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5. ‘The Brilliance of Invisibility’: Tracking the Body in the Society of the Spectacle

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[W]e need, as counterweight to the theory of the commodity as a form of alienated social relations, a parallel one of its evocation of endless desire.

—Timothy J. Clark, *Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?*

Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* extends Marx’s analysis of the commodity form to comprehend a consumer society marked by a surfeit of images. Rather than fall into the now familiar postmodern argument of the disappearance of the real and its replacement by the image, Debord centralizes the continuing importance of thinking the mediation between reality and appearance. *The Society of the Spectacle* characterizes the shift from the possession of the commodity to the appearance of images in the transition from ‘having’ to ‘appearing’ (Debord, 1995, p. 16). Debord defines the effect of this transition thus: ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather it is a social relation between people mediated by images’ (p. 12). The commodity-form’s mediation of alienated social relations, which Marx deciphers, and the manifest visibility of proliferating images must be thought together. The commodity-form and images function in similar fashion, by firstly mediating alienated social relations, and secondly, by making invisible this process of mediation. Debord’s expansion of Marx’s concept of mediation, however, stresses the paradoxical importance of appearance, whose ubiquitous power coincides with its power to hide alienation and separation from appearance. In other words, a dialectical relationship is set up between appearance and invisibility. The power of a society of overwhelming appearances resides in its ability to dissimulate its power of making social relations invisible.

However, the capacity for this dissimulation must necessarily pass through the field of visuality implied in the term ‘appearance’. How do figurations of the social get stabilized through vision? What historically-specific capacities of visualization are required to both produce and encounter the image-world of appearances? In this essay, I track how the
body is produced as the object of figuration, the site for the production of vision, and a social body. The painted body, the spectatorial body and the social body are historically-specific productions in capitalist modernity. The painted body is the artistically-rendered realization on canvas of the human body in its historical specificity. The spectatorial body is not an ontological given but the site for a multiplication of disciplinary techniques, which produce its specific capacities to sense and see in encounters with the phenomenal world. The social body is the class-differentiated composition of a social totality. The endless desire manifested in the commodity world and the alienated social relations hidden from sight through images, I argue, can be tracked in the unstable relations between these three bodies. The contingency within the visual regime of the spectacle is the effect of the instability of scopic desire manifested in the unstable relations between these three bodies. The invocations of scopic desire produced through visuality between these three bodies are intrinsic, and not only a counterweight, to the commodity-form’s transformation into images in the society of the spectacle. It is the instability in the relations between these three bodies within the field of vision, which enables a critical political potential to be thought within ‘the endless invocation of desire’ in the society of spectacle. In ‘The Misadventures of Critical Thought’, Jacques Rancière (2009) suggests that contemporary artistic practices do not just repeat the critique of the spectacle, but neutralize Debord’s critique of capitalist exploitation and domination. My argument exploits the critical potential of visuality manifested in the unstable relation between the painted, spectatorial, and social body to suggest the contemporary relevance of Debord’s critique of appearance.

I begin by briefly indicating the vast, complex, and coordinated processes on whose success both the power of the spectacle and the logic of reification depends. This complex coordination triggered by different periods of capitalism, I argue, is fraught by risk precisely because of the intensity and the magnitude of coordination and integration implied in terms like the ‘spectacle’ and ‘reification’. A close comparison (and juxtaposition) of Jonathan Crary’s and the British Situationist T.J. Clark’s analyses of late-nineteenth-century painting develop an understanding of the work of stabilizing the relation between these three bodies in the field of visuality. The ‘brilliance of invisibility’, a term Foucault deployed in his reading of Manet, captures precisely how the evocation of endless desire, including scopic desire, is accompanied by the impossibility of fixing, aligning, and coordinating the spectator’s, society’s, and the painting’s body. This productive failure in fixing a relation between the three bodies is not a negation
of Debord’s argument, as we shall see in the next section. It is the effect, rather, of the complexities and contingencies that mark the incomplete transition from ‘being’ to ‘having’ to ‘appearing’ that Debord developed in his theses in *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Contingency and its management, risk and its avoidance, coordination and integration on the one hand and disruption and separation on the other—the tension between these elements is registered already in Georg Lukács and Debord, and this very same tension is registered in the field of visuality. Visuality is the domain in which I want to stage an encounter between contingency and permanency, fixity and flux. *Logics of identification* I argue, seek to stabilize these three bodies by emphasizing only one sort of scopic regime and desire which would contemplatively guarantee what Debord described as ‘separation perfected’ (Debord, 1995, p. 11). Yet, as the following section will show, if the ‘society of spectacle’ spans such a vast domain of life, the coordination of its various elements undermine stabilization, including the stabilization of visuality. Instead there is always the threat of a *dynamic of dissolution*, which threatens both visuality, and other dimensions of the lifeworld. However, rather than privilege the logic of identification as the secured victory of complete spectacularization (the pessimistic, and I argue mistaken, reading of Debord), or declare the dynamic of dissolution as the goal artistic and political practice must aim at, I will argue that a paradoxical *dynamic of identification* best describes both the increasing mediation of social life by images and the artistic and political critique made possible by the instabilities between the three bodies these images seek to stabilize. I shall stage an encounter between two readings of modernism (Clark and Crary) in the late nineteenth century to explore this relation between identification and dissolution. In T.J. Clark’s explicitly Marxist reading of Manet’s paintings in *The Painting of Modern Life* (1999a), and in Jonathan Crary’s *Suspension of Perception* (2001), the dynamic tension between what I call the stabilizing logic of identification and the threat of the dynamics of dissolution are played out, but played out differently.

1. Coordinating the Society of the Spectacle: Debord and Lukács

The spectacle suggests an overwhelming power that at a particular historical moment universalizes the separation of man from all around him, and all in him. But if the spectacle arises not out of a victory but out of the risks of a
historical development, revisiting those risks to investigate if they still exist in transformed form becomes politically relevant today. The contingency that had to be covered over by the awe-inspiring power of the spectacle needs revisiting, to ask how the concentrated, diffuse, and integrated forms of the spectacle were produced, registered, and struggled with in the late nineteenth century, and how, in transformed form, this same contingency might appear in our present. The historical development in question, out of which the ‘society of spectacle’ emerges, is the universalization of the logic of exchange in all spheres of life. This universalization is the generalized conversion of concrete specificity, or quality, in Hegel’s and Marx’s terms, into quantity. The transformation of value’s form of appearance makes the universalization of exchange value possible, precisely because the sensuously felt and concretely experienced, it is claimed, gets transformed into an abstract logic of equivalency. Urbanization, the mass movement of peoples, the crowd, transportation and communications technologies, the institutionalization of all aspects of life—this historical development reaches its climax in the late nineteenth century in the ‘Age of Capital’ (Hobsbawm, 1984, p. 13). Clark extends this understanding of capitalist modernity in relation to the society of the spectacle, describing it as

a massive internal extension of the capitalist market—the invasion and restructuring of whole areas of free time, private life, leisure and personal expression. [...] It indicates a new phase of commodity production—the marketing, the making-into-commodities of whole areas of social practice which had once been referred to casually as everyday life. (Clark, 1999a, p. 9)

But if the massive and intensive reorganization of all aspects of life in capitalist modernity is the claim on which the spectacle as a concept rests, it must account for how such an enormously diverse and differentiated set of processes can be so seamlessly coordinated. Noting the tension between massive coordinated transformations of capitalist societies on the one hand, and the infinitesimal ‘internal extension’ of the capitalist market into all areas of everyday life helps to begin thinking the intrinsic instability of the concept of the ‘society of the spectacle’.

Expropriation, which is an economic term for the alienation and exploitation of labour power (Arbeitskraft), operates on two levels. At the subjective level, mechanization and rationalization, Lukács (1971) argues, means the lived time of work is abstracted into a calculable input element in the production process. The worker’s ‘whole human personality’ is
fragmented, the useful elements isolated and exploited through psychological analysis. The reification of the 'soul' where the specific elements of a person's capabilities get separated from him, and integrated into specialized rational systems, and human qualities reduced to 'statistically viable concepts' are part of this process of reification (Lukács, 1971, p. 88). Human qualities through psychological analysis and analytic separation become statistically calculated units of measurement. In disciplinary terms, this separation gets codified in fields such as optics, labour-time management, psychology, home economics, etc., and in institutional spaces such as civil and criminal law, the state and its complex machineries, the economy and its organizations. To complete the dynamic of successful reification, separation at both subjective and objective levels must be matched by a concomitant coordination across different institutional spaces, practices, and bodies.

Lukács emphasizes that while the laws of commodity exchange and profit, exchange value over use value, seem to become rigid, all-controlling, and universal they can do *so only* if they succeed in 'disregarding the concrete aspects of the subject matter of these laws' (Lukács, 1971, p. 101, emphasis added). The laws congealed in the state, the economy, and civil society must disregard the concrete specificity of the objects, practices, and bodies that they abstract into sites of control. Further, specialization, rationalization, and calculation results in fragmentation of these spheres, thus proliferating separated spaces of power with their own specific interests. Thus, law can contradict the state; one state opposes another; state support of national economic interests might come into conflict with support for international free trade. As a result, laws must 'link up with each other through partial systems' (p. 101) while as far 'as concrete realities are concerned they can only establish fortuitous connections' (p. 101). The picture of a capitalist totality that Lukács paints then, and I insist on the relevance of the term 'totality', is that of 'mutually interacting coincidences' rather than 'one truly rational organization' (p. 102, emphasis added).

It is precisely for this reason that the 'society of the spectacle' as an argument provokes such unease, because it is wrongly read as the successful achievement of sheer separation from concretely felt sensuous particularity registered in the lifeworld as a corollary of the successful completion of the transition to a consumer society. The spectacle's changing form must be seen more or less as a response precisely to the contingencies, time lags, fragmentations, and often competing specializations which aim to grasp the concrete 'subject matter' of all aspects of everyday life. Debord makes this clear enough when, going back on the 'separation perfected' argument,
he admits ‘that spectacle’s grip on social reality had not yet been perfected’ (Debord, 1990, p. 7).

The falseness of reality is manifested for him in the reality of the image. This doubling of the Real is a marker of Debord’s recognition that the true and the false do not line up with the Real and the Unreal. If the image is the form that mediates alienated social relations, this image is as real as the real unreality of society. I will leave aside for now the continual reworking of Marx in Debord’s theses, and simply point out that the doubling of the Real is a function of this doubling between the spectacle and the social world of capitalist society whose contingencies it attempts to veil over. One glimpses it in Debord’s turning Hegel over once more when he claims ‘in a world that has really been turned on its head, truth is a moment of falsehood’ (Debord, 1995, p. 14).

Thus, he states ‘[t]he real consumer becomes a consumer of illusion. The commodity is this illusion which is in fact real, and the spectacle is its most general form’ (p. 32). What is a real illusion? And how does the consumer consume a real illusion? On the one hand, this is clearly a Lukácsian argument—that is, the veil of reification undermines an apprehension of the concrete sensuous particularity of the object. The spectacle is the general form of this illusion through reification. But the spectacle’s logic is that of separation perfected (the title of the first section of the theses). The formulation ‘perfected’ gives a sense of permanency but Debord’s argument is explicitly historical. Perfection can only be achieved at a specific moment in time. At least two elements must be mentioned here. Firstly, the concentrated and diffuse spectacle, which translate as concentrated state power over the spectacle’s reach, and diffuse, fragmented coordination of logics, occur within the same historical moment. The ‘general form’ of the spectacle has multiple forms within the same period. Secondly, this ‘form of form’ undergoes yet another transformation when twenty years later the ‘integrated spectacle’ is posited. Perfection names a punctual strategy for managing the risk of continually evolving dynamics of unification and fragmentation, coordination and disaggregation, flux and stability. The transition from being to having to appearing which structures Debord’s thetic narrativization registers their co-appearance at different historical moments in particular combinations. And ‘separation’, like ‘reification’ registers this dynamic of dependency, contradiction, and opposition within and between historical moments.

The ‘society of the spectacle’, and its attendant concepts of reification, alienation, and separation, are both markers of the waning of sensuous particularity (quality to quantity, use to exchange value, having to appearing),
and an acknowledgement of the risks entailed in the massive reorganization of the diagrams of power in increasingly complex societies. The unstable relationality between the painted body, the social body, and the spectator's body is the effect precisely of both the intensification of alienation and the risky, incomplete coordination of the destabilizations modernity produced.

2. Interception/Identification/Dissolution

Clark's investigation of artistic modernism links the specific experience of modernity in the late nineteenth century to its realization through technique on the painted canvas. ‘Painting’, he argues ‘is potentially a means of investigation, [...] a way of discovering what the values and excitements of the world amount to’ (Clark, 1999a, p. xxi). This painterly investigation involves the construction and transformation on the canvas of the experience of modernity outside it. Clark therefore asks ‘[H]ow do the values and excitements called ‘modernity’ look when they are put down in two dimensions?’ The field of sensations, including the visual dimensions of modernity, do not just ‘appear’ but must be transformed through ‘a play between flatness and depth', which 'stress [...] the picture's limits [...] [through] sorts of insistence, ellipsis, showmanship, restraint’ (p. xxi). This transformation of a generalized experience of modernity into the visual experience of it onto the canvas emphasizes the necessity of transformation, realization, and construction in the gap between ‘having’ and ‘appearing'. Clark emphasizes the ideological work of this construction of appearances when he asks ‘[D]oes the ‘realization’ extend and intensify—that is to say, validate—the meanings and appearances, or disperse and qualify them?’ (p. xxi, emphasis added). The representational practice of painting does two things then: it translates the experience of modernity through transformation within the limits and possibilities of painterly technique; and, this transformation into appearance of experience could either validate, or qualify and disperse the meaningfulness of experience.

Clark shows how painting as investigation shoves a wedge between the phenomenal apprehension of painting and the realization of the validity of the values of modernity which we call the spectacle. And it does so precisely by encountering in the process of picture making the intrinsic tension between the logic of identification and the dynamic of dissolution. The increasing fragmentation, specialization, and acceleration of life, captured in the Impressionists’ love for painting trains, for example, threw up problems (coordination, alignment, etc.) for the efficient management of all aspects of
life. Society is marked by ‘a modernity of continual assessment, negotiation, and constraint in the public sphere, or demarcation and displacement, of segregation and self-management, of sexual and occupational inequality’ summed up ‘by the difficult word ‘class’’ (Clark, 1999a, pp. xxi–xxii). Painting as construction, the social dynamic of modernity and the dialectic of mobility and stabilization are captured in the cultural experience of the ‘cultivated rentier’ by Meyer Shapiro. In this class-stratified society, Shapiro argues, the ‘cultivated rentier’ enjoys ‘the realistic pictures of his surroundings as a spectacle of traffic and changing atmospheres’ while ‘experiencing in its phenomenal aspect that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owes his freedom and income’ (quoted in Clark, 1999a, p. 1). The phenomenally experienced mobility of the social environment is experienced visually in the spectacles pictures provide of ‘traffic and changing atmospheres’. Clark’s reading of Manet’s *Chemin de Fer* (1872–1873) captures precisely this dialectic of phenomenal mobility and pictorial stability, which exposes the co-presence of both a waning sensuality of the object world and the separation and alienation furthered by capitalist modernity.

Debord’s argument when read through Clark and Shapiro reveals something specific—that the spectacle had to convert and stabilize into images the flux precipitated by modernity and this difficult attempt is captured in the word ‘class’. The category of class, which keeps reappearing as the location of the viewing subject and the representation of a painted subject brings up the question of the social body in both reception and representation, yet the stability of this category is undermined by the difficulty in accurately apprehending it through vision. Clark insists that “class’ [...] was one of the images on which modernity thrived’ (Clark, 1999a, p. xxviii), precisely because of the instability in class formations thrown up by capitalist modernity which produced increasing complexity in class fractions and their relations to each other as well as to other classes, as Hobsbawm (1984, pp. 262–269) eloquently traces. For this reason class difference could not be stabilized adequately within the picture-frame and its images were so central to modernity as a problem of representation. Clark goes on ‘[C]lass was one of its [modernity’s] favourite games, but the game observed essentially the same rules as all the other terms of the spectacle—rules of mobility, elusiveness, disembodiment, pure visibility, confinement to the world of signs’ (1999a, p. xxviii). The logic of the spectacle then is the risky task of identification, of delineating class specificity through visuality where the visual was itself identified as the experience of flux on the one hand, and confinement on the other.
The gaze of the woman in *Chemin de Fer* (Figure 5.1) is intercepted by the spectator, or rather, her gaze meets ours. The picture is an ‘interception’ (p. xix) but Clark argues ‘we sense that the woman is really somewhere else, still in her novel’s dream of consciousness’ (p. xix). As much as the spectator would like to visually possess her subjective interiority (‘having’), the linking of her eyes to the fingers that hold her open book signal that she is lost to us, in a space produced by the words on the page. She appears to us but we cannot have her visually. The logic of identification through brush strokes of the woman on the bench is dissipated by the object’s refusal to accede itself as subject to us, and to be subjected by us, opening a gap between the pleasure of enjoying a spectacle and the distance between the position of the spectator and the woman as object of scopic desire. The phenomenal experience of enjoying a spectacle is an experience of separation (Debord). Only this time, the separation is *revealed* rather than hidden through the painted representation of the presence of her body separated from the spectator’s desire to possess and fix it, mimed in the steam from the train which block’s the child’s desire to see in the painting.

Figure 5.1. Edouard Manet’s *Chemin de Fer*, 1873.
This dialectical process of exposure and dissolution is powerfully captured in Clark’s description of the grapes in the painting. Here is his sentence: ‘Likeness is perfect, but external. The bunch of grapes the child has put down—those Chardin still-life grapes, spilling over the sill for the viewer to pick—is like a pathetic after-image of sensuousness, already half-melted into the thin air of spectacle’ (Clark, 1999a, p. xxiii, emphasis added). Perfection is achieved as perfect externality—yet precisely the perfection of the rendition is an after-image of what had been, a sensuousness whose concrete particularity melts away into thin air, like the steam of the train at Oisy. The thinness of the spectacle, deflecting ocular possession, and the sensuous presence of the ‘spilling’ grapes coexist in the same plane, in the flatness of the painting. This coexistence Clark describes thus: ‘what [the] staging of the picture’s exchange of looks [...] makes comprehensible [is] the balance in Manet between hard, almost epigrammatic appropriation of things seen and deep distance, deep outsideness and displacement’ (p. xxiii). That is why Clark argues ‘[I]t is what the picture does with its identities that matters, not which identity it tries on first as its ‘own” (p. xxiii, emphasis added). The picture as spectacle works to represent a body on a surface where separation is not yet perfected because the rendering of the distanced, alienated gaze of the woman coexists with the ‘after-image of sensuousness’ that modernity’s dynamic threatens to dissipate through abstraction.
3. Suspension/Attention/Dissolution

Jonathan Crary’s focus on the construction of subjectivity through vision develops a Foucauldian understanding of modernity echoing the arguments of Debord and Lukács. He argued that ‘the very possibility in the late nineteenth century of concepts of a purified aesthetic perception is inseparable from the processes of modernization that made the problem of attention a central issue in new institutional constructions of a productive and manageable subjectivity’ (Crary, 2001, p. 2). Crary (1989) explicitly rejects a simplistic focus on the gaze. He insists that ‘attention, as a constellation of texts and practices, is much more than a question of the gaze, of looking, of the subject only as a spectator. It [attention] allows the problem of perception to be extracted from an easy equation with questions of visuality [...] simply as questions of opticality’ (Crary, 2001, p. 2).

A number of things need to be said here. Firstly, Crary’s turning to perception rather than viewing, seeing, and spectating, allows him to then focus on ‘non-optical visuality’ and the ‘embodied spectator’ as essential to understanding how the calculated, atomized, segmented modern subject is formed (the subtitle of the book is ‘Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture’). This virtuoso performance of an archaeology of vision moves visuality into a philosophical, physiological, and psychological domain and thus explicitly addresses the spectatorial body. The scientific problems thrown up by the recognition of the ‘after-image’ in physiological optics severed the link between the image and the referent in time. The absence of the viewed object in the time of the after-image called attention to the density of the eye and the complexity of the retina. This recognition shifted the focus from a purely visual understanding of visuality to the complexities of embodied spectatorship. Here we see in the realm of embodied visuality precisely the risk emphasized in the terms ‘reification’ and ‘spectacle’ in Lukács and Debord. ‘Spectacular culture’, Crary argues ‘is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered’ (Crary, 1989, p. 3, emphasis added). Crary’s argument centralizes the tension between mobility and stabilization, attention and distraction within the field of embodied vision which ‘spectacular culture’ must manage. So where do we find this tension manifest? Once again, it is Manet, but this time the Manet of In the Conservatory (1879).

Crary’s reading points out two sides of the tension animating the painting. On the one hand, the tightly framed, vertically striped, corseted
character of the figures and objects in the frame; and on the other, the
dream-like, far-away, unavailable look of the woman. Till this point,
Crary does a Clark—that is, articulating a tension between distance and
unavailability on the one hand, and constraint and control on the other.
This tension is identified in the representational function of the painting
as the execution of brushstrokes. Crary shifts his reading however, beyond
the picture frame to the body of the spectator as the field on which the
disciplinary dynamics of modernity’s rationalizing imperatives take place.
The unreliability of bodily perception (the retinal after-image, binocular
vision) required the work of harnessing distraction and transforming it into
efficient forms of attention in the late nineteenth century. The year 1879 is
the date for the start of ‘unbinding vision’ (Crary, 2001, p. 81), unravelling
in front of the images of Manet’s many paintings, In the Conservatory, in
particular. This unbinding then gets fully revealed in 1888, in the Chapter
titled ‘Illuminations of Disenchantment’ and is exemplified in Seurat’s
Parade de Cirque (1887–1888) (Figure 5.2). The tension makes its appearance
felt as the experience now of disenchantment, perspective vanishing into
multiplanar staging and no single conceivable position for the spectator
to occupy. Seurat’s knowledge of and experimentation with scientific
principles of vision is well-known. Precisely this knowledge of physiological
optics produces a displacement of vision in the pictorial realization of a
scene. Depending on where the spectator is placed, the painting, Crary
argues convincingly, is both realistic and identifiable, and amorphous and
shape-shifting—a congeries of colours without bordering. The physical
location of the body, the alignment of the eyes with the multiple picture
planes on the single surface, the displaced composition of the elements in
the painting, all taken together underline the spectatorial body’s mobile
relation to the object of the gaze. Here we see the spectatorial body slowly
being displaced by the painting, a displacement and a mobilization which
reveals, or illuminates, the disenchantment suffered in modernity by
a subject’s own unstable sense of self. The painting does not stabilize
experience as a visual object separable from the spectator. Instead, by
constructing multiple positions between the object and the spectator,
it reflects rather than hides the shock-like, multiple displacements that
mark human experience in modernity. The politics of Crary’s argument
rests first on the insistence of perception as inherently unstable due to
embodied spectatorship, and the destabilization and displacement of the
spectatorial body, mirrored in the heterotopic place of viewing triggered
by painting itself.
4. From the Logic of Dissolution to the Dynamic of Identification

The critical potential of visual culture in the society of the spectacle lies in the unstable interplay between a desire for identification of bodies and the displacements, re-alignments, and instabilities this desire produces between the spectatorial, painted, and social body. In the previous two sections, or rather across them, three bodies emerge. The embodied and shifting spectator placed and dislodged by Crary’s reading of certain paintings, the distanced represented gaze and emplaced painted bodies of Manet read by both Crary and Clark, and the slippery, visually tense and complicated social body set in motion through class, analysed by Clark. The three bodies, when thought together, enable a conceptual reversal. They dynamize a ‘logic of identification’ through displacement, diffusion, and the coexistence of visual separation and sensuous proximity. The instability of this triple relation produces a ‘dynamic of identification’, which captures the necessarily incessant production of stable objects and bodies in the field of visuality. Yet till now, the argument has gestured rather than developed how class, and its relation to the social body are integral to the field of visuality.

For Clark, it becomes very clear that the painted body manifests the anxieties of class mobility, and the tension between segmentation and displacement, confinement and elusiveness, the rules of the game of class, as he calls it. The gaze that seeks and meets another gaze which in turn refuses to entertain communication but ‘is somewhere else, in the novel's dream of consciousness’—this encounter between missed gazes manifests the tension between epigrammatic appropriation of things seen, and their identification on the one hand, and deep displacement and unavailability to the gaze, on the other. Clark’s reading seems close to what Crary writes much later, about dreams, reveries, hypnotic states, and the like. But Clark’s painted body has a different function—it is not the trigger to the displacement of the spectator’s body that Crary desires. That is why his woman in the conservatory does not meet the gaze of the spectator. She is truly lost elsewhere while we remain fixed. Her unavailable gaze is a clue to a process that, as Clark shows, resists the alignment of seeing with knowing and identifying. The movements of classes and between them (as both class interest and class mobility) the changing contours of the city, the heterogeneous ambulatory populations of the boulevards—these, and other effects of modernity triggered also by rising consumerism, display, and spectacle, made the identification of class and its accurate representation such an obsession for painting in the nineteenth century. Clark's reading
of another Seurat painting provides a clearer understanding of this relation between class, the social body, and visuality. This reading also reveals his distance from Crary, a distance, I argue, which makes Clark’s readings far more useful in understanding the capitalist dynamic of modernity.

Analysing Seurat’s *Un Dimanche Après-midi à l’Île de la Grande Jatte* (1884), Clark notices that the critics were unanimous in noticing one thing: ‘[Seurat] wished to show the nature of class distinction in a place given over to pleasure, but also the various things that made distinctions hard to grasp’ (Clark, 1999a, p. 263, emphasis added). Capturing the tension ‘between diversity of social detail’ and a ‘uniform and as it were extreme execution’ (p. 264), the painting manifested both the precision of its technique and the imprecision of the social world’s class composition it sought to represent. The dissolution of dots into colour combined punctuated precision with separable form through colour, yet the object of this technique could not comfortably represent the uncomfortable proximity of different classes within the same social space and picture frame. The uniform technical composition of class-differentiated bodies sharing the same space both posed difference and undermined it. Jean Ajalbert in *La Revue Moderne* observed ‘[O]nce the first impression of surprise is over, the exaggerated stiffness of these people softens; the dots of colour are less fatiguing’ (quoted in Clark, 1999a, p. 264), producing a tension between stiffness and fluidity, separation, and coexistence. Clark argues ‘[T]he life is intense for all its rigidity’ (p. 265, emphasis in original). ‘Who precisely belongs to whom?’ he asks, for ‘class is present here unmistakeably but the fact that workers and bourgeois share the same pleasures does not result in this case in an infinite shifting as much as an effort at reaching a modus vivendi, agreeing to ignore one another, marking out invisible boundaries and keeping oneself to oneself’ (p. 265). The term ‘invisible boundaries’ within an act of visual representation captures this dialectical tension between posing and dissolving separate identities. That is why Clark is right when he insists ‘Seurat’s subject [...] is the intermingling of classes, not their neat separation; it is the elaborate texture of controls and avoidances that the classes bring with them to the place of pleasure’ (p. 265). The body’s disappearance into the numberless vibrations of a directionless spreading of an immense social body meets the coexistence of multiple bodies whose ‘stiffness’ and consanguinity in the same space unites and divides. The picture renders the contradictions of an intense life shared by different sorts of bodies in the same conflictual space.

Clark insists on thinking both the logic of class identification and the dissolution of its perception in painted representation thus:
The identification of class is not a *brake* on meaning: it is the trigger, once again, of a sequence of connotations which do not add up, which fail to circle back on themselves, declaring their meaning evident and uniform. It may be that we are too eager, now, to point to the illusory quality of that circling back, that closure against the ‘free play of the signifier’. Illusion or not, it seems to me the necessary ground on which meanings can be established and maintained: kept in being long enough, and endowed with enough coherence, for the ensuing work of dispersal and contradiction to be seen to matter—to have matter, in the text, to work against. (Clark, 1980, p. 30, emphasis in original)

Illusion is the paradoxical ground for meaning because even if connotations do not add up, this failure is not eccentric but internal to the production of meanings through visuality. Clark maintains this tension between illusion and meaning, refusing to succumb to the temptation of cancelling out identification in the name of ‘the free play of the signifier’. This is precisely where the ‘socioscopic’ function of the gaze (Bolla, 1996, p. 79) establishes a dynamic relation between the logic of identification and the dynamic of dissolution, which is traceable in ‘an archival account of the society of the spectacle’ (p. 65). For Crary, embodied visuality is the alibi for valorizing the dynamic of dissolution into the immense borderless, non-contradictory social body. But if the social body is apprehended socioscopically as the play between illusion and meaning, multiple connotations and yet ‘enough coherence’, the *dynamic of identification* describes best the unstable practices of visuality in the society of the spectacle. The after-image of sensuousness returns only if one can recognize the inherent tension between dot and form, between form and form in the same place, between stiffness and fluidity, between *modus vivendi* through avoidance and control. That is why the critics were caught, like Clark, in a dynamic of identification (‘Who belongs to whom?’) triggered by class as central to the representation of the social body. Art, Jacques Rancière argues, is one place where the seeming apportioning of class mobility on the one hand, and the appropriate forms of its rendition (in literature, for example) get derailed. He argues, through a reading of Stendhal, that ‘the promised concordance between the growth of a genre and the rise of a class gets muddled’ (Rancière, 2013, p. 42). This tension between a sociology of class mobility and an aesthetics concomitant with a period becomes palpable in vision.

For Crary however, the intensity of life *in its rigidity* is what he seeks to dissolve through a quasi-scientific *logic* of dissolution. Rather than the painterly realization of the uncomfortable coexistence of a class-fractured
social body, intensity for Crary is identified in the spectatorial body’s displacement by the fractured construction of Seurat’s multiplanar construction of space in *Parade du Cirque*. Crary requires an archaeology of knowledge that cuts across physiological optics, philosophy, and psychology to construct this displacing dynamic. Crary constructs a logic of dissolution rather than maintaining a dynamic of identification while Clark’s argument manifests a tension between rigidity and flux. The role of class within the composition of the social body as a problem that is both identified, played with, and struggled over, find little place in Crary’s arguments. Where Clark insists on the tensions and anxieties of class cross-contamination as manifested in the strictly painterly practice of the ‘realization’ of the values and excitements of modernity, Crary desires instead an escape through the sensorial dissolution of the body. The body vanishes.

Crary describes the leaves in Cézanne’s *Study of Foliage* (1903) in these terms: ‘[T]heir euphoric groundlessness’ provides ‘an intimation of a libidinal release, of an intoxicating loss of self’ (Crary, 2001, p. 357). Cézanne’s works ‘diagram perceptual experience in constant transformation’ and his late works, Crary argues, ‘surely fulfil and perhaps extravagantly exceed Bergson’s hypothesis of an ‘attention to life’ in their disclosure of a world that resolves itself ‘into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and travelling in every direction like shivers through an immense body” (Crary, 2001, p. 357; Bergson, 1988, p. 208). The visual encounter for Crary produces an immediate enervation, a libidinal loss of self, and a dissolving spectatorial body. Paradoxically, Crary’s discourse of immediacy, inspired partly by Bergson, seeks to escape positivism yet repeats the same logic, that of identification through immediacy. Clark takes the encounter between the three bodies produced in visuality as the occasion for thinking the work of mediation, while Crary’s identification of painting as the experience of immediacy avoids any mediating process for sensory immediacy. Crary’s reading exemplifies the ‘unmediated acceptance of the so-called given as a firm basis of knowledge’ (Adorno, 1993, p. 55).

For Hegel, sense certainty begins through immediacy and immediately starts dissolving into what he calls ‘a complex of many Heres’ (Hegel, 1977, p. 64). And the reason is time. ‘The Here pointed out, to which I hold fast, is similarly a this Here which in fact is not this here, but a Before and a Behind, an Above and Below, a Right and a Left. The Above is itself this manifold otherness of above, below, etc. The Here, which was supposed to have been pointed out vanishes into other Heres. [...] What abides is a negative’ (Hegel, 1977, p. 64, emphasis in original). Clark’s readings highlight precisely
this negativity within the ‘pointing out’ in painting, which subverts the stabilization of place (here, there) and the temporalization (now, then) of pointing and representing. Visual experience, I argue, harbours precisely this function of negativity rendered in the term ‘dynamic of identification’. It undermines both a logic of identification and a dynamic of dissolution, and that is why spectacular culture promises but can fail in successfully rendering alienation invisible.

In his reading of Cézanne’s The Bathers (1904–1906) three years after Study of Foliage, Clark describes the painting as ‘a kind of literalization of the notion of the body’s being always subject to movements of substitution, replacement, shuttling between possible places or identities’ (Clark, 1999b, p. 158, emphasis added). This is a Lukácsian reading of the subject in the advanced capitalist world of Debord, if anything. That is why Clark describes Cézanne’s technique in classically Taylorist fashion as ‘an idea of knowledge built out of singular, equivalent units—events, that happen in the eye, and which the dab of paint will analogize precisely’ (p. 166). Yet The Bathers ‘are haunted by figures of inconsistency and displacement, or by kinds of coexistence (of marks and objects) that are more painful than natural, more like interruption than juxtaposition, more like grating and locking of the parts of a great psychic machine than the patient disclosure of a world’ (p. 166). The coexistence of the ‘ruthlessness’ of the painter’s precision and ‘their [the bodies] will to resist [...] vision’ (p. 167) is captured on the same plane. The body persists in ‘the inorganic chill in the air’ yet makes the painting breathe by ‘having its surface be vibrant, tense, or sensitive’ (p. 166). Inorganic time of singular equivalent units, of mechanical materialism (Clark’s reference is Freud’s ‘Project for a Scientific Psychology’) is conjoined with the morphing of bodies, their inter-penetration and softness. That is why Clark argues that ‘glimpses of alternative systems of representation are only thrown up by the most intense and recalcitrant effort to make the ones we have finally deliver the goods’. He goes on: ‘It is only in the process of discovering the system’s antinomies and blank spots [...] that the first improvised forms of contrary imagining come to light’ (p. 165).

In 1968 (one year after the publication of Debord’s book), when the May events were taking place in Paris, Foucault delivered a series of lectures in Tunis on Manet. The second to last painting he spoke on was The Balcony (1868). For Foucault this painting is a paradoxical study in invisibility—we cannot see what the three figures are looking at. All three figures are looking in different directions, and of course we do not know if they are even looking at anything. ‘All three’, he says are ‘absorbed by an intense spectacle which, evidently we cannot know, one because it is in front of the canvas, the other
because it is to the right of the canvas, the third because it is to the left of the canvas. And, in any case we see nothing, we see only the gazes, not a place but a gesture and always the gestures of the hands, folding hands, unfolding hands, hands actually unfolded. [...] It is simply this circle of hands [...] which unifies [...] these divergent elements of a picture which is nothing other than the brilliance of invisibility itself’ (Foucault, 2009, p. 71, emphasis added). This is the body taking place, an event, in the present continuous, never once and for all. The gaze encounters bodies, and the bodies are only gazes, and this visibility of the gazes renders a nothing: the brilliance of invisibility. The dynamic of identification is precisely this contradictory perception—the brilliance of invisibility as the displacement of the body as it persists in its consistency. That is why Foucault closed his lecture with The Bar at the Folies Bergère, the same picture that closes Clark’s readings of Manet in The Painting of Modern Life, stating ‘Manet did not invent non-representative painting because everything in Manet is representation, but he made a representative play of the fundamental material elements of the canvas’ (p. 79). Manet, the Painter of Modern Life, pushes representation to the limit and in this play with materiality prefigures the modernism which will centralize the failure of adequate representation. Clark argues that ‘the body may never take place anywhere once and for all; but what it is made of—what our imagining of it is made of—will take place, and take on its own consistency [...] and the kind of consistency it has is hard for us to deal with—that is why we retreat into the world of the imaginary—just because it is ultimately inhuman, or nonhuman, or has humanity as one of its effects’ (Clark, 1999b, p. 166).

5. Conclusion

In a scathing review of Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, Clark comments that ‘[B]enjamin’s Paris is all dream and no spectacle: The apparatus of spectacle is not understood by him to invade the dream life and hold even unconscious imagining in its grip’ (Clark, 2003, p. 47). A critical and comparative perspective on Clark and Crary show that one way of loosening the grip of the apparatus of the spectacle is to note and perhaps exacerbate the gap between the dream and the spectacle. This would be where the ‘endless desire’ of the epigraph can be the changing ground on which a counterweight to the spectacle can be constructed. The spectacle cannot always invade dream life perfectly, or map its diagrammatics perfectly on the imaginary. Other imaginings become possible when the map slips over
the surface it aims to cartographically stabilize. This is where the transition from ‘having’ to ‘appearing’ in Debdor, and the alignment of subject matter to the proliferation of laws in Lukács, becomes the space for slippages, uncoordinated effects, and dis-alignments.

This is what Clark asks about the Here and Now of the Image: ‘Why should a regime of representation not be built on the principle that images are, or ought to be, transformable (as opposed to exchangeable)—meaning disposable through and through, and yet utterly material and contingent; shareable, imaginable, coming up constantly in their negativity, their non-identity, and for that reason promoted and dismantled at will?’ (Clark, 1999c, p. x).

The brilliance of invisibility as one perspective on contemporary visual culture continues then to provide a critical potential for the spectacular society of today. The unavailable bodies and gazes in Foucault and Clark’s readings are related to the fuzzy social body whose contours cannot be mapped by a determining socioscopy precisely because of the possibility of ‘negativity’ and ‘non-identity’. In their spectacular brilliance, bodies are contingent and fractured, whose unstable and dissonant composition produce ‘cryptograms of modernism’ (Adorno, 2003, p. 337).

Bibliography