

SEX, FILMS AND... MAY 68?: AN INVESTIGATION ON HISTORICAL
REPRESENTATION IN GILBERT ADAIR'S *THE HOLY INNOCENTS*

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RESUMO: A representação histórica de *The Holy Innocents* (1988) de Gilbert Adair revela uma atitude paradoxal pós-moderna. A história se passa na França no fim da década de 60; especificamente entre Fevereiro de 1968 com o chamado “Langlois Affair” na Cinémathèque Française e a revolução Maio de 68. O foco é a juventude revolucionária que estava crescendo tão excitada em relação às pílulas contraceptivas, às drogas sintéticas como o LSD, à música de Bob Dylan, Janes Joplin e Jimi Hendrix, além dos filmes de Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, entre outros, que compunham a Nouvelle Vague. Nascidos depois da Segunda Guerra Mundial, essa geração viu pouco dos terrores produzidos pelas duas guerras mundiais; entretanto, assuntos como gênero e socialismo eram largamente discutidos. Mas a alienação dos personagens principais em relação a esses tópicos expõe uma irônica virada na narrativa, que subverte a abordagem histórica da própria narrativa. Esse paradoxo corrobora com a explicação da teórica Linda Hutcheon, de que textos pós-modernos abordam a representação história de forma consciente, ao expor que o passado só pode ser compreendido por meio de representações do presente, que distanciam e distorcem a história “real”.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *The Holy Innocents*; representação histórica; pós-modernismo.

ABSTRACT: *The historical representation in The Holy Innocents (1988), by Gilbert Adair, reveals a quite paradoxical postmodern attitude. The novel's story is set in France in the late 60's, specifically in-between the February 68 with the Langlois Affair in the Cinémathèque Française and the May 68 revolution. The focus is the revolutionary youth that was growing so excited about contraceptive pills, LSD, Bob Dylan's, Janes Joplin's, Jimi Hendrix's music, and Jean-Luc Godard's and François Truffaut's movies to name a few. They were the result of the post-World War II baby-boomers. Gender and socialism are some of the issues raised. But the main character's alienation in relation to these issues unveils an ironical twist within the narrative, which subverts the novel's own historical account. This paradox corroborates with theorist Linda Hutcheon's explanation that postmodern texts understand that the past can only be acknowledged from present representation, which distances and distorts the “real” history.*

KEYWORDS: *The Holy Innocents*; historical representation; postmodernism.

Andreas Huyssen explains that the postmodern period is filled with present pasts. In his words: “the world is being musealized” (2003, p. 25). He argues that contemporary society reveals a new concern in relation to the past; the growth of museums, memorials, historical documentaries, memoir writings, to mention a few, are only a demonstration of this musealization. A fear of forgetting generates an obsession with the past, which dominates our society. This desire to pull the past into the present vary from guilt for the unforgettable horrors of the past (2003, p. 26) to a nostalgic feeling for an idealized past (1995, p. 88). To Huyssen, the present is not interfering with the past, but the past cannot be avoided in the present. *The Holy Innocents* (1988) fits in this context as it is a

¹ This paper is part of my Master's thesis entitled **Historical Representation in the Age of Lost Innocence** (2012).

postmodern novel, which portrays the history of France in 1968; specifically, the “Langlois Affair”² in the Cinémathèque Française³ and the May 68⁴ riot. It is a story about the young American Matthew and his unusual French twin friends, Danielle and Guillaume. Despite the ongoing events, these three young beauties seem to understand little of their historical context, as they are only interested in films and sex, which seems to ironize and trivialize the novel’s own historical account on May 68.

Hayden White this apparently paradoxical representation. He demystifies the idea of a grand and unified history with the understanding that history is only acknowledged through its representations. Representations are far from being facts. According to White “all original descriptions of any field of phenomena are already interpretations” (1978, p. 128). Hence, a historical event cannot be simply described, it is first interpreted and, only then, represented. In *The Content of Form*; White explains that discourse in itself is an expression of the content, which means that the way in which something is told already influences its interpretation. Different narrative genres modify the final understanding of the past. In this sense, historical representation is a subject to its genre. Furthermore, for White “the facts do not speak for themselves” (1978, p. 125), somebody always speaks for them. This somebody provides his interpretation, and intentionally or not, modifies and limits history. In short, this biased understanding of the past is rather inevitable. Linda Hutcheon provides a further and complete explanation on the relationship between history and its representation in fiction, acknowledging that:

The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power [...] we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations. In a very real sense, *postmodernism reveals a desire to understand present culture as the product of previous representations*. The representation of history becomes the history of representation (My emphasis, 1989, p. 58).

² The “Langlois Affair” happened in France in February 1968, when Henri Langlois, the Cinémathèque’s curator, was dismissed by André Malraux, France’s Minister of Culture, and directors, scriptwriters, actors, film lovers, among others, joined to protest against the imposition of a new curator. Historiographer Herman Lebovics affirms that the minister alleged that the curator was not careful enough with the films, and he states that Malraux was right in part, that the curator would carelessly keep the films in his bathtub or under his bed (1999, p. 149), although this does not diminish his relevance to the history of cinema.

³ The Cinémathèque Française is a cinema house founded in 1936, by Henri Langlois, Georges Franju, Paul-Auguste Harlé and Jean Mitry. Their initial objective was to create a movie library where films could be preserved. It also sheltered many film sessions, which made it famous because of the diversity of the films exhibited. Furthermore, filmmakers with less or no financial support could have their films screened there, which facilitated the contact between public and films. In addition, it was an active part in the education of many innovative directors from that period, such as Robert Bresson, Bernardo Bertolucci, Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, to name a few. The Cinémathèque Française still exists. Since September 2005, it moved to the 12th district in Paris, in the modern building designed by Frank Gehry.

⁴ Historiographer Richard Jobs explains that May 68 was a month of civil war in France. It started and grew under the leadership of young university students from the Paris University at Nanterre (2007, p. 278-80). The revolt grew fast because it soon reached the factory workers, who had other demands, such as wage rise, less working hours, among others (JOBS, 2007, p. 278). Historiographer Kristin Ross states that “9 million people, across all sectors of public and private employment—from department store clerks to shipbuilders—simply stop working” (2002, p. 3). Around two third of the French workers joined the students on the streets, causing a series of general strikes. This almost caused the collapse of President Charles de Gaulle’s government.

This quote reveals another postmodern feature: self-consciousness. The postmodern self-consciousness arises through the understanding that the past can only be acknowledged from one's contemporary perspective, from today. As our present vision will always influence our understanding of the past, the present is a ghost that hunts the past in postmodern texts. In addition, the past cannot exist without present representations, and it is in doing so that the present distorts the past. In any case, postmodern art is not concerned with the "real" past, but with the awareness that all the past we know is from present representations. It de-naturalizes the static notion of present and past, and future. Moreover, postmodernism's self-consciousness contests the modernist tradition of "transparency in representation" (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 34). Catherine Belsey, for instance, explains that Classic Realism literature is expected to create a world of its own where the individual is able to forget his present reality (2002, p. 2). Postmodern literature does the opposite; the reader is constantly reminded of the text's position within a web of representations and discourses. The reader is reminded not only of the text's artificiality in representing history, but also of its textual nature (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 15).

According to Fredric Jameson the turn back into the past "endows present reality [...] with the spell and distance of a glossy mirage" (1984, p. 68), or an aesthetic of nostalgia. Hutcheon defines nostalgia as a place for emotional longing and ironic distancing. She explains that nostalgia is not simply homesickness, the missing of a place. Nostalgia is an idealized and a sentimental longing for a *time* (2000, p. 19). Since time cannot be returned to, we feel nostalgic. It credits the past with present desires. Taking this into consideration, Adair's recovering of 1968 in France is overcrowded with sex and films, while the violent riots become distant or alienated images. The positive memories emphasized in the narrative, because nostalgia transforms the past into an ideal site. The intriguing point is that this idealized past cannot be returned to because it also never really existed.

The Cinémathèque Française and its *rats*⁵ emphasize nostalgia. The former's construction is composed by a mix between empirical and metaphorical description. The narrator describes some of its aspects in details, such as its address "in the XVIth Arrondissement between the avenue Albert-de-Mun and the Trocadéro esplanade" (1988, p. 3), which shows a concern in reproducing history accurately, as an attempt to recover the image of the Cinémathèque with precision and objectivity. At the same time, the Cinémathèque's entrance is romantically idealized as "a kind of Japanese garden," where "through this garden's floodlit shrubs [one] can be glimpsed the wrought iron Mount Fuji" (1988, p. 3). Inside this garden, the Eiffel Tower becomes the Mount Fuji; as if the place could influence a person's view. Similarly, the Cinémathèque also influences the characters, Danielle, Guillaume and Matthew. They see their world as a movie, and are constantly and consciously acting as if they were part of it. The novel's emphasis on a romantic idealization of this cinema house suggests that their obsession is nourished by films in as much as it is by the place where they are screened. The detailed description loses its attempted objectivity and is flooded with nostalgia with the metaphorical language.

⁵ *Rat* is the term the Cinémathèque cinephiles used to refer to themselves, "true fanatics, the rats de la Cinémathèque, those who arrive for the six-thirty performance and rarely leave before midnight" (ADAIR, 1988, p. 3).

The conjunction of detailed description and metaphorical language indicates one of the characteristics that reveal the novel as a historiographical metafiction. According to Hutcheon, this kind of novel is both fictional and worldly. This combination is postmodern because it is paradoxically self-conscious of the artificiality of its historical account (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 15). This paradox is generally accompanied by irony, since the metafictional novel tends to infer contradictions in the narrative. In other words, the postmodern element comes from the awareness in mixing historical and fictional representation, and being aware of the ironical paradox this may raise. The paradox is that history cannot be fully recovered, and the historiographical metafiction evinces this through irony.

Similarly, the *rats* also raise nostalgia. They represent a whole generation, which was obsessed with movies. They would stay hours in the Cinémathèque's sessions, talk about them in the cafés, and then go home to read about them in the *Cahiers du Cinéma*.⁶ They would even have their own language when "talking shop: which is to say, cinema" (1988, p. 9). The conjunction of all these elements: setting, characterization and language represents a generation of people as cinephilic *rats* that only existed in the 60s in France. This literary mood fits into Jameson's understanding of nostalgia as the creation of an "ideology of the 'generation'" (1984, p. 66) – the stereotype of a generation. He problematizes that these stereotypes portray history through a romanticized nostalgia, which implies a lack of politicization. These depoliticized stereotypes ignore more complex, in-depth and encompassing understanding of history. For Jameson, it actually "displaces 'real' history" by a nostalgic view of a generation (1984, p. 67). In my view, the "real" history is indeed not the objective in this historical representation, but rather a conscious reflection upon them.

The issue of nostalgia raises another postmodern paradox. The conflict between the edged ironic subversions (HUTCHEON, 1989, p. 93) with nostalgia's emotional idealized past. Hutcheon explains this issue in the following quote:

If our culture really is obsessed with remembering—and forgetting—as is suggested by the astounding growth of what Huysen calls our "memorial culture" with its "relentless museummania" (1995, 5), then perhaps irony is one (though only one) of the means by which to create the necessary distance and perspective on that anti-amnesiac drive. The knowingness of irony may be not so much a defense against the power of nostalgia as the way in which nostalgia is made palatable today: invoked but, at the same time, undercut, put into perspective, seen for exactly what it is—a comment on the present as much as on the past (2000, p. 23).

Thus, postmodern text mocks the obsessive urge to remember with irony, but at the same time, it does not deny this nostalgic urge. Irony grants nostalgia with presentness; it calls attention to nostalgia's distorted view of a certain past. In this sense, irony prevents nostalgia from being merely sentimental, and adds a critical position to historicism. For instance, Matthew, Danielle and Guillaume's passivity in relation to the May 68 riots is ironic, because May 68 was a remarkable riot formed by young minds. They are young and involved with the Cinémathèque and the students' issues, but even though, they act

⁶ *Cahiers du Cinéma* was an influent French film journal, among its main writer were André Bazin, Claude Chabrol, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette and François Truffaut.

passively in relation to the riots for a long time, as if those issues did not belong to their present reality. Still, history is there ironically and distant, aware that it cannot be fully recovered. This combination of irony and nostalgia agrees with Hutcheon's affirmation that postmodern texts "both legitimizes and subverts" (1989, p. 101) cultural codes and conventions. It legitimizes by reproducing and subverts by being ironic about ideologies and forms. Furthermore, Hutcheon explains that contradictions are an essential postmodern feature, and that they are not necessarily solvable issues, as they frequently generate more questions (1989, p. 14).

The novel's progressive plot emphasizes the characters' alienation and the irony it generates. The story begins in the Cinémathèque's protest, moves into the apartment, passes through a small trip and ends with the street riot. In a circular structure, the final riot reminds the initial protest, since the Cinémathèque is just the beginning which generates the final confront. This progression is explained as the following: in the Cinémathèque's episode, they see the protesters from above, they are "overlooking the scene and sat there dangling their legs and biting on their crusty baguette sandwiches" (1988, p. 16). In this moment, they are spectators; Danielle assumes an all-privileged position, as "she annotated the spectacle that lay spread out at their feet. She played God" (1988, p. 16), judging everyone who walks under them. In the apartment, they play the Home Movies game, mimicking *Top Hat* (1988, p. 57), *Citizen Kane* (1988, p. 58) and *Beyond the Forest* (1988, p. 64) to mention only three. At this point, they are actors-to-be. Finally, when they decide to leave the apartment and join the May 68 riot, they become actors. As the narrator says "the director cried *Action!*" (1988, p. 126). The following quote shows how even when they participate in the riot, they are just role-playing, or playing a new game.

And so, slowly, gradually, without being aware of what was happening to them – and even if they would only ever belong to that aristocratic race of revolutionaries more fascinated by the decline, the delicious deliquescence, of the old and moribund world than aroused by the problematic genesis of the new – *Guillaume and his sister found themselves once more in thrall to a cause, a charm, to an exciting new drug* (my emphasis, 1988, p. 140).

In addition, the irony raised by the characters' alienation also appear in other moments. As true *rats* they should know about the "Langlois Affair." Their diligence in relation to the Cinémathèque should inform them about it, but they only see the protesters from above, as spectators. Even more, they should at least participate in the protest. But Matthew, Danielle and Guillaume isolate and alienate themselves once more in the apartment since the Cinémathèque is closed due to the "Langlois Affair." Due to this overt individualistic desire, the characters seem rather to live in a different reality, that is not in 1968, but in some nostalgic time about 1968. Their ongoing historical moment is explained to them by a friend as if they did not belong there. The characters' ironical indifference indicates a postmodern self-conscious paradox in representing history, in the sense that the novel attempts to reproduce history, but it knows it cannot, thus it focuses on a nostalgic view which creates irony and sustains this awareness. It also implies that the focus is not on the history of May 68 or the "Langlois Affair" but on cultural context in which these young cinephiles were inserted.

Three topics which related to May 68 reinforce the novel's concern in recovering history with details and accuracy: an appointment with Cohn-Bendit, a bookstore and a

restaurant. Daniel Cohn-Bendit was probably one of the main young figures of May 68. Being of German origin, Cohn-Bendit was 23 in 1968 and was a sociology student at University of Nanterre. Whereat that point his career as a revolutionary began. As the novel portrays, he was a leader on the streets, “he represented the street [...] wherever he went the streets followed him” (1988, p. 136). Dauphin, a friend of the twins, has an appointment with him at Denfert-Rochereau (1988, p. 143), meaning that they are forming a riot there. Cohn-Bendit’s figure is symbolic because he represents the youth uprising, the young leading force that began May 68.

According to Ricard Jobs, the role of youth in May 68 has its roots in the World War II. The postwar period redesigned France’s economy and government, and mainly rejuvenated its society (2007, p. 6). After its liberation in 1944, France reconstructed not only its buildings and streets, it went through a cultural reconstruction as well. The postwar period suffered two different booms: the economic and the baby boom. Because of the latter, youth dominated the country in a ubiquitous way that could not be ignored. The elderly population suddenly saw themselves as minority, and the government had to start thinking about these young people’s needs. Another aspect is that the devastated postwar France bet its future in this generation. Jobs writes that “youth and youthfulness became a key site around which France imagined and planned this future” (2007, p. 24).

May 68 becomes the utmost symbol to this youth generation. Jobs writes that the “one thing that makes the events of May 1968 so unique historically is the authoritative role played by youth in such a broad and grand uprising [...] 1968 helped to repoliticize the concept of youth as revolutionary” (2007, p. 283). This revolt demonstrated that the youth was indeed a powerful and uprising generation which is represented by Cohn-Bendit and also Dauphin, who differently from Matthew, Guillaume and Danielle, was committed with the ongoing changes in France. Furthermore, the narrator also describes other young revolutionaries, such as “a semi-conscious young man” (1988, p. 128), “a young girl [...] beating with her bare fists the chest of a CRS officer” (1988, p. 146) and “a young black woman” being interrogated by the police (1988, p. 147). The term young is indeed exhaustively repeated, but it reinforces the notion that youth was the leading force in the May 68 revolt.

The bookstore, *La Joie de Lire*, represents the intellectual force in May 68. Dauphin takes the trio there, because they are “Martians,” and need “re-education” (1988, p. 137). In the bookstore, he picks up “books off one of the tables as mechanically as though he were buying staple foods in a supermarket” (1988, p. 139). Knowledge is abundant, and it is consumed as such. Margaret Attack emphasizes the importance of the intellectual power in May 68 in “Intellectual Fictions.”⁷ In this article, she explains that this revolt did not begin in the university by chance, but because there was a general discomfort in the way education was organized. They wanted it to be more democratic and interdisciplinary. The students would participate in the riots during the day, and discuss them during the night (1988, p. 66). In accordance to this combination of do and talk, the narrator describes that “the same young people who had been demonstrating in the streets an hour or so before [...] were now leaning against its [the bookstore’s] walls or sitting cross-legged on its uncarpeted floor” (1988, p. 138). Being a young revolutionary also meant being an intellectual. In Attack’s words “the politically motivated were nothing if not propelled by

⁷ This article is part of her book *May 68 in Fiction and Film*.

intellectual curiosity” (1988, p. 67). And, Dauphin does agree with this. As he says: “History, knowledge, imagination – they’ve taken to the streets. They’re in circulation. They’re no longer private property. They’re no longer the private property of an élite, to be dispensed to those it considers worthy to receive them” (1988, p. 134).

The restaurant represents the raise against the bourgeoisie. While Danielle crosses the street to buy cigarettes, Guillaume, Matthew and Dauphin stand by a restaurant. The latter despises the men’s Italian jackets and the women’s excessive use of jewelry. To him, they are the “*petits-fascistes*” or “as you say *petits-bourgeois*. Fit for nothing but the dustbins of history” (1988, p. 141). Ross argues that May 68 was influenced by the Vietnam War’s and the Algerian War’s memories. Both represented a negative image of imperialism over countries that were economically and politically weaker (1988, p. 8-10). To May revolutionaries, the United States in Vietnam and France in Algeria used force to impose their imperialist order “in the name of independence and freedom” (ATAACK, 1999, p. 10). CRS’s aggression toward the students and workers was, in a similar way, imposing order in French society. Moreover, the modernization of France was introducing consumerism and alienation to French middle-class. Attack states that the “Vietnam war was providing a political focus for the critique of consumerism and the economic logic of capitalism” (1999, p. 10). She further explains that “critique of the socio-economic system goes hand in hand with a critique of the alienated, distorted conception of man, turned into a consumer of products with artificially stimulated needs” (1999, p. 24). Thus, in Dauphin’s criticism of the petit-bourgeois for their wearing imported clothes and consuming in excess, one can read the historical context of May 68 whose main targets were capitalism, consumerism and alienation. Moreover, the fact that the twins are petit-bourgeois casts doubt on the restaurant critique and their joining the uprising. Indeed, these ironical disparities evince a critique on alienation revealing a hidden hypocrisy.

The novel also subverts its historical approach through Matthew’s romantic death. He dies attempting to protect his twin friends. He picks up a red flag and starts singing to call the police’s attention. Then, he is shot. When he dies, he unexpectedly becomes a historical subject. In the sense that, while in the apartment, his love only leads to humiliation and degradation, such as the rapes (1988, p. 74 and 114) and the excrement in his face (1988, p. 117). But in the street, his love becomes a heroic act, which is realized only through a historical moment, the May 68 revolution. Most importantly is that Matthew dies to save the twins, but in doing so he symbolically also saves France. The contradiction and the irony is that all those young adults, who actually cared about the uprising, are resumed into one-character’s selfish deed. This way, history is trivialized, and May 68 ends up distorted by the story. Furthermore, it is also ironic how France, with all the cultural connotations it embodies, is symbolically saved by the American immigrant, who is only doing that for romantic and personal reasons. This ironical trivialization of history does not raise postmodern consciousness, but rather emphasizes a romanticized nostalgia.

Other aspects such as the feminist portrayal expose how the novel worries not necessarily with the events of France in 1968, but with the context it was inserted. The contraceptive pills became popular in the mid-20th century, freeing women from the danger of pregnancy and also from the obligation of building a family. Jobs alerts that sexual activity was condemned by society only if it was related to young females. Young women were still expected to assume the roles of mothers and housewives. Catholic Church and

the government joined forces to condemn women's liberation (2007, p. 190). Thus, sexual liberation was much more a women's cause than a male's preoccupation. Because of this, Jobs points out that "sexuality became the arena in which young women asserted their autonomy," and further concludes that women's independence was "based on the pursuit of sexual pleasure" (2007, p. 193).

This feminist aspect is particularly interesting if one compares Danielle to her stepmother. These two women portray the distance separating these two generations. Danielle's answers and attitudes are always ironical and provocative. She, for instance, demands her brother to masturbate under a Gene Tierney poster in front of her and Matthew. This punishment is the first sexual forfeit of their Home Movies game. When Guillaume refuses to do so alleging that, if it were her, she would not pay such a shameful forfeit, she answers "No, I wouldn't. But then, she isn't my type. Otherwise..." (1988, p. 65). In another occasion, revolted with Rollos's⁸ hypocritical attitude, Danielle turns a bowl of salad on his head (1988, p. 106). But the most interesting episode that really shows who Danielle is and how she feels about herself is when she plays God. Sitting on a balcony beside her two men, she is so secure about herself that she judges everyone who passes under them. She annotated the spectacle that lay spread out at their feet. Insolently staring at a teenage girl with brown eyes, an olive skin and the inking of a moustache, she would remark: "Yes, to be sure, that type obviously had to exist, whatever you think of it" (1988, p. 16). The twins' unnamed stepmother, on a quite different position, is not even a mother or a wife, she is a full-time secretary. She married their father, the poet, eight months after their mother's death. Before this, she was his real [paid] secretary. Marriage gave her an unpaid and full-time job, as "her role in the poet's life was to serve that rather anemic, crabby invalid: his inspiration" (1988, p. 36). The worst of it is that she is completely voiceless in this house, indeed one of her services is silence, "She was ever at its [her husband, the poet] beck and call with an unending supply of placebos – cups of watery Indian tea, inane words of encouragement and, *mostly, silence*" (My emphasis, 1988, p. 36). In opposition to Danielle, who "as a Trappist monk takes a vow of silence she had taken a vow of conversation" (1988, p. 16). Besides, the stepmother's silence does not come from a freewill vow, since she "felt like screaming a dozen times a day, [but] never raised her voice above a whisper" (1988, p. 36). Her insignificance to this family is accentuated in relation to the cats, which "she was mildly allergic" (1988, p. 36) to the cats, what would not prevent the animals to walk freely in the apartment. Her well-being is not more important than the cats' presence. Thus, while Danielle snobbishly plays God, her voiceless stepmother becomes an unpaid and full-time secretary in pretty bad working conditions.

Danielle represents two raising forces from that period. Firstly, she is young, and secondly she is a young woman. She clearly is not under her brother's or Matthew's influence, she has her own contradictory and strong opinions. She is stubborn, proud, bossy, witty, and prankster. In accordance to what Jobs explains about feminine power (1988, p. 193), Danielle uses her sexuality to assert her autonomy. Indeed, she is the one who first rapes Matthew, who is by the way raped twice. Danielle's rape is not only an issue of pursuing sexual pleasure; it is an act of dominance and imposition. This is observed in how she bullies Matthew "come, come, my little Matthew, you aren't being terrible gallant, you know. Is the prospect of making love to me so very hateful?" (1988, p.

⁸ An Argentinian friend.

73). She affirms her power over him, using the same kind of force that is historically associated to men, rape. As a consequence, it is possible to affirm that the focus is not on the “real” history, as I already mentioned, or rather that history is not the plot’s main concern, it rather portrays a contextual history, in which the feminine rise, for instance, gains an exponential and representation account.

Furthermore, postmodern self-consciousness is also evident in metalinguistic strategies. An example of this is when Isabella plays God (1988, p. 16). Firstly, her playing god recalls the writer’s own role in creating characters. To illustrate, she suggests more cheekbones to a blond young man, which the narrator ironically comments “meaning: if I were God.” This comment could be easily changed for “if I were the writer,” or even “if I were the narrator,” which stands for the postmodern self-conscious position of recalling aspects that are outside the story’s world, and that are related to the novel itself. In other words, Danielle’s play, added by the narrator’s comment, creates a metaphor to the very act of creating stories. A second aspect is that later in this play Isabella is surprised when she sees a pair of blind albino twins, both dressed in the same way and “both carrying white canes which they tapped in time together.” About them, she says: “well! I can’t say I’d ever have thought of that!” (1988, p. 16). This constitutes a meta-image since it recalls Danielle and her brother’s own incestuous relationship, remembering that they are also twins. In this duplication of the twins, the novel anticipates its own plot, foregrounding its meta-fictional characteristic.

The novel’s heavy references to other works of art also corroborate to the notion of a self-conscious postmodern novel, indicating that it knows its place in art history and position itself as such overtly. Some of the novel’s references are Bob Dylan (1988, p. 6), Jean Cocteau (1988, p. 23), Katsushima Hokusai (1988, p. 26) Edgar Degas (1988, p. 29), François Truffaut (1988, p. 32) and René Magritte (1988, p. 53). This use of references goes in accordance to one of the May 68’s ideas that knowledge was power. Meaning that the frequent recovering of films, paintings, and songs, reinforce the intellectual power as part of May 68 historical representations. Danielle demonstrates this when they are leaving the Louvre museum, she muses “Why, when nature imitates art, does it always choose the worst art to imitate? Sunsets by Harpignies, never by Monet” (1988, p. 31). Her commentary shows that she is quite educated. Harpignies and Monet painted in the same period, the nineteenth century, and treated the same theme, landscape, but they converged to different schools. While Monet is widely known by his Impressionist paintings and his sensitive hues of blue, Harpignies was from the Barbizon school, which favors a more realist view, and silvery pervades in his landscapes. Moreover, Attack explains that “knowledge was (sexual) power” (1988, p. 69). The conversion of intellectual power into sexual power is present in the characters’ games, in how they go from film guessing to sexual domination; as when Théo is not able to guess Danielle’s mimic, his forfeit is to masturbate in front of Matthew and her (1988, p. 67).

This postmodern position is relevant since it turns our attention to a different aspect of history. The issue is not as much on the truthiness of the represented aspects as it is on a contemporary concern in how to portray it. In this sense, the focus is on a contextual history about youth culture in the late 60s. Furthermore, as the subversion of the historical by the fictional losses relevance, so does the dichotomy between the political and the personal. Since the emphasis is on the conscious representation and the contextual history. In this sense, I understand that the sexual exploration and the cinematic attention

happening inside the apartment are as revolutionary and as historical as the revolt happening on the outside. In sum, the problem may seem that the history of May 68 is subverted by the fictional story, but nostalgia, irony and the conscious representation raised by them shows that the personal story is also an account of history. This unexpected view of the past allows a different understanding of history, which becomes a pluralized history. In addition, it also shows an attempt not to mystify the historical event and a need to revise history from a contemporary perspective.

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