, 12, 13.} This can be seen as a striking characteristic of Gillespie’s treatment as well, achieved by playing with various generic conventions but deserting all of them: Lars is almost a romantic comedy, almost a drama, almost a fairy tale. What it clearly is, instead, is a mise en abyme of storytelling, a reflection on narrativity and meta-narrativity. If it is Lars who starts telling a story – Bianca is a missionary of Brazilian and Danish descent, reliant on a wheelchair, orphan and unable to give birth and so on – Bianca’s life story, emerging and descending in the space of the film, will be created as a collective effort, in this way taking life on the screen for us. As a redoubling of storytelling and the ability to engage the audience into a second-grade make-believe play, the film resonates with illustrious literary and cinematic precedents. One reference should be made to Luigi Pirandello’s Enrico IV (1922), in which a rich man in 1921 Italy believes himself to be a feudal king and everyone around him sustains this delusion. Other intertextual links can be established with Cervantes’s Don Quixote (1615), openly cited in the film, with Lars shown to read it out loud to Bianca, and Harvey (Henry Koster, 1950), where James Stewart plays the part of an amiable alcoholic who thinks he is ubiquitously accompanied by an invisible gigantic rabbit. For the way Lars attempts to walk the ‘thin line’ between fantasy and ordinary reality, the style of Hal Ashby, seen in films such as Harold and Maude (1971) and Being There (1979), may be another important intertextual reference. There, too, we find a mix of dark satire and fairy tale elements, with the
5.2. Dark tones for the death of Bianca in *Lars and the Real Girl* (Gillespie, 2007).
‘message’ of the film being obscured by the act of telling the tale itself, while pop-psychology didacticism and symbolism are transcended in the pleasure of creating a film world in which childhood wonder obscures the cynicism of the adult world.

Rather than psychological realism, Lars offers fairy tale tropes, the recognition of which is part of the pleasure offered to the audience, through the creation of “a gnawing familiarity – that comforting yet supernatural awareness of living inside a story”, that Kate Bernheimer attributes to fairy tales.¹ Flatness, typically achieved in the fairy tale through conjoining matter-of-fact descriptions of events with a suspension of physical and psychological laws, is something than can be seen at work in Lars, where things happen and characters ‘do things’ but their ‘deep’ psychological motives remain inexplicable, enigmatic, ultimately not credible, and indeed not showing any effort to be. We are informed that Lars has bought a love doll once this has already happened, for instance, while Karin and the community devote all their efforts to help Lars, never telling us why. If all this makes little sense logically or psychologically, it follows a certain fairy tale “nonsensical sense”.² If the world of Lars bears resemblance to the ordinary world of human existence, it diverges from it, opening into another place, a ‘magical’ world of possibilities where wonders are fulfilled.

In such a world, characters have a limited emotional range and psychological depth. Karin, true deus-ex-machina and double of the narrator-screen writer Nancy Oliver in her role to feed the plot with continuous inventions, does not show signs of evolution during the story, except for her pregnant belly. Equally, Doctor Dagmar’s palpable existential intensity maintains the same beautiful pitch all along, like a cypher, in her role of enabler-godmother-doctor. Gus, Lars’s double as the capable but insensitive brother, is the only character to show the signs of some psychological conflict, however predictable in its trajectory, as a mirror of Lars’s own development towards social ‘maturity’. Margo, of the co-protagonists, is the most flat, a proper animated version of a princess-doll, with almost non-existent psychological motivations, as has been widely noted by critics, emerging as a barely alternative choice to the inanimate doll Bianca. With regard to Lars, if someone has called Gosling’s approach a character study, others criticise his mannerisms, such as Manohla Dargis who has described Lars as a character “more stunted than damaged, soft rather than hurt”, and Gosling “never fill[ing] this conceit with life”. “Lars too is a doll”, she adds, “as pliable as Bianca and just as phony”.³ Albeit within her negative critique, Dargis points to a fundamental flatness of Lars as a character, who, although on a path of personal development, appears as an abstraction of the human capability for self-renewal rather than a character imbued with a complex psychic world. Lars’s condition is one of loneliness and

¹ Kate Bernheimer, "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale!", in Dorothy Allison et. alii, The Writer’s Notebook: Craft Essays from Tin House (New York: Tin House Books, 2009), 65.
² Id., 67.
³ For the film as a character study see Hornaday, "Lars and the Real Girl"; and Dargis, "A Lonely Guy".
helplessness at the beginning, which, thanks to his self-starter act of creativity – the invention of the doll-girlfriend – turns into secure and self-possessed individuality at the end. A reference to Ashby is topical here again, since Lars shares this condition of allegorical simplicity with the similarly simple-minded Chance of Being There, with Gosling showing the same respect for the character there demonstrated by Peter Sellers, and with Lars, like Chance, made to be something more than a cheap joke.

Thanks to this simplicity, the characters on screen can be seen – like Bianca in the narrative, functioning as an empty vessel for others, filling her with their various contents – as the audience's dolls, allowing a range of responses as an effect of an animating effort. In this sense, the film's use of colour seems to reinforce this logic. The limited colour palette – the greys and browns of the first part's costumes and décor, accentuated by the winter landscape – may not only be an emotional and social coding conveying sorrow, boredom and middle-class respectability, but also a choice which creates abstraction and absence, similar to that found in fairy tales. Likewise, the matter-of-fact quality of the story, working in derogation of logical sense and leaving unexplained holes in the narrative, may be seen to create what has been called a "lyrical disconnect" in relation to "a story that enters and haunts you deeply", precisely like Lars, often described as a "strangely affecting love story".

Alongside its fairy tale flatness and absurdism, the film shows a great deal of knowledge of psychoanalytical theories, as well as managing to mirror contemporary mores and manners. It offers an amusing and subtle satire of current definitions of femininity, masculinity and family, dialoguing particularly with recent U.S. debates on fatherhood, as we shall see in the second section of the chapter. Like the world of fairy tales, described by Marina Warner as "laboratories for experiments with thought, allegories of alternatives to the world we know", Lars and the Real Girl introduces us to a topsy-turvy realm, in which women manage the world and men strive to be more like them – steady and empathetic, forward-thinking and firm – and human society as a whole is a place where everyone is accepted and valued for their unique, quirky idiosyncrasies. Lars transports the audience beyond the limits of mere ordinary reality, engaging graciously with political and philosophical thinking, while delivering through its kind satire not only consolation and hope, but poignant humour, social and sexual critique. If the merit of the film, often highlighted by enthusiasts and detractors alike, is its ability to walk "a delicate line through a minefield of potential bad taste", the fairy tale register should be recognised as a central means for this achievement, since it allows the handling of a problematic sexual theme, still generally

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1 Bernheimer, "Fairy Tale", 67.
2 ibidem; Lars and The Real Girl, DVD cover.
3 Marina Warner, Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2014), 5. For a reading of Lars as a utopian version of queer acceptance see King and West, "This Could Be the Place".
4 Ansen, "Ansen on Lars".
deemed ‘perverse’ and ‘freaky’, that is difficult to address otherwise. In its allegorical treatment of sexuality, mental illness, and the figure of the doll, the film shows a sure awareness of the traditional associations, well established in Western culture, between psychosis, the doll and the maternal. In what follows, I first trace the connections defined between the character’s illness and the maternal sphere, before analysing the way the doll enters this scenario. How does the film mobilise these classical associations? How does it manage to function differently from other films using the doll, while using the same tropes?

The references to psychoanalysis and its traditional associations between psychosis and the maternal are introduced in the first section of the film, which makes of Lars a cypher of psychotic-like helplessness against a threatening world. Lars’s ‘illness’ is initially established as fidelity to the maternal sphere, which the film translates in the most literal sense in the character’s physical attachment to a baby blanket that the mother had crafted for him before dying in labour. This is a central object in the affective dynamics of the narrative, circulating exclusively between Lars, Bianca, and Karin, as a token of the imaginary doubling and projections built along the axis of the mother-child relationship. Transitional object par excellence, listed by Winnicott among the first “not-me” objects of the child, between thumb-sucking and toys, the blanket is presented in the first scene as a sign of a maternal thing which is coded as dead and deadly, in its association with the sterility of Lars’s dwelling. To the sound of a naïve melancholic melody, the film opens with the camera observing Lars behind the window of his garage-apartment watching a family scene outside (Fig. 5.3). He sports a bad haircut and an unfortunate 1970s moustache, halfway between the “funny-looking” Carl Showalter (Steve Buscemi) in Fargo and the fervent Christian devotee Ned Flanders from The Simpsons. In the window glass we perceive the faint reflection of figures bustling around a car in a snowy landscape, with the noise of children chuckling in excitement. The portrait of Lars’s face through the glass, itself a double of the cinema screen, with projected action on it, is almost a still in its ten-second duration, were it not for the feeble movements of the projected figures on the glass. Showing his face encased within Georgian bars, this shot suggests both proximity and detachment. Proximity is translated in the close-up of the face of the attractive Ryan Gosling, a popular icon of American independent cinema, who, despite the little weight acquired for the role and the odd moustache, is clearly shown here in his attractiveness. This could be seen as an attempt to facilitate the audience’s emotional involvement with a character who will soon display rather uncomfortable behaviours. Although at close distance, Lars appears to be beyond the reach of proximity, with the superimposition of the family scene on his portrait suggesting a

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8 In this sense Lars is closer to the fantasy world of Air Doll than to the realistic style of Monique, more attuned to the former’s poetic animation of the doll in a childlike surreal space, than to the latter’s slapstick comedy treatment of a man having ‘the time of his life’ masturbating with a doll.

9 Winnicott, "Transitional Objects", 90.
5.3-5.6. Lars (Ryan Gosling) in the opening sequence of *Lars and the Real Girl*. 
collapse of fantasy and ordinary reality, and with the absence of a shot-reverse shot frustrating a possible identificatory spectatorial dynamics: we cannot see what Lars sees. As a cypher, this almost-still image could be seen to contain the film in its entirety, as a play between fiction and reality, both thematically and textually, as a way for the film to test its own ability to animate a doll into a real character, and to create a credible world out of the absurdism of its premise.

The bars of the window framing Lars’s face in this scene rework the motif of the cage, classically used to describe (psychic) entrapment and a disturbance of personality, a fixation to the mirror, reminiscent of Raoul Ubac’s 1938 Mannequin and Caillois’s theory of mimicry.\(^1\) The motif suggests that Lars, like Caillois’s psychotic insect, may be suffering from a “disturbance in the perception of space”, “no longer know[ing] where to place itself”\(^2\). Lars’s gesture of covering his mouth with his baby blanket signals his attachment to the maternal object, while the claustrophobic, cavern-like appearance of this murky garage-apartment suggests he inhabits a non-living space (Fig. 5.4-5.6). As all-white as the outside snow-bound landscape, this is an aseptic and hollow ambience, with the dreariness of the décor and the almost complete absence of accessories and food declaring it to be bereft of human life.

The entire first section of the film aims to define Lars as outcast, in response to many others trying to convince him that he needs an other to be happy, someone to share his life with. Lars’s exclusion from a symbolic shared space emerges as a comic motif in the early sequence of the Sunday Mass, with his childish behaviour during the sermon, and his even more childish reaction to Margo’s approach. It is a dry humour emerging from context more than words, namely from the contradiction between Lars’s awkward behaviour and general expectations of what is an acceptable, adult and masculine demeanour. Lars is described as childish, albeit in an indulgent way – as Mrs. Gruner (Nancy Beatty) puts it, he is a “good boy”. Like a boy, he gets distracted easily during the Reverend’s speech, who is preaching God’s law of ‘love one another’, but that becomes a background noise while Lars’s attention is evidently focused on the toys of a nearby child, placidly sleeping on the mother’s breast.

In our first sight of Lars in the church, his figure, rendered clumsy by the bulky winter coat and the blanket used as a scarf, is set against the blurred silhouette of the minister of God, a visually inconsistent – besides barely audible – presence, as an allegory of Lars’s disconnection from the surrounding symbolic world (Fig. 5.7). Here we meet Margo, who is singing in the choir but, like Lars, indulges in distractions, losing her tempo while giggling amused at Lars’s childlike ‘misbehaviour’. In the world of Lars, where men are shown to be indifferent or invisible – Gus is unconcerned with Lars’s remoteness and the Reverend is

\(^{1}\) I analyse these in Chapter 1.

\(^{2}\) Caillois, ”Mimicry”, 27, 28.
5.7. Lars (Ryan Gosling) at the church.
plainly undetectable – it is women who are described as the ones who see, who are either concerned about, or interested in, Lars. In this scene, through the means of subjective shots, the audience is set to assume the look of Margo, through which Lars’s immature tics are read as amusing and lovable quirks. Later, observing him through mother-to-be Karin’s point of view, we are invited to ascribe meaning to what is not (yet) meaningful (Fig. 5.8-5.9). Like a mother with an infant, Karin attributes a significance to gestures and behaviours that Lars’s lack of expressive language renders enigmatic.

The dynamics of the look receive a decided emphasis in the film, with the device of the frame within the frame being repeated several times, particularly in relation to Karin, often replicated in point of view shots while she observes Lars through the windows of the family home. This stress reflexively doubles the centrality of women’s views in the narrative, in a way that ironically reverses the classical reading of Hollywood cinema as a male ‘viewing machine’, controlling a passive woman’s image and imposing male characters’ points of view. In Lars, on the contrary, we have many instances of women gazing at the protagonist, while little is known about what Lars actually thinks and wants if not through the women’s narratives and desires projected on him. In contrast to conventional protagonists who are given narrative agency and whose knowledge and desires are shared through constructions of identificatory spectatorship, Lars is a hero whose point of view remains enigmatic, and whose ‘content’ we are mainly able to construct through what others around him see and say. Gosling’s understated acting style adds to the affective flatness of his character, which is a style that, following Lauren Berlant, can be seen as one that “foregrounds the obstacles to immediate reading”, while at the same time “intensifies the curiosity one must bring to its aesthetics”. This underperformed emotionality is not only functional to the depiction of an emotionally withdrawn character, but manages to expose a fundamental aspect of the film, related to its fairy tale coding: the universalisation of the space of fantasy, whereby it is not only Lars’s delusion that brings fantasy to ‘contaminate’ the fabric of ordinary reality, but the whole community projecting content on the doll, as well as on Lars. Lars’s world would have been ‘dead’ in the static loneliness of the initial shot, a still of a funny-looking character languishing forever against a melancholic musical background, without the women projecting their views and demands on him. There is a varied phenomenology of fantasy in the film: fantasy that allows one to see others as lovable and that initiates sociality (Karin and Margo), fantasy that ‘covers over’ the Real (Lars’s initial need for defence from others), and fantasy which allows one to inhabit the Real (Lars’s final opening to others). From a psychoanalytical point of view, Lars may be seen as a human being lacking a fantasy screen

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5.8-5.9. Lars (Ryan Gosling) seen through Margo and Karin's point of view.
that would allow him to relate to others and their jouissance. In this sense Lars is a ‘boy’, unable to decipher women’s demands from which he can but flee.

It is precisely Lars’s failure to conform to others’ – and the audience’s – expectations in terms of adulthood and masculinity that produces comic effects. Freud has described laughter as the effect of a conflict between what is observed in the comic object and one’s own ideal image.¹ He refers to an initial moment of identification and to a second of aggression, when the image of the other does not correspond to one’s ideal ego, with laughter emerging as a device to create distance from the inadequate image, which therefore exposes a moment of narcissistic defence. In the scene of the first encounter with Margo at the end of Mass, social conventions of heterosexual masculinity and generic expectations of romance are embodied on screen by Mrs. Gruner, who, despite showing liberal views on alternative sexualities – she knows “everything about gays” since her nephew is gay – urges him to find someone and not “leave it too long”, since “it’s not good for you”. We follow Mrs Gruner and Lars at their back left walking out of the church; he is clumsily obscured by a large arrangement of flowers that he has kindly offered to carry, before a cut shows us the old lady from the opposite side, handing a flower to Lars, suggesting he should give it to “somebody nice”, “for a start”. A reverse shot reveals Margo behind them, a materialisation of ‘somebody nice’, indeed über-nice with her pink knitted mittens and naively flirtatious tics. On hearing Margo’s “hello”, Lars reacts by throwing the flower away with the most theatrical gesture, before freezing from embarrassment and running away, like prey chased by a she-hunter (Fig. 5.10-5.12). Lars’s passive mode of action and awkwardness towards the other sex clearly contradicts the image of assertive, heterosexual masculinity as an active, sexually dominant position. At the same time this scene sets the terms of the ‘mission’ of the protagonist, creating romantic expectations in the audience for a final ‘and they lived happily ever after’.

Lars’s passivity, however, is also a coding of mental illness, whose exact nature is more left to the imagination than actually specified, which is another way the film plays on the plane of myth rather than within the conventions of realism. He “appears to have a delusion”, as Doctor Dagmar says, but trying to exactly define Lars’s pathology would be a rather vacuous exercise, since his condition does not seem to make sense diagnostically but rather suggest malaise on a more abstract, existential plane. However, Lars’s ‘freezing’ under the gaze of the other, as well as his likeness to an object in the following scene of him sitting still in a dark room, are rather fitting images of psychosis. In the image of stillness, the film posits an affinity in objecthood between Lars and the doll, an affinity later echoed by Bianca’s biography, herself marked by maternal loss and physical vulnerability, translated

5.10-5.12. Lars (Ryan Gosling) in the initial sequence of the encounter with Margo (Kelley Garner).
into her paralysed condition. Showing the protagonist both in opposition to the diegetic world of the social and reduced to an object, ‘freezing’ under the gaze of the other, diegetically translates two ways that psychoanalysis describes psychosis.

A classical psychoanalytical account of psychosis sees it as a condition in which the subject finds itself in a “symbolic opposition” to the Other, unable to mobilise a foreclosed master signifier, a Name-of-the-Father that would allow him/her to find a position in discourse.¹ Psychosis is also defined as a situation whereby the subject is “thrown into the field of the Other, without mercy, as an object a”, with jouissance appearing like a vortex from which there is no protection.² In a psychotic structure, the demand coming from the Other cannot be turned into desire – as in the neurotic’s experience – taking on a persecutory feel, with the subject exiled from subjectivity and displaced into the status of object. We could see Lars’s appeal to flight and tendency to immobilise as an allegory for the cycle of restlessness and helplessness of a subject unable to defend itself from the unbearable anxiety caused by the demands of others that, out of symbolic frame, appear threatening and malignant. The film’s use of the blanket and of pink flowery pyjamas, among the many layers of clothes that Lars costume includes, are hints to the fact that, as in psychosis, it is some sort of excess that the protagonist is trying to manage to achieve a minimum of subjective stability.

After the first section of the film establishes Lars’s condition of suffering, the doll’s arrival appears, initially, as a device for Lars to defend himself from the intrusion of others. As in a fairy tale, Bianca’s arrival is a matter-of-fact event, introduced by an intertitle displaying the text ‘six weeks later’ at the end the first section. The viewer will never know in Lars’s words the exact motives for his decision to buy a love doll, or how he did it, leaving the other characters, Karin and Dagmar mainly, to come up with a rationale. Initially, the doll is presented as a disturbance, with Bianca playing the role of the villain, of hindrance to the sexual relationship and of the romantic hopes around the couple Lars-Margo.

The first shot of Bianca, sitting on the family sofa with Lars, is a comic treat, playing on the contrast between the hyper-sexualised figure of the doll, wearing a black fishnet shirt and faux leather boots, and the antiquated fashion of the parlour and its inhabitants. The juxtaposition of the cheap sexualised appeal of the doll with Lars on one side, sporting his best Christmas jumper and with hair slicked back for the occasion, and Karin on the other side, in her chaste brown corduroy pinafore dress, is a careful construction of deadpan humour (Fig. 5.13-5.14). Bianca’s role as the outsider, coming to disturb the tranquil, devoted manners of the Christian community, sustains a good part of the film’s comic

5.13-5.14. "You know, Bianca is a missionary". Lars (Ryan Gosling) introduces Bianca to his brother Gus (Paul Schneider) and sister-in-law Karin (Emily Mortimer).
effects, exploiting the same juxtaposition between Minnesotan nicety and the ‘depravity’ of outsiders that *Fargo* had notably displayed a decade earlier.\(^1\) The Scandinavian over-nicety of the community is here contrasted not with horrifically violent crimes, as in *Fargo*, but with the doll’s reference to non-conventional sexual mores. Gus’s annoyance at others’ willingness to play along with Lars’s delusion offers a double of the sceptical audience, and comic situations are typically built on his uptight reactions, with appalled facial expressions and skittish gestures at hearing Lars’s stories about Bianca – that she has likes and dislikes, that she wants to choose a magazine while waiting for the doctor, that she is a nurse and can help Gus who is feeling sick and so on. There is an opposition between a level of ordinary reality, sustained by uncompassionate Gus for whom the doll is a mere inanimate object, and a level of ‘delusion’, whereby the doll is a living being, with wants and desires that the whole community sustains, in an act of communal *as if* play.

The absurdism of the film seems not to lay so much in the doctor’s proposed solution to “go along” with Lars’s delusion, as much as in the fact that the community willfully participates in the clinical intervention, effectively transforming the village into an open-air psychoanalytical couch. Contrary to criticism pointing to the unlikely motif of a doctor suggesting people to mirror Lars’s delusion, there is a certain clinical validity in this instruction.\(^2\) Within a psychoanalytic account of classical psychosis, a delusional metaphor, that is the delusional construction of a world-view, is one possible way for a subject not inserted in discourse to stabilise “the disaster of the imaginary” that results from the foreclosure – the exclusion from the symbolic order – of a key signifier.\(^3\) Instead of building psychic stability around the paternal metaphor, a psychotic subject can use his delusion to find sense in the chaos of existence. While the psychoanalytical clinical approach with neurotic subjects aims to create conflict in the analysand, questioning his identifications through an opening to the enigma of desire as lack, the intervention with subjects not inserted in discourse, on the contrary, is usually directed at the stabilisation of the Imaginary, as a way out from the pain caused by an overwhelming, unbridled *jouissance*. If in the first case the intervention moves from the Imaginary, the level of fantasy, to the Real, the level of the drive, in the second case the direction is opposite, from the Real to the Imaginary, towards the construction of a fantasy scenario.

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\(^1\) The couple Karin-Gus relates to *Fargo’s* Marge (Frances McDormand) and Norm (John Carroll Lynch), similarly portrayed as overly nice, in old-fashioned attire, and defiant of traditional gender divisions of labour. Karin, like Marge, is the heavily-pregnant woman who leads and finally solves problems, albeit on a lighter register than in *Fargo’s* pluri-homicidal crime case.


The doll, as in the Kleinian approach with children, works in the narrative as a platform onto which the interpretive work is displaced. Bringing the doll to the doctor for her weekly blood pressure checks, Lars recounts his story to Dagmar, exposing his thoughts of having caused his mother’s death. In readings of the film, Lars’s evolution is usually seen as a ‘working through’ of a traumatic experience, with the illness and death of the doll repeating – as a way to master – the traumatic loss of his mother. However, notwithstanding the film’s play with traditional cultural associations between the doll and the maternal, I see the film making space for a more adventurous scenario.

The film initially does play with these traditional associations, with the arrival of the doll undoubtedly coded as funereal. Arriving in a coffin-like box in a gothic-inflected landscape, it seems that Mother herself has come back from the realm of the dead, with the doll appearing as a double of the dead, a *kolossós*. Through a long shot of the wide open space marked by the Lindstrom big white house, in the background of a landscape made spectral by a thick blanket of snow, we see the heavy crate-coffin containing the doll being unloaded from a van (Fig. 5.15). Evoked by the branch-claws of a majestic, leafless tree, etched against a turbulent sky under the sound of cawing crows, the presence of the macabre could not be more evident and, at the same time, more parodic, contrasted with the ordinary character of the UPS courier van.

We encountered the concept of the *kolossós* in Chapter 1, mobilised by Maurizio Bettini to describe the uncanny valence of the doll as virginal double, a presence signifying an absence created by loss. What we find here is a rather eccentric and clever re-edition of this classical figure, described by Vernant as a double that facilitates the passage between the world of the living and that of the dead. He describes it as a double of the dead that “returns to the light of day and manifests his presence in the sight of the living”.4 Silence, coldness, rigidity, lack of sight and mobility are classical attributes of death symbolised in the *kolossós* – whereby death appears “as a petrification of living beings”— and are features that can describe Bianca, never animated on screen.5 They can be seen to characterise Lars too, initially shown as a quasi-silent, immobile object, an object of the gaze rather than a subject holding the look, *seen* rather than *seeing*. The attributes of life to which the *kolossós* is opposed – voice, light (as an instance of sight), and movement – then return in Lars’s delusional construction of the doll as a living being. However, these are not assumed in the diegesis, if not imperceptibly, with the face of the doll slowly changing from her initial heavy make up to a more chaste, natural look, before veering to a greenish skin tone to signify her illness. Here, again, the film can be seen to play its generic positioning ambiguously. On the one hand, it keeps its distance from an overblown fantasy scenario, in which the doll would

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5 *Ivi*, 311.
5.15. A gothic landscape for the delivery of the doll.
be fully animated, a trope ancient as cinema itself – from the already-mentioned works by Meliès, Lubitsch, and Mattsson, to Michael Gottlieb’s Mannequin (1987), which all play on the animation of a doll-mannequin into a ‘real’ girl through the use of editing, switching on screen from object to real actress.\(^1\) In Lars, Bianca’s voice is only audible to Lars and her lack of movement is circumvented by her disability – she is ‘constrained’ to a wheelchair by her illness, as if contingently unable to walk. On the other hand, the progressive discoloration of Bianca’s face, which gradually appears more ill, achieved through the use of several masks for her face, complicates a clear-cut generic definition, partially conceding to Lars’s ‘delusion’ and to the age-old ‘magic’ of cinema of animating the doll into a living character.

The early scene of the doll invited to the family dinner can be seen to be a witty version of the rite of evocation of the dead described by Vernant, as one of the main functions of the kolossós, called into the sphere of the living through a rite of hospitality, before being re-established forever in the realm of the shadows.\(^2\) The film’s ambiguity allows for a reading of Bianca as the psuché of the dead mother, her ghost, which, haunting Lars with its “dangerous power”, is first fixed on the double-kolossós, and then forever relegated to its resting place.\(^3\) At her grave, Lars could be seen to emerge to new life, transfigured into an assertive heterosexual man able to embrace the joys of coupledom. Read this way, Lars’s use of the doll would appear to be in continuity with a cinematic tradition in which dolls, mannequins and the like are figures marking a (male) subject’s deadly attachment to the maternal object, as to a pre-symbolic jouissance that if not abandoned drives the protagonist to madness and death. However, if Lars enters into dialogue with this post-Surrealist cinematic tradition, the characters’ flatness and the central narrative development show how the doll in fact enables, rather than hinders, the protagonist’s entrance into a discursive symbolic sphere.

The doll’s diegetic role can in fact be seen to engage with a fundamental aspect of the kolossós; that is to say, its being “a substitute for the absent corpse”, rather than an “image of the dead” – not a representation of someone but a placeholder.\(^4\) A reference to psychoanalysis is helpful at this point, since this formulation by Vernant is strikingly

\(^1\) Toys have been animated on screen since cinema’s beginnings: from Arthur Melbourne Cooper’s Dreams of Toyland (1908) where toys are animated with stop-motion, to Ted (Seth MacFarlane, 2012) whose teddy bear’s animation is achieved with 3D technology and motion capture effects. See also Babes In Toyland (1934), Nutcracker (1986), Labyrinth (1986), The Christmas Toy (1986), The Indian In The Cupboard (1995), Small Soldiers (1998), among others. Animated play dolls, puppets and ventriloquist dummies appear in numerous horror movies, such as Dead of Night (1945), Magic (1978), the Chucky series (Child’s Play, Don Mancini, 1988-2013), Dead Silence (2007).

\(^2\) See Vernant, Myth and Thought, 314.

\(^3\) *Ivi*, 306.

\(^4\) *Ibidem.*
LARS AND THE REAL GIRL

evocative of the Lacanian *sinthome* as a "supplementary device", a place-holder for the Name-of-the-Father.\(^5\) The *sinthome* is, in fact, in opposition to the metaphorical functioning of the Freudian symptom, which is a signifying formation to be interpreted as a message addressed to a consistent, complete Other. I see *Lars and the Real Girl* as a humorous mythical take on present times as the era of the decline of the Oedipus, in which every subject is required to find a way to defend from *jouissance*, once the Other has lost its symbolic efficacy to localise it through the traditional means of metaphorisation. This framework allows us to make sense of the enabling function of the doll in the film, which is not otherwise understood through the structure of the return of the repressed. The doll does not stand for a traumatic eruption of *jouissance*, as in the modernist tradition, but can be seen as a means to manage *jouissance* in the absence of a traditional paternal function.

Before going into the details of my reading, it may be appropriate to clarify some aspects of this theoretical frame. As we have seen in previous chapters, psychoanalytic practice has registered a blurring of the boundary between traditional classifications of neurosis and psychosis in recent years. The notion of ‘ordinary psychosis’ aims to address this situation, which can be translated as the “end of the power of the Name-of-the-Father as the unique signifier for symbolic law”.\(^6\) Just as the Oedipus complex had been redefined by Lacan as one of Freud’s myths, so has Miller called the Name-of-the-Father "a Lacanian credo, unable to account for the existence of cases standing between categories".\(^7\) In the 1970s, Lacan had set the foundations for this displacement, by theorising the pluralisation of the Name-of-the-Father in his *RSI* seminar, making it a symptom among others.\(^8\) In the 1950s the Other was seen to possess a substantial quality, with the paternal metaphor conceived as the only means to localise *jouissance* in the body and stabilise the subject, and psychosis emerging as an exception to neurosis, with foreclosure as “the nonexistence of this thing [the Name-of-the-Father] in that place”.\(^9\) In his 1975-76 seminar on Joyce, Lacan introduced the *sinthome* as a universal construction, referring to the fact that each subject is required to singularly knot his psychic structure and find a suitable form of social bond with the Other, with repression through the Name-of-the-Father as only one form of this. As Miller has underlined, Lacan’s *sinthome* is an “effort to write both signifier and jouissance in one sole trait”, that is to describe a symptomatic form which “is not a formation of the

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unconscious”, to be deciphered, but a “detached piece” which has a function for the subject, who “makes an art” of it.\textsuperscript{10} Svolos put it most succinctly: “the sinthome is nothing other than the social bond for the subject”, that is a \textit{semblant} of the Other that needs constructing for each and every subject.\textsuperscript{11} I suggest this framework may prove enlightening to read the role of the doll in \textit{Lars and the Real Girl}.

I see two stages in the film in relation to the functioning of the doll. Initially, and similar to what we saw in previous chapters, Bianca can be seen as an \textit{ersatz other} of sex and love, with the function to assist the subject in preventing the intrusion of an Other of sex and love. When Bianca is introduced to the story, she appears as an intruder, set against the social pressures to enjoy sex and coupledom, against the godly Law of “love one another”. In this sense, Bianca can be considered a clever stratagem formulated by Lars in order to deny those demands ‘as if’ accepting them, through the delusional construction of a girlfriend. Though defensive, this act of creation marks a structural change in the way Lars is perceived, and in the way laughter is produced in the film. If at the beginning Lars is a comic object in his opposition to the discursive field created in the narrative, with the introduction of the doll he becomes the creator of a joke, subjectifying his position. In this sense, an analogy can be identified between Lars’s new subjective position and the way the comic effect is produced for the audience, with a movement from a bipartite to a tripartite structure, in which the doll functions as a trestle supporting the protagonist, a subjective supplement giving him a voice.

If the doll’s initial intrusion into the Christian community is comic, in its role of hindrance to all that is deemed ‘normal’, the subsequent participation of the parishioners in the projection of the most varied narratives on the doll means that Lars acquires a life too, by proxy. We see him making himself up at the mirror, eating voraciously, for him and the doll (playing on the ‘eating for two’ motif that popular wisdom attributes to pregnant women), going to parties and so on. We may read this as a moment when a modicum of symbolic efficiency sets in, making \textit{Lars} a philosophical tale on the essential role of fiction in the creation of the Social, as “a fiction which, for contingent reasons that have nothing to do with its inherent nature, possesses performative power – is socially operative, structures the socio-symbolic reality”.\textsuperscript{12} Bianca may not be a living being but she has ‘real’ effects, functioning on a symbolic level. Based on this fundamental dynamic, my reading of the doll


\textsuperscript{11} Svolos, “Ordinary Psychosis”.

\textsuperscript{12} Žižek, \textit{The Ticklish}, 330.
in *Lars* suggests that, ultimately, it works as a *sinothome*, a formal envelope of *jouissance*, a tool able to knot the registers of experience into a stable psychic reality. Rather than signifying the eruption of *jouissance*, as in the Freudian return of the repressed, I see the doll here as a fundamentally reparative device allowing the formation of the social bond through a containment of *jouissance*. Instead of emerging as a harbinger of death it works as a narcissistic prostheses, enabling the invention of an Ego. Whereas the father figures of the story are unavailable or invisible, the doll can be seen to assume the role traditionally assigned to the paternal function, that of organising a consistent psychic experience through the curbing of *jouissance*.

The community’s projection of content onto the doll transforms it into an *ersatz-point-de-capiton*, a signifier around which Lars can be seen to organise his life and through which he is able to produce knowledge – what it means to ‘grow up’, to be a an adult man – which is what he asks of his brother Gus. In *Lars’s* world, this knowledge is a list of definite behaviours that the brother dictates to him in a scene that is a humorous re-contextualisation of a *man-to-man talk*, with Gus hustling between cooking and folding clothes in the laundry: 1) “you don’t jerk people around”, 2) you “don’t cheat on your woman”, 3) you “take care of your family” and 4) you “admit when you’re wrong” – besides doing the chores, that is (Fig. 5.16). Ethics becomes a neat list that Lars will seem to diligently put in action, repeating it to Margo, after their first night together at the bowling alley – “I’ll never cheat on Bianca [...] ’cause a man doesn’t cheat on a woman”. The efficacy of this easy-to-follow inventory will mark the obsolescence of Bianca that will subsequently be put to rest by Lars, after honouring her with a funeral, since it has done what he needed. This list delivers a problem-solving approach to the enigma of the other’s desire and we may see Lars’s social inclusion, graciously rendered in the bowling scene, as a metaphor of the consumerist approach typical of the *capitalist’s discourse*, as a means for a subject excluded from discourse to stabilise psychic reality as a mode of relating to the other.13 Gus’s list, like a database of possible solutions, can be seen as a new signifier that Lars can adopt, as a consumer, through which he can navigate how people and life ‘function’, ignoring the question of unconscious truth. If the doll’s ‘independent life’ gives Lars a prop to learn how to deal with women and other people’s ‘capricious’ demands, Gus’s list provides instrumental knowledge that he can use to transform inexplicable behaviours into more predictable demands, as for a subject attempting to wrap up the other’s *jouissance*.

13 As Vanheule has suggested, “capitalist discourse opens a market with solutions for distress, thus avoiding a confrontation with the fundamental non-rapport and with basic questions of existence, like “who am I” or “what do I want?”. In case of psychosis such avoidance is functional since a signifier for addressing these issues is lacking, as Lacan’s hypothesis of foreclosure makes clear”. See Stijn Vanheule, “Capitalist Discourse, Subjectivity and Lacanian Psychoanalysis”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, no. 7 (2016), doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01948, 11.
5.16. "Yeah, you know, yeah. I mean, it's... Yeah, it's kind of...". Gus (Paul Schneider) delivering a man-to-man talk to Lars while chopping vegetables.
The sequence of bowling with Margo is exemplary for how the same signals that caused Lars to run away at the beginning of the film – Margo’s flirtatiousness – become alluring and inviting for him, who can now actively engage in the sensual play of looking and been looked at. At this stage, we have seen in a previous scene how Lars had started to be a subject of the look, signalling the passage of status from object to subject through a redoubling of the cinematic apparatus. Like a spectator sat eating from a pack of crisps, he had watched Margo flirt with a colleague with interest (and jealousy perhaps), with the camera subjectivising his position of onlooker and Margo now the object of the look, in a reversal of the initial relationship in the Church (Fig. 5.17-5.18). The bowling scene is entirely played on this dynamic of the look, and now, for the first time, there is a glowing quality to the image, which emphasises the protagonist’s newly acquired emotional range (Fig. 5.19-5.21). We may know nothing of Lars and Margo’s real thoughts and emotions but colours and light, together with an elevating musical theme, translate excitement, flirting and seduction, albeit always within a naïve register, far from an overt sexualisation. If we visually compare Margo and Lars’s first encounter with this moment, we can appreciate how the initial opaqueness, absence of music and limited palette of beiges, greys and browns, conveying awkwardness and dullness, have turned into a softly vibrant mood of romantic colours, in which pale pinks and blues are revived with hints of yellow – a fairly popular wedding palette, in fact. Even the old-fashioned Minnesotan attire of the two appears at its best here, having lost any trace of bulkiness, their flannel check shirts and side-parted hair having acquired a more desirable hipster look, accompanied by a beaming fuchsia neon illumination from the counter, reverberating on bodies and things (Fig. 5.19). The camera movements follow the two as they alternate on the bowling lane, with a dance of coming and going, their play of looks and baroque self-conscious gestures, choreographed to the uplifting musical score, acquiring a haptic quality, as if the look of one could touch the body of the other only through the viewer’s intervention (Fig. 5.20-5.21). This is romance in the world of Lars, naïve and sexless, touching without touch, with the audience forever filling in the gaps of interrupted and enigmatic emotions.

The doll has played the role of enabler of Lars’s transformation from helplessness to active player in the theatre of his life, guiding Lars in his own private rite of passage towards manhood. To support the role of the doll as an ersatz paternal metaphor, the narrative structure suggests a doubling between Bianca and Gus, himself engaged on a path of enlightenment towards responsible fatherhood. It is Gus’s parable, as we shall see, to further imply that the doll in Lars is engaged in its narcissistic strengthening potential, rather than as an uncanny figure of annihilation, as in its Surrealist tradition.
5.17-5.18. Lars (Ryan Gosling) watching Margo (Kelly Garner) at the office.
5.19-5.21. Looks that touch in the glowing scene of the bowling.
5.2. PROPPED-UP FATHERS AND THE OTHER OF CARE

In parallel to the doll’s production of a social bond for Lars, we observe Gus’s maturation of guilt and repentance, an event as central in its unlinking of Lars’s personal development into manhood as totally predictable. The sequence of Gus confessing his guilt to Karin is very enjoyable, if read as a parody of the Christian sacrament of penance, in which the sinner takes steps towards conversion through confession, with the difference that, here, the priest is replaced by pregnant wife Karin. The camera tracks Karin in her movement from the kitchen, where she has seen Lars dancing with the doll in his garage-apartment through the kitchen window, to the lounge where Gus is sitting in an armchair, fidgeting with his ring and looking pensive, like someone waiting for the curate to enter the confessional. He discloses his sins of selfishness to the wife-priest, while the camera gets closer to him with a close-up, cutting to show Karin’s face empathising with this penitent sinner, and thus inviting us to do the same (Fig. 5.22). To the husband’s assumption of guilt – “It’s all my fault”, which replaces his previous mantra “it’s not my fault”– Karin relieves him with an unfinished sentence, before inviting him onto the sofa for a hug, as a sign of granted absolution. If penance requires “the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction”, Gus’s development can be seen to do just that, repenting of his previous ‘selfishness’ towards the younger brother, and declaring his ‘humility’, here efficiently rendered in the assumption of the most awkward, floppy posture (Fig. 5.23).¹ Lars’s car launched on a downhill road, in the following shot, signals the success of the sacrament of healing, informing us metaphorically that the story has taken the ‘right direction’ towards a happy ending.

At this turning point in the narrative, we find a symbolic handover between Gus and Bianca, with the former becoming a loving compassionate father-figure discarding his initial negative traits of intolerance and negativity, absorbed by the latter – a classic split between ‘good father’ and ‘bad father’, worthy of a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann. However, where in The Sandman it is the good father who dies, leaving poor Nathaniel in the clutches of bad father Coppelius-Coppola which will guide him to his fatal end in madness, in the fairy-land of Lars the opposite is the case. Shuffling tropes from the gothic and the horror genre with the fairy tale, the scene of Lars’s quarrel with Bianca at the lake informs us that Lars has developed an interest in Margo, and that Bianca has now become a dominant, capricious and jealous character, who reproaches and “yells” at him.²

² The very long shot in which we overhear Lars arguing with Bianca in the car can be seen as a humorous pastiche of Hitchcock’s same trope in Psycho, when a still of the house from a long distance is the only visual concession to
5.22-5.23. Gus (Paul Schneider) in the sequence of his penance with his wife Karin (Emily Mortimer).

the reprimand that Mother makes to Norman. Far from *Psycho*, in the world of *Lars* the loneliness and mental illness of the protagonist is taken care of by (several) mother figures and propped-up fathers.
The construction of the father appears as a double concern in Lars, first in the guise of Bianca as an ersatz paternal metaphor, and then in that of Gus as a mythical New Father, an updated (good) version of the old (dead and bad) paterfamilias. Before the arrival of the doll, the world of Lars appears to be a society characterised by the dominance of strong women and the failure of men who, nonetheless, occupy centre stage, as the main protagonists: Lars is an ‘incompetent’ man, indeed a 27-year old ‘boy’, and Gus an incompetent father. Women ‘wear the trousers’, with Karin as the supreme governess, always quick witted and empathetic,cooling the frenzied husband down with firmness and compassion. She will land on Lars’s back, immobilising him on the floor, in order to invite him to come over for “salmon and cherry pie”, while Dagmar will be seen delivering a relaxing back massage to Lars, curled in foetal position in the consultation room. The women’s role as ‘governesses’ is a central element conveying the film’s story as an initiation journey for the two brothers who, like fairy tale heroes in their route to self-actualisation, “will be guided step by step, and given help when it is needed” by stable, strong, motherly female figures. It is the strength and compassion of the women that guides the narrative and allows the development of their male counterparts towards manhood (Lars) and responsible fatherhood (Gus). Within this quest, the doll can be seen to be an educational prop for both, allowing Lars to learn how to deal with a feminine other, and dad-to-be Gus to rehearse basic parental skills, taking care of Bianca like a child – washing, carrying and dressing her – in the family home with Karin.

While Lars’s women in their strength and wisdom are unchanging pillars, the role of Gus in initiating Lars to the mysteries of manhood, and his own development through guilt and penance, makes of him a substitute father, albeit one ‘in the making’, as a double of Bianca as ersatz paternal metaphor. Read in this way, the film opens an interesting dialogue with the debate on fatherhood that, particularly in the U.S., has been a major cultural and political concern in the last few decades. The discursive construction of ‘responsible fatherhood’ has been advanced by organisations such as the Fatherhood Responsibility Movement, a network of associations active since the mid-1990s, which, although related to several cross-party federal initiatives promoting family and child wellbeing, has typically expressed a conservative agenda in terms of family values and gender roles, especially in its pro-marriage wing. The Movement shares with a vast array of other interest groups the widespread notion of father absence as the root of social pathology, whereby fatherlessness is seen as “one of the greatest social evils of our generation”, an “engine driving our worst

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1 Bettelheim, *The Uses*, 11.
social problems, from crime and teen pregnancy to child poverty and domestic violence”. On the other side, if fathers have lost their legal authority in the family, they have gained a new central role in recent legislation in relation to the emotional and psychological wellbeing of children, becoming the “producer[s] of normal, heterosexual children, the stabilizing anti-delinquency agent, and the bringer[s] of realistic values and the desire for achievement”. The Fatherhood Responsibility Movement can be seen to add a masculinist narrative to this framework, claiming that, since the family has become “feminised”, the reestablishment of fathers ought to imply the masculinisation of fatherhood, in a double attempt to domesticate men and separate them from any “feminising” connotations of family involvement. As social anthropologist Anna Gavanas has pointed out, Christianity has emerged as “a common ground where different constituencies of men come together within the Fatherhood Responsibility Movement”, with religious metaphors used to assert a notion of male leadership, as a part of their ideas of gendered division of labour. The 1997 gathering of the Christian Promise Keepers, in Washington, is a conspicuous example of such a contemporary plea for a renewed leading role for fathers, exhorted “not to ask” for their role but to “take it back” from wives, since “men should lead their families like Christ lead the Church”.

In relation to this context, the fundamental joke of the film is to offer a fairy tale of the construction of responsible fatherhood not only as an Other of (motherly) care, in which the father has, in fact, to be ‘feminised’ in order to succeed, but also as a figure finally unable to produce the hoped-for ‘normal, heterosexual children’, since Lars is not exactly a picture of heterosexual masculinity by the end of the film. In relation to Gus, it is clear that he begins his parabola in the skin of the old, uncompromising paterfamilias and the comic gags based on his rigidity create a distance from such a figure, albeit through an affective lens. His initial point of view, unsympathetically judgemental and emotionally distant, is opposed to Karin’s point of view, whose look toward Lars is one of care. Although described as a ‘good husband’, always busy in the kitchen among pans and chopping boards, Gus can be seen, initially, to be identified to the old (dead) father, as an absent and resented figure towards Lars. The failure of “the old man” is first subsumed and then expiated through Gus’s act of contrition, from which he will embrace Karin’s view that Lars is worthy of love, notwithstanding his attachment for a “fiancée in a box”. Gus’s self-perceived fault is to have

5 David Blankenhorn, in Wade F. Horn et al., The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999), 170.
9 Tony Evans (leader of the Promise Keeper), quoted in McGowan, The End of Dissatisfaction?, 45.
been absent, associated with selfishness – “I left home as fast as I could”, “I never thought about him”. The father is thus restored in the film, but as a present, all-loving figure, as opposed to the absent old paterfamilias. Through the functional role of the doll, the story can accordingly be seen to allegorise the removal of an unforgiving (Freudian) paternal figure – an agent of prohibition, distant from the subject’s ways of jouissance - in favour of an agency which is present and called to guarantee the individual’s enjoyment.

It is exactly this hateable characterisation of the old father that the poor doll will end up absorbing and, as such, is disposed of to make space for the compassionate manners of Gus the New Father. In this view, the doll’s ‘dead’ body emerges as the paterfamilias’s kőlossos rather than a maternal object, as in the classical cinematic and cultural tradition, namely that which needs to be abandoned in order for Gus to fully embrace the new ideal of the caring, present father. After all, Bianca is the only one ‘yelling’ at Lars, towards the end of the film, the only bearer of prohibition, in a world bathed in the benevolence of the right to enjoy. Of course these are fantasy-psychoanalytical speculations in a fairy tale world of infinite (reading) possibilities such as Lars, but the diegesis is more lucid than expected in offering an allegory of the post-Oedipal ideal of a familiarised society, where, as opposed to the traditional public sphere of activity, public institutions do not exist to discipline or regulate the individual’s conduct, but to narcissistically facilitate his or her emotional wellbeing and self-actualisation. The absurdist premise of an entire community playing make-believe with a sex doll for the sake of the wellbeing of one ‘good boy’ could not be a better satire of the ‘therapeutisation’ observed in Western societies, where public institutions have increasingly assumed the role of “ersatz families”, as Žižek put it.10

The responsible father that Lars’s world ‘props up’, in its fundamental absorption of Karin’s maternal point of view, can be read in opposition to the conservative politics of groups, such as the Promise Keepers and the like, calling for the return of an authoritarian father of prohibition, able to restore discipline and the moral education of the young. The film could not better mock contemporary conservative attempts at ‘masculinisation’ of fathers and the reaffirmation of traditional, gendered division of labour in the family. In Lars, it would seem that men are, on the contrary, being called upon to recover their feminine-compassionate aspect, with sexual difference apparently reinscribed as the men’s ‘disturbed

10 Žižek, The Ticklish, 343. Psychologist and philosopher Ole Jacob Madsen, writing on the ‘therapeutic turn’ in Western culture, takes this issue one step further when he underlines how religion has emerged as a primary arena of therapeutisation, where the notion of God found in contemporary American and European Christian circles emerges as the ultimate guarantor of the individual’s path to successful self-actualisation. As the One who is ‘always there to help’, God does not impose constraints anymore but is closer to a ”cosmic therapist” who “administrates rights” and imposes obligations only to a limited extent, “wholly keeping with the therapeutic ethos in which the Self is the foremost authority”. See Ole Jacob Madsen, The Therapeutic Turn: How Psychology Altered Western Culture (London/New York: Routledge, 2014), 48.
equilibrium’ between their feminine and masculine archetypal traits. In relation to this dynamic, the film exposes how the figure of the doll is appropriated from its original feminine roots, both to signpost the protagonist’s path to manhood and the ideological passage between the old Father of the Freudian tradition to the modern New Father of presence. Lars can be seen as an allegory of a cultural shift, a moment where a system “restructures its rules in order to accommodate itself to new conditions by incorporating the originally subversive moment”: the compassionate ‘maternal’ is not in opposition to the ‘paternal’, but the first is subsumed by the latter.\(^\text{11}\)

Historically a female initiation figure, the doll in this story becomes the enabler of the men’s self-actualisation. We saw in Chapter 1 how the doll’s role in the fairy tale is that of a magic object with a strong maternal connotation, with the function to accompany the young woman to marriage, often creating the conditions for it. I noticed how the doll’s role as magic helper in the folk tradition translates its historical place within classical antiquity’s female hereditary transmission and initiatory rituals. In being offered by Greek and Roman young women to the temple on the eve of their wedding, the pūpa and the kōre were considered not only an apotropaic object, as a double of the living child, but also a symbol of female virginity, a double of the (symbolically) ‘dead’ child, in a rite of separation from childhood. The film engages ingeniously with this tradition, peppering it with more virile undertones of physical pain, displays of courage and the ability to control one’s emotions, commonly associated to male rites of passage.\(^\text{12}\)

However, in doing so Lars and the Real Girl not only shows knowledge of the cultural sources, and the will to thus entertain a savvy viewer in the know, but it also applies a twist to the consoling causality of the fairy tale and the symbolic efficacy of initiation rituals, through a final undermining of the ‘magic’ it has created. Although the film can be seen to reach a happy conclusion in the final formation of the couple, it does not deliver the satisfaction that its consoling premises had led us to expect. There is a doubt about the doll’s efficacy to achieve the ‘mature sexuality’ that its historical and cultural tradition would imply. Lars and Margo as a couple are sketched in the bowling scene, as we have seen, which gives an anticipation of what their love could look like. At the end of that sequence, after the sensual glowing of pinks and blues under the light of neon, we see the two exchanging a gentle handshake in the dark of the snowy night, signalling that touch for Lars does not ‘burn’ anymore. Instead of consenting to the overly-familiar romantic-comedy cliché of the final kiss, it is the fairy tale ambience here that shines through in a rather explicit reference to Little Red Cap, with Margo looking innocent and sweet, her rosy cheeks

\(^{11}\) Žižek, The Ticklish, 328.

\(^{12}\) The sequence of the doll’s funeral can be also read in relation to ancient pagan ceremonies involving korai and pupae and to Japan’s present-day Buddhist ceremony of the ningyo kuyo, a funeral for dolls held in temples.
5.24. Margo (Kelly Garner) as a *Little Blue Cap*. 
framed by the natural coloured soft fur trimming her hooded cloak (Fig. 5.24). But then Margo is not the passionate and inconsiderate Little Red Cap, wearing instead a cloak tinted in a more sober Virgin-Mary blue, so as to underline her distance from the former’s “budding sexuality”.

After this differently romantic scene, in the final sequence of the film which is set at the cemetery after the doll’s funeral, Lars’s leaner and fresher appearance on a spring sunny day, having scrapped the baby blanket, suggests that he has made his transition into manhood, but there is no clear sign of a ‘maturation’ into heterosexual sexuality. Here, again, we find the film’s reflexive approach in its play with the classic Hollywood cinema trope of a male protagonist fixated at an infantile sexual development stage at the beginning of the film, who, by the end, grows into ‘mature sexuality’. On one hand, Lars suggests a developmental cycle through the allegory of the passage from winter to spring and from doll to ‘real girl’, while, on the other, what we are finally presented with is a self-conscious display of conventions at the level of genre and gender. The couple is formed, but the camera shows it with an odd lateral angle, with the two standing beside each other at the grave side. In a pause in the scarce irrelevant dialogue, Lars closes his eyes, as an actor in recollection before the performance, and creasing his forehead with a frown he finally pronounces his invitation to Margo – “do you want to go for a walk?” – with the kind of masculine erotic assertiveness that Gosling is known for, off screen, as a sexy icon (Fig. 5.25-5.27). It seems that Lars can do heterosexual masculinity, and that is all we know about his transformation. This is a subtle moment of subversive comedy, where the subjective movement towards the belief in the master signifier (heterosexual masculinity) comes to the fore, and identification with it shows as a moment of disidentification.

The romantic colour palette returns in this final scene, brightened up by the natural warm but pale light of springtime, with the two wearing the same combination of colours in romantic blue and pink. They are indeed a perfect match, but surely disappointing as a classic romantic couple. ‘Real girl’ Margo has demonstrated to be no more three-dimensional than Real Doll Bianca, or less child-like than Lars, in this sense a rather improbable ‘object-cause’ of desire for his male counterpart. Flat as gingerbread dolls on a wedding cake,

1 Bettelheim, *The Uses*, 173.

5.25-5.27. The final sequence in *Lars and the Real Girl.*
both have not easily lent themselves to identification, due to their psychological inconsistency and general affective vagueness. This is their charm, as a visual question mark attempting to posit the impossible scenario of romance beyond the Oedipal constellation, in a story whose utopian horizon affirms that to be ‘good’ you are allowed to be ill, inefficient and have troubles. Through the reflexive adoption of the building blocks of the fairy tale form the film seems to suggest that a sense of self, masculinity and fatherhood are similarly realities to be constructed, while the a-historical fairy tale temporality makes us dream of new possible myths to be written, on the ashes of the inefficiency of the old Oedipal norm. However, unlike fairy tales with their definite clear ending, Lars’s finale is open, ambiguous, suggesting another beginning but without any promise that the newly formed couple will lead to a future, let alone a happy one.

My reading of Lars has underlined how the figure of the doll, exposed in many of its cultural and historical nuances – with links to psychoanalysis, the anthropology of the kolossós, and its literary magic role within the fairy tale – ultimately emerges as an object enabling the stabilisation of subjectivity and the formation of sociality, in dramatic opposition to the traditional Surrealist reading of it as a figure of the uncanny. While the modernist use of doubling and mirroring is based on a concept of psychosis as a “loss of ego substance”, a “decline in the feeling of personality and life”, in Lars the double embodied by Bianca can be read as a device enabling psychic stability, carrying a subject initially excluded from discourse into a social bond.¹ In contrast to other readings of Lars, based on a maternal characterisation of the doll that turns the film in a traditional art form and a fundamental nostalgic piece, in this chapter I have focused on the doll as an ersatz-paternal function. This allows to account for the centrality that the issue of fatherhood plays in the film and reveals the actuality of it in connection to debates on the decline of traditional forms of symbolic authority in Western civilisation. I have remarked how the doll can be read in connection to its fairy tale role of magic helper, rather than as a figure of subversion and death, and be contextualised by referring to current psychoanalytic discussions on the sinthome as an invention that can substitute for an ‘Other that does not exist’.

¹ Hollier, ”Mimesis”, 11; Caillois, ”Mimicry”, 30.
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This thesis has explored how contemporary forms of the doll can be seen to mark an aesthetic and psychic shift away from a traditional interpretation of this figure as a motif of the uncanny and its connections with loss and castration. Through a close formal analysis of photographic and cinematic work produced between 1989 and 2016, this thesis has found the doll to be an object of visual pleasure, an associate of a capitalist jouissance-turned-Law, a device of narcissistic reinforcement and an enabler of sociality, beyond the traditional dynamics of the Oedipus. Throughout the preceding five chapters, I have proposed conjoining the fields of art history and critical theory with a recent corpus of psychoanalytic theories that have emerged in the Lacanian School, testing their potential as an aesthetic model. The discourse of the capitalist, the sinthome and ordinary psychosis – the main constructs used in this project – deal with the “evaporation of the Father” and the crisis of (unconscious) desire in the contemporary discourse of civilisation.¹ If the capitalist’s discourse has been adopted as the frame to account for the problematic denial of lack implied in the hypermodern proximity of the libidinal object, discussions about the sinthome and ordinary psychosis have offered a view of new ways to curb jouissance within the contemporary decline of traditional forms of symbolic authority. The sinthome, a symptom functioning as a “place-holder” for the Name-of-the-Father, implies the possibility of managing jouissance through a formal envelope, rather than only through repression by means of the Name-of-the-Father.²

As I analysed in detail in Chapter 1, the notion of lack is central to an understanding of the Freudian concept of the uncanny and the modern doll. As Freud underlines in his 1919 essay, it is repression that gives rise to the effect of the uncanny.³ The lost object thus rises like a ghost in front of the subject, which is pierced with an image of death. The Ego is annihilated before the emergence of the lost object. The case studies presented in this project have explored what becomes of the doll, and of the image, once lack is not the central issue in the dominant mode of subjectivity. I have asked how we might describe the

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² Miller, “Ordinary Psychosis Revised”, 161.
visual effects of the doll once *jouissance* is not hampered or inhibited, but rather becomes the "compass of our civilisation".\(^4\)

This project has arisen from the realisation that recent photographic forms of dolls possessed none of the traditional distinctive qualities and effects of their avant-garde predecessors. I have offered a synthesis of these aspects in *Chapter 1*, where I attended to the classical role of the doll as a figure of disruption, between narcissistic presence and symbolic absence, due to its connection to a moment of loss. I have followed Rosalind Krauss’s classic reading of Bellmer’s dolls and Hal Foster’s understanding of postmodern human replicas through his notion of *traumatic realism* as ways to trace the links between the doll and a concept of visuality held in the theories of the uncanny, *mimicry*, the *informe*, the *punctum* and the Lacanian gaze. Moving from the visual arts to classic texts by Charles Baudelaire, Rainer Maria Rilke and Victor Hugo, central to the cultural history of dolls, I have identified how the modern doll is defined by its ability to reveal, through doubling, the fundamental split of the subject of the unconscious.

From a formal point of view, the potential of the uncanny to blur boundaries – ultimately the boundary between the Ego and the unconscious, between Law and *jouissance* – has traditionally been translated in devices aimed at the creation of ambivalence: between self and other, past and present, interior and exterior, rational and irrational, and so on. Photography and the doll, through their structure of doubling as a way to create a moment of anamorphosis, have classically been perfect associates in this mission of disrupting modern forms of subjectivity and art conventions. Attacks on the contours of the body, distortion of perspective, rotation from verticality to horizontality, blurring, flashing and other technical means of image manipulation, together with the production of a sense of dread or oneiric atmosphere through the use of light and colour, have all typically been described as photographic means able to create the menacing effects of the uncanny.\(^5\) This project is subtitled ‘the end of the uncanny’ because, primarily, the aesthetic qualities of the works analysed cannot be captured through an aesthetics of anamorphosis. Foregrounding flatness and presence, visual pleasure and a general atmosphere of distension, they do not lend themselves to being read through a framework which would point to (unconscious) depth, absence and unsettling effects of ambivalence and threat.

Ultimately, however, the aesthetic deployment of the uncanny has been connected to the assumption that its effects are based on a personal, individual level, and as such it has been central to the valorisation of a kind of art playing on the side of the primacy of the beholder’s experience in defining its meaning. The uncanny can be seen as a central device for asserting the ‘theatrical’, as opposed to a model of contemplation, and as such there was

\(^4\) Miller, “A Fantasy”, 6.
\(^5\) See Krauss, “Corpus Delicti”; Foster, *The Return*. 

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a return towards this, particularly in the 1990s, in an attempt to counteract the post-structuralist model of the simulacral. In my Introduction, I touched on Mike Kelley’s *The Uncanny* and Hal Foster’s notion of *traumatic realism* as two major examples of such a deployment of the structure of the uncanny as a means to oppose a model of the image as lack of depth, and of the subject as devoid of affect and history. However, on a structural level, to be pierced by the uncanny means one is *lack-of-being*, a subject of the unconscious as desire. The challenge that the case studies analysed in this thesis has opened is precisely to think beyond this subject of desire, beyond the Oedipus. The implications of my reflections here have pointed to the aesthetic consequences of Lacan’s *discourse of the capitalist*, which is a structural impossibility of the uncanny within the contemporary discourse of civilisation.

The thesis has explored the contemporary figure of the doll in relation to a realm of a visuality whose position contradicts an aesthetics of the uncanny. The work of Olivier Rebufa, analysed in Chapter 2, opened my series of case studies, presenting a focus on visual and psychic flatness that I read as the oxymoron of a *historic simulacrum*, able to create a subjectivising effect through play and the metonymy of the series. I argued that Rebufa’s focus on the stereotype, mirroring and lack of perspectival depth become signifiers for the psychic flatness of the narcissistic subject of the *discourse of the capitalist*, while the evidence of montage reveals the image’s own constructedness, deflating its simulacral power. As a sculptural and performative form of photography, the image can be seen to pre-empt the truth-effect of the Barthian *punctum*, rooted in the unconscious, while simultaneously working conceptually as a form of *divertissement* with the potential to distance the viewer. Death is a miniature figurine literalised in an amusing *tableau*, but the interminability of the series might push a capitalist viewer requiring enjoyment towards the hysterical gap of a question. I argued that it is the structure of play of Rebufa’s self-portraits with dolls that, ultimately, creates a fissure between immersion in the illusion and distance, enjoyment and self-awareness. Reading this work as a *historical simulacrum*, I pointed to the paradoxical condition of a play of surfaces as a means to achieve the “retrospective dimension” of a project of reorientation within the confusion of contemporary capitalist experience. This is the paradox of a poison taken as treatment, which can be seen as a *leitmotif*, parallel to the *sithome* as a form of enjoyment able to defend against the Real, which I also followed in subsequent chapters.

After introducing superego enjoyment in relation to Rebufa’s capitalist fantasia, Chapter 3 looked at Stephan Gladieu’s photographic documentary on men living with erotic

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6 Among recent examples, see Tamara Trodd, “Thomas Demand, Jeff Wall and Sherrie Levine: Deforming ‘Pictures’”, in Costello and Iversen, *Photography After*, 130-152.
dolls, which I read as devices of protection against the threat of *jouissance*, perceived in the Other. In *Silicone Love* dolls appear animated and mere things at the same time, with a clear authorial intervention in the documentary’s emphasis on the dolls’ simulacral auto-referentiality or objectual inertia. In this chapter I argued that this strategy, whereby the fantasy of the doll’s aliveness is never assumed in the image, and is indeed counteracted by an exposure of its constructedness, works as a means of de-fetishisation. On a thematic level, the documentary’s careful use of composition, perspective, symmetry and colour was seen to expose a kernel of closure and protection in the phenomenon of the love doll. I read the use of artificial light, the setting in self-enclosed interiors and the lack of space, coupled with an insistence on symmetrical composition, as a suggestion of a paranoid logic of exclusion. Alongside a formal emphasis on control, I interpreted the doll as a device of defence, rather than ambivalence – the true dimension of the unconscious and the uncanny. The chapter concluded that Gladieu’s doll, far from emerging as a ‘harbinger of death’, functions as a crutch of the Ego, a narcissistic prosthesis *de-Realised* from any contamination with *jouissance*.

Gladieu’s documentary offered an introduction to the love doll as a figure of contemporary popular and material culture, forming a precursor to the subsequent two chapters’ focus on photographic and filmic works who have adopted it as a central signifier. After reading Gladieu’s doll hygienist formalism as the allegory of an ‘anorexic gesture’, as a device set against the intrusion of the Other through an act of will, I proposed viewing Laurie Simmons’s lavishly pictorial *Love Doll* series, in Chapter 4, in relation to a bulimic logic of addition and addiction. In terms of *jouissance*, something is added rather than subtracted. I described the exquisiteness of Simmons’s Japanese doll, set within airy, elegant interiors and treated through pictorial means and hyper-definition, as an ‘image-substance’, instigating a passion for fullness in the beholder. The chapter identified an oxymoron in the series between the immediate enjoyment of the image’s visual magnificence and an atmosphere of repose, emerging from the image’s measured treatment of light and colour, and the emphasis on the doll’s innocence. This is an oxymoron that I called ‘enjoyment as repose’, explored through a Lacanian understanding of addiction, in order to conceive a form of hyper-stimulation in its protective effects. In Simmons’s *Love Doll* series we can see a synthesis between the capitalist injunction to enjoy, encountered in Rebuffa’s figure of Barbie as the Other who enjoys, and the issue of protection described in the work of Gladieu. However, whereas Gladieu’s focus on protection can be seen to evoke a will to master the Real through a paranoid move of distillation whereby *jouissance* is left in the Other, I stressed Simmons’s pictorial splendour as being an *image-substance* that instigates craving. The framework of the capitalist’s discourse, with the un-mediated proximity between subject and object and the denial of lack therein, was my reference point.
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in this chapter for framing the image’s imposition of visual satisfaction and a seeming indifference for under-text.

From different perspectives, in this thesis I have tried to describe the doll as a figure opposed to the classical conception of the subject as lack of being and of the visual field as field of the gaze. It is particularly in Chapter 4 where this dynamics finds a visual paradigmatic form unhindered by devices of restraint, which are found in the other case studies. I have proposed seeing Simmons’s image-geisha as offering a jouissance floating on a surface and knotted in form instead of being repressed. It is the clearest art form, among those analysed, in which the doll acquires a distilled visual form as a device of doubling, which affords a psychic stability instead of posing a threat to it. The doll-image does not divide, as in the classical Lacanian diagram of the gaze, but offers a modicum of stability through a formal envelope of jouissance.

This shift in the way the image is linked to the Real, thereby creating effects for the viewer, can be seen as the shift from the image as locus of the (Freudian) symptom to the image as sinthome – doing, rather than meaning, something for the viewer. This dynamics returns in Lars and the Real Girl’s narrative structure, in Chapter 5, in relation to the film’s association of the figure of the doll with the issue of fatherhood. Flatness, abstraction and atemporality, often seen as handicaps of the film, are assumed in my reading to be purposeful aesthetic choices, which, borrowing from the structure of the fairy tale genre, manage to point to a post-Oedipal aesthetics. Lars updates the fairy tale role of the doll as magic helper, seen in Chapter 1, in its characterisation of Bianca as enabler of the social bond. The doll creates the social bond, instead of hindering it, as in the tradition of the uncanny. My chapter based its argument on the doubling between the doll and Gus as the paternal figure of the narrative, in this way opposing conventional readings of the film which engage with the doll as a maternal object. A lookalike of a maternal object, the doll is seen in the chapter to function, structurally, as an ersatz-paternal metaphor, becoming a kolossós of the ‘bad’ absent father, finally dying to make space for the ‘good’ present New Father (Gus), at the end of the film.

Typically an object related to female initiatory rituals, in Lars the doll enables men’s self-actualisation, marking the moment of a cultural passage between the old father of absence, unconcerned with jouissance, and a new father of presence, whose role is to guarantee jouissance. However, what I have described in Chapter 5, through recourse to the sinthome, is a cultural shift whereby the conventional binary divides between the maternal and the paternal, the realms of presence and of absence, the spheres of jouissance and of Law, are overcome. Lars’s engagement of the doll as enabler of sociality, as an ersatz-Name-of-the-Father, contradicts the modern idea of the doll as a device of subjective
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separation and social disruption, proposing the hypermodern doll as a supplementary device with symbolic effects.

Arguing that these works foreground the figure of the doll as a cypher of the contemporary evaporation of the Father should not be taken as an indication of a cultural regressive tendency. There is a fundamental lack of backward posture and nostalgia in the way these works engage with the doll, and I have tried to read them through an equally non-nostalgic tone. The case studies analysed mobilise psychoanalytic notions – such as doubling, narcissism, paranoia, scopophilia, and psychosis – which could appear as a simple rehearsal of old themes and issues if assessed using a traditional psychoanalytic aesthetics. This thesis has tried to highlight the ways in which they may, in fact, point to a post-Oedipal aesthetic and subjective dimension. Rebufa can be seen to update narcissism for the 1990s, coupling his flat display of enjoyment with a suggestion of duty and apathy. The contemporary figure of the narcissist as the new exemplary citizen – narcissism as the "socially mandatory form of subjectivity" within capitalist's discourse – has indeed been one major leitmotif running through this thesis.\(^8\) I have suggested that the post-1968 deployment of primary narcissism, conceived as a strategy for the liberation of jouissance, with a view to delivering cultural and political subversion, might have become anachronistic. The hope to create cultural shock through a flaunting of enjoyment or the creation of an encounter with the Real, advanced in The Uncanny or Abject Art, for instance, can be seen, with hindsight, to have underestimated the convergence between the capitalist discourse and the invitation to get past one's inhibitions.

The liberation of jouissance, the mission that aligned Surrealism to Freudianism in the first half of the twentieth century, has indeed been a “sensational success”, the consequences of which contemporary psychoanalysts (and cultural politics) are attempting to deal with.\(^9\) As J.-A. Miller has put it, “Freudian practice anticipated the rise of the object small a to the social zenith and this practice contributed to its installation”.\(^10\) Far from being lost, the libidinal object rules within the contemporary discourse of civilisation and as such it is hardly conceivable as a ‘bone in the throat’ of the Symbolic. Still thought in the 1990s as a disruption of dominant discourse, the revelation of the Real through traumatic realism can be seen, at best, as a reflection of the status quo.

The fetish has emerged as another notion that might usefully be subjected to a revision of its cultural and political potential. In my chapter on Gladieu, I asked what the situational value of the fetish might be within the contemporary capitalist discourse. If the object is lost in perversion, and belief has the function to deny it, as opposed to neurosis’s

\(^8\) Žižek, “‘Pathological Narcissus’”, 234.
\(^9\) Miller, “A Fantasy”, 11.
\(^10\) ibidem.
acceptance of it, how are we to conceive the object of the capitalist's discourse, with its attachment to the subject? Is the love doll a fetish object, as suggested by Marquard Smith?¹¹ I have read Gladieu’s love doll as a device of protection from enjoyment, within a notion of closure and defence to be intended not as a regressive move, but as an adaptive strategy within the context of the capitalist compulsion to enjoy. In this sense, the doll does not appear as a substitute for a woman but as a partner beyond the human, not as a misogynistic choice but as an asexual choice.

All the art forms analysed suggest a coupling of simulacral flatness and affective intensity, in this sense pointing beyond the postmodern simulacrum as “waning of affect”.¹² Flatness has emerged as a fundamental signifier. We encountered it in the depthless fantasia of Rebufa’s cut-out figures within a sculptural photographic world; in Gladieu’s authorial choice of disruption of the doll’s aliveness; in Simmons’s construction of enjoyment without gaze; and in Lars’s protagonist’s lack of psychological depth and interruption of conventional identificatory dynamics. In these works’ coupling of flatness with enjoyment, out of the dynamics of the repressed, the binary between affect and the simulacrum, central in the debates that I have recalled between Deitch and Kelley, and between the simulacrum and affect, loses its relevance. I opened my project, in the Introduction, with the oxymoron between a concept of reality as repulsive excess and, conversely, as simulacral flattening out. The notion of an image and of a subject, at once hyper-affective and lacking in depth, has traversed the entire thesis, in relation to the new organisation of jouissance as unknotted from the traditional symbolic level of a regulating agency. In their different modalities, the case studies analysed point to an excess-with-flatness, a Real intensity floating on a surface, beyond the post-Freudian dynamics of the Real as trauma. We can see the contemporary doll pointing to a simulacrum which is not only in direct relationship with the Real, beyond the dynamics of symbolic alienation, but organises it through form. The image becomes a substitute for a failing paternal Law.

The contemporary doll might point to the fact that the Imaginary is not disrupted by the crisis of the Symbolic, as suggested by Foster in The Return of the Real, but is instead reinforced, presenting one possible solution to the problem of naming the Real, creating a modicum of psychic consistency. The return of dolls and mannequins in contemporary art can be seen as a preoccupation with the role of the image in its new capacity of organising psychic consistency where the Symbolic has failed. Rather than veiling and unveiling a repressed Real, the image might be seen enveloping an un-symbolized Real, knotting it on the surface. The play of mimicry opened by the dolls of Rebufa, Gladieu, Simmons and Lars and the Real Girl seems to have relinquished its modernist connection to “legendary

¹² Jameson, Postmodernism, 11.
psychasthenia”, as a loss of Ego boundaries, to relate, instead, to a doubling as
reinforcement of the Ego. Beyond the Freudian unconscious, the doll has been seen in this
thesis as a supplement of the Ego, a protection against the Real and a device preoccupied to
hold the different registers of experience together.

Reading the doll through the lens of the capitalist’s discourse and the sinthome, we
are able to valorise these works’ forward-thinking potential. It should be clear by now that
the imaginary strengthening to which I have related the image-doll is not to be understood
in relation to a soothing restoration of a modernist ideal of subjectivity as idealised whole, or
of the image as an ‘autonomous’, ‘anti-theatrical’ entity. The subject and the image in
question in these works have appeared as hybrids. The doll has been associated with an
overlapping of traditional boundaries between practices – photography, performance,
sculpture, painting, documentary – and between genres – comedy, drama, fairy tale –
contravening any notion of a pure medium. I have suggested that it is precisely this semiotic
liminality of the doll that makes it a central device in contemporary art. Its semiotic
indecisiveness as an image and an object at the limit of personhood can be seen as the ideal
starting point to explore the post-medium condition of the contemporary image.

In relation to the art-historical contextualisation of the return of the figure to which I
referred in the Introduction, the case studies of this thesis can certainly be seen to play
within the post-conceptual legacy of Minimalism and its ‘theatricality’. A post-medium
condition is associated with strong authorial intentionality within them, through the
proposition of a highly constructed and formalist image, as well as with a ‘theatrical’ and
conceptual force. I have read Olivier Rebufa’s Bimbeloterie as a wholly constructed fantasia
engaging the beholder through a sado-masochistic structure as well as through play;
Stephan Gladieu’s pictorial documentary as a fiction qua document; Laurie Simmons’s large
scale pictorial photography as maximally theatrical, as an image that ‘badly’ wants to create
(Real) effects for the viewer; and Lars and the Real Girl as a post-narrative cinematic
experience, at once closed (to conventional identificatory dynamics) and open (to curiosity).
Therefore, if I subscribe to linking dolls and mannequins within the art-historical trajectory of
Minimalism, as suggested by Mike Kelley, Hal Foster and Isabelle Shaw, among others, I
have proposed a substantial amendment. This thesis has understood these figures’ condition
as “quasi-subjects” through the constructs of a post-Oedipal subjectivity, beyond the notion
of the Real as what is totally excluded from the Symbolic. Objects, images and persons
have appeared to be coordinated in a logic that goes beyond the old binaries of interior-
exterior, form-formless, conscious-unconscious, Law-jouissance.

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13 See Caillois, "Mimicry”.
14 See Fried, Why Photography Matters.
15 Shaw, Art and Subjecthood, 14.
Ultimately, the image-doll of this thesis can be seen to open the problem of a definition of the work of art beyond the traditional dynamics of lack. I spoke of the symbol, in Chapter 1, as the horizon opened by absence (of the mother). The hypermodern doll seems instead to suggest a post-symbolic creative dimension opening beyond the realm of the “elevation of an object to the dignity of the Thing”, beyond the empty space of lack.\(^\text{16}\) This might suggest interesting questions on new ways to theorise the aesthetic object, traditionally connected to lack, both in production and reception. The image-doll seems to point to a different paradigm of contemporary visuality, still to be theorised, whereby the signifier is directly linked with *jouissance*, beyond the classical construct of the repressed. This is not to suggest that the image may be Real. Like a subject always in need of a way to limit the Real, in order to be human, the artwork is always a framed event. However, the dimension that I have explored in the analysis of the doll through the theory of ordinary psychosis and the *sinthome* is precisely the intertwining of the image with the Real, enveloped in a post-Oedipal knot. The doll, with its fundamental semiotic liminality and anthropological complexity, introduces us once again, to curiosity, and asks for an effort to think newly about aesthetics in the era of the *evaporated Father*.

\(^{16}\) Lacan, *The Other Side*, 141, 165.
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