

Real Estate and Stating the Real in Jean
Echenoz's *L'Occupation des sols*

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Jean Echenoz's *L'Occupation des sols* (1988) would seem to be a work that seriously questions notions of the "real." The novel's opening declaration—"Comme tout avait brûlé" 'Since everything had burned'—predicates the ensuing narrative on an absence of those cultural landmarks and institutions that lend stability and coherence to our existence. At its most constative level, the opening statement alludes specifically to the fire that ravaged the Fabre family's building, destroyed all of their belongings, and killed Sylvie Fabre. Consequently, much of the novel's thematic material pertains to the manner in which the two remaining family members, Sylvie's husband and son, rebuild or replace their lost property and lost lives. In many respects, this scenario might confirm Martine Reid's observation that banality is essential to Echenoz's modes of narration (992). The banal residue of this tragedy is adopted as the novel's centerpiece. Moreover, at a mere fifteen pages of text, it is exceedingly brief, especially when one considers that its publisher designates it as a novel. Thus might one quite reasonably ponder, as does Warren Motte, whether or not *L'Occupation des sols* may correctly be called a book (97). Both in its thematic development and in the actual quantity of discourse that it employs, the narrative forces its readers to reflect on its insufficiencies to the point where its own coherence is called into question. It is perhaps not surprising that Echenoz's (non)development of the narrative situation draws its questions of lost property—and the restoring of lost property—into proximity with questions of narrative coherence. The history of Western con-

sciousness relies heavily on recourse to the material—and especially to property ownership—as a foundation for the cognitive paradigms that it employs to establish the real and the rational. In this respect, it might certainly be argued that the novel serves primarily to test fundamental convictions about property and the stability of its grounding—its *occupation des sols*—in Western consciousness. It leads its readers, through its curiously minimal tale, to the foundations of these convictions in Western thought, and the strange yet determining role that they play in shaping narrative structure.

The rhetorical and philosophical convention in which the masculine is associated with the ownership and transmission of property while the feminine is associated with property itself figures among the novel's central concerns. This notion is provocatively, though quite laconically, articulated in the opening statement of *L'Occupation des sols*: "Comme tout avait brûlé—la mère, les meubles, et les photographies de la mère—pour Fabre et le fils Paul c'était tout de suite beaucoup d'ouvrage" 'Since everything had burned—the mother, the furniture, and the photographs of the mother—for Fabre and the son Paul it was immediately a great deal of work' (7). The novel's goals—the tasks that it sets for its characters—relate precisely to reconstituting or "refurnishing" this site in our imaginary collectively occupied by the mother and the family's belongings. A brief review of twentieth-century Western thought would suggest that this site has, in fact, been abundantly furnished. Frederick Engels, whose late nineteenth-century treatise on the history of property underlies twentieth-century conceptions of patriarchy, cites male dominance in patriarchal order as the enduring emblem of that primal moment in (pre)history where private property became the domain of the masculine (50). For Engels, this single event conditions and defines the intelligibility of patriarchal culture. In his 1960 study of exogamy, Claude Lévi-Strauss illustrates key aspects of this paradigm's progression in twentieth-century thought. In one of the more dramatic episodes of his essay, Lévi-Strauss concludes that women, despite their degree of participation in the forming of marriages, cannot be considered partners in the union, but instead, must be counted as property exchanged between groups of men (135). This assertion assumes particular prominence in Luce Irigaray's project to develop a feminist idiom

that would elucidate a repression of female consciousness. In defining her notion of “homosexuality,” a system of exchange that valorizes masculine desire and suppresses feminine desire, Irigaray specifically invokes Lévi-Strauss’ argument that woman has always been—and, contrary to all appearances, continues to be—property in the marital exchange.¹ Irigaray clearly shows that, despite its claims of objective empiricism, Lévi-Strauss’ assessment of the meaning and value of the feminine in patriarchal consciousness is fraught with unexplored sexual and political dimensions; yet her own argument makes little effort to deconstruct or disavow the assumptions that Lévi-Strauss adopts. To the contrary, she ironically confirms the premises of his argumentation and assimilates them into her condemnation of patriarchy’s consequences for female subjectivity.²

Echenoz’s typology reflects on the development of these convictions and their expression in French thought via a new and enigmatic tale of “homosexuality”: this bond between father and son that must be examined in light of missing property. Indeed, the entire narrative situation emanates from the eradication of this support upon which the bulk of our cognitive apparatus for understanding gender and cultural identity is based. Michel Collomb has proposed that Echenoz’s prose often employs numerous techniques to unmoor the narrative from its conventional framings and underpinnings.³ Perhaps *L’Occupation des sols* is especially ambitious in this respect. It dislodges the narrative from essential cognitive paradigms in Western thought, and forces its readers to begin anew. It proposes, in effect, to formulate a new “zoning plan,” to compel a (re)mapping of that site in our imaginary where these configurations have been so indelibly engrained, and to question the very anchoring of the real in symbolic relations.

Echenoz’s scenario reprises some problematics that Jacques Lacan associates with the boundary between the imaginary and the symbolic orders. Lacan argues that conceptions of the real are founded specifically on access to the symbolic. The imaginary constitutes a realm of deceptive relations that must be overcome in order for a relationship with the symbolic to be forged. It is primarily for this reason that the “mirror stage” figures prominently in Lacan’s typology: it marks the subject’s encounter with its own “otherness,”

and conditions its entry into the symbolic order.⁴ One of the pivotal episodes in *L'Occupation des sols* represents a dilemma in this schema; that is, it relates the faltering relationship between father and son to language's faltering power to reproduce the visual dimensions of Sylvie's body:

Le soir après le dîner, Fabre parlait à Paul de sa mère, sa mère à lui Paul, parfois dès le dîner. Comme on ne possédait plus de représentation de Sylvie Fabre, il s'épuisait à vouloir la décrire toujours plus exactement: au milieu de la cuisine naquirent des hologrammes que dégonflait la moindre imprécision. Ça ne se rend pas, soupirait Fabre en posant une main sur la tête, sur ses yeux, et le découragement l'endormait.

In the evening after dinner, Fabre would speak to Paul about his mother, that is, Paul's mother, sometimes beginning before dinner had ended. Since they had no more pictures of Sylvie Fabre, he would exhaust himself trying to describe her ever more precisely: in the middle of the kitchen arose holograms that the slightest imprecision would deflate. That's not quite right, Fabre would sigh, placing his hand on his head, on his eyes, and the frustration would tire him. (7-8)

Much of the novel's thematic material radiates from this impasse between the realm of the specular and the order of language. Its narrative trajectory prioritizes the father and son's pursuit of that specular dimension for which language does not adequately compensate. This situation is especially interesting in that it calls attention to difficult aspects of property's roles in regulating intersubjective relations and in orienting them around gender. In certain respects, the novel echoes attitudes—such as those of Engels, Lévi-Strauss, and Irigaray—where subjectivity is linked through property ownership to knowledge of a history of male sexuality: it authenticates this notion through reference to the female body as the object whose representation governs homosocial relations. Yet the narrative's staging of a further episode in this scenario provocatively recasts its circumstances. This involves specifically a curious structure that must be deciphered as a key to the novel's narrative coherence: a building whose side is emblazoned with the only remaining image of the late Sylvie Fabre. Her husband and son turn to it repeatedly, making regular pilgrimages to its address to contemplate the mural:

Le dimanche et certains jeudis, ils partaient sur le quai de Valmy vers la rue Marseille, la rue Dieu, ils allaient voir Sylvie Fabre. Elle les regardait de haut, tendait vers eux le flacon de parfum Piver, Forvil, elle souriait dans quinze mètres de robe bleue. Le gril d'un soupirail trouait sa hanche. Il n'y avait pas d'autre image d'elle.⁵

On Sundays and certain Thursdays, they would head down the quai de Valmy, toward *la rue Marseille, la rue Dieu*, they would go to see Sylvie Fabre. She looked down at them, extending toward them the flask of Piver perfume, she smiled in fifteen meters of blue dress. The grillwork of the ventilation system pierced her hip. There was no other image of her. (8-9)

The novel's depictions of this image's power of fascination invite reflection on its meaning as a unique and overt sign of woman's fusion with property, and on the remedy that it purports to provide for the crises—in representation, and in the status of the male subject—that the scene in the Fabres' kitchen makes apparent. Because the mural establishes male subjecthood in respect to a singular icon where the commercialization of property and of the female body come together, it might seem to confirm projects of explaining the male subject as the possessor of their value; but the novel implies the inadequacy of such projects. It dramatizes a dysfunctionality in the linkage between male subjectivity and language, the symbolic domain that governs the subject's insertion into the cultural order; it further suggests that the relay of property and of the fetishized female body overtakes male subjecthood, appropriates its language, and offers it back to men through the (al)lure of spectatorship. The mural evokes, in effect, what Lacan has called the "*objet petit a*"; that is, it stands in place of the object of desire, or more precisely, it occupies the space where desire seeks an object. For Lacan, the true object of desire is unconscious: desire is motivated by a quest for the impersonal Other that defines the ego at the mirror stage; and thus, the purpose of desire is to elicit "le désirant dans l'autre." The mural, having no desire of its own, cannot serve this purpose; yet by "failing" to perform its function, it is highlighted as an obstacle in the father's and son's route toward a more authentic expression of the meaning of masculine desire, and toward inclusion in the cultural system or law that language subtends. Ultimately, the mural might

be best explained as an exacerbated sign of this situation: the problematics of coordinating property, sexual identity and subjectivity within the economy and discourse of desire.

Echenoz demonstrates that the logic of the cult object that woman's body becomes in its association with property is intertwined with the mission to construct consciousness around the notion of a male subject. *L'Occupation des sols'* consideration of obsessive visual interest in the mural partakes of this logic, with its emphasis on an enigmatic sign that would reveal itself as the source of the intelligibility of male consciousness. The novel takes an interesting turn in asserting that the mural participates in erasures of language and gaps in male consciousness: "Nul ne raconta rien de ces dernières années; on discourut juste de la nécessité" 'These past years were not mentioned; they spoke only out of necessity' (19-20). This breakdown recalls Julia Kristeva's characterization of the abject as the culminating stage in a falling away from language, a stage where the subject is fascinated by its own exile from language and from cultural identity: "On comprend ainsi pourquoi tant de victimes de l'abject en sont les victimes fascinées sinon dociles et consentantes" 'It can thus be understood why so many victims of the abject are fascinated if not docile and consenting victims' (17). The mural resonates Kristeva's idea of the abject as a domain where signs acquire perturbing aspects and contradictory meanings (12): as a sign of woman's "representativity" within the marketplace, the realm of property, it confirms the success of the project to stabilize the male subject; yet it is also a sign of those dimensions of masculine identity that must be silenced or suppressed in order to ascertain the intelligibility of that success.⁶ The realm of real estate transactions takes up this fascination, fostering the drive to move ever nearer to the mural's consummate meaning: when construction begins on a new apartment building that would conceal Sylvie's likeness from their view, Fabre moves into the apartment to ensure proximity with the mural:

On ne le dissuada pas franchement d'emménager tout de suite, au quatrième étage côté Wagner, dans un studio situé sous les yeux de Sylvie qui étaient deux lampes sourdes derrière le mur de droite. Selon ses calculs il dormait contre le sourire, suspendu à ses lèvres comme dans un hamac; à son fils il démontra cela sur plans.

Frankly, no one dissuaded him from moving immediately, on the fourth floor of the Wagner side of the building, into a studio located under Sylvie's eyes, which were two dull lamps behind the wall on the right. According to his calculations, he was sleeping against her smile, suspended from her lips as though he were in a hammock; using blueprints, he showed this to his son. (18-9)

Echenoz's tale centers in this respect on the pivotal role that this image of woman's body fused with property plays in maintaining the fragile barrier between the abject and cultural identity, and thus, in sustaining the relations through which the intelligibility of consciousness and subjectivity can be expounded. At its most constative level, the mural purports to "stand in" for Sylvie herself; yet the novel gives us reason to wonder if it does not signal an ineffable need to question its own coming into being and all that it represents in Western consciousness. It engages us in its own overdetermined factitiousness: Echenoz maps out the thematics of its origins in strict compliance with existing paradigms. The mural arises from the very sort of pact that Lévi-Strauss has in mind; that is, Fabre and Flers, its painter, conspired to engage Sylvie, against her will, in its creation: "Choisie par Flers, pressée par Fabre, Sylvie avait accepté de poser. Elle n'avait pas aimé cela" 'Selected by Flers, pressured by Fabre, Sylvie had accepted to pose. She hadn't liked it.' (10). Sylvie is, in effect, a scopic object exchanged between them. The mural thus confirms longstanding conceptions of the "real" through its visual evidence of a preexisting pact; it rigorously accounts for woman's discovery of the law through the hegemony of the masculine—the moment where Sylvie's will yields to that of her husband—and documents her entry into the law in its reference to an enduring emblem that attests that moment. Yet in establishing and confirming the familiar paradigm in which woman's will and desire is subjected to male domination, the episode raises further and more problematic questions about the origins of masculine desire, and the sorts of mechanisms that Western culture uses to engrain that desire in men's experiences.

The Œdipal myth is without doubt the primary frame of reference in literary criticism and critical theory's attempts to account for this structuration. Echenoz, in manipulating the Œdipal situ-

ation, may be attempting to uncover elements of the tale's mythic structures that remain unresolved in our efforts to explain its significance. In Freud's Œdipal complex—one of the most fundamental of all modern inquiries into this myth's implications for intersubjective relations—Œdipus represents a pivotal figure in the emergence of masculine desire's association with viewing, and with knowing through viewing. He enacts the insatiable drive to reveal entirely the origins of knowledge and its full spectrum of positions in narrative form and familial structures. This drive assumes special import in Echenoz's typology, where visual recourse to the mother as a purely specular form—that is, as a mural, an object that exists solely to be viewed, rather than as a person—plays a crucial role in the novel's portrayals of its own meaning. The narrative calls special attention to the peculiarity of woman's "objectal status" in Western culture, that is, as a figure who, according to conventional logic, is assigned a passive role in the construction of "patriarchal thought": it is contended in this view that woman participates in patriarchal institutions as the scopic object of the desires and perspectives of men.⁷ Echenoz's situation might be said to dramatize through its insistence on this convention an ongoing tension in the effort to explain its functions and consequences, and the relevance of Œdipus for the decoding of its full connotations. Œdipus has proven fascinating to twentieth-century critical theory largely because it encrypts deeply entrenched impediments in the individual subject's attempts to master its entry into the cultural order and into the object world; and thus, Œdipus is seen as a figure who would explain for us the relationships between knowledge, eroticism, and the object world, and who would tell us something about our own attempts to comprehend these relationships. Echenoz's scenario is especially interesting in that it does not merely rearticulate the Œdipal situation; rather, it creates a context in which the myth's original outlines are at once normalized and exaggerated: unlike the original myth in which the father's murder constitutes an essential element in the tale's meaning, the father and son in Echenoz's "retelling" of the myth negotiate separate, peaceful existences as a result of their initiation into its thematics; and unlike the original myth in which blindness is the ultimate consequence of Œdipus' deeds, Fabre and Paul's peaceful coexistence reasserts visual relationships with the

object world, and more particularly, with woman as the focal point in the object world. The narrative situation glaringly underscores these “corrections” that property’s association with woman brings to the original myth’s trajectory, and thus, compels its readers to reflect on woman’s “objectal status” as a dimension of Western culture’s labors to stave off the threats that Œdipus poses for its schemata of knowing.

It would seem, then, that Echenoz emphasizes the everyday, commonplace effects of the “woman as property” scenario in resolving conflicts made apparent by the lesson of Œdipus. For Œdipus is a mythic tale, and hence, does not profess to tell us directly about the “realities” of ordinary family structures and everyday intersubjective relations. It represents extreme and radical desires that are normally mitigated or rerouted in one’s everyday engagement with others. Echenoz, on the other hand, presents his readers with a tale that adapts this mythic situation to an everyday setting: its actors never yield to—or even contemplate—the drastic divagations from cultural imperatives that come into play in the original myth of Œdipus; instead, it focuses almost exclusively on the mural’s capacity to reassert the Law’s systems of interddictions, and thus, prevent the resurgence of the radicalized desire that the original Œdipus had experienced. In a sense, Echenoz’s novel is ultimately about the inauthenticity of desire that arises from continuing efforts to suppress the sorts of threats that the myth of Œdipus represents. Because the novel rather explicitly—although somewhat disingenuously—endorses viewing as a means of integrating its characters into their world, it pantomimes an alternate ending to the Œdipal myth, where the pursuits that animated the original Œdipal drama are neutralized and assimilated into the cultural order. The novel thus suggests that the cultural enactment of viewing in Western consciousness—and more particularly, its configuring of man as scopic agent and woman as scopic object—attends to the mythological project whose failure Œdipus portrays, that is, the project of fully assimilating the eroticized desire to know—what Freud would call *Wissstrieb*—into the cultural order. For Œdipus, whose fullness of knowledge coincides with blindness, spectatorship evidences an insurmountable obstacle in this pursuit. In this new scenario, scopic relations are restored and oriented around the deceptive visual co-

herence that the mural's uniting of woman and property presents to us.

The mural of Sylvie Fabre presents undeniable challenges to our efforts to know how to understand its coherence. For the mural represents not merely a substitute for the unconscious object of desire—an *objet petit* in its strictest Lacanian sense—but also a curious referent to that unsymbolizable moment where man was assimilated into the “law of the phallus.” This identification with the law is effected for Sylvie through her acceptance of her husband’s will. While she is alive, her desire for her husband fulfills the need for the “desirer in the Other”; and their common identification with the law is borne out in the birth of their son three years later (10). Without this support, these bonds evaporate; they cannot be restored through symbolic relations, that is, Fabre’s incipient efforts to reintegrate himself into the symbolic economy by *describing* Sylvie to his son. The “real” that such narrative relations are meant to promote no longer has any meaning in his experience; it is no longer sustained by a reciprocation of desire. The mural signals, then, a secret weakness in the symbolic economy’s ability to engrain a desire for the law itself into the masculine imaginary. Were it not for this painting and the visual evidence that it offers of woman’s body bound to property, the father and son would surely reject symbolic relations altogether and revert entirely to the “mirror stage,” the forbidden contemplation of their own bodies. The mural preserves a consciousness of the “law of the father” in their experience. It ensnares them in a fragile yet enduring relationship with that law that cannot account for them: whereas Sylvie’s acceptance of the law allegorizes the cultural adoption of woman’s body as a privileged site of spectatorship, Fabre’s participation in that law effaces his visual presence, and bars his own representation within scopic relations. The mural emblemizes, in this respect, the very important function that the “woman as property” syntagm performs in “phallic” thought: it suppresses an always imminent revolt embedded in man’s forced rejection of his own image as a precondition of his symbolic identity, and in so doing, conditions his ongoing compliance with the law. He becomes, to borrow Echenoz’s imagery, “suspended” in the symbolic economy, an unseen byproduct of its operation, always hidden behind its façade.

One of the novel's main concerns relates, then, to the roles that property plays in maintaining systems of knowing the material world, and to understanding the functions that gender performs in governing our empirical attention to the bodies that compose that world. Our observations within the realm of objects purport to reveal to us the true nature of the beings that we perceive, yet they tell us little about our own purposes in the act of spectatorship, that is, the quest to know a truth that always lies beyond the scopic information received through visual inspections. One might certainly read *L'Occupation des sols* as a challenging reflection on the coherence of spectatorship as a whole, and more particularly, on the recourse to sexualized identity in attempts to overcome the gaps that spectatorship leaves in our epistemic constructions. In studying the effects of the mural, the novel returns its readers to questions about these lacunæ.

Part of the novel's depictions of the mural's meanings and functions involves staging its potential incoherence. For Paul in particular, the mural has no ready and apparent meaning; painted three years prior to his birth, it is merely a vestige of some past life: "ce mur n'était qu'une tranche de vie antérieure" 'this wall was but a scene from a past life' (10). Once again, the novel is striking in its contrast to the classical tale of Œdipus: rather than a fascination with the maternal body as a site that would reveal the mysteries of eroticism and its functions in annexing human corporality to its own signifying processes, Echenoz's tale recounts a disinterest on the part of the son that the father must work to correct. One might propose that this dissimilarity has something to do with the fact that Jocasta, in the original myth, was a living woman while Sylvie Fabre, as she appears within Echenoz's textual universe, is an inanimate being. In a sense, Echenoz's novelistic strategies, by accentuating the more purely "objectal" status of Sylvie Fabre, do focus more intensely than the original Œdipal narrative on the spectator's relation to the image, and on the relations that are established between spectators through their common engagement in viewing. Given that Western culture has defined the prerogative to view and interpret the world as the domain of the masculine, *L'Occupation des sols* raises particular questions about the coherence that spectatorship is believed to confer upon constructions of masculine identity. It en-

codes these questions in its efforts to overcome Paul's estrangement from the desire to view, and to negotiate his initiation into the cognitive imperatives of the gaze. The coherence of the gaze—its promise to make the world graspable and comprehensible—would seem in this demonstration to be contingent upon a system of transmission that is in crisis in *L'Occupation des sols*. Confidence in scopic relations must be artificially reactivated and reinstated through ongoing performances of their cogency.⁸

This is, in effect, what happens between Paul and his father; after observing his father's animated and emotional response to the image of Sylvie Fabre, Paul begins to visit and view the mural of his own accord, and this mediated relation to the scopic object comes to substitute for discursive relations between him and his father: "Plus tard, suffisamment séparé de Fabre pour qu'on ne se parlât même plus, Paul visita sa mère sur un rythme plus souple" "Later on, distanced from Fabre to a point where they no longer even spoke to each other, Paul visited his mother on a more flexible schedule" (10). Given this outcome, it would be difficult to claim that traditional configurations of spectatorship are in any way subverted in Echenoz's novel; rather, the novel emphasizes its own inability to alter the vectors of the viewer's scopic engagement with the object world. Yet because *L'Occupation des sols* is a fictional work, its goals do not consist simply of attempting to give an accurate account of a body of events, but might more precisely serve to bring its readers into closer proximity with those gaps that our modes of knowing the world never fully eradicate, and to incite new interpretations of the real through its staging of conventional truths.

The novel implies, in effect, that the cultural directive to view in the masculine experience—and especially the directive to view woman, to examine her ever more closely in an unending attempt to uncover Truth—is the result of an incoherence embedded in Western consciousness' attempts to deal with the irreducibility of matter in our constructions of meaning. Judith Butler has approached this situation in her reference to a "productive" aspect of signification. For Butler, this means that signification is not a mirror of the material world, but instead, actually produces material bodies as an outcome of its own operation, and thus, the body posited as prior to signification is, in fact, "an effect of signification" (30). More sim-

ply stated, Butler suggests that our initiation into understandings of the object world are conditioned and motivated by the conjoined origins of matter and meaning in human consciousness, and that, in attempting to know the meaning of matter, we are continually confronted with our own epistemic investment in the material world. This confrontation has particular resonance in the world of commodities, where property is imbued with fetishistic magnetism. Echenoz's allusions to the body's implication in the world of property fetishism highlight the role of property as a fetish object that intervenes in the problematic confrontation between consciousness and bodily existence. Yet *L'Occupation des sols*' questions pertain most specifically to the unmanageable effects of this fetishistic recourse to property. Echenoz's narrative situation undoes the completeness of Sylvie's image as an emblem of mastery over the subject's entry into the material world: in the inscribed observers' attempts to process its full implications, further matter intervenes; that is, additional buildings are erected to fill in the blank spaces and replace the decaying edifices that surround it, eventually eclipsing Sylvie's likeness altogether ("Les étages burent Sylvie comme une marée" "The floors consumed Sylvie like a rising tide" [14-5]). This is, in effect, an especially blatant and dramatic rendering of how matter gets in the way of the endeavor to understand investigations into the material world.

The narrator explains these intrusions in terms that insist upon a metonymic operation: "Il suffit d'un objet pour enclencher une chaîne, il s'en trouve un toujours qui scelle ce qui le précède, colore ce qui va suivre—au pochoir, ainsi, l'avis du permis de construire" 'A single object suffices to start a chain; there is always one that ensures another, conditions additional links—and so, to the press goes the construction permit' (13). The metaphor of the chain evokes Lacan's signifying chain, the projection of unattainable desires into language. In Lacanian logic, this movement indicates the signifier's covering of the inevitably elusive signified, desire's true yet unstatable object. Language takes up the unfulfillment of desire, and passes it on to the listener or reader, who is charged with uncovering its ultimate, though always ineffable, meaning. Echenoz's situation is interesting in that its depiction of language in the signifying chain does not relate to the conscious statement of desire, but to mechan-

ically produced construction permits that herald the intrusion of matter. In this respect, the novel draws attention to the artificiality of language's role in transcending the limits of specular relations. Language, it is suggested, does not always serve to rectify the inauthenticity of our relationship to the material world; it repositions, but does not eradicate, the gaps that spectatorship leaves in our understandings. The desires that it conveys are always in some sense determined by unconscious processes to which it does not have access; and thus, language in some circumstances can only signal barriers. The construction permit textualizes in this sense a barrier that remains indelibly in place in the novel's concluding image: "On gratte, on gratte et puis très vite on respire mal, on sue, il commence à faire terriblement chaud" 'They scrape, they scrape and then very quickly they have difficulty breathing, they sweat, it begins to get terribly hot' (22). In the mounting heat and discomfort, the prospect of another fire that might finally displace this barrier becomes a possibility that the novel seems to want its readers to ponder.

Suffering and learning to suffer the linkage between property and knowing the real become the twin emblems of the novel's final scene. Indeed, *L'Occupation des sols* in no way challenges the "effects of signification" that might be elicited by its scenario; it fully supports conventional explanations of property's place in the development of narrative coherence and the roles that narrative relations play in supporting and sustaining current notions of what is real. It carefully documents and confirms the conviction that male hegemony in Western culture derives from a subordination of woman so extreme that she becomes man's property. Yet it signals its own questioning of standard interpretations of these conventions: it constructs a banal obedience so oppressive and so suffocating that its readers have little choice but to question the facile solutions and explanations that it offers, but which do not suffice even to sustain the narrative's own mechanisms beyond its fifteen pages of text. In this respect, the novel's primary goal might consist in beckoning its readers back to their own tenuous engagement in the banality prescribed by the cultural construction of gender identity, and in the roles that these identities play in maintaining the "real."

Notes

1 I am referring in particular to Lévi-Strauss' insistence that marital relations continue to rely upon the paradigms of exchange that he notes in early cultures: "Ce point de vue doit être maintenu dans toute sa rigueur, même en ce qui concerne notre société, où le mariage prend l'apparence d'un contrat entre des personnes" "This point of view must be rigorously maintained, even with regard to our society, where marriage appears to be a contract between individuals' (135). Irigaray responds specifically to Lévi-Strauss' formulations in her renowned essay, "Le Marché des femmes": "Dans cette nouvelle matrice de l'Histoire, où l'homme engendre l'homme comme son semblable, la femme, la fille, la sœur ne valent que de servir de possibilité et d'enjeu aux relations entre hommes. Leur usage et leur commerce sous-tendent, entretiennent, le règne de l'hom(m)o-sexualité masculine, tout en maintenant celle-ci dans des spéculations, des jeux de miroirs, d'identifications, d'appropriations plus ou moins rivales, qui diffèrent sa pratique réelle" "In this new matrix of History, where man engenders man in his own image, wives, daughters, sisters serve only as possibilities and stakes in the relations between men. Their usage and their marketing underlie, uphold, the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, all while confining woman in speculations, games of mirrors, identifications, rivalries, which diverts her true use' (168).

2 Irigaray is cited here as one of the most classic feminist discourses in which woman is discussed as property value, and of course, it is the one that enters most directly into dialogue with Lévi-Strauss. This line of reasoning has by no means disappeared from more current feminist idioms. In a much more recent volume, Monique Wittig adopts as the premise of her particularly sweeping condemnation of heterosexuality the notion that our current political regimes remain founded upon "l'esclavagisation des femmes" 'the enslaving of women' (11). For an additional example, see Colette Guillaumin's *Sexe, Race, et Pratique du pouvoir* (Paris: Côté Femmes, 1992).

3 See "Sortir du cadre," 191-4.

4 On these Lacanian concepts, see in particular "Le stade du miroir" (*Écrits* 93-100).

5 The question of the mural's singularity—its image has not been or cannot be reproduced—heightens its mythic connotations for the narrative situation. Herein lies an important consideration pertaining to the novel's

reflections on representation. High speed transmission of pictorial representation—certainly not a new concept in the period during which the novel's events take place—could be viewed as a means of revolutionizing the representational systems that underlie classical knowledge. This implies a “modern” material discourse that can account for a multiplicity of images, increasingly freed from the mediating effects of subjectivity. The image would become what Susan Blackmore calls a meme, that is, a piece of information that is released from its moorings to take on a life of its own (4). In rejecting this possibility, the novel returns the image and its attendant notions of representation to a primal and identifiable moment in the nexus of language, consciousness, and gendered subjectivity.

6 “Representativity” is the concept that Evelyne Ender adduces in her study of the female subject's situation within nineteenth-century definitions of subjectivity (139).

7 See Laqueur for an account of the foundations of this notion in early Western culture.

8 René Girard's dissatisfaction with Freud's explanations of *Œdipus* relates to similar concerns. In Girard's conception, desire is always mediated, and hence, an accurate and legitimate accounting of the *Œdipal* complex would necessarily consider the individual subject's initiation into a preexisting configuration of desire: “The subject needs the desire of his rival to sustain and to legitimize his own desire. In Oedipal terms, this would mean that the son wants the father's desire to sustain and legitimate his desire for the mother. If there is one thing the Oedipus complex will not allow, it is certainly that. It would mean that the mother is not desired ‘for herself,’ that she has no independent value of her own, that she is desired primarily as an object for the father. In addition, it would mean that the father is not the incarnation of the law against incest. The two pillars of the Oedipus edifice crash to the ground” (67). See also Toril Moi's rebuttal, which provides a standard feminist perspective on Girard's paradigms (312-28).

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