
Distant toys, dissected bodies and reality TV: Luc Tuymans and painting in the age of ritual and new media

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Abstract: This article examines the work of Belgium painter Luc Tuymans (born 1958) and the manner in which his work deals, in particular, with the correlation between photography/film and painting. In order to scrutinise the impact of photography on Tuymans' work, the article makes extensive and critical reference also to Walter Benjamin's article 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility'. It forms an ideal prism through which to explore Tuymans' work, which in recent years has embraced the new technology and media in paintings. This article further deals with the extent to which the undermining of dualities or binarisms (the pairing of concepts such as inside/out, particular/general or real/imaginary, material/spiritual, etc.) recognisable in European Modernism also thereby questions the binarisms object/representation, and how postmodern painters (and Tuymans in particular) react to this questioning.

Keywords: Luc Tuymans; new media; Walter Benjamin; ritual; painting; photography.

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1 Introduction

What are the mechanisms by which visual artists deal with the exacting demands of new media? How might it be possible to think this relation between creative practice and the demands of new media without falling into the charm of technological determinism? With these two questions in mind, this article explores the development of a particular conceptualisation of mimesis in the 20th century, which is to say the way in which art sets out to depict the external world. How 'man' constructs his relationship with that world, and connects that conceptualisation to recent developments in the visual arts, puts a particular emphasis on the relationship between painting and photography. Hence, this article examines the work of Belgium painter Luc Tuymans (born 1958) and the manner in which his work deals, in particular, with the correlation between photography/film and painting. In order to scrutinise the impact of photography on Tuymans' work the article makes extensive and critical reference also to Walter Benjamin's article 'The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility'. Benjamin's influential essay explores the inception of photography and its influence on artistic production but, more importantly, also deals extensively with artistic modes of production and the changing perception of art. Although written in 1936, Benjamin's article represents a significant contribution to the theorisation of technological change and to the relation of technology to productive modalities more broadly. It thus forms an ideal prism through which to explore Tuymans' work, which in recent years has embraced the new technology and media in paintings such as *Iphone* (2008) or *Big Brother* (2008) *CCTV* (2009).

This article deals therefore not just with Luc Tuymans. It is also an attempt to trace the continuity between European Modernism's and Tuymans' attitudes to figurative depiction by addressing a number of concerns that are shared between the two. Many later 20th-century and early 21st-century theorists have commented on the fusion of the material and the spiritual as part of a new paradigm. However, it seems clear that this had already been mentioned in particular by Benjamin in his conceptualisation of ritual. In what follows, I attempt to test the extent to which the undermining of these dualities or binarisms (the pairing of concepts such as inside/out, particular/general or real/imaginary, material/spiritual, etc.) recognisable in European Modernism also thereby questions the binarisms object/representation, and how postmodern painters (and Tuymans in particular) react to this questioning.

2 On the relation of man to nature

In one of his recent shows, Tuymans includes the photographs he used as source material for his paintings instead of the paintings themselves (*I don't get it*, 2009). Yet, despite this close relationship of painting and photography in his work, Tuymans' paintings have often been seen as a denial of "photographic veracity" [Molesworth, (2009), p.23]. The close connection of photography and painting is nothing new and has been discussed before, but what is of interest here is that the amalgamation leads to what has been described as an "analogy for something non-visual and incomprehensible" [Herbert, (2007), p.42]. For Tuymans, it seems, the fallibility of representation, visual fragmentation, faded imagery and the ubiquitous deviation from norms all work as ways dealing with ideas of loss and absence. This agglomeration of thematics is crucial for any understanding of his work and, arguably, for the wider early 21st century context. As

Schwabsky (2007, p.29) has argued, the photographic influence here results in "... a certain type of surface, one that somehow or other erodes the potential pictorial organisation of its imagery in favour of a 'dissolution into sheer texture, sheer sensation'...". Almost hundred years after Benjamin's essay 'The work of art' and its exploration of the impact of photography and film on more traditional artist production such as painting, Tuymans' work seems to beg a revisiting of Benjamin's text. This body of work offers a particularly interesting case study since his most recent work deals with ideological visual manifestations in religious contexts (*Les Revenants*, 2007), the entertainment industry (*Forever – The Management of Magic*, 2008), and media society with paintings such as *Big Brother* (2008), *Iphone* (2008), or *CCTV* (2009) and in one of his most recent workgroups, *Mot dagen/Against the Day* (2009). One thing that interest us here is what Kittelmann (2009, p.33) has termed the 'question of distrust' in visual representation and it is thus my intention here to revisit critically the concept of *mimesis*.

Tuymans' paintings have been also described as foregrounding "a tension between the conceptual and the physical" [Jensner, (2009), p.51]. Hence, his works constitute a particularly sustained and eloquent examination of ambiguity. And this ambiguity is at work not only in the interplay of photography and painting but also in the paintings themselves which have been described as 'polyfocal' combining contradictory meanings [Vermeiren, (2007), p.18]. Furthermore, Tuymans' work has also been described as tarrying at the "periphery of cataclysm" [Herbert, (2007), p.43], as if they were at any minute to effect the downfall of *mimesis* altogether. This cataclysmic tone, a sort of epochal narrativising of Tuymans' works, and the ubiquitous sense of 'lateness' or endgaming that attends the reception of Tuymans' work. All clearly point here to something quite particular at work. It is this 'something', this historical particularity that I now move on to explore below.

3 Dissecting the body

Tuymans' work is, from the beginning, marked by a fascination for what might be termed the 'erasure of the body': in several paintings parts of the body are erased as in *Illegitimate III* (1997) where the head is removed or in other paintings like *Illegitimate I* (1997) where the whole body form becomes blurred. Tuymans also speaks in many places of isolation and separation, and many of his paintings show isolated objects [see e.g., Sandqvist, (2009), p.67; Coggins, (2008), p.193] and these two thematics – isolation and the attenuation of the body – are clearly central to his work. In one of his first portraits *G. Dam* (1978), Tuymans emphasises his impression of the separation of the head from the body. He compares it to the fairground attraction where people put their head through a hole in a façade onto which a life-size picture is mounted, thus producing the uncanny effect of one body part sticking to an alien body [Tuymans, (1996), p.122]. This metaphor, where a part is shifted into another context, is not unusual in recent visual culture, and in Tuymans it is clearly linked to a certain notion of the contemporaneous. The image thus constructed becomes an amalgamation of the fictional and the real, undermining the cohesion of the signifier/signified relationship and speaking in quite telling ways to the predicament of visual artists working at a moment at which the visual is at war with itself.

4 Distant toys

Yet, this contemporaneity has deep roots. In 1936, Benjamin (2002b) produced his extraordinarily radical essay 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' in which he outlined the processes by which new technologies of dissemination and reproduction had come to be 'taken up' by works of art themselves (and film in particular). One key issue for Benjamin was the apparent contradiction in contemporary modes of artistic production between, on one hand, the problematic of distance and aura, and, on the other, closeness, verisimilitude and sameness. In other words, how could it be that art could hold these two contradictory concerns together?

Tuymans shows strikingly similar concerns: In many of his paintings, he sets up a rhetorical distance to his objects that Hoptman (2000, p.121) describes as the "signature of all his works". Tuymans himself characterises *Der Diagnostische Blick* as created in a "detached manner" [Heynen, (2004), p.9]. This is important for him since the objects in themselves bear a certain distance from the painter and that distance intervenes also in what we might term the cohesion of signifier/signified relation. The more remote the object the more the particularity of its meaning is called into question. Just as Benjamin relates uniqueness to distance, so Paul Nougé suggests that, in reference to Tuymans, "the more an image recedes the larger it grows" [cited in Foster, (1993), p.199]. Indeed, Tuymans refers specifically to toys and pictures from model makers' catalogues highlighting the importance of distance, nostalgia and the multiple interventions of different technologies of representation – the model represents the 'real' car, the catalogue represents the model (a representation of a representation) and so on. Tuymans goes further, taking photographs of these models as indexical images and as source material for his painting. Moreover, he perceives the painting as an object itself, having a place in the system of objects (an kind of array) he sets in motion: "The toy-world pictures are also a good demonstration of the way that I very much see my own paintings as objects, and the distance that lies between them and myself" [quoted in Heynen, (2004), p.10].¹

Below, it will become clear how the figure of the transitory or the in-between I mentioned above in Benjamin's concept of ritual or Freud's notion of the uncanny can be applied to Tuymans' paintings in a number of ways. Tuymans shows in several aspects of his work a tendency to blur representations such that human bodies can easily be confused with landscapes, persons characterised as objects, animated objects can appear to be the same as inanimate objects. This flattening of hierarchies corresponds to the equalisation of paradigms: at best what we can say here is that imprecision is equal to imprecision [Dexter, (2004), p.16]. This undermining of dualities thus effected is continued in the erasure of individual facial features in most of his paintings with the objective of anonymising the figures, where finally only the shell of the body remains [Aliaga, (1996), p.15]. Tuymans speaks of this necessity of disguising objects which evade representation, as that "which is absolutely inaccessible if it is not disguised" [Loock, (1996), p.51]: disguising something is thus, paradoxically, a way of showing it. This paradox can be explained by understanding this strategy of hiding as having a certain micro-political import: the tendency to hide something with the purpose of transgressing it is, according to Calvesi (1997), a certain characteristic of Flemish painting, especially among the surrealists who attempted to alter the boundary between reality and fiction as a way of opposing established dualities. One way in which Tuymans can be said to partake of this opposition to established dualities, beyond the

problematisation of object and representation we have discussed above, is in the use of camouflage and mimicking. The shift from individual to general can be witnessed in paintings where the faces are covered or removed as in *Hands* (1978), *Nr.6* (1978), *Heillicht* (1991), *Angel* (1992) or *Der Architekt* (1997/98).

Raoul De Keyser's paintings offer a useful point of departure, being both a compatriot and a representative of the Belgium artist movement *Nieuwe Visie*. Titles in De Keyser's paintings such as *Camping II* (1969) and *Clochard* ('Homeless people') (1978) suggest something of the transitory in his work, disrupting established patterns, altering schemata, dallying in the makeshift. Searle characterises him as having something 'unsettling' about him where "nothing seems to remain except residue, or a ground disfigured with brush wiping" [Searle, (2004), p.17, see also Bell, 2012].

Tuymans belongs to that self-same tradition, and yet his work seems to intensify the problematics of representation not, as one would expect, by intensifying abstraction (away from figuration).² By simply drawing attention to the constructedness of visual images he returns to modes of representation that might seem somewhat nostalgic or even atavistic. In his paintings, Tuymans nonetheless seems to undermine the established values even more by questioning, through more explicit attempts at figuration, the possibility of depicting certain subjects. As we have seen, he is concerned with necessity to mask things [Loock, (1996), p.51]. This leads us to recognise some of the general characteristics of later 20th-century Flemish painting – the use of figurative concrete painting to break representational norms.³

Tuymans' work is thus, in various ways, determined by the loss or fragmentation of depicted subjects. As almost a precondition of postmodernism, Tuymans eschewed the creation of something new since for him everything has already been said, shown or painted. And as the attempt to create something new is related to the modernist belief in the genius creator, Tuymans underscores the 'clumsy' look of his paintings when he suggests:

I am not into aesthetics; I am into meaning and necessity; Folk art works in a similar way. It is about anonymous elements, something that is not owned by anybody in particular. It is a collective thing, it is precise, it may look banal at first but it isn't. [Aliaga, (1996), p.26]

Most of Tuymans' paintings do not fit in with the expectation of 'good' painting; moreover, painting in general is seen by Tuymans and many of his contemporaries as an 'outmoded medium' [Dexter, (2004), p.17]. Reactions to Tuymans' work would seem to underline this view where his painting seems to represent its own inadequacy: phrases like 'alibi' [Loock, (1996), p.47], 'mimicking and output of the amateur', 'amateur format and scale' [Dexter, (2004), p.17] all reference the absence [but also haunting (invisible) presence] of some entity beyond the representation itself. After his somewhat harsh judgement of Tuymans work, for example, Salzman (1994, p.32) states: "Its [his work's] authority is undermined by the clumsy, naïve and brute physicality of the work" and in recent years this 'clumsiness' has been advanced to a style of painting in its own right [Kantor, (2004), p.164]. Tuymans would probably agree and accept the notion that these qualities are precisely the point of his work: in *Still Life* (2002), he is clear about the qualities he sees in it: on the one hand 'banality' and 'anti pictures' and yet, on the other it is for him 'fantastically precise' [Heynen, (2004), p.13].

This figuration of folk art, as an important reference point in Tuymans' work, could be read as a form of productive nostalgia.⁴ In relation to forms of nostalgia such as this,

Jameson has suggested that the past is often 'metonymically' depicted where clothes or stylistic elements stand for the prior [Dika, (2003), p.10]. Indeed, Tuymans refers in his paintings to the past through reference to fragmented bygone objects; he also takes photographs from the past as source material for his fragmented and metonymic representations. Yet, these show more than 'just' a conservative a nostalgic view: the inaccessibility of the objects in their whole state, means also that our access to the empirical objects of history is also curtailed [Loock, (1996), p.48]. Tuymans' attitude to the past includes also, like memory, the loss of specific details in his depictions, and the viewer is cut off from any worldview which poses the relation between object and past as empirically limitable.⁵ This is the first principle, it seems to me, of his attitude to representation and mimesis in the broadest sense. As Tuymans puts it: "Making pictures is a task that takes on the question of distrust" [in Kittelmann, (2009), p.33].

Anxieties about the limits of representation, and the distrust (of representation) that follows from it, can be easily identified with certain features of European Modernism as, for example, in Benjamin's work. For the Modernists, the processes of fragmentation and technologisation were something to celebrate and, paradoxically, the source of a disciplined yet palpable nostalgia for more 'organic' ways of being. Benjamin's (2002b, p.116) writings on art and representation articulate some of the attitudes to these processes in the early part of the 20th century: "the painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law".

This fragmentation, then, is embedded in a number of historical transformations: the single viewer of artworks is replaced for Benjamin in cinema by the 'collective perception' (2002b, p.118) and 'mass participants' (p.119) of the close-ups, getting, as it were, 'closer' to the object, facilitating yet more fragmentation. For Benjamin, this new closeness to the external world provokes a new and intense distance from nature (p.107) and a consequent 'self-alienation' (p.113). Moreover, he articulates a contradiction in the cinematographic situation: although the art of cinematographic representation is based on enormous technical facility, the tool is not noticeable, it shows 'an equipment-free aspect of reality' (p.116). It thus marks the replacement of hand craft with technical or mechanically-based production, reflected by the shift from the hand to the eye. Technical innovation does not only imply new modes of production but also affects the nature of representation itself.

Benjamin's observations have proven particularly fruitful. Later thinkers draw extensively on his work representing a sustained attempt to elaborate some of Benjamin's ideas into a full theory of 'mediality' (the quality of 'media-ness'). According to McLuhan (2001, p.37), media become part of the seeing process: "The book is the extension of the eye"; perception dominated by the eye attempts to recover over and over (in a nostalgic gesture) the sense of simultaneity and the primordial space.⁶ *Map* (2008) has been described as 'positioning' the painting between viewer and image. The interstitial place highlights the ambiguous space of the face depicted in the painting, which half-dissolves into a map and further into the flat canvas. This raises the question, for Merleau-Ponty as to how objects are changed before or after perception. He notes finally that the relation of those objects to reality is based on a specific mutuality, which does not foresee a beginning or origin (1993, p.124).⁷ However, Tuymans in his work

reiterates the return of (and an emphasis on) the tangible, emphasising the hand in the painting process: “What is specific about painting is that it is a physical process for which nothing else can substitute...But one’s hands also possess a certain intelligence, that is something that tends mostly to be forgotten. The hands are very important because they are the least dilettante, they really are as they do...” [Luc Tuymans in Kittelmann, (2009), p.33].

Since the *tactile* and *making* have become key elements in contemporary painting practice [Schwabsky, (2004), p.8], Tuymans’ work can be seen as part of a broader aesthetic currency. Viewed in a broader context, his work evokes modernist concerns with the structure or surface of the artwork. Benjamin, for example, argued as early as 1936 that the ‘modern’ experience of self-alienation is often compensated for by ritualised habitual attempts to get closer to things [Benjamin, (2002b), p.105]. The ‘era’ covered by Benjamin was one characterised by crisis: for him this period is one in which an intensification of the cultural binarisms individual/collective, particular/general, familiar/strangeness, whole/fragment is effected. A key point in Benjamin’s *The work of art* documents the failure of mimesis to convey an adequate depiction of the real. Despite their nearness, objects cannot be differentiated if they do not appear as belonging to the same group (objects) [Benjamin, (2002b), p.105]. This is reinforced elsewhere by Benjamin (2003, p.338):

The ‘perceptibility’ he [the artist?] has in mind is none other than that of the aura. Experience of the aura thus arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to [a/the?] relationship between humans and inanimate and natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us.

In these two essays, *The work of Art* and *The Storyteller*, then, Benjamin introduces forms of representation which are connected through the passing of time and spatial distance. The key point for the narrative form of transmission is repetition: “The narrative is revealed through the layers of various retelling” [Benjamin, (2002a), p.150]. The fact of retelling a story draws a connection between levels of the original story and its repetition and, therefore, it draws attention to the consequent time displacements between original and copy (p.28).

To return to the question of the timeliness of Benjamin’s work, what is timely here, then, is the notion that technology and strategies for representing the world are not to be separated out into secondary and primary agency, but can be theorised as constituting a single frame. In this sense, the ‘distrust’ of representation we mentioned above in conjunction with Tuymans’ work is thus something that can also be understood as embedded in a much larger historical predicament, characterised by Kittler (1999, p.203) as a new ‘discourse network’.

Tuymans’ work resonates with Benjamin’s later work in this regard in particular and, in a similar way to the *Work of art* essay shows a fascination with the process of repetition (of constantly remaking what is already made); indeed, Tuymans’ work deals often with imageries which refer to other images, and to images of images, something Schwabsky (2007, p.31) has called “images of images of images of images”, creating ‘many layers of distance’.

5 Repetition

Repetition can be understood as a recovering or re-finding of something lost: it works a compensation for that loss [Foster, (1993), p.10]. Like the surrealist artists who attempt to recover a loss through the found object, Lyotard (1991, p.29) refers, in his essay 'Rewriting modernity', to occurrences in the past which we try to structure, but he argues that we demand too much: "Remembering, one still wants too much". The recapture of occurrences in the past is described as the attempt to get hold of that past, to "master, to exhibit the original crime" (1991, p.29). Benjamin (2002b, p.105) has also written about the tendency to want to get hold of things, which he regards as counterproductive, since the result reveals only 'sameness' and paradoxically an increased distance from the thing we seek. In a similar way, Tuymans refers to his selection of imagery from the past by selecting motives as not yet having been categorised or worked through and as still not 'digested' [Wulfschlager, (2011), p.12].

In this complex relationship with the past, Benjamin's work is crucial for an understanding of the relationship between repetition and loss. In 'The storyteller', he juxtaposes novel and narration, describing *novel* as 'isolated', 'devoid' (2002a, p.146), 'secluded' (p.147): "the reader of a novel is isolated, more so than any other reader" (p.156) whereas storytelling is seen as 'transmissible' (p.151) 'integrated' and 'a process of assimilation' (p.149). Clearly the novel, then, marks a sense of loss for Benjamin. This is developed also in Benjamin's (2003, p.316) late essay 'On some motifs in Baudelaire' (1940):

[T]here is a contrast between all these forms [the novel, newspapers, etc.] and the story, which is one of the oldest forms of communication. A story doesn't aim to convey an event per se, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much the way an earthen vessel bears the trace of the potter's hand.

The narrative provides congruence between form and content due to the unity of narrator and listener in one person: "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" [Benjamin, (2002a), p.146]. The process described by Benjamin witnesses a rare congruence of matter and form. While 'conventional' forms of representation are inserted into the passing of time and vanish, this medium *generates itself through time* through *retelling*. As we shall see in the next section, the function of retelling, like rewriting, builds a link between occurrences in the past to the present.

The possibility of reclaiming for the loss enacted by modernity of this linking process is explored, I would argue, quite extensively and deliberately in Tuymans' work. Polaroids, for example, are an essential source material in his work and seem to encapsulate the kind of rare congruence of matter and form staged for us by Benjamin. Different to photographs, polaroids entail a momentariness, an uncontrollable and physical aspect, due to the instability of its chemical layers. Tuymans' work is highly influenced by the idea, especially in relation to his use of the polaroid, of bringing darkness to the light [Van Pee, (2007), p.68]. Paintings such as *Shadow 1* (1994), *Shadow 2* (1992), *W* (2008) or *Iphone* (2008) draw particular attention to the ambiguous character of presence/absence through their depictions of hazy shadows. And it is to certain extent this ephemerality which gives his paintings duration and impact, as Vermeiren (2007, p.25) has pointed out: "Such a material exercise or repetition of the

image indicates a different order of urgency concerning the subject; it makes the image more penetrating”.

Figure 1 Luc Tuymans, *Iphone*, 2008, oil on canvas, 45 × 34 1/4 × 1 1/2 inches, 114.3 × 87 × 3.8 cm (see online version for colours)



Note: Courtesy David Zwirner, New York and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

6 Particular/whole

Most Marxist literary critics like Benjamin and Lukács, have drawn a boundary between the sensuous individual object and the universal [Eagleton, (1985), p.28]. The continuum of sub- and superstructure as a ‘social whole’ figures the artistic work as a product of the time and condition of its creation [Eagleton, (1985), p.61]. Benjamin coins the term *outmoded object* for an object which bears the quality of time, recognising a special quality of ‘distance’ in products from another time: he refers to the German translation of the word ‘mode’ which insinuates two meanings: ‘mode of fashion’ and ‘mode of production’ [Foster, (1993), p.159]. He relates his notion of the ‘outmoded’ to both of these meanings, highlighting ‘the inscription of time’ into objects as a crucial process in the making of their meanings. This substantiates for Benjamin the insight that medium, production and perception depend on a socio cultural superstructure. According to him, the artwork is not only influenced by nature but also by historic processes (a historicism that would have been seen at the time as quite radical).⁸

It is interesting in this context that Tuymans’ paintings are described as in some sense partaking of a ‘delayed medium’ [Folie, (2002), p.119] or ‘outmoded medium’ [Molesworth, (2009), p.17]. Indeed, the analogies often drawn between his work and folk art function somewhat as a kind of strategic opposition to the highly polished overworked

products of our 'digitalised' age. This 'delay' is strikingly similar to Kittler's view of film as not directly linked to reality but only a chemical reaction to the light: it is not a direct physical 'recording' in the sense that might understand sound recording.⁹ An even more important issue here is the coincidence Kittler figured out between technical advances and the invisibility of technology, which, he deduces, is a result of the emergence of the typewriter and a subsequent intensification of the distance between body and object. Just as Loock recognised the displacement of the subject of the painting outside the canvas in Tuymans' work, so Kittler (1999, p.203) recognises in film a certain primary displacement: "The spot where the next sign to be written occurs is precisely what ... can not be seen".¹⁰

Tuymans' of film-stills as source material for his paintings suggests that the meaning of the representation does not lie in the painting itself [Loock, (1996), p.47]. Of particular importance for Tuymans is the freezing of time in the film-still and the strange reconstruction of time it effects:

Of course my fascination with film and paint is extremely similar, in the sense that I would be a very bad photographer because I would be always too late. A photographer works with a moment whereas in film you can approach imagery as you do in painting [quoted in Garret and Robecchi, (2004), p.79].

Loock (1996, p.47) elaborates this point further by suggesting that the film still refers to a scene before or immediately after but cannot be read on its own: "Its meaning lies where it is not".

Benjamin's writings on distantiation from the object in the context of what he terms 'aura' exemplify elegantly the core modernist critical insight that the medium of representation intervenes in the veracity of that representation. This leads us to the question as to the nature of the relationship between verisimilitude and mimesis. For Tuymans, the distance between viewer and represented object is important since it helps him to describe the uniqueness of an object. Many of Tuymans' paintings show isolated and dismembered bodies, where only a tiny detail refers metonymically (or perhaps synecdochically) to the whole [see *Nose* (1993), *Leg* (1994), *Der Diagnostische Blick VII* (1992), *Body* (1990) *The Doll* (1994)]. This brings us back to the peculiar qualities of the film-still exploited by Tuymans where the separated entity refers to the whole and cannot be understood without it. Moreover, even in the perception of the artwork, a sense of distance is, for him, vital: "The small gap between the explanation of a picture and the picture itself provides the only possible perspective on painting [...] I can't project myself completely into the picture; if I did that I would not be detached enough to paint it. [...] The work develops an idea of loss and ideas of beauty. Beauty exists only as a perversion. It is calming" [in Sandqvist, (2009), p.67].

I want to focus here on the painting *Der Diagnostische Blick VII* (1992) in which a single breast is depicted. The composition of the painting is dominated by an unstructured (or perhaps better out of focus) surface, in a monochromatic painting which would not be identifiable without the lower part which outlines a breast. The simultaneous impression of presence/absence, individual/general seems to me emblematic for this series of painting, since it shows one breast and refers at the same time to the lack of the other. Another loss is defined in the fading context: *Der Diagnostische Blick VII* is one of a series of ten paintings, created around 1992, showing six male portraits, close-ups of heads, details of body parts and wounds. The original context of these photographs, "the clinical investigative viewpoint towards the subject" is altered by undermining the

cohesion of the signifier and the signified [Salzman, (1994), p.30]. The loss or erasure of the body occupies a similar place in this series to the loss of space in other paintings such as *Our New Quarters* [Loock, (1996), p.55] and coincides with the lack of the original semiotic context, which deprives the persons represented of any kind of individuality. Tuymans intensifies this anonymisation, “I don’t want to make portraits on the psychological level. I take all ideas out of individuality and just leave the shell, the body” [Aliaga, (1996), p.15]. The breast in *Der Diagnostische Blick VII* can furthermore be seen to represent loss through its evocation of the maternal breast, standing for the primary loss [Foster, (2000), p.137]. Repetition as compensation for loss is discussed by Freud in the ‘fort/da game’ and there, the re-depiction or revisiting of the loss marks a shift from the passivity of suffering to the active role of taking ownership of that loss. It articulates also the fact that in every representation there resides a loss and that “any representation works to compensate a little” [Foster, (2000), p.139].

7 Ritual and new media

A core Benjaminian concept that we have already briefly outlined above is the notion of ritual as a kind of ‘fusion’. Benjamin (2003, p.316) refers to rituals as ‘amalgamations’ of individual experiences with material of the collective past:

Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory [*Gedächtnis*] with material from the collective past. Rituals, with their ceremonies and their festivals (probably nowhere recalled in Proust’s work), kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained available to memory throughout people’s lives.

Thus, ritual stands in opposition to modern media where the alienation of man from his surrounding can be seen in the fact that occurrences cannot anymore be connected to the subject. The lack of a link here might be connected to the decline in ethical liability or agency in the empirical world, which cannot be compensated for through “principles of journalistic information like newness, brevity and clarity” (2003, p.316). Although new media technology “penetrates deeply into reality” (2002b, p.115) the viewer cannot link them to his own experiences (2003, p.315). The gap between experience and visibility increases as the distance from the object decreases. This paradox is dealt with in both ‘The storyteller’ and ‘The work of art in the age of technical reproducibility’. The attempt to “get closer to things”, “to get hold of an object” (2002b, 105), an interest for “what is nearest” (2002a, p.147), the “striking lack of discretion” (2002b, p.110), is not, in the final analysis, about striving for a closer understanding of the object but delivers only a debilitating ‘sameness’, as compensation for our inability to reconnect the separate parts. In ‘The storyteller’, this discrepancy (between sameness and the inability to connect) is referenced at the beginning: a thing only becomes visible, “when it is viewed by an observer from the proper distance and angle” [Benjamin, (2002a), p.143].

Tuymans’ paintings explore this discrepancy in considerable depth. Often, that which is depicted is often faded out so that the viewer has difficulties identifying or recognising the depicted objects. The lack of focal point, mentioned before as characteristic in his work, confronts the viewer with the challenge or impossibility of finding a central position from which to view the work. This has been described as a ‘transformative

element', as out-of-focus figure, which blurs the boundary between what is knowable and what is unknowable, what has been defined as a 'calibration of distances from the object' [Singer, (2010), p.175]. This removing of objects from the direct gaze has been recognised in Tuymans' work in his strategies of cutting off and covering over part(s) of the painting.¹¹ And yet, instead of eliminating traces totally, Tuymans frequently applies a hazy, blurred veil of obscurity, that, in the work-group *Dusk/Penumbra* has been described as a "crepuscular moment...producing something more like the vague haze of remembering" [Filipovic, (2006), p.260]. The visual distancing between viewer and represented object can be understood here again as an erosion of traditionally perceived boundaries between the rational/irrational, tangible/intangible or between the duty to show and the duty to make. And indeed, clouds and fog, classical iconographic aspects in paintings, have been remade as a kind of protection against the penetration of the controlling rational gaze and a movement towards "elusive, changeable, internal material" [Warner, (2006), p.13].¹² Of course, it is not difficult to identify a recent tendency in contemporary art production to focus in particular in the elusive, unstable entities favouring phenomenological and sensual aspects, as Smith has argued. He has described the claim for the *spiritual* in recent art production, a demand which emphasises the 'desire for enchantment' and yet, "create[s] encounters that are reflexive, critical and unstable" [Smith, (2010), p.12]. If the fading and blurring of the depicted object, as mentioned before, seems to heighten the distance between viewer and depiction, it must also be recognised that the falability of representation also updates and transforms the man-nature relationship such that traditional binary categories come to seem outmoded, crude, markers of a hopelessly innocent time before the incursion of the material into representation.¹³ Moreover, the autonomisation of sight from touch, as from the empiric, sensuous world, correlates very strongly to the surrealist attempt to challenge the bourgeois hegemony over that empirical, sensually-experienced world. Something, which has been referred to as a Belgium tradition, as noted above. Despite the symbolic value of icons of the capitalist productions like mannequins or machines (see Tuymans' use of puppets in paintings such as *Body* (1990), *The Doll* (1994) *Toys* (1994) and others), the surrealists used them and cited them with a parodic force. Attracted by the blending of the paradigms nature/culture and animated/unanimated [Foster, (1993), p.21], surrealist artists attempted to destroy some fundamental foundations of society and the 'natural order' by connecting two or more meanings to one object and equalising the conscious and unconscious realms.¹⁴ The uncertainty thus generated led to a certain undecidability in the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, leading to an inevitable 'non-distinction' in external and internal value [Foster, (1993), p.23], and, consequently, in other classically held distinctions such as the particular and the universal.

The disappearance of the body from discourses on perception seems to me one of the key issues in analysing modernist conceptions of reality. On the one hand, objects are charged with transcendent values, like the found object, which gives the possibility of recovering events in the past. On the other, perception and creation are disconnected from the body as a consequence of the technical processes outlined above. While Crary (1999, p.19) emphasises the 'loss of touch' in the perception process, Foster analyses this loss from a psycho-analytic viewpoint. Freud (2001, p.230) connects the uncanny, the loss of distinction between real and imaginary, to the fear of losing sight and the fear of castration. Accordingly, Foster (1993, p.25) describes surrealists' work as an "oscillation between two uncanny fantasies of maternal plenitude and paternal punishment, between the dream of a space-time before bodily separation and psychic loss and the trauma of

such events". As we shall see, it is in the encounter with the body, that representation meets its greatest crisis.

8 Shadows

Emphasising the idea of '(w)holeness' in his paintings, as discussed above (for example in the cutting off corporeal limbs in his paintings), Tuymans moves objects in his paintings to the boundaries of the canvas delivering a sinister equivocation of absence/presence. Having examined this in the context of film and having looked at how, in various of his paintings, Tuymans marginalises and cuts off his motives, I now want to move to explore his use of shadows. As exemplified in *Shadow 1* (1994), *Shadow 2* (1992), *W* (2008) or *Iphone* (2008) the object of his paintings is removed from the centre stage of the image and reduced to a flattened, hazy depiction of a shadow cast by the absent image. This tendency to flatten or dissolve the subject can be seen (in a Greenbergian, Modernistic interpretation) as a recuperation of the painterly surface against photographic depth or illusionistic space. Yet, the use of the shadow, reducing the depiction of a person to the hazy silhouette stands also for a very delicately drawn and intensely discursivised ambiguity between presence and absence. Warner (2006, p.160) reminds us that the depiction of shadows stands for the inception of painting or drawing tracing the silhouette of a person as a kind of proxy for them. Tuymans, then, not surprisingly engages in his work extensively with the ambiguous symbolic economy of the shadow. In the project *Ende Ladenlokal* restricts paint to the areas between the shadows, with an emphasis, as it has been argued on the "non-areas" [Wesseler, (2009), p.7]. Yet, the apparent indexical quality of shadows, as 'proof' of presence out of sight, has been further called into question since the shadows in his paintings seldom correspond to a perspective structure of a fixed viewer [Molesworth, (2009), p.23]. They seem, rather, to heighten the distrust of the representation.

Many of Tuymans' paintings employ what seems like extremely faded colours (see, for example, *The Flag* (1995), *Still Life* (2002), and *Sniper/Prickskytt* (2009) which distances the viewer from the shady almost blurred depiction of the object. Despite its enormous scale the painting *Still Life*, because of its faded colours, enacts a kind of tenuous or modest expression. Tuymans' paintings are also characterised as forcing the viewer to focus on contradictory meanings or incongruent visual elements at the same time [Vermeiren, (2007), p.17]. This is by no means a new phenomenon in Tuymans work where the negotiation of the abstract and the figurative has come to be almost a trademark. But the representational deviations, the faded imagery, the stretching of conventional limits have all become an almost safe place in Tuymans work. Referring to paintings which insinuate a close relationship to the spectacularised media society such as *Big Brother* (2008), *Map/Karta* (2008) *CCTV* (2009) and *Tits/Tuttar* (2009), Tuymans deals in his work group 'Against the day' with images well known from reality TV shows.

If Tuymans' work may be described as an attempt to create a critical distance between viewer from representation, then the use of images from TV reality shows can be understood as part of an extended critical project in which the gap between representation and reality is dramatised, polemicised and insisted upon. *Big Brother* (2008) *Tits/Tuttar* (2009) or *Map/Karta* (2008) in their sensationalistic approach, can be seen as deliberate breaches of convention, social, formal ethical, but also as offering a

‘safe’ place, such as the *Wonderchamber* or the *freakshow*, that does not necessarily claim to give an accurate account of reality. This ‘safety’ or abnegation of the demands of the responsibilities of representation is thus a complex play with the radicalising and discursivising elements of Tuymans’ work.

Figure 2 Luc Tuymans, *CCTV*, 2009, oil on canvas 39 1/8 × 31 1/8 inches, 99.5 × 79 cm (see online version for colours)



Note: Courtesy David Zwirner, New York and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

With strategies such as the displacement of objects outside the image frame (see *W* or *Iphone*) distancing the viewer (*Still Life*) or spectacularising the depicted object (*Tits/Tuttar* or *Map/Karta*), Tuymans seems to depart from the conventions of the classical optical space and to tarry in marginal spaces such as the *Wunderkammer* or *Freak shows*. The concept of the *Wunderkammer* is an undermining of the classical optical space of precision and order [Munster, (2006), p.5]. It is also linked to the desire of the viewer to face the unrecognisable and the stupefaction of the unknown, something Tuymans deals with, as we have seen, in *Diagnostischer Blick*, where the depicted physical illness stays unknown to the eyes of the viewer.

Figure 3 Luc Tuymans, *Big Brother*, 2008, oil on canvas, 57 5/8 × 88 5/8 inches, 146.4 × 225.1 cm (see online version for colours)



Note: Courtesy David Zwirner, New York and Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp

By ‘domesticating’ or ‘controlling’ the gaze [Sandqvist, (2009), p.67] and making it more cognisant of representation, Tuymans seems, in his paintings, to open out and resituate classical conventions of representation. By playing with images from reality TV shows,

freak shows and *wonderchambers*, he draws on places which traditionally stand for the acceptance or possibility of difference, where deviations are valued and possible [Bogan, (1988), p.268]. Places like these become a necessity in society, and, as Bogan further puts it, so-called 'misrepresentation' or 'enfreakment' had its fixed place and its vital role within the stable order of society.¹⁵ Tuymans' agenda of irreconcilable contradictions in his painting, such as not matching shadows where the traditional sense of mimesis does not serve any purpose anymore, where those means are exhausted or the "mimetic or representational function has been played out" [Vermeiren, (2007), p.17], thus has a kind of freakish prehistory, a makeshift *Hintergrund* which feeds it and sustains it.

It is probably this makeshift microhistory that gives Tuymans' work its polyfocal quality:

It is the quality that allows painting to rise above discourse, above the 'sayable', without having resource to vagueness and mystification. It is a quality by which the painted image has the edge over other types of image, and perhaps even language. The appearance of the paradoxical simultaneity of the painting in our monofocal world is still – as a strategy of for generating meaning – extremely difficult to translate or to interpret. [Vermeiren, (2007), p.19]

The concept of the *Wunderkammer* can be linked to the amalgamation of different temporalities, an aspect which is reflected in Tuymans' paintings in the concept of 'belatedness'. There is a sense in the 'too lateness' of his work of a distance from the image he seeks to capture. This spatial separation between the meaning and its 'representation' is discussed by Kittler who emphasises the concept of mediality and suggests that film, due to its material characteristics, was, from the beginning, connected to cutting and the introduction of other materials. Referring to the manipulatory potential of film editing techniques he states that "cinema, in contrast to sound recordings, began with reels, cuts and slices" [Kittler, (1999), p.115]. Kittler's view is an elaboration of Benjamin's, where cinema's aesthetic and technical ontology is to be seen in contrast to a 'whole' painting (which can be taken in as whole, complete in some sense) whereas film is always 'piecemeal', to be understood as a number of "manifold parts being assembled according a new law" [Benjamin, (2002b), p.116].

Similar evidence of the increased distance, despite the empirically parsed world, is given by the emergence of the typewriter, which symbolises not only the division of hand and eye, but also a spatial separation between place of execution and perception. Separation as a technical aspect reflects the discontinuity of content and the attitude of the viewer. The hand, as the mark of an individual, is no longer connected to the writing process, and this is ever more the case as when reading becomes ever more spatially separated from writing. The separation of sight and touch can be traced back to the early 18th century as a 'precondition of the observer' of the 19th century, who loses his specific viewpoint, and the capacity to touch what he sees. The 'autonomisation of sight' accelerates the homogenisation of optical perception according to Crary (1999, p.19) a point reinforced by Deleuze (2004, p.124), who speaks of an 'ideal optical space' liberated from the hand.¹⁶ The progress towards the continuity of space and time and the uniformity of codes is a precondition for the appearance of the individual, separated citizen. The independent view of the observer is best characterised in the image of the *flâneur*, as outlined by Benjamin, which finds its reference in Breton's *Nadja*: Breton's interrupted plot meandering without obedience to storyline, plot, objective, on the

desperate search for the (female) opposite, which is finally revealed as mere utopian ruminations and imaginings [Shandler Levitt, (1999), p.50].

9 Conclusions

As we have seen, Tuymans applies in his work a variety of strategies which allow him to deviate established ('classical') norms of mimesis. The at first glance unfinishedness and repetitious nature of Tuymans' work, might be said to fit all too well into a postmodern predicament. What is more, fragmented body parts, and the appropriation of media imagery can be read very easily as another pastiche, copy or failure of representation. Yet, Tuymans deviates categories of representation in a very particular way and slows our perception down by engaging consciously with the idea of absence and the distance between the depicted object and the viewer. By means of an exoticised depiction of freakshow-like imagery such as in *Map/Karta* (2008) or *Tits/Tuttar* (2009), Tuymans engages with the visual symbolic pairings of familiar/unfamiliar, us/them, in order to broaden the scope of mimetic representation. The so called 'non-areas' in his work, oscillate on the brink of cataclysm. The unintelligible elements in Tuymans' paintings often link his work paradoxically to photographic and film material. These media epitomise the idea of referring out to something that lies beyond the image frame, the cutting out of elements, and of referring to something which is not here. Benjamin's remarkable 1936 essay thus allows us to contextualise Tuymans' work within a broader set of concerns about the historicity of technology and representation. Tuymans stand for a strikingly original 21st-century strategies for dealing with representation by linking his imagery with the instantaneous, very sensual and momentous impulse of the painting process itself. The conflation of photographic image with the painterly trace deliberately merges two different semiotic logics, the indexical signs of the brush with the iconographic image of the photographic. But since we know that traces in Tuymans' paintings do not lead anywhere, and that the shadows are no real proof of anyone ever having been there, the meanings of Tuymans' paintings lies in its interdiction of a simple hermeneutics of the eye. The impossibility of closeness and the fallibility of perception, as argued through by Benjamin, is turned by Tuymans into a deliberate practice: he chooses the most ephemeral imagery and imagines what it might be like to give the permanence. Above, the use of shadows was referred to as marking the inception of drawing or painting and as an impulse to keep hold of memories of the absent. Shadows, faded images and the images of *freakshows* here seem to all execute the same procedure, where the painting becomes not just a means of allowing the ephemeral to become permanent, but also a key of understanding how the ephemeral comes into being. The 'modernist' agenda that attends much of Tuymans' work, and Benjamin's observations on the need for distance, are also profoundly ambivalent. Just as Benjamin's work has come to be understood ever more as interbally self-contesting, so Tuymans' work is testament to a certain elegant refusal of mimesis. Hence Benjamin has proven beneficial precisely because Tuymans deals with religious aspects or features of our media culture which show a close link to the ritual and to repetition.

Perhaps the function in both Benjamin and Tuymans of the overarching structure of repetition is as a form of doubling. Modernism sought over and over to deal with this structure as a problem to be overcome, silenced even, and Tuymans can be seen to both belong to and critique this tradition. It was no less than Bertolt Brecht who sought to

disrupt the unity of dramatic action in his plays through a process of alienation and speaks of a *division* within the actor, and mentions explicitly a doubling or ‘clash of two voices’ in the actor [Brecht, (1984), p.138]. Hence, doubling and/or repeating in Brecht, just as in the *fort-da* game, can be seen as an attempt to master the loss in the past, and as affecting a shift from passivity to the active role. Brecht (1984, p.192) suggests both of these for actor and viewer when he says: “To transform himself from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry he would need to develop that detached eye”. Tuymans builds on this tradition and establishes shadowy figurative forms in order to show the failure of mimesis: “Tuymans’ mourning consists in creating, with pictures of empty rooms and isolated things, the incommensurable insufficiency of pictures, in order to do justice to something that must remain outside our grasp” [Loock, (1996), p.57].

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Notes

- 1 Whereas, for Tuymans, toys function as distance, Benjamin and surrealists like Breton connect it with a maternal memory, 'psychic intimacy and bodily unit' [Foster, (1993), p.163]. Breton pledges, 'one day, perhaps, we shall see the toys of our whole life'.
- 2 "Certainly at the beginning of Tuymans' career the feat was above all mental, as can be seen from the small paintings resembling pieces of grey mud, more like sediments than real images" [Vermeiren, (2007), p.17].
- 3 We might, however, see this as part of a longer specifically Flemish tradition. Calvesi (1997), for example, describes the forebears of the likes of Tuymans and De Keyser, the renaissance Flemish school, as marked by the loss of the monuments of classical antiquity, which were present as an abstract ideal but not, as for the Italian artists, in front of their eyes. To transcend the external world becomes in this tradition all the more pressing since the abstraction if not fantasy that such a transcendence inevitably entailed was fomented in the "northern landscape, which was amidst the mists, richer in indistinct presences and potential apparitions" [Calvesi, (1997), p.102]. The sometimes 'polyfocal', incongruent aspect of his paintings has been also interpreted as linked to his upbringing in Belgium [see Vermeiren, (2007), p.20].
- 4 Just as Tuymans' work is often described as analogous to 'Folk Art', so he himself is not perceived as an out of touch or aristocratic artist. Indeed, as Vermeiren (2007, p.16) suggests: "Over and above this Tuymans is 'ours', like a 'working class hero'..."
- 5 "I made decisive decisions: I was not going to make art out of art. I really can not do anything with postmodernism. And here the real comes in: I chose a period of time, which was not digested, world war two" [Wullschlager, (2011), p.12].
- 6 Merleau-Ponty, frequently associated with the philosophical movements of existentialism and phenomenology, was nonetheless fascinated by the complexities of representation in the modern mechanically-produced world. In his essay 'Eye and mind', vision is strongly connected to the body, it is defined through movement like a body. The capacity to 'see' presupposes therefore the corollary of a 'to be seen' [Merleau-Ponty, (1993), p.124] which recasts the relationship between man and world in a new complexity.
- 7 As we shall see, Crary (1999, 19) emphasises the 'loss of touch' in the perception process.
- 8 Arendt (1999, p.19) establishes a more general sense of what might be termed the continuity of the discontinuous (or perhaps 'homogeneity') when she describes in her 'Foreword' to Benjamin's *Illuminations* a debilitating continuity between the terms 'reason' and 'perception', both words reflected in the German word 'Vernunft/vernehmen'.

- 9 Although it must be said that sound recording is itself little more than a chemical reaction to the fluctuation in a magnetic field analogous only in the most distended sense to the sound 'captured' in the microphone [Kittler, (1999), p.119].
- 10 The detective/painter dedicates his work to occurrences in the past, small elements in the painting refer metonymically to the event in the past as a "first piece of evidence" [Hoptman, (2000), p.120]. The painter/detective attempts to reveal the guilty perpetrator of an incident in the past with established empirical tools. To pursue further the metaphor of the detective, Tuymans' titles evoke both criminological tools [*Recherches* (1989), *Diagnostischer Blick II* (1992), *Spiegel I* (1992), *Schrift* (1988), *Correspondence* (1985), *Slide#1* (2002)] and criminal incidents [*The Cry* (1989), *Bloodstains* (1993) or *Child Abuse* (1989)] to name but a few.
- 11 "An Affinity exists between the cropped and truncated forms which appear in Tuymans' paintings, and the painful but effective cut-and-suture of film editing" [Rosenthal and Archer, (2000), p.70].
- 12 "The metaphor of clouds and cloudiness returns to communicate the elusive, changeable, internal material of someone's mind: it can serve to signify spirit indwelling the person" [Warner, (2006), 14].
- 13 Luc Tuymans deals in particular with the complexities of distance in a Modernist framework in his painting *Allo!* (2012) (see Searle, 2012).
- 14 Indeed, the reference to the unconscious is linked also to an explicitly archaic world view. In the middle ages, miracles were seen as ruptures of the natural order, when the reason for the occurrence could not be identified in the material condition [Foster, (1993), p.19].
- 15 In their discussion of *Der Diagnostische Blick* Rosenthal and Archer (2000, 72) observe: "...we are forced to become accomplices to the brutalizing gaze that appropriates, victimizes and chops the body into pieces, instead of experimenting it in its wholeness. One feels the suffocating obscenity of extreme close-ups that makes monsters of us all."
- 16 See McLuhan (1964, p.83) who speaks of the uniformity of literacy as one of the preconditions of civilization, referring to the transfer from "magically discontinuous and traditional of the tribal world into the cool and uniform visual medium".