

UT PICTURA POESIS: INTERFERENCES (THE IMPRESSIONISTS AND ZOLA)

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*Abstract: Within the Romantic context of the 19th century the preoccupation with the fusion of arts is of constant interest. This aspect is illustrated by Baudelaire's « correspondences » "les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent". If César Birotteau, the perfumer from Balzac's eponymous novel, seems to respond to Baudelaire's stimulus, later on, Zola emphasizes through his writing strategies used in **The Ladies' Paradise**, the techniques characteristic of impressionist painters, who in turn were inspired by the great writer's work. The advertising so present in Zola's novel, *The Ladies' Paradise*, has to resort to senses in order to reach its primary goal. We can find a genuine convergence of senses in Zola's descriptions: the sense of touch for the texture of the materials, the sense of sight for the colours, the sense of hearing for the silk's crackle, to all of which we can add the sculpture of the human body with its profound sensory input.*

Keywords: Zola, Impressionism, 19th century, *The Ladies' Paradise*, fashion

The impressionists and Zola

During a century in which the interference between the arts is highly visible, the relationship between painting and literature excited the critical interest of the time. Novels such as *His Masterpiece*, *The Kill*, *The Ladies' Paradise* or *Nana*, all part of *Les Rougon-Macquart* series by Émile Zola, stand as testimony of these interferences through their many chromatic descriptions that are highly influenced by the painting techniques used by the impressionists. The main point of convergence between Zola's descriptions and the canvases of the Impressionist painters is manifested by the fashion of the 19th century. The obvious presence of fashion in literature as well as in paintings is not random. The consequences of the Industrial Revolution facilitate technological development, which in turn has a direct impact on the world of fashion. At the same time, the economic progress of that period gives birth to a new social class, the bourgeoisie, whose fashion preferences become more and more refined and sophisticated. Guenollée Milleret, in her work *La mode du XIX^e siècle en images*¹, considers 19th century fashion to be the founder of contemporary fashion and thus, it is not at all surprising that nowadays, Paris is the home of fashion shows inspired by 19th century motives. However, it is important to point out that without the record of that period's garments in literature, painting and press, 19th century fashion could not have represented a constant source of inspiration. The birth of department stores facilitates the distribution of clothing items thus making competition fiercer. In this context the development of advertising techniques, which were considered deceitful by traditional salesmen, becomes evident. In the 19th century literature the beginnings of the advertising phenomenon are portrayed in Balzac's novel *César Birotteau*, while in Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* we can find the power that advertising holds over consumers, especially women. In the wake of this technological and economic progress, 19th century literature appears as a mirror of society and a true documentary source.

It is a well known fact that the main theme of *Les Rougon-Macquart* series is that of heredity. Guenollée Milleret considers that in fashion we can discuss heredity as manifested

¹Guenollée Milleret, *La mode du XIX^e siècle en images*, Eyrolles, Paris, 2012.

by the passing down of one generation's craftsmanship to another, but also by the passing down of designing techniques from simple tailors to important fashion designers.²

Beyond the favourable environment that made possible the development of a long lasting relationship between Zola and the impressionist painters such as Monet, Manet and Cézanne, a relationship which influenced both the great writer's work and the painter's works of art, Zola is also connected to Cézanne through a strong friendship which began in their teenage years, growing up in Aix-en-Provence. Later on, the image of Cezanne served as inspiration for Paul, the main character of Zola's novel *His Masterpiece*. In spite of their strong tie, the image of the failed painter that commits suicide at the end of the novel does not please Cezanne, thus bringing their beautiful friendship to an end.

In 1864 Zola makes his début in art criticism. A year after taking part in the *Salon des Refusés*, where he was accompanied by Cézanne, who was still his friend at the time, he writes a series of eulogies, mainly about Manet, whom he considered to be a natural born painter with a peculiar intelligence and exact vision of things, but also about other Impressionist painters.³

As well as supporting the Impressionist painters, Zola also portrayed them in literature, stating that "I not only supported the impressionists, I translated them into literature"⁴. Thus, as is the case with impressionist paintings, we can find juxtapositions of colours, tones and tints in his descriptions. Light, a defining element of impressionist canvases, is also to be found under different shapes in Zola's descriptions:

It was a winter's night, with a misty sky of sooty blackness, and was rendered extremely cold by a sharp wind blowing from the west. Paris, lighted up, had gone to sleep, showing no signs of life save such as attached to the gas-jets, those specks which scintillated and grew smaller and smaller in the distance till they seemed but so much starry dust.⁵

Continuing this sequence there are a number of collocations that depict the game played by light and darkness: "luminous beads", "glimmered", "darkening gloom", "bars of lights", "flame", "fans of light".

With the help of his descriptions the novelist tries to create a lively, dynamic world, in total contrast to the static, traditional one. An example of these efforts is represented by the fragment from the beginning of *The Ladies' Paradise* novel where the display window of the famous department store is described as a vivid and colourful painting:

A display of silks, satins and velvets was blossoming out there, in a supple and shimmering range of the most delicate flower tones; at the summit were the velvets, of deepest black, and as white as curds and whey; lower down were the satins, pinks and blue with bright folds gradually fading into infinitely tender pallors; further down still were the silks, all the colours of the rainbow, pieces of silk rolled up into shells, folded as if round a drawn-in waist, brought to life by the knowing hands of the shop

²*Ibid.*, back cover.

³ Denys Riout, Daniel Grojnozski, *Les écrivains devant l'impressionnisme*, Macula Littérature, Paris, 1989, p. 155.

⁴<http://qqcitations.com/citation/206412>, viewed at 25.02.2015 (our translation – *je n'ai pas seulement soutenu les impressionnistes, je les ai traduits en littérature*).

⁵ Émile Zola, *His Masterpiece*, Project Gutenberg ebook, Editor and translator Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, 2012 (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15900/15900-h/15900-h.htm>).

assistants; and, between each motif, between each coloured phrase of the display, there ran a discreet accompaniment, a delicate gathered strand of cream-coloured foulard.⁶

In this fragment we can find a descriptive method which is specific to realist novels, in which the author gives one of its characters, in this case Denise, the liberty to observe objects or people around her. In this way, the description becomes subjective, but as with a painting a series of layouts can be identified, such as “at the summit”, “further down” or “between”. The multitude of clothing items, the large array of colours, tones and shades which are evident, create a sense of chaos and saturation. As with Impressionist paintings, the emphasis is on colour and not on shape.

In describing the clothing departments we can also find an abundance of colours, tints and tones: “It was a rising tide of neutral tints, heavy woollen tones, iron-greys, and blue-greys, with here and there a Scotch tartan, and a blood-red ground of flannel breaking out. And the white tickets on the pieces were like a shower of rare white flakes falling on a black December soil”.⁷ It is not only the sight of the reader, “iron-greys and blue-greys“, “blood-red ground”, “white flakes”, that is excited, but also his hearing, “breaking out”, “falling on [...] soil”.

The display window of *The Ladies' Paradise* department store makes us think about James Tissot's painting, *Demoiselle de Magasin* (Image no. 1), Tissot being a painter best known for portraying ladies' outfits from the second half of the Second French Empire in his works. This painting also describes a department store in which the sense of chaos is portrayed by the disorderly arranged fabrics on the store's counter. The beauty of the store and the variety of colours attracts the glances of the passersby. The natural light is emphasized with the help of the window's size and the widely opened door which are elements that offer the painting a certain openness. The shadow of the lady behind the door which is reflected on the floor also represents an impressionist trademark. Although the onlooker's attention is rather directed towards the saleswomen and not the content of the store, the lively tints and tones that are to be found in the painting seduce our sight. In contrast with Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise*, the perspective of Tissot's painting is different. While Zola describes the window display through Denise's eyes from an outer perspective, Tissot uses an inside perspective which diminishes to a certain degree the mystery behind the described image.

⁶Émile Zola, *The Ladies' Paradise*, A Project Gutenberg of Australia eBook, Translated by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, 2014, London (<http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks14/1400561h.html#ch-04>).

⁷ Idem.



Image no. 1 – *Demoiselle de Magasin* by James Tissot⁸

The surprising fact is that in the screen adaptation of Zola's novel, *The Paradise* television series (Image no. 2), the outfits worn by the saleswomen are almost identical patternwise with those of the sales women from Tissot's *Demoiselle de Magasin*.



Image no. 2 – *The Paradise* television series⁹

Impressionist influences are also to be found in the fashion outfits' descriptions of Zola's characters. Renée, one of the main characters of Zola's novel *The Kill*, always preoccupied by her looks and who causes a stir each time when going out in Paris, is a relevant such example, with her outfits being admired by all of Paris's upper class:

Above the tulle skirt, decorated at the back with a cascade of flounces, she wore a bodice of pale-green satin bordered with English lace, caught up and fastened with large bunches of violets, held together by garlands of ivy, fastened a light muslin drapery. Her head and bust appeared adorably gracious above these regal, richly elaborate petticoats. The dress was so low-cut that her nipples were almost visible, while her arms were bare and she had clusters of violets at her shoulders: she seemed

⁸<http://www.1001tableaux.net/peintres/11/james-tissot/la-demoiselle-de-magasin.html>, viewed at 28.04.2015

⁹<http://www.visiontv.ca/shows/paradise/>, viewed at 28.04.2015

to emerge quite naked from her sheath of tulle and satin, like one of those nymphs whose busts issue from sacred oaks.¹⁰

This extensive description of the outfit portrays a subtle seduction technique. While on the one hand the woman's body is hidden behind the dress's flounces embroidered lace, on the other one her nudity is suggested by her audacious low-cut which almost reveals her nipples and also by her bare arms. The feminine mystery is implied by the character's elegance as well as her over suggestive outfit, with Renée's eroticism being present throughout the entire novel.

In this context of eroticism within Zola's characters, we can also mention Nana from the eponymous novel, who also served as a model for Manet's painting bearing the same name (Image no. 3).



Image no. 3 – *Nana* by Manet¹¹

The painting is set on different levels. In the forefront we have Nana powdering her face while being admired by somebody. Her image in the mirror, as well as her shadow reflected on the floor bear testimony to natural light being present in the painting. Objects are smaller in the background in order to put emphasis on the main character and to create an ample perspective. The presence of light in the background is also evident through the clear sky painted on the wall which in turn offers the painting a certain openness. The way the painting is organized, more specifically the existence of different levels within it, remind us of Velasquez's *Les Ménines*, Baroque painting probably being a source of inspiration for the Impressionists. The colours are lively and carefully stressed in the painting. Nana's outfit and the furniture that decorates the room can also be found in the novel, which allows us to believe that Manet used Zola's novel as inspiration for his painting.

Conclusion

The descriptions presented beforehand in tight correlation with the Impressionist paintings are but a few relevant examples of the interference between Zola's work and the impressionist canvases. Apart from the strong relationship between painting and literature, 19th century writers believed in a universal art which would also incorporate music, besides

¹⁰Émile Zola, *The Kill*, Translated by Brian Nelson, Oxford University Press, Great Britain, 2004, p. 20.

¹¹<http://www.manetedouard.org/Nana--1877.html>, viewed at 28.04.2015

the two already mentioned, thus giving birth to an alliance between the three of them. Balzac encourages one of his friends from Berlin to read “what your dear Hoffmann, the Berliner, wrote about Gluck, Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, in order to understand what secret laws keep literature, music and painting together!”¹². If we also take a moment to reflect on the screen adaption of *The Ladies' Paradise*, we can include cinematography as well in this interaction of arts.

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¹²Balzac's letter to Schlesinger on the 29th May 1837, entirely reproduced by René Guise, in La Pléiade edition, CH,t. X : 1447-1451 (our translation –*Lisezce que votre cher Hoffmann le berlinois a écrit sur Gluck, Mozart, Haydn et Beethoven, et vous verrez par quelles lois secretes la littérature, la musique et la peinture se tiennent!*).