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DETAILS VS DOGMA: DETAILS IN CONTEXT

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Abstract

This paper rests on the two-fold definition of the notion of detail provided by art historian Daniel Arasse, (characterized by the difference between two Italian terms: *particolare* and *dettaglio*), to address the question of today's interest in the notion of detail.

After recalling the way modernist fiction profoundly relates to modernity in its handling of details, (through examples taken from V. Woolf and J. Conrad), the paper explores the way contemporary fiction suggests yet another definition and configuration of details. Such postmodern anxiety of atomized traces and disappearance as can be found in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* finds an echo in some of the latest output of French theorists and account for today's haunting interest in the notion of detail.

Keywords: modernism, postmodernism, fiction, French theory.

Why should details matter?

The recent interest in the notion of detail, from the groundbreaking work of Daniel Arasse² onward, has certainly drawn attention to a number of so far sparse, analyses by Barthes, Agamben or Didi-Huberman³, and this certainly points to a definitely growing, significant, contemporary interest in some renewed approach to the structure of the work of art. In recent years, the notion of detail seems to have emerged in a new guise, as

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² Arasse, Daniel. *Le Détail. Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture*. Paris: Flammarion, 1992.

³ One can think of the notion of *punctum* in: Barthes, Roland. *La Chambre Claire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.

See also :

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo sacer. III. Ce qui reste d'Auschwitz : l'archive et le témoin*. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1999.

- Didi-Huberman, Geoges. *Survivance des lucioles*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2009.

if it exalted a genuinely contemporary approach to art. But while most contributions will develop new perspectives offered by the notion, very few of these contributions will really account for the current success of the notion itself. And yet, the very reasons why details should matter so much today, in the field of criticism and theory - whether it be art theory or literary theory – is no negligible concern.

The interest of scholars and theoreticians comes in consonance with a more general usage of the notion. The detail features as a key notion in a number of scientific or technical spheres such as image and soundtrack enhancement, the creation of virtual images and environments, the psychological approach to memory and perception, as well as in criminology to measure the reliability of witnesses. The variety of applications seems particularly wide and fully exploits the two-fold definition provided by Daniel Arasse.

At the outset of his ground-breaking analysis, Daniel Arasse recalls that the word comes from the French verb *tailler* (to cut), and thus either evokes the act of separating the various parts of an object from one another, the act of dividing an object into parts, or the process of shaping an object by carving and eliminating wood or stone. The two meanings of the verb correspond to two contradictory conceptions of the notion of detail. The first one is rational and can evoke what we do in academic text analysis : we teach students how to identify the various parts and elements a text is made of. The second meaning is far more subjective and generated by an empirical approach to any object. Daniel Arasse resorts to the Italian distinction between '*dettaglio*' and '*particolare*' to distinguish the two understandings of the notion of detail. First the conception of the detail as a constitutive element in a structure; then the reference to some arbitrary part or aspect that one chooses to single out.

The two conceptions generate two different ways of knowledge. The first definition leads to linguistics and semiotics on the one hand, to a rational way of separating a text into parts; whereas the second definition suggests subjective reading. The first definition generates scientifically oriented knowledge, and the second definition generates a more elusive, poetic kind of knowledge: a dualism of possible approaches sometimes compatible, sometimes at war with each other. The notion then encapsulates various forms of tension. One between the global structure of an object and its various parts, another between two antagonistic approaches to analysis or perception.

From modern detail to modernist fragments.

Before considering a specifically contemporary interest in details, one should recall and take into account the change of perspective operated by the rise of the scientific spirit from the Renaissance onward. The modern spirit based on observation changed the conception of knowledge precisely by promoting details over ready-made definitions of the order of the universe. The scientific approach to knowledge starts from details and fragments of phenomena to tackle the structure that might supposedly be lying behind appearances. The detail has acquired a prominent status as *the* path towards reliable knowledge. The history of science is paved with jarring details observed by humble scientists, unexplained peripheral details that have led to new theories and eventually disproved former certainties. The importance of empirical observation as the basis of science is precisely at the origin of the great and growing importance of the subject. The potential faculties of the human eye, the laws of the human mind have become a considerable concern in the context of modernity.

It is part of the essence of details to be potentially treacherous, to have to be ultimately identified as part of a structure or as isolated and chaotic entities. The permanent opposition between objectively important and subjectively selected details keeps recurring. The selection of a detail can prove efficient to grasp a structure and understand how it works, and it can as well just reveal the mental disposition of the observer. The irreducible ambivalence of the notion also prevails in the scientific sphere.

It was in the context of modernity that modernist writers blurred and almost annihilated the difference between objectively significant details and subjectively selected details. Dismantling the order of the narrative, introducing apparent chaos into narratives, they have forced critics to create new analytical concepts. The development of the notion of sign, in particular, has emerged as one major solution to face the challenge. If Proust plays such a role in the passage to modernism, it is precisely through the importance he gives to details and subjectively selected details that turn out to be objectively significant. The art of reminiscing is indeed based on details. Unlike remembrance which re-members elements of the past in a chronological order, reminiscence is based on fragments. It is apparently chaotic and irruptive, it cannot be mastered, it unexpectedly imposes itself to the conscious mind. It bridges the gap between past and present, changing the past into present experience. Unexpected elements of the past irrationally reach the surface and these irrational elements enlighten a hidden order of experience, the order of the unconscious, an in-

built cloud of unknowing. The small cake unexpectedly triggers a torrent of so far forgotten sensations that transform the past into strangely present and vivid experience to be explored anew, enriched with intervening experience, substantiated by new mental structures and faculties of interpretation. In *Proust et les signes*, Deleuze⁴ argues that the process of generating knowledge through the interpretation of signs is more crucial to Proust than the exploration of memory and retrieval of the past.

Apparently insignificant details turn out to be crucial signs and outcrops of a profound structure of experience, a promise of infinite knowledge. The chaos of reminiscences, contains a hidden logic that is gradually revealed to the narrator, provided he decides to accept this chaos and the difficulties of wading through it.

The transformation of chaos into new and more sophisticated order regulated by the unconscious is indeed what the modernist movement intends to explore, what modernist aesthetics is based on. Details treated as fragments, totally isolated fragments, observed and gathered without ever being entirely pieced together. The jig-saw puzzle never quite clicks into shape. One of the most representative examples of this new approach to reality, this new experience of the mind, is to be found in one of the first sentences of *Mrs Dalloway*. When reminiscing about Peter Walsh, in the second paragraph of the novel, Clarissa filters through details she has kept in mind for decades, she wonders why the details that come to her mind when thinking of Peter Walsh have remained so mysteriously clear.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; *his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness* and,

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964.

when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!—a few sayings like this about cabbages.⁵

The sequence “his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness” appears as an absolute challenge to logic, a perfect vignette of chaos. The sequence starts with a detail of Peter’s face, then it switches to something he carries with him, then it goes back to his face, and eventually stresses a particular trait of his personality. Yet, beyond appearances lies profound logic, and so much so that it is the queerest element in the series, the only exterior element, the pocket-knife, that contains the solution to piece all the fragments together, to go from details to the structure behind. The sharpness of the knife explains Clarissa’s unconscious choice of Peter’s sharp gaze, sharp ironic smile, and hurting grumpiness.

This example also illustrates the modernist attitude to details as fragments. Details remain sparse. The reader’s mind is required so that the text can make sense. Reading is more than ever an incentive to self-analysis and self-knowledge. From Kopernicus’s observations of the apparent movements of the Sun and the Moon to Freud’s interest in tongue-slips and incongruous, disruptive symptoms, science has definitely changed the status of details.

In such perspective, modernism appears as an integration, in the art of narration, of the kind of self-defiance and accurate observation that had been prevailing in the scientific field. If the teachings of psychoanalysis interested and influenced novelists so profoundly at the turn of the 20th century, one can relate this kind of interest to the crucial importance of the subject, of the capacities of the human mind, in a conception of knowledge exclusively based on observation - including self-observation. I think that the subject of our conference today is an occasion to consider and take into account the common objective of science and literature. It certainly is no hazard if Joseph Conrad, in a text considered as one of the foundation stones of modernism, states their complementariness in very clear terms:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you see. That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm—all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. To snatch in a moment of courage,

⁵ Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*, (1925). Penguin Books: 1992. 3.

from the remorseless rush of time, a passing phase of life, is only the beginning of the task. The task approached in tenderness and faith is to hold up unquestioningly, without choice and without fear, the rescued fragment before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood. It is to show its vibration, its colour, its form; and through its movement, its form, and its colour, reveal the substance of its truth—disclose its inspiring secret: the stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment.

To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and colour, of sunshine and shadows; to make them pause for a look, for a sigh, for a smile—such is the aim, difficult and evanescent, and reserved only for a very few to achieve. But sometimes, by the deserving and the fortunate, even that task is accomplished.⁶

The defence by Conrad of the ‘rescued fragment’, of the ‘snatched moment’ or ‘space of a breath’ to ‘glance’ at shadows and look for ‘a sigh’ or anything as evanescent as a smile opened a new approach to narration, giving way to what was sometimes called ‘new realism’. A new commitment to close observation and rendering of the most chaotic aspects of mental processes and human behaviour, which blurred the difference between details considered as elements of a structure (be it a hidden structure) and subjectively selected details. Modernist narration has demonstrated the subjectivity at work in any selection an observer can operate, as well as the profound logic invariably at work in all selections. In modernist narratives, the distinction between *particolare* and *dettaglio* tends to be abolished, sometimes in order to be reconciled and sometimes in order to demonstrate the elusive essence of all forms of knowledge.

From fragments to atoms: from chaos to new orders

The notion of detail inevitably questions the relation between an entity and its various parts. It involves a permanent effort of the mind to cope with the various tensions and connect details with one another. A process of the mind playing with its own limits, that contemporary fiction has brought to new extremes. Postmodernism takes one significant step toward chaos, in the handling of details. Fragmentation gives way to atomization, while signs seem to have been replaced by subliminal clues. Michael Cunningham’s reprise of *Mrs Dalloway* in his novel *The Hours*

⁶ Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, “Preface”. www.gutenberg.org/files/17731/17731-h/17731-h.htm.

(published in 1998)⁷ is a particularly appropriate source of illustrations for the change under scrutiny.

The novel is divided into alternating chapters dealing with three sets of characters and settings. Episodes of Virginia Woolf's life at the time when she was writing *Mrs Dalloway* intertwine with episodes of the life of a young wife reading Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* in the Los Angeles of 1949, and episodes of the life of a poet in the New York of the 1990s. The very idea of subliminal details may sound somewhat paradoxical but it is in fact suggested by the title of Cunningham's novel itself, to begin with, as long as it was the original title that Virginia Woolf rejected to replace it with the eponymous character *Mrs Dalloway*. There is no explicit mention of, or allusion to the former, ephemeral, unseen existence of 'The Hours' as a title in Cunningham's novel. Only the informed reader will detect the rescued title saved from oblivion and connected again (though rather faintly) to its original context. Then the relation between the title and the number of chapters in the book: *The Hours* is divided into 23 chapters, one hour symbolically missing and suggesting the impossibility to write the last chapter concerning death; but there again, the chapters are not numbered, so that only the most suspicious reader will discover the subliminal detail before he or she may want to risk some interpretation.

On the issue of subliminal details, Cunningham appears as a master. In his description of the America of the Fifties, through the family of a Second World War veteran, he describes the young wife smoking a cigarette, "exhal[ing] a rich grey plume of smoke" (48), and one may wonder whether the image evokes the mushroom of the atom bomb or not, but then the child is referred to as the "little boy" (43, 111) a banal but recurring expression strangely reminiscent of the name given to the bomb launched on Hiroshima. And the detail eventually ceases to be strange when, in a further chapter devoted to the 'little boy' once he has become a poet living in New York, his place is described as follows:

The apartment is full of light. [...] All the shades have been raised, the windows opened. Although the air is filled only with the ordinary daylight that enters any tenement apartment on a sunny afternoon, it seems, in Richard's rooms, like a silent explosion. Here are his cardboard boxes, his bathtub (filthier than [Clarissa] had realized), the dusty mirror and the expensive coffeemaker, all revealed in their true

⁷ Cunningham, Michael. *The Hours*. London: Harper Collins, 1998.