

PHENOMENOLOGY IN THE WORKS OF ROBBE-GRILLET

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis contends that a return to a phenomenological analysis of Alain Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction is a relevant and useful undertaking at the start of the twenty first century, providing the opportunity to reassess Robbe-Grillet's entire *œuvre*, both films and novels. It addresses the limitations of earlier phenomenological studies, analysing works not yet subjected to phenomenological analysis, and exploring important themes into which phenomenology can provide original insights, especially since the development of new phenomenological critical theories.

The structure of this thesis demonstrates the coherence of a phenomenological approach across the works of Robbe-Grillet. The introduction contextualises the contribution of the thesis, indicating oversights to be rectified in existing studies. The first chapter charts the development of phenomenology, highlighting areas of relevance to the insights outlined in the thesis. Chapter two demonstrates that both the phenomenological reduction, and Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies of challenging cultural expectations, result in a "making strange" of perceptual experience, with repercussions for the subversion of conventional fictional and filmic narratives. Subsequent chapters explore further consequences of the reduction, beginning in chapter three with the embodiment of consciousness, which impacts upon the presentation of narrative perspective in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction. The fourth chapter examines Robbe-Grillet's rendering of a lived experience of time, rather than an objective measurement of it, thus analysing another consequence of embodied existence, and of the "making strange" that results from undermining cultural expectations. Another mode of bodily existence, sexuality, was neglected in previous phenomenological studies, and is examined in the fifth chapter, in the light of feminist readings of phenomenology, making a new contribution in its reassessment of the debates around cultural stereotypes and subversion. Chapter six examines the complex relations surrounding intersubjectivity, another area not previously addressed, and elucidates the problematics of Robbe-Grilletian inter-human relationships.

The thesis concludes that earlier phenomenological studies have not fully worked through all of the implications of the phenomenological reduction in Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of cultural subversion, nor have they accounted fully for the interdependency of various modes of human embodiment (perception, situation in space and time, sexuality and intersubjectivity) as they are enacted in Robbe-Grillet's narratives.

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Introduction

The film and fiction of Alain Robbe-Grillet have been the subject of much academic scrutiny since the 1950s. He is undoubtedly a challenging writer and filmmaker, in terms of both the form and content of his works, and this is an important part of his attraction for academic enquiry. That is, the many varied approaches employed in the analysis of his literary and cinematic *œuvre* can, in part, be attributed to the difficulty initially experienced in making sense of his works. Given the abundance of books, articles and essays already devoted to Robbe-Grillet, in addition to his own copious comments in the form of essays, articles and interviews, the appearance of yet another study of his works may at first seem somewhat redundant. Yet, it is testimony to the quality of Robbe-Grillet's works and to the richness of his ideas that new studies are constantly being published on his artistic endeavours, suggesting that comment upon them has not yet been exhausted, and that he is still an important figure in French culture. Furthermore, Robbe-Grillet, a few months away from his eightieth birthday, has

celebrated his long career with the publication of another novel, as well as a screenplay.¹ Here, then, is scope for further comment on Robbe-Grillet, as these recent works mark a return to the two genres within which he has always worked, namely the novel and screenplay, following a period during which he had focused upon a semi-fictional form of autobiography. These works, at the time of writing, have yet to be subjected to much academic scrutiny, although an indication of the literary quality of *La Reprise* was its nomination for the *Prix Goncourt* in 2001. Robbe-Grillet remains, therefore, an important figure in the French culture of the twenty-first century.²

Robbe-Grillet came to prominence as a novelist as part of the *Nouveau Roman* in the 1950s, together with a group of writers published by the *Editions de Minuit*, including Claude Simon, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute and others. Although not a literary school, their works nevertheless displayed some common concerns, not least of which was a rejection of literary convention or realist mimesis in favour of an interest in experimentation with novelistic form. By the early sixties, Robbe-Grillet's career as a novelist had branched out into writing *ciné-romans*, a hybrid form that can function as screenplays, but can also be read as novels. In this respect, his career is comparable to that of Marguerite Duras, another *Minuit* novelist whose early forays into film also included writing a screenplay for the director Alain Resnais.³ Both Robbe-Grillet and Duras later became directors in their own right. Common to both was that the avant-garde style of their novels was reflected in their films, linking them with the *Nouveau*

¹ Namely, *La Reprise* and *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*. At a film retrospective at the *Cinéma Lux*, Caen, in June 2002, René Prédal (who at the time was preparing a book on Robbe-Grillet's films) revealed that the latter was unlikely ever to be made into a film, given the difficulty of securing funding for the project.

² The enduring influence of Robbe-Grillet upon French literature was attested to by a group of young French writers at a discussion evening in his honour at the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris in November 2001.

³ Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), and Alain Robbe-Grillet, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad* (Paris: Editions J'ai lu, copyright *Les Editions de Minuit*, 1961).

Cinéma of which Robbe-Grillet, Duras, Resnais and Jean-Luc Godard were part. The evolution of Robbe-Grillet's twin careers developed along broadly similar lines, although his films and novels are separately conceived projects.⁴ Initially, then, his earliest films and novels tended to follow the mental processes of one or more characters, presenting their perceptions in such a way as to focus upon objects, filtered through a disturbed or obsessed mind. This phase was displaced by the *Nouveau Nouveau Roman* period of his work, which represented a change in terms of its consciously self-reflexive play of forms, often generated by a set of recurrent themes or motifs borrowed from popular culture. This was reflected in his cinema of the same era, with *L'Eden et après*, for example, structured according to a list of themes repeated across the film. The idea of generating and constructing texts was taken further in Robbe-Grillet's collaborations with photographers and artists, wherein the impulse for the texts written by Robbe-Grillet were paintings and photographs, published alongside the texts. Parts of the resultant texts were then pieced together to form novels, published in their own right without the images.⁵ Following this, Robbe-Grillet's work took a different turn in the 1980s with the move towards auto-fiction, a semi-fictional form of autobiography. His autobiography was in three parts, collectively titled *Romanesques*, to suggest their novel-like form. In the 1980s and 1990s, he made only two films, *La Belle Captive* and *Un Bruit qui rend fou*. These films still bore the marks of the self-reflexive devices of his films of the late 1960s and 1970s, and contained many inter-textual and inter-filmic references to his novels and previous films. Following his series of auto-fictions, Robbe-Grillet has

⁴ For example, he would not consider making one of his novels into a film.

⁵ *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*. For details of the composition of these novels, see Bruce Morrissette's *Intertextual Assemblage in Robbe-Grillet from Topology to the Golden Triangle* (Fredericton, Canada: York Press, 1979).

returned to the novel and *ciné-roman* in the twenty first century, with the publication of a novel and a screenplay. Like the two previous decades' films, these works demonstrate a continuing obsession with the themes that have always haunted his works, for example, alienation, eroticism, the labyrinth, and continue to display an interest in self-reflexivity and the subversion of readerly expectation.

It is the aim of this thesis to show that there is still great profit to be gained from an approach that has, for some considerable time, been all but abandoned. A phenomenological approach has the advantage of elucidating many important areas of Robbe-Grillet's work, from a unified theoretical standpoint. The topics it encompasses include his formal strategies of questioning received ideas surrounding literature and cinema, and thereby open up the debate around cultural myth and stereotype, and the extent to which Robbe-Grillet is successful in achieving the subversion he aims for. Phenomenology also addresses the way in which Robbe-Grillet renders, in filmic or fictional terms, the embodiment of consciousness, the relation of consciousness to the objects of perception, and the way in which the embodied nature of consciousness affects the human experience of time, sexuality, and intersubjectivity. The phenomenological analyses to which Robbe-Grillet's novels were subjected in the earlier part of his career⁶ can now be updated to incorporate a renewed critical interest in phenomenology as an approach to film⁷ as well as to literature. This means that it is possible, for the first time, to analyse Robbe-Grillet's films and novels, together, from a phenomenological

⁶ Book-length studies were produced by Victor Carrabino, *The Phenomenological Novel of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Parma: C.E.M., 1974), and Olga Bernal, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: le roman de l'absence* (Paris: NRF Gallimard, 1964).

⁷ See, for example, Allan Casebier, *Film and Phenomenology* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991) and Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1992).

standpoint, and from a standpoint of the debates surrounding phenomenology at the start of the twenty first century. Equally, this renewed phenomenological study of Robbe-Grillet's works allows for those novels written after the earlier phenomenological analyses to be subjected to phenomenological analysis for the first time. Furthermore, the present study will be one of the first to examine Robbe-Grillet's most recent works, *La Reprise* and *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*, in the context of his previous output.

This thesis seeks to address the limitations of earlier phenomenological studies devoted to Robbe-Grillet, on several fronts. Firstly, earlier phenomenological studies omit to mention his films, as a consequence of which no phenomenological analysis of his films currently exists. Secondly, Merleau-Ponty's later work, which offers a different perspective on the nature of intersubjectivity to that offered in his earlier work, is not covered by these studies.⁸ Thirdly, they omit to mention the relationship between bodily existence and sexuality, a striking omission given that so much of Robbe-Grillet's work deals with sexuality and eroticism. This oversight is all the more surprising considering that, for Merleau-Ponty, perception and sexuality were always linked, and that bodily existence was necessarily sexual existence.

The point of re-visiting phenomenological readings of Robbe-Grillet is to demonstrate that, following the decline of an interest in phenomenology, and since the influence of the structuralist readings of his works that began to dominate in the 1970s, the phenomenological approach has been unjustly sidelined. In the 1970s, Renato Barilli recognised that phenomenology might still be applicable to the *Nouveau Nouveau*

⁸ In the case of Olga Bernal's phenomenological study of Robbe-Grillet, this is unsurprising since her book was published in the same year as Merleau-Ponty's *Le Visible et l'invisible*.

Roman, in spite of Robbe-Grillet's increasing interest in a structure engendered by generative themes:

Si, d'un côté, il ne faut pas interpréter Robbe-Grillet en entier avec des modèles qui sont de nos jours, s'il faut penser qu'il y a eu un Robbe-Grillet lié au modèle phénoménologique et que celui-ci est un instrument toujours utilisable, il n'en reste pas moins qu'il est possible d'appliquer, rétrospectivement, les modèles d'aujourd'hui au premier Robbe-Grillet, et inversement, qu'une partie des modèles phénoménologiques sont encore quelque peu rentables pour les nouveaux développements.⁹

This thesis would go further than Barilli in claiming that the phenomenological approach, as it was left in the mid 1970s, left some unfinished business, and that it is indeed a very profitable means of understanding Robbe-Grillet, given the developments that have been made in phenomenological critical theory since then. Furthermore, this thesis would contend, whilst acknowledging that Robbe-Grillet structures his works according to generative themes and ludic self-references, that his art retains its embodied narrative structures. The objects upon which Robbe-Grillet's works focus still reveal an embodied consciousness, as Lise Frenkel remarked in a reply to Barilli's comments. She suggested that, even in a film such as *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, which is structured around the generating elements of the shoe and the bottle, "il y a rapport symbolique ou fétichiste entre l'objet et le sujet. L'objet parle du sujet, et, donc, c'est une émanation du sujet".¹⁰ This view is supported by a remark made by Robbe-Grillet in the same discussion: "C'est vrai que (...) j'ai tenu à préciser que le matériau qui servirait à l'établissement des séries était obligatoirement pour moi un signifié, c'est-à-dire, comme l'a fait remarquer

⁹ Renato Barilli, discussion of his paper 'Neutralisation et Différence', in Jean Ricardou, ed., *Colloque de Cerisy Robbe-Grillet* vol. 1 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976), p.437.

¹⁰ Lise Frenkel, quoted in discussion on Barilli, in Jean Ricardou, ed., *Colloque de Cerisy Robbe-Grillet* vol. 1, p.428.

Barilli, un objet intentionnel.”¹¹ His films and novels continue to centre upon one or more characters through whose embodied consciousness objects in the world are mediated, and, as in his early narratives, no privileged omniscient perspective is allowed, the bodies of the protagonists form the centrepieces for his narratives. These bodies, furthermore, remain phenomenological ones, they are always already in the world, a world of cultural significance that they cannot shake off. Thus, Robbe-Grillet’s narratives continue to render bodily perception and situation, time, sexuality and intersubjectivity in the same way that they did during his early career, from an embodied perspective whose mediation of the world is always via the culture of which, as phenomenology teaches us, it is already a part. Therefore, this thesis seeks to offer an enriched understanding of his filmic and fictional narratives via a revised evaluation and understanding of his formal strategies.

In reviewing the wealth of commentaries on Robbe-Grillet, the sheer range of critical approaches is remarkable. An early indication of this was Roland Barthes’ comment in his preface to Bruce Morrissette’s *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*.¹² In this discussion, Barthes identifies two Robbe-Grilletes, the *chosiste* and the subjective. As studies of his works proliferated, more and more Robbe-Grilletes surfaced; so many in fact, that one might be tempted to argue that it is possible to identify almost as many Robbe-Grilletes as there are studies of his works. In spite of the overwhelming volume of works devoted to Robbe-Grillet, it is nevertheless possible here to identify the major contributions to scholarly understanding of Robbe-Grillet, contributions which have been

¹¹ Robbe-Grillet, quoted in discussion on Barilli, in Jean Ricardou, ed., *Colloque de Cerisy Robbe-Grillet* vol. 1 p.410.

influential in driving forward the debates surrounding his works. As a means of contextualising the usefulness of this thesis, it is necessary to evaluate the commentaries provided by previous studies devoted to Robbe-Grillet. The following survey will provide an account of the development of reaction to his works that is both representative of the field and that foregrounds those figures whose contributions may be considered as being of most importance.

Pour Un Nouveau Roman

Before turning to evaluate the contributions made by those previous studies, it is first important to consider the claims Robbe-Grillet makes about his own works. It is fortunate for scholars of Robbe-Grillet that he has shown a constant willingness to give of his time and his opinions in numerous media interviews, colloquia and other public meetings. As well as these public appearances, he has taken up his pen to write about his aims as a novelist and filmmaker, and he justifies and comments at length on his choice of methods and subject matter. One of the best examples of this is the collection of articles he wrote that were gathered together and published under the title *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*.¹³ In this collection, Robbe-Grillet set out his vision of the novel, in what came to be seen as a manifesto for the group of writers who took their name from this work, the writers of the *nouveau roman*. *Pour Un Nouveau Roman* expounds an eschewal of past conventions of literature, particularly those of the nineteenth century realist novel, as exemplified by Balzac. For Robbe-Grillet, realism is constructed from a series of commonly accepted means of representing reality. Anthropomorphic metaphor,

¹² Bruce Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1963).

for example, is common in this literary genre. An empty chair might be a symbol of an absent person in the Balzacian novel, whereas for Robbe-Grillet, it is merely an object. It is neither significant nor absurd, it simply is. Robbe-Grillet surely makes a justifiable point here; it would appear that, in realism, the extent to which a literary description of an object is considered realistic depends upon the extent to which it fits into codified, expected conventions:

Déjà l'observateur le moins conditionné ne parvient pas à voir le monde qui l'entoure avec des yeux libres. (...) A chaque instant, des franges de culture (psychologie, morale, métaphysique, etc.) viennent s'ajouter aux choses, leur donnant un aspect moins étranger, plus compréhensible, plus rassurant. (...) Nous sommes habitués à ce que cette littérature (...) fonctionne comme une grille, munie de verres diversement colorés, qui décompose notre champ de perception en petits carreaux assimilables.¹⁴

Robbe-Grillet claims that such literary techniques are outdated, and proposes to rid objects in literature of, for example, deceitful metaphoric devices, in favour of descriptions of objects as simple objects. Vision has a kind of cleansing power for Robbe-Grillet, it removes the apparent psychological depth which surrounds objects in the realist novel and instead allows their surfaces to be described, so that objects as they really are may be laid bare. Hence, it is the object itself, not the culturally loaded or metaphoric meaning it has acquired, that is to be foregrounded in the *Nouveau Roman*.

Robbe-Grillet's *Nouveau Roman* project is set in the context of the changing face of literature since Balzac. One might summarise his position by saying that it is as though the reader of the *Nouveau Roman*, after having read realist literature, is suffering from a hangover, the intoxicating effects of which mean that he or she is unable to adjust

¹³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour Un Nouveau Roman* (Paris: Gallimard, [n.d.], 1st published by Les Editions de Minuit, 1963).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.20-21.

to the subsequent developments in literature. What is surprising about this, for Robbe-Grillet, is that the novel has been undergoing a process of evolution ever since the nineteenth century, and that the *Nouveau Roman* is only a continuation of that process:

Et, depuis [Balzac et Stendhal], l'évolution n'a cessé de s'accentuer: Flaubert, Dostoïevsky, Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett... Loin de faire table rase du passé, c'est sur les noms de nos prédécesseurs que nous nous sommes le plus aisément mis d'accord; et notre ambition est seulement de les continuer. Non pas de faire mieux, ce qui n'a aucun sens, mais de nous placer à leur suite, maintenant, à notre heure.¹⁵

Robbe-Grillet identifies certain features of the novel that are considered necessary in "good quality" realist literature, features that are deemed to give the novel its depth and reality. These include, for example, characterisation whereby a character has a first name and a surname, a family background, a character which dictates the manner in which he or she will behave, and facial features that reflect this character. As Robbe-Grillet points out, even before the time when he began writing, Camus and Sartre already had included characters in *L'Étranger* and *La Nausée* who did not conform to these expectations. Thus, conventional notions of characterisation, handed down from nineteenth century realism, had already been outdated for some years, as is evidenced by Robbe-Grillet's listing of writers since realism in the quotation above. In Robbe-Grillet's *Nouveau Roman* therefore, characters often have no name, or if they do, it is reduced to the most basic form of reference, as with the simple initial designating A... in *La Jalousie*, for example. A similar process of naming characters is to be found in the *ciné-roman* *L'Immortelle*; the principal character or *narrateur*, N, is named by an initial for the reader of the *ciné-roman*. The attentive viewer may, however, notice that L very briefly remarks that he has a Greek name, André. Similarly, in other *nouveaux romanciers'*

works, such as Butor's *La Modification*, the protagonist (and, by implication the reader?) is referred to as *vous*, his name is scarcely ever revealed to the reader.

In a similar vein, the idea that a novel must tell "a story", and that it must be told in a smooth, continuous manner, without the interruptions, gaps, or other unexplained episodes that are characteristic of the New Novel is another outmoded feature of realist literature, claims Robbe-Grillet; such features would be considered "faults", according to realist conventions. Robbe-Grillet also outlines other features he considered important to the *Nouveau Roman*, including its lack of political engagement, for example, stemming, for him, from the need for writers to be engaged with the possibility of an artistic, rather than a political revolution.

In a further reaction against realist literature, Robbe-Grillet suggests in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman* that, just as a rejection of realism signals an end to anthropomorphism and metaphor, so it entails a rejection of omniscient narration. That is, in realist literature, the narrative perspective is frequently that of an all-knowing, God-like narrator, one who has knowledge of the actions and thoughts of all the characters. This, to Robbe-Grillet, bears no resemblance to reality; nobody (with the possible exception of a god) has access to all events and thoughts at the same time:

Qui décrit le monde dans les romans de Balzac? Quel est ce narrateur omniscient, omniprésent, qui se place partout en même temps, qui voit en même temps l'endroit et l'envers des choses, qui suit en même temps les mouvements du visage et ceux de la conscience, qui connaît à la fois le présent, le passé, et l'avenir de toute aventure? Ça ne peut être qu'un Dieu.

C'est Dieu seul qui peut prétendre être objectif. Tandis que dans nos livres, au contraire, c'est un homme qui voit, qui sent, qui imagine, un homme situé dans l'espace et le temps, conditionné par ses passions, un homme comme vous et moi. Et le livre ne rapporte rien d'autre que son

¹⁵ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.146.

expérience, limitée, incertaine. C'est un homme d'ici, un homme de maintenant, qui est son propre narrateur, enfin.¹⁶

It is this reaction against an omniscient narration that leads the *Nouveau Roman* to describe events from a human perspective, one which, by definition, cannot have access to all events at once, which can only narrate what is experienced at any one time. This is what leads Robbe-Grillet to claim that: "le nouveau roman ne s'intéresse qu'à l'homme et à sa situation dans le monde"¹⁷ and that "le nouveau roman ne vise qu'à une subjectivité totale."¹⁸ Robbe-Grillet, then, is making two important claims about his literature and that of his *Nouveau Roman* colleagues: firstly that objects are described just as objects, and secondly that they are described from a human perspective. The importance of these two points is reflected by early critical responses to Robbe-Grillet's works, especially the reactions of Roland Barthes and Bruce Morrissette. The key to the difference between the positions of Barthes and Morrissette in terms of their analyses of Robbe-Grillet is that whereas Barthes sees the description of objects as having no further significance, for Morrissette, they hint at a human mind which is perceiving these objects, often because they have some kind of significance for the state of mind of the perceiver. This is summed up by Robbe-Grillet when he comments:

Même si l'on trouve beaucoup d'objets, et décrit avec minutie, il y a toujours et d'abord le regard qui les voit, la pensée qui les revoit, la passion qui les déforme.¹⁹

In order to examine this further, it is apt at this point turn to consider how critics have variously responded to Robbe-Grillet's works.

¹⁶ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.147.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.148.

Barthes and *chosisme*

There is a similarity between what Robbe-Grillet claims for his New Novel in terms of describing objects just as objects and the interpretation of his works proposed by Roland Barthes, one of the first commentators to have devoted serious study to Robbe-Grillet's novels. The approach suggested by Barthes is variously known as the *chosiste* or *école du regard* interpretation of Robbe-Grillet's work; that is, things themselves are of importance, descriptions are favoured over explanations, the world is rendered in terms which give it no meaning beyond the bare fact of its existence.²⁰ Barthes outlines his reading of Robbe-Grillet in 'Littérature Objective' and 'Littérature Littérale'.²¹ Robbe-Grillet's literature could be considered objective, for Barthes, in that it was concerned with the description of objects in a way that was not culturally loaded:

L'écriture de Robbe-Grillet est sans alibi, sans épaisseur et sans profondeur: elle reste à la surface de l'objet et la parcourt également, sans privilégier telle ou telle de ses qualités (...) le langage (...) est chargé de "peindre" l'objet (...) l'objet de Robbe-Grillet n'est pas composé en profondeur; il ne protège pas un cœur sous sa surface (et le rôle traditionnel du littéraire a été jusqu'ici de voir, derrière la surface, le secret des objets); non, ici, l'objet n'existe pas au delà de son phénomène.²²

It is striking that Robbe-Grillet and Barthes both identify the same feature in Robbe-Grillet's works, namely the *surface* of objects, as being of importance: "la *surface* des

¹⁹ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.147.

²⁰ Not all reactions to Robbe-Grillet the *chosiste* were favourable, see for example Pierre de Boisdeffre, *La Cafetière est sur la table ou contre le nouveau roman* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1967).

²¹ Both these and other articles analysing Robbe-Grillet's works are reproduced in Barthes' *Œuvres Complètes* 3 Tomes (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993). 'Littérature Objective' is also reproduced in François Jost ed., *Obliques/Robbe-Grillet*, 16 – 17 (Nyons: Editions Borderie, 1978), pp.69-73.

²² Roland Barthes, 'Littérature Objective' in François Jost ed., *Obliques/Robbe-Grillet*, p.69.

choses a cessé d'être pour nous le masque de leur cœur".²³ Barthes' observations are certainly consistent with what Robbe-Grillet states as his aims of overthrowing the conventions of realism in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*. However, this thesis will argue that such a subversion of literary conventions can also be explained by the process of phenomenological reduction, which turns attention to objects as they appear in perception. The advantage of this approach over Barthes' *chosisme* is that it allows for an examination of many other thematic aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works, and demonstrates that these objects are never entirely stripped of their cultural significance; the fact that they have been foregrounded in the Robbe-Grillet's narratives is because they do have a meaning for the consciousness that perceives them.

Barthes' other main essay on Robbe-Grillet, entitled 'Littérature littérale', concerns the use of objects in the production of the story, with particular reference to *Le Voyeur*; they are 'literal' objects, since, without them, the crime does not exist:

Il est remarquable que nous ne connaissons du crime ni des mobiles, ni des états, ni même des actes; (...) Les données de l'histoire (...) sont réduites à quelques objets surgis peu à peu de l'espace et du temps sans aucune contiguïté causale avec.²⁴

However, in spite of the influence this approach had during the early part of his career, critics began to realise that to claim that Robbe-Grillet's work deals uniquely with *chosiste* descriptions does not do justice to all aspects of his work. As mentioned above, Robbe-Grillet outlines another possible approach in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, when he claims that *nouveaux romans* are always narrated from a human point of view, and this

²³ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.27, original emphasis.

²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Œuvres Complètes*, p.1213.

influenced the subsequent phase of critical comment on his works, the psychological interpretation.

Morrisette and psychological interpretations

Opposed to Barthes' *chosiste* interpretation is the claim that Robbe-Grillet's novels are deeply psychological. A psychological account of his work would assert that, in many cases, a disturbed or traumatised mind is at work in the narrative, that the workings of the narrator's mind can be deduced by the reader, via a series of narrative devices. Therefore, placing emphasis solely on the neutral description of objects no longer reveals the whole picture, in this interpretation. This is the position argued by Bruce Morrisette, whose work *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* has become an essential reference point for subsequent studies on Robbe-Grillet. Morrisette aims at a recuperation of the "stories" told by Robbe-Grillet's novels; he explains them by a close examination of the plot of each novel, and by revealing the novels' implied psychology. Barthes' introduction to Morrisette's study was noteworthy for its condemnation of Morrisette's reading of Robbe-Grillet; indeed, as Morrisette himself admits, Barthes' remarks included;

expressions of regret at seeing the old "non-significant" Robbe-Grillet of the "mat surfaces" threatened with replacement by a Robbe-Grillet who creates levels of meaning, employs things or objects not in neutral isolation or detachment but in a referential manner – as objective correlatives or supports of human emotions: in a word, by a Robbe-Grillet who, for all the newness of his techniques, composes *novels*.²⁵

²⁵ Bruce Morrisette, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), pp.8-9, original emphasis.

Morrisette devotes a great deal of effort to explaining exactly what he means by “objective correlatives” in *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*. Whereas a *chosiste* interpretation of Robbe-Grillet’s novels would have it that the surface of objects revealed nothing more of significance, the psychological implications of Morrisette’s reading meant that they were deeply significant. Thus, the obsessive attention paid to objects by the characters in Robbe-Grillet’s novels is indicative of a psychological state wherein a character’s consciousness, disoriented by some shock or trauma, fixes upon certain objects. These objects, for the reader, become associated with the character’s state of mind. The millipede in *La Jalousie*, for example, becomes associated, for the reader, with adultery, since it is the thing upon which the (absent-present) narrating consciousness of that novel focuses; during moments when it feels jealous.

It is important to outline in what way Morrisette considers these “objective correlatives” are to be differentiated from conventional literary devices such as metaphors or symbols. Unlike the conventional symbol, the association of objects and emotions in Robbe-Grillet’s works does not rely on analogies of form and function, there is no perpetuation of an already existing literary device. That is, Robbe-Grillet allows no anthropomorphic metaphors in his fiction; there is a correlation between a state of mind and the object of consciousness, but again, the object never stands for that state of mind in the way that a pre-established symbol does in, for example, realist literature. Morrisette, whilst acknowledging that some critics do not agree that Robbe-Grilletian things are not artificially created symbols, nevertheless argues that, in his view, they are different from analogies, because:

Pour Robbe-Grillet, si l’objet peut “supporter” une passion, une obsession, ou toute autre charge affective, c’est pour la simple raison que l’homme ne

aurait exister que par la perception des objets. L'ontologie néo-existentielle de Robbe-Grillet, répétons-le, place l'homme au milieu d'objets qui, devenant les supports de ses pensées-images et de ses sentiments-images lui permettent d'exister, et sans lesquels il cesserait d'exister, car il n'y aurait plus alors dans son esprit que le néant absolu.²⁶

In saying this, Morrissette is effectively appealing to an existential-phenomenological account of human consciousness to back up his arguments. He refers several times in *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet* to phenomenology, to demonstrate that the objects described in Robbe-Grillet's works are perceived from a human perspective. So, in spite of the supposed "implied psychology" that he reads into Robbe-Grillet's novels, there is also a reliance upon another theoretical framework, that of phenomenological philosophy.

Morrissette also examines other important aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works; he concentrates on, for example, the question of narrative perspective in *Le Voyeur*, elucidating the way in which, although narrated in the third person, the reader is nevertheless able to grasp Mathias' mental states, to appreciate the tension he feels. An understanding of what is happening in the mind of Mathias can also help to explain the way in which scenes in the novel are joined together in what may at first appear a rather disjointed manner:

Rien de plus cohérent dans *Le Voyeur* que le rapport constant entre la psychologie implicite de Mathias et l'enchaînement des scènes: retours en arrière, visions projetées dans le futur, déformations de la réalité, scènes figées (...) tout s'explique en fonction de son complexe, où se mêlent l'érotisme, la terreur de l'échec, la volonté désespérée de passer pour un homme normal. Tout est en fonction d'une schizophrénie sadique (...)²⁷

Thus, the question of the non-chronological presentation of events is also understandable in psychological terms, for Morrissette.

²⁶ Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p.68.

It is notable that, as with his explanation of Robbe-Grillet's use of "objective correlatives", Morrissette's reading of *La Jalousie* also leans upon phenomenological philosophy. In a book that deals ostensibly with the psychology (or implied psychology) of Robbe-Grillet's novel, this is rather unexpected. He identifies a "je-néant" at the heart of the novel, a centre (or lack thereof?) from which the narration emanates; a human consciousness that is conscious of the objects in its environment. Morrissette claims that the justification for Robbe-Grillet's technique of *objets-supports* or *corrélatifs-extérieurs* is reinforced by what he perceives to be its psychological verisimilitude.²⁸ That his argument should be reinforced by phenomenology rather than couched purely in psychological theory appears to be at odds with his aim of elucidating a psychological account of Robbe-Grillet's novels. However, Morrissette does not acknowledge that of his use of phenomenology at times rivals what he claims is a psychological approach. It does, however, indicate that Morrissette sees compelling reasons to claim that there are, at the very least, parallels between existential phenomenology and Robbe-Grillet's works, if not a demonstrable phenomenological underpinning.

Morrissette does, however, follow his professed interest in reading Robbe-Grillet along psychological lines when examining *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. Although *Marienbad* might not apparently be an obvious choice for a book on Robbe-Grillet's novels, it nevertheless exists in the form of a *ciné-roman*, a work which reads not so much as a novel, as a description of the film, and is therefore different from a straightforward screenplay. Morrissette points to the fact that Robbe-Grillet has himself

²⁷ Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, p.106.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.112, see footnote.

claimed that the cinematic image expresses a kind of “réalité mentale”,²⁹ and this provides the impetus for Morrissette’s psychoanalytical reading of the film. Following from Robbe-Grillet’s suggestion that the film depicts the story of a persuasion, Morrissette argues that the house in which the characters find themselves might be seen as a clinic, where A is receiving treatment from X, her psychiatrist. Given this interpretation of the film, her past has been suppressed, and other psychoanalytic details are present in the form of the Freudian corridors, the narcissistic bedrooms and the gunshots as signs of impotence.³⁰ This, then, is a more straightforwardly psychological reading of Robbe-Grillet.

It should be mentioned at this point that another commentator on Robbe-Grillet’s novels has applied the possibility of a psychological reading very strictly and literally to his work. Rosanne Weil-Malherbe’s brief study³¹ is a psychological account of Robbe-Grillet’s fiction that, whilst acknowledging the influence of Morrissette, goes beyond Morrissette’s psychology by its close adhesion to clinical psychology. Her examination of *Le Voyeur* is a thoroughgoing account of what she sees as the clinical condition from which Mathias is suffering. She painstakingly elucidates the symptoms that a patient suffering from a particular form of epilepsy might be expected to display, and demonstrates that Mathias’ behaviour in *Le Voyeur* is entirely consistent with such symptoms. Consequently, the conclusions she draws are somewhat different to those of Morrissette. Whilst, for Morrissette, Mathias is a sadistic schizophrenic, for Weil-Malherbe, he suffers from psychomotor epilepsy. Morrissette’s “diagnosis” would make

²⁹ Morrissette, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, see Morrissette’s summary of Robbe-Grillet’s ideas on cinema, p.192.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, see pp.198–199.

Mathias a rare case, Weil-Malherbe argues, and his position does not fully take account of Mathias' behaviour, which swings from searching desperately to find out what happened, and behaving awkwardly, to then behaving rationally. Although it is true, she argues, that if Mathias were a schizophrenic, then he might suffer from confused states of mind, it would not be the case that he would seek to retrace his movements, since he would be indifferent to the consequences of his actions.

Although acknowledging the valuable contribution, and the influence on critical understanding of Robbe-Grillet offered by these psychological readings, this thesis contends that a phenomenological approach offers a more comprehensive overview. This is because it can account for the mental processes of characters in the films and novels, but in a different way from the psychological readings offered by Morrissette and Weil-Malherbe; that is, it can account for Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies of making strange, in addition offering new ways of understanding the rendering of perception, time, intersubjectivity and sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction.

The generation game

During the 1970s, a new approach to Robbe-Grillet's works began to emerge. The notion that Robbe-Grillet's works were structured around a system of repeated words, images, etc., had already been suggested by Gérard Genette,³² but his ideas were taken further by another figure who came to be strongly associated with this approach – the *Nouveau Roman* author and theorist, Jean Ricardou. Ricardou's theories on Robbe-Grillet advanced the idea that his novels were driven by linguistic generators, by a kind of

³¹ Rosanne Weil-Malherbe, 'Le Voyeur de Robbe-Grillet: un cas d'épilepsie du type psychomoteur', *French Review*, 38, 1, (October 1964), 469-476.

word play. For example, in *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman*, Ricardou makes a detailed analysis of the use and re-use of the word *rouge* in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*.³³ He identifies a great many linguistic transformations throughout the novel such as anagrams or near-anagrams, homophones, etc. His interest here in such linguistic elements is strongly reminiscent of Saussurean theories of linguistics, wherein signifiers are differentiated from one another on a basic level via graphological differences.³⁴ Thus, for Ricardou, the play of signifiers in Robbe-Grillet's works was emphasised over that which they signified. However, Ricardou's relationship with the *Nouveau Roman* was not always a happy one; Robbe-Grillet questioned Ricardou's analysis of *Projet pour une révolution à New York* at the *Colloque de Cerisy*. In his *communication* 'Sur le choix des générateurs',³⁵ Robbe-Grillet expressed his unease with Ricardou's analysis on two levels. Firstly, it is Robbe-Grillet's belief that to link words in this way is not concordant with any conscious production of meaning; i.e. it is too random a process. Robbe-Grillet claimed to prefer a conscious production of meaning, leading to his second point, that the *meanings* of the words, and the *themes* linking them were important to him, rather than the playful re-combinations of sounds and spellings suggested by Ricardou. Robbe-Grillet claimed to take elements of the society around him and to use them in a new way, so that, rather than to use Ricardou's example of the word "rouge", Robbe-Grillet would instead take the "couleur rouge" as a theme that helps to structure the novel. Robbe-Grillet suggests that the spilling of blood, the glow of fire, the red flag of revolution are

³² Gérard Genette, 'Vertige Fixé' in François Jost ed. *Obliques/Robbe-Grillet*, pp.95-106.

³³ Jean Ricardou, *Pour une théorie du nouveau roman* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), pp.223-224.

³⁴ See Jean Duffy, *Structuralism: Theory and Practice* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German publications, 1992), p.2.

³⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Sur le choix des générateurs', in Jean Ricardou and Françoise van Rossum-Guyon eds. *Nouveau Roman: hier, aujourd'hui* 2 2 vols. (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1972), pp.157-162.

all thematic variants that compose *Projet pour une révolution à New York*. It is this process of generating the text that allows Robbe-Grillet to play with the myths that surround him.

The idea of combining thematic elements of the culture that surrounds him was a structural method that preoccupied Robbe-Grillet a great deal throughout his career. It was a technique that came to be known as *bricolage*, a term which, as Roch Smith³⁶ notes, was used by Claude Lévi-Strauss to describe a process of using whatever materials came to hand, wherein the resultant structure, rather than the composite materials themselves, was of importance. Robbe-Grillet uses this technique in a very systematic way in the planning of his film *L'Eden et après*. The issue of *Obliques* devoted to his work reproduces a hand-written table in which twelve themes are combined and re-combined across five columns in order to plan out the film.³⁷ Roy Armes complains, in his structuralist analysis of Robbe-Grillet's films, that the claims Robbe-Grillet makes for the structure of *L'Eden et après* are not easily identifiable when one attempts to analyse the film:

The lack of marking of the set of themes denies one the aesthetic satisfaction of perceiving a fixed pattern underlying their subsequent returns and shifts. Without such a marking we cannot sense, at a viewing of the film, the order and necessity of its structure or answer so fundamental a question as why these particular ten series have been chosen out of the almost infinite range of possibilities.³⁸

Whilst Armes' criticism is quite valid, it comes as no surprise that the serial structure is difficult to identify, even on close analysis. Schönberg's serialism, upon which Robbe-

³⁶ Roch C. Smith, *Understanding Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), see footnote 2, p.102.

³⁷ François Jost ed., *Obliques/Robbe-Grillet*, p.197.

³⁸ Roy Armes, *The Films of Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Amsterdam: Benjamins B.V., 1981), p.134.

Grillet's structural system is loosely based, is also virtually impossible to detect in his music, even to a trained ear. Serial music, which may be based upon a note row of, for example, twelve notes, requires that the notes be repeated in the same order in each series, but their pitch, duration and timbre may be varied with each repetition. This means that each series may sound radically different from the last. For example, a middle C played on a trumpet for four beats in one series could be changed into a top C played on a piano for one beat in the next, and so on for the other notes of the series. Robbe-Grillet's serialism is even more freely applied in *L'Eden et après*, as he does not impose the restriction of using each of the themes (equivalent to musical notes) in the same order in each series, further compounding the difficulty of detecting a pattern running through the film. However, the point of serialism is not that the structure should be noticeable, rather, it is merely a means of organising or structuring music. As to why Robbe-Grillet has chosen these particular themes, Armes does not postulate a theory. However, they are themes with which he seems to be constantly preoccupied, and which appear repeatedly throughout his novels and films, particularly those of the 1970s.

Armes' study of Robbe-Grillet's cinema is one of a number of structuralist studies of his works that focus upon an analysis of the formal and structural elements of his films.³⁹ Patterns are identified across a given work, establishing links between individual words, visual images or audible elements. These elements are often repeated, re-combined, slightly altered each time they appear, or set in opposition to one another, and they give the work its structure and impetus. Often, for example, Robbe-Grillet sets up pairs of doubles in his works; characters have a look-alike, or a counterpart as is the case

with Violette and her *sosie*, or the artist Duchemin/Dutchman in *L'Eden et après*. Also, characters may return to a place they have visited before, as with Mathias in *Le Voyeur* or Elias in *Trans-Europ Express*. Armes notes that events may occur in such a way that they could be plotted on a graph as forming a V or a U shape. In other words, at the middle of a film one will find a pivotal event, from which one can trace a symmetry of events in the first and second halves of the film; in this way, a film might begin and end with an event that happens in reverse. In *L'Homme qui ment*, for example, Boris emerges from the woods at the start of the film only to disappear back into them at the end. The structure of Robbe-Grillet's films, in other words, often doubles back on itself. Structuralist analyses of Robbe-Grillet's films and novels, then, are concerned with the non-mimetic interplay of literary and cinematic language. Identifying connections such as these across a work enables the critic to lay bare the structural devices employed within it, and can raise an awareness of the way in which the formal aspects of a given work combine to construct its meaning.

However, structuralist analyses, in spite of the dominance that they have enjoyed since the 1970s, do not account for everything that occurs in Robbe-Grillet's narratives, and this is where the value of returning to phenomenology is to be found. Although structuralist studies are an apt means of revealing the generative play that so keenly interested Robbe-Grillet, they overlook the fact that his narratives remain rooted in embodied perspectives, and they ignore the cultural significance of the generating elements themselves. Ben Stoltzfus has recognised this, in his attempt to find a middle way between mimetic and reflexive interpretations of Robbe-Grillet's work. He

³⁹ See also Dominique Château and François Jost, *Nouveau Cinéma, nouvelle sémiologie* (Paris: 10/18 Union Générale d'Éditions, 1978), André Gardies, *Le Cinéma de Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Editions Albatros,

comments that although the serial patterns that structure some of Robbe-Grillet's novels signify nothing but themselves,

the novels do signify; they are not pure reflexive surfaces. Each novel transcends the autonomy of its parts, the adventure of writing, its own internal patterning.⁴⁰

Although Stoltzfus concludes from his observation that generative play creates something out of nothing, the contention in this thesis is that generative play is not the only reason for the creation he identifies. That is, it is equally the case that, in spite of the waning of critical interest in phenomenology, it continues to be relevant to reading and viewing Robbe-Grillet's art. This manifests itself in the fact that his work continues to signify in ways that can be traced back to his early career and to the first phenomenological readings of his works in terms of cultural embodiment. The importance of phenomenology as a critical approach has not been exhausted, even though it was overtaken by structuralism and consequently neglected as an analytical tool.

Politics

In spite of Robbe-Grillet's professed non-committed political stance in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, his works have nevertheless been subjected to scrutiny from a sociological or political standpoint. Lucien Goldmann's sociological study of the novel⁴¹ was the first of these, and concerns itself with establishing a link between the form of the novel and the state of society, in particular capitalist society. Goldmann argued that capitalist society, at the time Robbe-Grillet was writing, was characterised by a decrease

1983), and André Gardies, *Alain Robbe-Grillet, Cinéma d'aujourd'hui 70* (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972).

⁴⁰ Ben Stoltzfus, *The Body of the Text* (London: Associated University Press, 1985), p.31.

⁴¹ Lucien Goldmann, *Pour Une Sociologie du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965, second edition).

in importance of the individual and a corresponding increase in the importance of objects, and he saw this reflected in the important role played by objects in the work of Robbe-Grillet. Tribute is paid to Goldmann by Jacques Leenhardt at the beginning of his socio-political study of *La Jalousie*, a study which concentrates on the theme of colonialism in the novel.⁴² Leenhardt identifies a series of under control/out of control oppositions in the novel, such as for example, the way in which the “safe” environment of the interior of the house and the grounds visible from it represents an area over which the absent/present narrator has a degree of mastery. These areas are analogous with the order and control imposed by a colonial framework. Even the banana plants, visible from the house and planted in ordered rows, are a demonstration of the extent to which the disorder of nature has been ordered by the colonial narrator. Conversely, anything that occurs beyond the boundary of the house and its grounds is characterised as dangerous, threatening, and represents the other. Thus, whatever happens during A...’s excursions with Franck is beyond the narrator’s domain, remains unknown to him, and cannot be influenced or controlled by him. So, there is something in her absence that potentially threatens the order established on the plantation. Also, A...’s apparent ease of communication with the servant boy is an indication of her identification with what lies beyond the house, with a somewhat unfathomable (because it is foreign to the colonialist) and therefore, perhaps, threatening environment. A... is therefore identified with danger, the unknown, disorder, and ultimately with sexual transgression in the form of adultery.

⁴² Jacques Leenhardt, *Lecture politique du roman: La Jalousie d’Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1973).

In another political analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work, Lynn Higgins has aligned his output with a specific historical context.⁴³ In her study of *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, she points to Robbe-Grillet's role as a signatory, in 1960, of the so-called *Manifeste des 121*,⁴⁴ as evidence of his opposition to the war in Algeria. However, Robbe-Grillet, in spite of having signed it, remarked:

A l'époque de la guerre d'Algérie, je signais le Manifeste des 121, et je militais pour l'indépendance du peuple algérien, mais je n'ai jamais introduit rien de tel dans mes romans ou mes films.⁴⁵

His signing of the document signalled the apparent rapprochement of Robbe-Grillet and one of his immediate literary predecessors, Jean-Paul Sartre, who, according to Roger-Michel Allemand:

voyait là le signe d'une entrée dans le rang, d'un engagement du romancier en tant que tel, alors qu'il s'agissait uniquement de l'engagement d'un homme privé, sans que son œuvre en porte aucune trace.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, Higgins argues that something of the political and historical context of the time can be uncovered in the film. She argues that the mysterious initial letters that are used instead of names in the film can be understood as having a political significance. A, she suggests, might stand for Algeria, saying that *Marienbad* bears the "thematic impact of the historical moment of its creation".⁴⁷ Her suggestion is supported by the (literal) rape of A in the *ciné-roman* (omitted by Resnais in the film version), which might be seen as the metaphorical rape of Algeria, or the use of rape as a part of the war.

⁴³ Lynn Higgins, *New Novel, New Wave, New Politics* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

⁴⁴ More formally known as 'La Déclaration sur le droit à l'insoumission dans la guerre d'Algérie'.

⁴⁵ Robbe-Grillet quoted in Olivier Corpet, and Emanuelle Lambert, *Alain Robbe-Grillet le voyageur du nouveau roman: chronologie illustré 1922 – 2002* (Paris: Editions de l'IMEC, 2002), p.42.

⁴⁶ Roger-Michel Allemand, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), p.95.

⁴⁷ Higgins, p.108.

Political readings of Robbe-Grillet certainly offer an enlightening way of understanding his works. However, the discord between Robbe-Grillet and Sartre on the issue reveals, once again, a reason for reading Robbe-Grillet along phenomenological lines. If Sartre applauded Robbe-Grillet's personal engagement, he objected to his lack of literary engagement, accusing him, according to Allemand, of living in "un monde complètement abstrait et détaché des réalités socio-politiques de son temps",⁴⁸ resulting in a lack of human significance in his novels. As Allemand reminds us, the objects described by Robbe-Grillet are divested of pre-established meaning, but they are still objects described by a human consciousness, by a person who is already in the world. It is on this level that Robbe-Grillet considers his novels should engage with human significance, rather than on a political level.

Post-modernism

Robbe-Grillet's novels have also been examined in the light of critical theories since structuralism, by Brian McHale,⁴⁹ who again concentrates his study upon Robbe-Grillet's novels. McHale compares Robbe-Grillet's novels before and since *La Maison de rendez-vous*, identifying features which, he contends, make Robbe-Grillet (since *La Maison de rendez-vous*) a post-modernist writer. McHale concentrates upon the destabilising of the narrative world in Robbe-Grillet's novels, via such features as the splintering of the narrative point of view, the self-erasure of the text, and disjointed depictions of time and space, claiming that these are what make Robbe-Grillet a post-modernist writer. However, this thesis, in addition to offering an analysis of Robbe-

⁴⁸ Allemand, p.93.

Grillet's films, which have not been covered by McHale's reading, contends that questions of multiple points of view, time and space, etc., may still be accounted for in phenomenological terms, even in the later works of Robbe-Grillet's career.

Feminist objections

An area of great debate in relation to Robbe-Grillet is the depiction of sexuality in his film and fiction.⁵⁰ The sadoerotic content of Robbe-Grillet's works means that they have been the subject of some controversy. Understandably, much of the condemnation received has been from feminist critics, although not exclusively from females. John Fletcher, for example, roundly condemns Robbe-Grillet.⁵¹ Fletcher does take on board Robbe-Grillet's professed aims of creating works of *bricolage*, borrowing from popular culture in order to exaggerate and thereby undermine sexual stereotypes, however, he remains far from convinced by such justifications. He devotes a chapter of his book on Robbe-Grillet to the topic, carrying the following unequivocal warning:

Robbe-Grillet's view of women's sexuality seems at best misleading and at worst sadistic and perverse, and his attempts in articles and interviews to argue that he is being ironic, self-aware and amusedly detached from these phantasms are not wholly convincing. [A] pornographic work of his (...) *Temple aux miroirs*, is sold in a sealed polythene cover and shows an obsessive and repellent interest in the genitals of little girls. Paedophilia, voyeurism and sadism are indeed the hallmarks of most of the works considered in this chapter, which are therefore not for the squeamish.⁵²

It is against such accusations of pornography, then, that defenders of Robbe-Grillet have to make their case. Even Fletcher, amongst his scathing comments, admits that there is

⁴⁹ Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (Lodon and New York: Routledge, 1996, 1st published by Methuen, 1987).

⁵⁰ See Raylene L. Ramsey, *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992).

⁵¹ John Fletcher, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983).

great complexity to be found in Robbe-Grillet, thereby perhaps implying that there is some hope that not all of his works are purely pornographic. Indeed, the general impression one has when dealing with his works, is not that their sole aim is to titillate (nor is this the effect they have); the sophistication of Robbe-Grillet's artistic endeavours, as Fletcher points out, prevent them from coming across as just pornography. It is precisely the subversion of genres (e.g. the vampire story) that leads one to believe that there is more at work in Robbe-Grillet's art than pornography. The depiction of sexuality in his novels and films, then, has provided rich pickings for commentators.

Susan Suleiman's article on *Projet pour une révolution à New York* is one that is often mentioned by subsequent commentaries in considering the theme of sadism in Robbe-Grillet's works.⁵³ Although her analysis is a little more forgiving than Fletcher's, she still claims that *Projet* is "definitely a man's book",⁵⁴ arguing that it is a novel in which male fantasies of sexual power over females are repeated, rather than undermined. Suleiman's study suggests that *Projet* can be read as a male fantasy in more than one way, however. The text is self-engendered, it is the word of the male narrator that creates the text, thus removing any reliance upon female involvement in the process of textual (re)production.

Whilst those who have taken Robbe-Grillet's side in this debate have followed more or less the same line that he has, that is, the idea that he is exaggerating myths in order to expose them, what has not yet been attempted in relation to Robbe-Grillet's

⁵² Fletcher, p.58.

⁵³ Susan Suleiman, 'Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet pour une révolution à New York*' in *Romanic Review* 67, 1 (January 1977), 43-62, is considered in John Phillips, *Forbidden Fictions: Pornography and censorship in twentieth-century French literature* (London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.57.

depiction of sexuality is an explanation of it that integrates it into a phenomenological framework. This thesis will therefore attempt to address this omission in the light not only of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, but also of feminist comments upon the relationship between phenomenology and feminism. Doing so allows for the influence of sexuality upon embodied perception to be brought into focus, and it also reveals a new assessment of Robbe-Grillet's stated aims of undermining sexual stereotypes.

Phenomenological approaches

Whilst hints as to the value of a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet are, as has been noted, to be found amongst the pages of Morrissette's study of Robbe-Grillet's novels, some scholars have taken an even closer interest in this possibility, and have argued the case that his work may be best understood not from the context of psychology, but from that of phenomenological philosophy. Robbe-Grillet's interest in the portrayal of phenomena as perceived, rather than objects with a ready-made significance, is similar in intent to the phenomenologists' attempt to produce a descriptive philosophy. That is, phenomenology aims to describe the world as it is given to consciousness in perception, free from the prejudices and pre-conceptions of science and cultural conditioning. This process can be likened to the phenomenological reduction, wherein cultural expectations are put out of play (*mise hors jeu*), or bracketed (*mise entre parenthèses*). The result of this process is that phenomena can be experienced taken out of their usual context, without any pre-established or expected meaning. However, in the absence of any cultural expectations, objects lose their familiarity, they appear strange, unexpected. Similarly, Robbe-Grillet's work contains

objects which are without obvious significance, allowing for a visual description of the surface of the object to take precedence over any symbolic meaning the reader may be tempted to confer upon it. However, in phenomenological philosophy, there is always a human being who perceives these objects, who focuses upon certain objects rather than others, from among a field of objects. The situated nature of this narrator (or of the narrative perspective), in time and space in Robbe-Grillet's work is also analogous to the phenomenological account of a consciousness with a bodily situation in the world. The consequence of being an incarnate consciousness, for phenomenology, is that all phenomena are experienced subjectively. This is the case in Robbe-Grilletian descriptions too – the viewpoint of the narrative or the angle of the camera is always that of a human being, whether or not it represents the perspective of one of the protagonists. Equally, as a result of having a spatial and temporal existence, time, for a phenomenologist, can only be experienced in the present. Memories of the past are re-experienced now in the present; the past and the future radiate out from one's position in the present. In Robbe-Grillet's art, it is often difficult to tell which images and perceptions are in the past, which in the present, and which are projections into the future or fantasies. Events are frequently relived, jumbled up with present events, which suggests, in accordance with the phenomenological account outlined here, that they are being re-lived now in the present.

These, then, are some of the conclusions to be drawn from a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet's novels, and some studies have already been devoted to elucidating his works from this perspective. The most important are those of Olga Bernal

and Victor Carrabino.⁵⁵ Bernal's study was the first book to be devoted to a phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet's novels, and as such, is often a point of reference for subsequent studies of his works. Her study naturally only deals with Robbe-Grillet's earliest novels, since it was published in 1964. The present study is therefore able to go beyond Bernal's contribution in that it covers his novels to date, as well as his films. Equally, this thesis will re-assess the early novels covered by Bernal in the light of subsequent theoretical developments in phenomenology, and in doing so, expand on the rather narrow focus offered by her study. Bernal's main concern was to elucidate what she saw as being at the heart of Robbe-Grillet's works, namely, an absence. His novels are all structured around an absence of some kind or another, she argues, and this is consistent with a phenomenological account of human existence. She argues for the link between phenomenology and Robbe-Grillet's novels in the introduction to her study:

Si tout état de conscience est conscience de quelque chose, l'homme est bien obligé de sortir de lui-même, de chercher le complément, l'objet de sa conscience dehors, dans le monde matériel auquel il est lié indissolublement.⁵⁶

Thus, Bernal sees the objects described by Robbe-Grillet as being not *chosiste* objects, but ones perceived by a human consciousness. She also sees Robbe-Grillet's aims as a novelist as comparable to those of modern artists; in that their aim is to suppress the idea of profundity that is to be found in conventional literature or art. This would also tend to support Barthes' view that Robbe-Grillet describes only the surface of things; just as

⁵⁵ See also George H. Szanto, *Narrative Consciousness: Structure and Perception in the fiction of Kafka, Beckett and Robbe-Grillet* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1972). Although not as rigorous in its application of phenomenological philosophy, Szanto's study bears some similarities to those of Bernal and Carrabino in its analysis of the exteriorising of consciousness.

modern art suppresses perspective and produces paintings whose pictorial space is presented on a flattened ground. This reveals something of the value of a phenomenological approach; it spans the range of insights offered by *chosiste* and psychological readings. Robbe-Grillet's refusal to go beyond an examination of the surface of things, comes about, for Bernal, because the literature of phenomena is not about presenting humankind in terms of richness and profundity, but about presenting human existence in terms of a hollow or hole. Furthermore, Bernal makes the case that the phenomenological reduction, a process whereby prejudices and presuppositions are "bracketed" so as to allow for perception of the world as it really is, is comparable to Robbe-Grillet's art:

La mise hors circuit de tout ce que nous étions habitués à voir dans la peinture classique, l'absence de tous ces points de repère romanesques que nous constatons dans les romans de Robbe-Grillet nous font penser qu'il ne s'agit pas ici d'une mise en date rhétorique des valeurs traditionnelles mais d'un effort radical pour retrouver l'aspect originaire des choses.⁵⁷

Bernal considers that no matter how one tries to link Robbe-Grillet to his context in the history of French literature, one always returns to the phenomenological attitude, that is, the dominant attitude of the period at which he was writing when Bernal's study was undertaken.⁵⁸ She explains that what differentiates the thought and literature of one of Robbe-Grillet's immediate literary predecessors, Jean-Paul Sartre, from Robbe-Grillet himself, is, as mentioned in respect of political approaches to Robbe-Grillet's work, Sartre's insistence upon the necessity of human political engagement. Sartre's work

⁵⁶ Bernal, p.12.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, see p.13.

always requires a system of values, be they social, moral, etc. For Robbe-Grillet, on the other hand, human beings are not in a situation of values, but a situation of things.⁵⁹

The main thrust of Bernal's argument, then, is that there is a nothingness at the centre of Robbe-Grillet's work, that things do not reveal a deeper meaning. The same is true of words, she argues, indicating descriptions of objects in *Les Gommages* that have no particular significance to the "story". However, she admits that it is difficult to find words that are neutral, as is demonstrated in Wallas' constant attempts to avoid raising suspicion about his movements. He finds that he has to create new lies to cover up the lies he has already told. She argues further, that in *La Jalousie* and *Le Voyeur* there is an absence at the centre of each narrative, in the form of the absent/present narrator of *La Jalousie* and in the form of the absence of the central act (of possible rape and murder) in *Le Voyeur*. Bernal's reading of Robbe-Grillet, whilst persuasive, has its limitations. Although, obviously, when Bernal was writing in the 1960s, the debates around phenomenology differed from present debates, her privileging of the notion of *néantisation* at the centre of being means that her reading of Robbe-Grillet is narrowly focused. And, although this study clearly owes a debt to Bernal's, it will also advance her understanding of Robbe-Grillet in new ways. To that end, this study re-assesses the early novels of Robbe-Grillet, both in the interests of providing a comprehensive survey of his novels, and in the interests of bringing new phenomenological arguments to bear upon them.

Victor Carrabino's phenomenological study of Robbe-Grillet's novels has a wider focus than Bernal's, and is, in certain respects, a model for this thesis. His analysis is a thoroughgoing exegesis of phenomenological philosophy, presented together with

⁵⁹ Bernal, see p.20.

examples from Robbe-Grillet's novels to demonstrate the similarities between the two and the way in which phenomenology may helpfully explain various features of Robbe-Grillet's works. The present study will return at several points to consider Carrabino's important contribution in greater detail. In order to avoid repetition, therefore, it will not be outlined in great detail here. Once more, however, the striking omission of Carrabino's study is its lack of mention of Robbe-Grillet's films, and more surprisingly, given that it was published in 1974, its omission of Merleau-Ponty's later thought. The consequence of this is that Carrabino makes no mention of intersubjectivity as theorised by Merleau-Ponty in his *Le Visible et l'invisible*, an important text as it represents a development on his thought in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Equally, Carrabino's reading of Robbe-Grillet has other limitations. In his chapter on the *epoché*, or phenomenological reduction, for example, he mentions only one novel, *La Jalousie*. This study will examine a wider range of Robbe-Grillet's works than is analysed by Carrabino. These, then are the chief ways in which the work carried out already by Bernal and Carrabino may be enriched by a re-examination of Robbe-Grillet's works in the light of a phenomenological perspective.

However, as well as outlining the benefits of a return to a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet, is important to anticipate any possible objections. One obstacle to be tackled for any re-visiting of phenomenology in relation to Robbe-Grillet is the objection to such an approach argued by Stephen Heath.⁶⁰ Heath would reject any attempted phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet on the grounds that in his theoretical pronouncements, especially in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, Heath sees a contradiction between Robbe-Grillet's position and that of phenomenological philosophy.

For Heath, Robbe-Grillet's insistence upon the cleansing power of vision would suggest that perception is a passive, rather than an active, act of consciousness. Hence the contradiction, since for Merleau-Ponty, this would not be the case; perception requires some active participation on the part of the perceiver.

Heath's analysis, even though it initially appears worrying for anyone attempting to align Robbe-Grillet with phenomenology, fails to account for some important considerations. Primarily, what is lacking in Heath's analysis is any mention of Robbe-Grillet's art. He does not ground his discussion in an examination of Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, but in his theories. Whilst it is of course important to consider an artist's stated aims, critical theories can often suggest valid approaches to an artist's *œuvre* that may not have even occurred to him or her at the time of producing their works of art. Robbe-Grillet claims "Je ne suis pas théoricien du roman";⁶¹ furthermore, he has admitted that his pronouncements in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman* are, to some extent, an exaggeration of his theoretical position, and that his artistic practice does not always follow his theory to the letter. Thus, for example, Robbe-Grillet admitted at the *Colloque de Cerisy* held in his honour, that, having written *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, he contradicted his theoretical statements in his artistic practice:

Pendant que j'écrivais cette condamnation définitive de la métaphore, *La Jalousie* ne cessait de traiter des métaphores. Le titre même (annonce de cette immense métaphore qui va se développer dans le cours des pages) était pour moi extrêmement conscient.⁶²

⁶⁰ Stephen Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek, 1972).

⁶¹ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.7.

⁶² Robbe-Grillet quoted in Jean Ricardou ed., *Colloque de Cerisy Robbe-Grillet* vol. 1 (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1976), p.35.

What is of paramount importance in the case of Robbe-Grillet, then, is the study of his films and novels; after all, it is in his artistic practice that he puts his money where his mouth is, so to speak. Furthermore, although Robbe-Grillet does, as Heath indicates, emphasise the *chosiste* view of his descriptions of objects in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, thereby supporting Heath's arguments that Robbe-Grillet's account of vision might be likened to a passive, camera-eye, this is not the whole story. Robbe-Grillet also states in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman* that the objects described are always viewed from a human point of view, that they are significant to the character perceiving them, but that they are divested of the significance that might have been attached to them in conventional or realist literature, since such outmoded literary forms are precisely those that Robbe-Grillet seeks to overthrow. In this respect, one can argue against Heath, that Robbe-Grillet's theory does show signs of the influence of phenomenology.

Scope of thesis and plan

The main body of the present study will be devoted to an in-depth analysis of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction, from the standpoint of phenomenological philosophy. A few words to explain the scope of this thesis are firstly in order, however. In the interests of a cohesive study, this discussion incorporates Robbe-Grillet's novels and films right across his career.⁶³ However, the autobiographical *Romanesques* are not included here, as they require a rather different approach. Whilst recognising the fact that Robbe-Grillet's works naturally reflect episodes of his own experience, life and interests, the

⁶³ Robbe-Grillet's photo- and picto-novels, consulted at the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris, would add nothing of substance to a phenomenological reading, and are not included in this study. However, their texts form part of *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, and therefore feature in this study in their incarnation as novels.

question of distinguishing between his own life and his imaginary one in the *Romanesques* merits a study in itself. Considerations of fictional narratives of embodiment in Robbe-Grillet's works are the focus of this thesis, therefore to stray into the territory of facts about his life, to consider whether or not what he relates is fact or fiction, would be to move away from the intended focus. Furthermore, some commentators have already devoted works to the *Romanesques*, and have been able to supply the depth of detail deserving of such a topic.⁶⁴ These studies have considered topics such as self identity at greater length than is possible here (although this study does touch upon it in chapter six). In the interests, therefore, of maintaining a phenomenological focus upon the consequences of bodily experience as rendered via film and fiction, regrettably, the *Romanesques* have been set aside for the moment. In terms of Robbe-Grillet's films, exhaustive enquiries reveal that some titles are unavailable, and therefore these too have been sidelined.⁶⁵

It is clear from the foregoing survey of works already published on Robbe-Grillet that he is a writer and filmmaker of great complexity, whose works may be elucidated profitably by analyses from a great many different theoretical perspectives. The theoretical approach chosen here demands a revisiting for a number of reasons, as discussed. But, instead of returning to a purely Merleau-Pontyan perspective, this study also takes into account the development of his thought by others. Also, this thesis does

⁶⁴ See, for example, Roger-Michel Allemand and Alain Goulet, *Imaginaire, Ecritures, Lectures de Robbe-Grillet, d'Un Régicide aux Romanesques* (Lion-Sur-Mer: Arcane-Beaunieux, 1991), Sjeff Houppermans, *Alain Robbe-Grillet, Autobiographie* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993).

⁶⁵ In November 2001, at a discussion on his works in at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, Robbe-Grillet confirmed in person that *N a pris les dés* and *Un Bruit qui rend fou* are unobtainable, and recommended contacting the *Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine*, to whom he has donated all of his documentation. Although no information was forthcoming from the IMEC, it was possible to view *Un Bruit qui rend fou* at a film retrospective in Caen in June 2002. As part of the same retrospective, the

not focus exclusively on aspects of phenomenological theory that have not been previously exploited, such as sexuality and intersubjectivity. These aspects of human experience are so much part of bodily experience that to consider them in isolation from the overarching phenomenological theory in which this thesis is couched would risk distorting the argument.

By way of introduction to the phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction, the first chapter of this thesis will trace the development of the phenomenological movement from its German origins to its evolution in France just prior to the time when Robbe-Grillet turned to writing. An examination of the development of phenomenological philosophy will serve to contextualise a movement that was dominant in French thought during the post-war years, at the time when Robbe-Grillet was starting out as a writer. In order to begin to look at the value of a Merleau-Pontyan approach to Robbe-Grillet, the philosophical background against which his philosophy is set must be outlined. Therefore, it will be necessary to examine the contributions of Franz Brentano, the first significant forerunner of phenomenology, whose work was taken up by Edmund Husserl, widely considered to be the founder of the movement proper. Following Husserl, an interest in phenomenology evolved over the French border, with firstly Jean-Paul Sartre, and then Maurice Merleau-Ponty taking up the baton. Although there are, of course, more figures in the phenomenological movement than these, those mentioned here are significant in the development of the thought of Merleau-Ponty, whose philosophy is to provide the theoretical underpinning for this thesis. This initial discussion of the phenomenological movement will therefore provide an overview of the

concerns of phenomenological philosophers, and the way in which these were taken forward by Merleau-Ponty in an attempt to resolve what he saw as some of the shortcomings of his predecessors. The exposition of his concerns will pave the way for arguing towards a Merleau-Pontyan analysis of Robbe-Grillet, one that concerns itself with the rendering of human embodiment in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction. Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology is an apt means of elucidating the embodiment of consciousness, as his argument with his predecessors suggests. Merleau-Ponty's notion of the body-subject was intended to resolve the dualism he perceived in the work of other phenomenological philosophers, notably Husserl and Sartre.⁶⁶ The phenomenological issues chosen for consideration are those that are pertinent to this analysis of Robbe-Grillet's works.

Following this outline of the phenomenological movement, the focus will then shift to discuss how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology may be applied to the films and fiction of Robbe-Grillet. This discussion will be structured to demonstrate the cohesion of bringing together various aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works under a unified theoretical standpoint, and in doing so, will follow the topics raised by Merleau-Ponty, in his major work, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, with other texts by Merleau-Ponty mentioned as necessary. It makes sense to use a cohesive theory of the body as the underpinning for this study, since it subtends all the other aspects of the thesis. However, in order to lay the foundation for this, it is essential firstly to examine the notion of the phenomenological reduction, which is the basis from which Merleau-Ponty argues his

⁶⁶ The extent to which Merleau-Ponty succeeded in achieving this, particularly in relation to Sartre, is a contentious issue, however, it is not for a thesis on Robbe-Grillet to address it. Many important areas of debate between Merleau-Ponty and Sartre are discussed in Jon Stewart ed., *The Debate between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

account of embodied consciousness. A consideration of the embodiment of consciousness, together with the undermining of cultural myths, are what will drive the argument forward in this thesis. Thus, chapter two will be devoted to the notion of the phenomenological reduction, as Merleau-Ponty conceived of it. The phenomenological reduction was the cornerstone of phenomenology, so it is of importance to discuss the ways in which the reduction may elucidate Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies of subversion. Because the notion of 'making strange by undermining convention is also a starting point for Robbe-Grillet's work, considering his aims and the reduction together are an important foundation for the rest of the discussion. Through a close study of various works by Robbe-Grillet, this chapter will explore the way in which the lifting of cultural certainties suggested by Robbe-Grillet can be understood to effect a kind of phenomenological reduction for the protagonists of his films and novels. This analysis goes beyond earlier analyses of the reduction by Bernal and Carrabino, as it analyses different texts with regards to the reduction (Carrabino's discussion of the *epoché* focused only upon *La Jalousie*). Also, this study considers the effects of the reduction discussed by Merleau-Ponty (the question of a loss of personal identity) but not by Bernal and Carrabino, who place their emphasis on the *néantisation* of the reduction, the nothingness at the centre of consciousness. Understanding Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies as effecting a fictional or cinematic form of reduction helps elucidate some of the difficulties encountered by the reader of his novels or the viewer of his films in terms of their perceived strangeness or incomprehensibility.

The first main conclusion of the phenomenological reduction was, for Merleau-Ponty, that consciousness was always incarnate, that it was a *body*-subject, and this is to

be the topic of the third chapter. The consequences of this conclusion for Robbe-Grillet's choice of narrative perspective in his novels is examined, and is compared to the camera work used in his films. The influence of the shared aims of Robbe-Grillet as *romancier* and as *cinéaste* are considered in this respect. An analysis of Robbe-Grillet's rendering of perceptual experience is also offered in this chapter, revealing the importance of another consequence of the reduction. That consciousness is always embodied is highlighted by the role of sensory perception in apprehending the world.

In subsequent chapters, further consequences of human existence as bodily beings will be examined. The experience of time, discussed in chapter four, once more allows for an examination of Robbe-Grillet's narrative strategies; it constitutes another attempt to subvert readers' or viewers' expectations. In doing so, Robbe-Grillet renders time in a way that makes it seem strange, but that also corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's explanation of time as perspectival. Thus, a consideration of time as depicted in Robbe-Grillet's works is an integral part of understanding his work as narrating embodied consciousness and as subverting cultural expectations. Since, for Merleau-Ponty, time is not linear, but emanates from the here and now of the body-subject, all time is experienced from the perspective of the present. The discussion of this topic will thus demonstrate that a complex, even bewildering, aspect of Robbe-Grillet's rendering of human experience in film and fiction becomes explicable when considered in the light of Merleau-Ponty's account of time. They share the notion that the past and future are part of our present experience. A case for understanding Robbe-Grillet's cinema in terms of phenomenological time has been made by Gilles Deleuze, and his updating of

phenomenology is incorporated into the new application of phenomenology to Robbe-Grillet's cinema for which this thesis argues.

In addition to the topic of time, Merleau-Ponty offers a theory of the body as a sexual being, a subject that is most pertinent to Robbe-Grillet, since an emphasis on sexuality is notable in many, if not most, of his works. Chapter Five deals with sexuality, and is of particular importance in this thesis, since it will be the first time that any attempt has been made to account for the proliferation of scenes depicting human sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of phenomenological philosophy. Again, as with the discussion of time in Robbe-Grillet, developments made in phenomenology since Merleau-Ponty's death will be used to explore this topic and to evaluate Robbe-Grillet's success in depicting what has proven to be one of the most controversial issues of his career.

Finally, this study will consider the question of human relationships, of human knowledge of others, in a discussion of Merleau-Pontyan intersubjectivity. The discussion in the last chapter necessitates a move away from Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception* in favour of a reading of his *Le Visible et l'invisible*, where he re-worked his initial view of intersubjective relations. Reading *Le Visible et l'invisible* allows for the sophistication and progress made in his later thought to be brought to bear on the problematic human relationships presented by Robbe-Grillet in his novels and films. The sophistication of Merleau-Ponty's arguments here also encompasses a consideration of self-knowledge and self-reflexivity. Again, this analysis constitutes an advance on previous phenomenological studies of Robbe-Grillet's works, since they did not incorporate a reading of Merleau-Ponty's later thought. Language as a

means of intersubjective communication is analysed in this chapter, again outlining the extent to which Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies of making strange and subverting expectations are relevant.

The study now turns to set its examination of the works of Robbe-Grillet in the context of the theoretical standpoint that underpins it, by examining the development of the phenomenological movement.

Chapter One

Phenomenology

The phenomenological movement has its earliest roots in the work of Franz Brentano, whose 'descriptive psychology' was a springboard for Edmund Husserl's phenomenology proper. The notion of intentionality, posited by Brentano, was to become the cornerstone of the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl and those who took his work forward, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The following discussion will briefly trace the contributions of these, the major figures in phenomenology, charting the progress they made from Brentano's basic notion of intentionality through to the complex account of bodily existence offered by Merleau-Ponty. Whilst the scope of the present discussion precludes the possibility of a detailed examination of the various standpoints of all of the philosophers in the phenomenological movement, a summary of some important aspects of the work of the major figures will serve to provide a context for Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. This in turn will be the basis of the later discussion of Robbe-Grillet's work. Much of the existing phenomenological

criticism of film and fiction can generally be characterised as either that based upon the philosophy of Husserl, or that based upon the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, and the present examination of their thought will illuminate the adaptation of it as critical methodology by those who have produced phenomenological commentaries on Robbe-Grillet. This discussion of phenomenology will serve to situate both previous critical approaches to Robbe-Grillet and the position of this thesis in relation to them. In order to set them in a wider context, this brief introduction to phenomenology will concentrate upon the beginnings of the movement in Austria and Germany with Brentano and Husserl, and then consider the impact of phenomenology in France, in the work of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. The examination of Merleau-Ponty's work, which will outline his critique of previous phenomenological philosophers, will also demonstrate the extent to which Merleau-Ponty was able to take up the ideas of his phenomenological predecessors and develop them. This discussion will consider Merleau-Ponty's contribution in terms of his attempt to characterise human experience in phenomenological terms, and his side-stepping of the age-old philosophical problem of Cartesian dualism, that is, the problem of accounting for the interaction between a physical body and a non-physical mind. This is an especially important part of his contribution, since he outlines his own work against that of Husserl and Sartre with regards to the question of the mind-body problem. It is Merleau-Ponty's attempt to account for human experience in terms of a bodily consciousness rather than dividing consciousness from bodily existence that makes his phenomenology an apt means of examining the rendering of embodied existence in the film and fiction of Robbe-Grillet.

Merleau-Ponty's own phenomenology will be outlined in detail, concentrating upon those elements which are most pertinent to an appraisal of Robbe-Grillet's work in phenomenological terms. Here, the discussion will largely be based upon Merleau-Ponty's lengthy work *Phénoménologie de la perception*,⁶⁷ and focus on: the phenomenological reduction, a means of suspending the usual conditions of perception in order to allow for a return to basic sensory experience; the body-subject, the basis of our experience of the world around us; the body as a sexual being, a further consequence of being a body-subject; time, our awareness of temporality, again founded upon our bodily situation; and lastly, intersubjectivity, the awareness we have of other people as having a bodily consciousness like our own.

Finally, this examination of the thought of Merleau-Ponty will end with a look at his reflections on topics such as film, literature and art. Close parallels will be drawn here between the aims of the artist/writer/film-maker as outlined by Merleau-Ponty and those mentioned by Robbe-Grillet in regard to his own work, both in interview and in his theoretical writing, such as in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*. Clearly, these will be of great relevance in the consideration of the artistic output of Robbe-Grillet. These, then, are the elements which are to be the basis of the following analysis of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction, and which will help elucidate some of the more perplexing aspects of his work.

⁶⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

Husserl and the Influence of Brentano on phenomenology

Brentano's project in *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*⁶⁸ was an attempt to describe mental acts and mental states. It was a descriptive psychology, the emphasis being on its descriptive, as opposed to explanatory, nature. The matter to be described here was one's own mental states, chosen by Brentano because he wanted to base his philosophy on non-inductive foundations, his aim being that these would yield claims which were indefeasible. His argument ran thus: one makes no inductive judgements concerning one's basic perceptual experience, so there can be no error of judgement, hence Brentano's claim of indefeasibility. Brentano, then, would make no claims about the physical phenomena which are the objects of mental acts, since these are not within the remit of psychology. Rather, he would concern himself solely with mental phenomena. Phenomena, for Brentano, were anything that was given directly in experience, be they perceptions or emotions or feelings of any kind. He could claim indefeasibility when describing such phenomena because their appearance coincides with their reality. That is, the way phenomena appear is just the way they are. One might be mistaken about the object of a mental phenomenon, e.g., one might see a chair as being blue when in fact it is green, due to a trick of the light, but the mental phenomenon of the blue chair is just what it is. If the phenomenon is of a blue chair, then it is simply a phenomenon of a blue chair, rather than a proof of the blue chair's existence. Brentano would not wish to make any truth claims about it beyond what is given in perception as a phenomenon. He mentions in this regard the experiment conducted by John Locke.⁶⁹ Locke immersed one hand in a bowl of hot water and the other in a bowl of cold water at

⁶⁸ Franz Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* ed. L. L. McAlister, trans. by A. C. Rancurello, D. B. Terrell, and L. L. McAlister (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

the same time. He then placed both hands into the same bowl of tepid water. He had a sensation of warmth in one hand and of coldness in the other, although both hands were feeling water of the same temperature. What we may conclude from this, claims Brentano, is that:

We have no right, therefore, to believe that the objects of so-called external perception really 'exist as they appear to us. Indeed, they demonstrably do not exist outside of us. In contrast to that which really and truly exists, they are mere phenomena.⁷⁰

That is, it makes no sense to say that there was anything erroneous about the phenomena undergone by Locke *in themselves*. Whilst it may be true that he could have based some judgement upon these phenomena which bore no resemblance to reality, the untruth of any such assertion is not connected to the phenomena as experienced; they just are as they are.

Importantly, the main contribution to the phenomenological movement made by Brentano stems from his initial interest in the objects of consciousness, namely, mental phenomena. Brentano claimed that all mental acts had to be about something, they had to have an object. This basic structure characterises all consciousness, and Brentano, taking up a term used by scholastic philosophers from the middle ages, called it intentionality. The notion of intentionality is essential to the thought of Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and will be of great importance when arguing for a phenomenological understanding of the work of Robbe-Grillet. That is, for Brentano, and for all subsequent phenomenological philosophers, consciousness depends upon there being some phenomenon to be conscious of. This phenomenon would not necessarily have to

⁶⁹ Brentano, p.8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

correspond to any object 'out there' in the physical world, such as the blue chair or the bowls of water mentioned above. The phenomenon in question might just as easily be an emotion, say, a feeling of anger, or an imagined or dreamed phenomenon, say, a dream about feeling angry or an imagined blue chair. Just so long as it is an object of consciousness, so long as it is the object of which one is aware, upon which one is focused, then it is an intentional object. Furthermore, consciousness needs objects in order to be conscious. There cannot be consciousness of nothing.

However, it is precisely in attempting to account for consciousness via the explanation of intentionality that Brentano runs into difficulty. He claims that all mental acts have an intentional object within them. As Brentano puts it, intentional objects *inexist* or have intentional *inexistence* as parts of mental phenomena (i.e., they exist in phenomena, they are part of them):

Every mental phenomenon is characterised by what the Scholastics of the Middle Ages called the intentional (or mental) inexistence of an object, and what we might call (...) reference to a content, direction towards an object' (which is not to be understood here as meaning a thing) or immanent objectivity. Every mental phenomenon includes something as an object within itself, although they do not all do so in the same way. In presentation something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired, and so on.⁷¹

The problem here lies in accounting for consciousness. An act could register an intentional object, given this account, but then how does consciousness arise from this process? In order to avoid this problem, Brentano introduces the notion of having an inner awareness of a mental act. Since the intentional object of an act may come from within the perceiver, say, in the form of pleasure at hearing a sound, there is an inner

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.88.

perception. In this process, Brentano thinks that it is possible to maintain that an act refers to itself:

(...) the pleasure which I feel is not actually pleasure in the sound, but pleasure in the hearing. In fact you could say, not incorrectly, that in a certain sense it even refers to itself (...) the feeling and the object are “fused into one”.⁷²

This process involves having a primary awareness of an intentional object, and then this act itself becomes the object of a secondary awareness, so that there is effectively an awareness of being aware. Again, the question arises as to whether this awareness can be equated with consciousness, or whether a process of simply one thing’s registering another would explain equally well the process outlined. Furthermore, if, as Brentano claimed earlier, intentional objects exist within acts, or are part of acts, then it is impossible to say that they are identical to acts. Brentano is saying that act and object are “fused into one”; but if they are identical, then the object is no longer part of the act. Brentano is contradicting a claim he made earlier – to say that the act is identical to its object is to contradict the claim that the object is part of the act.

Husserl adopted Brentano’s study of phenomena and his use of the notion of intentionality, however he approached the question of intentionality differently from Brentano, and in so doing, avoided some of the problems encountered above. For example, Husserl did not hold the same view as Brentano in relation to intentional objects and mental acts. For Husserl, an intentional object was external to a mental act; an act was intentional if it was directed to an object which was not contained within that act. An act has intentionality by means of its structure, which he calls a noesis. The noesis is that aspect of the act which directs it towards its intentional object (the noema). The

noesis picks out the noema from the mass of perceptual data given in consciousness. These sensory, or hyletic data are the most basic form of experience, and the function of the noesis is to structure certain of these data into an intentional object. As will be elucidated later in this discussion, Merleau-Ponty, in his account of perception, completely disagreed with Husserl in this respect. David Bell comments that, for Husserl, hyletic data

(...) are merely undergone or registered: the mind, in other words, is purely passive in the reception of such material. (...) Hyletic data, as such, are just *had*, and are neither intentional experiences nor the intentional objects of experiences. (...) They are exclusively sensory, that is they are without intellectual or conceptual articulation of any sort. And for Husserl this means that they are intrinsically meaningless or senseless.⁷³

Husserl's account here gives an explanation of the conditions necessary for an act to be directed towards an intentional object, however, his explanation does not go so far as to explain exactly how acts and intentional objects manage to relate to each other. That is, it looks problematic to claim that one can make meaning out of something that is intrinsically meaningless, as if one were imposing a meaning where none exists. Husserl does not account for just how the noesis decides upon which hyletic data to pick out to form an object, nor does he explain how meaning might be conferred upon hyletic data. Husserl, then, is essentially an idealist. Sensory experience impinges upon the mind, which then has to synthesise this information into some kind of meaningful perception. He faces the same problem as all idealists, that of accounting for the fact that whilst experience is understandable to us, it is based upon a senseless mass of sensory data.

⁷² Brentano, p.90.

⁷³ David Bell, *Husserl* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 1991), p.173.

In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl, taking inspiration from Descartes, set out to establish apodictic or indubitable evidence upon which to base his philosophy. He claimed to be taking a scientific approach to philosophy, by basing his work strictly upon this indubitable evidence:

Evidence is, in an *extremely broad sense*, an “*experiencing*” of something that is, and is thus; it is precisely a mental seeing of something itself. (...) It is plain that I, as someone beginning philosophically, since I am striving toward the presumptive end, genuine science, must neither make nor go on accepting any judgement as scientific *that I have not derived from evidence*, from “experiences” in which the affairs and affair-complexes in question are present to me as “*they themselves*”.⁷⁴

Here, the influence of Brentano is obvious. Husserl, like Brentano, will use only that which is given in experience as a basis for his phenomenology. The way in which Husserl achieved this return to experience was to have a great deal of influence on the phenomenological philosophers to come after him, and it is to this that we shall now turn our attention.

The important innovation in Husserl’s philosophy, which paved the way for later philosophers in the phenomenological movement, was his use of the reduction. It is essential for this study to consider it, since it informs Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and his conception of it will be pertinent to an understanding of Robbe-Grillet’s formal strategies of making strange or subverting literary convention. The aim of the reduction was to parenthesise, or to ‘overthrow’, as Husserl puts it, assumptions commonly accepted in our usual attitude to the existence of the world around us. Husserl called this the natural attitude. It includes the assumptions we make about the existence of things in

⁷⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* trans. by Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991, 1st published The Hague, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1950), pp.12–13, original emphasis.

science, in culture and so on. The natural attitude is basically a realist view of the world, that is, a view in which objects exist independently of our experience of them. For Husserl, their existence could not simply be assumed, since after performing the reduction, casting aside the natural attitude, all that remained were the phenomena themselves, as encountered in perception. As for Brentano, phenomena are simply phenomena, and no claims about their existence can be made beyond the evidence of our experience of them, and Husserl explains that, having performed the reduction:

As radically meditating philosophers, we now have neither a science that we accept nor a world that exists for us. (...) Along with other Egos, naturally, I lose all the formations pertaining to sociality and culture. In short, not just corporeal Nature but the whole concrete surrounding life-world is for me, from now on, only a phenomenon of being, instead of something that is.⁷⁵

So, Husserl's phenomenological epoché, or reduction, referred to by Husserl⁷⁶ as a process of "inhibiting", "putting out of play", or "parenthesising" the "Objective world" allows him access to the universe of phenomena. Also, (and this will be a point of disagreement with later phenomenological philosophers, as we shall presently discuss), it leads to his apprehension of himself as an Ego:

The epoché can also be said to be the radical and universal method by which I apprehend myself purely: as Ego, and with my own pure conscious life, in and by which the entire Objective world exists for me and is precisely as it is for me.⁷⁷

So, for Husserl, the reduction yields perceptual phenomena and himself as the ego undergoing those phenomena. A major problem for Husserl here is that he must come down firmly on the side of idealism in order to maintain this philosophical position. That

⁷⁵ Husserl, pp.18-19.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.

is, given that one has performed the epoché, yielding the transcendental ego and its phenomena, the natural attitude has been transcended, and existential enquiries about the “real” world have to be suspended. That is, Husserl cannot know about the world out there on this account – all he can know are the contents of the sensory data, or the phenomena he perceives in perception. He wants to argue later in *Cartesian Meditations* towards intersubjectivity, but this will be difficult, given that he appears to have argued himself into an idealist and solipsistic corner.

One difficulty with the transcendental reduction as put forward by Husserl, a difficulty that he recognised and tried to argue around, was that it yields little of philosophical significance. That is, having performed the reduction, one is able to identify an ego and its objects of consciousness. However, this raises the question of whether these discoveries may be put to any useful purpose. It would appear to be of little interest to identify or describe one’s own subjective and contingent objects of consciousness, one’s own experience, especially since Husserl aimed at attaining indubitable knowledge. He therefore requires some method of moving from the particular to the general, some procedure that allows him to indicate what it is in one’s own experience that is common to all human experience. That is, he needs next to describe the essence of human experience. Husserl’s next move, then, is the eidetic reduction, an additional stage of reduction that will allow him to identify essences. For Husserl, this amounts to a process of imaginatively varying what an experience could possibly be, and once one comes across any variant that is impossible to imagine, then

⁷⁷ Husserl, p.21.

that variant is excluded. So although one could, for example, imagine seeing physical objects, one would not be able to imagine seeing a sound.⁷⁸ As Husserl puts it:

We, so to speak, shift the actual perception into the realm of non-actualities, the realm of the as-if, which supplies us with “pure” possibilities, pure of everything that restricts to this fact or to any fact whatever. (...) Perception, the universal type thus acquired, floats up in the air, so to speak – in the atmosphere of pure phantasiableness. Thus removed from all factualness, it has become the pure “eidos” perception, whose “ideal” extension is made up of all ideally possible perceptions, as purely phantasiale processes.⁷⁹

In spite of Husserl’s somewhat peculiar terminology, his meaning is clear. The universal or essential possibilities so imagined are what he calls the *eidos*. Husserl claims that the *eidos* is a

beheld or beholdable universal, one that is pure, “unconditioned” – that is to say: according to its own intuitional sense, a universal not conditioned by any fact.⁸⁰

In other words, the *eidos* is not so much concerned with intentional objects as experienced, but reveals what an ideal or “pure” perception (pure because stripped of all conceivable contingent factors) of them would be. Any particular instance of an object of perception, is therefore, for Husserl, merely one example of an eidetic object, of a “pure possibility”. Once more, the eidetic reduction is a part of Husserl’s philosophy over which Merleau-Ponty would take him to task, as will soon be explained.

The final part of Husserl’s phenomenology of importance for understanding the basis of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is the question of intersubjectivity. Husserl makes his case in strictly phenomenological terms for the perception of other human beings.

⁷⁸ This example has been suggested by Michael Hammond, Jane Howarth and Russell Keat, in *Understanding Phenomenology* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1991, 1992), see p.76.

⁷⁹ Husserl, p.70.

There has traditionally been a problem in philosophy of wanting to claim that there are other human beings, with bodies inhabited by minds, but arguing towards this position is made difficult by the fact that one only has access to one's own mind. This, however, is not necessarily to be seen as problematic. Indeed, it is a condition of the existence of other minds that they should not be accessible by oneself, otherwise they could not truly be claimed to be other minds, as Husserl points out:

These two primordial spheres, mine which is for me as ego the original sphere, and his which is for me an appresented sphere – are they not separated by an abyss I cannot actually cross, since crossing it would mean, after all, that I acquired an original (rather than an appresenting) experience of someone else?⁸¹

So, it is quite logical, as Husserl indicates, that I cannot cross the abyss which separates me from another, since otherwise there would only be one mind, my own. Husserl's use of the term "appresent", however, requires some explanation, since it is by appresentation that he claims one can experience others. He argues that we are able to perceive others as conscious beings via a form of sensory awareness, other people are "appresented" to us, rather than inferred by us:

If we stick to our de facto experience, our experience of someone else as it comes to pass at any time, we find that actually the sensuously seen body is experienced forthwith as the body of someone else and not as merely an indication of someone else.⁸²

What Husserl means by this is that a person's body is presented to us in perception, and in this perception, the fact that he or she is a conscious person is "appresented". What Husserl seems to be at pains to emphasise here is that this process is not to be understood

⁸⁰ Husserl, p.71.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.121.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.121.

as a process of inference or analogy from one's own body and one's experiences of it. It is not the case that other people's bodies are perceived, and that one then infers the existence of their minds on the basis that their bodies resemble one's own. Rather, other people are experienced as other *people*, as having a mind, just like one's own, and this is just given in experience, it is appresented. In this way, Husserl avoids having to make an argument based upon inference or analogy in order to move from one's own mind to other minds, and he manages to account for other minds in a phenomenological manner, that is, by describing only what is given in experience.

One criticism which could be levelled at Husserl after the performance of the reduction is that it would appear that little has been gained by performing it. Performance of the reduction leads only to a change in attitude: the natural attitude towards the existential status of the objects of perception has been suspended and our experiences remain for us as phenomena, but with the caveat that we no longer assume anything about their existence. Husserlian phenomenology, then, may describe what is given, but it can do no more than that. In philosophical terms, this may well be problematic for Husserl, the reduction yields a description of one's own perceptions which will be of strictly limited value to anyone else. Husserl's idealism, which amounts here to solipsism, does little to further philosophical understanding, his rigorously scientific method only allows him to "describe his own intuitions",⁸³ and furthermore,

(...) given a pure intuition of the kind Husserl believes himself to have isolated, all one could do with it would be to describe it. But there seems to be no philosophical problem to which such a description could be the solution, no philosophical use to which it could be put.⁸⁴

⁸³ Bell, p.197.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.197.

It will be the contention of this thesis, however, that the phenomenological reduction, and the aims and methods of phenomenology - more specifically Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology - in accounting for human perception, are a useful means of approach when analysing Robbe-Grillet's literature and film. The bracketing of cultural assumptions and the consequent return to phenomena can be seen as a radical break with the past in literary and filmic terms. Therefore, although Husserlian phenomenology could be laid open to criticism on a philosophical level, its revision by Merleau-Ponty makes its wider application to film and literature far from redundant.

Phenomenology in France: Sartre

Sartre's approach to phenomenology differed in many ways from that of Husserl. It was, however, influential in the formation of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, particularly in relation to the Merleau-Pontyan notion of the body-subject. One of the most important developments in Sartre's philosophy was the differentiation he established between consciousness and the objects of consciousness. Sartre wanted to reject Husserl's account of the reduction, in which the ego was given as a residuum of the process of the reduction. In *La Transcendance de l'ego*, Sartre sets out his argument against Husserl, and demonstrated the problems inherent in Husserl's transcendental reduction.

The main aspect of the transcendental reduction (as conceived of by Husserl) to which Sartre objects is the notion that it reveals an ego. For Husserl, it should be remembered, the reduction revealed the ego and its acts of consciousness. Sartre distinguishes two forms of consciousness, reflective and unreflective, and begins his argument against Husserl by claiming that, in *conscience irréfléchie*, the notion of an ego

is superfluous. That is, when one is not thinking about, or reflecting on, the fact that one is conscious (i.e. in unreflective consciousness), there is no I, no ego, of which one is aware. One is only aware of the object of consciousness. It is as if, Sartre says, in unreflexive consciousness, instead of objects having qualities of heat, smell, shape, etc, they have qualities of repulsiveness, attractiveness, charm, usefulness, etc, and it is as if these latter qualities were what made us act or behave in the way we do.⁸⁵ It is only in reflective consciousness that one is aware of the ego, as well as the object of consciousness perceived as the thing desired, or hated, etc:

Dans le cas de la réflexion, et dans ce cas seulement, je puis penser “*Je hais Pierre*” “*J’ai pitié de Paul, etc.*”. (...) La réflexion “empoisonne” le désir. Sur le plan irréfléchi, je porte secours à Pierre parce que Pierre est “devant-être-secouru”. Mais si mon état se transforme soudain en état réfléchi, me voilà en train de me regarder agir au sens où l’on dit de quelqu’un qu’il s’écoute parler. Ce n’est plus Pierre qui m’attire, c’est *ma* conscience secourable qui m’apparaît comme devant être perpétuée. Même si je pense seulement que je dois poursuivre mon action parce que “cela est bien”, le bien qualifie *ma* conduite, *ma* pitié, etc.⁸⁶

However, it still looks as though there is an “I” present in reflexive consciousness, given the account of it Sartre outlines here. But this “I” is still not graspable, not clearly apparent, even in reflexive consciousness:

il n’est que trop certain que le Je du Je pense n’est l’objet d’une évidence ni apodictique ni adéquate. Elle n’est pas apodictique puisque en disant *Je* nous affirmons bien plus que nous ne savons. Elle n’est pas adéquate car le Je se présente comme une réalité opaque dont il faudrait développer le contenu. Certes, il se manifeste comme la source de la conscience, mais cela même devrait nous faire réfléchir: en effet, de ce fait il apparaît voilé, mal distinct à travers la conscience, comme un caillou au fond de l’eau.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Transcendance de l’ego* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1965), pp.41-42.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.35.

Thus, although Sartre thinks that it is possible to discover objects of consciousness and a hazily present “Je”, no transcendental ego, such as that posited by Husserl, emerges, as is neatly summarised by Hammond, Howarth and Keat:

First, the Sartrean ego is *transcendent* as opposed to *transcendental*: that is to say, it is part of the world, not ‘beyond’ the world; second, it is *transcendent* as opposed to *immanent*: that is, it is not wholly ‘in’ the phenomena, it can have hidden facets, a past, a future, a character, about any of which one can be ignorant or mistaken.⁸⁸

For Sartre, it is in perceiving the object of consciousness that consciousness is to be discovered. That is, even in reflexive consciousness, consciousness itself is not the object of consciousness, because it is already given in the act of being conscious of something:

Une conscience n’a nullement besoin d’une conscience réfléchissante pour être consciente d’elle-même. Simplement elle ne se pose pas à elle-même comme son objet.⁸⁹

Thus, the important point made by Sartre about consciousness is that it is contained in the act of consciousness itself, rather than in a conscious subject. In this respect, Merleau-Ponty was in agreement with Sartre, for him too, Husserl’s reduction arrived at the wrong conclusion, consciousness and its acts could not be separated.

Sartre further elaborates his ontology in *L’Être et le néant*.⁹⁰ In this work, he distinguishes between two modes of being, the first, *l’être-pour-soi*, is, for Sartre, a nothingness, as opposed to the second mode of being, *l’être-en-soi*, a plenitude. Sartre asserted that consciousness consisted of nothingness, it was a hole at the centre of being:

(...) le Pour-soi apparaît comme une menue néantisation qui prend son origine au sein de l’Être; et il suffit de cette néantisation pour qu’un bouleversement total *arrive* à l’En-soi. Ce bouleversement, c’est le

⁸⁸ Hammond, Howarth and Keat, p.102.

⁸⁹ Sartre, *La Transcendance de l’ego*, p.29.

⁹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

monde. Le Pour-soi n'a d'autre réalité que d'être la néantisation de l'être.⁹¹

In terms of intentionality, consciousness was always aimed towards something outside itself, by definition, since there was nothing within it. Consciousness was aimed at *l'être-en-soi*, being-in-itself. Being-in-itself was, by contrast, pure being, its existence being described by Sartre as superfluous, "de trop",⁹² and this kind of being constituted the objects of consciousness. This being-in-itself, the matter of which the world is made, existed simply as a contingent fact, for Sartre. Furthermore, he claimed that these two modes of being were "scindés en deux régions incommunicables".⁹³ Given this incommunicability, then, how was consciousness to operate?

Consciousness, for Sartre, "is somehow in direct contact with being and is nothing other than this grasp of being."⁹⁴ Sartre's account affords no further explanation than this. He does, however, in *L'Être et le néant*, re-emphasise his point that self-consciousness is already present in consciousness. A condition of consciousness having knowledge of its object is that it is also consciousness of itself:

(...) si ma conscience n'était pas conscience d'être conscience de table, elle serait donc conscience de cette table sans avoir conscience de l'être ou, si l'on veut, une conscience qui s'ignorerait soi-même, une conscience inconsciente – ce qui est absurde.⁹⁵

So, for Sartre, self-consciousness is given in the act of consciousness, that is, one is aware of oneself as a conscious being in any conscious act, and this awareness is just there without one's needing to think about it:

⁹¹ Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp.711-712.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁹⁴ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Lodon and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.360.

Ainsi n'y a-t-il aucune espèce de primat de la réflexion avec la conscience réfléchie: ce n'est pas celle-là qui révèle celle-ci à elle-même. Tout au contraire, c'est la conscience non-réflexive qui rend la réflexion possible: il y a un cogito préréflexif qui est la condition du cogito cartésien.⁹⁶

However, Sartre explains that it is wrong to equate consciousness with being conscious of itself as an act, rather, "la conscience existe par soi."⁹⁷ Critics of Sartre have judged this explanation to be somewhat inadequate as an account of consciousness. Dermot Moran complains, for example, that:

Sartre has a peculiar and entirely unexplained view of a self-creating consciousness emerging at the heart of a brute being. (...) This whole act in fact contradicts Sartre's equally strongly held view that consciousness is not its own foundation. There is not much point in trawling through Sartre's works for a more nuanced resolution of this contradiction. All one will succeed in doing is multiplying the assertions – one will not discover an argument.⁹⁸

In spite of the weaknesses in Sartre's account of consciousness, however, Moran⁹⁹ does see some value in the insights Sartre provides of a phenomenological account of bodily existence. The for-itself in Sartre's philosophy is a bodily consciousness, it has a situation in a body, and it is through this body that it expresses itself. Sartre's discussion on the body is also bound up with his account of the perception of others. For Sartre, one's own body is not only the point of view I actually have, it is also an object upon which other points of view, (ones I could not possibly have), can bring their attention to bear. One becomes aware of the existence of others through one's experience of being perceived by others, claims Sartre. In a situation of, for example, feeling oneself blush or

⁹⁵ Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p.18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁹⁸ Moran, p.387.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.389.

sweat, one is acutely aware of one's body not as it is for oneself, but as it is for another.

Sartre explains that

(...) je ne saurais être embarrassé par mon corps tel que je l'existe. C'est mon corps réel qu'il est pour l'autre qui devrait m'embarrasser.¹⁰⁰

The reason for this feeling of embarrassment or profound discomfort is due to the fact that the Other sees us as we are, which we are ourselves unable to do, since it is impossible to view oneself from outside one's own body, unless in a mirror or a photograph, etc. More importantly for Sartre, this process is one of analogy, in which I realise that the other sees me as I see them, that is, as an object:

C'est à ce niveau que se fait l'assimilation analogique du corps d'autrui et de mon corps. Il est nécessaire en effet – pour que je puisse penser que “mon corps est pour autrui comme le corps d'autrui est pour moi” - que j'aie rencontré autrui dans sa subjectivité objectivante, puis comme objet; il faut, pour que je juge le corps d'autrui comme objet semblable à mon corps, qu'il m'ait été donné comme objet et que mon corps m'ait dévoilé de son côté une dimension-objet.¹⁰¹

Merleau-Ponty would fundamentally differ from the view expressed by Sartre here in his own account of the perception of others. No such analogical argument for the existence of other minds was permissible, for Merleau-Ponty.

Phenomenology in France: Merleau-Ponty

In common with his phenomenological forebears, Merleau-Ponty took up the aim of describing phenomena, of elucidating an intentional relationship between consciousness and the objects of consciousness, of thinking through the phenomenological reduction, and of describing bodily existence in the world. It was,

¹⁰⁰ Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, p.421.

however, Merleau-Ponty's arguments concerning bodily existence that set him apart from the previous phenomenological philosophers.

Merleau-Ponty's account of the reduction, unlike Husserl's, asserted that a complete reduction was never possible. In this respect his account of the reduction is similar to Sartre's. Whereas for Husserl, what remained after having performed the reduction was an ego and the objects of consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, this could not be the case, since the ego and its objects were inseparable. Since consciousness was always consciousness *of* something, that is, consciousness could not exist in a vacuum, or without an object, it made no sense to speak of a transcendental ego as Husserl had.

Merleau-Ponty explains, in relation to the reduction that:

C'est parce que nous sommes de part en part rapport au monde que la seule manière de nous en apercevoir est de suspendre ce mouvement, de lui refuser notre complicité, (...) ou encore de le mettre hors jeu. Non qu'on renonce aux certitudes du sens commun et de l'attitude naturelle, - elles sont au contraire le thème constant de la philosophie, - mais parce que, justement comme présupposés de pensée, elles "vont de soi", passent inaperçues, et que, pour les réveiller et pour les faire apparaître, nous avons à nous en absentir un instant. (...) Le plus grand enseignement de la réduction est l'impossibilité d'une réduction complète. (...) Si nous étions l'esprit absolu, la réduction ne serait pas problématique. Mais puisque au contraire nous sommes au monde, puisque même nos réflexions prennent place dans le flux temporel qu'elles cherchent à capter, (...) il n'y a pas de pensée qui embrasse toute notre pensée.¹⁰²

Just as the ego is not separable from the objects of consciousness in the process of reduction for Merleau-Ponty, so the Husserlian notion of experiencing hyletic data fails to correspond to our lived experience. As was discussed previously, the idea that hyletic data are formed into objects of consciousness for the noetic act is fraught with problems, since it is illogical to claim that a meaningful perception may be created out of

¹⁰¹ Sartre, *L'Être et le néant*, pp.421-422.

meaningless data. Furthermore, for Merleau-Ponty, this just does not correspond to experience. Hyletic data simply are not what we experience. We do not, for example, experience redness as a sensation in isolation, as Husserl's account of hyletic data might suggest. As Merleau-Ponty points out, redness is not a sensation, but rather a property of an object. Borrowing an example from Sartre, he remarks that,

(...) ce rouge ne serait à la lettre pas le même s'il n'était pas le "rouge laineux" d'un tapis.¹⁰³

This is a more convincing argument than that of Husserl – sensations are not experienced in isolation and then gathered together to form some coherent object; the redness and the woolliness of the carpet cannot, in this case, be separated. Neither can the ego, or consciousness, be separated from the object of consciousness:

Nous sommes pris dans le monde et nous n'arrivons pas à nous en détacher pour passer à la conscience du monde. Si nous le faisons, nous verrions que la qualité n'est jamais éprouvée immédiatement et que toute conscience est conscience de quelque chose.¹⁰⁴

So, for Merleau-Ponty, the result of the reduction is that we find ourselves grounded in the world around us; far from being transcendental egos, we are bound up in our environment. That part of the reduction that aims to yield, or help us describe, experience as it is undergone, still remains; there is still a process of bracketing as described by Husserl:

Le réel est à décrire, et non pas à construire ou à constituer. Cela veut dire que je ne peux pas assimiler la perception aux synthèses qui sont de l'ordre du jugement, des actes ou de la prédication. (...) Chercher l'essence du monde, ce n'est pas chercher ce qu'il est en idée, une fois que

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp.viii-ix.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.10.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

nous l'avons réduit en thème de discours, c'est chercher ce qu'il est en fait, pour nous avant toute thématisation¹⁰⁵

The reduction is the process of suspending our usual mode of perceiving the world, of putting to one side our pre-conceptions of it, and our theories about it. It is in this respect that Merleau-Ponty has carried on in the spirit of Husserl, although his conclusions after performing the reduction were, clearly, radically different. There is an implicit criticism of Husserl's eidetic reduction in what Merleau-Ponty says here. That is, he rejects the idea of trying to describe essences, which was the aim of Husserl's eidetic reduction. The world as it is perceived has nothing to do with essences, as Husserl conceived of them, claims Merleau-Ponty. What interests him is, rather, the world as it is given in perception, before we thematise it or subject it to any form of analysis.

The body-subject

Let us turn now to look at what Merleau-Ponty thinks is going on in perception. His account of perception offers a solution to an age-old problem in philosophy, namely, the mind-body problem. That is, philosophers have found it difficult to account for the fact that a physical body and a non-physical mind can interact with each other. Similarly, it is difficult to account for the way in which the physical world is perceived via a physical body by a non-physical mind. Traditionally in philosophy, there have been two ways of accounting for the relationship between consciousness and the world perceived by consciousness. The first of these, Materialism, holds that the objects of perception exist independently of human consciousness, and that the world impresses itself upon our minds in perception. The problem here is that of making the jump from the physical to

¹⁰⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.iv, p.x.

the non-physical – from the world to the mind. Also, for Merleau-Ponty, this account makes the human consciousness too passive – it has no role in the perception of objects. In other words, the world does not rely upon the human consciousness for its existence. Opposed to this view is Idealism, an account of perception in which the only things available to the human mind are the objects of consciousness. The world relies for its existence upon a consciousness to perceive it. An idealist cannot prove the existence of anything beyond what is present to the mind; without human consciousness, the outside world cannot exist. Husserl, in performing the transcendental reduction, fell into this trap – he could only account for the existence of perceptual data, rather than for that of the world “out there”. Clearly, our intuition is always to assume the existence of such a world, and it is therefore counter-intuitive to deny its existence. Idealism, for Merleau-Ponty, gives the perceiving subject too much power – one could say that it has an almost God-like creativity. He claims of empiricism (Materialism) and intellectualism (Idealism) that “l’un et l’autre sont incapables d’exprimer la manière particulière dont la conscience perceptive constitue son objet.”¹⁰⁶ That is, both of these accounts fail to correspond to our normal experience of perception. We neither create something from nothing, nor do we undergo a process of the world simply representing itself to us:

The central insight to be gained from (...) phenomenological studies is that knowledge is not something which is pre-given in the world – it is not embedded in the world waiting to be located. Nor is knowledge embedded inside some essential inner self revealed through introspection. Instead, knowledge is viewed as emerging from our ongoing interpreted action in the world.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.34.

¹⁰⁷ Dennis J. Sumara, *Private Readings in Public*, (New York: Lang, 1996), p.102.

Merleau-Ponty's account of perception is a kind of third way; neither Realist nor Idealist. His account is based on the notion of the body-subject (*le corps propre*), and it is on this basis that the whole of his philosophy is developed.

In perception, claims Merleau-Ponty, rather than the world being impressed upon the human consciousness from without, or the world being created by the conscious subject, the world is given to the subject, but in an indeterminate and ambiguous way. If we consider the visual field, for example, there are many elements within it to which the perceiver may pay attention, but only one area will be noticed by the perceiver at a given time. The perceiver may choose which element within the indeterminately given field to pay attention to, which element to make determinate. Merleau-Ponty likens this process to a gestalt shift, wherein the subject can never bring their attention to bear simultaneously on both the figure and the ground; *either one or the other* is the object of perception at any one time:

Quand la Gestalt-theorie [sic] nous dit qu'une figure sur un fond est la donnée sensible la plus simple que nous puissions obtenir, (...) c'est la définition même du phénomène perceptif, ce sens sans quoi un phénomène ne peut être dit perception. Le "quelque chose" perceptif est toujours au milieu d'autre chose, il fait toujours partie d'un "champ". Une plage vraiment homogène, n'offrant *rien à percevoir* ne peut être donnée à *aucune perception*. La structure de la perception effective peut seule nous enseigner ce que c'est que percevoir. La pure impression n'est donc pas seulement introuvable, mais imperceptible et donc impensable comme moment de la perception.¹⁰⁸

Gestalt psychology first made the discovery of this figure/ground structure in perception, and for Merleau-Ponty, this perception of a figure against a ground is what consciousness consists of. Either the figure seen against the background can be the object of perception, or the background itself can become the object of perception, it can become the thing

upon which attention is focused. The focus of attention can switch between the two. This process of shifting perception is known as a Gestalt shift. The important result of this discovery for Merleau-Ponty is that the perceiving subject is able to pick out a figure from a background – either one or the other becomes the object of consciousness. But only one is the object of consciousness, only one is foregrounded at any one time. This is the most basic form of perception, and its structure is common to all human perception. In perceptual experience, therefore, we are presented with something which is already structured, already meaningful in some way, but its structure remains ambiguous until we bring our attention to bear upon it. This is absolutely fundamental to Merleau-Ponty's account of how consciousness arises:

Le miracle de la conscience est de faire apparaître par l'attention des phénomènes qui rétablissent l'unité de l'objet dans une dimension nouvelle au moment où ils la brisent. Ainsi l'attention n'est ni une association d'images, ni le retour à soi d'une pensée déjà maîtresse de ses objets, mais la constitution active d'un objet nouveau qui explicite et thématise ce qui n'était offert jusque là qu'à titre d'horizon indéterminé. (...) Ce passage de l'indéterminé au déterminé, cette reprise à chaque instant de sa propre histoire dans l'unité d'un sens nouveau, c'est la pensée même.¹⁰⁹

So, rather than Husserl's noetic/noematic distinction, or Sartre's *l'être-en-soi/l'être-pour-soi* account of the act of consciousness and the conscious subject, Merleau-Ponty bases his account of consciousness firmly on the experience of perception. Hyletic data are not organised into meaningful objects by the noesis, as in Husserl. Rather, a figure arises from a field, the indeterminate becomes determinate, and the evidence for this structuring of perception is readily available when we consider examples such as a figure seen against a background. In accounting for perception and

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.10.

consciousness in this way, Merleau-Ponty has avoided the problems of Materialism and Idealism, as the conscious subject is neither all-powerful in creating its environment, nor is it at the mercy of the impressions made upon it by the world “out there”. Instead, the world is ambiguous, indeterminate, and consciousness arises when the body, in making it determinate and meaningful, perceives it.

Another aspect of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology that is of importance in considering his account of perception is the notion of sedimentation. This is a process whereby previous experiences are ‘sedimented’ so that the knowledge gained from them can be applied to new situations:

Il y a un “monde des pensées”, c’est-à-dire une sédimentation de nos opérations mentales, qui nous permet de compter sur nos concepts et sur nos jugements acquis comme sur des choses qui sont là et se donnent globalement, sans que nous ayons besoin à chaque moment d’en refaire la synthèse.¹¹⁰

The sedimented knowledge of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is not an inert mass, it is put to use constantly in perception, making us privilege certain aspects of the perceptual field before us. We constantly feed off the sedimented knowledge we have amassed, and we constantly add to it in perception; it is an active process of acquisition and application. This means that past experiences can influence the experiences we choose to concentrate upon in the present.

The account of perception outlined by Merleau-Ponty is dependent upon bodily consciousness. That is, the fact that perception has a structure is also due to the situation of the consciousness within a body. Here, the influence of Sartre can be detected in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. The situation of the body-subject obviously determines the

¹⁰⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.39.

range of possibilities within the perceptual field (e.g. one cannot see what is behind one's back). Consciousness, then, always perceives from a given perspective. Also, human consciousness of the world is always intentional, that is, directed towards the object of consciousness. Thus for Merleau-Ponty, the direction of intentional experience is always from the perceiver towards the world, so that consciousness cannot be directed towards itself.

En d'autres termes, j'observe les objets extérieurs avec mon corps, je les manie, je les inspecte, j'en fais le tour, mais quant à mon corps je ne l'observe pas lui-même: il faudrait, pour pouvoir le faire, disposer d'un second corps qui lui-même ne serait pas observable. (...) Ce qui l'empêche d'être jamais un objet, c'est qu'il est ce par quoi il y a des objets. Il n'est ni tangible ni visible dans la mesure où il est ce qui voit et ce qui touche.¹¹¹

Just as one can never jump on one's own shadow, one's own consciousness is never available as an intentional object. Equally, consciousness is always *of* something, it cannot exist in a void. It is always directed towards something outside of itself, and, due to its bodily incarnation, it has a certain perspective on the world, a situation in space and in time.

Time

The consequences of Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of perception and the body-subject can be found in his accounts of sexuality, intersubjectivity (the existence of other people) and time. Merleau-Ponty's notion of temporality stems, once again, from his account of bodily existence. According to Merleau-Ponty, time is not something external which consciousness records, rather, it arises from my present consciousness. The past

¹¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.151.

and the future are merely a part of my experience in the present, and can only be experienced in the present. Furthermore, time can not be a succession of separate moments, for Merleau-Ponty, since this would require that consciousness intend each separate moment from outside of that moment, which would lead to an infinite regression:

(...) si la conscience du temps était faite d'états de conscience qui se succèdent, il faudrait une nouvelle conscience pour avoir conscience de cette succession et ainsi de suite.¹¹²

As was discussed earlier, in relation to the body subject, consciousness cannot stand outside of itself or be an object for itself, so an atomistic account of temporality is illogical, for Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty dismisses the notion that time can be described as flowing like a river. Although the metaphor of a river that flows is often used to make sense of the idea of time passing, Merleau-Ponty claims that it is quite wrong to conceive of it in this way. The problem with time thus explained is that it omits to mention, yet presupposes, the very thing upon which Merleau-Ponty's account insists, viz. a situated observer. There has to be someone standing on the riverbank, watching the flow of the river, so to speak, otherwise no direction of flow, no "to" or "from", is possible. Moreover, this metaphor for time would have the body-subject observing the passage of time passively, whereas Merleau-Ponty wants to claim that in fact the body-subject has a role to play in the process. Time is something that is born of one's relationship with the world, it is part of one's being in the world; time is reaching out and interacting with the world, it is not something that one undergoes, but is something that one *lives*:

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp.107-108.

Le temps n'est donc pas un processus réel, une succession effective que je me bornerais à enregistrer. Il naît de *mon* rapport avec les choses. (...) Un passé et un présent jaillissent quand je m'étends vers eux.¹¹³

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's notion of time is not dependent upon any process of re-constituting time from remembered or projected memories/fantasies. One's experience of the past, for example, is not an intellectualised process whereby one tries to put a date to a certain experience by means of deduction. Such a process of reasoning bears no resemblance to our relationship with the past, claims Merleau-Ponty. Instead, our experience of the present reaches out towards the future and the past; we are always in touch with the past and the future:

Mon présent se dépasse vers un avenir et vers un passé prochains et les touche là où ils sont, dans le passé, dans l'avenir eux-mêmes. Si nous n'avions le passé que sous la forme de souvenirs exprès, nous serions tentés à chaque instant de l'évoquer pour en vérifier l'existence.¹¹⁴

Merleau-Ponty's account of time also takes issue to some extent with Bergson's explanation of time in *Matière et Mémoire*.¹¹⁵ Whilst Merleau-Ponty is prepared to admit that Bergson is right to conceive of time as a continuum, he claims that Bergson's account amounts to a denial of time, in that it does not distinguish between past, present and future:

Bergson avait tort d'*expliquer* l'unité du temps par sa continuité, car cela revient à confondre passé, présent et avenir, sous prétexte que l'on va de l'un à l'autre par transitions insensibles, et enfin à nier le temps. Mais il avait raison de s'attacher à la continuité du temps comme à un phénomène essentiel. (...) chaque présent réaffirme la présence de tout le passé qu'il chasse et anticipe celle de tout l'à-venir, et (...) par définition, le présent

¹¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p. 483.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.471, 481.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.479.

¹¹⁵ Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (Paris: Alcan, 1908).

n'est pas enfermé en lui-même et se transcende vers un avenir et un passé.¹¹⁶

So, for Merleau-Ponty, although time cannot be *explained* in terms of its continuity, since this would mean no distinction between past, present and future, time is nevertheless *experienced* as a continuity. Two contiguous moments in time are not indistinguishable, therefore, time is not a continuum, but they blend into each other, one instant is the anticipation of the next. Merleau-Ponty sees time as a result of the introduction of a human consciousness into the world, and it is for this reason that past and future are experienced from the perspective of the present. The human subject necessarily perceives from the present, since time is nothing more than the result of the subject's existence in the world. Similarly, in Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, the past and future exist via the present; time is experienced in the present because this present is the perspective of the perceiving consciousness. Merleau-Ponty explains that time *is* human existence in the world:

Le passé n'est donc pas passé, ni le futur futur. Il n'existe que lorsqu'un subjectivité vient briser la plénitude de l'être-en-soi, y dessiner une perspective, y introduire le non-être. Un passé et un avenir jaillissent quand je m'étends vers eux. (...) Le passage du présent à un autre présent, je ne le pense pas, je n'en suis pas le spectateur, je l'effectue, je suis déjà au présent qui va venir (...) je suis moi-même le temps, qui "demeure" et ne "s'écoule" ni ne "change".¹¹⁷

Human beings do not exist "in" time, a human perspective on the world cannot be measured by any "objective" or external yardstick; the situation of a person in the world is determined by his/her existence as a body. Space and time are relative to the situation of the body, for Merleau-Ponty, rather than the body's position being measured in time

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.481.

and space. This bodily anchorage in the world ensures for Merleau-Ponty the unification of his philosophical accounts of perception, space, time, and sexuality, since they all flow from this corporeality; all our experience results from our bodily existence.

The body as a sexual being

Merleau-Ponty's explanation of the body as a sexual being is based upon his account of perception. In the same way as, in perception, phenomena are given in an indeterminate manner and then made determinate when they are focused upon, the body in its sexual being sometimes perceives the phenomena around it in an ambiguous way. The world is given ambiguously, and it is the fact that we have bodies, sexual bodies, which allows us to decide which element of the perceptual field will be intended in perception.

Il y a (...) des formes confuses, des relations privilégiées, nullement "inconscientes" et dont nous savons très bien qu'elles sont louches, qu'elles ont rapport à la sexualité, sans qu'elles l'évoquent expressément. (...) La sexualité, sans être l'objet d'un acte de conscience exprès, peut motiver les formes privilégiées de mon expérience. (L') existence est la reprise et l'explication d'une situation sexuelle, et (...) ainsi elle a toujours au moins un double sens. Il y a osmose entre la sexualité et l'existence, c'est-à-dire que si l'existence diffuse dans la sexualité, réciproquement la sexualité diffuse dans l'existence, de sorte qu'il est impossible d'assigner, pour une décision ou une action donnée, la part de la motivation sexuelle et celle des autres motivations, impossible de caractériser une décision ou un acte comme "sexuel" ou "non sexuel".¹¹⁸

So, for Merleau-Ponty, perception is inextricably bound up with sexuality. Our perspective on reality is reliant upon the fact that we inhabit a body. The fact that we are sexual beings means that certain aspects of the perceptual field will be picked out in

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.481-482.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.196-197.

perception, although it will not necessarily be immediately obvious to the perceiver that the attention paid to these aspects is sexually motivated.

Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality also has implications for relationships between human beings, and for the perception of others in general, not only in a sexual context. He talks about the relation of power between two people in a sexual situation, and the way in which we can use our bodies to gain power over another. Merleau-Ponty claims that we rarely show off our bodies to another person, but if we do, it is either in fear, or else in the attempt to fascinate another:

Il lui semble que le regard étranger qui parcourt son corps le dérobe à lui-même ou qu'au contraire l'exposition de son corps va lui livrer autrui sans défense, et c'est alors autrui qui sera réduit à l'esclavage (...) cette maîtrise est une impasse, puisque, au moment où ma valeur est reconnue par le désir d'autrui, autrui n'est plus la personne par qui je souhaitais d'être reconnu, c'est un être fasciné, sans liberté, et qui à ce titre ne compte plus pour moi. (...) Ce qu'on cherche à posséder, ce n'est donc pas un corps, mais un corps animé par une conscience (...)¹¹⁹

For Merleau-Ponty, the realisation that if others can be objects for me, then I can also exist as an object for others and therefore become enslaved myself is a disturbing one, as my own freedom is thus called into question. In this respect, he is in agreement with Sartre's account of human relationships. However, since Merleau-Ponty thinks that other people are given in perception as conscious beings, rather than as objects, the value in any relationship is not in the mastery or enslavement of another, but in interacting with another free, conscious being.

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, pp.194-195.

Intersubjectivity

The existence of other minds has often been considered difficult to prove in philosophy. Clearly, we have no access to the minds of others, and this is indeed a condition of their status as other minds, as Husserl pointed out. However, both for Merleau-Ponty and for Husserl, this does not preclude our ability to perceive other people as being bodies inhabited by consciousness like ourselves. Whereas for Sartre, Merleau-Ponty claimed, the process of perceiving other people was one of analogy with one's own situation, no such analogy was necessary for Merleau-Ponty. Following Husserl's notion of the apperception of others, Merleau-Ponty claimed that other people were given in perception as other people. He did not see the need to account for this as a process of seeing someone else and then concluding from their behaviour, speech or movement that a consciousness was at work within their body, as did Sartre:

Il n'y a rien là comme un "raisonnement par analogie". (...) Le raisonnement par analogie présuppose ce qu'il devait expliquer. L'autre conscience ne peut être déduite que si les expressions émotionnelles d'autrui et les miennes sont comparées et identifiées et si des corrélations précises sont reconnues entre ma mimique et mes "faits psychiques". Or, la perception d'autrui précède et rend possible de telles constatations, elles n'en sont pas constitutives.¹²⁰

To argue by analogy, then, is to admit circularity into one's argument, which is not acceptable. Also, the perception of others is required before any such process of analogical reasoning can take place.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates his argument with an example from his own observations. One can notice, even in a baby of fifteen months, that the baby perceives the other as another person like himself. If, argues Merleau-Ponty, I playfully take the

¹²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p.404.

child's finger between my teeth and pretend to bite it, then he copies the way I open my mouth. A baby of this age is not yet capable of arguing by analogy, claims Merleau-Ponty, he has never seen his own reflection, so he cannot know by comparison that I have a face just as he does. In any case, this comparison would not help, since my features do not very closely resemble his, I have teeth which do not look like his own. Nevertheless, there is an intersubjective significance in biting, for the baby. That is, the way the baby feels his teeth and jaw from his own, internal perspective is as a means of biting, and he perceives my jaw and teeth, from the outside, as capable of performing the same task. Although an analogy of the kind described by Sartre may be used to re-confirm what is already given in the perception of others, it cannot replace or become prior to what is given in perception, i.e. that other consciousnesses exist, in just the same way as I do.

Merleau-Ponty modified his position on intersubjectivity later in his career, and this was largely in response to what he perceived to be the dualistic tendencies of previous phenomenological philosophy. Merleau-Ponty thought that the notion of selfhood for his philosophical predecessors came at the price of the subject's severance from the world which is the object of human consciousness. A Cartesian mind/body split reared its head in the works of Husserl and Sartre, in the form of Husserl's distinction between the world and the transcendental ego, and Sartre's *être-pour-soi/être-en-soi* division.¹²¹ A schism between the self and the world, for Merleau-Ponty, would lead to difficulty in arguing convincingly for the existence of other minds, of other consciousnesses – how can the move from knowledge of one's own mind to knowledge of others be justified? Indeed, Husserl's idealism is dangerously close to a solipsistic

¹²¹ There is debate about Merleau-Ponty's argument in this regard; see Jon Stewart ed., *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

account of consciousness, and his attempt to side-step this via his notion of the ‘apperception’ of other human beings, whilst arguably a faithful phenomenological rendering of his own experience, is less than convincingly argued. Whilst the solipsist corner is clearly an undesirable place from which to argue, in terms of making a convincing case for the existence of others, it is, in addition, a contradictory position. The very act of engaging in an argument that one can only be sure of one’s own existence and perceptions, and that there can never be any absolute proof of the veracity of these, is an act that assumes the existence of an interlocutor.

Sartre’s account of being is no less difficult a starting point for arguing towards the existence of others; the division between the *en-soi* and the *pour-soi* remains dualistic. That is, the mind/body problem is unresolved by the way in which Sartre carves up Being. Merleau-Ponty considers this in the following remark:

Certes, entre les deux “côtés” de notre corps, le corps comme sensible et le corps comme sentant, - ce que nous avons appelé autrefois corps objectif et corps phénoménal - on peut répondre qu’il y a, plutôt qu’un écart, l’abîme qui sépare l’En Soi du Pour Soi.¹²²

Thus, Merleau-Ponty, without naming Sartre, seems to be criticising the latter’s stance, referring to him implicitly by borrowing his terminology. Any suggestion that the body belongs simply to the realm of the *En Soi* is not sufficient to account for the sense of touch, for example, it makes the hands seem too mechanistic:

Oui ou non, avons-nous un corps, c’est-à-dire non pas un objet de pensée permanent, mais une chair qui souffre quand elle est blessée, des mains qui touchent? On le sait: des mains ne suffisent pas pour toucher, mais décider pour cette seule raison que nos mains ne touchent pas, et les renvoyer au monde des objets ou des instruments, ce serait, acceptant la

¹²² Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l’invisible* p. 180.

bifurcation du sujet et de l'objet, renoncer par avance à comprendre le sensible et nous priver de ses lumières.¹²³

What Merleau-Ponty wishes to explore and describe, then, is the inherence of the subject within the physical body, and any suggestion of two separate modes of being, the *En Soi* and the *Pour Soi*, he claims, precludes the possibility of such an exploration.

The alternative suggested by Merleau-Ponty is an inherence of the consciousness in the world that allows for the consciousness to be part of that world and therefore to have access to the world and to other human beings due to the fact that everything is made of the same stuff, of the same flesh:

(...) notre corps est un être à deux feuillets, d'un côté chose parmi les choses et, par ailleurs, celui qui les voit et les touche; nous disons, parce que c'est évident, qu'il réunit en lui ces deux propriétés, et sa double appartenance à l'ordre de l' "objet" et à l'ordre du "sujet" nous dévoile entre les deux ordres des relations très inattendues. (...) Car, si le corps est chose parmi les choses, c'est en un sens plus fort et plus profond qu'elles: c'est, disions-nous, qu'il en est, et ceci veut dire qu'il se détache sur elles et, dans cette mesure, se détache d'elles. (...) S'il touche et voit, ce n'est pas qu'il ait les visibles devant lui comme objets: ils sont autour de lui, ils entrent même dans son enceinte, ils sont en lui, ils tapissent du dehors et du dedans ses regards et ses mains.¹²⁴

Thus, there are no longer two realms of being, but one, that which Merleau-Ponty calls *la chair*. The flesh of the world is the means by which the body has a purchase on it; it can communicate with and perceive the flesh of the world because they are of the same kind: "Je suis fait de la même chair que le monde, c'est dire aussi qu'autrui et moi sommes de la même chair."¹²⁵ Thus, claims Merleau-Ponty, we should no longer say that the body is

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible* p. 180.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 180-181.

¹²⁵ Zielinski, Agata, *Lecture de Merleau-Ponty et Levinas: Le corps, le monde, l'autre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), p.188.

made up of two components, with the *sensible*¹²⁶ or perceivable aspect being the same as the world. Rather, the body is not either a thing that is seen or a thing that sees, but it is of the world itself, the world that everyone sees, and it can do this because its eyes and hands

(...) ne sont rien d'autre que cette référence d'un visible, d'un tangible-étalon à tous ceux dont il porte la ressemblance, et dont il recueille le témoignage, par une magie qui est la vision, le toucher mêmes.

It is his contention that the human body and the world and other human bodies are all made up of *chair* that will then allow Merleau-Ponty to account for the existence of others. This strategy seems to present a means of avoiding any argument from analogy or Husserlian 'apperception'.

Merleau-Ponty implicitly criticises Husserl in *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

He argues that evidence of other people is possible precisely because I am not transparent to myself (i.e. I cannot perceive myself as a pure Ego or as *être-pour-soi*), and because my subjectivity brings its body along with it; it is always an incarnate subjectivity:

Nous disions tout à l'heure: en tant qu'autrui réside dans le monde, qu'il y est visible et qu'il fait partie de mon champ, il n'est jamais un Ego au sens où je le suis pour moi-même. Pour le penser comme un véritable Je, je devrais me penser comme simple objet pour lui, ce qui m'est interdit par le savoir que j'ai de moi-même. Mais si le corps d'autrui n'est pas un objet pour moi, ni le mien pour lui, s'ils sont des comportements, la position d'autrui ne me réduit pas à la condition d'objet dans son champ, ma perception d'autrui ne le réduit pas à la condition d'objet dans mon champ.¹²⁷

By way of this critique, then, Merleau-Ponty modified his understanding of intersubjectivity. What Merleau-Ponty did take from Sartre, however was the idea that

¹²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.181.

¹²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.405.

being perceived by others was a part of knowing oneself and was the basis of interaction with others.

Beyond philosophy: Merleau-Ponty and phenomenology in art, fiction and cinema

The application of Merleau-Ponty's interest in perception, the phenomenological reduction, and in the body-subject as the locus of perception went beyond the philosophical. His writings also cover the consequences of his phenomenology for painting, literature and cinema. He sees art and phenomenology as having a common purpose, as is illustrated by the following remark in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*:

La vraie philosophie est de rapprendre à voir le monde, et en ce sens une histoire racontée peut signifier le monde avec autant de "profondeur" qu'un traité de philosophie. (...) [La phénoménologie] est laborieuse comme l'œuvre de Balzac, celle de Proust, celle de Valéry ou celle de Cézanne, - par le même genre d'attention et d'étonnement, par la même exigence de conscience, par la même volonté de saisir le sens du monde ou de l'histoire à l'état naissant. Elle se confond sous ce rapport avec l'effort de la pensée moderne.¹²⁸

The novelist seeks to render experience just as it is experienced as in the process of phenomenological reduction. Robbe-Grillet's works perform the literary and cinematic equivalent of the phenomenological reduction in rejecting the cultural baggage of previous literary and cinematic conventions and metaphoric devices, and returning to the exploration of objects, of things themselves. In this sense, the artist, whether novelist or painter, is working to the same end. Merleau-Ponty, in describing Cézanne's project, seems effectively to be describing the phenomenological reduction:

Nous vivons dans un milieu d'objets construits par les hommes, entre des ustensiles, dans des maisons, des rues, des villes et la plupart du temps nous ne les voyons qu'à travers les actions humaines dont ils peuvent être

¹²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p.xvi.

les points d'application. Nous nous habituons à penser que tout cela existe nécessairement et est inébranlable. La peinture de Cézanne met en suspens ces habitudes et révèle le fond de nature inhumaine sur lequel l'homme s'installe. (...) C'est un monde sans familiarité, où l'on n'est pas bien, qui interdit toute effusion humaine. Si l'on va voir d'autres peintres en quittant les tableaux de Cézanne, une détente se produit (...) ¹²⁹

The feeling of *dépaysement* described here might just as well apply to that experienced by the reader of a Robbe-Grillet novel or the viewer of one of his films. The difficulty experienced in reading or viewing them is due in no small part to the fact that Robbe-Grillet refuses metaphor and literary convention in favour of a return to the perceptual, to descriptions of objects unimbued with a pre-established meaning.

Merleau-Ponty also took an interest in cinema, and it is the subject of an essay entitled 'Le cinéma et la nouvelle psychologie'. ¹³⁰ The overlap with his theory of the perception of others is evident in his discussion. Just as Merleau-Ponty describes our relations of other people, who are experienced directly as other conscious beings in *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, he applies the same approach to his contemplation of cinema:

Voilà pourquoi l'expression de l'homme peut être au cinéma si saisissante: le cinéma ne nous donne pas, comme le roman l'a fait longtemps, les pensées de l'homme, il nous donne sa conduite ou son comportement, il nous offre directement cette manière spéciale d'être au monde, de traiter les choses et les autres, qui est pour nous visible dans les gestes, le regard, la mimique, et qui définit avec évidence chaque personne que nous connaissons. (...) La philosophie contemporaine ne consiste pas à enchaîner des concepts, mais à décrire le mélange de la conscience avec le monde, son engagement dans un corps, sa coexistence avec les autres, et (...) ce sujet-là est cinématographique par excellence. ¹³¹

¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et non-sens* (Paris: Les Editions Nagel, 1948) p.28.

¹³⁰ In *ibid.*, pp.85-106.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.104-105.

It is clear here that Merleau-Ponty's remarks on cinema hark back to the central point of his phenomenology of perception, that is, the embodied nature of consciousness. Cinema can directly convey someone's behaviour and so render the bodily consciousness of others to us in a way which allows us to grasp it directly, without the need to have that person's thoughts told to us.

Bearing in mind the phenomenological possibilities that Merleau-Ponty saw for rendering human experience in art, the following chapter examines how the basis of phenomenology, the reduction, may elucidate some of the more perplexing aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works.

Chapter Two

The Phenomenological Reduction: making strange

The development of phenomenology outlined so far has highlighted the fact that the phenomenological reduction was, for Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, of primary importance in the process of carrying out any phenomenological description. It allowed for a return to phenomena themselves, to the contents of our experience as undergone in perception. This meant also that cultural assumptions about experience were to be suspended. These assumptions were composed of presuppositions in relation to the sciences, arts, etc. This “natural attitude”, as it was labelled by phenomenological philosophers, included that which could be termed our cultural baggage, that is, all the prejudices, presuppositions and attitudes instilled in human consciousness over years of existence, the assumptions we make to enable us to make sense of the world around us. As mentioned previously, the results of the reduction were different for Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, and it was against Husserl that Merleau-Ponty set out his ideas about the reduction. Whereas for Husserl, the reduction revealed a transcendental ego which

assembled hyletic sensory data into meaningful perceptions, for Merleau-Ponty, it revealed a body-subject which was already firmly grounded in its environment, in the world around it, and for whom perception already had an ambiguous structure. For both philosophers, however, the main thrust of their phenomenological project was the return to phenomena themselves, and to the description of these phenomena. The aim of the reduction then, was to suspend for a moment one's adherence to the natural attitude in order to become aware that one usually adheres unthinkingly to it.

La meilleure formule de la réduction est sans doute celle qu'en donnait Eugen Fink, l'assistant de Husserl, quand il parlait d'un "étonnement" devant le monde. La réflexion ne se retire pas du monde vers l'unité de la conscience comme fondement du monde, elle prend recul pour voir jaillir les transcendances, elle distend les fils intentionnels qui nous relient au monde pour les faire paraître, elle seule est conscience du monde parce qu'elle le révèle comme étrange et paradoxal.¹³²

It is the strangeness of the perceived world after the performance of the reduction that is to be under discussion here. More specifically, in the context of Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, the possibility of understanding disturbed or traumatised mental states as performing a role similar to that of the reduction will be explored. That is, as Merleau-Ponty indicates, when one is in a state of anguish, obsession or trauma, the intentional links between subject and world are loosened, the world can appear different from the way it usually does, experiences are undergone as fragmented perceptions rather than as meaningful events. The phenomenological reduction, then, can explain Robbe-Grillet's seemingly obsessive description of the minutiae of sensory data which occurs due to a suspension of normality, in terms of the circumstances or situations experienced by fictional or filmic characters. A Robbe-Grilletian protagonist may, for example, find

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.viii.

him- or herself in an unknown place, cut off from the cultural norms he or she is used to. Alternatively, he or she may be undergoing some kind of crisis which means that his or her usual mental processes are not functioning correctly. This frequently leads the Robbe-Grilletian protagonist to pay more attention to small perceptual details, rather than to analyse the situation from a larger perspective and thus put a name to his or her situation. The aim of this analysis is to discuss these issues in detail, and also to endeavour to demonstrate that the notion of the reduction, as well as being pertinent to a discussion of the novels of Robbe-Grillet, can yield similar insights when applied to his films. This is one level on which the reduction can be seen to operate in the works of Robbe-Grillet, i.e. on the level of the experiences of his novelistic and filmic characters. In a sense, it also operates on the level of the reader or viewer's approach to reading or viewing a Robbe-Grillet novel or film. That is, pre-established habits of reading novels or viewing films have to be revised when confronted with the Robbe-Grilletian novel or film. So, the effect of strangeness experienced by the character within one of his works is not limited to the depiction of that character's experience of the world. It is also experienced by the audience of that work, upon encountering the work's non-adherence to traditions of chronological plot, omniscient narrative perspective, characterisation and so on. (These issues will be explored in more depth, and in a more relevant context in later chapters.) This suspension of cultural norms, this bracketing of habitual ways of perceiving the world in order to lay bare raw experience, whilst being originally intended as a philosophical procedure by phenomenological philosophers, can be adopted as a means of explaining Robbe-Grillet's break with the novelistic devices of the past. That is, due to his rejection of the conventions of the nineteenth century realist novel, the

Robbe-Grilletian novel requires its reader to suspend reading strategies which might previously have been applicable, and this constitutes a form of suspending cultural attitudes. Traditional narrative devices and conventions are flouted, readerly expectations are overturned, and the reader finds that habitual strategies for making sense of the novel are ineffective. It has already been noted that, although Robbe-Grillet's novels have already been subject to some analyses in phenomenological terms, and although some film theory exists in relation to phenomenology,¹³³ no critic has yet attempted a phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet's films. The present discussion will therefore explore the ways in which phenomenology, and in particular the notion of the phenomenological reduction, may be applied to his films, as well as to his novels.

Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies of describing objects without pre-established meaning, as outlined in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, suggest a position analogous to Merleau-Ponty's stated aims when he outlines his conception of the phenomenological reduction. This call for a return to unprocessed, pre-reflective states of perception, as they are experienced without the prejudices we usually bring to bear on them, is remarkably similar to the aim of *nouveaux romanciers* in their eschewal of literary conventions in favour of descriptions of basic human perceptual experience. In *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, Robbe-Grillet argues for a return to objects themselves:

A chaque instant, des franges de culture (psychologie, morale, métaphysique, etc.) viennent s'ajouter aux choses, leur donnant un aspect moins étranger, plus compréhensible, plus rassurant (...) A la place de cet univers des "significations" (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionnelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat. Que ce soit d'abord par leur *présence* que les objets et les gestes s'imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer, par-dessus toute théorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence, sentimental, sociologique, freudien, métaphysique

¹³³ See: Casebier and Sobchack.

ou autre. Dans les constructions futures, gestes et objets seront *là* avant d'être *quelque chose*.¹³⁴

Traditionally, literature works like a grid, claims Robbe-Grillet, it renders experience comprehensible, filtering it into squares which may be readily assimilated. However, that is not what the world is really like. For him, it is neither significant nor absurd, it has no meaning beyond the bare fact of its existence. Robbe-Grillet speaks of the shock of this reality, and with good reason; it is not difficult to imagine that the reader who is used to conventional literature might find himself or herself perplexed when confronted for the first time with a *nouveau roman*. His discussion also mentions the effect film may have in making the viewer see reality anew, and in particular he compares those films which have been adapted from novels to the texts upon which they are based. The aim of these kind of films, Robbe-Grillet remarks, is simply to translate a story into images. However, the effect on the viewer of such a film is often greater than on the reader of the original novel:

Mais il arrive à tout moment que le récit filmé nous tire hors de notre confort intérieur, vers ce monde offert, avec une violence qu'on cherchait en vain dans le texte écrit correspondant, roman ou scénario.¹³⁵

Robbe-Grillet's explanation for this is that in the original novel upon which the film was based, objects, gestures, etc., had a significance. For example, an empty chair was a sign of an absent person. In the film, the chair may now be seen for itself, as it really is; if any symbolic significance remains, it is only in a superfluous manner:

Et voici maintenant qu'on *voit* la chaise (...) ce qui nous atteint, (...) ce qui apparaît comme essentiel et irréductible à de vagues notions mentales, ce sont les gestes eux-mêmes, les objets, les déplacements et les contours,

¹³⁴ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, pp.20-21, p.23.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.22.

auxquels l'image a restitué d'un seul coup (...) leur *réalité*. (...) L'aspect un peu inhabituel de ce monde reproduit nous révèle, en même temps, le caractère *inhabituel* du monde qui nous entoure: inhabituel, lui aussi, dans la mesure où il refuse de se plier à nos habitudes d'appréhension et à notre ordre.¹³⁶

The endeavours of Robbe-Grillet and Merleau-Ponty to describe reality are comparable, then, in so far as they both espouse a suspension of culturally loaded ways of perceiving the world, and a return to the objects of experience, to raw perception. Neither seeks to explain, nor to give an account of the world in conventional terms, but to present the most basic level of our relationship with the world around us, a relationship born of our corporeal existence.

The defamiliarising effect of the process of reduction, it could be argued, might also be explained in terms of a Formalist analysis. Formalism is an approach to literature and cinema that analyses art forms according to their difference from the norm, and the extent to which this difference creates a strange or unfamiliar effect.¹³⁷ In a Formalist analysis, therefore, a break with past literary or cinematic forms might employ certain new techniques which would create a sense of unfamiliarity or strangeness for the reader or viewer. For the Formalists, a work of art can be considered more or less artistic according to the extent to which it employs defamiliarising techniques. This view of literature or film would certainly account for some of the strange aspects of Robbe-Grillet's work, and would therefore allow an analysis in which his works would be seen as literary or artistic. However, in terms of analysing Robbe-Grillet's body of work, this would be a relatively simplistic method of literary or cinematic analysis. It is

¹³⁶ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, pp.22-23.

¹³⁷ See Victor Chklovski, *Sur La Théorie de la prose*, traduit du russe par Guy Verret (Lausanne: L'Age D'homme, 1973).

immediately apparent to the reader of a Robbe-Grillet novel or the viewer of one of his films, that the work they are engaged with does indeed display defamiliarising artistic techniques and tendencies. Indeed, even now, some years since their initial appearance, these works still retain their defamiliarising power. The benefit of a phenomenological analysis over a Formalist one in this regard, then, is in its wider applicability to many areas of Robbe-Grillet's work. Whilst it is true that there are a great many examples of defamiliarisation in Robbe-Grillet's artistic output, to explain them simply as literary or cinematic devices whose inclusion only serves the purpose of confirming a work's artistic status, would be to fail to account for many of the complexities of Robbe-Grillet's works. The benefit of phenomenology over formalism with regards to the notion of making strange is that it can account for the strangeness encountered in Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of such diverse areas as the emphasis on sensory perception and on body-centred experience, and the bizarre, confusing treatment of time, but from a cohesive, body-centred perspective. Moreover, the many strange-seeming aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works can be accounted for in phenomenological terms from within a cohesive theoretical framework, that is, one that returns constantly to the foundations of phenomenology, the process of the reduction and the conclusion it produces, i.e. that human existence cannot be accounted for in terms of a dualistic mind and body, but that consciousness *is* the body, the phenomenological body-subject.

The reduction in *Le Voyeur*: unconventional descriptions and the return to phenomena

Existing phenomenological commentaries on Robbe-Grillet have, of course, paid attention to the way in which his novels can be understood to effect a phenomenological reduction. However, the analyses of Bernal and Carrabino have placed a slightly different emphasis on the reduction than that proposed here.¹³⁸ Bernal concentrates heavily on the notion of the *néantisation*, the nothingness that is at the heart of consciousness. Although her reading of Robbe-Grillet is enlightening and persuasive, she omits to mention the suspension of the habitual physical and cultural environments of Robbe-Grillet's protagonists, and the extent to which this also effects a bracketing such as is outlined in the phenomenological reduction. Neither does she consider the dissolution of self-identity that Merleau-Ponty claims occurs when illness, stress or trauma interfere with the normal processes of perception, and which he thinks forces the subject to focus on the phenomena in his or her immediate environment. The protagonists of Robbe-Grillet's works frequently find themselves in situations which lead them into a crisis or trauma. In these situations, their habitual conditions of being are suspended, they are cut off from their familiar surroundings, some aspect of their everyday life is thrown into turmoil, which means that they can no longer make sense of what is happening to them, the reality confronting them has lost its comforting, familiar veneer. This suspension of the usual means of making sense of reality is reminiscent of Sartre's *La Nausée*, in which Roquentin, when he experiences the chestnut tree root at the level of phenomena, experiences this sensation of strangeness that, for Sartre, is nausea.

In Robbe-Grillet's works, this kind of experience is also narrated, and *Le Voyeur* is a rich source of examples. In *Le Voyeur*, Mathias is suffering from some kind of sexual obsession concerning a young girl he remembers from his past. This leads him to attend to perceptual details which, under normal circumstances, would go unnoticed. These details cannot be re-assembled by Mathias into a meaningful account of what is happening to him. He is confused, nothing makes sense, because his usual apparatus for processing the experiences he undergoes into something meaningful have been put out of play by the obsession from which he suffers.

His lack of awareness of the obsessive nature of his thoughts is in evidence throughout the novel. The difference in preoccupations between Mathias and everyone else on the island is apparent from the first page. Whilst the other passengers on the boat are trying to see what or who is waiting for them on the quay, Mathias is absorbed in other contemplations:

Légèrement à l'écart, en arrière du champ que venait de décrire la fumée, un voyageur restait étranger à cette attente. La sirène ne l'avait pas plus arraché à son absence que ses voisins à leur passion. Debout comme eux, corps et membres rigides, il gardait les yeux au sol.¹³⁹

Mathias is in fact looking at a length of rope, which transports him back to memories of his childhood collection of pieces of string. This bizarre behaviour, which would make little sense to any onlooker, is quite justified in Mathias' mind. He sees nothing strange in taking an interest in rope or string, passing it off as a perfectly normal interest for a young boy, and furthermore, he sees nothing odd about his continuing interest in lengths

¹³⁸ Carrabino's account of the reduction concentrates upon *La Jalousie*, and consequently this text is not mentioned here. What is proposed instead is a reading of a range of Robbe-Grillet's novels and films, from across his career, to demonstrate the applicability of the approach to a diverse selection of works.

¹³⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Voyeur*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1955) p.9.

of string or rope long into adulthood. However, Mathias next turns to look at a small child, a little girl, who has been observing him. Her pose is described in detail,¹⁴⁰ and this pose (leaning against a pillar or post, hands behind the back, as if tied together, legs slightly parted, head leaning back on the pillar), is to be repeated, albeit with slight modifications each time, in descriptions of various young females throughout the body of the text. There is no *explicit* link made here in the descriptions of the young girl and the rope, although their contiguity in the text suggest an association of some kind. The fact that the link is not spelled out at any stage points to Mathias' inability to label his thoughts. This in turn, makes it difficult for the reader to realise what is happening, as it is, after all, Mathias' perspective that is being presented to the reader. His obsessive state of mind hinders recognition of the thoughts that he is having as being sexual or sadistic and so the bare component elements of his perception are presented, without being labelled as constitutive of sadistic sexual fantasies. This hindrance of recognition can be accounted for if we consider the conditions of the phenomenological reduction. The reduction involves a suspension of the usual conditions of perception, allowing for a return to pre-reflective sensory experience. This experience will not be significant or meaningful, since it has been divested of all cultural signification. Mathias' obsession here acts in the same way, preventing any 'normal' assessment of his thoughts, precluding the possibility of his realising that what is going on in his mind is a sexual fantasy. This is never articulated by Mathias, and consequently, never articulated for the reader either.

In Robbe-Grillet's fiction, the protagonist's perception of the world is rendered in such a way as to create a feeling of *dépaysement* or defamiliarisation in the reader.

¹⁴⁰ *Le Voyeur*, p.22.

Conventional reading strategies are useless. This is because the Robbe-Grilletian protagonist's experiences are never thematised in the course of the narrative. That is, the reader has to perceive the fictitious world along with the protagonist, he or she only ever has as much information as the protagonist has. This in itself would not necessarily confuse the reader, were it not for the fact that the Robbe-Grilletian protagonist tends to be confused, obsessed, or somehow unable to make sense of the world around them. Since the information narrated is largely perceptual, the reader lives through the text with the protagonist, experiences the same phenomena as he (it usually is a "he" in Robbe-Grillet) does. No privileged perspective is presented, no ultimate explanation is ever provided, of the constantly shifting and sometimes contradictory experiences and thoughts portrayed. The Robbe-Grilletian text is literally the description of experience, rather than the telling or explaining of a tale, and it is in this respect that it can be understood as a phenomenological project; as a reduction from the thematised world of meaning to the pre-reflective world of phenomena. Objects as images are communicated to us as readers in Robbe-Grillet's art, rather than objects as ideas (or metaphors), as Ben Stoltzfus points out:

The meaning of his novels passes through a minimal distortion of conceptual apprehension. (...) The process of language as thought (the author's) has always interfered with the direct apprehension of things.¹⁴¹

This lifting of the distortion of conceptual apprehension is perhaps best exemplified by the episode in the third part of the novel, when Mathias revisits the cliff top following the disappearance of Jacqueline. By this stage, the clues as to a possible link between Mathias' own movements and the adolescent's disappearance are mounting up, yet

Mathias never manages to formulate the possibility of his own guilt into a specific thought. Instead, his attempt to re-trace his steps and to remove any potentially incriminating evidence (such as the sweet wrappers or the half-smoked cigarette butts) are accounted for by Mathias in ways which do not suggest any involvement on his part. They are brushed off as coincidences, or their presence is postulated as being due to the activity of some other person.

This is what makes a Robbe-Grillet novel so difficult for the reader, as well as the novel's protagonist, to make sense of. The clues are there, but little sense can be made of them, since the evidence is conflicting, and many different possible versions of events are considered by Mathias. This translates, for the reader, into a mass of descriptions that defy one's expectations, when compared with the more traditional realist novel. The lack of explanation as to the events that are occurring means that the reader is a step removed from having the story told to her, as would be the case in, for example the Balzacian novel. (Balzac is an apt example here, because Robbe-Grillet, in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, sets his novelistic enterprise against that of Balzac.) Stoltzfus claims that with the increasing emotional involvement of a Robbe-Grillet character in his environment, descriptions become ever more traditional.¹⁴² For Stoltzfus, Robbe-Grillet's language becomes emotionally charged to the extent that an equivalent of the anthropomorphic adjective is used: the objective correlative. An objective correlative is an object that comes to be associated with, for example, an emotion felt by a character in a novel, but is not a metaphor, a metaphor being a pre-established symbol for that emotion. Whilst it could be claimed that some descriptions of objects in Robbe-Grillet might be replaced by

¹⁴¹ Ben Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French New Novel*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964) p.110.

an anthropomorphic expression in more traditional, realist literature, Stoltzfus' claim that such a structure is a direct equivalent is questionable. Objects in Robbe-Grillet's fiction and films grow to be associated with, for example, the state of mind of the protagonist, but this process is established via the repeated contiguity of the object and the state of mind. Their association is never made explicit, and furthermore their contiguity often appears to be arbitrary, so that it is not possible to claim that x is *definitively* a metaphor for y. More importantly, Robbe-Grillet's use of such objective correlatives is not dependent upon pre-established, generally accepted metaphor – precisely the kind of cultural baggage the phenomenological reduction aims to put out of play. (An example of this is the millipede in *La Jalousie*, which, via its repeated presence in situations suggestive of a sexual relationship between two of the characters, could be understood as a sexual metaphor.¹⁴³ Again, however, such an interpretation must ultimately be resisted due to the lack of ultimate proof of such a relationship.) Such objective correlatives do not allow two ideas to be understood as directly equivalent because of the complexity of Robbe-Grillet's texts, and also because they do not rely upon any commonly accepted cultural significance. It is precisely this kind of commonly accepted cultural significance which makes realist novels easily “readable” and gives them their veneer of what André Gardies calls the “vraisemblable”.¹⁴⁴ As he points out, this is merely a construct, “un concept purement culturel”,¹⁴⁵ yet our reliance on such cultural concepts is only revealed to us via a process such as the phenomenological reduction. Robbe-Grillet, in his artistic practice, refuses a traditionally constructed “vraisemblable”.

¹⁴² Stoltzfus, *Alain Robbe-Grillet and the French New Novel*, p.116.

¹⁴³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957), see, for example pp.62, 166.

¹⁴⁴ André Gardies, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (Cinéma d'aujourd'hui 70) (Paris: Editions Seghers, 1972), p.20.

¹⁴⁵ Gardies, p.15.

Loss of personal identity

In terms of suspending habitual modes of being in the world, *Le Voyeur* effects a phenomenological reduction on another level. In a very straightforward and factual sense, Mathias is cut off from the usual conditions of his existence by the fact of being on an island. His daily routine has been disrupted by the necessity of an early departure, dictated by the ferry timetable. This has a physical effect on him, making him visibly weary. His weariness accounts to some extent for his general physical feeling of unease, such as the headaches from which he frequently suffers. These physical effects on Mathias of the disruption to his routine suggest that Robbe-Grillet, like Merleau-Ponty, definitely conceives of human existence as being incarnate, and situated in the world. It is in this respect that Heath's contention that Robbe-Grillet views man as separate from the world can be questioned.¹⁴⁶ It will be remembered that Heath can argue that this is the case with regard to Robbe-Grillet's theory, his novels and films suggest otherwise. Consciousness, for Merleau-Ponty, cannot be separated from physical reality, and this has consequences for the way in which the world is perceived, as is the case in *Le Voyeur*.

Mathias' weariness apparently affects the islanders' ability to recognise him, as for example when he sees Mme Marek:

Celle-ci ne le reconnut pas tout de suite. S'il ne lui avait pas adressé le premier la parole, elle serait même passée sans le regarder, tant elle pensait peu le rencontrer là. Pour s'excuser de son inattention, elle prétendit que le visage de Mathias avait changé depuis la dernière fois qu'ils s'étaient vus, en ville, et qu'il paraissait aujourd'hui très fatigué – ce qui était normal puisqu'il avait dû se lever de bien meilleure heure que de coutume, pour prendre le bateau, sans s'être couché plus tôt pour cela. D'ailleurs il dormait trop peu depuis plusieurs jours.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Heath, *The Nouveau Roman: A Study in the Practice of Writing*, see chapter 3.

¹⁴⁷ *Le Voyeur*, p.101.

Mathias' general fatigue and the disruption to his routine is used here, in Mathias' mind, to excuse Mme Marek's inability to recognise him, despite her having seen him only two hours earlier. However, although there has indeed been a suspension of normal circumstances, of daily routine, for Mathias, this could be only part of the reason for the strain which is manifested in his face. The meeting with Mme Marek appears towards the beginning of section two of the novel, just after the blank space which Mathias begins to realise he cannot account for. There is an unstated suggestion here that something has just happened which may have added to the appearance of stress on Mathias' face. If Mathias was indeed on top of the cliff at the time of Jacqueline's disappearance, then perhaps some greater trauma has added to the strain he is under.

The inability of the islanders to recognise Mathias, coupled with their reaction to him, adds to the impression that he does not fit in, or is somehow different from them, and thus he is somewhat removed from what is normal for the people there. Although he claims that he was born and brought up on the island, he has not visited it for several years, and his claim to be a native is contradicted in some measure by the fact that nobody there seems to know him. Most people who see him look at him strangely, indicating that Mathias is somewhat different or unusual, an outsider. This happens in the opening pages, when Mathias first sees a little girl on the ferry. She stares at him because he is different from all the other passengers, his behaviour is odd. Mathias seems not to have an awareness of how to behave in a normal manner. He does not react in the same way as other people. The garage-owner who hires him a bicycle, for instance, remarks that he finds a woman who passes by to be attractive. Mathias is quite

unaware of why he should make this remark, and does not share the view that she is particularly attractive.

The one islander who does know him, claiming to be an old acquaintance, is unknown to Mathias. When he invites Mathias to dine at his house, Mathias feels he cannot refuse, particularly since he is asked in the presence of the waitress in the café. Her witnessing of Mathias being recognised by an islander lends credence to Mathias' claim of being from the island. Mathias only learns this man's name, Jean Robin, when he sees it scrawled on the door of his house. Jean addresses him as "Matt", a name Mathias has never been called before. So there is some doubt as to Mathias' identity even from someone who claims to know him.

All of these examples point to Mathias' difference from those around him, and attest to an unstable sense of his own identity. He does not seem to exist for the people he meets, they do not seem able to relate to him. This can be attributed to his disturbed state of mind, his bizarre behaviour before the blank in the centre of the text caused by his obsessive fantasising, and his behaviour thereafter caused by his attempts to establish whatever took place during the time that he cannot remember. His state of mind effects a process of phenomenological reduction. It prevents Mathias from being able to process elements of his environment into anything meaningful. Furthermore, it leads to a dissolution of his own identity, a sense of dislocation. Although Bernal identifies some of these aspects in *Le Voyeur* as indicative of Mathias' distance from the other islanders, she does not make a specific link with the phenomenological reduction.¹⁴⁸ Whilst Bernal's study of Robbe-Grillet is a phenomenological one, Mathias' loss of identity is simply posited by Bernal, rather than rigorously analysed and elucidated in

phenomenological terms. As Jean Duffy has demonstrated in relation to Claude Simon, a Merleau-Pontyan analysis of the *nouveau roman* can lend insights into this dissolution of personal identity.¹⁴⁹ Her Merleau-Pontyan analysis of Simon's work can be successfully adopted and applied to the work of Robbe-Grillet, in the case of a loss of identity such as that suffered by Mathias. Duffy highlights Merleau-Ponty's contention that the intentional relation normally in operation between the perceiving subject and the world breaks down in traumatic or stressful circumstances. Merleau-Ponty remarks on the link between living at the level of experience and a feeling of depersonalisation:

Toute sensation comporte un germe de rêve ou de dépersonnalisation comme nous l'éprouvons par cette sorte de stupeur où elle nous met quand nous vivons vraiment à son niveau.¹⁵⁰

Just as the phenomenological reduction suspends the normal relation of consciousness to its objects, so that the pre-reflective contents of experience are laid bare, so, in the case of *Le Voyeur*, Mathias' normal relation to the world around him has been suspended by the obsessive state of mind he is in, and by the panic that sets in during the second and third parts of the novel. This leads to an inability on his part to grasp what is occurring to him, to make sense of his experiences, and it also leads to an increasing sense of loss of identity.

An even more striking example of Mathias' loss of grip on his own identity comes towards the end of the novel, as he finds himself once more in the café, amidst islanders discussing Jacqueline's disappearance. As Mathias returns to the café, his headache is less severe, although it is still affecting his thought processes; his head is filled with "une

¹⁴⁸ Bernal, see part 2, chapter 2.

¹⁴⁹ Jean Duffy, 'Claude Simon, Merleau-Ponty and Perception', in *French Studies*, 46, 1 (1992) 33-52.

¹⁵⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.249.

sorte de bourdonnement cotonneux”.¹⁵¹ This, combined with the general tumult of the people in the café, affects his ability to make out what is happening around him:

Il y avait beaucoup de gens, de fumée, de bruit. L'éclairage électrique, faux et bleuâtre, était allumé au plafond. Des lambeaux de conversations, quasi incompréhensibles, se détachaient par instant du brouhaha général; un geste, un visage, un rictus, émergeait quelques secondes, ici et là, à travers les miroitements du brouillard.¹⁵²

Here again, Mathias' tiredness is a factor in his inability to comprehend events. The mental strain caused by his headache and his tiredness means that his perceptions occur on the level of basic phenomena, of snippets of sensory experience, rather than easily understandable events or conversations. For Merleau-Ponty, experiencing events on this very basic level leads to a sense of depersonalisation, a feeling of losing one's grip on one's identity. This is increasingly the case in this scene in the café. Mathias has so far been variously named throughout the novel as either “Mathias” or “le voyageur”. At this point in the novel, however, the two names seem to belong to two different people:

Mathias termina son absinthe. Ne sentant plus la petite mallette entre ses pieds, il abaissa le regard vers le sol. La valise avait disparu. Il enfonça la main dans la poche de sa canadienne, pour froter ses doigts maculés de cambouis contre la cordelette roulée, tout en relevant les yeux sur le voyageur. La patronne crut qu'il cherchait de la monnaie et lui cria le montant de la consommation; mais c'était le verre d'absinthe, dont il s'appropriait à régler le prix. Il se tourna donc vers la grosse femme, ou vers la femme, ou vers la fille, ou vers la jeune serveuse, puis reposa la valise afin de saisir la mallette tandis que le marin et le pêcheur s'immisçaient, se faufilaient, s'interposaient entre le voyageur et Mathias...

Mathias se passa la main sur le front. Il faisait presque nuit. Il était assis, sur une chaise, au milieu de la rue – au milieu de la route – devant le café de Roches Noires.

“Alors, ça va mieux? demanda près de lui un homme.”¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ *Le Voyeur*, p.220.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.220.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.222.

The remarkable feature of this passage is the manner in which the third person narration, expressing Mathias' own thoughts, refers to Mathias both as "Mathias" and "le voyageur", in a way which suggests that they are two separate people. This is also true of the other characters described, and even of inanimate objects. It is indicative of the extremely distressed state Mathias is in. The fisherman, named on the previous page simply as "un pêcheur" now becomes simultaneously "le marin et le pêcheur"; the briefcase Mathias has been carrying his watches in is variously "la petite mallette" and "la valise". This could perhaps be explained as an attempt on the part of Robbe-Grillet to render the effect of drink on Mathias – a kind of double vision. But this alone would not be sufficient to explain other examples, where Mathias' intentional object is something conceptual or abstract, rather than a sensory perception of a concrete object, for example, there is a distinction between "la consommation" and "le verre d'absinthe". These are not two things which are seen, rendered in blurred or double vision; rather they are the same item, but described as if separated, as if really two different notions, in Mathias' mind. As mentioned previously, this fragmentation occurs with regard to people as well as objects, and here the café waitress takes on a number of names associated with scattered memories from Mathias' past, names which have been introduced previously in the course of the novel. Again, this suggests an inability on Mathias' part to work out what is happening, or to label successfully events and phenomena in his environment. It suggests also that Mathias does not distinguish between females – their poses as described throughout the novel are all slight variations on a theme, the first example of which was the little girl on the boat. As these variations are all lined to Mathias' sexual

fantasies, it would appear that women are perceived mostly in terms of their sexuality by Mathias. The one exception to this is the woman admired by the garage-owner, who, since she is not attractive to Mathias, receives little attention in the text.

Finally, and most significantly, Mathias perceives himself as two people. Whilst the fragmentation of “le marin” and “le pêcheur” could be attributed to Mathias having consumed a glass of absinthe or to his headache, the fact that these two figures weave in between Mathias’ two selves attest to a breakdown in his self-identity. Mathias’ state of mind, by this stage, is extremely disturbed. Evidence of this troubled mind is given in the passage in its reference to the string which Mathias touches, ostensibly in an attempt to wipe the oil from his hands. However, by now the attentive reader will have noticed the association of Mathias touching the string and his sexual obsession, so that Mathias’ excuse of wiping his hands is only further evidence that he is either unaware of his own mental state, or trying to deny it to himself.

The phenomenological reduction in Robbe-Grillet’s cinema

As with *Le Voyeur* and other novels, Robbe-Grillet’s films are constituted of a series of perplexing sensory data. However, in the case of his films, the data concerned are images and sounds, directly perceived by the viewer, as opposed to words on a page describing such experiences. There is, therefore, a focus upon sensory data in the present of the unfolding story, but also, frequently, a re-living of the past. Just as elements of remembered experience come to mind for Mathias in *Le Voyeur* during his failed attempts to construct his perceptions into something meaningful, so for A in *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, the past constantly interferes with the present. For A, little sense

can be made of the repetitious mass of experiences she lives and re-lives, with each perception appearing to be slightly different each time she experiences it. Equally, in *L'Immortelle*, N's attempt to make sense of the events he has recently undergone involves living and re-living sensory experience. In these films, just as in *Le Voyeur*, it is possible to identify a process of reduction at work. That is, once more, the protagonists of these films find themselves in a state of trauma, confusion or desperation, which leads to an inability to make sense of their situations. On a structural level, this means that the films are difficult to follow for the viewer, as they do not conform to conventional cinematic structures or plot developments. As in *Le Voyeur*, the viewer of Robbe-Grillet's films has no privileged perspective, so that if the protagonist struggles to work out what is happening around him/her, so does the viewer. The viewer only ever has as much information as the protagonist.

The phenomenological reduction in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*

Many elements in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* constitute a process of reduction, in that they represent a suspension of normal circumstances. The intrigue of the film lies partly in the fact that the viewer never finds out quite why any of the characters are in the *château* in which the film is set. They may be on holiday, since they are only ever seen pursuing leisure activities (playing card games, walking around the castle grounds, watching a play, dancing, drinking, etc.), however there is no ultimate proof of this. There is also the possibility that A and M are there for reasons of A's health, as M reminds her: "Il faut vous reposer. N'oubliez pas que nous sommes là pour

ça.”¹⁵⁴ This indicates that there is some kind of problem, and that there is currently a suspension of their normal routine or circumstances. A and M appear at first to be married, although they address one another as “vous”, which could suggest a more formal relationship (if she is unwell, he may be her physician). The nature of their relationship is also questioned by X: “Qui est-il? Votre mari *peut-être*.”¹⁵⁵ There is never any suggestion that A and M’s relationship is loving or warm, indeed the reverse is the case. They behave stiffly and indifferently towards each other. This could be the source of A’s discontent and anguish. Equally, X’s persistent attempts to persuade her that they met and had an affair the year before could be the reason for her anxiety. In any event, A does seem to be distracted, unwell, confused. She is incapable of functioning normally, due to the influence of some stressful or disturbing situation, and this results in a confusing mass of experiences being presented to the viewer, who, as mentioned before, has access only to the same information as the characters in the film.

Just as the troubled Mathias hears snatches of conversation which do not add up to anything coherent in *Le Voyeur*, so in *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, indistinct conversations are overheard, tantalising the listener, who almost manages to hear what is being said, without ever fully understanding anything. Equally, only glimpses of people are seen, and this effect is underlined in the music which accompanies the images.

La caméra (...) se met alors à suivre les deux hommes, par une modification aussi naturelle que possible de son mouvement.

Les deux hommes parlent à voix basse. On ne distingue pas ce qu’ils disent. La caméra les accompagne d’un peu loin, et peut-être de façon assez vague. D’autres personnages traversent des fonds, çà et là; et des fragments de corps apparaissent par instants en gros plan.

On entend des bouts de phrases, venus on ne sait d’où:

...Vraiment, cela semble incroyable...

¹⁵⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, p.150 (emphasis added).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.123.

...Nous nous sommes rencontrés, déjà, autrefois...

...Je ne me rappelle pas bien. Ça devait être en vingt-huit...en vingt-huit ou vingt-neuf...

En même temps la musique reparaît, insensiblement; ce n'est plus celle, romantique, du début: elle est faite au contraire de notes éparses ou de brèves séries, elle est incertaine, hachée et comme inquiète.¹⁵⁶

Robbe-Grillet is perhaps suggesting, by the “natural” movement of the camera, that there is some person who is watching this scene, through whose eyes and ears the viewer has access to these events. If A is trying to make sense of what happened last year, and indeed of what is happening now, then perhaps these are her perceptions, presented to the viewer as seen by her. This is certainly the view taken by Vivian Sobchack in her Merleau-Pontyan analysis of cinema. Her contention is that the film is as much an intentional object for the viewer as the events depicted in it are for the characters in the film. Sobchack’s account of film-as-intentional-object, then, is concurrent with a Merleau-Pontyan account of phenomenological reduction. The viewer shares in the filmic characters’ experiences, and is incapable, just as A is, of forming a coherent story from the mass of phenomena presented. The “story” here is not *told*, but *lived*, for both A and the viewer. Due to the state of crisis in which A finds herself, there is a suspension of the normal conditions of her existence, so that the objects of consciousness are foregrounded, perceived just as they are experienced, without any thematisation or explanation. A’s distressed or confused state of mind is highlighted in the *ciné-roman* of *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*:

Il faut que A ait toujours l’air absent, [sic] détournée même du groupe où elle figure, regardant ailleurs, souriant vaguement quelquefois mais toujours belle de visage et gracieuse de pose.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ *L’Année dernière à Marienbad*, pp.36–37.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

La photo montre de face un groupe d'auditeurs, dont A (...); il y a en outre, dans le champ, un certain nombre de sièges vides (de part et d'autre de A, en particulier). Ce plan est très sombre; seuls les visages émergent de l'obscurité: tournés vers la scène, ils sont éclairés par celle-ci. Visages immobiles et attentifs. Mais celui de A est très différent des autres, comme absorbé par autre chose: les yeux baissés, par exemple, ou fixés au delà.¹⁵⁸

Although in watching the film the viewer can see that A is set apart from the other characters and is therefore somehow different from them, a more explicit indication of Robbe-Grillet's intent in setting her apart from the others is given in the *ciné-roman*. (This is also true of his other *ciné-romans*, compared to his films – the authorial intent is sometimes clarified through a reading of the text.) Just as Mathias' difference from those around him is signalled in *Le Voyeur* by his odd behaviour, so A's unease is signalled by her distance from the other characters around her. It is true that the other characters in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* behave in an equally odd manner. They frequently appear to be frozen, mannequin-like in their lack of facial expression and bodily movement. This is indicative of the fact that, for A, the only characters who matter are herself, M and X. A herself is rarely animated; she often appears sleepy or confused, particularly when X tries to persuade her of their affair the year before. This is further evidence of some emotional crisis; A appears to be too emotionally fragile to bring herself to even contemplate, let alone acknowledge, the relationship X claims they once had. The upshot of all of this is the "strangeness" experienced by the viewer when watching the film, a reflection of the strange, confusing nature of A's perceptions. This strangeness and stupor are indicated by Merleau-Ponty in mentioning the effect of living at the level of phenomena. In the same way as Mathias loses his grip on his own

¹⁵⁸ *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, p. 113.

personality and sense of identity in *Le Voyeur*, so A in Marienbad becomes less able to act on her own impulses, to make her own decisions. As she falls under M's spell, she is less capable of making sense of what really did happen to her, and her sense of her own individuality is dissolved.

The Phenomenological reduction in *L'Immortelle*

Evidence of a process analogous to that of the phenomenological reduction is also to be found in *L'Immortelle*, a film in which certain elements vary considerably from the 'norm'. Non-linearity of plot, an unclear distinction between "real" and "imaginary" events, an absence of psychological depth with regard to characterisation, and a lack of a final solution to the mystery all serve to alert the viewer that the strategies usually employed to understand a film will not necessarily be of use in this case. The viewer is required to put aside her assumptions in understanding this film; they are to be bracketed out, placed in parentheses. The viewer's access to the film, rather than being explained or told to her through the conventions of a naturalist or psychological film, is presented through a bodily, human perspective, that of the central character, N. N's real name is André Varais, although Robbe-Grillet suggests in his introduction to the ciné-roman that N stands for 'narrator':

Un narrateur qui ne "raconte" rien, mais par les yeux de qui tout est vu, par les oreilles de qui tout est entendu, ou par l'esprit de qui tout est imaginé. Et c'est là ce qui lui donne, lorsqu'il est présent sur l'écran, cet aspect à la fois vide et gauche, qui n'est évidemment pas celui d'un "héros" de cinéma¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *L'Immortelle* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1955), p.9.

In other words, the film is composed of N's understanding of events, of his experiences and imaginings. Here, Robbe-Grillet's narrator takes on a position akin to that of the perceiving consciousness suggested by Merleau-Ponty after the reduction. That is, the narrator is a bodily consciousness; he exists in a certain point in space, and it is through this point, through his body, that everything is experienced. This is further evidence of the similarity between the reduction as outlined by Merleau-Ponty and Robbe-Grillet's artistic practice. The position of the protagonist of Robbe-Grillet's film could not, for example, be likened to the ego of Husserlian phenomenology, which is separate from the objects of consciousness; N is bound up in the world in which he lives; his direct contact with it is through his body. In the above remark, Robbe-Grillet highlights N's awkward manner – not that of the traditional hero. Here there is evidence of a suspension of the usual conventions of cinema – a hero would typically be in control of his situation, he ought to be able to resolve the mystery by the end of the film. Rather than achieving such a final resolution, N remains perplexed; by the end of the film he is still left with a mass of shifting memories of events, which he never manages to assemble into a plausible account of L's mysterious behaviour.

N is divorced from his usual conditions; he finds himself newly arrived in a foreign country where he knows nobody, and does not understand the language or the customs of the local people. The cultural norms of his own country no longer apply to his current situation. They are, in phenomenological terms, bracketed, put out of play. Hence, perhaps, N's need to constantly return to his experiences, to replay them in his mind in an effort to make sense of them. His experiences as presented in the film are frequently disjointed, unconnected, devoid of obvious significance, indicating his

confusion and the inapplicability of his usual strategies of understanding to his new life in Turkey. In the absence of any cultural knowledge of events around him, he is obliged to return to perceptions as given directly in experience, unimbued with any cultural significance. Indeed, L warns him that such cultural understanding he may think he has is merely illusory:

L: Vous n'êtes pas d'ici?

N: Je viens d'arriver. Vous êtes française?

L: Non. Pourquoi? (...) Vous êtes étranger... Vous vous êtes perdu (...) Vous venez d'arriver dans une Turquie de légende... Les mosquées, les châteaux forts, les jardins secrets, les harems...

N: Comme dans les livres!

(...)

L: Tout ça, ce sont vos imaginations (...) Regardez... une mosquée comme dans vos rêves... Elle est en train de s'écrouler...¹⁶⁰

N has just arrived in Turkey, and already he is lost, both literally and figuratively. The cultural insights N has, as a foreigner, such as those gleaned from books, are likely to be highly stereotypical, over-simplified assumptions about Turkish culture. L, with her greater experience of the country and its culture and language (a fact she mysteriously denies, claiming only to speak "du turc pour touristes"¹⁶¹), sees through the façade of this over-stylised image. N's expectations about Turkey are undermined by L's remarks; the Turkey of books and legends bears little resemblance to the real Turkey in which N now finds himself. Here again, N's over-simplified cultural assumptions will have to be suspended if he is truly to experience the world around him.

Again, just as Mathias in *Le Voyeur* and A in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* are different from those around them, cut off from a normal relation with the world by some trauma which affects them, so N in *L'Immortelle* is marked out both by his foreignness

¹⁶⁰ *L'Immortelle*, pp.30-32, 164-165.

and by the trauma he too undergoes. His obsessive search for L takes him over and he appears, rather like A, to live in a dream world, constantly re-living the past and making hypotheses about what may have become of L.

The phenomenological reduction in *La Reprise* and *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle*

Robbe-Grillet's return to the novel and ciné-novel in the twenty-first century mark a continuation of some familiar concerns. Both *La Reprise* and *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* are reminiscent of previous texts in terms of the themes that reappear, and, as with the other texts and films discussed in this chapter, contain features that can be understood as effecting a kind of phenomenological reduction. In the case of Robbe-Grillet's *Gradiva* this is unsurprising, as it is comparable in many ways to an earlier film and ciné-roman, *L'Immortelle*. *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* contains many references to *L'Immortelle*, including the fact that the female characters in both share one of their names, Leïla (although both have *sosies* and other names too). It is with the mysterious L/Lale/Leïla/Gradiva that the male protagonists of both *L'Immortelle* and *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* have fallen in love. The similarities between Robbe-Grillet's earlier film and Wilhelm Jensen's story, *Gradiva*¹⁶² have been outlined in an insightful essay by Phillipe Sollers.¹⁶³ What is remarkable about the similarities between Jensen's *Gradiva* and *L'Immortelle* is, as Sollers explains, that when writing the ciné-roman for *L'Immortelle*, "Robbe-Grillet ne connaissait pas *Gradiva*".¹⁶⁴ However, she is a recurrent

¹⁶¹ *L'Immortelle*, p.99.

¹⁶² See Jensen's story and Freud's reading of it in: Wilhelm Jensen and Sigmund Freud, *Gradiva and Delusion and Dream in Jensen's Gradiva*, trans. by Helen M. Downey (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon, 1993). (*Gradiva* originally published 1903.)

¹⁶³ Phillipe Sollers, 'Le Rêve en plein jour', in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, 125 (1 mai 1963) 904-911.

¹⁶⁴ Sollers, p.906.

figure in his works, also appearing in briefly in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* and *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*.¹⁶⁵ In terms of the phenomenological reduction, then, the protagonist of Robbe-Grillet's *Gradiva*, John Locke, is subject to the same disorienting surroundings as is N in *L'Immortelle*. Although not suggesting a phenomenological reading of *L'Immortelle* or Jensen's *Gradiva*, Sollers' list of the principal features of *L'Immortelle* apply equally well to Robbe-Grillet's *Gradiva*, and these are features that ensure that the protagonist's usual means of understanding his environment are no longer there:

Un homme rencontrerait une femme (...) énigmatique participant à une organisation suspecte qui aurait sur elle des droits absolus (...) il perdrait sa trace, la chercherait, se heurterait sans cesse à une conspiration de silence et d'incompréhension, à des complicités multiples – multipliées par son langage et sa situation d'étranger, etc...¹⁶⁶

John Locke is in Marrakech, so that, like N, he is cut off from his usual cultural surroundings, he can make himself understood only to those locals who speak French, and their wall of resistance to his enquiries makes it impossible for him to work out who this mysterious woman is, a woman who he has only ever glimpsed briefly, yet with whom he seems to be in love. Nevertheless, the locals to whom he does speak seem to misinterpret his meaning, and to be keen to lure him into an underworld of prostitution, as happens, for example, when John enters an antique shop looking for Leïla/Gradiva, who had disappeared amongst the crowd outside the shop. All the while, John tries to find out whether the young woman has entered the shop, and all the while, the antiques seller tries to turn the topic of conversation to tempting John into buying “des bracelets

¹⁶⁵ See Morrissette, *Intertextual assemblage in Robbe-Grillet from Topology to the Golden Triangle*, pp.53-55, for a discussion of these intertextual references.

¹⁶⁶ Sollers, 'Le Rêve en plein jour', p.905.

d'esclaves, des bijoux indiscrets..." Or, still more suggestively, he offers: "j'ai d'excellentes adresses, pour le plaisir. (Ces trois mots dits à voix très bas)".¹⁶⁷ Like N in *L'Immortelle*, John is not a traditional hero, he is powerless to resolve his problems, he has no control over his circumstances and the people he encounters are more of a hindrance than a help in unravelling the mystery of Leïla/Gradiva.

The plot as well as the setting of Robbe-Grillet's *Gradiva* are labyrinthine; as Robbe-Grillet explains in the preface, the story takes place in "le dédale imprévisible des ruelles et impasses de l'ancienne médina".¹⁶⁸ The physical environment of the city thus itself reflects the story; it is a foreign environment, one whose intricacies can never be fully understood. It defies understanding and expectation, it removes the protagonist from the certainties of his habitual existence. Thus, the conventions to which he is accustomed are no longer of any use, they are bracketed, put out of play, and so John cannot understand his situation via recourse to his usual points of cultural reference.

Similarly, in *La Reprise*, the central character, Henri Robin/HR/Ascher/etc. (who, because he is a secret agent, has a number of alter-egos) is sent to an unfamiliar city, this time post-war Berlin, on a mission about which he knows nothing. Rather like Mathias in *Le Voyeur*, his physical discomfort due to lack of sleep and a headache, act upon him in such a way that he is unable to make sense of his surroundings:

Le prétendu Henri Robin s'est réveillé de très bonne heure. Il a mis un certain temps à comprendre où il se trouve, depuis quand, et ce qu'il fait là. Il a mal dormi, tout habillé, sur son matelas d'infortune, dans cette pièce de dimensions bourgeoises (mais présentement sans lit et glacée).¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *C'est Gradiva qui vous appelle* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2002), p.25.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7.

¹⁶⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Reprise* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2001), p.45.

Thus, his physical surroundings are, as for the other protagonists, unfamiliar, as well as being uncomfortable, and this physical discomfort affects his ability to make sense of his situation. This is strongly suggestive of the phenomenological body-subject of which Merleau-Ponty speaks. The fact that the consciousness is embodied means that physical hardship impacts on the power of thought; the physical and the mental are inextricably connected, because human existence is incarnate consciousness.

Conclusion

The phenomenological reduction, a procedure which demands the suspension of culturally ingrained habits of perception and favours instead a return to phenomena as experienced, can explain many aspects of the work of Robbe-Grillet. Firstly, it can account for the effect of defamiliarisation experienced by viewers and readers of his work. This is more than simply a process of defamiliarisation on the part of Robbe-Grillet for the sake of rendering his works unusual and therefore more avant-garde or artistic than the norm. Although there is a desire on the part of Robbe-Grillet to break with past literary and cinematic forms, the resultant body of work is more than just a strange-seeming art form. That is, the viewer or reader of a Robbe-Grilletian work is offered no wider viewpoint than that of the characters in a given work, and is therefore obliged to live through the film or novel from the perspective of those characters. Because these characters are frequently in a traumatised, distressed or obsessive state of mind, they perceive events around them on a basic, unprocessed level, as a mass of disjointed experiences, and fail to see their situation from a wider perspective. For the reader or viewer, the effect is a defamiliarising one, since their past reading habits may

have made them more accustomed to being presented with a view of events in which those events form part of an overall perspective. Thus, the reader or viewer is detached from their habitual conditions of reading or viewing, and sometimes finds it difficult to work out what is occurring, just as the character is rendered incapable of processing what is happening to them due to some stressful situation. One result of this in Robbe-Grillet's work is the character's sense of loss of their personal identity, often in the form of a feeling of difference from others around him or her. The Robbe-Grilletian protagonist may be cut off from their usual cultural reference points due to being in a foreign place, and therefore their attempts to understand the behaviour of others are undermined by the suspension of the familiar and comforting elements of their usual conditions of existence. Their inability to interact normally with others becomes apparent in the Robbe-Grilletian characters' behaviour towards others; this is due to a lack of mutual cultural reference points, but in addition, their bizarre behaviour may be due to a trauma, making them appear to others to be detached, withdrawn, or somehow odd. The Robbe-Grilletian character may experience a dissolution of their sense of self, due to their experiencing events at the level of pre-reflective phenomena. When perception occurs at this level, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the individual exists almost in a dreamy stupor. This would explain why Robbe-Grillet indicates that the characters in his films should appear detached from the others, in a noticeably dream-like state. The same is true of his novels, as is the case for Mathias in *Le Voyeur*: his difference from other people is indicated in their reactions to him, and his sense of depersonalisation becomes apparent in his loss of grip on reality and his perceived dissolution into two different people.

Chapter Three

The Body-Subject: narrative perspectives

The lesson of the phenomenological reduction is, for Merleau-Ponty, that a complete reduction (a reduction to the Husserlian transcendental ego) is not possible. Instead, Merleau-Ponty insists that the *corps-propre*, the body-subject, is the centre of consciousness and perception. Robbe-Grillet's fictional and filmic universe is similarly centred upon bodily existence, indeed his theoretical position on the subject is borne out by his artistic practice. That is, his films and novels are presented or narrated from a human perspective in space and time. The discussion in this chapter will focus upon the spatial, bodily perspective from which Robbe-Grillet's films and novels are shot or narrated, while an analysis of the temporal implications of perception from a bodily perspective will be the subject of the next chapter. The two main consequences of representing a bodily situation in the world, both for Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and for Robbe-Grillet's fiction or film are, firstly, a sense of bodily perspective or viewpoint and secondly, an insistence upon sensory, bodily perception. This discussion

will examine the benefit to be gained from a reading of Robbe-Grillet's fiction and a viewing of his films that is grounded in Merleau-Ponty's account of the body-subject. It will detail the way in which the notion of the body-subject elucidates Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction in terms of its narrative perspective and focus upon perception.

Bodily situation

Robbe-Grillet's insistence upon depicting the world from a human perspective is well documented. This is in part a reaction to the God-like narrative perspective of nineteenth-century realist literature, against which he argues in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*:

Qui décrit le monde dans les romans de Balzac? Quel est ce narrateur omniscient, omniprésent, qui se place partout en même temps, qui voit en même temps l'endroit et l'envers des choses, qui suit en même temps les mouvements du visage et ceux de la conscience, qui connaît à la fois le présent, le passé, et l'avenir de toute aventure? Ça ne peut être qu'un Dieu.

C'est Dieu seul qui peut prétendre être objectif. Tandis que dans nos livres, au contraire, c'est un homme qui voit, qui sent, qui imagine, un homme situé dans l'espace et le temps, conditionné par ses passions, un homme comme vous et moi. Et le livre ne rapporte rien d'autre que son expérience, limitée, incertaine. C'est un homme d'ici, un homme de maintenant, qui est son propre narrateur, enfin.¹⁷⁰

Having a situation in space and time, in the here and now, is of great importance in terms of the perspective from which Robbe-Grillet's novels are narrated. The narration is always from an embodied perspective, so that the reader never has access to any objective, overall viewpoint such as that described above. The perspective presented is that of one of the characters, rather than being from an omniscient narrator.

¹⁷⁰ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.149.

A stylistic consideration of the opening sentences of many of Robbe-Grillet's novels illustrates his attempt to situate his works, from the very outset, within a given perspective of space and time, often in the here and now. One example of this is the fact that some of his novels begin in the present tense, creating an immediacy which draws the reader into the text by making the narrative time frame the present and by forcing the reader to adopt the same perspective as that of the protagonist. Thus, the reader witnesses events along with the protagonist. Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Un Régicide*, begins with just such a technique. The narrator, although not identified as a narrating *je* until the second page of the text, nevertheless situates himself for the reader within a time frame and a situation at the very start of the novel:

Une fois de plus, c'est, au bord de la mer, à la tombée de jour, une étendue de sable fin coupée de rochers et de trous, qu'il faut traverser, avec l'eau parfois jusqu'à la taille. La mer monte, par vagues soudaines venant en même temps de plusieurs côtés et se mêlant en dangereux remous.¹⁷¹

The narration is taking place in the present tense, from the now of the narrating body-subject. The emphasis upon the body as a perspective is indicated in the fact that the water is "jusqu'à la taille", and that it is "venant en même temps de plusieurs côtés", that is, from all sides around the narrator's body. So, even without the mention of a *je* in this opening passage, Robbe-Grillet's narrator has a bodily perspective in relation to his surroundings. Similarly, the opening lines of *Dans Le Labyrinthe* place the narrator in a here and now, although this time there is an explicit *je* right from the start: "Je suis seul ici, maintenant, bien à l'abri."¹⁷² As for *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, a narrating *je* appears half way through the first page with: "Je suis en train de fermer la

¹⁷¹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Un Régicide* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1978), p.11.

¹⁷² Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Dans Le Labyrinthe* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1959), p.9.

porte derrière moi...”.¹⁷³ This is followed on the second page with a description of the outside of the door, thus situating the narration in a bodily perspective, with the door, the body’s object of consciousness, described relative to the body. This initial description appears to be a re-living, in the present (indicated by “en train de”), of a past experience, and so can be seen as another instance of a bodily here and now. Such instances of memory relived in the present will be discussed more fully in the following chapter, however. Once again, there is a narrating *je* at the beginning of the first chapter of *Djinn* (although the prologue is written from a third person perspective, the writer of the prologue claiming to have found the manuscript of *Djinn*):

J’arrive exactement à l’heure fixée: il est six heures et demie. Il fait presque nuit déjà. Le hangar n’est pas fermé. J’entre en poussant la porte, qui n’a plus de serrure.¹⁷⁴

So here there is yet another narrator who places himself in a temporal here and now, giving the position of objects and time in relation to himself.

So, with respect to situating human experience from a human, rather than a God-like perspective, Robbe-Grillet’s novelistic practice is in harmony with his theoretical writing. Apart from rejecting a God-like perspective because it is outdated, then, it appears that Robbe-Grillet grounds his accounts of human existence in the experience that human existence offers up. That events should be narrated from this embodied perspective is understandable, since that is how human beings experience life, a view which is certainly consistent with a phenomenological account of human experience.

¹⁷³ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1970), p.11.

¹⁷⁴ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Djinn* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1981), p.11.

Merleau-Ponty argues that human existence is grounded in corporeal being, and that as a result of this bodily being, all experience emanates from the here and now.

Il ne faut donc pas dire que notre corps est *dans* l'espace ni d'ailleurs qu'il est *dans* le temps. Il *habite* l'espace et le temps.¹⁷⁵

That is, a human perspective on the world cannot be measured by any "objective" or external yardstick, the situation of a person in the world is determined by his/her existence as a body. Space and time are relative to the situation of the body, for Merleau-Ponty, rather than the body's position being measured in time and space. Indeed, once Merleau-Ponty has established that the body is our anchorage in the world, that all our experience results from our bodily existence, his accounts of space, time, sexuality and intersubjectivity all flow from this corporeality. For Merleau-Ponty, then, experience is always structured in this way; it always has the body at its centre. The question here, given that Robbe-Grillet appears to take a theoretical standpoint similar to that of Merleau-Ponty, is one of how he translates a theoretical insistence upon body-centred existence into film and fiction.

Merleau-Ponty's view of what a novel can achieve in terms of translating human experience into art is apt here when considering the placement and perspective of human beings in Robbe-Grillet's novels:

Le romancier n'a pas pour rôle d'exposer des idées ou même d'analyser des caractères, mais de présenter un événement interhumain, de le faire mûrir et éclater sans commentaire idéologique, à tel point que tout changement dans l'ordre du récit ou dans le choix des perspectives modifierait le sens *romanesque* de l'événement. Un roman, un poème, un tableau, un morceau de musique sont des individus, c'est-à-dire des êtres où l'on ne peut distinguer l'expression de l'exprimé, dont le sens n'est accessible que par un contact direct et qui rayonnent leur signification sans quitter leur place spatiale et temporelle. C'est en ce sens que notre vie est

¹⁷⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.162.

comparable à l'œuvre d'art. Il est un nœud de significations vivantes et non pas la loi d'un certain nombre de termes covariants.¹⁷⁶

This account of a novelist's aims certainly fits with Robbe-Grillet's novelistic theory and practice on at least two counts. Robbe-Grillet has insisted on the fact that his writing is non-committed, and also he never provides his reader with an analysis of the personalities of his characters; rather, he simply describes events and allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. *La Jalousie* is a case in point; as Merleau-Ponty mentions in respect of the choice of perspective, *La Jalousie* simply would not be the same novel if the narrative perspective were altered. Likewise, the ambiguity upon which the novel rests (the possible objective/subjective readings of the novel) would be destroyed if there was textual confirmation that narrator was indeed A... 's husband.

A possible objection to aligning Robbe-Grillet's theory with that of Merleau-Ponty might be raised at this point. Whilst Robbe-Grillet argues that only a God can see "l'endroit et l'envers des choses",¹⁷⁷ for Merleau-Ponty, many possible perspectives are given in human perception. That is, when I observe an object, even though I can only see one side of it, I know nevertheless how it will look from the other side, or from above or from below:

Voir, c'est entrer dans un univers d'êtres qui *se montrent*, et ils ne se montreraient pas s'ils ne pouvaient être cachés les uns derrière les autres ou derrière moi. En d'autres termes: regarder un objet, c'est venir l'habiter et de là saisir toutes choses selon la face qu'elles tournent vers lui. Mais, dans la mesure où je les vois elles aussi, elles restent des demeures ouvertes à mon regard, et, situé virtuellement en elles, j'aperçois déjà sous différents angles l'objet central de ma vision actuelle. Ainsi chaque objet est le miroir de tous les autres. Quand je regarde la lampe posée sur ma table, je lui attribue non seulement les qualités visibles de ma place, mais encore, celles que la cheminée, que les murs, que la table

¹⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp.175-177.

¹⁷⁷ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.149.

peuvent “voir”, le dos de ma lampe n’est rien d’autre que la face qu’elle “montre” à la cheminée.¹⁷⁸

Although it may at first seem that this notion of having knowledge of an object’s various perspectives runs counter to what Robbe-Grillet claims about human beings not having access to any God-like perspective, the two positions are not contradictory. Merleau-Ponty’s argument still relies upon the body being situated, having a limited perspective. His point is, rather, that in experience, objects are perceived from a given perspective, but that part of the condition for having a perspective is that certain sides of any given object will be hidden. That perception should have this structure does not exclude knowledge of what may lie on the hidden side of the object, in fact, perception entails an attribution of (unperceived) qualities to an object, based upon those which are directly perceived. This projection of qualities is not so much a procedure of the imagination as simply an inherent part of perception, for Merleau-Ponty.

Let us now turn to examine the importance of perspective in Robbe-Grillet’s films and novels. Robbe-Grillet’s work, in terms of narrative perspective, can broadly be categorised into two groups; those works in which a single character’s perspective is presented, and those in which the characters take turns at presenting their experiences, where the description of events slips (sometimes almost imperceptibly) from one character’s control to another’s. These two categories will be discussed in turn, beginning with a consideration of the single protagonist’s point of view, as presented in *La Jalousie* and *L’Immortelle*.

¹⁷⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.82.

Literary narrative perspective

La Jalousie is, of all Robbe-Grillet's novels, the one which adheres consistently to presenting experience of the world from a single embodied perspective. The discussion of the novel here places its focus 'slightly differently from previous phenomenological commentaries on Robbe-Grillet's works, in that it looks at the question of why there is a "missing je" in *La Jalousie*, and how this can be accounted for in phenomenological terms. Although a protagonist is never named or explicitly mentioned, it is possible to read the novel as though it was littered with clues as to his/her presence. The implied, yet unmentioned narrator is assumed by most commentators to be the husband of A..., suspected by the narrator of having an affair with their neighbour, Franck. At the beginning of *La Jalousie*, the narrator's temporal perspective is immediately established:

Maintenant l'ombre du pilier – le pilier qui soutient l'angle sud-ouest du toit – divise en deux parties égales l'angle correspondant de la terrasse. (...) seules les dalles de la terrasse sont atteintes par le soleil, qui se trouve encore trop haut dans le ciel!¹⁷⁹

Thus, the reader discovers that the narration is unfolding in the present (which, one can ascertain, must be well after sunrise and well before sunset, given the position of the sun). The exact location of the narrator is less clearly defined in this passage, however. Although he is never explicitly mentioned, the reader nevertheless can find clues that point towards his being present. Perhaps the first strong hint as to his presence and situation is in the following passage, where the position of the armchairs on the veranda is described:

Le troisième, qui est un siège pliant fait de toile tendue sur des tiges métalliques, occupe – lui – une position nettement en retrait, entre le quatrième et la table. Mais c'est celui-là, moins confortable, qui est

¹⁷⁹ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Jalousie*, (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1978), p.9.

demeuré vide. (...) De l'autre côté de la balustrade, vers l'amont de la vallée, il y a seulement le bruit des criquets et le noir sans étoiles de la nuit.¹⁸⁰

Up until this point, there has been explicit evidence within the narrative only of the existence of A..., Franck and Christiane, Franck's wife. As Christiane is at their home looking after their child, then logically, only two of the four seats described here can be occupied by A... and Franck. Yet, the passage above indicates that three of the four chairs are occupied. It is at this point that the reader is tempted to conclude that the third occupant must be A...'s husband. The temptation to conclude that the husband is seated on the veranda in one of the armchairs is furthered by the way in which the narration goes on to describe the scene beyond the veranda, beyond the hand rail. Thus, the temporal and physical situation of the supposed (but never mentioned) narrator is the locus of the narration throughout the novel.

The absence of any indisputable evidence of a narrating *je* might well lead to claims that these clues are mere red herrings and that the entire novel is a *chosiste* work in which a camera-like eye merely records events and objects. Nevertheless, the temptation on the part of the reader to posit a jealous male heterosexual protagonist, (i.e. A...'s husband) is almost irresistible. The urge to posit such a narrator is, in part, a result of reading strategies acquired via reading rather more traditional literature, and Robbe-Grillet knowingly exploits this tendency on the part of his reader. Indeed, the novel's title is part of its own potentially double meaning. A purely *chosiste* reading would have it that the *jalousie* referred to was simply a venetian blind which impedes the viewing of objects and the occurrence of events. A psychological reading, however, would posit the

¹⁸⁰ *La Jalousie*, p.20.

presence of a jealous narrator, whose emotion partly blinds him, impeding and distorting his view of things. A psychological explanation such as this does not necessarily, however, explain the lack of any mention of a narrating consciousness.

A possible explanation for the absence of any mention of a *je* at the centre of the narrative of *La Jalousie* has been put forward by Szanto. His analysis of narrative consciousness suggests that one does not generally refer to oneself as *je* when thinking, even though the use of this pronoun does become necessary in speech:

In a sense, the elimination of the personal pronoun in reference to oneself is an honest fictionalised description of the relation between a subjective conception and the objectivication of oneself. In speaking, one does say "I". In thinking, such pronouns are rare. Nor does one use a name (with which the external world objectifies all the qualities compounded to describe an individual) for oneself in personal thoughts. Since memory and imagination do not reach a stage of symbolisation demanding words, and pictures suffice (much as they suffice to describe what one sees at a given moment), the need of a pronoun or any label for self-reference is not necessary. A... 's husband finds need neither for this nor for labels other than the most simple (A...) in referring to his wife, whether the letter suffices to bring to mind all associations of their life together is not important.¹⁸¹

Whilst there is truth in Szanto's assertion that, in thought, self-reference of the kind requiring the use of a personal pronoun is rare, there is perhaps more than just an attempt to reproduce thought accurately at work in *La Jalousie*. So, whilst an explanation such as this may be acceptable in terms of providing anecdotal evidence of the reflection of life in art, a theoretical explanation as to why this should be the case is lacking. A phenomenological explanation, however, may help to shed some light on this gap at the centre of the narrative.

¹⁸¹ George H. Szanto, *Narrative Consciousness* (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1972).

Robbe-Grillet himself acknowledges this gap in the narrative, as Morrissette points out:

The 'narrative' (...) is expressed without any immediately discernible reference to self. (...) Robbe-Grillet has spoken of a *creux*, or hole (...) at the centre of the narrative. It is here that the reader installs himself and, seeing, hearing, witnessing what the husband perceives, is obliged to assume the narrator's vision of things and to create without verbal cues or instructions his own interpretation of scenes and events¹⁸².

Thus, without positing the existence of an "I", the narration nevertheless emanates from a point in space and time, this point being the body inhabited by the never-mentioned narrator. Morrissette's notion of the *je-néant*, which he claims is situated in this *creux*, is essentially a Sartrean one, in which consciousness is always consciousness of something, but, as Sartre argued in *La Transcendance de l'ego*, never reveals a separate "je".¹⁸³ Morrissette remarks, in a footnote, that

On ne saurait trouver de meilleure démonstration de cet existentialisme du néant auquel renvoie, implicitement, la technique du "je supprimé" de *La Jalousie*, ni de meilleur soutien à la théorie robbegrilletienne des objets-supports, des objectivations mentales ou des corrélatifs extérieurs. Le fait que la justification de cette technique se trouve renforcée par sa vraisemblance psychologique (comme en convainc *La Jalousie*) souligne l'extrême richesse de ses procédés qui commencent à se répandre dans le roman contemporain (...).¹⁸⁴

What is strange about Morrissette's support for a phenomenological approach to Robbe-Grillet is that his own position, that of using psychology as a means of analysis of Robbe-Grillet's works, should be sidelined. The phenomenological approach is "renforcée" by the psychological approach, rather than the other way around. What this does suggest,

¹⁸² Bruce Morrissette, *Novel and Film* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.106.

¹⁸³ This corresponds to the notion of the *creux* at the centre of being referred to by Bernal.

¹⁸⁴ Morrissette, Bruce, *Les Romans de Robbe-Grillet*, footnote 2, pp. 112-113.

however, is that Morrissette sees strong evidence for a phenomenological reading of the novel.

The Sartrean approach on which Morrissette's *je-néant* is based makes human existence somewhat dualistic, as Sartre makes a distinction between two kinds of being: the *pour-soi* and the *en-soi*. Merleau-Ponty's conception of the *corps-propre* was intended to be a way of reconciling the two modes of being into an incarnate subject. This is a fitting description of the (absent/present) narrator of *La Jalousie*, since the narrator of the novel is, after all, obsessed with *bodily* sensation, whereby conscious thoughts are not articulated, rather, the novel consists of noting sensory perceptions. So whilst Merleau-Ponty would be in agreement with Sartre's claim that, in perception, no "je" is discoverable, which certainly is the case in *La Jalousie*, Merleau-Ponty would disagree with Sartre's separating consciousness from the body by making the *en-soi/pour-soi* division. Thus, given a Merleau-Pontyan reading of the novel, the *corps-propre* is the locus of the narrative in *La Jalousie*, it is bodily sensation, sensory perception, that is referred to, rather than the consciousness or *pour-soi*. A Merleau-Pontyan explanation makes sense of the absence of the narrator, or the reason for his never explicitly being named. For Merleau-Ponty, the direction of intentional experience is always from the perceiver towards the world, so that consciousness cannot be directed towards itself:

le cogito comme expérience de mon être est cogito pré-réflexif, il ne le pose pas en objet devant moi; par position, et avant toute réflexion, je me touche à travers ma situation, c'est à partir d'elle que je suis renvoyé à moi, je m'ignore comme néant, je ne crois qu'aux choses. Précisément parce que, dans ce que j'ai de plus propre, je ne suis rien, rien ne me sépare jamais de moi-même, mais aussi rien ne me signale à moi-même¹⁸⁵

That is, there is nothing to be perceived in looking into one's own consciousness. This is why the body-subject is always turned outwards, towards the world and towards its intentional objects. *La Jalousie*, then, is a perfect example of this; the narrator's intentional objects are described without the narrator ever mentioning himself. This is not to say that one cannot have consciousness of oneself, it is just that consciousness itself can never be the object of our perceptions. For Merleau-Ponty, self-consciousness, in the sense that one is conscious of the fact of one's own consciousness, is perfectly possible, indeed it is affirmed to us in every perception:

Toute pensée de quelque chose est en même temps conscience de soi, faute de quoi elle ne pourrait pas avoir d'objet. A la racine de toutes nos expériences et de toutes nos réflexions, nous trouvons donc un être qui se reconnaît lui-même, immédiatement, parce qu'il est son savoir de soi et de toutes choses, et qui connaît sa propre existence non pas par constatation et comme un fait donné, ou par inférence à partir d'une idée de lui-même, mais par un contact direct avec elle.¹⁸⁶

So, the self is given in consciousness, but not in an explicit way; it is certainly not the transcendental ego posited by Husserl after the reduction, but a self absorbed in its own perceptions, indeed in its own obsessions, as is the case in *La Jalousie*.

The nearest the narrator of *La Jalousie* ever comes to including himself in the narrative is in the use of the catch-all "on". This is rarely used in the novel, but where it does appear, it is suggestive of the presence of the narrator, and emphasises his awareness of his bodily situation:

On entend, venant par sa porte entrebâillée, la voix de A..., puis celle du cuisinier noir, volubile et chantante, puis de nouveau la voix nette, mesurée, qui donne des ordres pour le repas du soir.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.83.

¹⁸⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.426.

Here, it is the sense of hearing that situates the narrator on the other side of the door, and the use of “on” suggests a human presence of some sort. Merleau-Ponty’s comments on the use of “on” rather than “je”, which constitute part of his argument against Sartre’s *en-soi* and *pour-soi* dualism, are enlightening with respect to the passage from *La Jalousie* above:

Comment avons-nous pu échapper à l’alternative du pour soi et de l’en soi, comment la conscience perceptive peut-elle être engorgée par son objet, comment pouvons-nous distinguer la conscience sensible de la conscience intellectuelle? C’est que (...) toute perception a lieu dans une atmosphère de généralité et se donne à nous comme anonyme. Je ne peux pas dire que *je* vois le bleu du ciel au sens où je dis que je comprends un livre ou encore que je décide de consacrer ma vie aux mathématiques. Ma perception, même vu de l’intérieur, exprime une situation donnée: je vois du bleu parce que je suis *sensible* aux couleurs – au contraire les actes personnels en créent une: je suis mathématicien parce que j’ai décidé de l’être. De sorte que, si je voulais traduire exactement l’expérience perceptive, je devrais dire qu’*on* perçoit en moi et non pas que je perçois.¹⁸⁸

Thus, in the passage from *La Jalousie* above, the sensation of hearing the voices coming from a certain direction (the other side of a door), situates the narrator’s body in space. The passage also uses “on” to describe what the narrator hears. This is in line with the remarks made by Merleau-Ponty here, it is “on”, rather than “je” that perceives, in basic perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty argues here that a bodily account of consciousness is more true to our lived experience than a dualist account of consciousness, claiming that perception as it is experienced is anonymous, that there is no “je”, no ego, as Husserl would have claimed. In a point related to this, Merleau-Ponty claims that the anonymity of sensation is due to our body’s perspectival grasp of the world; it is because the body is situated:

¹⁸⁷ *La Jalousie*, p.16.

La sensation ne peut être anonyme que parce qu'elle est partielle. Celui qui voit et celui qui touche n'est pas exactement moi-même parce que le monde visible et le monde tangible ne sont pas le monde en entier. Quand je vois un objet, j'éprouve toujours qu'il y a encore de l'être au-delà de ce que je vois actuellement, non seulement de l'être visible, mais encore de l'être tangible ou saisissable par l'ouïe (...) toute sensation appartient à un certain champ. Dire que j'ai un champ visuel, c'est dire que par position j'ai accès et ouverture à un système d'êtres, les êtres visibles, qu'ils sont à la disposition de mon regard en vertu d'une sorte de contrat primordial et par un don de la nature, sans aucun effort de ma part; c'est donc dire que la vision est prépersonnelle; et c'est dire en même temps qu'elle est toujours limitée, qu'il y ait toujours autour de ma vision actuelle un horizon de choses non vues ou même non-visibles. La vision est *une pensée assujettie à un certain champ*.¹⁸⁹

The following passage from *La Jalousie*, as well as the previous one, both combine these ideas – the anonymity of perception as revealed by the use of “on”, and by the fact that the narrator, in the next quotation, has part of his field of perception rendered invisible by the situated nature of his body:

Mais le regard qui, venant du fond de la chambre, passe par-dessus la balustrade, ne touche terre que beaucoup plus loin, sur le flanc opposé de la petite vallée, parmi les bananiers de la plantation. On n'aperçoit pas le sol entre leurs panaches touffus de larges feuilles vertes. Cependant, comme la mise en culture de ce secteur est assez récente, on y suit distinctement encore l'entrecroisement régulier des lignes de plantes.¹⁹⁰

Thus, the narrator cannot see the earth between the leaves, it is screened by the leaves, due to his perspective, just as the narrator in the previous quotation could not see, but only hear, what was happening behind the door. Thus, the use of “on” indicates the absence of a “je” in perception, and, in revealing the limited nature of perception, indicates the bodily position of the perceiver.

¹⁸⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.249, original emphasis.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.250-251, original emphasis.

Cinematic point of view

The technique of situating the narration of space and time within a perceiving body is also apparent in Robbe-Grillet's films, and evidence of this is to be found in Robbe-Grillet's first foray into cinema with *L'Immortelle*, wherein the perspective presented is often that of N, a human viewpoint. That is not to say, however, that events are revealed exclusively through the protagonist's eyes, since the camera often focuses on N himself. There appears to be something of a contradiction at work here in Robbe-Grillet's theoretical position if we consider again his remarks in the introduction to *L'Immortelle* concerning N, the narrator, as the character from whose perspective events are perceived. N is, Robbe-Grillet tells us:

Un narrateur (...) par les yeux de qui tout est vu, par les oreilles de qui tout est entendu, ou par l'esprit de qui tout est imaginé.¹⁹¹

Robbe-Grillet's emphasis here on a single human perspective, whilst concurring perfectly with his novelistic practice in *La Jalousie*, where one person's viewpoint is consistently presented, is less strictly adhered to in other works. Sometimes, an almost imperceptible shift from third to first person perspective is employed (e.g. *Le Voyeur*), or else a perspective which shifts from one character to another (e.g. *Les Gommages*, *La Maison de Rendez-vous*). *L'Immortelle* appears to contain a mixture of techniques. Whilst the narrative in, for example, *Le Voyeur* is a third person narrative giving access to Mathias' subjective thought processes, *L'Immortelle* appears to achieve a similar effect by giving the viewer access to N's experiences whilst including him in the shot. That is, he is viewed as if from another person's perspective (a kind of third person perspective),

¹⁹⁰ *La Jalousie*, p.11.

¹⁹¹ *L'Immortelle*, p.9.

and that other person is not necessarily one of the other characters, in, for example scenes where N is alone in his flat. Thus, the viewer sees N's face instead of what N himself sees; sometimes N's face and the scene around him are visible in the same shot. How is this third person narration to be squared with Robbe-Grillet's position as stated above with regard to avoiding the kind of God-like narrator found in realist novels or with presenting only what N experiences?

The answer to this problem, as pointed out by Morrissette, lies in the possibility of separating:

point of view in itself, as localisation of a camera objective or of an authorial eye, from the reason or internal justification of this same point of view. Does this "observer", who for Robbe-Grillet (...) need not be a "character" in the narrative, have the privilege of randomly positioning himself almost anywhere, with no excuse other than the exactitude of those visual perspectives?¹⁹²

Morrissette wonders what is to prevent the observer mentioned above from becoming the omniscient observer of the Balzacian novel, as he would indeed have liberty of movement. These kind of third person perspective shots would take on a similar role in the film as descriptive passages do in a novel. The sliding of the perspective between third and first person in the novel would become the change of shot from the protagonist's point of view to a view of the protagonist, or vice-versa, in the film. For Morrissette, there is a risk here that Robbe-Grillet's theoretical position may be weakened. If, for Robbe-Grillet, the perspective presented to the viewer is not that of one of the characters, how is he to justify the choice of the camera's point of view? It seems that Robbe-Grillet is not unaware of the need to justify the camera's point of view, indeed

¹⁹² Morrissette, *Novel and Film*, p.45.

he has himself commented, in an interview, on the importance of justifying each change in the point of view presented by the camera:

The cinema, whether or not there is a character to assume the point of view, is under the absolute obligation of always defining it – the photo has to be taken from a given point; the camera has to be somewhere. If there are changes of perspective during the course of the description, they will not go unnoticed; in one way or another they will have to justify themselves.¹⁹³

For Robbe-Grillet, then, the camera does not need to occupy the position of a literal point of view shot, it does not have to situate itself literally where the eyes of the protagonist would be. However, his films do tend to limit themselves to only revealing that which the protagonist knows, and in this sense, there is no God-like perspective, such as the perspective Robbe-Grillet complained of in novels of Balzac. It is in this sense too that Robbe-Grillet's films are limited to the perspective of one body-subject; there is no privileged overview. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet has commented on the fact that the narratives of his films are *incarnated* by an actor:

J'ai toujours eu dans mes films un acteur principal, quelqu'un qui incarne en somme la parole narratrice primaire ou essentielle.¹⁹⁴

Thus, Robbe-Grillet's cinema concentrates on events which are witnessed or imagined by one of its characters, even if the camera does not always mimic the protagonist's literal point of view, as was the case with an incarnate narrative perspective in *La Jalousie*.

Alain Spiegel notes the similarities between novel and film in his discussion of the camera eye in literature. The main focus of his argument is that the novel, even

¹⁹³ Edward Branigan, *Point of view in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film* (Berlin, New York, Amsterdam: Mouton Publishers, 1984), p.45.

¹⁹⁴ Robbe-Grillet quoted in booklet accompanying box set of videos: *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Œuvres Cinématographiques* (Paris: Ministère des Relations Extérieures, 1982), p.33.

before the invention of cinema (as far back as Flaubert), uses narrative techniques which are not unlike the use of the camera. For Spiegel, the camera can be likened to the perspective of human vision:

(...) the camera is a subjective medium, for it cannot show us any object without at the time revealing its own physical position – its angle and distance from the object (). This means that the images produced by the motion picture camera will only allow us to experience the object through a series of perspectives; that the ontology of the image itself will never allow for an apprehension of the object as a whole. In this sense no other art is less equipped to present a godlike and omniscient view of human experience than the camera (...)¹⁹⁵

Robbe-Grillet has also suggested that the novel has taken inspiration from the cinema in trying to decide upon the direction and duration of a description of point of view. In the cinema, the decision is inevitably taken for the director, to some extent, since the camera already has a point of view and a direction, whether or not it is meant to represent the point of view of one of the film's characters:

Sur la pellicule les choses n'existent que comme phénomènes; elles ont obligatoirement une forme, et celle-ci se présente soit d'un côté soit de l'autre, jamais de plusieurs côtés en même temps.¹⁹⁶

Given that the camera has a point of view, the difficulty is in deciding on how the shot will be taken, and it is this problem which the novelist must also address:

Sous l'influence, ou non, de telles exigences du récit cinématographique, le roman à son tour semble prendre conscience des mêmes problèmes. D'où est vu cet objet? Sous quel angle? A quelle distance? Avec quel éclairage? Le regard s'y arrête-t-il longtemps, ou passe-t-il sans insister? Se déplace-t-il, ou bien reste-t-il fixe? Le romancier perpétuellement omniscient et omniprésent est ainsi récusé. Ce n'est plus un Dieu qui

¹⁹⁵ Alan Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual Consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1976), p. 32.

¹⁹⁶ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Notes sur la localisation de les déplacements du point de vue dans la description romanesque', in *La Revue des lettres modernes: Cinéma et roman, éléments d'appréciation*, 5, 36-38 (Été 1958) 256-258 (p.257).

décrit le monde, c'est l'homme, *un* homme. Même si ce n'est pas un personnage, c'est en tout cas *un œil d'homme*. Ce roman contemporain, dont on répète volontiers qu'il veut exclure l'homme de l'univers, lui donne donc en réalité la première place, celle de l'observateur.¹⁹⁷

Robbe-Grillet's project as a novelist and filmmaker therefore aims for the same grounding in a human perspective as does Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. What is interesting about Robbe-Grillet's account of narrative perspective in fiction, then, is that the point of view of the narrative in the novel or of the camera in the cinema does not necessarily have to be that of one of the characters, so long as it is a human point of view.

Indeed, it is questionable whether a cinematic equivalent of the first person perspective of *La Jalousie* would be possible. Commentaries on cinematic point of view indicate the failure of *Lady in the Lake* to depict successfully a subjective perspective on the screen. This was a film in which a camera was attached to an actor's body in order to show events from his perspective. Morrissette notes the problem highlighted by *Lady in the Lake*, and the way in which Robbe-Grillet's *L'Immortelle* avoided it:

Some scenes use the subjective camera (with the lens where N's eyes would be), but in most instances the camera is alongside N. (...) It is a means, without resorting to the exclusive use of subjective camera (which, as *Lady in the Lake* demonstrated, cannot maintain the desired effect), of subjectifying the narration while retaining the third-person mode.¹⁹⁸

However, the alleged success or failure of a camera technique in one film does not in itself provide a justification for dismissing the possibility that it might not be used successfully in another film. Vivian Sobchack's discussion of point of view, in relation to a phenomenological approach to cinema, however, provides greater justification for

¹⁹⁷ 'Notes sur la localisation de les déplacements du point de vue dans la description romanesque', pp.257-258.

not attempting to render internal experiences of consciousness via a film entirely composed of point of view shots. Sobchack's dismissal of the technique attempted in *Lady in the Lake* is justified in phenomenological terms, and distinguishes between the "film's body" and the human, lived body. The "film's body" is just not the same as a human body, Sobchack argues, and this is the cause of the failure of the subjective camera technique:

Thus, disguised in human form in *Lady in the Lake*, the film's body and its perceptual experience is made explicit in its *inauthenticity* as a lived-body (...) Seen only objectively, both our own bodies and the film's body are reduced to mere physiological visibility. Their material nature, whether human flesh or metal and celluloid, becomes strange as it is estranged, abstracted, and amputated from its intentional function. In sum, the body we objectify is finally not a lived-body for us – whether it be the film's body or our own. It is not the subject of experience, but merely an object for experience.¹⁹⁹

Because the film's body is an object for the viewer, and not a subject, it cannot convince the viewer that it has an intentional grasp of the world in the same way that a body-subject does.

Merleau-Ponty's remarks on the cinema suggest that point of view shots are not always necessary to allow the viewer to identify with a character in the film:

(...) le cinéma ne nous donne pas (...) les pensées de l'homme, il nous donne sa conduite ou son comportement, il nous offre directement cette manière spéciale d'être au monde, de traiter les choses et les autres, qui est pour nous visible dans les gestes, le regard, la mimique, et qui définit avec évidence chaque personne que nous connaissons. Si le cinéma veut nous montrer une personne qui a le vertige, il ne devra pas essayer de rendre le paysage intérieur du vertige (...) Nous sentirons beaucoup mieux le vertige en voyant de l'extérieur, en contemplant ce corps déséquilibré qui se tord sur un rocher, ou cette marche vacillante qui tente de s'adapter à on

¹⁹⁸ Bruce Morrissette, *Alain Robbe-Grillet* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1965), p.41.

¹⁹⁹ Sobchack, pp.232, 248.

ne sait quel bouleversement de l'espace. Pour le cinéma moderne, le vertige, le plaisir, la douleur, l'amour, la haine sont des conduites.²⁰⁰

This is the basis of Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity, the way in which we perceive others and have access to their minds. Just as our own behaviour communicates our internal states, so we can grasp the feelings and desires of others through their external manifestation in behaviour. Hence the need to show N's face, his bodily movement and the way in which he interacts with L and other characters – these aspects of his behaviour are a means for the viewer of identifying with what he is experiencing. So, the viewer experiences both N's perceptions as undergone by him (in literal point of view shots), and an understanding of what N is experiencing by watching his behaviour (shots in which N is seen within the frame). N's behaviour is also presented to the viewer either from the perspective of other characters, or from the perspective of none of the other characters. These various perspectives are described in Merleau-Ponty's account of how we intend the world around us from a subjective perspective, and how we understand and identify with the experiences of the other people by observing them.

Sensory perception

As well as the bodily centring of experience, Merleau-Ponty discusses the process of perception, a central part of his philosophical project in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. The return to phenomena themselves is, of course, an important result of the phenomenological reduction. In accordance with his aim of describing, rather than analysing or explaining, Merleau-Ponty sets out to describe what happens in perception. His detailed exposition comprises accounts of the perceptual field and how objects within

²⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Sens et Non-sens*, p.104.

it solicit one's attention so to become intentional objects, the objects of perception. He also discusses the tyranny of unwanted and apparently insignificant perceptions, and of the role of perception in relation to the imagination. All of these will be relevant in the analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work, which concentrates to a great extent upon painstaking descriptions or depiction of the perception of many phenomena. Since an obvious reason for the inclusion of such descriptions in Robbe-Grillet's work is not often apparent, it is hoped that Merleau-Ponty's call to examine the phenomenology of perception will render some of Robbe-Grillet's descriptive passages more understandable.

The perceptual field

Perception, Merleau-Ponty claims, always has the basic structure of a figure perceived against a background. That is, in order to perceive anything, the subject has to be able to pick out an object against its surroundings. In this regard, it is worth underlining the influence, noted earlier, of Gestalt theory, as Merleau-Ponty acknowledges in *Phénoménologie de la perception*:

Quand la Gestalt-theorie nous dit qu'une figure sur un fond est la donnée sensible la plus simple que nous puissions obtenir, (...) c'est la définition même du phénomène perceptif, ce sans quoi un phénomène ne peut être dit perception. Le "quelque chose" perceptif est toujours au milieu d'autre chose, il fait toujours partie d'un "champ". Un plage vraiment homogène, n'offrant *rien à percevoir* ne peut être donnée à *aucune perception*.²⁰¹

So, perception for Merleau-Ponty is a process whereby attention is brought to bear on an object within a perceptual field. Robbe-Grillet's prose describes a similar process, it presents perceptions via a character or a narrator, and these perceptions are frequently described as if one object is being focused upon amongst a field of objects, before the

attention of the perceiver moves on to the next object. This is not restricted to visual sensation, in Robbe-Grillet's fiction; the following passage from *La Maison de rendez-vous* takes place in a dark corridor, which results in a noticeably *bodily* contact with the objects the narrator encounters. In addition, as he cannot see, there is a delay in the identification of each object perceived, so that each object is described in terms of tactile sensations before becoming recognisable, or named, as that particular object. Thus, the newspapers are initially "des choses entassées" before being recognised as "journaux"; similarly the fish are firstly described as "un contact froid et humide", or "des corps allongés, très froids, un peu visqueux", until the ambiguity is resolved and the narrator realises that they are "[de] gros poissons":

Comme je cherche une issue à ce désordre, j'atteins des régions qui ne sont plus éclairées du tout. Je bute sur des choses entassées que je devine ensuite, au toucher, être des piles de journaux épais, sur papier lisse, du format des illustrés chinois. En avançant la main à tâtons, je rencontre alors un contact froid et humide, qui me fait retirer le bras vivement. Mais, dans une direction voisine, et avec l'espoir toujours de découvrir un passage entre les piles de journaux que se multiplient, je tombe sur d'autres objets identiques – des corps allongés, très froids, un peu visqueux – dont je finis, d'après l'odeur plus forte que dégage cet endroit, par comprendre la nature: un grand nombre de gros poissons, sans doute considérés comme inconsommables.²⁰²

This kind of description, in which the objects are named only after being experienced, corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's claim that in perception, the objects of perception become determinate against an indeterminate or ambiguous background: "Ce passage de l'indéterminé au déterminé (...) c'est la pensée même."²⁰³

²⁰¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.10.

²⁰² Alain Robbe-Grillet, *La Maison de rendez-vous* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1965), pp.96-97.

²⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.39.

So, the phenomenological reduction leads to an emphasis upon things themselves, upon phenomena as experienced without any explanatory framework included in that perception. The ambiguous perceptual field, against which the body-subject picks out objects, making them determinate, is nevertheless constantly soliciting the attention of the senses. In spite of any attempt to concentrate, there are still objects around the body-subject that provide a distraction. Merleau-Ponty describes his own attempt to concentrate upon his work, whilst at the same time, his senses and his thoughts wander; his eye is drawn to the trees outside his room:

Je pense au Cogito cartésien, je veux terminer ce travail, je sens la fraîcheur du papier sous ma main, je perçois les arbres du boulevard à travers la fenêtre. Ma vie se précipite à chaque moment dans des choses transcendantes, elle se passe tout entière au dehors.²⁰⁴

So, part of the structure of perception is that it takes place against a background, and this background, even in ordinary situations, solicits the attention of the body-subject away from its deliberate activities. Let us return once more to *La Jalousie*, and consider the narrator's attempt to concentrate deliberately on the banana trees, by methodically counting them. These efforts at focusing upon something ordered and quantifiable are thwarted when the narrator's attention wanders back to the activities of A... and Franck. In one passage in particular, the narrator describes what is in front of him, that is, the window with its blind through which A... and Franck can be seen on the balcony. The narrator, watching A... and Franck, turns to concentrate on the stumps of some recently harvested banana trees, which have new shoots growing next to them:

Juste à côté de chaque disque blanc, mais dans des directions variables, a poussé le rejet de remplacement. Suivant la précocité du premier régime,

²⁰⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.423.

ce nouveau plant a maintenant entre cinquante centimètres et un mètre de haut.

A... vient d'apporter les verres, les deux bouteilles et le seau à glace. (...)

“Nous partirons de bonne heure, dit Franck.

- C'est-à-dire?

- Six heures, si vous voulez bien.

- Oh! là là...

- Ça vous fait peur?

- Mais non.” Elle rit. Puis, après un silence: “Au contraire, c'est très amusant.”²⁰⁵

The white discs of each stump are counted and described meticulously, in what appears to be a conscious effort to concentrate upon the banana plants. That is, a casual observation, an eye flicking across the plants as part of a perceptual field coming into focus would probably not trouble to count the individual plants in this way. However, the narrator's jealous inclinations at this point mean that he is incapable of keeping his mind on the task of surveying the banana field. Like Merleau-Ponty unable to concentrate upon his work, the narrator of *La Jalousie* has his concentration broken by elements of his perceptual field. The reason that his concentration breaks in this way is that his attention is drawn back to contemplation of the very thing he sought to avoid – the relationship between A... and Franck. The suspect nature of their relationship is underlined in the above passage by the somewhat flirtatious conversation between them; they are arranging to spend time together, A... giggles at Franck's jokes, suggesting a closeness between them.

²⁰⁵ *La Jalousie*, pp.80-81.

Non-signifying objects

Frequently, Robbe-Grillet's narratives concentrate upon objects which apparently have no particular signification. These objects neither serve to further the development of the plot, nor do they have any special meaning for the narrator or character who is describing them. As such, they are one of the more bewildering aspects of his work for readers brought up in the tradition of realist literature. The description of such objects in his fiction appears to be an attempt to render human perception in prose, and is part of Robbe-Grillet's move away from realist fiction. Whereas in realism, an object can have a meaning via the use of conventions such as metaphor, for Robbe-Grillet, objects are not to be understood as metaphors for emotions or to be read as having any significance other than the fact of their brute existence. Again, this is analogous to the process of phenomenological reduction, with conventional signification or explanation being parenthesised to allow for a return to phenomena. Such descriptions of objects devoid of meaning are very much the kind of descriptions called for by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, when he says that:

Il s'agit de décrire, et non pas d'expliquer ni d'analyser. Cette première consigne que Husserl donnait à la phénoménologie commençante d'être une "psychologie descriptive" ou de revenir "aux choses mêmes", c'est d'abord le désaveu de la science. (...) Tout ce que je sais du monde, même par la science, je le sais à partir d'une vue mienne ou d'une expérience du monde sans laquelle les symboles de la science ne voudraient rien dire.²⁰⁶

A comparison with Robbe-Grillet's theoretical writing on the *Nouveau Roman* reveals the similarity between their theoretical standpoints. Merleau-Ponty's remarks are echoed by Robbe-Grillet's aims for his literature:

²⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.ii.

A la place de cet univers des “significations” (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionnelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat. Que ce soit d’abord par leur *présence* que les objets et les gestes s’imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer, par-dessus toute théorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence, sentimental, sociologique, freudien, métaphysique ou autre.²⁰⁷

So, just as Merleau-Ponty rejects science as a theoretical framework which guides our perceptions and helps to make them understandable, Robbe-Grillet rejects any theory that circumscribes experience or locks it into a system of explanations. The close description of the tomato on a plate in a restaurant in *Les Gommages* is just such a description, concentrating as it does on the perception of the object, giving it no other meaning than the fact of its presence:

Un quartier de tomate en vérité sans défaut, découpé à la machine dans un fruit d’une symétrie parfaite.

La chair rouge périphérique, compacte et homogène, d’un beau rouge de chimie, est régulièrement épaisse entre une bande de peau luisante et la loge où sont rangés les pépins, jaunes, bien calibrés, maintenus en place par une mince couche de gelée verdâtre le long d’un renflement du cœur. (...etc...)²⁰⁸

This lingering description is an apt illustration of Robbe-Grillet’s desire to show things just as things, not as imbued with any meaning that might make them significant or absurd, but quite simply there, existing. He states this as one of his aims in literature in

Pour Un Nouveau Roman:

Dans les constructions romanesques futures, gestes et objets seront *là* avant d’être *quelque chose*; et ils seront encore *là* après, durs, inaltérables, présents pour toujours et comme se moquant de leur propre sens, ce sens qui cherche en vain à les réduire au rôle d’ustensiles précaires, de tissu provisoire et honteux à quoi seule aurait donné forme – et de façon

²⁰⁷ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.23.

²⁰⁸ *Les Gommages*, p. 161.

délibérée - la vérité humaine supérieure qui s'y est exprimée, pour aussitôt rejeter cet auxiliaire gênant dans l'oubli, dans les ténèbres.²⁰⁹

Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of a non-signifying object in *Les Gommages* calls to mind Jean-Luc Godard's long close-up of a coffee cup in *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle*.²¹⁰ The same resistance to any metaphorical or further meaning beyond the very presence of the object applies equally to Godard's image. Steven Shaviro comments along similar lines to Robbe-Grillet with regards to these kinds of non-signifying objects, and he provides citing Godard's coffee cup to illustrate his remarks. These images, in virtue of the fact that they appear on the screen for such a length of time, "persist beyond the act of recognition that stabilizes and rationalizes perception".²¹¹ It is as if, Shaviro claims, these images are being presented to ask the question "What is an object?" The images no longer present objects inscribed in a meaningful system:

The aberrant scale and unfamiliar lighting of these images defamiliarizes their objects – or, better, forces us to stop regarding them as referential objects. They appear in fixed shots, held for a long time: duration has become an independent dimension of the image, and is no longer a function of the time needed for cognition and action. The pebble and the coffee are neither useful nor significant; they work neither as things nor as signs. They are nothing but images, mutely and fascinatingly soliciting our attention. The pebble rests, the coffee swirls, filling the screen. Our gaze is suspended; we are compelled merely to regard these images, in their strangeness, apart from our knowledge of what they represent.²¹²

The defamiliarising effect to which Shaviro refers is in line with the strangeness resulting from the phenomenological reduction, and the *dépaysement* to which Robbe-Grillet has referred in relation to his own works. Images such as those mentioned in Godard's

²⁰⁹ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p. 23.

²¹⁰ Jean-Luc Godard, *Deux Ou Trois Choses que je sais d'elle* (France: Argos, 1967).

²¹¹ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body Theory out of Bounds, Volume 2* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, 3rd printing 2000), p. 29.

cinema, although they do occur in Robbe-Grillet's novels, are less apparent in his films. However, one moment at which a single shot lingers longer than is necessary for mere recognition in Robbe-Grillet's cinema is in the night club scene in *Trans-Europ Express*. A naked woman, bound in chains, revolves slowly on a stage for the delectation of the audience. The shot of the woman is in a similar vein, but it could be claimed that its inclusion in the film has a diegetic justification; the display of her body forms part of the entertainment in the club visited by the film's protagonist. It is this inclusion in the diegesis that distinguishes it from other non-signifying objects such as the tomato in *Les Gommages* and Godard's coffee cup. In addition, the sexual nature of the image means that its function is rather more complex, a topic to be discussed in a later chapter.

The invasion of unsolicited perceptions

For Merleau-Ponty, the pervasive nature of apparently insignificant sensory perception may at times be linked to situations of danger or crisis. The body takes over in such situations, the subject has no wilful control over what the body will pay attention to.

Pendant que je suis accablé par un deuil et tout à ma peine, déjà mes regards errent devant moi, ils s'intéressent sournoisement à quelque objet brillant, ils recommencent leur existence autonome.²¹³

There are situations in Robbe-Grillet's fiction where such crises induce a heightened awareness of sensory perception in a fictional character. In *Le Voyeur*, at the beginning of part two of the novel, Mathias notices a flattened, desiccated frog in the road. There is an extraordinarily detailed description of a shadow that falls across the road and of the

²¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 29 – 30. (The pebble features in Godard's *Weekend*).

frog's dried-up corpse. There is something reminiscent here of the tomato passage from *Les Gommages*; the frog is apparently a non-signifying and insignificant object, when the reader first encounters this description. However, it becomes apparent retrospectively, that it is just prior to the description of the frog that Jacqueline disappeared and was possibly raped and thrown over a cliff. Mathias' guilt in this matter is never absolutely established by the end of the novel, however it becomes evident that he is grappling with some kind of trauma connected with the girl's disappearance. Olga Bernal's phenomenological study of Robbe-Grillet suggests that the squashed frog, nothing more than a hollow skin, is a metaphor for the hollow in being in which the intentional consciousness resides. Whilst Bernal's argument is consistent with a phenomenological interpretation of the novel, I would contend that a phenomenological explanation that fits with the novel's diegesis can also be argued; that is, assuming that Mathias is the perpetrator of the crime, he is suffering from some kind of guilty trauma following Jacqueline's misfortunes. Mathias, in line with all the descriptions in this novel, does not state that he is traumatised; rather the reader is left to work this out, given the experiences he undergoes. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, his body takes over in this situation; he has no control over the focus of his perceptions, and so stares in incomprehension at the frog.

Perception and imagination

There is a link in phenomenology between perception and imagination. In discussing perception, Merleau-Ponty claims that, in ordinary perception, one notices things that are not literally there, that is, one imagines things. For Merleau-Ponty, these things are just as much objects of perception as "real" things out there in the world. The

²¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.100.

two are not to be confused, claims Merleau-Ponty, imagined objects are not mistaken for real ones; rather, the real objects spark off our imagination, which weaves dreams around those objects:

A chaque moment mon champ perceptif est rempli de reflets, de craquements, d'impressions tactiles fugaces que je suis hors d'état de relier précisément au contexte perçu et que cependant je place d'emblée dans le monde, sans les confondre jamais avec mes rêveries. A chaque instant aussi je rêve autour des choses, j'imagine des objets ou des personnes dont la présence ici n'est pas incompatible avec le contexte, et pourtant ils ne se mêlent pas au monde, ils sont en avant du monde, sur le théâtre de l'imaginaire.²¹⁴

Instances of *glissements* from the real into the imaginary abound in Robbe-Grillet's works. Whilst some of these are imaginings about the past, and so might be classified as memories, others are comprised of events that have not yet occurred, or that are purely speculative. *La Jalousie* provides an example of this - the description of the noise made by the millipede transforms into the noise made by A... 's comb:

(...) la bestiole choit sur le carrelage, (...) les mâchoires s'ouvrent et se ferment à toute vitesse autour de la bouche, à vide, dans un tremblement réflexe... Il est possible, en approchant l'oreille, de percevoir le grésillement léger qu'elles produisent.

Le bruit est celui du peigne dans la longue chevelure. Les dents d'écaïlle passent et repassent du haut en bas de l'épaisse masse noire aux reflets roux, électrisant les pointes et s'électrisant elles-mêmes, faisant crépiter les cheveux souples (...)

Les deux longues antennes accélèrent leur balancement alterné. (...) Dans le silence, par instant, se laisse entendre, le grésillement caractéristique, émis probablement à l'aide des appendices bucaux.²¹⁵

A single perceptual phenomenon here runs through the description of the millipede and of A... 's hair being combed; they are linked via the crackling noise they both make. Yet

²¹⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp.iv-v.

both phenomena are not literally in front of the narrator, rather, the narration recounts the perceptions of his imagination, which has woven the two perceptions around one another. The narrative continues, describing Franck killing the millipede, returning to bed, a hand (A...’s hand?) grasping the sheets, and Franck going faster “dans sa hâte d’arriver au but”²¹⁶. The euphemistic choice of words here is clearly deliberate, since another transformation takes place at this point. The fact that he is in bed seems to indicate that Franck is quickening his pace in the sexual act in order to reach a climax. But, by the end of the paragraph, these words refer to him driving a vehicle that hits a tree and bursts into flame. The *glissements* of meaning continue, as the crackling of the flames again becomes the same as that of the millipede and then of A... combing her hair.²¹⁷ These slidings of meaning are an apt rendering in fictional terms of what Merleau-Ponty describes, when he claims that a single perception can trigger off others in our imagination. It is typical of Robbe-Grillet’s style that he should describe this process without making it explicit, and this is also consistent with the phenomenological method of describing, rather than analysing or explaining. The reader is carried along by the narrator’s perceptions and imaginings, only realising retrospectively that a description he/she has just read applies to two different intentional objects of the narrator’s perception. All of the perceptions in the passage described above are linked via the crackling sound made by the millipede, the comb and the fire, and in each one in turn is woven into an imagining of another.

A somewhat similar process of the encroachment of something that is not literally there into the perception of something real is also apparent in Robbe-Grillet’s cinema.

²¹⁵ *La Jalousie*, pp.164-165.

²¹⁶ *La Jalousie*, p.166.

L'Immortelle is, for example, a film in which reality and imagination are often difficult to disentangle. The real slides to the mythical and the imaginary throughout the film, and this is again similar to the imagination being sparked off by the objects of immediate perception as outlined by Merleau-Ponty. When N returns to the mosque after L's death in the car crash, he is seen in shadow. He is lit up for an instant, at the same time as the noise of a door opening and closing is heard. Robbe-Grillet clearly intends the viewer to assume that the illumination of his face is caused by light coming through as the door is opened and closed. As L appears, however, no such noise can be heard to justify the illumination of her features:

C'est ensuite une autre silhouette qui s'éclaire, plus en arrière, et sans justification cette fois: L assez lointaine entre des colonnes, dans la même robe que lors de leur visite à cette mosquée. Elle est droite comme une statue et regarde vers N et la caméra. Il se tourne lentement du côté de la jeune femme, mais elle s'éteint à son tour et le plan change.²¹⁸

Thus, although she is not literally there (there is no sound from the door, and therefore not enough light coming into the dark interior to allow her to be seen), the setting of the mosque is enough to allow N to imagine her presence. Unlike the passage from *La Jalousie* quoted above however, this is an imagined scene that takes place in N's memory, rather than being a scene that the narrator has invented for himself without having witnessed.

Conclusion

The discussion of the body subject as outlined by Merleau-Ponty has two major consequences which are reflected in the film and fiction of Robbe-Grillet. Firstly, the

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.165-167.

narrative perspective used by Robbe-Grillet in his novels suggests that they are narrated from a human point of view, if not always necessarily that of one of the characters. In a novel such as *La Jalousie*, it is possible to detect the presence of a narrator, even in the absence of any mention of him. The narrator's presence in spite of his apparent absence is indicated by a phenomenological analysis of the text. Two points made by Merleau-Ponty in reference to perception allow this to be demonstrated; firstly, since consciousness is impossible to perceive, there is no direct reference in the book to any narrating consciousness. Secondly, every act of perception is already a recognition of oneself as a perceiving subject, so again, the narrator's perceptions already indicate that there is a human presence narrating. In Robbe-Grillet's films, and most especially in *L'Immortelle*, it is again the perspective of the narrator that is presented. Although Robbe-Grillet does not film exclusively from N's point of view, the camera nevertheless is placed in such a way as to make the viewer identify with N and view events in relation to him, rather than in relation to any of the other characters in the film.

The other major consequence of the phenomenological reduction is a return to phenomena themselves, described as they are perceived, devoid of any explanatory framework. In Robbe-Grillet's works, there are many examples of seemingly insignificant perceptual data, described in apparently excessive detail. Once more, when viewed from the perspective of a phenomenological project, their inclusion is less surprising. Robbe-Grillet's depiction of objects and his emphasis on sensory perception is understandable as an attempt to heed the call of phenomenology for a return to phenomena unaccompanied by any justificatory or explanatory framework.

²¹⁸ *L'Immortelle*, p. 78, shot n° 284.

Chapter Four

Time: the strangeness of the present

Closely linked to an examination of the body-subject, its spatial situation and corporeal perception, is the question of time. Indeed, these are inseparable in a phenomenological account of filmic and fictional narratives, since the body-subject is a temporal as well as a spatial being, thus, for Merleau-Ponty, “perception, being inherently perspectival, is of its very nature temporal.”²¹⁹ This is the crux of his argument in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and is an important part of this analysis of Robbe-Grillet’s works. For Merleau-Ponty, the various modes of existence of the body-subject - its existence in space or time, or, as we shall see in the following chapter, its existence as a sexual being - cannot be considered separately; the body-subject is a combination of all of these modes of being:

Nous pouvons dès maintenant dire de la temporalité ce que nous avons dit (...) de la sexualité et de la spatialité: l’existence ne peut avoir d’attribut

²¹⁹ Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception*, (Handmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: MacMillan, 1989), p.123.

extérieur ou contingent. Elle ne peut être quoi que ce soit – spatiale, sexuelle, temporelle – sans l'être tout entière, sans reprendre et assumer ses "attributs" et faire d'eux des dimensions de son être, de sorte qu'une analyse un peu précise de chacun d'eux concerne en réalité la subjectivité elle-même.²²⁰

This, then, is what is at issue in using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy to analyse Robbe-Grillet's films and novels – phenomenology reveals the interconnected nature not only of spatial situation and the objects of perception, but also of the temporal and cultural nature of lived experience. Our discussion here will concentrate on the temporality of the body-subject, and on the perception of time.

The main thrust of the discussion here is to be an analysis of the centring of time on the body-subject in Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of the way in which time is presented from the perspective of the present in his films and novels. For Robbe-Grillet, time and space are always perceived through the here and now, as he remarks in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, "il n'y a pas plus d'ailleurs possible que d'autrefois."²²¹ It is the contention of this analysis that the here and now of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction is that of the intentional consciousness, the phenomenological body-subject. The notion that embodiment leads to an apprehension of time via the present is the main point that Merleau-Ponty makes in relation to time, as Eric Matthews comments:

An embodied subject necessarily perceives the world from a certain perspective, not only, as is obvious, in space, but also in time. The world that we perceive is not timeless, but *present*.²²²

Another important point for discussion in an analysis of temporality in Robbe-Grillet's work is the consequence of his depicting events from a constant here and now, the

²²⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.469.

²²¹ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.166.

resultant non-realist narratives he produces. This examination will discuss the extent to which the non-chronology of his work effects a kind of phenomenological reduction, examining the sense of strangeness that results when a non-realist rendering of time is narrated, making events lose their veneer of familiarity.

The past and the future in the present

Gilles Deleuze, who has a link with phenomenological approaches to cinema via his interest in Bergson, a forerunner of phenomenology, deals with the issue of time in isolation in Robbe-Grillet's cinema. That is, he does not integrate it into a study of other issues, such as the body, which might also be linked with a phenomenological approach. This is of course because his aim in his books on cinema is not simply to study Robbe-Grillet, or phenomenological approaches to his work. Rather, Deleuze deals with the issues of movement and time, and the way in which films since the second world war have been structured around time, as opposed to movement, as had been the case in pre-war films. In his discussion of cinema in *Cinéma 2: L'Image-temps*, Deleuze argues, along phenomenological lines, that Robbe-Grillet's treatment of time in his films often amounts to a kind of past/future lived in the present. He says, of Robbe-Grillet's cinema, that:

Il n'y a jamais chez lui succession de présents qui passent, mais simultanéité d'un présent de passé, d'un présent de présent, d'un présent de futur, qui rendent le temps terrible, inexplicable.²²³

This looks to be a move towards a Merleau-Pontyan conception of time on the part of Deleuze; the past and the future are lived in the present. If Deleuze finds that Robbe-

²²² Eric Matthews, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Acumen: Chesham, Buckinghamshire, 2002), p.92.

Grillet's presentation of time renders it 'inexplicable', then a Merleau-Ponty-based explanation of Robbe-Grilletian time will make it more understandable. Deleuze points out that there is a difference in the conception of time between Robbe-Grillet (the scriptwriter of *Marienbad*) and Resnais (who directed *Marienbad*). For Resnais, something really did happen last year in Marienbad, Deleuze explains, the film is supposedly based upon something that did happen, whereas for Robbe-Grillet, the affair did (or did not) take place only in the minds of X and A:

[Chez Resnais] il y a toujours du réel qui subsiste, et notamment des coordonnées spatio-temporelles qui maintiennent leur réalité, quitte à entrer en conflit avec l'imaginaire. (...) Tandis que, chez Robbe-Grillet, tout se passe "dans la tête" des personnages, ou mieux, dans le spectateur lui-même.²²⁴

Deleuze remarks that the positions adopted by Resnais and Robbe-Grillet are analogous to those taken by the characters in the film. That is, Deleuze sees Resnais as taking a similar position to X, believing that the affair really did happen, whereas, for Robbe-Grillet and for A, it is not possible to assert whether something really did happen or not. Deleuze argues that Resnais sees time as a series of *nappes* or layers of the past, and in the film, X tries to wrap these layers around A, to surround her in his version of the past. Deleuze thinks that for Robbe-Grillet, there is a process of shocks, of jumping from one version of the present to another. Thus A is constantly hesitating between two possible presents, she is pushed from one version to the other. In spite of this difference between Robbe-Grillet and Resnais, Deleuze remarks that the one thing common to both their positions is the lack of a centre or fixed point in time.

²²³ Gilles Deleuze, *L'Image-Temps* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1985), p.133.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.136.

A fixed point is, however, provided if time is a result of the body-subject's existence in the world. Living a situation in space and time, in the here and now, is of great importance in terms of the perspective from which Robbe-Grillet's novels are narrated. As discussed, the narration is always from an embodied perspective, so that the reader never has access to any objective, overall viewpoint such as that of the realist novel. So, for Robbe-Grillet, perception must be presented as being experienced from the perspective of a given body, rather than narrated from an external point of view. This includes the narration of time, which occurs always in the body-subject's present in Robbe-Grillet's work – the internal film plays or replays present and past events, as well as flights of fancy into the future.

This is certainly also the case in *L'Immortelle* – the film is 'narrated', Robbe-Grillet tells us in the introduction to the *ciné-roman*, from the point of view of N, so that the viewer is presented with N's experiences in the film and the *ciné-roman*, events are narrated from his perspective, from an embodied point of view. The way in which time is presented in the film is extremely complex, with numerous returns to scenes already seen, although with modifications each time the scene is repeated. These may be trivial modifications, such as characters wearing different clothes, or they may be more significant changes, such as dialogues differing so that something said initially may be denied in a later version of the same scene. The reason for these modifications is that N is obsessively trying to work out what has happened to L, the woman with whom he has fallen in love, firstly after her disappearance, and then later in the film, following her death. Whatever the case, something in his present experience makes the narrator slip

into his past, he is always in contact with it, even as he lives the present, as Merleau-Ponty suggests.

A similar case occurs in *La Jalousie*, with the absent narrator's obsessive reworking of the millipede being crushed against the wall. The past is always on the horizon of the present in this novel, the narrator slips from the present into the past at a given sight or sound, the past is always there in the present. The sound of A... brushing her hair becomes the noise made by the millipede, with its association of infidelity. The absent narrator's jealousy may be prompting these associations, but nevertheless his past remains part of his present and informs his perceptions.

Making strange: the disruption of chronology

The reduction is a feature of phenomenological philosophy of relevance to Robbe-Grillet's rendering of time, which previous phenomenological commentaries on Robbe-Grillet, including Deleuze, do not mention. This is of relevance to Robbe-Grillet's formal strategy of subverting literary and cinematic conventions. If it were simply the case that rendering time via the present experience of past and future were faithful to our experience of time, then all of Robbe-Grillet's works ought to appear completely *vraisemblable* for the viewer or reader. The fact that this is not the case points to Robbe-Grillet's deliberate undermining of the ways in which the viewer or reader expects time to be presented. Thus, what Robbe-Grillet's works display, once more, is not only a phenomenological fidelity to the way that time is experienced via a permanent present tense, but also an attempt to render time in unconventional and unexpected ways. Robbe-Grillet places an emphasis on the immediacy of lived

experience in his works, and this can be plotted onto a phenomenological world view; his creative vision reproduces many features of the ontology of human experience explored by phenomenological philosophy.

As has been discussed, the question of time in Robbe-Grillet's novels and films is one which is particularly perplexing. What is at issue in any discussion of time in Robbe-Grillet's works, is that time is presented in a non-conventional way, so as to render it almost impossible to decipher "real" events from imagined ones and past events from present or future ones. This is no simple matter of the use of fictional or filmic flashbacks or flashforwards, which would suggest that the viewer or reader is given the chance to re-construct a narrative chronology by the end of the work; with Robbe-Grillet, there is frequently no indication to the viewer or reader as to whether a passage is to be understood as, for example, a flashback. Robbe-Grillet comments on this in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, with reference to *La Jalousie*, saying that it was most certainly not the case that he had deliberately mixed up a pre-established chronology, but rather that he had constructed it in such a way that any attempt to re-establish such a chronology on the part of the reader would end in failure. Robbe-Grillet's rendering of time, as well as of space (as was discussed in the previous chapter in terms of spatial perspective), suggests that what *La Jalousie* presents the reader with are the perceptions of an intentional consciousness:

(...) il n'existait pour moi aucun ordre possible en dehors de celui du livre. Celui-ci n'était pas une narration emmêlée d'une anecdote simple extérieure à lui, mais ici encore le déroulement même d'une histoire qui n'avait d'autre réalité que celle du récit, déroulement qui ne s'opérait nulle part ailleurs que dans la tête du narrateur invisible, c'est-à-dire de l'écrivain, et du lecteur.²²⁵

In fact, it is true to say that time is always organised around the present in Robbe-Grillet's films, as well as in his novels. He notes that the viewer (assuming that he or she is watching the film at the cinema and not on a video player) cannot re-view sections of the film, or linger over certain episodes, in the same way the reader of a novel can.²²⁶ He or she is constrained by the will of the director, who has dictated the speed at which the film progresses. The presentation of any temporal dimension in film, then, whether past, present or future, necessarily unfolds before the viewer's eyes in the present.

If what Robbe-Grillet's films narrate is a phenomenological present tense, one which presents the past or future via the present, then the lack of conventional devices indicating that scenes occur in the past or future is understandable. This is the case in Robbe-Grillet's novels just as it is in his films. He claims, in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, that,

Film et roman se rencontrent (...) dans la construction d'instant, d'intervalles et de successions qui n'ont plus rien à voir avec ceux des horloges ou du calendrier. (...) les recherches actuelles semblent (...) mettre en scène, le plus souvent, des structures mentales privées de "temps". Et c'est justement ce qui les rend au premier abord si déroutantes.²²⁷

The *déroutant* aspect of his works, indicated here by Robbe-Grillet, is a result of the process of a rejection of past conventions, such as realism, and this is what he argues for in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*; he seeks a new form of writing – the *nouveau roman*. Previous phenomenological commentaries on Robbe-Grillet's work have, however, omitted to indicate that his aims in rejecting a realist depiction of time can be considered

²²⁵ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.167.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, see p.164.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.164.

akin to the process of phenomenological reduction.²²⁸ As the reduction underpins any phenomenological project, and as Robbe-Grillet's formal strategies share its bracketing of conventional significance, his perspectival and strange-seeming rendering of time mirror the body-subject revealed by the reduction – an embodied and therefore perspectival, temporal being.

In the introduction to his *ciné-roman*, *L'Année Dernière à Marienbad*, Robbe-Grillet provides an explanation for the film and *ciné-roman*'s complex time scheme when he argues that this complexity is an attempt to render a kind of internal, or mental, time. He describes a *film intérieur* consisting of memories and fantasised future events, in between which are interspersed perceptions of what is really in front of the perceiver, so that:

Le film total de notre esprit admet à la fois tour à tour et au même titre les fragments réels proposés à l'instant par la vue et l'ouïe, et les fragments passés, ou lointains, ou futurs, ou totalement fantasmagoriques.²²⁹

The presentation of such an internal film meant a departure from the usual way in which time was depicted in cinema, for Robbe-Grillet, and in the absence of certain filmic or literary conventions the work becomes less easy to understand. In this respect, there are similarities between Robbe-Grillet the *romancier* and Robbe-Grillet the *cinéaste*. Just as in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, where Robbe-Grillet rails against conventions such as anthropomorphism and the use of metaphor in realist literature, in the introduction to *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, he rails against the use of certain well-worn cinematic techniques, such as a flashback signalled by a blurring of the image – once the viewer sees this blurring:

²²⁸ Bernal and Carrabino's studies of Robbe-Grillet.

il comprend qu'il a désormais sous les yeux une action passée, et la parfaite netteté de la projection peut se rétablir, pour le reste de la scène, sans que personne soit gêné par une image que rien ne distingue alors de l'action présente, une image, qui est en fait au présent.²³⁰

So, usually in cinema, two scenes belonging to different points in time may be presented to the viewer in the present, they are distinguished from one another as belonging to different points in time only via cinematic convention. Robbe-Grillet explains that he and Resnais preferred to let the viewer of *Marienbad* work out for him/herself the twists and turns of the time scheme. In fact, for Robbe-Grillet, the film is most profitably viewed not as a series of events to be deciphered and re-ordered by the viewer in a chronological succession; if this is the case, he claims, the viewer will find the film difficult to understand, if not incomprehensible. Rather, the viewer should allow him/herself to be carried along as if watching his/her own mental film unfolding. This viewer, says Robbe-Grillet:

Se laissera porter par les extraordinaires images qu'il aura devant lui, par la voix des acteurs, par les bruits, par la musique, par le rythme du montage, par la passion des héros ..., à ce spectateur-là le film semblera le plus facile qu'il ait jamais vu: un film qui ne s'adresse qu'à sa sensibilité, qu'à sa faculté de regarder, d'écouter, de sentir et de se laisser émouvoir. L'histoire racontée lui apparaîtra comme la plus réaliste, la plus vraie, celle qui correspond le mieux à sa vie affective quotidienne, aussitôt qu'il accepte de se débarrasser des idées toutes faites, de l'analyse psychologique, des schémas plus ou moins grossiers d'interprétation que les romans ou le cinéma ronronnants lui rabâchent jusqu'à la nausée, et qui sont les pires des abstractions.²³¹

A truly realistic cinematic story, for Robbe-Grillet, is one which corresponds to the reader's senses, perceptions and emotions, one in which an emphasis is placed upon a

²²⁹ *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, p.15.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p.17

bodily or sensory awareness of the film. For Merleau-Ponty, the reduction led to a heightened awareness of sensory perception, to perceptual experiences deprived of their usual significance; hence their apparent strangeness. We can see how the procedure of the phenomenological reduction helps us explain the apparent strangeness of Robbe-Grillet's work.

Examples of the way in which Robbe-Grillet seeks to impede or destroy the possibility of establishing a traditional chronology include the fact that in many of his works, certain information is presented, only to be denied or disproved later. Also, his works often have a circular kind of structure, whereby anything that has happened over the course of the novel or film is the subject of uncertainty by the end of it, so that the viewer or reader finds themselves back where they started. In his film *L'Immortelle*, Robbe-Grillet uses both of these techniques for impeding a traditional chronology of events leading the viewer to feel that same sensation of strangeness to which Merleau-Ponty refers, after the phenomenological reduction is carried out. Firstly, then, the information N gleans in attempting to make sense of L's life after her initial disappearance and after her car accident seem to suggest that anything that happened between them could not have happened. Signs of his past life with her are systematically removed or denied. Thus, the viewer is left with the impression that perhaps nothing has happened during the course of the film. As N re-visits the places they had been to together, any evidence of their initial visit is erased. For example, on returning to the antiques shop (shots 182 and 311), N sees a statue, identical to the one L had already bought, in the window, displayed in the same place and position. When she bought the statue on N's initial visit with her (shot 64), the antiques seller assured her that it was a

very old (and therefore, presumably, unique) object, thus making it unlikely that another just like it would be available for sale again:

Le Marchand: Pour Madame, soixante livres seulement... C'est très ancien...

L (ironique): Oui, oui, naturellement!

Le Marchand: C'est sûr, madame, je garantis.²³²

L's ironic reply suggests that she is mistrustful of the salesman's technique, and Robbe-Grillet indicates that he should appear to be unnervingly obsequious in the *ciné-roman*, describing him thus: "le marchand a un drôle de sourire – gêné, ou servile, ou insinuant (...)".²³³ It is tempting therefore, to conclude that the presence of an identical statuette on N's return to the shop could be explained as result of the antiques seller's lies to L in order to maximise the sale of his "antiques". The antiques seller, nevertheless, insists that the second statuette's being the genuine article, as N examines it on his return to the shop:

N: Est-ce qu'elle ne ressemble pas beaucoup à l'autre?

Le marchand: Quelle autre, monsieur?

N: Celle que j'ai achetée ici, il y a quelque temps.

Le marchand: Il y a quelque temps? Ici?... Peut-être une petite chose du même genre?

N: On dirait la même.

Le marchand (souriant): Comment cela pourrait-il être la même, puisque vous l'avez achetée?

Les manières du marchand n'ont pas changé: toujours cérémonieuses, un peu serviles. Peut-être son air faux s'est-il encore accentué.²³⁴

Thus, the viewer is left feeling uncertain as to whether or not the man in the shop is lying to N, or as to whether N has made a mistake in remembering the purchase of the statue. Without having the statue in front of him to compare, how is he to rely on his memory,

²³² *L'Immortelle*, p.69.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p.69.

especially since his recollections of events are called into question by so many of the local people he encounters? N's recollections of the past are thus undermined, his ability to reconstruct a chronology of events and to account for L's past and her mysterious disappearance and death are seriously hindered.

However, this is not the only incident where N finds that the traces of his experiences with L have been brushed over. The white car in which L had the accident, for example, appears to have been resurrected towards the end of the film. At a garage, he sees a car which appears to be the same as the one owned by L: "il y a une grosse voiture blanche décapotable, absolument identique à celle de L; vue de face, elle ne semble porter aucune trace d'accident sur la carrosserie."²³⁵ N takes an interest in buying it, and asks the garage-owner whether the car has been repaired at any point:

N: L'aile, ici, elle a été refaite?
 Le Vendeur: Jamais, monsieur... Neuf... Tout neuf... Très peu roulé...
 N: C'est vite arrivé, un accident.
 Le Vendeur: Jamais, monsieur... Pas d'accident. Pas le plus petit... Le monsieur parti pour un long voyage.²³⁶

Of course, N's ability to make sense of what is happening is partly hindered by his lack of cultural awareness, his inability to speak Turkish, and his reliance on the poor French language ability of the locals. It is precisely his cultural ignorance that leads him to think that in Turkey, everything happens as if in an eastern mystery or adventure. It turns out that he cannot re-construct events along these lines, he cannot solve the mystery. It seems that the visible signs of the passage of time, have been to all intents and purposes removed. Unless, that is, the people concerned have misled N. The enigma of the film,

²³⁴ *L'Immortelle*, p.136.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.189.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.193.

the enigma which leads N to his death, is that it is impossible to tell what has and has not happened. The traditional mystery story would reveal the truth and allow for a chronological story to be reconstituted by the end of the film, whereas in *L'Immortelle*, the truth and the order of events remain murky.

The erasing of evidence of the past in this way is reflected in the circularity and doubling in the film's structure. These are yet more means by which Robbe-Grillet destroys any sense of chronology or of time having passed. In *L'Immortelle*, the initial shot opens the film with the camera mounted on a moving vehicle so as to show a drive past the walls of an old Turkish castle, accompanied by Turkish music and singing. This establishes that the film takes place in an ancient city, full of myths and legends, where reality is not all that it seems. It is followed by a fade-in of L, reclining and smiling slightly (shot n° 2). At the end of the film, the penultimate shot (n° 354) is again of L, and Robbe-Grillet describes it in the *ciné-roman* thus:

Le cadrage, la position de la jeune femme et son expression sont exactement ceux du n° 2. Quant à la netteté, c'est le phénomène inverse qui se produit ici: l'image, d'abord brillante et précise, devient floue progressivement (...) ²³⁷

Thus the film's second and second from last shots are the same, framing the film with the enigmatic gaze of L. This is significant to the extent that the series of events occurring between these two shots is never definitively established; the "story" cannot be recuperated by the viewer, and thus the film has returned to the point at which it started, any progression or series of events is denied. There is a subtle warning to the viewer that this will be the case from as early as the first shot, which indicates that the story will unfold in the Istanbul of legend, with all its implications of uncertainty and

untrustworthiness. Shot 353 shows N dead after the car crash, in the same pose as L in shots 2 and 354. It seems that his inability to recuperate a chronology of events, mixed with his obsessive desire for L, has led to his death. The untrustworthiness of the legend and myth of Turkey is again emphasised in L's laughter, apparently from beyond the grave, in the final shot (n° 355). Are the two final shots of L the images and sounds that go through the mind of N as he breathes his last? Or is it the case that L's mocking laughter is a message from Robbe-Grillet to the viewer that the traditional narrative, the mystery stories of far away lands, are not to be trusted? All that N and the viewer have to go on in the film are N's perceptions, his imaginings and re-workings of events. Nothing is certain, thus N fails to establish a traditional solution, or a chronology of events, by the end of the film. So, a process somewhat akin to the phenomenological reduction has occurred in the film – the means of working out whether events have happened, and moreover, why they have happened, have been suspended, bracketed. What remains for N and the viewer is a series of events whose occurrence is increasingly subject to doubt over the course of the film, and a conventional representation of the past becomes impossible. What this leads to in the work of Robbe-Grillet, as we shall discuss in the next section, is a rendering of time that focuses on a subjective experience of temporality, rather than a time frame that can be objectively established.

La Belle Captive is another film in which a character finds his past is being erased. Walter, the protagonist, finds that Marie-Ange, the woman for whom he finds shelter after a car accident, is impossible to trace, following his brief involvement with her. The barman at the night club where they had spent the evening just before the accident claims to have no recollection of her. Moreover, Walter discovers from her

²³⁷ *L'Immortelle*, p.209.

father that Marie-Ange died some time ago. Again, as with N in *L'Immortelle*, Walter's attempts to find Marie-Ange are thwarted by an erasing of his past and a denial by other people of his own memories. As is the case elsewhere in Robbe-Grillet's works, Walter's story is complicated by the fact that it is difficult to tell which events are happening in the past or present, and which are dreams or imaginings on Walter's part. For example, when Marie-Ange appears on the screen, it is unclear whether she is a ghost, a dream, or a figment of Walter's imagination. Towards the end of the film, he wakes up next to his partner, who had been known as Sara Zeitgeist, his boss, throughout what the viewer must now take to be the dream from which he has just awoken (i.e. the whole of the film preceding this scene). A remark made by Robbe-Grillet indicates the way in which dreams can be mistaken for memories:

Rappelez-vous cette méditation de Descartes, où il faisait remarquer que, quand il avait rêvé une chose avec assez de force, le lendemain matin au réveil, c'était comme du souvenir.²³⁸

However, Walter's waking reality, in *La Belle Captive*, is soon overtaken by elements of this dream; Sara turns out to be in league with the people who had been misleading him all along. Thus, time is destroyed; successive presents force Walter (and the viewer) to re-think the scenes they have just seen. The film is embodied from the perspective of Walter, it is only the information that he has that the viewer gains access to, and he lives in a constantly revised present tense, haunted by Marie-Ange in his dreams and imaginings. The film thus makes time seem strange, due to the fact that events are not definitively placed into any kind of time scale, the viewer follows Walter through whatever he is currently experiencing.

The question of the verifiability of the past is also at issue in *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. The story revolves around whether or not a man and a woman met and had an affair the previous year at Marienbad. The man, X, tries to persuade the woman, A, that they did indeed have an affair and had promised each other that they would meet up the following year. Robbe-Grillet, who scripted the film, claims that it is nothing more than the story of a persuasion, and should not be seen in terms of what happened or did not happen the previous year at Marienbad. A seems to allow herself to be half-persuaded at some moments, and then denies all knowledge of any such events at others, leaving the audience yet again unable to establish whether anything did in fact happen last year at Marienbad. X's attempts at convincing A of the fact that they met last year are, on occasion, accompanied by such imprecise detail that the viewer must doubt that he really does have a truthful story to tell. One occasion that he recalls, for example, contains nothing of substance whatsoever:

Voix de X: Nous nous sommes revus dans l'après-midi du même jour.

(...)

Voix de A: Par hasard, naturellement?

Visage de A souriante. Le ton de X est un peu plus lointain.

Voix de X: Je ne sais pas.

Visage de X, toujours le même; cependant la phrase de A y provoque une modification, une sorte de sourire à peine indiqué, alors que le ton de A est redevenu plus hostile:

Voix de A: Et en quel lieu était-ce, cette fois-ci?

(...)

Voix de X: En quel lieu... Ça n'a pas d'importance.²³⁹

What is remarkable about this sequence in terms of establishing a definitive version of events is that the certainty with which they speak about the past wavers throughout the

²³⁸ Robbe-Grillet, quoted in discussion on Barilli, in Jean Ricardou ed., *Colloque de Cerisy Robbe-Grillet* vol 1, p.433.

²³⁹ *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, pp.84-86.

conversation. Although for the greater part of the film, it is X who is the more persuasive character, pulling A along in his wake, his description of the past takes on an air of uncertainty in this passage. At the same time, A, who is usually the passive partner in their friendship, gains momentarily in confidence. This is followed by a reversal, whereby A returns to her usual self, mistrustful of X, who at the same time smiles at regaining control of the direction of the conversation. The effect of the conversation is such as to leave the viewer undecided as to who is telling the truth. In spite of X's usually detailed accounts of their experiences last year, he is not always able to provide a convincing answer to A's queries. Thus, again, the truth about the past is denied or questioned on the one hand, constantly, by A, and on the other, occasionally by X's own vague recounting of events.

So, a phenomenological analysis of time elucidates Robbe-Grillet's concerns in depicting time as lived, which coincide with Merleau-Ponty's aims in carrying out the phenomenological reduction. Just as the reduction signals a move away from expectation in terms of perception, so Robbe-Grillet's treatment of time fails to conform to expected conventions in literature and film. Let us now turn to look at the consequences of the reduction, in terms of the resultant strange-seeming way in which time is depicted in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction.

One of Robbe-Grillet's novels takes a particularly defamiliarising approach to time. *Djinn*, with its subtitle *un trou rouge entre les pavés disjoints*, refers, as Roch Smith notes, to memory as rendered in the works of Proust.²⁴⁰ However, the novel deals with time on many levels. Firstly, the book was originally published alongside a set of grammar exercises in conjunction with an American academic, in the form of a teaching

text for American university students learning French. Therefore, the text had to contain examples of grammar usage in the context of a story. Robbe-Grillet duly includes examples of various tenses, such as the past historic, as, for instance when Marie demands that Simon tell her a story.

Une histoire, ça doit être au passé historique. Ou bien personne ne sait que c'est une histoire.²⁴¹

The irony, given this logic, is that *Djinn* itself, a good deal of which is narrated in the present tense, would not be a “real” story, since “une vraie histoire, c’est forcément au passé”. When the book was published as a novel in France, with a prologue and epilogue added, the prologue again suggested that the text, ostensibly discovered as a manuscript, was not a true story; it may or may not have been a factual account of Simon Lecœur’s adventures. In fact, the prologue notes the similarity of the text to a school textbook, in which all the grammatical difficulties of the French language set out in increasing order of complexity. So, in the prologue, there is a very heavy *clin d’œil* to the text’s original format, and the reader is forewarned about the very evident insistence on tense and time on a grammatical level within the text.

On another level, however, the story itself twists and doubles back on itself, repeating the paving stone scene where Jean falls:

Tout cela aurait donc déjà eu lieu, auparavant, une fois au moins. Cette situation, pourtant exceptionnelle, que j'affronte ici, ne ferait que reproduire une aventure antérieure, exactement identique, dont j'aurais vécu moi-même exactement les péripéties, où je jouerais le même rôle... Mais quand? Et où?²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Smith, p.121.

²⁴¹ *Djinn*, p.51.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p.105.

Following this scene, the account of time Simon is given by Djinn is scarcely credible. Jean has some kind of illness which means that he remembers what is going to happen, creating what appear to be inconsistent and impossible situations for Simon. Djinn tells him that “Jean mélange les temps. C’est cela qui dérègle les choses et les rend peu compréhensibles.”²⁴³ Thus, although the novel is narrated from Simon’s present tense perspective,²⁴⁴ Djinn’s account of Jean’s illness attempts to render time more complex than living the past and future through the present. In the quotation above, one might well replace “Jean” with “Robbe-Grillet”; it is his deliberate disruption of time that makes it strange. His subversion of conventional depictions of time, then, concord with his formal strategies of making strange and of removing a familiar explanatory framework, as suggested in the phenomenological reduction.

Phenomenological time versus objective time

Robbe-Grillet has insisted upon the notion that what he presents in his works is time as it is lived, rather than the time measured by clocks or calendars. Merleau-Ponty, meanwhile, parallels this by insisting that time is precisely that: something that we live, that is not objectively measurable. Many instances of the failure of a character to measure time in an objective way are to be found in Robbe-Grillet’s works. Although his characters make attempts to master what might be termed objective time (that is, time as measured by clocks or calendars), to measure it and to make their lives fit into its constraints, they find themselves unable to do so. Concerns such as these, i.e. the apparent incompatibility of time as it is experienced and time as it might be measured

²⁴³ *Djinn*, p.118.

²⁴⁴ With the exception of the passages where there is a change of narrator, e.g. the final chapter.

objectively or scientifically have also been tackled in fiction by Proust, and in philosophy by Bergson, both of whom Merleau-Ponty mentions in his discussion of time.

Part of the legacy of phenomenology is the work of Paul Ricœur, who, as David Wood explains, has attempted to reconcile objectively measured time with phenomenological time, and in doing so he

(...) singles out as a persistent difficulty in the history of philosophy, that of reconciling, of doing equal justice, to both phenomenological and cosmological time.²⁴⁵

The problem with phenomenological time, for Ricœur is that it leads to a series of aporias, obstacles, blocked paths. Conversely, for Robbe-Grillet, it would seem that this is not a problem, rather it is just the way time is experienced. In his literary and filmic works, he deliberately constructs space and time into a labyrinthine web of dead ends and red herrings: “ici l’espace détruit le temps, et le temps sabote l’espace. La description piétine, se contredit, tourne en rond.”²⁴⁶ Robbe-Grillet, rather than seeking to resolve the differences between “objective” and phenomenological time, or time as it is experienced, seems to delight in further complicating the knots that Ricœur seeks to unravel. Any attempt to unravel these knots does not do justice to our experience of time, for Robbe-Grillet:

Car il s’agit d’expérience vécue, et non des schémas rassurants – et désespérants tout à la fois – qui tentent de limiter les dégâts et d’assigner un ordre conventionnel à notre existence, à nos passions. Pourquoi chercher à reconstituer le temps des horloges dans un récit qui ne s’inquiète que de temps humain? N’est-il pas sage de penser à notre propre mémoire, qui n’est *jamais* chronologique. (...) Nos livres (...) ne

²⁴⁵ David Wood, ‘Interpreting narrative’, in David Wood ed., *On Paul Ricœur: Narrative and Interpretation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p.3.

²⁴⁶ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.168.

présentent aucune difficulté particulière de lecture pour ceux qui ne cherchent pas à coller dessus une grille d'interprétation périmée.²⁴⁷

Other *nouveaux romanciers* would doubtless agree, given that Michel Butor, for example, called the novel

(...) le domaine phénoménologique par excellence, le lieu par excellence où étudier de quelle façon la réalité nous apparaît ou peut nous apparaître; c'est pourquoi le roman est le laboratoire du récit.²⁴⁸

So, Butor's remark returns us once more to phenomenology, which emphasizes that a purely phenomenological account of fiction (in terms of time) can make sense in respect of the *nouveau roman*. It is Robbe-Grillet's foregrounding of lived time at the expense of chronological time that makes his work understandable in phenomenological terms.

In one of Robbe-Grillet's earlier novels, *Le Voyeur*, a tension is established between objectively measurable and phenomenological time. Mathias, the novel's protagonist, is constantly aware of time and calculates how much time he has in order to carry out his watch sales. Such an acute awareness of time is perhaps unsurprising in a watch salesman; however Mathias is not the master of time, a fact which is predicted by the garage owner's remark as Mathias hires a bicycle from him:

“Vous êtes voyageur? demanda l'homme.
- Bracelets-montres”, acquiesça Mathias, en donnant une tape légère à sa mallette. (...)
“Vous n'en vendrez pas une, dans ce pays d'arriérés. Vous perdez votre temps.”²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.150.

²⁴⁸ Michel Butor, 'Le Roman comme recherche' in *Essais sur le roman* (Paris: Gallimard, copyright Les Editions de Minuit, 1960, 1964), p.9.

²⁴⁹ *Le Voyeur*, p.48.

His prescient remark proves to be true in two senses: Mathias literally loses time, in the sense that he fails to meet his time-regulated sales targets, and also, in the middle of the novel, he loses an hour or so of his memory, a time during which a local girl disappears and is murdered. Mathias realises, even at the stage when he is calculating the length of time required for each sale, that the project is unrealistic, especially given that some people will surely refuse to buy anything: “Autant valait abandonner tout de suite, puisqu’il n’avait même pas assez de temps pour se libérer de tous les refus.”²⁵⁰

Rather than being able to plan and to live his life by measurable time, Mathias finds himself in a world of reverie, dipping into memories of the past as his present experiences trigger replays of past events. Although he is on the island for a length of time that could be measured by clocks, any awareness of measurable, objective time evaporates for Mathias, who lives in a disjointed world of immediate sensation, memory and fantasy. His attempts to impose order and to divide his experiences up according to measurable time fail, instead of which, he lives either in the present, in the re-lived present of memory, or in the projected present of fantasy.

Conclusion

This examination of time in Robbe-Grillet’s works has revealed the difficulty of establishing a definitive chronological time scale, due to the fact that his presentation of time amounts to rendering time as it is experienced rather than as it may be measured. The way in which he depicts all time, future and past, from the perspective of the present, is consistent with a phenomenological account of time, and, as Deleuze’s remarks on *Marienbad* demonstrate, this is true of Robbe-Grillet’s cinema as much as it is of his

²⁵⁰ *Le Voyeur*, p.52.

novels. The idea that time is always experienced from the present, coupled with the notion of suspending a conventional explanatory framework, as suggested by the phenomenological reduction, explain why Robbe-Grillet's rendering of time is so unfamiliar and difficult to make sense of.

Chapter Five

The body as a sexual being: sexuality and subversion

Having established in previous chapters that Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction can be understood as an articulation of bodily existence, this discussion of sexuality in his works will explore the extent to which a phenomenological understanding of sexuality can explain the proliferation of sexual and eroticised images and descriptions in his novels and films. An important consequence of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the *corps-propre* is that human beings are sexual beings. He devotes a chapter of *Phénoménologie de la Perception* to this very subject, arguing that existence is inseparable from sexuality, and that sexuality suffuses all our perceptions to some extent or other. In the same way that human beings are inescapably temporal and spatial beings, since human existence occurs within a body situated permanently in the perspective of the here and now, so they are inescapably sexual beings. This is of course because human consciousness inhabits a body; human existence is undeniably bodily and therefore is undeniably sexual. Hence the interconnectedness of the topics discussed previously, namely, perception, situation in

space and time, and now sexuality, all of which hinge upon the notion of the body-subject.

Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction are remarkable for the number of scenes or descriptions they contain that include depictions of sexuality. Indeed, the issue of sexuality is arguably the one that has caused the most controversy in terms of critical responses to his *œuvre*, notably from critics who side with the feminist viewpoint that his works are misogynistic. He counters such objections with the defence that the inclusion of images of deliberately exaggerated sexual violence is part of his project of subverting the hackneyed sexual stereotypes of western popular culture. To date, discussions of sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's films or novels have consisted either of attacking him for these violently misogynistic tendencies, or of defending him as one who revels in the playful and humorous possibilities to be gained by revealing the trite and predictable nature of sexual stereotypes. The debate perhaps reached its zenith in the seventies when *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* was condemned as being pornographic in an Italian court.²⁵¹ However, since then, the debate has reached something of a stalemate, with neither side developing the argument further in more recent responses to his work. This is equally true of Robbe-Grillet himself, when questioned about the sado-erotic scenes in his latest novel in recent interviews. To the extent that he has consented to engage in the debate at all, he has adhered to his usual position, rather than elaborating on it.²⁵² His refusal to engage willingly in this debate could be attributable to the monotony of the issues raised on the topic, its stagnation over the years. However, where his artistic

²⁵¹ See Robbe-Grillet's interview with Francois Jost in the booklet accompanying the video box set *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Œuvres Cinématographiques*, pp.52-53.

practice is concerned, far from being bored with the depiction of eroticism, he has continued to embrace it, and to explore it in fiction and cinema, whatever the reasons for his dismissal of questions on the subject.²⁵³ Rather than taking either of the well-beaten paths of the two opposed and stagnant positions then, the intention in this chapter is to attempt to drive the debate forward by examining the possibility that phenomenology might be able to offer an alternative understanding of Robbe-Grillet's work as far as sexuality is concerned. It is striking that, where studies have been devoted in the past to examinations of Robbe-Grillet's work in phenomenological terms, the question of sexuality has been ignored.²⁵⁴ Reactions to his early works included some persuasive arguments that Robbe-Grillet's novels have a bodily and sensory focus, which may be elucidated by phenomenological philosophy, although these early analyses ignored the question of the body as a sexual being. This is surprising not only because of the fact that Robbe-Grillet's work abounds with references to sexuality, but also because phenomenology, and especially Merleau-Ponty's conception of it, is bound up inextricably with carnal, and therefore sexual, existence. Perhaps, then, given that so many features of Robbe-Grillet's work can be elucidated by phenomenological philosophy, the question of his depiction of sexuality may be similarly understood and explained by the application of a phenomenological approach. What is proposed in this discussion is the possibility of a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet's films and novels, one based upon a bodily understanding of sexuality, to establish whether it can

²⁵² In an interview at the *Institut Français* in London in March 2002, and in a televised interview with Guillaume Durand for *Campus* on France 2 broadcast on 4 October 2001, Robbe-Grillet was dismissive of any discussion of sado eroticism in *La Reprise*.

²⁵³ Whilst it is true that Robbe-Grillet's pronouncements on aspects of his work have been unchanging over the years, viz. his anti-realist stance; his critical view of his own work has been influenced, in some cases, by such figures as Barthes and Ricardou. Feminist critique of his work does not, however, appear to have altered his stance on sado-eroticism.

provide a more satisfactory explanation for the inclusion of scenes depicting sex and eroticism in his work than that advanced by Robbe-Grillet himself. Furthermore, this chapter will discuss whether Robbe-Grillet's passage from ambiguous depictions of sexual situations to more explicit and violent situations can be explained in phenomenological terms, as both are elucidated by Merleau-Ponty in his account of the body as a sexual being.

Robbe-Grillet himself has commented extensively in interviews on his depiction of eroticism and sexuality. There is a discernible heightening of his interest in depicting scenes of a violently erotic nature as his career progresses. Whilst sado-eroticism in some form has been present from the beginning of his career in narratives such as *Le Voyeur*, with the murder and possible sexual assault of a teenage girl, its treatment was relatively subtle in such early works. In the case of *Le Voyeur's* Mathias, even though some of what he perceives and imagines can be inferred by the reader, the question of the girl's rape is not finally resolved, and thus an air of ambiguity surrounds the novel. Following such ambiguously described situations is a shift in later works to more explicit depictions of sexuality, including scenes of rape and torture. These depictions of sexual violence and of overt eroticism, are to be found in works such as *La Maison de rendez-vous* and *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, both of which describe erotic or sado-masochistic scenes in detail. Arguably, the depiction of sexual violence in his later works is simply a continuation of what had already been done in for example, *Le Voyeur*. However, the graphic and explicit detailing of such scenes is what constitutes their development into something more unsettling, more violent. Critics have attacked Robbe-Grillet on the grounds that his work is misogynistic and even pornographic. It is usually

²⁵⁴ See Bernal, Barilli, Carrabino.

the later novels and films that come under attack from detractors for their violent content, but Robbe-Grillet has always staunchly defended his own works, both in interviews and in explanatory essays, and we shall now turn our attention to accusations made against him and to the defence he puts forward.

Objections to Robbe-Grillet

Firstly, let us look in more detail at the case against Robbe-Grillet. He is a writer and filmmaker who has produced enough theoretical pronouncements to allow us to conclude that he is well informed about the debates concerning sexuality that have ensued from his work, and that he certainly includes sadistic images in full knowledge of the way they are likely to be received. In the introduction to the screenplay of one of his more controversial films, *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, he argues along Saussurean lines that the elements making up the film are the conventions with which we are over-familiar, but that they are divested of their usual meaning in the context of the film:

Selon l'irremplaçable opposition saussurienne entre langue et parole, disons que les scènes de comédie, le goût du sang, les belles esclaves, la morsure des vampires, etc., ne représentent pas la parole de ce film, mais seulement sa langue. C'est la parole d'une société qui a été découpée en morceaux afin de la faire rétrograder à l'état de langue. Et c'est cette langue seconde qui va servir de réservoir à matériaux pour produire une parole nouvelle, une structure non réconciliée, ma propre parole.²⁵⁵

This analysis has been supported by commentators on Robbe-Grillet's work, by way of justification for the presence of sexual and sado-erotic scenes. One such is Ben Stoltzfus' defence of *Projet Pour Une Révolution à New York*. This novel contains a scene depicting a naked woman chained up and made to sit astride a circular saw, with the

²⁵⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Glissements progressifs du plaisir* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 14.

horrific results described in graphic detail. For Stoltzfus, such a scene is not to be understood literally, it is not to be taken as a realist depiction of an act of violence against a woman. Rather, the violence is “directed against the *langue* of cultural ideology, taboo, social codes, [etc.]”.²⁵⁶ The trouble with Stoltzfus’ defence is partly that the passage in question does not read as if it were an attack upon cultural ideology in the same way that other passages in Robbe-Grillet are more obviously parodies of cultural stereotypes or genres. Although elsewhere, Robbe-Grillet clearly does play with conventions in respect of plot, characterisation, genre, etc., when it comes to describing erotic scenes, the playfulness is less evident. Ann Jefferson has criticised Stoltzfus’ position, again using Saussurean terminology. She complains that

What Stoltzfus doesn’t acknowledge is the fact that Robbe-Grillet’s scenario is based consistently on a highly sexist division of roles in which *langue*/woman is attacked and dismembered by the phallic performance of male *parole* (...) doesn’t this merely repeat the stereotypes and the ideologically inspired oppositions from which writing is supposed to release it?²⁵⁷

So, it seems that Robbe-Grillet’s artistic practice fails to live up to the aims of his theory. Melinda Camber, for one, has argued that it is difficult, if not impossible, to claim to challenge sexual stereotypes when they themselves form the basis of the work. Of his film *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, she comments that:

Alain Robbe-Grillet seems to be attempting the impossibly difficult task of incorporating a critique of his film within the film (...) many critics dismiss his “ironic” treatment of eroticism as mere pornography.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶Ann Jefferson’s summary of Stoltzfus’ argument, ‘The sex behind the text’, in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 7 March 1986, p.245.

²⁵⁷ Jefferson, p.245.

²⁵⁸Melinda Camber, ‘Robbe-Grillet: the ‘ironic’ treatment of eroticism’, *The Times*, 29 October 1974, p.12.

So, what is needed then, is an approach to Robbe-Grillet that takes into account the objections raised by feminists, but which provides an alternative to the subversion-of-cultural-stereotypes theory as advanced by Robbe-Grillet and Stoltzfus. In the search for an alternative, this discussion will attempt to ascertain whether the applicability of phenomenology to the bodily focus of his novels can be extrapolated to his depiction of sexuality. However, we must firstly consider Robbe-Grillet's own line of defence.

Bricolage

Robbe-Grillet's usual defence and that of those who argue with him in favour of his inclusion of scenes of sexual violence in his films and novels is that he is merely exaggerating, sometimes to what he considers to be humorous effect, the depictions of sexuality that already exist in western culture. This has been referred to as a process of cultural *bricolage*,²⁵⁹ of taking elements of culture and putting them back together so as to highlight the fact that some of them are in fact clichés; hackneyed stereotypes upon which we rely all too often for a ready-made understanding of novels, films, etc. In questioning our usual understanding of such clichés, Robbe-Grillet is continuing the aims he set out in *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, he is attempting to undermine our cultural expectations. The stereotypical elements of culture he includes in his works are not meant to be representations of sexual relationships that hold a mirror up to reality, nor are they realist accounts of such relationships – they do not rely upon over-used literary or cinematic techniques to convey meaning, rather, they reveal these techniques in all their falseness. This, then, is Robbe-Grillet's defence, and it is apt at this point to examine examples of the kind of *bricolage* carried out by Robbe-Grillet in his novels and films in

order to determine whether it can truly be said to throw into relief the kind of stereotypes that culture usually relies upon. This process, if it does indeed prove to be what Robbe-Grillet is carrying out, is akin once more to the process of phenomenological reduction; of “making strange” cultural commonplaces and suspending our usual attitude towards them. The success of his endeavours will then be able to be measured by the extent to which he does indeed manage to “make strange” these clichés.

A novel often singled out for criticism in this respect is *Projet Pour Une Révolution à New York*. This is a novel that clearly plays with many different elements of popular culture, with, for example, its references to a television programme popular at the time. There is a reference to the dire special effects of *Mission Impossible*, when the characters in *Projet Pour Une Révolution à New York* peel rubber masks off their faces. It was perhaps because of the less than convincing appearance of the masks that Robbe-Grillet chose them. They are a very obviously fake element of popular culture, but one about which we are prepared to suspend our disbelief every time we view the programme. The Robbe-Grillet version of the removal of the *Mission Impossible* masks is arguably more disturbing than the television original – Robbe-Grillet’s character removes not only his mask but also chunks of his skin:

L’un des hommes, qui n’arrive pas à se défaire de son visage d’emprunt, trop bien collé à sa vraie tête, pressé d’en finir (...) s’énerve, tire au hasard sur les divers bords ou saillies qui peuvent offrir une prise, et se met à déchirer par lambeaux ses oreilles, son cou, ses tempes, ses paupières, sans même s’apercevoir qu’il est en train d’arracher dans sa hâte des grands morceaux de sa propre chair.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ See Smith’s definition, mentioning Lévi-Strauss’ *bricolage*, p.167, note 2.

²⁶⁰ *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, p.61.

So, here is a very straightforward reference to a part of popular culture that we are expected to accept unquestioningly when we watch the programme. We swallow the detective thriller whole, in spite of its obvious lack of realism, and Robbe-Grillet hints at this in his reference to *Mission Impossible*. We do not attribute any kind of realism to such special effects, but we accept them nevertheless, as part of the genre of TV programme we are viewing.

In contrast to the rubber mask episode, there is a scene later in the novel which depicts “la belle Joan”²⁶¹ chained down astride a circular saw. It is quite clearly a sexual torture; having burned her genitals, the narrator describes the effect of the saw:

L'écartement des longues jambes, bien tendues par les liens, fait pénétrer davantage les pointes d'acier dans les chairs tendres du périnée; des filets de sang commencent à couler sur le plat de la lame et à la face interne des cuisses (...) le sexe (...) où la scie a pénétré de plus en plus à chaque mouvement convulsif de la patiente, labourant les chairs et entamant le pubis, barbouillé de sperme, bien plus haut que le sommet de sa fente naturelle.²⁶²

One might argue that this is again a reference to popular culture in the same way as the rubber mask scene above; it bears a certain resemblance to a scene from a James Bond film.²⁶³ The saw-blade scene in *Projet pour une révolution à New York* is very reminiscent of the moment where James Bond narrowly avoids being sliced in half by a laser by the eponymous villain in *Goldfinger*.²⁶⁴ The difference is that Bond's wit and skill of course allow him to escape unscathed, and, unlike the unfortunate young woman

²⁶¹ *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, p.179.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p.181-185.

²⁶³ A reference to the spy genre was made in Robbe-Grillet's *clin d'œil* to Bond in *Trans-Europ-Express*; Jean-Louis Trintignant is seen in the film in front of a poster advertising *From Russia with Love*, copying the pose of Sean Connery as he holds his gun. There is a still from the film illustrating the scene in *Obliques: Robbe-Grillet*, 16-17, p.123.

who is tortured in *Projet pour une Révolution à New York* there is no graphic detail of his mutilated genitals. This could account for a critic's description of the novel as "rien d'autre qu'une petite histoire de sadiques".²⁶⁵ So, unless exaggeration alone can be said to constitute the parodying or subversion of the scene from Bond, it is difficult to ascertain how Robbe-Grillet could justify such a scene as an example of cultural *bricolage*.

Bricolage: women as dolls

The argument concerning Robbe-Grillet's use of cultural stereotyping to subvert western culture, to reveal the stereotyped images it employs has also reared its head in relation to Robbe-Grillet's most recent novel, *La Reprise*. Tom Bishop has argued that Robbe-Grillet's inclusion of scenes of sexual violence in this novel amount to no more than an attempt to parody pornography.²⁶⁶ The novel contains passages depicting the sexual torture of Gigi, its precocious, coquettish, heroine. Bishop's point seems to be that it is obvious that Robbe-Grillet is *parodying* sexual torture if one considers the fact that Gigi, the subject of this torture, is described as doll-like:

Toute l'imagerie érotique de l'auteur est là: cordes, chaînes, feu, gémissements de nymphettes suppliciées mais triomphantes. Mais cet érotisme convenu est moins pornographique que parodie du genre. Les poses de Gigi copient celles de poupées: il est question d'un "salon de poupées érotiques" (...)²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Guy Hamilton, *Goldfinger* (U. K.: Danjaqu Productions, Eon Productions, 1964) As *Goldfinger* was released in 1964, and *Projet pour une révolution à New York* published in 1970, Robbe-Grillet could have seen the film in advance of writing the book.

²⁶⁵ Pierre Bouregeade quoted in Susan Suleiman, 'Reading Robbe-Grillet: Sadism and Text in *Projet Pour Une Révolution à New York*', in *Romanic Review*, 67, 1 (January 1977) 43-62 (p.43).

²⁶⁶ Bishop, Tom, 'Topologie d'une reprise ou le retour de Robbe-Grillet', in *Critique: Alain Robbe-Grillet*, août - septembre 2001, 651-652 (août-septembre 2001) 295-604.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.602.

Indeed, Bishop is correct in his assertion that Gigi is very closely associated with dolls; she and her mother live in a toyshop selling dolls.²⁶⁸ The problem with his argument here is twofold. Firstly, even though Gigi might be “trionphante”, since she is trying to outwit her male torturers, this in no way excuses their torturing her. Moreover, if what Bishop means by parody is a humorous or satirical mimicing of pornography, the parody is scarcely noticeable when sexual violence towards a woman is being straightforwardly re-enacted. Secondly, his argument is objectionable on the grounds that he suggests that the doll-like description of Gigi makes her character an obvious parody. She is not a *real* person, she is just a symbol for one, a dummy or stand-in, therefore no real harm is being done and the implication is that we, as readers, ought not to worry about it. Yet, this attitude in itself is not so much a parody of patriarchal popular culture, as a copy of it. That it is acceptable that women should be considered as little more than sex objects, as chattels, as Barbie dolls or mannequins is suggestive of an attitude firmly rooted in patriarchal culture rather than one distanced from it or mocking it. It is true that the people of both sexes depicted in Robbe-Grillet’s film and fiction lack psychological depth, as a result of Robbe-Grillet’s rejection of a realist style of characterisation. However, to reduce females to the level of inanimate dolls is to objectify and de-humanise them, and appears less than even-handed when the male characters in his novels and films are not caricatured in the same way.

The depiction and description of females in doll-like terms is an image that is often repeated in Robbe-Grillet’s films and novels. In this respect, a line linking female characters can be traced right the way through his career, so that Gigi has something in

²⁶⁸ *La Reprise*, see p. 67; the name of the toyshop, *Die Sirenen der Ostsee*, (The Mermaids of the Baltic) with its reference to mermaids, suggests females who are both attractive and dangerous.

common with the description of many other female characters: in *Djinn*, Simon is unable to decide whether Djinn is a mannequin or a real woman. Whatever she is, she holds a strange power over him; female sexuality is depicted as dangerous, something threatening to men. Also, in *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, the two female protagonists, Nora and Alice play strange ritualistic games of torture with a female dummy or mannequin, daubing it with fake blood (it is so bright red that nobody would believe it to be real) and with eggs. Nora herself also takes the part of the dummy as Alice covers her in “blood” and raw eggs. These two are once more strongly suggestive of female sexuality and reproduction; the red paint suggesting menstruation, blood loss due to childbirth or loss of virginity, and the eggs suggesting fecundity.

Robbe-Grillet’s depiction of women, it seems, has changed little over the course of his career, in spite of feminist objections to his works. The doll-like Gigi, Djinn and Nora are all foreshadowed in an early novel, *Le Voyeur*, although in this novel the link is not made in a direct way between Jacqueline, the murdered girl, and any kind of doll-like appearance or behaviour. However, the use of certain descriptive words and sentences are repeated throughout the novel to make a connection between women, dolls or mannequins, and the kind of behaviour that merits punishment. This begins with the waitress in the café, who is described as having:

un visage peureux et des manières mal assurées de chien battu (...) [et de] longs cils de poupée dormeuse. Ses formes un peu frêles ajoutaient encore à son air vulnérable.²⁶⁹

From the first, the waitress is depicted as a victim. When she clumsily pours the wine for the men talking in the café, she is scolded. The men in the café are talking about some

²⁶⁹ *Le Voyeur*, p.56.

unidentified female, although their remarks could conceivably apply to the waitress herself; the context of their conversation is not fully revealed, nor is its subject:

“Elle mériterait...” (...) “Des claques...”

Mathias aperçut les grands yeux sombres de la fille. (...) L’essuyage des verres était terminé; pour se donner une contenance, [la serveuse] mit ses mains derrière le dos, sous prétexte de renouer les cordons défaits des son tablier.

“Le fouet!” reprit la voix du jeune homme.²⁷⁰

The waitress appears uncomfortable when the men talk of the unidentified woman in this way – she fiddles with her apron strings so as to pretend to be occupied, rather than preoccupied, by their conversation. However, this is no co-incidence, since throughout the novel Mathias pays particular attention to females whose hands are behind their back, leading the reader to think that Mathias’ proclivities include sexual encounters with women who are bound in this position. So the waitress appears not only timid, but (also, perhaps in Mathias’ mind) sexually compliant.

In an identical remark made by Jean Robin, whose house Mathias visits for lunch, it becomes clear that Jacqueline (the girl who is later murdered) was the subject of the conversation in the café. Jacqueline is apparently worthy of even more reproach than the waitress. Jean’s remark that “Elle mériterait le fouet, cette garce!” leads Mathias to conclude,

d’après tout ce qu’il entendait dire depuis le matin, il semblait en effet que la gamine eût besoin d’être fouettée ou même de recevoir un châtiment plus sévère.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ *Le Voyeur*, p.59.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.141.

The timid, compliant waitress and the naughty Jacqueline are linked further by doll-related vocabulary when, after Jacqueline's body is found, its discovery is reported by one of the locals:

Le marin qui en faisait le récit (...) ne semblait d'ailleurs nullement ému par ce qu'il rapportait: il aurait été question, aussi bien, d'un mannequin de son rejeté au rivage.²⁷²

The link between women conceived of as dolls, and as (sex) objects begins to become apparent from the moment when Mathias first notices the waitress. So, the dehumanising and objectifying of women (describing them as dolls or mannequins), is coupled with the implication that Jacqueline's behaviour somehow made her fate less surprising, that she was "asking for it". The belittling of Jacqueline's death by the islanders is indicative of a certain attitude towards female sexuality that firstly views women as sexualised objects (dolls) and that excuses sexual violence towards women if they are considered to be behaving in a seductive or wanton way; that is, displaying their sexuality overtly.

The association of women with dolls, then, would appear to be a straightforward borrowing from patriarchal attitudes towards women. Whilst it is undoubtedly part of popular culture and is evident in advertising, films, television, etc., Robbe-Grillet's use of the idea that women are doll-like does nothing to parody popular culture, rather female characters emerge the worse for it; they are tortured, raped or murdered.

²⁷² *Le Voyeur*, pp.174-175.

Bricolage: la sirène/saumon

The potential danger represented by women is alluded to in Robbe-Grillet's works via the depiction of women as mermaids or sirens. This is linked to the connection between women and dolls in *La Reprise*, via the name of the shop selling dolls and other toys where Gigi and her mother live: *Die Sirenen der Ostsee* (the mermaids of the Baltic).²⁷³ However, this in itself carries no hint of the danger that is suggested elsewhere in relation to mermaids. In *Un Régicide*, there is a warning about the sexual allure of the mermaids that visit the island:

“Sur les plages torrides, au creux des rochers, nous trouverons les jeunes femmes aux écailles dorées, à la nage rapide et souple, à la chevelure d'algues onduleuses.

“Elles sont filles de l'écume, nées du soleil à la crête des vagues et leur rire, qui ne cesse jamais, endort les plus grandes peines. (...) déjà tu attends celle qui vient pour toi, ton amante au goût de sel...”²⁷⁴

So, once more, female sexuality is depicted as dangerous, treacherous, to men. Elsewhere, however, the mermaid is depicted as a victim. *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* contains several word plays that suggest a connection between women and fish, especially via the confusion over the name of one of the female characters, Angélica Salomon. “Vous vous appelez Angélica Salomon. Salomon, et non pas Salmon comme cela figure par erreur sur votre feuille de contrôle sanitaire”.²⁷⁵ Mermaids/females become victims in this novel when they are turned into tins of salmon, the fate that is hinted at by Angélica's surname. There is another suggestion of this during the point in the novel when the interrogators/narrators are trying to clarify their jumbled story:

²⁷³ *La Reprise*, p 67.

²⁷⁴ *Un Régicide*, pp.117-118.

Le seul poisson en cause serait la jeune fille elle-même, quand les marins l'ont remontée à la surface, prise dans leurs filets de pêche.

L'usine en bordure de mer, qui constituait le but avoué de votre parcours, se trouve pourtant bien être une conserverie?
Je ne sais pas... Et, de toute manière, elle est abandonnée, comme j'ai pris la précaution de le dire dès le début.²⁷⁶

Thus, the connection between the woman who is caught like a fish, and the canning factory is dismissed at this point, but it is stated explicitly later, when the food produced by the factory is explicitly named:

Quand (...) une prisonnière est réformée (...).elle est livrée à la conserverie et vendue dans le commerce, après découpage et préparation appropriées, sous l'étiquette de "saumon aux aromates". Vous reconnaîtrez ces boîtes sans mal, parmi les innombrables piles des supermarchés, à la jolie figure de sirène qui les orne.²⁷⁷

There is more than a hint, therefore, that a female victim could become a victim of cannibalism. This is reminiscent of the scene from *Le Jeu avec le feu*, where one of the girls who is imprisoned in the brothel is used, almost like a slab of meat, or a garnish, on a bed of spaghetti in red sauce. The red sauce, with its likeness to blood, as will be discussed in more detail presently, carries connotations of female reproduction, menstruation, and sexuality. The artful arrangement of the girl's naked body in the scene in question does suggest that it is a carefully composed *tableau vivant* or an unreal scene; nevertheless, the notion that female sexuality represents danger and that females are to be punished for it is in evidence in both *Le Jeu avec le feu* and in *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*.

²⁷⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Souvenirs du triangle d'or* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1978), p.176.

²⁷⁶ *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, p.67.

²⁷⁷ *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, p.76.

Bricolage: vampires, horror and fake blood

In another borrowing from popular culture, Robbe-Grillet works the myth of vampirism into his film *La Belle Captive* which is, as its title suggests, the story of a woman, Marie-Ange, who is captured. She is captured by a group of mysterious men, who use her to seduce Walter Naime. Walter finds himself compelled to follow her. Thus, whilst Marie-Ange's appearance (white robes, blond hair) and name (Marie suggests the mother of Christ) are both suggestive of something angelic or holy, they belie the fact that she turns out to be part of a dangerous game of manipulation. As Beauvoir remarks, "la femme est à la fois Ève et la Vierge Marie."²⁷⁸ Although there is, at first, no suggestion that Walter is a vampire, he orders a vodka and tomato juice or *Marie Sanglante* at the bar where he meets Marie-Ange, who expresses disgust at the taste of the cocktail. However, when she is offered the same drink later in the film, she drinks it willingly, and the viscous red liquid drips from her lips rather as blood drips from a vampire's mouth in so many horror films. Having seduced Walter, Marie-Ange bites his neck, leaving two red teeth marks. Once again, Robbe-Grillet has selected elements of popular culture that are obviously and instantly recognisable. Their potential for comic exploitation is evident, due to a link with Hammer Horror-style vampire films. Such films are funny rather than frightening, and that clearly deal with myth rather than reality. However, there is something darker at work here; Sara Zeitgeist, Walter's boss, is something of a dominatrix figure. Her instructions to Walter are always no-nonsense, whilst her appearance (straddling a motorbike, in a masculinised pose, wearing leather and a lacy shirt) suggests both a (sexually) dominant woman (the leather and the motorbike), and hints at all things gothic and vampiric (the lacy shirt). Sara and Marie-

Ange are in league with the group of mysterious men who initially capture Marie-Ange, and together they lead him to his death, by the means of their sexual allure. Sara, then, is a *femme fatale* in this scenario, in league with the group that leads him to his doom. The *belle captive* herself, whilst initially apparently a victim, is used by the group as bait to capture Walter.

So, certain elements of the vampire film are present in *La Belle Captive*, however many of the traditional elements of a vampire film are missing, and the viewer's attempts to understand the film as a vampire story are hindered, the film being far more complex than it first appears. There are elements of the *film noir* here, in that there is a male protagonist who is trying to solve a mystery, and two *femmes fatales* who lead him to his death. However, the inclusion of elements that are not usually found in *film noir* or vampire films, such as the inclusion of what might be called "living paintings", (in the style of Magritte's *La Belle Captive* series) is a striking feature of the film. It is partly their presence that signals to the viewer that predictable genres are not being respected, and that the film cannot be read according to the conventions of these genres.

Just as Magritte challenged conventional depictions of reality, Robbe-Grillet is challenging the way in which we attempt to understand film. Indeed, the link between surrealism and English gothic literature was made by Breton: "I believe in the future resolution of those two states, in appearance so contradictory, that are dream and reality, in a sort of absolute reality; of *surreality*."²⁷⁹ Breton suggested that the English gothic novel (and hence, the vampire novel) exemplified this. Equally, dream and reality come into play in *La Belle Captive* – the film is clearly divided into two sections: Walter's

²⁷⁸ Beauvoir, Simone de, *Le Deuxième Sexe* vol 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p.236.

dream, followed by the morning after his dream. Eventually, the dream spills over into reality. Robbe-Grillet notes, in relation to the film, that there is a communication between two worlds:

What interests me in Magritte is the presence on his canvases of several worlds, often of two worlds, that ought not to communicate but that connect through an opening. Through this opening, one sees another world. Magritte's presentation of two worlds that ought to be separate but are connected seems to me to have a relationship to the story of the Greek legend of "The Bride of Corinth" in which a young man falls in love with a woman who, unbeknownst to him, is dead, is a ghost. My interest in Magritte brought forth a whole series of scenes of going through – going through a barrier, going through a painting, and so forth; and this relationship obviously recalls the sexual act.²⁸⁰

There are movements between two worlds, what one might call "goings through", on several levels in the film. Marie-Ange and the other characters in the film pass from Walter's dream into reality. Marie-Ange is often seen framed by velvet curtains, on the beach, in a 'living painting': The curtains on the beach perhaps represent an opening, a point of passage, a going through. They resemble theatre curtains, which again suggests the meeting point of two worlds – the curtains being between the 'real' world of the audience and the drama being acted out on stage. Equally, the mythical Bride of Corinth, (or Marie-Ange in the film) exists between the living and the dead, she can pass between these two worlds. Following the moment when Walter is seduced and bitten on the neck by Marie-Ange, is a *mise-en-scène* of Magritte's painting, in which the camera moves through a picture frame towards some velvet curtains. Then Walter wakes up, screaming and clutching his neck where Marie-Ange has bitten him. This is a crucial moment in the

²⁷⁹ Quoted in David Pirie, *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema 1946 – 1972* (London and Bradford: Gordon Fraser, 1973), p.19.

²⁸⁰ Anthony N. Fragola, & Roch C. Smith, *The Erotic Dream Machine: Interviews with Alain Robbe-Grillet on his films* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p.103.

film, as it marks the beginning of Walter's obsession with Marie-Ange. The passage through the picture frame and towards the curtains indicates Walter's passage into the control of Marie-Ange. This is reflected in the camera work, as, accordingly, the camera's penetration of the picture frame occurs at the same moment that her teeth penetrate his neck. The bite Marie-Ange inflicts upon Walter, as well as her seduction of him, represent a passage from the world of the dead to that of the living – in vampire stories the penetrative power of the sexual act and of biting are closely linked, if not interchangeable. So, it is through the seduction of Walter and through drinking blood (both Walter's blood and the bloody Mary) that Marie-Ange moves from the helpless captive to a position of power. She breaks free from her handcuffs and becomes the dominant sexual partner, at the same time gaining strength and changing from being on the point of death or collapse to being full of life and stronger than Walter.

It has been suggested by Robbe-Grillet that there is a kind of role reversal here. Walter is an especially weak character – his actions are controlled for him by Sara and Marie-Ange; he appears to have little or no volition. If it is accepted that weakness is usually characterised as feminine, and control and power masculine, then it is true that there is to some degree a reversal of feminine and masculine roles. Robbe-Grillet sees this as a defence against feminist critics, and was asked about this in an interview:

Interviewer: In *La Belle Captive*, Sara is dressed in leather, on a motorcycle – both symbols of masculine sexuality – and Marie-Ange, whose femininity is emphasised, is the dominant sexual partner. Do these leading women represent an answer to feminist attacks on your films?

R-G: Yes. Moreover, one of the things that displeased Mesguich [who played Walter], who is very macho, was that he had a role that was really quite feminized, whereas Cyrielle Claire, who played Sara Zeitgeist, had a role that was masculinized.²⁸¹

²⁸¹ Fragola and Smith, p.107.

However, if what feminists object to in Robbe-Grillet's work is the stereotyping of females, the reversal of roles outlined here remains stereotyped. The dominatrix-cum-*femme fatale* as incarnated in Sara and the not-so-innocent captive played by Marie-Ange are both predictable types found in *film noir* and horror. Robbe-Grillet appears to have taken up both genres and re-worked them, subverted certain elements of them, and added to them in his references to Magritte. Gender roles however, have not been subjected to any kind of re-working. Marie-Ange, the innocent *belle captive*, becomes a *femme fatale* when she uses her feminine charms to lure the protagonist to his death. Her apparent innocence is part of her danger; as a vampire, she is a *femme fatale* as well as a *belle captive*. Sara, meanwhile, is more obviously a *femme fatale*, she is clearly in control of Walter from the start, but his trust in her turns out to be misplaced. So, once more, for all of Robbe-Grillet's original re-working of the vampire genre, predictable gender roles remain undisturbed.

So, whilst it is true that to some extent, Robbe-Grillet's film undermines his viewers' expectations of the *film noir* and vampire genres via such devices as the non-resolution of the central mystery, a complex temporal re-ordering of events, and the intermingling of dream and reality, there is one generic convention to which he consistently adheres, that of gender roles, which is surprising given his professed interest in subversion. Arguably, it may well be the case that in order to subvert a genre, recognisable elements of that genre must remain intact. However, the occasional reversal of masculine and feminine qualities (strong females and weak males), is not in itself a reversal of conventional gender typing. Robbe-Grillet aims to take genres, myths and

conventions and to re-work, exaggerate or undermine them in order to illustrate that a film's meaning is a process of cultural construction. The problem with gender roles in *La Belle Captive* is that they are so close to those found in conventional filmic genres that, once again, the subversion is not clear.

Blood, religion, myth and danger

Just as the vampire myth forms a link between blood, sex and danger or even death, female sexuality and reproduction are linked in patriarchal attitudes to women. Whilst the blood in some of Robbe-Grillet's films is obviously fake (*La Belle Captive*, *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*), in other works it is less obviously so. This is due, in part, to the fact that Robbe-Grillet intentionally used bright red liquids in his films to represent blood, whereas the same parodying of bad filmic special effects cannot literally be achieved in a novel. The associations between blood and female sexuality reveal the power of female sexuality over the main character in *La Belle Captive*, and thus, potentially of a threat to male dominance. In the same way, descriptions associated with blood in Robbe-Grillet's novels subtly suggest a threat posed to men by women's sexuality and reproductive cycle. There are examples of this in one of Robbe-Grillet's early works, *La Jalousie*. Throughout the novel, there is a link between stains and the female character, A..., who may or may not be having an affair with her neighbour, Franck, under the nose of her never-mentioned, yet ever-present partner, from whose point of view the novel is narrated. The association of a woman with a stain might be considered to indicate women's supposed impurity. The colour of the stain on the wall

and the pulpéd remains of the millipede, with their red-brown hue are suggestive of menstruation:

[le mille-pattes] n'est plus qu'une bouillie rousse, où se mêlent des débris d'articles, méconnaissables.

Mais sur le mur nu, au contraire, l'image de la scutigère écrasée (...) se présente plutôt comme une encre brune (...) ²⁸²

The millipede is linked in the novel with A... 's suspected infidelity – in one episode, as Franck crushes the beast, A... 's hand clutches the tablecloth which transforms into bed linen – and thus with her impurity. Beauvoir argues that woman is seen as other, as dangerous, mysterious, unknowable, and this is bound up with female sexuality, reproduction and the menstrual cycle. Beauvoir reminds us that it used to be thought that menstruating women could cause crops to fail and mayonnaise to curdle.²⁸³ It is not the mere fact that menses contain blood that mean that they are associated with such danger, it is the fact that they are closely linked to women's sexuality and reproduction:

(...) les pouvoirs maléfiques du sang menstruel sont plus singuliers. Il incarne l'essence de la féminité. (...) En vérité, ce n'est pas ce sang qui fait de la femme une impure, mais plutôt il manifeste son impureté; il apparaît au moment où la femme peut être fécondée; quand il disparaît, elle redevient généralement stérile; il jaillit de ce ventre où s'élabore le fœtus. A travers lui s'exprime l'horreur que l'homme éprouve pour la fécondité féminine.²⁸⁴

Is it then a co-incidence that an object that is suggestive of A... 's adulterous sexual behaviour should be described as having the same colour as menstrual blood, a symbol of the otherness of women and the fear they engender in men? The whole novel exudes a sense of unease on the part of the unmentioned narrator, an apprehension about A... 's

²⁸² *La Jalousie*, p.129.

²⁸³ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, p.245.

behaviour with Franck. The narrator's misgivings are hinted at when he notices that the millipede has formed the shape of a question mark: "la peinture reste marquée d'une forme sombre, un petit arc qui se tord en point d'interrogation (...)."²⁸⁵ Even the curls of A... 's hair as she brushes it mimic the same shape, albeit upside down, in the manner of a Spanish question mark (¿): "Mais la mèche rebelle demeure sur la soie blanche, tendue par la chair de l'épaule, où elle trace une ligne onduleuse terminée par un crochet."²⁸⁶ Both of these elements, the red colour and the question mark shape also appear in a passage where A... is erasing a word a letter (from/to Franck?): "Le flot des lourdes boucles aux reflets roux frémit aux moindres implusions que lui communiquent la tête."²⁸⁷ This passage is significant not only for the implication that she is erasing some kind of secret, perhaps her secret affair, but also for its auto-erotic overtones; the movement of A... 's body as she erases the word is suggestive of masturbation – another "dirty secret".²⁸⁸

So, whilst the apparently synthetic colour of the red paint used in his cinema suggests that Robbe-Grillet is playing with the notion of blood and its connection with sex, passages such as the one outlined above would tend to suggest that, when Robbe-Grillet is not making an overt and obvious reference to blood in connection with female sexuality, the blood described is of a more realistic, dirty, brownish red that might be connected with menstruation. That the millipede stain, with its associations of adultery, and therefore of threat, is reminiscent of menstrual blood is indicative of the paranoia that

²⁸⁴ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, pp. 245-247.

²⁸⁵ *La Jalousie*, p.64.

²⁸⁶ *La Jalousie*, pp.134-135.

²⁸⁷ *La Jalousie*, pp.133-134, emphasis added.

²⁸⁸ See Jeremy F. Lane's discussion in 'The Stain, The Impotent Gaze and the Theft of Jouissance: Towards a Žižekian reading of Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie*', in *French Studies*, 55, 2 (April 2002) 193-206 (p.200). This passage will be discussed further later in this chapter.

surrounds male-female relationships in Robbe-Grillet's art. Women, as Beauvoir has suggested, are described in terms of their otherness:

elle est considérée non positivement, telle qu'elle est pour soi, mais négativement, telle qu'elle apparaît à l'homme. (...) elle est toujours définie comme Autre.²⁸⁹

Whilst feminist critics of Robbe-Grillet may well have grounds for complaint in terms of the very blatant victimisation and suffering of women in Robbe-Grillet's works, the remainder of the women he depicts are presented as a danger to men, albeit in more subtle ways, thus women are either victims or threats.

The "tache" is further implicated with adultery, when Franck and A... are away in town. A single place setting has been laid at the table, suggesting that the narrator is alone in the house, yet a reminder of their guilty secret remains even in a stain on the table cloth in the place where Franck usually sits:

A droite de la lampe, une petite tache de sauce marque la place de Franck: une empreinte allongée, sinueuse, entourée de signes plus tenus. De l'autre côté, les rayons viennent frapper perpendiculairement le mur nu, tout proche, faisant ressortir en pleine lumière l'image du mille-pattes écrasé par Franck.²⁹⁰

So, the stain on the table-cloth (left by Franck?) draws the narrator's eye back again to the millipede stain on the wall. The mark left by Franck becomes the intentional object of the narrator's perception, it stands out from his visual field even though he does not solicit it deliberately. Merleau-Ponty remarks that when in a situation of grief or upset, our conscious mind does not choose the objects seized upon by our senses:

²⁸⁹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, p.236.

²⁹⁰ *La Jalousie*, p.145.

Pendant que je suis accablé par un deuil et tout à ma peine, déjà mes regards errent devant moi, ils s'intéressent sournoisement à quelque objet brillant, ils recommencent leur existence autonome.²⁹¹

The narrator's grief here is for the perceived breakdown of his marriage. Although it is not made explicit, there seems to be some form of paranoia in his fixation with any object that might indicate his wife's (real or imagined) affair with Franck.

Also linked to the notion of blood and female sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's works is the theme of religion. Beauvoir reminds us that woman is both Eve and the Virgin Mary, as discussed earlier, and that women's blood represents danger. For Robbe-Grillet, the themes of blood and religion are connected via the crucifixion. This is the fate of Christine in *Souvenirs du Triangle d'or*, her name suggesting the fate she shares with Christ.²⁹² The crucifixion of Christine is also a sexual torture, however:

Le prêtre (...) tend le cierge à bout de bras vers la suppliciée qui commence à perdre ses forces; et, pour la ranimer, il éteint tout en haut des cuisses, dans la fente médiane qui s'ouvre sous la toison noire triangulaire, souillée de vermillon. L'adolescente se tord faiblement sur sa croix. (...) A la septième flamme qui la pénètre, le spasme est si violent qu'elle pense expirer...

Christine se réveille, secouée par une longue jouissance, sur son lit de fer.²⁹³

Christine does wake from her crucifixion, soon realising that she is in a coffin, just as Christ came back to life and rose from the tomb. Christine's experience, however, seems to have been a sexual, rather than a spiritual one. Again, sex is linked to blood, to death and to danger in this description – the vermillion blood, however, suggests a degree of

²⁹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, p.100.

²⁹² Many of the names of his female characters are suggestive of religion, such as Marie-Ange in *La Belle Captive*, and Angéline in *Souvenirs du Triangle d'or*.

²⁹³ *Souvenirs du triangle d'or*, p.213-214.

unreality. Another sexualised crucifixion is enacted in *Le Jeu avec le Feu*, where one of the girls who is being kept prisoner is crucified in a rather stylised way. The girl is not only crucified, but has been cut or stabbed, and blood from the wound trickles from one of her breasts. That it should be an erogenous part of the body that is injured in this way, rather than the hole pierced in Christ's side at his crucifixion, again links blood, female sexuality and death. The flow of blood, whether real or fake, is also associated with sexuality and religion in *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*. Alice, watched by Sister Maria, is painting to amuse herself in the cell where she is kept prisoner in the nunnery, and takes advantage of Maria's innocence to tease her:

Maria est à genoux par terre pour regarder de plus près, écoutant scandalisée et curieuse les propos de la prisonnière:

“Qu'est-ce que tu fais, toi, le soir, quand tu te mets au lit?

- Je dis ma prière.

- Non, après, toute seule dans ton lit?... Tu te caresses? Tu ne sais pas bien faire, peut-être?... Je t'apprendrai, si tu veux...(.)

D'un geste soudain, l'autre ne se méfiant pas du tout, Alice lui applique sa main droite pleine de peinture fraîche sur le sein, de manière à laisser une belle empreinte rouge sur l'étoffe blanche. (...) [Alice] macule encore la robe de la bonne sœur à l'emplacement du sexe.²⁹⁴

Another nun, having witnessed the scene, warns Maria that she will be punished, and scolds Alice also. So, female sexuality is presented as transgressive, something to be punished, especially in connection with religion.

In the light of this discussion of religion and transgressive behaviour, it is notable that in *L'Immortelle* L also makes explicit the link between women and impurity, in a religious context. On meeting N in the mosque, she remarks that:

²⁹⁴ *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, pp.97-98.

Les femmes ne peuvent pas prier à cet endroit (...) Parce qu'elles sont impures (...) Ce sont à la fois des êtres inférieurs et des démons (...) Elles ne sont bonnes que pour faire l'amour.²⁹⁵

Once more, the exclusion, otherness, inferiority, and dangerous sexuality of women are highlighted in this remark. *L'Immortelle* is a film in which myth and danger surrounding womanhood is of major importance. The portrayal of the female in *L'Immortelle* is bound up with the theme of exoticism. As the action takes place in Turkey, the narrator finds himself in a foreign environment, one which his French cultural background makes him ill-equipped to understand – both on a linguistic and a cultural level. Correspondingly, he has difficulty in understanding the habits and behaviour of L, with whom he is apparently having some kind of on/off affair. L warns N not to have too much faith in her:

Ne soyez pas si sûr de vous... N'ayez pas trop confiance en moi...²⁹⁶

L's warning implies that she herself is not to be trusted, since she is the one who bewitches N and weaves this exotic mystery around him. L's beauty and enigmatic allure are clear from the first time the audience lays eyes on her. Her face, the first time we see her, is looking motionlessly into the camera, yet an air of mystery is suggested in that she seems to be focusing on something beyond the camera; she has a vague and mysterious smile, which Robbe-Grillet describes in the *ciné-roman* thus:

Les traits du visage sont parfaitement immobiles et n'expriment rien, si ce n'est qu'un lointain sourire, un peu tendre, un peu dangereux.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ *L'Immortelle*, p.62.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.166.

²⁹⁷ *L'Immortelle*, p.15.

She is therefore a *femme fatale*, promising delight and danger, she seduces N, and it is his obsession with her that leads him to his death. It is in this respect, then, that Robbe-Grillet's depiction of her adheres to the stereotype of woman as other, woman as danger.

So, whilst the form of the conventional mystery story in Robbe-Grillet's cinema is subverted (there is no explanatory *dénouement* at the end), the depiction of the lead female character remains strongly tied to patriarchal depictions of woman as other, and this is linked to the otherness of exoticism. The way in which L seduces N is a part of the exotic setting of the film. She and N go to watch a Turkish dancer perform a belly dance. During the original performance, N places his hand upon L's neck. This takes on sexual and sado-masochistic resonances when viewed in the context of other scenes in the film. There are many close-ups on L's neck during the film, often with hands (presumably N's hands) encircling her neck, perhaps suggesting that N has some fetishistic desire to strangle her. L later copies the dancer's movements, re-enacting the performance when they return to N's flat. She appears to be aware of the power of her sexuality in doing this, knowing that the memory of the exotic dance they have seen is likely to be irresistible to N. Although the film is structured around N's gaze and his experiences, L's exhibitionism ensures that N's gaze is focused upon her, and she thus gains control of him.

L: [Les maisons] C'est aussi pour les touristes, vous voyez bien.

N: Mais il n'y a pas de touristes.

L: Il y a vous et moi.

N: Ni moi, ni vous. Je me demande bien ce que vous faites à Istamboul...

L: Je me promène avec vous... et cætera...

N: Et le reste du temps?

L: Je vous attends, mon seigneur... Qu'est-ce que vous voulez que l'on fasse ici? C'est un décor d'opérette, pour une histoire d'amour.

(...) Il se penche sur elle, comme pour l'embrasser. Elle se dégage gentiment.

L: Pas ici. Il y a trop de fenêtres tout autour.

(...)

N: Qu'est-ce que ça peut faire, puisque ce sont de fausses maisons.²⁹⁸

What is intriguing about this sequence is that whilst L is using her charms to direct N's gaze onto herself, and thus to gain some control over him, she in turn is subject to the control of others via their gazing at her. L claims that the graveyard and the nearby houses are there for tourists, and that the environment in which she and N find themselves is the backdrop to an operetta, for a love story. However, theirs is not a straightforward love story; she is reluctant to let N kiss her for fear of being seen. When N asks her why it should matter, if they are fake houses, L has no answer. L encourages N to think of Istanbul as a *false* and *mythical* city, where, against a backdrop of crumbling mosques, women are sold into slavery and kept in harems. However, her claim that the myth to which she alludes is false is undermined by the fact that she behaves as if there were a *real* danger to her and N. Her actions belie her words. So, in turn, the power of the gaze is used to control L and N. M and a whole group of Turkish people carry out a surveillance of N's flat and of L's movements throughout the film. L dislikes being seen in public with N, for fear that they are being watched. So, whilst using the gaze to her advantage to play the role of *femme fatale*, L is also subjugated to the gaze and becomes a *belle captive*, rather like Marie-Ange in *La Belle Captive*. N wants her to become his captive in that he wants her for himself, as is illustrated in the examples cited earlier, when he appears almost to want to strangle her, to keep her under his control. However, he never really succeeds in doing this, as L always resists his

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.75–76.

control. Furthermore, she never explains to N her exact relationship to the sinister M, who does appear to have some control over L and her movements. A visual symbol of L's captivity is displayed in the chain she always wears. (There is a link with M here, he has dogs that are often chained.) Sometimes the chain is worn around her arm and shoulder, rather like an armband, on one occasion, it becomes a necklace. In the love scenes in N's flat, it is draped across her neck, in a way which suggests that she may be tied down by it. The chain's significance, again, is never fully explained to the viewer; it could simply be a form of jewellery; yet it is an odd piece of jewellery to wear. It is rather too large to be a necklace, and is out of proportion on a woman with such delicate features, and it is usually worn in an unconventional way. L is dismissive of its significance, saying, "celle-ci n'est pas une vraie chaîne."²⁹⁹

Further evidence for L being some kind of captive, under the power of M, is hinted at on other occasions in the film. When N investigates the circumstances surrounding L's death, he is confronted by a bewildering and contradictory series of information about local customs and people. Some of the information comes from Turkish people whom N cannot understand. Some of it comes from his fellow expatriates. He consults a French friend, Catherine, who informs him of what goes on in hushed tones, whilst looking about her to make sure that nobody is listening to their conversation:

CATHERINE: Vous savez qu'il se passe ici des choses particulières...

N: Quel genre de choses?

CATHERINE: Des enlèvements, des prisons secrètes, des filles qu'on vend... Et toutes sortes de trafics bizarres... pour le compte de pays étrangers...³⁰⁰

²⁹⁹ *L'Immortelle*, p.53.

Equally, the possible slavery of L is hinted at by an old man who sits outside the mosque where L and N once met. Upon seeing N's bandaged hand, the old man remarks in his broken French:

LE VIEILLARD: Très beau mosquée... Magnifique... Etrangers revenir ici toujours...

LE VIEILLARD (off): Blessé, monsieur? Main blessée? Accident? Bataille... Maris turcs très jaloux... Les madames enfermées harem... Vieux... Très vieux... Les madames pas sages, il fait mourir...³⁰¹

By referring to these notions of harems and jealous husbands, the old man draws attention again to the danger and otherness of the east. This is underlined not just by the meaning of his words, but also by his rather over-stated accent, with emphasis placed on the word "mourir".

So, again, myth is used to define and describe the situation of the female character, albeit in such a way that the audience and N remain unsure as to the exact truth of the circumstances. As Beauvoir indicates in her remark that women are both Eve and the Virgin Mary, if a woman is not a *femme fatale*, a danger to men, then she is a *belle captive*, controlled by men. In a film that is in many ways full of subversion and unexpected formal techniques, Robbe-Grillet clings to stereotyped depictions of the role of the main female character.

Furthermore, since N is the protagonist of the film, it is from his point of view that events unfold. Laura Mulvey has argued that cinema tends to encourage its viewers, even its female viewers, to take up and identify with a male perspective when viewing a film. Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory as a basis for her discussion of viewer identification with characters on the screen in her seminal article 'Visual Pleasure and

³⁰⁰ *L'Immortelle*, pp.168-169.

Narrative Cinema'.³⁰² She argues that, when viewing a film, the "conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world".³⁰³ Thus, the viewer's voyeurism is exploited by cinema, the viewer projects his or her "repressed desire on to the performer".³⁰⁴ This results in the viewer being able to forget his/her own identity for the duration of the film and identify instead with the characters (or with one particular character, as is the case in *L'Immortelle*) on the screen. Mulvey claims that the attraction of such an identification for the viewer is based upon a nostalgia "reminiscent of that pre-subjective moment of image recognition"³⁰⁵ (i.e. Lacan's mirror phase, where a child, upon seeing its own reflection ceases to identify with its mother and develops a sense of self-identity). Moreover, due to cinematic conventions, the viewer tends to identify with the male lead character:

The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.³⁰⁶

This is most definitely the case in *L'Immortelle*; the film plays on the myths surrounding womanhood, re-inforcing the patriarchal view of woman as other, as danger. Nevertheless, N is fascinated by L, and she becomes, as Mulvey has it, an "erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and (an) erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium".³⁰⁷ Thus even the film's narrative perspective presents a conventional

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.180.

³⁰² Mulvey, Laura, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in [editor anonymous] *Screen: The Sexual Subject* (Routledge, London, 1992).

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.25.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.26.

³⁰⁶ Mulvey, p.27.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.27.

depiction of women, with its lingering shots on L's body, she is an object for N and for the viewer.

Feminism and phenomenology

Before turning to look at a possible phenomenological explanation of sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's work, it should be mentioned that phenomenology itself also been accused of taking a sexist stance. Merleau-Ponty has variously been criticised and praised by feminists, so their arguments are an important consideration before formulating a phenomenological approach to this aspect of Robbe-Grillet's work.

For Merleau-Ponty, in perception, there is an indeterminate background or field against which objects are made determinate by the act of perception. So, there is a passage from the ambiguous to the determinate. There is also a degree of ambiguity at work in perceptions of a sexual nature. Merleau-Ponty claims that, as perception is a *bodily* act, and as our bodies are sexual beings, an element of sexuality permeates all perception to some degree, so that it is sometimes difficult to identify a perception as sexual or non-sexual. Furthermore, in sexual situations, the body can be used as a means of controlling, or of gaining power, so there is an element of mastery and enslavement at work.

Feminists have pointed out that the basic problem for a Merleau-Pontyan phenomenology of the body as a sexual being is that Merleau-Ponty describes experience from a male perspective. Whilst he can hardly be blamed for describing his experience from the only perspective available to him, his account of sexuality would perhaps not be as objectionable to feminists if he had *acknowledged* that he was describing this

perspective. Their argument with Merleau-Ponty is that he considers examples from male-centred, heterosexual experience to be universal.³⁰⁸ In other words, he takes no account of sexual orientation or, more importantly for feminists, of sexual *difference*, thus ignoring the possibility that a female perspective, since it is necessarily based in a biologically different body, might offer a different experience of sexuality. This sexual difference was noted by Beauvoir, who accepted the phenomenological account of the body's situation in the world as being of vital importance to any account of human existence. However, she implicitly criticised her male counterparts' assumption that a male perspective was a neutral or universal one, and moreover she criticised the patriarchal implication that biology could determine superiority or subordination:

Cependant, dira-t-on, dans la perspective que j'adopte – celle de Heidegger, de Sartre ou de Merleau-Ponty – si le corps n'est pas une *chose*, il est une situation: c'est notre prise sur le monde (...) le corps étant l'instrument de notre prise sur le monde, le monde se présente tout autrement selon qu'il est appréhendé d'une manière ou d'une autre. (...) Mais ce que nous refusons, c'est l'idée qu'elles constituent pour elle un destin figé. [Les données biologiques] ne suffisent pas à définir une hiérarchie des sexes; elles n'expliquent pas pourquoi la femme est l'Autre; elles ne la condamnent pas à conserver à jamais ce rôle subordonné.³⁰⁹

This may seem an obvious objection to Merleau-Ponty, yet paradoxically, it is the very fact that phenomenology is a philosophy based upon *bodily* experience that has led some feminists to argue that it may be of value to feminism. Elizabeth Grosz has, for example, argued that

³⁰⁸ For discussions of the problems posed by a male-centred phenomenology, see, for example, Dorothea Olkowski, 'Feminism and Phenomenology', Simon Glendinning, ed., *The Edinburgh Encyclopedia of Continental Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 323-332, Gaylyn Studlar, 'Reconciling Feminism and Phenomenology: Notes on Problems and Possibilities, Texts and Contexts', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 12, 3 (July 1990) 69-78. Butler, Judith, 'Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception', Jeffner Allen, and Iris Marion Young, eds., *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), pp.85-100.

[Merleau-Ponty's] emphasis on lived experience and perception, his focus on the body-subject, has resonances with what may arguably be regarded as feminism's major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges – its necessary reliance on lived experience (...)³¹⁰

Another way in which the aims of phenomenology coincide with those of feminism is in the procedure of the phenomenological reduction. Gaylyn Studlar has claimed, in relation to cinema, that there is value for feminism in a procedure that endeavours to put aside commonly accepted explanations of experience to allow for a re-appraisal of it:

The feminist effort to make strange the “common sense” of patriarchal filmic discourse shares unrealized similarities with the phenomenologist's attempt to bracket out (or make strange) naïve notions of reality before advancing to a neutral description of the immediacy of experience.³¹¹

So, phenomenology and feminism are not necessarily the antithesis of each other, as is often supposed they might be. The question is, taking account of the potential for a feminist re-working of phenomenology, whether such an approach to Robbe-Grillet can make his depiction of sexuality on the screen and on the page any more acceptable to feminists. Studlar's identification of some common ground between the phenomenological reduction and the feminist desire to make patriarchy seem less “normal” may well prove a helpful step forward in this respect. Robbe-Grillet's expressed interest in subverting the norms of representation as reproduced in what he calls the *parole* of society has a resonance with this position too. What has to be asked is whether or not Robbe-Grillet manages to “make strange” the patriarchal norms or whether his texts and films remain positioned within them.

³⁰⁹ Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, pp.72, 70.

³¹⁰ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.94.

³¹¹ Studlar, p.72.

Phenomenology: the link between perception and sexuality

It is perhaps odd that previous phenomenology-based commentaries³¹² on Robbe-Grillet's fiction (none have yet been attempted on his cinema) have failed to mention sexuality, given that it is a topic so closely linked to perception and to a bodily awareness of the world. Bodily perception, for Merleau-Ponty, always contains an element of sexual perception. Our sexuality is a factor in choosing which part of our perceptual field to attend to, and although a perception may not necessarily be experienced as sexual, sexuality guides certain parts of experience. Indeed, existence always has a double meaning, for Merleau-Ponty, the result of which is that

il est impossible d'assigner, pour une décision ou une action donnée, la part de la motivation sexuelle et celle des autres motivations, impossible de caractériser une décision ou un acte comme "sexuel" ou "non sexuel".³¹³

Those aspects of reality upon which the protagonists of Robbe-Grillet's works focus their attention are often guided by their sexuality, although this is not always acknowledged explicitly. There is an example of this in *Les Gommages*, as Wallas, a detective, notices the assistant in a stationery shop:

D'un demi-sourire elle l'encourage. Wallas prend la gomme dans sa main pour l'examiner avec plus d'attention; puis il regarde la jeune fille, ses yeux, ses lèvres charnues légèrement entrouvertes. Il sourit à son tour. (...) Elle le raccompagne jusqu'à la porte. Non, ce n'est plus une enfant: ses hanches, sa démarche lente sont presque celles d'une femme.³¹⁴

³¹² Bernal and Carrabino's studies.

³¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, pp.196-197.

³¹⁴ *Les Gommages*, p.66.

These observations by Wallas are not *explicitly* sexual, they are afforded no more importance in the course of the narrative than, for example, the description of the rubber he buys from the shop. Nevertheless, he notices the voluptuousness of her slightly open lips and her almost-womanly hips, both of which suggest that his perception of her is guided by his bodily existence, his existence as a sexual being, as Merleau-Ponty suggests.

Another apparently innocent image carries sexual connotations in *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*. When the mother of the twins passes a man selling watermelons, the little girl asks her mother to buy her a slice of the fruit. Her twin brother observes closely the effect the knife has made; the fruit seller has cut

une entaille béante dans le ventre rouge du fruit (...) de la fente ouverte à vif dans la chair rose, placée verticalement par les soins du vendeur, s'écoule un liquide rougeâtre qui forme bientôt une flaque sinueuse, juste sur un carreau blanc de la nappe.³¹⁵

The description, although on the one hand a perfectly innocuous image of the melon sliced open, does hint at female genitalia, especially given its shape, colour and the reddish liquid that flows from it. This is reinforced in the description that follows:

Ensuite, l'enfant regarde sa petite sœur, qui mord dans la tranche dont elle tient à deux mains l'écorce verte; des gouttelettes de jus ont coulé sur la robe blanche et formé une tache irrégulière au niveau du pubis.³¹⁶

Thus, a link is hinted at between the red juice and deflowering or menstruation, in either case, the little boy is fascinated by it. To read this as a perception guided by sexuality is possible, given that it is a male gazing at a female; however, to read it as an innocent, non-sexual gaze is also possible, as there is no definite mention of sexuality.

³¹⁵ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1976), p. 61.

Similar situations exist in Robbe-Grillet's cinema, although in one instance the intermingling of sexual and non-sexual perception on the screen is so subtle that it only becomes apparent that there is a hint of sexuality involved when the scene is described in more explicit terms in the *ciné-roman*. Without the *ciné-roman*, the reason for the shot's inclusion in the film is difficult to ascertain. Furthermore, without an understanding of sexuality that underlines the interrelated nature of sexuality and perception, the shot would be equally difficult to understand. The shot in question is a close-up of a sculpted detail on a table leg, and comes in between a shot of N looking in a mirror and making hand gestures in the air, and a shot of L by the sea, a memory of the time she and N spent there. The hand gestures made by N are sufficiently similar to the way in which he had previously caressed L's face to call their intimate moments to mind. The close up of the table leg is more difficult to interpret, however, and it is only through the *ciné-roman* that the reader/viewer realises that it is meant to represent a memory of L's body:

245: Il étend lentement sa main valide, doigts ouverts, vers son image dans la glace, et fait le geste d'effacer, ou de caresser, qu'il a répété souvent sur le visage de L. Puis il laisse retomber le bras, et abaisse le regard vers le sol, ou vers le pied de la table.

246: Détail d'un motif sculpté ornant le pied de la table, tel que l'aperçoit N: deux roses accolées, qui saillent comme des seins.

247: L marchant vers la caméra juste à la limite de l'eau (...) ³¹⁷

So, a perception that appears, on viewing the film, to have no connection with sexuality, takes on a sexual significance when explained in the *ciné-roman*. As N is remembering L in the preceding shot, it seems that the memory of their intimacy is guiding N's perception in shot 246. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, perception and sexuality are linked

³¹⁶ *Topologie d'une cité fantôme*, pp.61-62.

here in such a way that perception is structured by sexuality, N's memory of L's body is guiding his eye to view the carved rose not just as a rose but as a female form. It is L's body, rather than just any female body, that is suggested by the carved rose, so it seems, since the shot is immediately preceded and followed by shots which also call L to mind; in the familiar hand gesture and in the image of L by the sea. So, this brief point of view shot reveals not only that memory guides perception, but also that sexuality guides it, N picks out an object that has a sexual significance from a field of many possible objects that do not. This is not apparently a conscious decision, it is a quick glance, and as such is afforded no particular attention in the film, hence its apparent insignificance when considered without the benefit of reading the *ciné-roman*. Just like the passing glance of Wallas to the shop assistant, N's glance at the rose has a link with sexuality, although when this is filmed, it is afforded no special significance, there is no obvious or predictable nod to its sexual content. Robbe-Grillet could, for instance, have followed the rose shot with a close-up of L's breasts to make the significance of the carved rose clearer to the viewer. However, he clearly seeks to avoid such hackneyed techniques, and this might be considered an example of his rejection of over-used narrative and cinematic forms, in favour of a more defamiliarising technique. This returns us once more to the possibility of seeing Robbe-Grillet's artistic aims and cinematic or literary techniques as a further example of the phenomenological desire to see the world afresh, as outlined in the phenomenological reduction.

La Jalousie, a novel suffused with a sexual tension to which explicit reference is never made, contains a scene of a similar nature. Just as the scene described above from *L'Immortelle* is from one individual's perspective, the perspective from which *La*

³¹⁷ *L'Immortelle*, p.162.

Jalousie is narrated in a way strongly suggestive of an unmentioned protagonist. Once more, it is presented in such a way that sexuality is scarcely suggested, the boundary between the sexual and the non-sexual is blurred. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's account of perception and sexuality, with its implications of ambiguity, seems particularly apt in regard to this novel, which rests upon the tension created between various ambiguous possibilities. One scene in particular contains such ambiguous references to sexuality, and is repeated throughout *La Jalousie*. This scene has already been discussed from the point of view of stereotypical representations of women, but there is more to uncover in it. The scene in question carries associations of hiding evidence of some secret, perhaps of adultery. A... appears to be rubbing out a word on a letter, using a razor blade and a rubber of the kind used to erase typewritten mistakes. She uses the same items in an attempt to remove the stain left on the dining room wall by the crushed millipede. These events are linked, then, by the fact that a stain is involved in both cases, suggesting impurity, dirtiness, something to be erased, hidden or denied, and also by the fact that the crushing of the millipede is linked to Franck's virility. All of these associations combine to suggest some guilty secret, possibly an act of adultery. The ambiguity in these scenes is highlighted by the mention of a shape that is reminiscent of a question mark, underlining the doubt that the reader assumes exists in the mind of the narrator. It is also perhaps indicative that Robbe-Grillet is gently teasing his reader - is there really a narrator (if so, why does he never refer to himself?), is there really any adultery going on?

The first part of the scene, then, begins with the unmentioned narrator viewing an apparently non-sexual activity; the erasing of a word in a letter. A... is bent over her work in such a way that it is difficult to discern exactly what she is doing, although the

movements of her hair may be interpreted either as the action of rubbing out a word, or may suggest masturbation:

L'opulente chevelure noire est libre sur les épaules. Le flot des lourdes boucles aux reflets roux frémit aux moindres implusions que lui communiquent la tête. Celle-ci doit être agitée de menus mouvements, imperceptibles en eux-mêmes, mais amplifiés par la masse des cheveux qui parcourent d'une épaule à l'autre, créant des remous luisants, vite amortis, dont l'intensité soudain se ranime en convulsions inattendues, un peu plus bas... plus bas encore... et en dernier spasme beaucoup plus bas.³¹⁸

As mentioned earlier, Jeremy Lane has indicated in his discussion of *La Jalousie*, A... appears to be concealing some kind of dirty secret, whether it be masturbation or the erasing of something incriminating in the letter. Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that perception can be motivated by sexuality seems especially apt here, given that what the narrator describes has the potential to be viewed as an auto-erotic act or as a banal act of erasing a word. It is perhaps significant in terms of the narrator's apparent paranoia about his partner, as well as being in some ways typical of the description of A... that she is often associated in the text with stains. This was noted earlier in relation to blood and female sexuality; however, stains of a more general nature are also associated with A... throughout the text. An example of this occurs in a later description of her at dusk where the light behind her forms a "tache":

Seul le carré de la fenêtre fait une tache d'un violet plus clair, sur laquelle se découpe la silhouette noire de A...

Later still, the light carried by the boy servant again throws A...'s face into relief, and as the impression of it remains on the unmentioned narrator's retina in a highly evocative, phenomenological description, A... herself again becomes a "tache":

A... n'a pas détourné la tête pour s'adresser au boy. Son visage recevait les rayons de la lampe sur le côté droit. Ce profil vivement éclairé persiste ensuite sur la rétine. Dans la nuit noire où rien ne surnage des objets, même les plus proches, la tache lumineuse se déplace à volonté, sans que sa force s'atténue, gardant la découpe du front, du nez, du menton, de la bouche...

La tache est sur le mur de la maison, sur les dalles, sur le ciel vide. Elle est partout dans la vallée, depuis le jardin jusqu'à la rivière et sur l'autre versant. Elle est aussi dans le bureau, dans la chambre, dans la salle à manger, dans le salon, dans la cour, sur le chemin qui s'éloigne vers la grand-route.³¹⁹

This passage might be described as “evocative” and “phenomenological” because it contains so many detailed descriptions of the minutiae of perceptual phenomena. In it, A... is reduced to a “tache”, and in the second paragraph, the reader might initially believe that a repeat of the description of the millipede is about to start again – “la tache est sur le mur...”. Instead, the “tache” *is* A..., she has become a stain just like that made by the millipede, like the spot of oil on the drive that can momentarily be obliterated by a fault in the window pane, but in this passage, the stain that she has become is everywhere. No amount of attempting to obliterate it by rubbing it out or viewing it through a bubble of glass can remove it; it is burned into the narrator's retina. The “tache”, and, by association, the suspicion of her infidelity is in every sight the narrator views, making this short passage, in a sense, a *mise en abyme* of the novel. That is, the novel is composed of reports of A...'s real or imagined movements, with their associations of unfaithfulness, and there is no escape from it for the narrator, just as there is no escape from the “tache” that A... makes in the passage above. Thus A... is strongly linked with the act of adultery through the word “tache”, which had been used earlier to

³¹⁸ *La Jalousie*, pp.133-134.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.140-141.

describe the stain left by the squashed millipede, a stain which is, in turn associated with the act of adultery. Thus, descriptions which could have a straightforward and banal meaning read in one way can take on a meaning with implications of sexual infidelity when read in another.

In *L'Immortelle*, certain moments in the relationship between the two main characters, N and L, could be understood in a sexual or a non-sexual sense. N often stares at L's neck, which is not in itself an action which suggests sexual arousal; it is not, perhaps, the most obvious part of her body he could have focused upon if he were sexually excited by her. In a scene where L and N watch a belly dancer, the dancer lifts her hair aside to reveal the back of her neck (shot 69). As the shot changes, we see L from N's perspective, as indicated in the screen play:

Gros plan de la nuque de L, vue d'en haut et de côté, c'est-à-dire comme si c'était N qui la regardait, assise à sa droite un peu en avant de lui.³²⁰

The camera then moves to show that N is watching the dancer, but places his hand on L's neck. Her head bends forwards under the force of his fingers. There is the suggestion that N's touch on the back of L's neck, visible to the viewer as if it were seen through N's eyes, is motivated by his sexual desire, in that it is juxtaposed with shots of the dancer. He focuses upon L's neck, makes it the intentional object of his perceptual field, because of his arousal at the sight of the belly dancer. He seems to do so almost without realising it – he is no longer looking at L by the time he puts his hand on her neck, but staring at the dancer. His actions here seem strange; if he is motivated by sexual desire, then these are unusual gestures to make, the neck is not often considered an erotic part of the body, so the presentation of a sexual situation here is somewhat ambiguous. Once more, this

can be explained by Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the structure of perception is ambiguous both sexual and non-sexual.

Phenomenology: the master and slave relationship

The scene just described may be explained further by another point Merleau-Ponty makes in relation to the body as a sexual being, concerning the dynamics of power in sexual situations. N's actions whilst watching the dancer may be linked to a sadistic strangulation fetish; we later see him begin to strangle L (shot 306) and this is again described in the screen play:

L allongée sur le divan. On ne voit que la tête, le cou et les épaules. Etendue sur le ventre, elle a le visage dans les fourrures. La main droite de N (...) caresse la nuque, puis commence à serrer la base du cou. La victime bouge faiblement.³²¹

This shot is again from the perspective of N, his hand appearing as it would if the camera were positioned in the same place as N's eyes. Is this a sadistic sexual practice or a harmless game? The use of the word "victime" is strongly suggestive of something rather sadistic. The sexual nature of this scene becomes more complex when we consider that it is immediately preceded by L copying the belly dancer's movements, wearing only her underwear. For Merleau-Ponty, we rarely show off our bodies to another person, but if we do, it is either in fear, or else in the attempt to fascinate another. That is, the display of one's body is a means of seducing another person, of gaining power over them. So, in perception in a sexual context:

³²⁰ *L'Immortelle*, p.73.

³²¹ *L'Immortelle*, p.187.

Il lui semble que le regard étranger qui parcourt son corps le dérobe à lui-même ou qu'au contraire l'exposition de son corps va lui livrer autrui sans défense, et c'est alors autrui qui sera réduit à l'esclavage.³²²

L's aim is clearly to seduce N in the scene just mentioned; indeed she does succeed in enslaving him. He goes to great lengths in order to find out about her during her life and after her death, actions which lead him eventually to his own death.

These notions of dominance, slavery and capture are to be found in many situations in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction, as has already been discussed with reference to, for example, *La Belle Captive*, where Sara and Marie-Ange capture Walter via seduction. Another example of this is to be found in *Trans-Europ-Express*. In this film, Elias is a gangster trafficking drugs and is unsure of whom to trust. Consequently, it is a film characterised by many power struggles, chiefly by the struggle between the characters in the film for control of events. This struggle sometimes takes the form of a sexual struggle for power; the lure of sex is used by both the police and Elias' gang to capture him. A key role in this is played by Eva, the prostitute who attempts to trap Elias both for the gang leader and for the police by allowing herself to be tied up by him. He clearly thinks that he is in control of this situation, he is paying for her services, when in fact it is Eva's use of her body, her display of her body, that is being used to capture him so he can be turned in to the police. As Merleau-Ponty indicates, Eva is displaying her body in an attempt to captivate another. The plan backfires, however, when Elias lives out his fantasies and strangles Eva.

Similarly, it is the prospect of a woman who appears to be subservient, enslaved, who attracts Elias to the night club, Eve, which advertises the performance of a naked

³²² Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, p.194.

woman in chains. It is in fact a police detective who arranges for the night club advertisement to appear in the newspaper next to the story of Eva's murder, knowing that Elias will be sure to notice both. It is ironic that Elias should be lured into a situation of danger whilst all the time, he himself considers that it is another who is enslaved. (The night club performer's act is called 'l'esclave'.) Elias is in fact subject to the manipulation of the police; they are aware of his sexual proclivities, and know that his fascination with the female form will capture him for them.

Conclusion

Using phenomenology to gain an understanding of the inclusion of sexuality as part of a wider project of depicting bodily existence and experience in Robbe-Grillet's work certainly explains not only the presence, but also the abundance of his depictions of sexuality, since, for Merleau-Ponty, existence is sexual. If feminists are agreeable to the idea of describing experience as it is lived, from a bodily perspective, then this may be an acceptable way forward in terms of explaining Robbe-Grillet's depiction of sexuality. However, given that feminists are also in favour of adopting the phenomenological notion of "making strange" the stereotypes of patriarchal society, Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction are still problematic. As discussed, women in his works use their bodies to enslave men, to control them, and although this can be accounted for in phenomenological terms, as another part of sexual, bodily existence, it has the familiar ring of an adherence to patriarchal norms. That is, females in Robbe-Grillet continue to play out the role of Eve tempting Adam (as is suggested by the names associated with women in *Trans-Europ Express*: Eva and the performer at "Club Eve") they are still

femmes fatales. The threat posed by females is sometimes symbolised in Robbe-Grillet's work in an obvious way, in an attempt at parody, by fake blood. However, there is also evidence that, on a less obvious level, the association of words and colours, suggest a more deep-seated unease or paranoia on the part of male characters in Robbe-Grillet's works. They frequently resort to violent means to deal with the threat posed by women's physical sexuality, the power they hold over men. The men in Robbe-Grillet's films and fiction respond with fetishistic behaviour – for example, the neck fetish, the strangulation. Far from “making strange”, in the manner of the phenomenological reduction then, Robbe-Grillet is re-enforcing misogyny rather than dislodging or disempowering it.

Chapter Six

Intersubjectivity: mirrors, doubles, paranoia and lies

One observation that emerged from the phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction in relation to the theme of sexuality was the frequency with which characters in his films and novels experience a degree of alienation, a sensation of the otherness of their partner when in a sexual situation. The consideration of sexual relationships in Robbe-Grillet's work, then, raises the issue of human relationships in general, of the role played by bodily and linguistic communication between human subjects in arriving at intersubjective understanding. Therefore, as well as an analysis of the questions of alienation, the self and the other, what is also at issue in the following discussion is an exploration of the importance of verbal and non-verbal language in Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction. Given that previous chapters have demonstrated the value of Merleau-Ponty's notion of the phenomenological body-subject in enlightening many aspects of Robbe-Grillet's work, Merleau-Ponty's bodily-based accounts of intersubjectivity and language may also prove to be revelatory with regards to the

treatment of these issues in the film and fiction of Robbe-Grillet. We have seen how Merleau-Ponty's account of sexuality gave rise to an analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work in which a female presence could be considered threatening and dangerous to a male protagonist, and, following from this, the way in which a sense of general unease and paranoia often pervades his works. It remains to be seen whether this applies to relationships that are of a non-sexual nature. This observation has, of course, immediately to be qualified with the acknowledgement that, for Merleau-Ponty, being is always sexual being, since human subjects are incarnated in sexual bodies. The consequence of this is that perception is always tinged with sexuality, to however small a degree. It seems possible therefore, at first sight, that the intermingling of the sexual with the non-sexual may well mean that the perceived threat of the other also impinges upon non-sexual relationships.

The *Phénoménologie de la perception* was a study of perception, and Merleau-Ponty's later writings suggest that he felt the need to modify the arguments he set out in it. His later work can be read as an attempt to bridge the gap between the self and the world, and to provide an account of the knowledge of others that avoids the pitfalls of the position he had carved out for himself in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. To this end, he developed the notion of *la chair*, the flesh of the world in which all living beings inhere. The common inherence in the flesh of the world was, for Merleau-Ponty, what would enable him to account for the existence of others. Just as it allowed the human body access to objects which are made of the same flesh, it equally allowed access to and interaction with other human bodies, which are also made of the flesh of the world and which can interact with it in the same way as one's own body can. This "flesh" was, for

Merleau-Ponty, not just the living flesh of human beings and animals, but the physical stuff of which the world was composed, and part of which was animated by consciousness. The relation of intersubjectivity thus no longer took place via apperception or analogy, but by a common inherence in the flesh of the world:

Moi qui vois, j'ai ma profondeur aussi, étant adossé à ce même visible que je vois et qui se referme derrière moi, je le sais bien. L'épaisseur du corps, loin de rivaliser avec celle du monde, est au contraire le seul moyen que j'ai d'aller au cœur des choses, en me faisant monde et en les faisant chair.³²³

Indeed, the notion of intersubjectivity as it is conceived of in *Phénoménologie de la perception* is called into question; the direction of intentionality is questioned in Merleau-Ponty's later thought, so that, because the conscious subject and the world are part of the same flesh, the subject and the world have a reciprocal relationship:

Le mode d'existence du corps propre vient brouiller la dualité entre l'immanence constituante et le transcendant constitué: s'il n'est pas dans le monde comme un objet, il ne saurait en être séparé substantiellement et il ne peut être pensé en toute rigueur qu'à partir du monde qu'il déploie. (...) L'intentionnalité (...) ne va pas du sujet vers le monde, mais plutôt du monde vers le sujet.³²⁴

When phenomenological philosophy has been used in the past as a means of approach to Robbe-Grillet's works, the possibility of reading or viewing Robbe-Grillet's works in the light of the later ontology of Merleau-Ponty has been neglected. This is of consequence to the present study in terms of its original contribution to understanding Robbe-Grillet's works. Previous studies have not tackled the question of intersubjectivity; in their phenomenological studies of Robbe-Grillet, neither Bernal nor Carrabino mention intersubjectivity; moreover, it seems that neither of them had read Merleau-Ponty's *Le*

³²³ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.178.

Visible et l'invisible, since it does not feature in either of their bibliographies.³²⁵ The fact that neither of them had considered this later work by Merleau-Ponty has consequences for the conclusions that they arrive at in studying Robbe-Grillet, particularly in the case of Bernal. This is because her study is centred around the notion that consciousness is a nothingness that reaches out towards something; it is an intentional consciousness that reaches out to the world in which it is situated, as argued by Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception*. However, had she been able to consult *Le Visible et l'invisible*, she may have discovered a different relation between consciousness and the world in which it is incarnated. Merleau-Ponty's notion of *la chair* changes his ontology of being in a way that allows for a new consideration of subjectivity and its relations to others and the world around it.

Oneself

In terms of the knowledge or awareness that one can have of oneself, then, it is of interest to note that a development in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology occurs between the appearance of *Phénoménologie de la Perception* and *Le Visible et l'invisible*. In the earlier work, emphasis is placed upon one's bodily positioning and movement through space. This notion of the locus of perception in a spatially and temporally situated body-subject allowed Merleau-Ponty to argue that self-consciousness, or thought, arose in perception; the act of perception was consciousness itself. He discusses the example of a person tracing a line through the air with their hand, to illustrate that one can be aware of

³²⁴ R. Barbaras, quoted in Zielinski, p.106.

³²⁵ Bernal's book was published in 1964, the year *Le Visible et l'invisible* was published; it is possible, therefore, that Merleau-Ponty's work was unavailable at the time Bernal was writing and appeared too late

one's position in space without having deliberately to calculate it. This pre-reflective awareness of one's body is part of one's being as a *corps-propre* or body subject. It cannot be denied that examples of this kind of self-awareness exist in Robbe-Grillet's works – *La Jalousie*, for example, contains a description of rubber-soled shoes moving across a tiled floor, suggesting, although never confirming, the presence of a narrator. Thus, a consideration of Merleau-Ponty's earlier philosophy suggests a self-knowledge based upon movement and spatial situation. However, this approach is modified in Merleau-Ponty's later *Le Visible et l'invisible*, wherein he theorises bodily experience around the notion of *la chair*. The flesh to which Merleau-Ponty refers is the stuff of which the world is made, including one's own body, and it is what binds together transcendence (the intentional reaching out towards the object of consciousness) and immanence (consciousness of transcendence). Flesh is reversible; like the two sides of a glove, it has an inside and an outside. In terms of my own body, the visible, outside part is the side given to myself (or to others) when I see myself; the invisible part is the part that I myself do not see; for example I cannot see the back of my head although others can.³²⁶ Just as I cannot see all sides of an object in my visual field, due to my perspective in relation to it and its position in space, so there is always a part of myself that is invisible to me.

Où mettre la limite du corps et du monde, puisque le monde est chair? Où mettre dans le corps le voyant, puisque, de toute évidence, il n'y a dans le corps que des "ténèbres bourrées d'organes", c'est-à-dire du visible encore? Le monde vu n'est pas "dans" mon corps, et mon corps n'est pas "dans" le monde visible à titre ultime: chair appliquée à une chair, le monde ne l'entoure ni n'est entouré par elle. Participation et apparemment au visible, la vision ne l'enveloppe ni n'en est enveloppée

for her to consider it. Carrabino, however, published his book in 1974, therefore it is surprising that he makes no mention of *Le Visible et l'invisible*.

³²⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.181.

définitivement. La pellicule superficielle du visible n'est que pour ma vision et pour mon corps. Mais la profondeur sous cette surface contient mon corps et contient donc ma vision. Mon corps comme chose visible est contenu dans le grand spectacle. Mais mon corps voyant sous-tend ce corps visible, et tous les visibles avec lui. Il y a insertion réciproque et entrelacs de l'un dans l'autre.³²⁷

In terms of self-knowledge, it might be considered problematic that there is a part of me that remains invisible, unknowable, to myself; although it is visible to others. Perhaps, then, this difficulty could be avoided by viewing oneself in a mirror. This would give the perceiving subject access to herself in a way that only others normally have. Merleau-Ponty considers the appearance of one's self in the mirror and the implications it has for self-knowledge. In this account of human consciousness, the self can never be completely known, there is always a part of it that remains invisible. One has, therefore, to be seen by another, by the flesh of the world, in order to be fully constituted; to exist for others as well as for oneself.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's earlier theory of the body and its outward-reaching perceptions is a particularly apt way of accounting for the emphasis upon perceptual data in a novel like *La Jalousie*, a novel whose emphasis is on the intentional nature of perception, and on the body-subject's position and spatial perspective. It is a novel that deals very much with one person's perspective, with one person's relationship to the world, and little is mentioned about that individual's reciprocal relationship with others. Merleau-Ponty's later theories, which constitute a new way of conceiving intersubjective relationships, via the flesh of the world, come into their own when the shared world is narrated in Robbe-Grillet's other works.

³²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.182.

There is an intermediate stage in his thought, however, a phase in between *Phénoménologie de la Perception* and *Le Visible et l'invisible*, characterised by the last work he managed to complete before his early death.³²⁸ *L'Œil et l'esprit*, written whilst on holiday near Aix, in the setting of the landscapes immortalised by Cézanne, contains Merleau-Ponty's musings on the relationship between art and perception. Part of this work is devoted to a consideration of Cartesian philosophy and the possibility of knowledge of others. Merleau-Ponty claims that the question of seeing oneself in the mirror poses a problem for Descartes, since for him, the mind and the body are separate entities. Seeing oneself in the mirror would, from a Cartesian perspective, be just the same as seeing another person, and, just as Descartes claims that moving mechanisms covered in hats and cloaks could be mistaken for other people, one's own reflection could be just such another ruse. Merleau-Ponty's position undergoes a change between the writing of *L'Œil et l'esprit*, and the writing of *Le Visible et l'invisible*. In the first volume, he claims that there are parallels between sight and touch, whereas in the latter, he decides that there is in fact a difference between them; one can touch oneself when touching, whereas one cannot see oneself seeing in quite the same way. Seeing oneself in the mirror, therefore, does not give one such a direct means of perception of oneself as it might initially appear.

Merleau-Ponty considers knowledge of the self in terms of (literal) self-perception in looking at oneself in the mirror. This is one apparently obvious way in which one might know oneself; yet it begins to pave the way for the knowledge of others too. Looking at oneself in a mirror is a way of perceiving oneself as others do, that is, having

³²⁸ *Le Visible et l'invisible* was published posthumously; it comprises a manuscript and work notes that were incomplete at the time of Merleau-Ponty's death.

a de-centred or distanced perspective of oneself. The mirror is clearly a means of self-contemplation, as well as a means of considering oneself in an objective way. There would appear to be potentially rich literary and cinematic possibilities in the motif of the mirror, a means for a writer or cinematographer to suggest that a character is giving deep consideration to their situation, to themselves. It is no coincidence, then, that part of Robbe-Grillet's autobiography/*romanesques* should be called *Le Miroir qui revient*. It is, after all, a work concerned with questions of the author's selfhood, with an examination of his real and imaginary life. The book's title might also be considered in the light of the recurrence of mirrors in Robbe-Grillet's works. His film and fiction contain not just mirrors, but also doubles and twins, which, to all intents and purposes, function as mirrors; they allow the person perceiving their own double to see themselves as others see them and to consider their own identity. Equally, as Ben Stoltzfus has pointed out³²⁹, the many instances of *mise en abyme* in Robbe-Grillet's works are devices that function as formal mirrors, duplicating the structure of the events of a work in miniature. He argues that the multitude of viewpoints offered by Robbe-Grillet's various (literal and formal) mirrors function in the same way as the many perspectives of a Cubist painting, which, like a shattered mirror, offers many perspectives to its viewer at once. Stoltzfus highlights the formal play made possible by Robbe-Grillet's multiple mirrorings and reflections, claiming that mirrors allow for

consciousness to exteriorize being and perceive itself as object. (...) What is that Narcissus sees mirrored on the liquid surface? Is it himself or another?³³⁰

³²⁹ Stoltzfus, Ben, *Alain Robbe-Grillet: The Body of the Text*, (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1985), see chapter 4, 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall ...', for examples of *mise en abyme*, see especially pp.91-93.

It is noteworthy, from a phenomenological perspective, that Stoltzfus also directly mentions phenomenology in his discussion of mirrors in Robbe-Grillet's *œuvre*. However, his is a concluding reference to phenomenology, rather than a discussion devoted entirely to the phenomenological implications of the presence of so many mirrors in Robbe-Grillet's works. There is a hint at this in his conclusion, which is couched in phenomenological terms. His argument has been that the interior/exterior relationship offered by specular surfaces and other variants thereof, are used by Robbe-Grillet to ease communication between what is inside: "the phenomenological self" and what is outside.³³¹ He repeats a point made by Mikel Dufrenne that consciousness and its object are inseparable; the inside and the outside are inextricably linked. What Stoltzfus is suggesting is a link between consciousness and its objects that is entirely Merleau-Pontyan. There is a reflection of Merleau-Pontyan thought even in the language Stoltzfus uses, when he remarks that "the properties of space and perception establish curious and *reversible* relationships."³³² It is remarkable, then, that he does not mention Merleau-Ponty in this regard, nor is his analysis of the inside and the outside, the self and the other, rooted in phenomenological philosophy, aside from his concluding comments, as outlined here. Thus, Stoltzfus' discussion of Robbe-Grillet concludes that phenomenology may well be an apt theoretical underpinning in terms of the question of the relationship between the self and the other. However, he has not fully worked through the possibilities he himself suggests. The present analysis, then, will be an attempt to look again at some of the instances of literal and non-literal mirroring in Robbe-Grillet's works, but concentrating this time on a thoroughgoing phenomenological

³³⁰ Stoltzfus, p.95.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

interpretation of the significance of mirrors in terms of knowledge of the self and of others.

Trans-Europ Express is a film which contains many self-reflexive devices, which might be understood as mirroring, or reflecting upon, the process of making film itself. Structurally, there is a doubling of events over the course of the film. Like Mathias, making his double circuit of the island and revisiting places in *Le Voyeur*, Elias makes his journey between Paris and Antwerp twice, re-covering the same ground on each journey, performing a dry run before the gang trust him to carry the real merchandise. His first journey is mirrored by the second; the presence of mirrors is felt throughout the film, and where there are mirrors, there is an effect of reversal – is there an allusion to this in the name of Elias' destination: *Anvers/envers*? He begins and ends the film not as Elias, but as the real-life actor who plays the role, Jean-Louis Trintignant, and constantly reminds the viewer of the constructed and artificial nature of film. He looks directly into the camera (thus acknowledging its presence, rather than keeping up the pretence that it is not there). Elias is killed in character during the film, however he is resurrected as Trintignant during the closing frames of the film, and is seen kissing Marie-France Pisier (the actor who played Eva), whose character had also been killed during the film. There is, of course a difficulty for the viewer in deciding whether or not the person seen on the screen is Elias or Trintignant. The idea of making the film in the first place only arises by chance when Trintignant boards the train in which Jean, Lucette and the producer are travelling. Although the viewer tends to assume that what is then acted out is the film planned by Jean, Elias does not behave in ways predicted by Jean, suggesting that he is not really part of Jean's projected film, but still Trintignant. These details, then,

³³² Stoltzfus, p.101, emphasis added.

emphasise the self-reflexivity of the film, in their knowing nods to its construction, and in so doing, they raise the questions of personal identity (that of the characters and the actors).

This self-reflexivity extends to the role Robbe-Grillet himself plays in his own film; he is seen in the role of a director called Jean; his real-life wife, Catherine, plays his assistant, the script girl. Alain Robbe-Grillet, of course, is a director in real life, and Catherine Robbe-Grillet has assisted him in his career by typing out copies of his manuscripts prior to the publication of his novels, much as the script girl assists the director in *Trans-Europ Express*. There is even a brief scene in the film where Robbe-Grillet's character, Jean, is seen directing the film. Whilst the viewer might understand this as part of Jean's planning of the film he is to make, it could also be construed as a reflection of the real-life Robbe-Grillet directing the film *Trans-Europ Express*. Hence the impossibility of separating reality from fiction, through the use of doubling and mirroring in *Trans-Europ Express*. These, then, are all examples of mirroring, which suggest a degree of self-reflexivity in Robbe-Grillet's filmmaking enterprise. However, the film also contains literal mirrors.

There is a moment in the film where Trintignant/Elias, on his return to Paris on the train, examines his reflection in a double-angled mirror. This allows him to see himself from two perspectives at once; and the viewer of the film has access to an extra dimension, as Trintignant is filmed from behind, so that the viewer can see him looking at himself. Having emptied and re-loaded his revolver, he holds it as though he were threatening to shoot at his own reflection. The pose he adopts seems to be an attempt on his part to ascertain how he might appear to another when in a confrontational situation.

There is something strongly self-reflexive in this action, and, it also represents seeing oneself either as another, or from the perspective of another. This, then, is suggested in Merleau-Ponty's observation that in the mirror, one sees oneself as one is seen by others. Trintignant/Elias is looking at himself, but as if from the perspective of another.

Another scene in *Trans-Europ Express* allows us to see a face in a mirror, albeit very briefly. There is yet another example of self-reflexivity when this frame, early in the film, allows the viewer to glimpse Jean/Robbe-Grillet's face in the mirror of the train compartment. He is already a double presence in the film, as Robbe-Grillet is playing the role of someone who does what he himself does in real life, i.e., someone who directs films. This scene, in which we briefly glimpse the director's own face, is further mirrored in a description in Robbe-Grillet's most recent novel, *La Reprise*. Again, Robbe-Grillet seems to be tempting his reader into considering the possibility of linking the character described in the novel with himself. The temptation to do so stems from the fact that they share the same facial features, and that *La Reprise* contains details that are part of Robbe-Grillet's own life as well as occurring in the life of HR. For example, HR refers to "mon Brest natal",³³³ a town which was also Robbe-Grillet's place of birth. Further, the novel recounts a traumatic episode from the life of Robbe-Grillet, viz., the devastation caused to the formerly magnificent garden of his Normandy home in the great storms of winter 1999/2000.³³⁴

Just as Jean/Robbe-Grillet's face is mirrored in the train carriage in *Trans-Europ Express*, so HR's face is reproduced by his *doppelgänger* in *La Reprise*. Again, this occurs in a train carriage. Jean's face in the mirror in *Trans-Europ Express* is that of the

³³³ *La Reprise*, p.10.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.81.

young, moustachioed Robbe-Grillet of the 1960s, and the face of HR, as described in *La Reprise*, resembles the young Robbe-Grillet's, even down to the detail of his one unruly eyebrow. HR's seat in the train in which he is travelling is occupied by a fellow traveller in his absence. The fact that they look so much alike, then, might explain why the other passengers in the compartment do not prevent the usurper from taking HR's place – they mistake the usurper for HR. Then again, given that he has already inconvenienced them by moving in and out of his seat, perhaps they do not care to keep the seat for him. When the traveller lowers the newspaper that originally obscures his features, HR realises that the face is identical to his own:

(...) j'ai reconnu, face à moi, mes propres traits: figure dissymétrique au nez fort, convexe (le fameux "nez vexe" hérité de ma mère), aux yeux sombres très enfoncés dans leurs orbites surmontées d'épais sourcils noirs, dont le droit se relève en pinceau rebelle sur la tempe. La coiffure – cheveux assez courts en désordre bouclé, parsemé de mèches grisonnantes – était la mienne également.³³⁵

Once more, the last part of this description suggests a link with the real-life Robbe-Grillet; just as *était la mienne* refers to the usurper looking like HR, so it could refer to the *coiffure* that used to be Robbe-Grillet's own. More importantly, it is the realisation that this passenger has the same face as HR that causes him to become self-aware; the passenger is a living reflection, he forces HR to consider how he himself must appear to others. HR is reminded of his own appearance as his double scratches the point just below his nostrils, making HR check that his fake moustache is still in place:

Je me suis alors souvenu de la fausse moustache que j'avais adoptée pour cette mission, imitée avec art et parfaitement crédible, semblable en tout point à celle que je portais autrefois. Le visage relevé, de l'autre côté du miroir, était, lui, absolument glabre. Dans un réflexe incontrôlé, j'ai passé un doigt sur ma lèvre supérieure. Mon postiche était évidemment toujours

³³⁵ *La Reprise*, pp.13-14.

là, bien en place. Le sourire du voyageur s'est accentué, narquois peut-être, ou du moins ironique, et il a fait le même geste léger sur sa lèvre nue.³³⁶

The faces described here duplicate the face that was seen in the mirror of the railway carriage in *Trans-Europ Express*. The doubling of the two men constitutes a mirror here – HR sees his double's face as if seeing his own in a mirror. It is notable that part of this passage could, once again, apply equally to Robbe-Grillet himself; it includes a reference to the moustache "que je portais autrefois". Clearly, one cannot equate HR and Robbe-Grillet; *La Reprise* is a novel and not an autobiography, although it does testify to the importance of Robbe-Grillet's remark that "Je n'ai jamais parlé d'autre chose que de moi".³³⁷ (Notably, his autobiographies are not entirely based on fact, and thus they are entitled *Romanesques*.) The meeting with his double is also recounted by Robbe-Grillet in a brief text (a fictional short story or a factual account?), entitled 'Mon Double coréen'.³³⁸ From the content of the text, it is impossible to tell whether Robbe-Grillet is inventing these events, or whether they really happened. However improbable the story he tells may seem, there is no obvious hint to the reader that Robbe-Grillet is joking. Having claimed that, as a boy, he saw his double at the beach, he recounts a story almost identical to the episode mentioned above in *La Reprise*, with the difference that it takes place on a ferry in Korea, rather than on a train in Germany. On seeing a westerner who resembles him, he claims: "Ses traits m'ont fait croire un instant que je me trouvais devant un miroir..."³³⁹ Thus, whilst alluding to himself and his own life, Robbe-Grillet's

³³⁶ *La Reprise*, p.14.

³³⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1984), p.7.

³³⁸ Alain Robbe-Grillet, 'Mon Double coréen', in Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Voyageur* (Paris: Bourgois, 2001), pp.271-273.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.272.

works remain elusive in their avoidance of any equation between life and art, but at the same time, constantly raise questions of personal identity and self-knowledge.

However, for Merleau-Ponty, one cannot attain self-knowledge via the mirror; and any notion that one can is merely a ruse. This is because, in normal vision (without looking in a mirror), one cannot see oneself seeing; one only sees a part of oneself and there is always a side of oneself that remains invisible. This invisible side can only ever be constituted by another, and I cannot be my own object of consciousness in vision as I can in touching. I cannot see myself seeing as I can touch myself touching, as Agata Zielinski points out:

Je ne peux pas être un objet de connaissance pour moi-même, puisque dans la vision je m'échappe à moi-même (...) je ne peux être constitué que par autrui, qu'à partir du moment où il y a autrui. Puisque seul un autre peut me voir voyant – seul le regard d'autrui dans mon dos me donnera à moi-même ce dos.³⁴⁰

Touching, for Merleau-Ponty, is a different matter; as in the case discussed in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, when my two hands touch, I am both touching and touched. The relationship between seeing and being seen is not the same; I am only seen by another; I cannot be an object for myself in vision. The mirror, then, does not give the subject full self-knowledge, only another can do this; the most a mirror can do is to suggest how I am seen for another; I can never see myself as another sees me:

(...) le miroir est moins l'écho de ma propre vision que l'introduction à autrui, me suggérant la manière dont je suis vu, plutôt que celle par laquelle je me vois voyant.³⁴¹

³⁴⁰ Zielinski, p.87.

³⁴¹ Zielinski, p.87.

This seems to be true of the instances of mirrors in Robbe-Grillet's work considered here; the characters in each case are looking at themselves for the purposes of checking how they appear to others; Elias is checking that he looks the part of a gangster; HR that his disguise is still in place. These actions are aimed at appearing a certain way to others, they do not reveal any new information to the characters concerned about themselves. Whilst Robbe-Grillet's use of his own features to portray and describe his filmic and fictional characters may initially suggest an identification with these characters, the temptation to make such a link should be resisted. Robbe-Grillet is neither Jean nor HR, although there is of course always some degree of borrowing from himself, from his own experiences and imagination to flesh out his artistic universe.

So, Stoltzfus' assertion that the mirror allows for consciousness to exteriorise itself and perceive itself as an object is only part of the story. One is not an object for oneself in the mirror, claims Merleau-Ponty, one appears as an object for others. There is always a part of myself that remains invisible, even in the mirror; it is a part of me that only becomes visible in the presence of others. For Merleau-Ponty, the solution to the impasse of being invisible to oneself is the presence of others. He insists upon the necessity for self-awareness of being constituted by another; of their seeing what is invisible to oneself. The self that one sees in the mirror is not the same self that one touches when one touches one's own hand; it is oneself as seen by others, from a de-centred perspective. Being seen by others, then, is the only way of being fully self-aware.

Oneself and the other

The notion that Merleau-Ponty puts forward of the human subject not being fully constituted until constituted by another, by a common inherence in the flesh of the world, is illustrated in the works of Robbe-Grillet. In a striking passage in *Le Voyeur*, Mathias is brought into self-consciousness by the gaze of another. In this novel, it is only through others that Mathias begins to realise what he has done. Even in their presence, he only slowly becomes aware of himself and of his actions. Without their presence, the reader wonders whether Mathias would have ever become cognisant of his behaviour. Hence the importance of the novel's title – without others to observe him, Mathias would not reach any self-awareness. That is, *le voyeur* is not necessarily Mathias himself, it is those around him who observe his actions.

At the beginning of the second part of *Le Voyeur*, after the blank page (during which, one might assume, Mathias commits the crime he cannot remember), he is to be found standing by the roadside with his rented bicycle. He contemplates firstly the desiccated corpse of a squashed frog, and secondly the formations of the clouds scudding overhead. The clouds change shape, becoming the animals Mathias has encountered on his journey. He detects the shape of a sitting frog, and then of a seagull – the seagull he drew as a child. It even has an eye that seems to be watching him, as it has watched all of his real, remembered or imagined movements thus far in the novel. Perhaps, then, the seagull is the *voyeur* suggested by the title of the book. There is more than one observer of Mathias, however. It is this seagull that leads him to another figure who watches him; the cloud-seagull appears to be perched on a post by the roadside where he is standing, and coming along the road towards him is Mme Marek. By this point, he is quite lost in

his reverie; only when Mme Marek comes along does he realise how odd his behaviour must seem. During the passage in question, Mathias begins to consider whether his arrival in this place could have been noticed by Mme Marek. The twists and turns of the road would, probably, have prevented her from seeing the direction from which he had emerged.

La femme, en revanche, aurait remarqué cette pause inexplicable, dont il s'étonna lui-même à la réflexion. Pourquoi se trouvait-il au milieu de la route, les yeux levés vers les nuages, tenant d'une main le guidon d'une bicyclette nickelée et de l'autre une petite valise en fibre? Il se rendit compte seulement alors de l'engourdissement dans lequel il flottait jusque-là (depuis quand?); il ne parvint pas à comprendre, en particulier, pour quelle raison il n'était pas remonté sur sa machine, au lieu de pousser celle-ci sans se presser comme si rien ne l'appelait nulle part.³⁴²

The reader's suspicions are aroused here by the narrative's postulating as to Mathias' behaviour. Given that, so far in the novel, there is no evidence to suggest that he has done anything to Jacqueline, there is no reason for him to be obliged to be accountable to anyone for breaking his journey by the side of the road. Nevertheless, the fact that the strangeness of his behaviour is raised at all does begin to indicate some degree of wrongdoing on the part of Mathias. After all, there is no reason to consider any possible explanation for one's actions unless to allay the fears or suspicions of another.

Of course, on an initial reading of the novel, the reader will not associate Mathias' behaviour with any kind of wrongdoing; it is only towards the end of the novel that the reader (and Mathias) can begin to realise in retrospect that something had occurred at this point. It is notable that Mathias does not register any feeling of guilt at this point for the crime he has (perhaps/perhaps not?) just committed. Indeed, at no point in the novel does he feel an explicit feeling of guilt, rather he detects a feeling of indefinable awkwardness

or unease. That is, he implicitly becomes self-aware due to the presence of others, but never remorseful. The paranoia that often pervades Robbe-Grillet's works does owe something to the threatening presence of others. Others are perceived in negative terms in Robbe-Grillet's works; either they exist as objects for a human subject, or else their presence threatens to invade, to reveal, to objectivise. For Merleau-Ponty, in order for the subject to be a subject, to be self-aware and to be fully constituted, the subject must exist as an object for another, for the flesh of the world. This, then, is the case for Mathias – through the presence of others, he comes to realise the disturbing truth about himself.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty accounts for this disturbing discomfort experienced when the subject is perceived by another person; the decentralising experienced by the subject is painful, the subject is no longer the centre of the world. The other is not simply a body for me, but I am a body for the other; I am not the only one who can see, but am myself seen:

En affirmant que "Autrui ne peut s'introduire dans l'univers du voyant que par effraction, comme une douleur et une catastrophe", Merleau-Ponty destitue le sujet de son privilège de savoir (...). [Autrui] vient comme le voleur (...) et sa venue bouleverse l'univers des habitudes solipsistes, jusqu'à la douleur.³⁴³

This, then perhaps explains the feeling of unease, of discomfort that Mathias experiences in *Le Voyeur*. Furthermore, it is remarkable that he leads what might be described as a solipsistic, self-contained existence throughout the first part of the novel; it is only when others bring with them the suggestion of having seen Mathias commit the crime, or behave suspiciously, that his unease develops.

³⁴² *Le Voyeur*, p.92.

At a later point in *Le Voyeur*, as Mathias returns to the place where Jacqueline disappeared, it is again the presence of someone else that alerts him to the suspicious nature of his own actions. Julien Marek's presence is noticed by Mathias just after the latter has flung a grey, knitted cardigan into the sea from the cliff top above the place where Jacqueline's body was discovered:

Il fallait à présent relever le visage vers le garçon. Celui-ci avait évidemment vu le paletot de laine et le geste incompréhensible du voyageur... Non; il avait à coup sûr vu le geste, mais seulement un morceau d'étoffe grise, déjà roulé en bouchon peut-être. Il était important de le lui faire préciser.

Mathias se rendit compte, en outre, de la situation bizarre qu'il occupait lui-même et pour laquelle il devrait aussi fournir une explication.³⁴⁴

Once more, it is only the realisation that another is watching him that makes Mathias aware of himself. In Merleau-Pontyan terms, Julien is part of the flesh of the world that makes that part of Mathias that is invisible to himself become visible, and therefore fully constituted. Julien claims that the garment belonged to Jacquie, which Mathias is forced to contest in order not to give away the truth about his actions the previous day. This, and the fact that Julien produces a half-smoked cigarette of the type Mathias usually smokes and a sweet wrapper matching the sweets in Mathias' pocket, lead Mathias to imagine an alarming scenario. Julien throws the sweet wrapper over the cliff, perhaps to demonstrate to Mathias that he is in control of the situation; he can produce potentially compromising evidence and then destroy it at will:

(...) il proclamait son pouvoir sur Mathias: il détruisait ses traces avec la même facilité qu'il en suscitait de nouvelles, modifiant à son gré signes et itinéraires du temps révolu. Mais il fallait autre chose que des soupçons –

³⁴³ Zielinski, p.187.

³⁴⁴ *Le Voyeur*, p.207.

même précis – pour autoriser une telle assurance. Julien avait “vu”. Le nier ne servait plus à rien. Seules les images enregistrées par ces yeux, pour toujours, leur conféraient désormais cette fixité insupportable.³⁴⁵

For Merleau-Ponty, the other goes beyond their simple presence; the other is always more than what they appear to be, more than what is given in sensory experience. There is, therefore, a telling significance in the novel's title, when we consider the above quotation: *Julien avait “vu”*. Mathias knows that Julien had seen (the crime), and this is what makes Mathias aware of it. This, then, is precisely Merleau-Ponty's point in relation to the gaze of the other, as Zielinski points out: “par lui, je suis vu, je me sens vu voyant.”³⁴⁶

What renders Julien's apparent knowledge of Mathias' crime somewhat alarming is the fact that Julien seems unmoved by it. Mathias sees nothing in Julien's eyes that suggests that he is horrified, angry, or feels any emotion at all. Mathias considers the possibility that Julien may be short-sighted, or simple-minded:

Ensuite il regarda Mathias... Un défaut de vision, certainement, troublait l'expression du jeune homme, mais il ne louchait pas. C'était autre chose... Une myopie excessive? Non, car il considérait à présent le bonbon en le tenant à une distance normale. (...) Celui-ci n'était-il pas un peu simple d'esprit? (...) Et il [Julien] le dévisageait de nouveau... Ou bien était-ce un œil de verre qui rendait si gênant son regard?³⁴⁷

Thus, because there is something – something that Mathias cannot quite place – odd about the way Julien looks at him, it is Julien's troubling gaze that renders Mathias uncomfortable, that makes him aware that he has done something that he feels the need to

³⁴⁵ *Le Voyeur*, p.214.

³⁴⁶ Zielinski, p.195.

³⁴⁷ *Le Voyeur*, p.210.

dissimulate. What is striking then, is that there is no spark of humanity in Julien's gaze, it is described in terms of a hole, a lack or absence:

Cependant c'étaient des yeux très ordinaires – ni laids ni beaux, ni grands ni petits – deux cercles parfaits et immobiles, situés côte à côte et percés chacun en son centre d'un trou noir. (...) Il regardait Mathias droit dans les yeux, de ses yeux rigides et bizarres – comme inconscients, ou même aveugles – ou comme idiots.³⁴⁸

Merleau-Ponty's later work suggests that in human perception, the perceiving subject – in this case Mathias - would see that the other person perceives the world in the same way that he himself does, due to our existence as part of the flesh of the world. It is strange, therefore, that Julien's eyes suggest the absence of a person, an unconsciousness; one ought to be able to perceive the other as being a conscious being just as one is oneself, under a Merleau-Pontyan theory. One might initially be tempted to conclude that this hole in Julien's eyes – the very place that is said to be the window of the soul – reflects the nothingness at the centre of consciousness, the intentional consciousness which is nothing unless it has an object of consciousness, unless it reaches out towards something. Yet, a more convincing solution to this can be found in Merleau-Ponty's theory of the other. The very existence of other conscious beings does of course depend upon their being to some extent inaccessible to the subject who perceives them. Merleau-Ponty explains that: "c'est en faisant autrui non seulement inaccessible mais invisible pour moi, que je garantis son altérité et que je sors du solipsisme".³⁴⁹ That is, if I had access to other people's minds, they would not be other than me; they would be the same as me. This, then, explains the inability of Mathias to make out anything in Julien's eyes, since there must always be a part of the other that remains other to me:

³⁴⁸ *Le Voyeur*, pp.214-215.

L'expérience du monde a pour modèle celle du monde comme visible *et* invisible: autrui aussi est une énigme, autrui a aussi ses obscurités, ses opacités et demeure toujours pour une part "inaccessible".³⁵⁰

The protagonist of *Djinn*, Simon Lecœur, undergoes a similar sense of unease when he is surveyed by a dummy Djinn, by a mannequin whose presence he initially mistakes for a man, and then a woman who resembles the film star Jane Frank. It is only by touching Djinn that he is able to verify that she is a mannequin:

"Touchez encore, si ça vous fait plaisir", dit avec ironie la voix charmeuse de monsieur Djinn, soulignant le ridicule de ma situation. D'où vient cette voix? Les sons ne sortent pas du mannequin lui-même, c'est probable, mais d'un haut-parleur dissimulé juste à côté.

Ainsi, je suis surveillé par quelqu'un d'invisible. C'est très désagréable. J'ai la sensation d'être maladroit, menacé, fautif. La fille qui me parle est, aussi bien, assise à plusieurs kilomètres; et elle me regarde, comme un insecte dans un piège, sur son écran de télévision. Je suis sûr qu'elle se moque de moi.³⁵¹

This early encounter in the novel is indicative of the nature of their relationship throughout; Simon is always nervous of the power Djinn holds over him, by being seen, but unable to see her, he exists as the object of her vision but there is no reciprocal perception. It is typical of the suspicion aroused in Robbe-Grilletian protagonists when they believe that they are being watched without being able to see who is watching them; as with Julien in *Le Voyeur*, whose eyes are glassy and unreal, Djinn is an unreal presence, a dummy with no spark of life behind her eyes (obscured as they are by dark glasses), yet Simon knows he is being observed. Before Simon has realised that Djinn is a dummy, the dark glasses suggest that she may be blind, yet apparently she can still see;

³⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, p.110.

³⁵⁰ Zielinski, p.196.

³⁵¹ *Djinn*, p.15.

another common motif in Robbe-Grillet's works. Elias in *Trans-Europ Express* is pursued by a *faux aveugle* (carrying a white stick and wearing dark glasses) who collects money from him in the café where Elias' friend works. The *faux aveugle* turns out to be in league with the police and the many other people who conspire to bring about his death. There is a sense of unease and mistrust, then, on the part of Robbe-Grillet's protagonists when the eyes of another are somehow obscured or absent. Perhaps this is because the protagonists feel that they are being observed by someone whose eyes they cannot observe, whose observation they cannot reciprocate.

The sense of unease and paranoia often experienced by Robbe-Grillet's protagonists, then, is dependent upon the presence of another, or another's gaze. The protagonists' self-awareness is heightened, thrown into relief, by the unsettling presence of others. Others are frequently the means by which the Robbe-Grilletian protagonist feels he is being controlled, manipulated, or threatened.

Language

Intersubjective relationships in Robbe-Grillet, discussed above in relation to the self and the other, are also negotiated via language. Just as the presence of another often fuels a character's sense of unease and reveals a mistrustful relationship, so the dialogues between his characters also reveal that they are ill at ease with each other. Language is sometimes manipulated by Robbe-Grillet's characters to achieve their own success or safety, or to deceive other characters. In many of his novels and films, there is a process of *gommage* in the dialogues, of denying what has previously been stated, a process which questions the extent to which language is a true representation of fact. Victor

Carrabino outlines a common purpose between Robbe-Grillet and Merleau-Ponty as far as language is concerned. Carrabino indicates, for instance, Merleau-Ponty's consideration of literary language, in which he insists upon the creation of a new form of language, one which introduces unfamiliar perspectives, rather than re-confirming already established ones.³⁵² Once, again, the idea of bracketing what is familiar, of a rejection of convention, is suggestive of the phenomenological reduction; a lifting of the familiar and established in favour of a new literary form. This literary form, Carrabino suggests, finds a voice in the aims of the *nouveau roman*.³⁵³ Robbe-Grillet's vision for the New Novel was that it should cast aside the established forms of metaphor and anthropomorphism in favour of a new form of literary language. Whilst these remarks certainly do indicate a common vision of literary language, Carrabino's analysis tends to focus upon the way the novels' narratives are structured, rather than on examples of the words the characters speak in Robbe-Grillet's novels and films. The words used by Robbe-Grilletian characters is a potentially interesting area of analysis, then, as they often use language in a deliberately misleading, and consequently subversive, manner.

Carrabino suggests that Robbe-Grillet's writing strips language of its usual meaning. It is possible to argue that he strips language of its meaning in respect of dialogues spoken by his characters, whose words, on many occasions, cannot be trusted. The denigrating of truth in this manner happens both in Robbe-Grillet's novels and films. In his films, this is occasionally further complicated by the fact that the words spoken by the main character contradict the images that appear on the screen. Thus, language and sensory perception are set against each other. There is, in this sense, an undermining of

³⁵² Carrabino, p.133.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.134.

the faith that can be placed in language, to the profit of the visual image, in *L'Homme qui ment*, as Robbe-Grillet explains in relation to the protagonist Boris, who invents his own story, with the aim of usurping the place of a national hero:

Il parle; il raconte comment, en héros, il a sauvé le pays à plusieurs reprises, comment il a lutté contre l'occupant allemand, etc. Ce n'est pas un personnage: un personnage a un passé (...) Ici, l'homme qui sort de a forêt est vide. Il s'accroche à ce que voit le spectateur, disant parfois le contraire de ce qu'on a vu. Peu à peu son discours devient une pure invention, bien qu'il s'appuie ici ou là sur des faits incontestables.³⁵⁴

Of course, the film's title prepares us for this, it is only to be expected of a man who lies, whose whole life story is a tissue of lies, but his words are all the viewer or the other characters have to rely on for information. The viewer, of course, only knows that he is lying because what is seen on the screen contradicts his words; but this does raise the question of what to believe in film – the dialogue or the visual image, language or sensory perception.

Conversely, in *L'Immortelle*, L claims that what is seen is fake, that her word is to be trusted, rather than that of anyone else, or instead of what is seen:

LE VIEILLARD: . Très vieux mosquée... très ancien...
 (...)
 L: Tout ça est faux, naturellement.
 N: Tout quoi?
 L: Ce qu'il disait. Ça n'est pas ancien du tout, on l'a reconstruite après la guerre.
 N: Elle figure pourtant sur tous les guides.

Thus, it no longer seems true to claim that *voir, c'est croire*, if L is to be believed. N's claim that the mosque is featured in guidebooks suggests, however, that L may not be telling the truth either. Throughout the film, she plays a cat and mouse game with him,

sometimes reinforcing the notions of the mythical east, sometimes undermining them with a throwaway remark. The result is that N no longer knows what or whom to believe. Following her death, members of the local population seem to be doing their best to throw him off the trail; information given to him by them is never verifiable. The interplay of what is claimed to be truth and what appears to be lies makes it extremely difficult for N (and therefore also for the viewer) to work out what exactly is happening. This was apparently a deliberate ploy by Robbe-Grillet to lead his viewers to question their expectations of film:

Ce qui dérouté les spectateurs épris de "réalisme", c'est que l'on n'essaie plus ici de leur faire croire à rien – je dirais presque: au contraire... Le *vrai*, le *faux* et le *faire croire* sont devenus plus ou moins le sujet de tout œuvre moderne; celle-ci, au lieu d'être un prétendu morceau de réalité, se développe en tant que réflexion sur la réalité (ou sur le *peu de réalité*, comme on voudra). Elle ne cherche plus à cacher son caractère nécessairement mensonger, en se présentant comme une "histoire vécue". Si bien que nous retrouvons là, dans l'écriture cinématographique, une fonction voisine de celle assumée par la description en littérature: l'image ainsi traitée (quant aux acteurs, au décor, au montage, dans ses rapports avec le son, etc.) empêche de croire en même temps qu'elle affirme, comme la description empêchait de voir ce qu'elle montrait.³⁵⁵

Thus, the notions of truth and falsity are clearly bound up, in Robbe-Grillet's mind, with a new form of writing or film-making. The account given by Robbe-Grillet here is, once more, relevant to that which Carrabino outlines in relation to Merleau-Ponty's conception of literary language. Robbe-Grillet draws parallels between the genres of film and literature, which is significant here in so far as truth and falsity are not the exclusive domain of spoken or verbal language in *L'Immortelle*. Since this is a film, it is made up of moving visual images and of a soundtrack; these two comprise the language of the

³⁵⁴ See Robbe-Grillet's interview with Francois Jost in the booklet accompanying the video box set *Alain Robbe-Grillet: Œuvres Cinématographiques*, p.30.

film just as much as verbal language. Neither element is allowed to dominate, or to make greater claims to truth in the film. The viewer no longer knows whether to believe their eyes or their ears; indeed the viewer *can* no longer believe either their eyes or their ears, since the evidence presented to both is so often undermined.

In *L'Immortelle*, it is chiefly the soundtrack in the form of the words spoken by L and other characters that challenges the veracity of the image, however in *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, the non-verbal sounds on the soundtrack are again used in such a way as to subvert one of the characters' (and via him the viewer's) expectations as to what is "really" happening. Alice, locked in her cell, and apparently bored, amuses herself by carrying out various activities which might be interpreted as either innocent or highly provocative. For example, she paints Yves Klein-style body prints, daubing herself with paint and leaving the imprint of her body on the white walls. She is naked during the time she spends in the cell, and this in itself is apparently a means of distracting the various (mostly male) authority figures who visit her there. However, on the occasion of one of the magistrate's visits to her, there are noises coming from her cell that are suggestive of either violence, sexual activity, or both. The scene is described thus in the *ciné-roman*:

(...) un long plan du magistrat attendant derrière la porte de la cellule d'Alice (...), sur le point d'y pénétrer (une main sur le verrou) mais écoutant les sons étranges qui viennent de l'autre côté de la porte: une femme qui gémit, des bruits de pas, de verre cassé, des cris encore, des hurlements... Sur ce paroxysme, l'homme se décide à entrer, après avoir jeté un coup d'œil par le judas.

Dans la pièce, il ne se passe rien du tout (...) un vieux tourne-disque portatif, posé sur le lit, produit les sons que l'on vient d'entendre et qui se poursuivent (...)

³⁵⁵ *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*, p.163.

Le magistrat demande, d'un ton maussade:
 "Qu'est-ce que vous fabriquez avec ce truc?"
 - Eh, bien, vous voyez, j'écoute de la musique."
 Alice a parlé d'un ton aimable, presque mondain.³⁵⁶

Alice's matter-of-fact response is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of this scene. What she describes as "musique" is more like a record of film sound effects; perhaps another self-reflexive reference? It is unsettling for the viewer because one's initial assumption about the scene is that the magistrate is spying on some kind of sado-masochistic activity in the cell. The reliability of the film's sound track therefore becomes questionable; any possible realist interpretation of the scene becomes impossible. It is unsettling for the magistrate because Alice has apparently managed to fool him into thinking that she is doing something forbidden, and her claim to have been engaged in an innocent activity is belied both by her shameless nudity and by her defiance of an authority figure.

Of course, instances such as these can be found in Robbe-Grillet's use of literary, well as cinematic, language. *Projet pour une révolution à New York* is a novel in which there is a constant process of setting out a scenario only to deny the reality of that scenario later. This is bound up with the narration of fantasies and dreams throughout the novel, yet it has a similar effect on the reader to that outlined above in relation to Robbe-Grillet's films; the reader learns to distrust what she is reading; the contents of the novel will never be assimilable into a realist piece of narration. The extremely disturbing, sadistic scenes of acts of violence against young women narrated in the novel are a case in point. Once described, the narration appears to have been carried out by someone describing an unreal, fantasised or imagined scene. The horrific saw-blade scene involving a woman being mutilated is just such a scene. The events in it, whilst they

initially appear to be presented as factual, as a straightforward narration, then become a story that is being told to another character in the novel:

- Ici encore je vous arrête. Vous employez à plusieurs reprises, dans votre narration, des expressions comme celle-là: "petits seins naissants", "fesses charmantes", "cruelle opération", "pubis charnu", "splendide créature rousse", "éclatante plénitude", et même une fois: "courbes voluptueuses des hanches". Est-ce que vous ne croyez pas que vous exagérez?
- De quel point de vue serait-ce exagéré?
- Du point de vue lexicologique.
- Vous prétendez que ce sont des incorrections?
- Non, pas du tout!
- Des erreurs matérielles?
- La question n'est pas là.
- Alors des mensonges?
- Encore moins!
- Dans ce cas, j'avoue ne pas voir ce que vous voulez dire. Je fais mon rapport, un point c'est tout. Le texte est correct, et rien n'est laissé au hasard, il faut le prendre tel qu'il est.³⁵⁷

The narrator's reliability is thereby again called into question, just as the reliability of characters in Robbe-Grillet's films is constantly questioned by the visual and auditory elements of the films' language. In *Projet*, the chaotic narration (by conventional standards), the jumping from one narrator to another, the unreliability and need for constant revision of events narrated robs the reader of all confidence in the narrator's version and, indeed, their vision, of events. As seems to be the case here, the narrator's own obsessions can colour their understanding of what they see; this narrator is obsessed with violent sexuality, hence his interlocutor's questioning of the narrator's insistence upon those elements of his vocabulary that betray these disturbing interests. This question is, of course, linked to the discussion of sexuality in the previous chapter; given the fact that the scenes of violence depicted are subsequently undermined by having their

³⁵⁶ *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, pp.59-61.

factual status questioned, does this in some way mitigate the horror of the violence depicted?

Conclusion

The question of intersubjectivity in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy is one which allows for an analysis of various aspects of Robbe-Grillet's works. The notion that the mirror only allows one to experience or perceive oneself as if for others is reflected in the many instances of mirror images found in Robbe-Grillet's works. These mirrors can be literal and non-literal; often a double or twin takes the place of a mirror, but it nevertheless lets the character see himself as others would. The mirror still leaves part of the body-subject invisible, however, and only the presence of another can make this invisible become visible. That is, there is always a part of oneself that one cannot see or know; only the perspective of another can achieve this knowledge. Thus, a character such as Mathias in *Le Voyeur*, who is only partially self-aware, begins to gain self-awareness by being perceived by another person; and this is a clue to the meaning of the novel's title; Mathias is not the *voyeur*. The *voyeur* is Julien, the seagull, Mme Marek, the odd spectacles or figure of eight shapes that follow Mathias throughout. The figure of eights are the flesh of the world, the potential perspective of another from which he could be seen. Finally, the question of language, the means by which intersubjective communication is possible, reveals yet again the paranoia at the heart of many of Robbe-Grillet's works. Following from the aims of the phenomenological reduction, and of the *nouveau roman* as outlined by Robbe-Grillet, the conventional use of literary language is to be undermined, at least in formal terms. However, there is evidence that on a diegetic

³⁵⁷ *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, pp.188-189.

level, a similar process of undermining the reliability of language is underway also. Characters in Robbe-Grillet's works lie to each other for their own gain, creating a sense of mistrust and unease amongst them. The intersubjective world of Robbe-Grillet, then, is a singularly negative vision of human relationships.

Conclusion

Any reader of Robbe-Grillet's novels or viewer of his films cannot help but conclude that he is a writer and filmmaker whose work is by turns perplexing, enjoyable, complex and challenging. The multifaceted nature of his works is undeniably the reason for the proliferation of studies devoted to him, and for the continuing fascination he holds for academic research. The gauntlet thrown down to such research, therefore, is to identify approaches that allow for an examination of the complexities of his works, and that can profitably elucidate them. The present study acknowledges that this is a challenge that has been taken up admirably by many scholars, adopting their own differing approaches. The initial survey of the various studies already devoted to Robbe-Grillet's works revealed the importance of his artistic endeavours; the sheer volume of analyses of his literature and cinema are, in themselves, evidence of the richness of his creativity. Whilst recognising the contribution made by all of these approaches, each offering their own unique and valid insights into Robbe-Grillet's works, what has

emerged from this study is the range of insight to be gained by a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet's films and novels. That is, phenomenology has allowed for a reading of Robbe-Grillet that examines areas of key importance in his literary and cinematic *œuvres*, and yet is capable of uniting them cohesively under the aegis of one theoretical standpoint. Thus, it has been possible, in this discussion, to consider topics as diverse as the subversion of literary and cinematic conventions, as well as the question of narrative viewpoint, the depiction of space and time, bodily existence and sexuality, and inter-human relationships. Hence the value of using phenomenology as a means of analysis of Robbe-Grillet's film and fiction. It has to be acknowledged also that the impetus for such an enterprise has been driven by the valuable contributions of some of the earliest commentaries on Robbe-Grillet's works, i.e. those who share the same theoretical underpinning as this analysis. However, what demarcates this study from those early ones is, firstly, their neglect of any reference to Robbe-Grillet as a *cinéaste*, and secondly, their oversight of certain important areas of Robbe-Grillet's work, such as sexuality and intersubjectivity. What was all the more surprising about their omission of these topics was the fact that sexuality and intersubjectivity are entirely consistent with, and indeed, inseparable from, the notion of a corporeal ontology such as is elucidated in phenomenological philosophy, a philosophy whose focus is upon describing bodily existence. These omissions, then, have been addressed by this analysis, with the further benefit that is brought by several years' distance from the earlier phenomenological studies, allowing for subsequent developments in phenomenology to be brought to bear on Robbe-Grillet's work. In addition to this, Robbe-Grillet has, of course, continued to produce novels and films in the intervening years, and, at the time of writing, hardly any

studies exist on his twenty-first century works, making this study one of the first to subject them to academic analysis.

A phenomenological analysis of Robbe-Grillet's work allows for insight into and comment on various aspects of his work right across his career, even though his aims as a writer and filmmaker have evolved over the years. This is supported by the fact that he has acknowledged, in interviews from the start of his career up until the present, the influence of phenomenological philosophy on his work. That is, whilst his ideas and artistic practice have developed over the years, Robbe-Grillet's work continues at present to be recognisable as the work of the same author who emerged as part of the *nouveau roman* in the 1950s. In other words, certain techniques from his early works are still identifiable in his later works, even when these later works have moved in an apparently different direction. So, for example, his interests and aims as filmmaker moved, in the 1970s, towards a method of structuring his works in a way that reflected the structure of serialist music. This happened at a time when he had already become interested in piecing together examples of cultural stereotypes in a process of *bricolage* in his novels. These were apparently different aims to those identified by early critical reactions to his works, e.g., the *chosiste*, phenomenological or psychological interpretations, in which his work was seen, on the one hand, as an expression of neutral, detached, objective perception, or, on the other hand, one of total subjectivity. Nevertheless, in spite of these developments, Robbe-Grillet did not leave behind his aim of describing experience from a viewpoint located in a human subject; even when this subject is splintered or shifting. Thus, in a novel such as *Projet pour une révolution à New York*, the presence of the technique of *bricolage* is clearly noticeable, but also, the narration remains situated

within a human consciousness, albeit shifting from one character's perspective to another's. Equally, the presence of the *bricolage* technique, in its exploitation and undermining of myths can be identified in his earliest works; the film *L'Immortelle* plays on the building up and tearing down of stereotypes and myths about the east and about the allure of women. Similarly, *Les Gommages* is a novel clearly structured by the detective story genre, although again, as in *L'Immortelle*, it constantly creates expectations in the reader only to undermine them, thus the murder mystery is not resolved in the expected way.

Before beginning to analyse Robbe-Grillet's works from a Merleau-Pontyan standpoint, this discussion provided an account of the thought of Merleau-Ponty. In order to pinpoint the aims of the phenomenological philosophy as outlined by Merleau-Ponty, and its importance in the context of the phenomenological movement, it was necessary firstly to ascertain the position of Merleau-Ponty as compared with that of other phenomenological philosophers. This is because Merleau-Ponty's philosophy was written in response to some of the problems raised by other members of the phenomenological movement. The examination of the evolution of the phenomenological movement which was the starting point for this study situated the contribution of Merleau-Ponty in relation to his fellow phenomenological philosophers. Thus, this study outlines the phenomenological movement by charting its development from the examination of psychology offered by Franz Brentano which was then taken up by Edmund Husserl, widely regarded as the founder of the movement. Following this, the French reaction to and development of phenomenology, as found in the work of Sartre, was noted. The critique of Husserl and Sartre were, in many ways, the backdrop

to Merleau-Ponty's own thought, and it is mostly against the contributions of these two thinkers that he fleshes out his phenomenology.

The phenomenological reduction, then, proved a valuable starting point in analysing Robbe-Grillet's works not only because it provides a cohesive framework for the development of Merleau-Ponty's thought, but also because, in its basic aims, it strikes a chord with the professed objectives of Robbe-Grillet as a *nouveau romancier* and *nouveau cinéaste*. That is, in stepping back from, or momentarily suspending, the conventions to which most readers and viewers are accustomed when reading and viewing films and novels, they become aware of the way in which these conventions usually influence and structure their reading and viewing strategies and habits. The flouting of such conventions is a stated aim of Robbe-Grillet, and is consistent with his artistic practice, as well as that of his fellow *nouveaux romanciers* and *nouveaux cinéastes*. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty suggests that it is only when we step back from the natural attitude, in which we are normally situated in perception, that we can loosen the intentional threads that are our means of making sense of the world around us. It is at this point that we begin to realise that there is a set of scientific or cultural conventions that usually structure our perception. In the world of Robbe-Grilletian film and fiction, the reader or viewer is constantly reminded of their normal inclination to read and understand film and fiction in a conventional, predictable way, because his works undermine the possibility of using conventional reading or viewing practices by drawing attention to them. Thus the scientific and cultural explanations and strategies commonly used to make sense of and to structure perceptual data are akin to the reading and viewing strategies that are used to make sense of literature and film. Robbe-Grillet's artistic

enterprises conspire to force us to set aside our usual habits and formulæ for making sense of the filmic and literary universes. In the absence of such strategies, the world appears unfamiliar, claims Merleau-Ponty, and in the same way, the Robbe-Grilletian film or novel is unfailingly rebarbative, given the literary and cinematic conventions one might otherwise expect. It is this bewildering world seen without a reassuringly familiar framework, such as that described by Merleau-Ponty, that Robbe-Grillet portrays in his art.

This question of the subversion of the reader's or viewer's expectations is clearly of importance to Robbe-Grillet, as is evidenced in his literary manifesto *Pour Un Nouveau Roman*. The rejection of literary conventions as practised by nineteenth-century realism was one of his chief aims, and a natural consequence of this is that new strategies of making sense of the resultant literature must be adopted by the reader. That the suspension of conventional reading strategies necessitated by such literature has a parallel in the phenomenological reduction is one of the first significant conclusions of the present study. As with phenomenological philosophy itself, this discussion takes the phenomenological reduction as starting point for all subsequent accounts of the bodily locus of consciousness, time, sexuality, and so on.

Nevertheless, just as Merleau-Ponty insists upon the impossibility of performing a complete reduction, and goes on to argue that the world is always perceived via certain structures, Robbe-Grillet retains some conventions in his film and fiction. That is, in order for the reader or viewer of Robbe-Grillet's works to realise that some subversive process is taking place, there has to be a structure in place that can be undermined. His works are characterised by a constant setting up and tearing down of conventions, a

process of *gommage*, of undoing what has just been done. It is in this way that the reader thinks that they are dealing with, for example, a vampire film, a mystery, or a detective story, only to discover that they are dealing with its destruction. Hence the violent reaction of an audience in Italy to *Glissements progressifs du plaisir*, since the film was shown in a porn cinema, the audience expected pornography. What they were presented with proved to be rather more *avant-garde*, and they consequently tore the cinema apart.

The notion of “making strange” that stems from the reduction also has an application in terms of the psychological state of Robbe-Grillet’s protagonists. Whilst mental trauma and disturbed states of mind can be accounted for and explained in psychological terms, and whilst previous commentaries have convincingly argued for such an approach, such notions are also to be found in a phenomenological elucidation of Robbe-Grillet’s art. For Merleau-Ponty, the world seems strange in situations of crisis, the body takes over and conscious thought is momentarily put on hold. Conscious thought is something that Robbe-Grillet’s protagonists do not articulate; the reader or viewer is never privy to any thoughts that may be explicitly occurring to them. Rather, their bodily responses to situations of crisis are what is narrated; the perceptions that they experience, the objects upon which they focus; these are the nearest the reader of a Robbe-Grillet novel comes to finding out what a character is thinking. Also, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the sense of depersonalisation that comes with a loosening of one’s grasp on conscious thought, and this phenomenon is certainly observable in Mathias’ deepening unease in *Le Voyeur*.

Another fundamental conclusion drawn by Merleau-Ponty following from the reduction was the incarnation of human consciousness in a body-subject, and it was from

the notion of the body-subject that the rest of his phenomenological project was to be mapped out. Similarly, the incarnation of human consciousness in a body structures the narrative point of view in Robbe-Grillet's works. This remains the case whether or not the point of view shifts from one subject to another. Robbe-Grillet has commented on the importance he places upon the situated nature of narrative; on a rejection of any God-like, or objective narration. Nevertheless, not all of his narratives are situated uniquely within one character's perspective; frequently the perspective offered jumps from one person to another. Whilst this initially appears problematic for a *romancier* and *cinéaste* who professes to want to present the perspective of one narrator (as in *L'Immortelle*), he never steps beyond an incarnated perspective into one that could not be perceived by any given human character. Thus, in *L'Immortelle*, the perspective presented is not strictly that of N, since his own face appears on the screen, yet the viewer never knows more than N does. That is, whilst N is sometimes seen from a perspective that is not his own, there is never a realist-type overview of events, the viewer remains as much in the dark as to the "truth" as N does. The cinematic technique of showing a character as another might see him or her, or of jumping from one character's point of view to another, has apparently influenced Robbe-Grillet the *romancier*. That is, his novels contain the perspectives of more than one character, although again, these are always human perspectives.

An absence of conscious thought is strongly linked to the articulation of alienation and paranoia in Robbe-Grillet's works. This is frequently notable for the fact that male characters feel threatened by females, whereas the fear felt by females in the face of threats from male characters is rarely brought to the attention of the reader or the viewer from the female's point of view. Female characters, then, are rarely the locus of the

narration; more usually, they are the victims of male characters, or else are the focus of a male character's paranoia. The examination of sexuality in Robbe-Grillet's works in this study highlighted the following points: firstly, that sexuality is inescapably a part of bodily existence, and therefore is a necessary consideration in any phenomenology-based study; notably, Merleau-Ponty insisted upon the intermingling of the sexual and the non-sexual in human existence and perception. By looking at Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, it has been possible to see how, in some areas of Robbe-Grillet's work, the narration or depiction of sexuality is achieved on a very subtle level, consistent with Merleau-Ponty's claim that the sexual and the non-sexual are closely entwined. Secondly, by examining developments in phenomenology since Merleau-Ponty, it has been possible to evaluate Robbe-Grillet's success in his ambition to subvert cultural stereotypes, including those surrounding sex. The evaluation of Robbe-Grillet's success in attempting to subvert conventional depictions of sexuality via exaggeration has shown that, whilst the theoretical aims and arguments that he puts forward in his own defence are convincing to a certain extent, his artistic practice fails to make the subversion which he aims at sufficiently explicit. His supposedly ironic treatment of sexuality just does not come across as ironic, or as a parody of predictable depictions of women as dangerous and threatening. Taking the notion of the phenomenological reduction, which has proven such a useful comparison to Robbe-Grillet's subversive aims in other aspects of his work, this analysis revealed the failure of Robbe-Grillet as a novelist and filmmaker in "making strange" the conventions surrounding sexuality.

Another aspect of human existence inextricably linked to the body-subject was the experience of time, Merleau-Ponty argued. Once more, the question of time is

problematic in Robbe-Grillet's works and can be elucidated by phenomenological philosophy. That is, time as it might be measured objectively, by clocks or calendars, is not at all the experience of time that is presented in his works. Nor is Robbe-Grilletian time merely a matter of flashbacks or flash-forwards, as these techniques in films or novels tend to allow the viewer or reader to return to a coherent temporal framework at some point. Whilst there are some flashbacks/forwards in Robbe-Grillet's works, they are frequently complicated by the possibility that they may be imagined sequences, rather than real ones, so that it becomes impossible to recuperate them into any ultimate time scheme. Once again, this examination of Robbe-Grillet noted that his aims as far as depicting time were concerned could be linked to the phenomenological reduction, in the sense that there is a "making strange" of time, an undermining of expectations and of strategies for understanding it. The analysis of Robbe-Grilletian time in this study noted the likely influence of Proust. As links have been established by commentators on Proust between Proustian, fictional time and Bergsonian, philosophical accounts of time, and as Bergson was, in turn, a forerunner of Merleau-Ponty, a link between Robbe-Grillet and Merleau-Ponty can also be established in terms of their literary and philosophical forebears. Moreover, recent developments in film theory, as found in the work of Gilles Deleuze, argue for a link between Bergsonian/phenomenological accounts of time and time as portrayed in modern French cinema. Deleuze noted the complex nature of time in Robbe-Grillet's cinema, particularly in relation to *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. The analysis of time in this film from a phenomenological perspective was able to smooth out some of the difficulties in making sense of time in the film, as identified by Deleuze. The notion that time does not flow like a river from the past towards the present and future,

but that it emanates from our existence as body-subjects means that we are constantly in touch with all aspects of time; the past and the future are lived through the present. This, then, explains the mingling of past, present and future in Robbe-Grillet's works.

The question of intersubjective relationships was, like the question of sexuality and sexual relationships, one which had not been explored by phenomenological approaches to Robbe-Grillet prior to this study. What was revealed here, through an analysis of Robbe-Grillet's works in terms of the Merleau-Pontyan notion of the flesh, was the way in which inscrutable interpersonal relationships between Robbe-Grilletian characters took shape, consistent with Merleau-Ponty's account of intersubjectivity. Thus Mathias in *Le Voyeur* is someone whose relationships with others are never straightforward, but whose wrongdoings begin to dawn on him once he has been observed by other characters. Closely connected to the theme of intersubjective relationships is the theme of subversion as manifested in language and lies. The examination of the dialogues spoken by Robbe-Grillet's characters revealed the extent to which the paranoia and power struggles surrounding sexuality can also be detected in non-sexual relationships and situations. Robbe-Grillet's characters subvert expectations of truthfulness, denying what is seen and heard, thus further problematising human relationships.

In summary, a re-visiting of the phenomenological approach to Robbe-Grillet's works has also allowed for a re-establishment of the link between phenomenology and Robbe-Grillet at a time when the consideration of such an approach had apparently been abandoned by commentators on Robbe-Grillet. This study has demonstrated that Robbe-Grillet's works can still be profitably elucidated from the perspective of

phenomenological philosophy, and from developments on it since the death of Merleau-Ponty. Whilst Robbe-Grillet has continued to write and make films, the work of Merleau-Ponty has been taken up and developed by philosophers, and by commentators on literature and cinema. This re-appraisal of the connection between the two reveals the many common aims that link them, and the benefit a phenomenological reading of Robbe-Grillet's works can bring in terms of understanding his artistic practice and evaluating his contribution to literary and cinematic art.

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