

***The Lady in the Crinoline or Delirious Poem-Essay on Escaping Criticism (A Thing that Cannot Be or Boy Leaving the Picture) by Pere Borrell del Caso. 1874***

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1. Whenever I adopt the position of “looking at a picture”, I remember another moment of my life when I looked at a picture. I did so with the director Alfredo Castellón at the Prado Museum in Madrid. With my schoolmates, I looked at Goya’s *Majas*. We appeared on TV, but we stayed inside it. Our well-shod precocious schoolgirls’ feet never walked off the TV screen. Maybe we are still inside a wire, or we form part of a white noise that no longer exists because the TV broadcasts and broadcasts at all hours, and when it has nothing to broadcast, it shows commercials for objects that lonely people buy: electric blankets, gym apparatus, vouchers for digital casinos. The fact that today I look at a picture with the prejudice that at another time I was looking at another picture is a significant starting point for this delirious poem-essay. I also certify that I managed to escape from the innards of the TVs and other appliances that tried to keep me prisoner in their stomachs. As if I were an intestinal parasite. An earthworm. I furthermore certify – I have the soul of a notary and an exhibition curator – that this delirious poem-essay is about things that are inside other things and often cannot be got out. Like the Chinese children who are mysteriously drawn by the bars on balconies or the eyes of washing machines. They often wind up stuck inside the drum.

2. I place a magnifying glass over *Escaping Criticism (A Thing that Cannot Be or Boy Leaving the Picture)*, and I try to observe it “antiseptically” (a word that is at the very least impossible), but my eyes tell me things that are perhaps only in my eyes or, at most, in the eyes of other people I resemble. I am a silly woman, I am a tired woman, I am an urban woman. I am a clever woman, I am an active woman, I am a flower. I try to look at the picture without concentrating so persistently that the outlines are blurred – no, I’m not on drugs, nor do I believe in the creative effects of narcotics – or I start seeing lights and red veins, like when you press very hard against your eyelids. I try, I’m going to try: I see a boy with a tremendously frightened face who is leaning on a picture frame as he climbs out of it. The image raises doubts. Question marks formed by the neck of every swan<sup>12</sup> spring from an image realised in a pure realist style which is also able – and I would write this in capitals – to place us in an intrepid position as interpreters: figurative artworks, and specifically this *Escaping Criticism (A Thing that Cannot Be or Boy Leaving the Picture)*, blow my head off with their intellectual resonances, their connection with their precedents, their nineteenth-century contemporaneity, and the ethical and aesthetic discourse of this very period in history, which we can now only describe as pandemic and makes us long for the end of dystopia.

3. The delirious woman who is writing this text – a true lady – wants to escape from this reality of face masks, straight lines, antigen tests, disinfectants, and a future closed off by the lock of a metal shutter. Not a complete fool, the lady hates living in a science fiction fantasy, shut up inside a methacrylate box where the whole of reality is simplified and contained. The boy in the picture doesn’t want to live inside a genre, either. Living inside a genre makes you behave in a stereotypical fashion, and while for some people such clarity is a blessing, for others it is the

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<sup>1</sup> Do you know the poem “Wring the neck of the swan with deceitful plumage”, by the Mexican writer Enrique González Martínez? You must read it. Even though it is a classic, and very disrespectful to our new-found animalist sensibility, it is sensational.

<sup>2</sup> In the meantime, have you noticed that point 2 takes care to supply this delirious text with a geographically inclusive resonance that alludes to both sides of the Atlantic Ocean? This question is no doubt extremely important.

start of a nightmare. I hereby remove my disguise as a lady in a crinoline to confess with my pants down that I recall the protagonist of *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998), and also Jeff Daniels leaving the screen in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (Woody Allen, 1985) to drink some real champagne instead of soda pop and experience a love story with Mia Farrow. Daniels's exit, his rupture of conventions and of that cinematic fourth wall we call the screen, struck us as surprising and hilarious, a marvellous sensation that bears little resemblance to what must have been felt by the men and women who saw the first films of the Lumière brothers. How terrifying *The Arrival of a Train* (1895) would have been: the fear that it was going to run over you and crush you; the fear that we ought to feel with every uncompromising artwork, with those pieces that have surged out of the mind of someone who thought, even if just for a moment: "A book should be like an icebreaker to penetrate the frozen seas of our souls." A more forceful translation/version of the same idea would be: "If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the skull, then what's the point of reading it? A book has to be an axe for breaking the icy sea we hold within." In this *Delirious Essay-Poem*, there is a lot in us of the Kafka who wrote these thoughts in a letter to Oskar Pollak in 1907. On the other hand – warning! – it should be clarified, because sometimes there are overlaps between images and referents summoned up by words that sound similar, that an icebreaker is a ship and an ice pick is the homicidal weapon supposedly used by Sharon Stone to perpetrate her wicked deeds in *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992). In any case, we always speak of poetry as a weapon loaded with future.<sup>34</sup> At least, of the poetry that moves us. That qualification too seems accurate.

4. The picture of this boy escaping without escaping anywhere, but acting as if he was so that certain priests of the high temple – nineteenth-century critics – can feel that someone is poking a finger in their eye, also brings the lady memories of her father-in-law. The lady is a family-loving woman, and her father-in-law used to change the landscape background of the fish in his aquarium. The fish thought they were travelling, but in the end they realised they were in no danger and lacked nothing: whether they were in the frozen waters of the Pole or the exuberant depths of a coral reef, her father-in-law's fish enjoyed a constant temperature and a balanced diet. Escaping without escaping. Travelling without changing culinary habits and without any danger. Those pseudo-adventurous routines give you a lot of security. The carefree life of my father-in-law's fish – I return to myself, removing the lady's bodice – had its days numbered, because they were fish of flesh, bones and scales. However, neither Cecilia nor Tom Baxter, the protagonists of *The Purple Rose...*, nor the Cheshire Cat nor Alice on the other side of the looking-glass, nor the offspring of the Darling family, who fly off through the window frame, will ever die. And neither will this frightened boy. Unless the apocalypse comes and burns up all the worthwhile things of a culture prior to the algorithm. Goddess forbid.<sup>5</sup>

5. I make sure I perform the extremely idiotic exercise of looking without resorting to my prior knowledge, although I don't know why someone as constructivist as me – constructivism is a really interesting theoretical *framework* – should put herself in such a false and artificial position.

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<sup>3</sup> We remind the distracted or forgetful reader that "poetry is a weapon loaded with future" is a verse we owe – and I don't know if we ever paid him for it, as the writer died in quite straitened circumstances – to the great Basque poet Gabriel Celaya.

<sup>4</sup> Note that on this occasion, the tribute-reference to Celaya takes in not only the geographical centrality of the Iberian cultural field – there must be more to it than Madrid, Barcelona, Lisbon – but also its magnificent peripheries.

<sup>5</sup> We refer to the feminine, hermaphrodite, asexual or queer character of deities, not because these categories mean the same thing, though we do find there is something that relates them and which we shall have to investigate. Aha.

Why do I persist in an exhibition of contorsionism in which I shall no doubt break a bone and learn little? And so I accept that my glasses are dirty – another day we might talk about the sexual significance of eyes and glasses in the work of Hoffmann and Freud – at a time when everything is dirty despite our strenuous attempts at pulchritude, and to that patina of dirt I add the teachings of Javier Portús, compiled on the website of this formidable painting collection. I enrich my vision of *Escaping Criticism* by finding out that there are at least three extremely important precedents for this work: Murillo's *Self-portrait* (1670-73), the prints that show writers in their own works, and Rembrandt's *Holy Family* (1646). Moreover, this oil painting fits into the tradition of the picture within the picture, of *trompe l'oeil*, of the contrast between the living and the painted, of the attempt to put paid to two-dimensionality to find a third dimension. The men and women reading this delirious essay-poem will no doubt be grateful for the good academic sense of Javier Portús.

6. With the crinoline once more fastened round my waist, dressed as a lady in a space-time loop, leaving my pills forgotten inside their box, I throw myself head first into the vortex – I come out completely dishevelled – and wander through different *trompe l'oeils*. With my hair and stomach all in a knot, with the crinoline exposed to everyone's gaze and the skirts over my head, I have learned the following: the *trompe l'oeil* suggests a game with the point of view which on the one hand relativises reality and throws it out of focus, but at the same time, in its search for a commitment from the reception hall to recompose the figure in the carpet, underscores the importance of art and its capacity to act as a magnifying lens, enlarging and *visibilising* the real. *Trompe l'oeils* address themselves to us: the boy in the picture is leaving, but whoever is looking at the picture feels tempted to *enter*. To go into Bluebeard's room. Danger. To the dark part. The other side. Although the more practically minded would simply lift the picture off its wall to find there is nothing there but a flat surface. Or perhaps a hole, a passage, through which this boy has been born into another life and another world.

7. Henry James wrote *The Lesson of the Master* in 1888. There, with a finely barbed wit, the nexus between the living and the painted is presented. In 1896, James also published *The Figure in the Carpet*, an epiphany, in which someone suddenly sees something that was never seen before and was there all the time. Enlightenment. Sudden intelligence among the sensations, which could well be a political metaphor. As in Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1844). As in Ricardo Piglia's *Target in the Night* (2010). "You have to look closely," Piglia would say to us. You have to look closely to find out if the print is a rabbit or a duck, or both creatures at once. You have to look closely to see if the print is a beautiful girl showing us her neck and nape or the profile of a witch with a large nose and haggard features. So I look and look in the awareness that my eyeballs are dirty glass artifacts – dirty from life, from expectation and desire, from readings, prayers and curses, from foreign languages and warm colours – and I keep looking at this picture and this boy. Suddenly, I notice he is a ragged boy. He does not wear a frilly camisole or chapines. His hair is dishevelled. He is not even handsome. He does not have a red plume in his hair. He is not wearing a crinoline like me.

8. The critics of the time argued against *Escaping Criticism* – criticising criticism is always a bad idea: some high priests have ironclad contracts with society and are quite trigger-happy – at a time when a commitment to reality was being asked of artistic styles, while in this work "realism is equated to illusionism." For this reason, if the escaping boy with his very humble apparel did not have such a terrified expression, he might be the protagonist of a picaresque novel: a photogenic figure, seen approvingly by the same critics from whom the boy – and perhaps the painter – is trying to flee. The prejudices of the time are perpetuated in our own day, when it is

still claimed that aesthetic commitment can only be thematic. A gross error: I remember Bacon and his concept of technical imagination, with styles as tools that bare the personal nervous system of an author – and also an authoress. They leave us naked and exposed. Profoundly portrayed in the lines and colours we have chosen to paint our mask with. My crinoline and my delirium leave me in the nude. “Ready for a measurement.”<sup>6</sup> Like Pere Borrell del Caso, who suggests in titling his work that the paratext is in the text, the outside in the inside of the painting, the title in the sense of the image: the painter assumes a metapictorial posture that is risky, mischievous even, in his time and space. He is not a formalist. Thinking and painting head. Eraser head. But at times, as Rafael Chirbes used to say when he was very cross, the critics read from up on their high horse, and will not tolerate a single piece of mischief or a peashooter or a joke. Apel.les Mestre made this quite clear when he described this image as a “trivial and puerile... joke.” Pardon, pardon, pardon, Señor Apel.les – which also happens to be the name of a famous television priest. We will never, ever do it again.

9. The boy wants to get out of the frame, and in bracing for the escape – he has not yet set foot outside the darkness he emerges from – he makes a gesture that is far from cowardly, and is in fact very brave. Antonio Pau, in his *Manual of Escapology: Theory and Practice of Fleeing from the World* (2020), tells us that the idea of fleeing has lost much of its prestige, but that there are flights with very good reasons behind them. However, this boy faces a huge problem because he is escaping from one picture to fall into another picture, and that *trompe l’oeil*, that *mise en abyme*, that infinite specular reflection cuts short his desire to escape and transforms him into an unreal being. Into a flying donkey. Into a chimera.

10. I don’t know myself what I’m doing lost in this passageway. Even so, it’s high time you started to understand that I’m an important person. Summoned to write a few words on this collection, I have just finished preparing one of the texts for the hand leaflet of an opera, Verdi’s *Otello* (1887), to be performed at the Liceu, so I’m not just anybody. I am attired in crinoline and powdered wig, and I might climb up on some high boots at any moment.<sup>7</sup> I have also visited San Satiro in Milan, which makes me almost an expert in *trompe l’oeil*. The tragedies of Shakespeare and the books of Henry James and Agatha Christie – all placed on the same level through the effect of postmodern hallucination – are full of conversations heard through thick curtains, of words listened to without seeing the expression of those speaking them, of murders committed on a stage or in a hall of mirrors. *Trampantojo*, the Spanish word for *trompe l’oeil*, is not the name of a hunchback or a Spanish dancer. *Trampantojo* is a deception. An illusion. A magic trick that turns real. Because, at night, the boy dreams it and touches his legs again to make sure they are still stuck on his torso at the groin. The boy’s fear and the joy of being a whole body, not an amputated one, are realities, chemical substances, the oxytocin that will permit him to love and other hormones that will help him make up his mind to drop out of society or the picture. Who knows?

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<sup>6</sup> I take advantage of the academic whiteness of the footnote to legitimise the self-quotation. “I am ready for a measurement” are the words with which I end *La lección de anatomía (The Anatomy Lesson)* (2009). This is so, undeniably. And I use it because it is mine and I feel like it and because I’m tired of being nice and modest. The plumes and the crinoline have made me a much more empowered woman. When beside myself in other women, I am freed.

<sup>7</sup> Mental note: analyse the relationship of the critical institution, which watches over the semantic health of communities, and shoe shops. While we’re at it: analyse the relationship between the critical institution and dental health clinics. All the better to bite you with.

11. Even with my magnifying glass and the magnifying lenses inside my eyes, I would not be able to calculate the exact age of the boy, as I have a feeling that the physiognomy of a twelve-year-old was not the same in 1874 as it is in 2021. I am not talking about dress or fashionable hairstyles. I am referring to the length and width of the bones, and to the possibility that the shadow of fluff might appear on a male face. I am referring to how growing was done and how it is done now. I am referring to archaeologists and anthropologists – and vice versa – who study mummified anatomies and calculate the stature and age of a human being from the structure of the pelvis or way the teeth are inserted in the jaw of the skull. What strikes me about that boy is the contrast between the tension of the collar bone, the thinness of a small and narrow chest, and the roundness of a pair of hands, and even of an ankle, that are still a child's. Then I notice the boy's clothing again, and I have to insist that he's not from a good family. If he were sitting at a formal dinner, he probably wouldn't know what the fish knife was for.<sup>8</sup> He is barefoot and almost bare-chested. He emerges from a dark background, and to leave it behind, he grips onto a golden frame: the gilding is visible from the place the boy has reached, but perhaps gold and gold paint do not exist in the dark place the boy comes from. Maybe there isn't even any glitter. Is he fleeing from an art that is killing him or escaping towards an art that can save him? What is indisputable is that he looks like a disoriented animal. *La cucaracha, la cucaracha*, the cockroach can't walk any more...

12. My detective's investigations – the sole, unsullied, impossible observation of the visual stimulus – force me to concentrate on that frightened, valiant, curious, crazy face. Only one side of the face is lit, the one which has come out into the brightness from the dark, and that interplay of light and shadow produces a deformation... I don't know if the boy is fleeing from the horror of fictions, and what he finds on the other side is a still more horrible reality. I don't know if it hurts to cease to be the character/actor of *The Purple Rose of Cairo* and be transformed into the character/lover of the same film, obliged to leave the screen eternally so that the dots of light will undergo a molecular mutation, and chiaroscuro and illumination will be made flesh. I am worried by all the pain that might be caused by lunar lycanthropies and changes of texture or skin. The stretching, the physical tautness. Matter surgically deformed or assaulted by a scalpel or a paintbrush. I'm worried about whether the injection hurts. I still haven't matured, and I'm not going to be able to offer this boy any consolation.

13. Leaving one screen to enter another screen and another screen and another until someone is reduced to a distant speck. We still have no record of this boy's ever having appeared in one of the exhibition galleries of the Bank of Spain. We still have no philological record of his ever having slipped into a chapter of *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554) or a kitchen in *The Manors of Ulloa* (1887). He is not catalogued as a supporting actor in the picaresque or in the palpitating naturalism and its sexual, genetic and genealogical denunciations. We don't know. We can't say anything for sure. And in this hallucination that leads us from red leather to yellow leather and from yellow leather to red leather, from the represented to the object of representation, I remember that my own grandfather worked at the Bank of Spain. He liked to show off the crisp new notes in his wallet. His notes had no creases or microbes, and yet my grandfather was born in a village in Castile and was perhaps a muleteer – I won't stick my neck out to defend this hypothesis, but it comes in handy for the writing and for building the character – and he ended

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<sup>8</sup> It should be stressed that some practitioners of the arts, who do not come from unequivocally bourgeois homes, find it a huge struggle to respect the protocol at certain prizegiving ceremonies. Even though a virtue is sometimes made of necessity to reinterpret this ignorance as a gesture of anti-bourgeois defiance, we are not punks. Quite simply, there is an upbringing we have not received. It isn't there. All of us, men and women, are the boy. We're scared. We don't know how to carry it off.

up seeking out the Nationalist soldiers and frying eggs for them on the Ebro front. And my grandfather never found out who he really was. Perhaps because he forgot where he came from. Perhaps this boy is my grandfather, ragged and with dishevelled hair, who is escaping from his past, and puts on a suit and parts his hair with a ruled line, and occupies his place as cashier behind the window at the bank. At weekends he goes to watch Atlético de Madrid and smokes a cigar. My grandfather loved me very much, without knowing that I would turn into a woman in a crinoline who writes leaflets for the Liceu and delirious essay-poems about pictures that win prizes in nineteenth-century painting salons. My grandfather – who had very blue eyes, and that makes us think that he can't be the boy, or perhaps the boy is wearing dark contact lenses – has become an incomprehensible distant speck, a man unaware of his own shadow. When the moment comes to give us some pocket money, my grandfather's notes are the greenest and brownest. And they have no creases or microbes.

14. But to get back to the boy, I wouldn't know whether to describe his action of transcending the frame as a heroic or a reckless deed. I don't know if it's better to inhabit the space of the living or of the painted. At heart, all of us, men and women, inhabit the coloured strip where they intersect. Venn diagrams. Set theory. Set A: the living. Set B: the painted. Common elements of A and B: perhaps the intersection shares so many elements that we can talk of a union. Metabolism of representations and representation of metabolisms. Still lifes. I love to show off my mathematical knowledge. 'A+' writes the teacher on the school report card. Studying gives you something to flaunt.

15. The lady in the crinoline reflects and concludes that it could all be a painted space, although she subscribes more to the intellectual tendency to consider even the painted as living. That is her political point of view, and what gives art all its meaning. Performative, far from innocent, always outside Eden, but always by the side of artificial paradises. Delirious essay-poems are the result of the thought of individuals who have smoked everything or smoked nothing, and they make expression into the place of hallucinations and impossibilities.

16. I realise that in my case, the fact I have painted a detective, Arturo Zarco, inclines me towards a detective's point of view. I have the depiction of my detective fixed in my heart. Hands that paint, voices that sing, subjects of utterances are forever transformed by the moral quality of their offspring. The painting of the homosexual detective leaves its mark on my life. My detective says – or writes, I'm not too sure – that he would always live on the set of a Fritz Lang movie. For him, the painted is always superior. However, this boy escapes from the artistic space as though he were the victim of claustrophobia. I relive one of my recurrent nightmares: I am swimming in a wonderful blue pool; I take a deep breath and dive under the chlorinated water, holding my breath, to swim from one end to the other; when I am about to emerge, completely exhausted, and without a drop of air left in my lungs, I realise the surface of the water has thickened and hardened into a glass I cannot break. It is the glass of a bullet-proof windscreen. I beat it with my fists, but the screen does not turn liquid again, and I start to fall asleep, far from gently, while I watch the last bubbles escaping from between my lips. I learned my fear, to the point of naturalising it in a horrible nightmare, from a film called *The Legacy* (Marquand, 1978) starring Katharine Ross, the one in *The Graduate* (Nichols, 1967)<sup>9</sup> and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (Roy Hill, 1969).

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<sup>9</sup> Mrs. Robinson, played by Anne Bancroft, is dangling from this footnote. She holds on like a professional circus artist, her legs gripping the trapeze. She draws our attention because she too escaped from her film and went running off to a book of mine, *Susana y los viejos* (*Susana and the Elders*), to abduct Lorena, the

17. Fiction is truth, because it has stayed inside my body: in the form of thirst and nocturnal horrors. Like the child who wakes up in the middle of the night to make sure the magician has not severed both his legs at the height of the groin. The child, the boy in the picture and I need a glass of water. I don't know if I can give it to him: it might spoil him, the corners of his mouth might start to run, and the canvas of his skin might wrinkle. I don't even like to think how painful that thinning process might be for him.

18. The political dimension understood as the joke of a mischievous imp – the painter, his character – is intensified if we concentrate once more on the boy's expression. The boy experiences something more than fear. He is a terrified youngster fleeing from a dark room and entering an unknown world that does not at first sight make him feel particularly secure. The boy does not break the frame but escapes from inside one frame to be framed by another. The boy is being born, and we might even interpret his adventure as a symbol, gynaecological rather than sexual. Obstetric. There is a continuity even in rebellion against the establishment, as if aesthetic revolutions never escaped from the semantic field of evolution and intertextualities. Just as it is impossible to escape from the text, neither is it possible from a post-structuralist perspective to escape the influence of the traditions that make us up. With genre-based readings, the same often happens: we do not wish to cancel out fragments of art history or literature, we do not wish to ban reggaeton or Garcilaso's sonnet *En tanto que de rosa y azucena (While of Rose and Lily...)*, we merely propose a critical reading, not at all puritanical, constructive because we know very well that censorship and the denial of the evidence would be like amputating an arm, a leg, the left-hand ribcage of our anatomy of women reading or strolling through a museum gallery to recognise themselves in the lady with the crinoline and the red plume. The boy's flight places the canon in question: it is a critical movement with respect to criticism that we thank him for respectfully and sincerely. In the undeniable virtuosity of his realist aesthetic, the painter underlines the fact that he is neither a charlatan nor a novice. It seems to me.

19. The movement of the boy in a two-dimensional representation, his unforgettable frightened face, prompts me to relate the image to a story I read a long time ago, and which still makes my hair stand on end: *The Mezzotint* (1904) by Montague Rhodes James. And my shuddering increases – I am a sensitive woman who trembles like a leaf – when, thanks once more to Javier Portús, I discover there were three versions of *Escaping Criticism*, and in one of them the boy had aged. At least two major elements thus acquire a sinister glint: the fantasy of movement within a static and two-dimensional image, and the upsetting impression made on us by children who have aged or old people who look like children. I am a woman caught up in the intertextual weave and/or tangle, a bookish bore who suffers more and more memory lapses every day, and that is perhaps what saves this text from becoming a culturalist blitz and encyclopaedic minefield. Among her departments, sections and drawers on aged and wizened children or childlike old women, this entangled woman finds the terrible stories of Daphne du Maurier and her Little Red Riding Hood, a transvestite dwarf, of *Don't Look Back*.<sup>10</sup> Without too much rummaging, she can also hear the voice of Oskar as he beats the tin drum, she hears the singing of Bette Davis, dressed up almost like Shirley Temple at her first communion, in *What Ever*

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mother of Maximiliano (lover of cleaning ladies, false Juanito Santa Cruz), known to everyone as Mrs. Robinson owing to her enterprising sexuality and strange heart.

<sup>10</sup> The lady in the crinoline points out to me that the title of this story is actually "Don't Look Now". She furthermore advises me – the lady, although delirious, is also cautious, and checks my tendency towards bewilderment, but not versatility – that we do not know the date when the story was written. It escapes us. Her and me. But not, on any account, other illustrious and learned men and women.

*Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1963), and she can hear Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), terse and wrinkle-free, using his lubricious gentleman's arts to seduce his nameless governess. All that is in the file of children who age in pictures. That baroque larva of the cradle and the grave. That terror of encountering the depraved cell of malice in a child's face or, in the face of an old person, the anguish of the child that was. Locked inside an increasingly mortal flesh. Locked inside a stinking breath. Locked, like Dorian Grey, amidst the thickening oils, the spider's webs, bound to the canvas, his flesh fused with its textile strands, a witness to putrefaction and the re-encounter with one's own skull. The scariest skulls are the ones that still have tufts of hair on them. A nerve. All their teeth. Some appear in pictures of *vanitas vanitatis*. The lady in the crinoline covers her eyes when she walks past them, at night, along the passage of an art gallery.

20. Despite being a bookish bore of a woman who moans about her lapses of memory, I have not forgotten that the sinister in this picture is related not only to the boy who grows from one into another, but also to the illusion of motion in a static piece. Or the reverse, pretending that we are figures in a wax museum, immovable dummies. As in a game of Grandmother's Footsteps, bodies are frozen in their foreshortenings – Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Philip* (1639): how shocking, I hear the cries – or in their white softness: Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1538), that scene where a maid is paused forever as she searches in a trunk, while in the background we think we hear the music of lutes and harpsichords. The lady in the crinoline would feel very comfortable in that interior. From the nudity of the central figure, she infers that the room is well heated. I point out the lady's error: there are models who pose nude in the snow. I remind her of this. Or tell her of it.

21. Our protagonist, the boy of *Escaping Criticism*, the boy of this delirious essay-poem, has been looking – ecstatic but not static – at Venus, and to see her better has drawn a circle with his thumb and index finger around his right eye. Like a monocle. As if he were looking at her through a little hole. Sometimes frames help us to see much better.<sup>11</sup>

22. I haven't forgotten *The Mezzotint*:

The picture lay face upwards on the table where the last man who looked at it had put it, and it caught his eye as he turned the lamp down. What he saw made him very nearly drop the candle on the floor, and he declares now if he had been left in the dark at that moment he would have had a fit. But, as that did not happen, he was able to put down the light on the table and take a good look at the picture. It was indubitable – rankly impossible, no doubt, but absolutely certain. In the middle of the lawn in front of the unknown house there was a figure where no figure had been at five o'clock that afternoon. It was crawling on all fours towards the house, and it was muffled in a strange black garment with a white cross on the back.

M.R. James. *The Mezzotint*, in *The Collected Ghost Stories of M.R. James*, Edward Arnold & Co., London, 1931.

23. Cinema has invaded painting, and this temporal pirouette also has its share of the disturbing. When I was younger and more lucid – I too am aging sinisterly in the words I write, and my characters overlap with my own process of maturing – I wrote a text I do not regret, and which

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<sup>11</sup> The lady in the crinoline, the bookish bore and myself, one and treble, wonder if this observation on frames is an optical principle. It is certainly material for a theory of knowledge that suddenly opens our eyes so that we see clearly that the important thing in *Escaping Criticism* is not the figure of the boy but the frame. The frame.



today seems pertinent to me in talking of this boy who wants to leave but can't: "Pictures, busts, photographs, as duplications and reflections, have a sinister touch inherent to their own nature. In the case of the story by Montagu Rhodes James, that touch is multiplied by the dynamic and autonomous character of an image that is transformed without anyone's touching it. In impotence and incredulity, the gaze witnesses the transformations of the anodyne print of a house in the county of Essex, and with each transformation reveals a little more of the sordid tale of a child's kidnapping. Nevertheless, the sordidness of the tale is less disturbing than the vivification of the picture itself. First only the house is seen, then the moon starts to shine with a romantic glow that allows a figure with its back turned, barely a mark, to be made out. Later the mark becomes a human profile that crawls on all fours across the lawn towards the house and disappears. Then a window in the building lights up. Finally, the figure allows a glimpse of its face as it lifts up a bundle, perhaps a child, in its arms... The picture becomes a film where the ellipses, the unsaid, produce greater discomfort than what is shown, and the sinister is raised to the nth degree because the conventional domesticity of an ordinary house, shown in a conventional 'low-quality' print for bourgeois consumption, allows the mobile *pentimento* of its paper to reveal the *unheimlich*, what should remain hidden but has finally come to light: a dark story, but also, and very especially, the capacity of objects to impregnate themselves with voices, with stains on the wall that suggest incomprehensible forms or ancient languages, the permeability of the different strata of perception and existence that configure the real, the darkness and evil intentions of what remains concealed beneath the thick veil of logical and physico-mathematical reason..." Perhaps the boy, who wants to escape from the dark background and grips onto the frame, is fleeing so as not to be kidnapped. So that they won't extirpate his kidneys. So that they won't freeze him in the second dimension.

24. "It is necessary to reflect a little on the last remark in the previous paragraph, as the *unheimlich*<sup>12</sup> ceases to be a mere material stratum of reality – what we cannot see also exists: microbes, magnetic forces, protons, neutrons and electrons, memories...– and acquires a moralising dimension when charged with the electricity of evil. It is then that value judgements arise among writers who air their point of view to make an apology of the divine law or human law, of God or of the gods, of order and authority, of the ideological values that lie submerged beneath the iceberg of the cultural masses."<sup>13</sup> Take that! The lady in the crinoline couldn't have said things that way. No matter how she protests. I'm the woman who writes leaflets for the opera. The granddaughter of a cashier at the Bank of Spain. I've also left the frame, with a liana of words and no common sense.

25. Microbes and cultural masses are now very much back in fashion. Have you seen Bigas Luna's *Anguish* (1987)? The film within a film was not only a claustrophobic experience but cinema inside cinema, like painting inside painting and literature inside literature, can kill. Like heroin

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<sup>12</sup> The *unheimlich* is the bogeyman that frightens the boy fleeing from criticism. *Ergo* – without *cogito* – the *unheimlich* can be the criticism and pedantry of delirious essay-poems. The *unheimlich* can be the ash gathered under the carpet and the hunger, misery and inequality – understood artistically as disproportion – that makes reality a sinister place from which this boy – picaresque without malice, picaresque but not Lazarillo, non-picaresque picaresque – is trying to escape. And he jumps out of the frying-pan into the fire. The lady in the crinoline is startled and says to me: "You're a girl, and if you keep writing these incomprehensible things, you're going to mess it all up. How dare you. You're not an Oxonian. You're not in the club." And the lady in the crinoline is right. If she stopped my mouth or my fingertips, everything would go much better for me.

<sup>13</sup> The lady adjusts her spectacles and prophesies: "This fragmented text may be published, not so long from now, in a specialised cultural magazine." She pauses and adds: "Don't tell me that the *unheimlich* doesn't hold a certain interest."

and an addiction to orfidal. It may be that this boy is the mask of his painter, and there lurks a hypothesis that where jokes and a sense of humour were concerned, Pere Borrell del Caso was a junky. In a figurative sense. Like Iván Zulueta when he filmed *Arrebato (Rapture)* (1979). Or Lorenzo Llobet Gràcia, who made us the gift of his *Life in Shadows* (1949): cinema inside cinema, the addiction of those – men and women – who construct images, the addiction of those of us who shoot them into our veins and inhabit art as though it were a lysergic fairground ride that will end up killing us or driving us mad. I remind you that in one of my first investigations as a detective, I noticed that the boy in the picture had a crazy face. Because the boy in the picture is fleeing from hunger or from the representation of hunger, or is perhaps the alter ego of a painter who thought a great deal about painting. A modest self-portrait. Both hypotheses would be possible in the cultural field in which the canvas was painted, exhibited, awarded a prize, valued, and sold.

26. Now I think of Laura. She too returns from the dead, leaves the frame, vacates the picture and is incarnated before us in the stupefying face of Gene Tierney. That was how Otto Preminger (1994) imagined her. We don't know if Vera Caspary (1943) thought of her the same way, or a little less fascinating. With less fleshy lips and the next size up.

27. The boy in the picture doesn't look at us. He averts his eye from us so that we will not find him out, or perhaps it's because voyeurs – voyeuses, too – are not so important. In any case, it isn't us who fill him with terror.

28. The boy in the picture does not govern us and make us lethargic and intimidate us with his gaze like the figures in other two-dimensional representations. Have you ever been in the room at the Louvre where *La Gioconda* (1503) is exhibited? Or in the gallery at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome where *La Fornarina* (1518-1520) shows us her possibly cancerous breast? We can't hide anywhere. They, the supposed objects of observation, are the subjects of another type of gaze that is projected onto those of us who look at what lies inside the frame that semi-confines them. And I say 'semi-confine' because they depart from the canvas without the slightest gesticulation: their eyes emit rays or substances that petrify us. Mona Lisa contemplates me and, unconsciously, I smooth my hair. Powerful, she does not move a muscle of her ambiguous anatomy, even when I approach with a dagger to slash her face. Or – wait! – perhaps she moves. Maybe she does.

29. In the end, my fantasy does not have that much to do with the escapism of Houdini or with illusionism. I confess that magic bores me because I know it isn't magic, and I'm not interested in the secret behind the trick or in digital ingenuities (well, I am in some). My fantasy has to do with love of art: what makes me want to be inside *Las Meninas* (1656) stroking a mastiff, or inside Van Eyck's *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434) to test the quality of the cloths with my fingers. I enter these two warm rooms through the mirrors located in the background. Television has not yet been invented, and I can't slip into them by breaking the screens in an inverse movement to the suction that draws away the poor little dead girl in *Poltergeist* (1982). I would jump with Mary Poppins without a moment's hesitation into the chalk picture drawn on the pavement by the chimney sweep. And yet I wouldn't enter that canvas, because even though its critics called it a 'joke', it fills me with anguish. The black background. The face, almost deformed by a terrified curiosity, of the boy. The inability to leave. The pool with the surface of solid water. The asphyxia of a hypertrophied culturalism that's going to eat me up, and won't let me look from the correct proportion, the right balance, between the new stimuli and the ready-digested languages.

30. The lady in the crinoline rushes out, and before I can catch her, she leaps into a picture with a comfortable appearance. The lady in the crinoline is a queen who behaves like a humble and slippery kitchen cockroach.

31. The boy comes out, she goes in, and I remain, paralysed, incrustated, right where I am.