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THE FRAGMENTED BODY  
A STUDY OF SOME AESTHETIC IMPLICATIONS OF  
THÉODORE GÉRICAUT'S BODY FRAGMENT  
PAINTINGS

Between 1818-1819 Théodore Géricault (1791-1824) painted a series of "still lifes" consisting of body-fragments two of which include *Study of Two Severed Heads* (ill.1), to be seen at Nationalmuseum in Stockholm and *Anatomical Fragments* (ill. 2), at Musée de Montpellier. In *Study of Two Severed Heads* Géricault



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has depicted a female and a male head placed on white cloth, and *Anatomical Fragments* is dominated by cut off entangled legs and arms. What is striking in the meeting with these two pictures is not only the horrifying aspects of the motifs themselves, but the attractive way in which the body fragments are arranged and in which they are painted. The two Stockholm heads are depicted with a strong brushwork that provides the picture with an expressive quality of immediate sensuousness. Furthermore, the heads are given the intimacy of a married couple, the white cloth providing a pretty shawl effect for the woman. Dominating the *Anatomical Fragments* is the elegant way in which the fragments are arranged, the shattered arms and legs being unified by a dramatic use of *clairobscur*. Within these pictures the combination of the absolutely abominable and the attractive way in which the body fragments are represented



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manifests itself in an enigma of unsurpassed expressive qualities.

In both works the human body represents the site of suffering and death, and in both works fragmentation is the bearer of suffering. However, fragmentation is not necessarily confined to the motifs of body pieces themselves. In the following, I shall approach some other

implications of fragmentation; implications that – in taking the motifs of fragmented body pieces as a point of departure – simultaneously can be said to transcend these motifs.

## THE DISPLACEMENTS OF *The Medusa*

Dominating the reception of Géricault until the late 1990's has been the biographies written by Charles Clément and Lorenz Eitner.<sup>1</sup> Central to their analyses is an attempt to establish Géricault as an academic artist belonging to the classical tradition. As such they consider the strange still lifes of Géricault to be

<sup>1</sup> Charles Clément, *Géricault, étude biographique et critique avec le catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre du maître* (Paris: Didier, 1968) and Lorenz E. A. Eitner, *Géricault: His Life and Work* (London: Orbis, 1983).



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merely studies for Géricault's major work, *The Raft of the Medusa* (ill. 3) from 1819. The claim Eitner is putting forward is that the still lifes are to be regarded as an expression of the desire of the painter to expose himself to death in order to gain insights into what would give authenticity to *The Medusa*:

If his picture was to carry conviction, it had to express genuine experience. Without making himself a cannibal, he familiarized himself with the sights and smells of death, and tried to live with it day by day, as had the man on the raft.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Eitner explains the interest in the fragments of corpses as a result of Géricault's extreme realist intent.

No doubt, reality plays an important part in Géricault's works. On the other hand, it is difficult to argue in favour of Géricault being a realist, intentionally or in practice. Taking into consideration the way in which Géricault makes use of the human body, reality manifests itself instead above all as displaced. This implies that to the motifs which as such are recognizable, is added an element of estrangement by their constellation within the immanence of the picture. Therefore, it might just as well be argued that it is as displacements that the still lifes of body fragments and *The Raft of the Medusa* are interrelated.

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<sup>2</sup> Eitner, *Géricault*, 183.

In all three pictures the human body draws attention to itself as the center of composition as well as the carrier of expression. In both the still lifes and the *Medusa* the naked human body is allowed to form the pictures by being the sole determinator of movement, structure and expression. By the use of the human body the *Medusa* furthermore displaces itself in relation to the genre of history painting as well as the classical tradition as it developed during the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. These displacements can be maintained unfolding within the event depicted as well as within the composition.

Historically, *La Méduse*, refers to the loss of the government frigate *La Meduse*. Only six lifeboats were on hand; they could take no more than about two hundred and fifty of the *Medusa*'s four hundred passengers and crew. To accommodate the rest, a raft measuring about 20m in length and 8,5 m in width was built with the help of masts and beams crudely lashed together. One hundred and fifty people, including a woman, were herded onto the slippery beams, which instantly submerged under their weight.

An agreement had been made that the boats should stay with the raft and together tow it to the nearby shore. But in their haste to reach land, the men in the boats soon cut the cables which held them to the heavy raft, leaving its crew to the mercy of currents and winds, without means of navigation, without sufficient food or drink for even a short voyage. After six days only twenty-eight survivors remained, and hunger and thirst, exposure, murder and insanity took their toll of the remaining men, all practised cannibalism and supplemented their small ration of wine with sea water or urine. When they were rescued after thirteen days fifteen men had survived.<sup>3</sup>

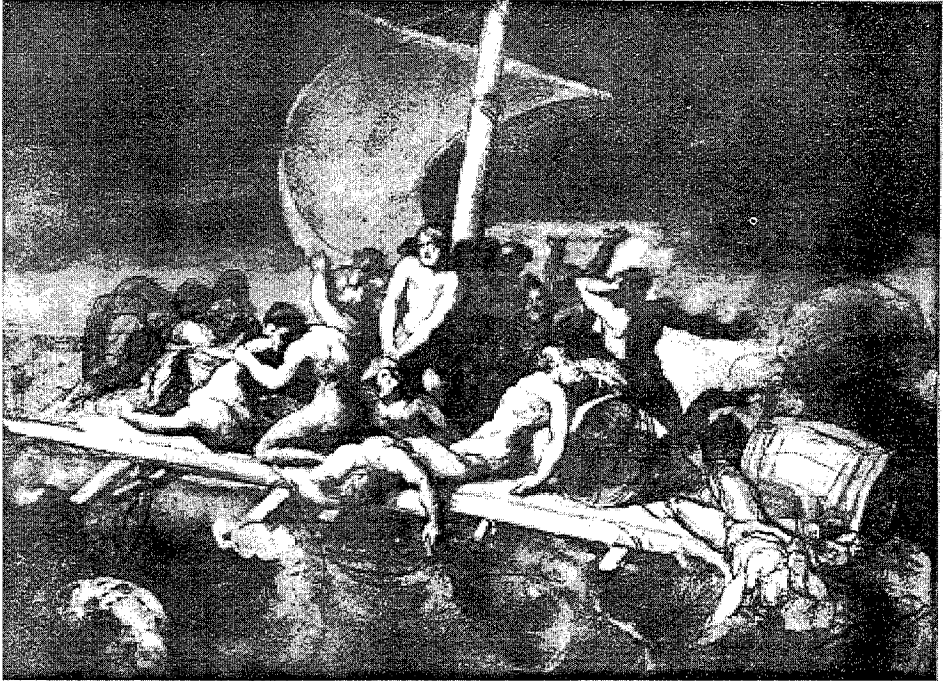
It is a strange scene Géricault chose to depict. Of all the studies he made for the final execution, he did not choose the most abominable – like the *Mutiny of the Raft* or *Cannibalism on the Raft*, (ill. 4) neither did he chose the scenes of hope, where the suffering is turned into glory, like *The Rescue of the Survivors* (ill. 5) or *Hailing an Approching Rowing Boat*. Instead he chose a scene of anxiety, disappointment and resignation. He has chosen a scene without any obvious point. Its drama is without a hero or a message; the suffering of the shipwrecked serves no cause, their martyrdom is without glory. Any possibility of immediate reconciliation is absent.

This absence of reconciliation is repeated within the composition. Thrusting all the figures into a single direction, the powerful surge of figures meets with no visible riposto. Géricault has made the rescue vessel scarcely

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<sup>3</sup> The above is a summary based on Eitner's account of the event, *ibid.*, 158– 63.

visible: too small to form an appreciable shape within the general design, it functions as the magnet on which all movements converge. As also Eitner points out, in the picture the disproportion between the overpowering nearness of the figures on the raft and the infinitesimal spot on the far horizon towards which they gesticulate produces an almost unbearable sense of strain.<sup>4</sup> The dissolution of the picture in incoherent parts is repeated in the dispersion between the panorama painted in the background and the figure composition, the two realities that they represent being underlined by the use of light which has the quality of studio-light rather than daylight, and giving the people on the raft a greenish colour.



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These narrative and compositional displacements of tradition are emphasized by the use of the human body. In the picture the human bodies are almost entirely stripped of any cultural and historical significance leaving no room for the identification of a hero leading the story. Another strange aspect of the picture is the use of athletes in the scene of starvation and death, and it becomes even more puzzling when compared with Gericault's turning dissected organs into picturesque still life compositions.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 169-170.



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In contrast to this grand piece of history painting the two still lifes of actual decaying have the look of intimacy. Géricault has kept the greenish colour in his objects, but the atmosphere in, for example *Study of Two Severed Heads* (ill. 1) is first of all peaceful. *The Anatomical Fragments* (ill. 2) is submitted to intimacy, depicted with a painterly beauty underlined by a use of *clairobscur*. Whereas an atmosphere of disillusion is unfolding within the dramatic gesticulations of the athletes of the *The Medusa*, the horrifying motif of decaying pieces of corpses is dominated by an atmosphere of harmony.

## THE FRAGMENT AND THE UNCANNY

Whereas there has been a reaction mainly against the biographical and iconographical dominance within the Géricault studies during the last five years, the

narrative has maintained its predominant position.<sup>5</sup> One example is Michael Fried's study of Géricault. In his study Fried maintains a commitment to drama within Géricault's oeuvre materialized by extreme contrasts of every kind.<sup>6</sup> Taking his theory of absorption and theatricality as a point of departure Fried claims *The Medusa* to be exemplifying Géricault's antagonism to the theatrical. Thus, according to Fried "the absorption of the straining, waving figures in their efforts to be seen" is underscored by the horror of their situation and "by the fact that they have been depicted largely from the rear which further emphasizes their ostensible obliviousness to our presence." Fried concludes that it is as if "the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld threatens to make theatrical even their sufferings".<sup>7</sup> In the "still lifes" of body fragments Fried recognizes an elaboration of self-absorption through opposition and contrast structuring every aspect of the image.<sup>8</sup> What according to Fried has been considered a break with artistic conventions, the realism of his painting, Fried now maintains to be grounded on issues of absorption and beholding.<sup>9</sup>

In a recent study undertaken by the late Stefan Germer<sup>10</sup> a focus is put on Géricault's use of the human body as well as the fragment. Germer's point of departure is the uncanny. Defining the uncanny as what appears only at the edge of something else,<sup>11</sup> Germer links it to Géricault's use of the human body in his artistic practice as well as to fragmentation.

Fried's theory of beholding has influenced Germer's analysis of Géricault's two still lifes, *Study of Two Severed Heads* and *Anatomical Fragments*. Taking the way in which the viewer is excluded in the two pictures as a point of departure, Germer finds not only an ambivalence within the two pictures, he points to a difference in which this ambivalence unfolds. According to Germer the Stockholm picture is both held transfixed and held at a distance by the

<sup>5</sup> One exception is Régis Michel, who argues in favour of Géricault being a post-modernist, negating representation and narrative, see Régis Michel, "Le Nom de Géricault ou l'art n'a pas de sexe mais ne parle que de ça", in *Géricault*, ed. Régis Michel (Conférence at du Louvre, La Documentation Française, Paris, b. & w. 1996).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 22-32.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Stefan Germer, "Pleasurable Fear: Géricault and Uncanny Trends at the Opening of the Nineteenth Century", *Art History*, 1999, vol. 22.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. For this definition Germer takes as a point of departure Hélène Cixous', "La fiction et ses fantômes: Une lecture de l'Unheimliche de Freud", *Poétique*, 1972, No. 10, 199-216.

glance, whereas any direct address to the viewer in the Montpellier picture is missing. Instead, it is ambivalent in the way in which the viewer is not sent away yet the picture closes itself towards him with the self sufficiency of the bodily part's togetherness.<sup>12</sup> Common to the two pictures is, however, according to Germer, the ambivalence that permeate the pictures, and provides them at different levels with uncanniness.

Germer historicises the motive of the uncanny, linking the two heads with the uncanny as a trend at the opening of the nineteenth century. As symptomatic of this, Germer mentions the living dead, i.e. among other motifs the two heads. In these two heads the effects are tied to marginal details such as the open eyes and mouths. Central to Germer's argument is the introduction of the guillotine in 1792. On the one hand it initiated a revolution in punishment procedures as it meant both a humanizing of punishment procedures and a rationalization of them. On the other hand, the introduction of the guillotine brought with it new horrors and uncertainties, as to whether the separated head really did lose all consciousness. A German doctor Sömmering claimed that it did not. He believed "that first the faculties of perception are located in the brain, and second that perception can take place even when the blood supply to the brain is suspended".<sup>13</sup> He further claimed, that "a head separated from the body by this form of execution retains the perceptive faculties, personality, and self-consciousness for a time and the pain experienced in the neck still has an after-effect".<sup>14</sup> According to Germer this conception remained one of the most powerful horror fantasies well into the nineteenth century. Terror, cruelty and uncertainty as to the heads's afterlife were retained, nourishing a morbid horror-literature.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Germer, "Géricault and Uncanny Trends...", 164.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Sömmering, *Sur le supplice de la guillotine*, quoted from Arasse, *Die Guillotine* (Reinbeck/Hamburg, 1988) 45. Here quoted from Germer, "Géricault and Uncanny Trends...", 161.

<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, Germer claims, the fantasies did provoke a debate in which the death penalty's abolition was promoted, and according to Germer, Géricault has been connected with both tendencies: the Romantic enthusiasm for the ghastly as well as the liberal efforts at reform of criminal law. Germer maintains, however, that while this accurately identifies the aesthetic as well as political context for his work in a broader sense, it falls altogether short of an explanation for his preoccupation with the death penalty (*ibid.*, 162). The reason for this is, according to Germer, that Géricault did not intend to exhibit the picture in public, and such a public is necessary for political efficacy. To support his claim, Germer compares the Stockholm picture with a picture of the would-be assassin of Guisepppe Fieschi painted by Jacques-Raymont Brascassat in 1836 (ill). That the Fieschi-painting is politically motivated can be concluded from the fact that the picture presents a story, having the guillotine depicted in the background, of the face given a portrait-like dignity, and that the picture is given a



However, the theory of beholding has first of all associated the uncanny with psychoanalytical – or rather psychosexual – elements. Thus, Germer determines the theme of the still lifes to be the disempowerment of the masculine subject at the moment when he realizes that the desire directed towards the mother will run aground upon the opposition and intrusion of the father – that it will end with his disempowerment, demasculization, castration.<sup>16</sup> Germer thereby finds an explanation of why Géricault can only conceive of the articulation of sexual difference in the Stockholm picture as failure. That is, a failure which would apparently be experienced by a male protagonist as more decisive, and would mark him more strongly than the female figure. Furthermore, it explains why tenderness in the painting from Montpellier can only be presented as a result of the erasure of sexual difference, and this is uncanny, proclaims Germer:

because Gericault uses an historical reminiscence – the longue durée memory of revolutionary violence and its revival with the executions of the Restoration – in order to reveal something familiar which has yet become alien to the (assumedly male) individual. The theme – if not the actual motif – of these pictures is the articulation and remembering of masculine desire in the oedipal phase: an uncanny moment in psychosexual development, which here reappears in a form displaced onto history.<sup>17</sup>

According to Germer the power of destruction in the Stockholm and the Montpellier picture was not simply presupposed as a precondition for representation. It determined instead their formal arrangement and subject matter, and sexual difference could be presented as being as much of a disruptive force as the artist must have experienced it to be.

Central to Germer's argument is the artist's relation to his pictorial subjects. Germer claims that they gained in complexity by not longer needing to function exclusively as extensions or reflections of the self. The objects got the appearance of an independent existence vis-a-vis the artistic subjectivity imagining them, and this, according to Germer, was their precondition for their being able to provoke uncanny effects: "No longer enlarged versions of the self, they could become manifestations of the alien."<sup>18</sup> And in approaching this

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dedication adding a martyriological glory that reminds us of David's *Marat*. As Germer underlines, Brascassat's picture is publicly presentable because it makes the gruesome noble. Contrary to this, in Géricault's picture the horrific remains unframed and nameless and therefore incapable of mobilizing sympathy or political outrage (Ibid., 163).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 165.

alienation fragmentation was used. It was, according to Germer, a means to go beyond the constant variations of oneself, in the direction of an alienation experienced as fascinating. "Thus he grasped the possibility to imaginarily break out of the armoured bodily limits, henceforth no longer only as fear-laden and therefore in the act of form-giving a threat to be defended against, but rather to the same degree a desire-provoking mental image."<sup>19</sup>

Against this background Germer interprets the Stockholm and the Montpellier picture as expressions of this pleasure of dismemberment. Thus, the facial expression of the man is "changing between horror at death and orgasmic moaning, while in the still-life from Montpellier, it does not simply affect the individual elements but rather permeates the whole representation's emotional state".<sup>20</sup>

Underlying both pictures is thus a duality according to Germer, a duality unfolding in two competing ways of seeing the beholder's depending on the outlook and changing with it. There is a homely one. In this the harmony and "the closed-inside-itself" quality of the motif counts, and there is the uncanny one, the brutal, the "hidden in the shadow" motif. This is the actual theme of the pictures, according to Germer, and he concludes by stating that "the degree of a representation's 'uncanniness' grows to the extent that it opens to the viewer a possibility of shockingly switching between two, actually exclusive, meanings".<sup>21</sup>

In focusing on a definition of fragmentation as the place in which the uncanny unfolds Germer bases his analysis on the narrative of the pictures. It is a narrative in which historical and psychoanalytical elements are specified, turning the pictures into contingent expressions of the psychic and historical conditions of the artist.

The category of "abjection" represents another psychoanalytical term by means of which certain aspects of the representation of the human body is approached. According to the definition of the category of the abject, put forward canonically by Julia Kristeva,<sup>22</sup> the abject refers to an existence before one

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>22</sup> See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). In a differentiation between the operation *to abject* and the condition *to be abject*, Kristeva defines *to abject* as the separation that is fundamental to the maintenance of subject and society alike, while the condition *to be abject* is to be repulsive, subject enough only to feel its subjectivity at risk, and this is corrosive to the formation of both subject and society. As Foster points out in a note: "To be abject is to be incapable of abjection, and to be completely incapable of

is subject (“before full separation from the mother”) or after one is object (“as a corpse given over to objecthood”).<sup>23</sup>

Both spatially and temporarily abjection is a condition in which “subjecthood” is troubled and where meaning disintegrates. As Foster points out, this makes the category of abjection attractive for avant-garde artists “who want to disturb the orderings of subject and society alike”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, motifs of abjection are given the potentials of being residuals of truth, the diseased or damaged body being necessary testimonials against power. Foster points out that if “there is a subject of history for the cult of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse”.<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, the category of abjection as well as the uncanny relates not only to avant garde art, but to the art of the past as well, Géricault’s dissected body pieces being as abjection not less testimonials against power than works of the avant garde, the power structures, however, differing historically.

By the application of the category of abjection the uncanny motifs of the body fragments in Géricault’s body pieces are transfigured into motifs of regression. Thus, fragmentation is provided with narrativity allowing history, ideology and biography the concluding remarks. Furthermore, in the studies referred to above fragmentation is a means of creating meaning of reality through reality itself, with reality implying the reality of society or the biographical or psychoanalytical reality of the artist. An alternative to the interpretation of the uncanny motifs of the body fragments as transfigurations of the category of abjection in which the sensuous material – the fragment – is locked in a motive of regression, is the upholding of the fragment as a fragment, as a process in which reality is included but displaced. It implies a processuality that replaces narrativity by upholding a divergence between the “how” of the picture and motif rendering any unity of meaning impossible. This process is being thematized within the aesthetics of the fragment first formulated by the Early German Romantics. Taking this aesthetics as a point of departure and following some of its lines of developments I shall apply it to Géricault’s body fragments in order to unfold some aesthetic implications of the fragment transcending any narrativity or any fragmentation attached to the motifs alone.

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abjection is to be dead, which makes the corpse the ultimate (non) subject of abjection”, Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 270, note 52.

<sup>23</sup> Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 149.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

## THE AESTHETICS OF THE FRAGMENT

Taking the quest for infinity of the Early Romanticism as a starting point, the displacements of Géricault can be regarded as materialisations of an aesthetics that sets itself against the “absolutism” of the Hegelian metaphysics. The most influential theoreticians of the first phase of Romanticism (c. 1795 – 1801) were Novalis and Friedrich Schlegel. In his *Athenaeum Fragments* Schlegel defines the romantic genre as a genre that “is eternally becoming and can never be perfected”.<sup>26</sup> As Romanticism therefore will remain in a state of becoming, its character as fragmentary is inevitable, the essential thought behind the Early Romantics, as opposed to the Idealist, being the acknowledgement of the undemonstrability of the sense of reality as a whole, of the Absolute. In the aesthetics of the Early Romantic fragmentation thus unfolds within a processuality with no reconciliation. It is a Romanticism that Simon Critchley presents as an *unworked romanticism*.<sup>27</sup> Critchley calls it a naïve romanticism, but with a naïvité that is self-conscious: “That is, an acute awareness of failure and the limitedness of thought.”<sup>28</sup>

Critchley points out that the aesthetics of the Early Romantics did not offer a theory of the fragment, but a *practice* of the fragment, “an enactment of a literary genre”.<sup>29</sup> Thus the form of the fragment opens up the possibility of discontinuous writing, fragments being “traces of an intense and agile aphoristic *energy*, a power of absolutely unlimited extension and intensity”.<sup>30</sup> This implies that Romantic writing, which is defined by Schlegel as the practice of the fragment itself, can be regarded as “the exploration of this lack of final synthesis of subject and object, a continual process of self-creation and self-destruction”.<sup>31</sup>

It is on the basis of this process that another contemporary interpreter of romanticism, Andrew Bowie, underlines that Early Romantic philosophy must attempt to come to terms with its own incomplete status,<sup>32</sup> the essence of it consisting in “the longing for the infinite and the training of the Under-

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<sup>26</sup> Cit. from Hans Eichner, *Friedrich Schlegel* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 58.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Critchley, *Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 97.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity from Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1993), 43.

standing".<sup>33</sup> For the work of art the aesthetics of the Early Romantics implies that Romantic art becomes concerned "with representing that which is *per se* unrepresentable".<sup>34</sup> Thus, romantic art does not represent a link between the sensuous and the intelligible as it did for Kant. According to Schlegel, Romantic art is "still in the process of becoming; yes, that is its real essence, that it can eternally only become, can never be completed. It cannot be exhausted by any theory" and multiplies itself "as if in an endless row of mirrors".<sup>35</sup> Therefore, as Bowie points out, romantic art seems to "deconstruct" the boundary of the intelligible and the sensuous as it was later thematized within Derrida's work.<sup>36</sup>

## IRONY

What is made possible by the form of the fragment is discontinuous writing. Simon Critchley emphasizes two concepts as generative of the essential processuality of the aesthetics of the Early Romantics: *wit* and *irony*.<sup>37</sup> Referring to Schlegel, Critchley points out that according to the Early Romanticism

*Witz* must be like *Blitz*, a lightning wit that must be both sudden and brief [...] What takes place in the suddenness and speed of wit is the combination or unification of seemingly heterogeneous thoughts, the [...] discovery of previously unperceived similarities, finding like in unlike<sup>38</sup>.

Schlegel describes wit as *chemical*: it is the unification of disparate elements.<sup>39</sup> "This emphasis on brevity, rapidity and chemistry means that the fragment becomes the ideal vehicle for the expression of wit, "Wit is absolute social feeling, or fragmentary genius".<sup>40</sup> *Irony*, on the other hand is the counter-

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente* Studienausgabe Vols. 1-6, ed. Ernst Behler and Hans Eichner (Paderborn, 1988), cit. from Bowie *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 43.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>35</sup> Schlegel, *Kritische Schriften und Fragmente*, 114-15, cit. from Bowie *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 44 and 49

<sup>37</sup> Critchley *Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 113, referring to Friedrich Schlegel, "Critical Fragments" in *Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 1-16.

<sup>39</sup> Schlegel, "Critical Fragments". Cit. from Critchley, *Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 113.

<sup>40</sup> Schlegel, "Critical Fragments", 9. Cit. from Critchley, *Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 113.

concept to wit: "If wit is *synthetic*, the chemical mixing of disparate elements, then irony is *diaeretic*, the separation or division of those elements. This diaeresis establishes an irreconcilable conflict between separated elements".<sup>41</sup>

Based on these insights Critchley claims to have approached the unworking that is the heart of Jena Romanticism. The genre of the fragment enacts a quasi-dialectical oscillation between wit and irony, that is, between the creative desire for synthesis and the destructive scepticism of diaeresis. In terms of the aesthetic absolutism discussed above, romanticism is torn between the desire for a complete work of art and the ironic abandonment of the work in a movement of parodic dissolution.<sup>42</sup> This concept of irony represents one line of development within the aesthetics of the Early Romantics that I shall pursue in the rest of this article.

To the Early Romanticism formulated by Schlegel irony is primarily a necessary and positive behaviour of the work of art. In the later development of the romanticism of the fragment the utopia of some distant reconciliation has disappeared. Thus, Kierkegaard maintains that the freedom from the Hegelian reconciliation of the subject with its object, which the early German romanticism offers and which unfolds within the aesthetics of the fragment, is a freedom of negativity. Within the continuous process of formation, the subject ends up creating its own self destruction. Kierkegaard points out:

The irony is a definition of subjectivity. In irony the subject is free negatively: the reality, that is to provide content to the subject is not there, it is free from the binds in which reality holds the subject, but it is negatively free and as such open because nothing holds it. But exactly this freedom provides the ironist with a certain amount of enthusiasm, as he in a way intoxicates himself in the infinity of possibilities.<sup>43</sup>

Here Kierkegaard introduces irony as an intoxication in which the aesthetic transcendence makes its appearance as nothing but distance and negativity. The fragments that are connected to a freedom of the infinity of possibilities, are bound up with the nihilism in which only the ironist can prevail as a subject. It

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>42</sup> It is the tearing of this between, Critchley emphasizes, *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>43</sup> Translated by the author. The original Danish text reads: "Ironien er subjektivitetens Bestemmelse. I Ironien er Subjectet negativ frit; thi den Virkelighed, der skal give det Indhold, er der ikke, det er frit fra den Bundethed, i hvilken den givne Virkelighed hold Subjectet, men det er negativ frit og som saadant svævende, fordi der Intet er, der holder det. Men netop denne Frihed, denne Svæven, giver Ironikeren en vis Enthusiasme, idet han ligesom beruser sig i Mulighedernes Uendelighed", Søren Kierkegaard, *Samlede værker XIII*, (København 1901), 335f. Cit. from Peer E. Sørensen, "Skyerne om Efteråret – sub specie ironiae" i *EST VII*, Oslo, Norges forskningsråd, 1994, 83.

is an unlimited subjectivity, which, however, is not there because it is ironically turned against itself and against the object in which subjectivity only unfolds within an unredeemed negativity.

Kierkegaard finds a new type of existentialist pathos of nihilism that is aesthetically and not philosophically determined. Romantic irony is for him the expression of it. The Kierkegaardian ironist invents himself: in order to live poetically, the ironist can have no "An-sich". Therefore the ironist above all turns into a "nothing".

Through the category of irony as it was formulated by Kierkegaard fragmentation is provided with a signification unfolding within motif and material. It adheres to this process and as such opens up a new understanding of Géricault and his body pieces in which the discrepancy of the grotesque of the motifs and the attractiveness of execution is not only taken into consideration, but is allowed to form a point of departure of the analysis. Thus, subjectivity is allowed no place in these fragments, but can only express itself in a process in which the unity of expression is absent and replaced by the process of fragmentation.

## THE FRAGMENT AND ROMANTIC ART

Strangely enough, the aesthetics of the fragment as it was formulated by the Early Romantics and reformulated during the 19<sup>th</sup> century has not been allowed to form a basis for the understanding of the romantic art of romantic painters like Géricault and Delacroix. When Germer relates Géricault's works to the uncanny, it is connected to a historicity of a trend experienced in France in the beginning of the nineteenth century, generating what Germer calls "psychic operating structures".<sup>44</sup> Thus, the understanding of fragmentation is limited to the narrative – in Germer's case to the introduction of the guillotine, and to the analysis of the motifs as an expression of the Romantic enthusiasm for the ghastly – whereas the aesthetics of the Early Romantics is left out. At one place Germer explicitly argues against Delacroix' recognition of Géricault's still lifes as "peinture sans sujet", claiming that Delacroix' explanation is not fully satisfying because it bases itself on "pure artistic interest"<sup>45</sup> leaving out

<sup>44</sup> Germer, "Géricault and uncanny trends...", 160.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 163. The quotation is from Eugène Delacroix, *Journal* 1822-1863, Paris 1980

what the pictures are all about: “destructive and sexual emotions”.<sup>46</sup> And when Christopher Kool-Want complains about the Géricault reception not including the link between the Romantics and its art, he is not referring to the aesthetics of Romanticism but to the romantic ideology, and concludes: “Géricault was a Romantic ideologue zealously intent upon convincing others of his beliefs.”<sup>47</sup> By submitting the art works to a discourse of contingencies such as ideology and trends or to the generalities of the human psyche, the work of art is objectified as a phenomenon among other phenomena. The work is considered an object that can be defined, implying that its content can be emptied through this definition. Left out is the transcendence of the expressive qualities of the work; qualities that can provide it with an abundance of associations and fascinations exceeding any definitions based on its reception and production.<sup>48</sup>

To the art works, the aesthetics of fragmentation implies an immanent processuality in which any compositional center is absent, as is seen in *The Medusa*. In it a Romanticism of displacement is allowed to unfold, displacing itself in relation to a depiction of any climax of the dramatic events; it has no hero, no focus, no point, only naked human bodies gesticulating death, starvation and disappointment; bodies, that in their appearance as athletes displace their own gestures as just gestures. This distance that the figures materialize, is repeated in the composition of the picture, the dispersed organization of the figures, the artificiality of the lightning and the lack of unity of foreground and background creating an overall expression of discrepancy.

In the catalogue for the great Géricault exhibition in Grand Palais, Paris, in 1991,<sup>49</sup> Régis Michel writes, that the choice of the scene for *Medusa* appears as a culmination of the *noirceur*, i.e. the French word for both the black spot and melancholy: he calls it a pathetic image of a ridiculous illusion, which silences the raft and reveals it as an absurd metaphor. Michel further maintains that the composition bases itself on the common dynamics of a rising diagonal culminating in the human pyramid or the active black as a semaphore for an empty liturgy of textile signs. And, finally, he interestingly focuses on the canvas, its dense shadows and its seagreen light, which lavishes its dying exhibition

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<sup>46</sup> Germer, “Géricault and uncanny trends...”, 163.

<sup>47</sup> Christopher Kool-Want, “Changing of the Guard”, *Art History*, 1999, vol. 22, 295.

<sup>48</sup> For further discussion see Jean-François Lyotard, *Gestus* (København: Det Kgl. Danske Kunstakademi, 1992)

<sup>49</sup> *Géricault* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des musées nationaux, 1991).



of hungry muscles in which a sarcasm of the negative heroism of this maritime grave develops.<sup>50</sup>

By focusing on the green light with which the human figures are illuminated; suggesting the colour of corpses, and by the underlining of the sea as a grave Michel points to an atmosphere of dissociation that to an even higher degree saturates the two still lifes, determining their immanent dynamics. Here fragmentation is furthermore implied as a motif. This fragmentation within the narrative brings about another dimension of fragmentation, the relationship between the "how" of the picture and its motif.

In *Study of Two Severed Heads* Géricault has painted the picture with strong, painterly brushwork, providing the picture with a profound sensuality. While a pallid light isolates the faces from one another, the cut areas are unmistakably accentuated with dark, as also Germer points out, leaving no doubt about their being dissected heads.<sup>51</sup> Because Germer focuses on the uncanny as appearing on the edge of something else, the narrative of the pictures forms the point of departure of his interpretation. However, even agreeing with Germer, the facial expression of the man - changing between pain, agony and orgasmic moaning lying beside a female head obviously sleeping peacefully - being uncanny,<sup>52</sup> another event is unfolding in the ambivalence between the macabre motif and the sensuous way in which it is painted. It is an event in which sarcasm through the motif itself and through the processuality of motif and form develops into irony, as is the case in *Anatomical Fragments*. In this picture Germer recognizes a duality between the painterly *clair obscur* uniting the joints, hiding almost totally the brutal dismemberments in deep shadow. It is, however, a duality conditioning the uncanny. According to Germer both pictures are subordinated a duality between unity and sensuousness and the horror of the themes. It is a duality that increases the uncanniness of the pictures to the extent that it opens to the viewer a possibility of shockingly switching between the two, actually exclusive, meanings.<sup>53</sup> However, taking the aesthetics of the fragment as a starting point the processuality implies not only the destruction of the aesthetics of identity, its unfolding within the process of self-creation and self-destruction makes any construction of reconcilable meaning irrelevant. Thus, an aesthetics of the fragment would not imply duality as a process determining a switching between different meaning

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>51</sup> Germer, "Géricault and uncanny trends...", 166.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 166.

contents. Insisting on the incompatibility of the sensuous and theory, meaning is replaced by the practice of the fragment.

Furthermore, in Géricault's works this process unfolds within the gap between motif and the execution of the work. It is a gap never to be covered, but which in the aesthetics of the fragment is forming a starting point, such as the expression of *Irony* within some of Géricault's work. Keeping a close contact with the reality on the basis of which it transcends into the expression of irony this process of fragmentation can be described as mimetic.

In his book, *Ästhetische Theorie*, T.W. Adorno describes mimesis as the nonconceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective as an unposited other.<sup>54</sup> Thus, mimesis to Adorno implies a way of transcending reality through reality itself. The process of mimesis as a basis for approaching works of art thereby opens up an understanding of the work of art as being emphatically different from the objective world that simultaneously is mimetically forming the basis of the sensuous material of the art works. Furthermore, the emphasis on processuality implies infinity. This aspect of the mimetic has been emphasized in the poststructuralist reformulation put forward by Lacoue-Labarthe. On the basis of an analysis of Hölderlin, Lacoue-Labarthe takes this processual aspect of mimesis as the point of departure, showing how Hölderlin allows mimesis to fester in the midst of his own tragic dramas, producing a kind of endless oscillation between proximity and distance that denies sublation and reconciliation and that cannot rest content at either pole.<sup>55</sup>

In his formulation of the process of mimesis Lacoue-Labarthe claims that only mimesis allows the tragic pleasure that overcomes a visceral feeling of horror at the terrible events reproduced.<sup>56</sup> In this way Lacoue-Labarthe includes the mimetic as the precondition for the playfulness of the fragment formulated in the aesthetics of the fragment by the Early Romantics. This allows for an understanding of a relationship between the dissected corpses of Géricault's still lifes and their transfiguration into a sensuous material as a relationship that transcends the motifs of body fragments at the same time as the motifs are a determining factor behind the transfiguration. Through this process the motifs of the body fragments are provided with aesthetic signifi-

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<sup>54</sup> See in particular Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973)

<sup>55</sup> Martin Jay, "Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe" in: Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (ed), *The Semblance of Subjectivity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 38.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-38.

cance. They are not merely cultural objects as was implied in Michael Fried's theory of beholding, they transcend the specificity of the notion of them being transfigurations of the psychic potentials of the artist as put forward by Germer's reading of his still lifes.

By defining a new romantic subject and allowing it to unfold within the fragment the preconditions have been established for a processuality of a work practice of the contradictory and the paradoxical, the playful and the serious. It is a practice in which the contradictory is maintained in its contradiction and in which the unfolding of irony determines and is determined by fragmentation. Thus, the pictorial beauty of the two guillotined heads in Stockholm exists concurrently with the horror of its motif, just as the expression of marital harmony unfolds playfully within the uncanniness of the death rattle of the man and of the dissected heads turned into "still lifes".

Integrated into the processuality of the fragment the sarcasm of Géricault's use of the human body, as it was also identified by Michel, turns into the irreconcilable negativity of irony. It is a negativity that differs emphatically from another expression of the infinity of the aesthetics of the fragment, the macabre and the horrifying. This aspect of the processuality of infinity is predominant within the practice of Delacroix, and is accentuated by a later protagonist of the aesthetics of the fragment, Charles Baudelaire.

In his essay on Delacroix, Baudelaire has described Delacroix' Romanticism as "désolation, massacre, incendies [...] tout cet oeuvre, dis-je, ressemble à un hymne terrible composé en l'honneur de la fatalité et de l'irréparable douleur".<sup>57</sup> According to Karl Heinz Bohrer, "evil" and "horror" are central to Baudelaire's categories of "the infinite"<sup>58</sup>. Another expression of the romantic quest for infinity is represented by irony. In Géricault the horror is not left horrible and it is not transfigured. Through the processuality of motif and the execution of the picture a distance in relation to the horrible is created without the horrible being transfigured. It is within this process of the sensuousness of the material and the motif that the aesthetics unfolds. It is an aesthetics that can be approached through the aesthetics of the fragment, allowing for approaching the relation between the immanent reconcillation of the fragmented body through the use of *clair obscur* or bold and sensuous brush strokes and its negation by the motif itself, and, thus, for an insistence on its

<sup>57</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Critique d'art* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1992), 420.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die Kritik der Romantik* (Frankfurt am Main: edition suhrkamp, 1989), 77.

character as fragmented. Thus, it is not only as a materialization of horror that Géricault's body fragments can be regarded as expressions of the Romantic aesthetics of infinity, but first of all through the distance vis-a-vis horror into the pure negativity of irony. Thereby his pictures transcend the contingencies of ideology and historically determined trends as well as the universality of the psychosexual aspect.

## EPILOGUE: THE ACTUALITY OF THE BODY FRAGMENT

In his reading of the early German Romanticism Critchley points out, that "*we* [...] still belong to the epoch opened up by romanticism. Romanticism is not a thing of the past, it is rather the trace of a past that continues to haunt our living present".<sup>59</sup> Bohrer specifies likewise that Romanticism is not just an epochally determined confusion of art history but a lasting challenge to the conceptualization of the reception of art.<sup>60</sup> This points not only to the aesthetic potentials of the fragment, it also gives an indication of the actuality of Romanticism today as an aesthetics offering a way of approaching some contemporary art as well.

At the 1999 Biennale in Venice Louise Bourgeois (1911) exhibited her *Torso* from 1996. It is made of pieces of fabric, padded and sewn together in the shape of a torso. Dominating the figure are the crudely stitched-up baggy breasts and the swelling belly, which makes the torso a representation of the female turned into "an 'abandoned' wrecked husk", expressing a vulnerability that is both painful but also tender and cuddly.<sup>61</sup> The figure is a fragment in two ways: it is a torso and as a torso it is fragmented within itself, the body parts literally being added or maybe on the verge of being torn apart.

In her *Torso* Bourgeois has created the same expression of an open ended processuality as was evident within the works of Géricault, keeping a distance from the pain that is the motif of the works. Not only does she take the classic torso as a point of departure of the tearing apart and the stitching together, she creates a processuality of the motif of pain and the material of which it is made, expressing the opposite of pain: softness and tenderness. In neither Géricault's nor Bourgeois' work is representation negated or left irrelevant by the application of the aesthetics of the fragment; instead it renders possible the

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<sup>59</sup> Critchley, *Death, Philosophy, Literature*, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Bohrer, *Die Kritik der Romantik*, 72.

<sup>61</sup> With these words the catalogue text describes Bourgeois' sculptures exhibited at the Biennale. See 48 – *Esposizione internazionale d'arte*, (Venezia: Marsilio, 1999), 2.

insistence of the motif *and* the 'how' of the works, replacing the linear narrative with the process of negation through irony. In Géricault's as well as in Bourgeois' work fragmentation is both a motif and the unfolding of the process of motif and execution.

This shows that just as older theories can shed light on contemporary art, the most recent expressions within visual art can point to new aspects of the art of the past. Thus the recent focus on Géricault and his use of the human body reflects the preoccupation with the body in contemporary art as well as in art theory. This has not only opened a new reading of the art of Géricault liberated from the narrative of biography and historicity; it points above all to the relevance of an aesthetics of the fragment.

