

# explorations



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## Neobaroque performance in Miranda Glover's *Masterpiece*

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**Abstract.** The article briefly discusses the origin and the scope of Neobaroque, the notion of theatrical performance, including theatricality of life, and the way the above can be illustrated by Miranda Glover's first novel, *Masterpiece*. Neobaroque as a trans-historical set of ideas concerning the nature of reality and the question of representation, manifests itself in the tension between major and minor strategies. The two strategies are at work in theater whose particular form, tableaux vivant, is used in a revised form by Miranda Glover in her novel. Ekphrases, that is, the descriptions of artworks, tableaux vivants and other performances are used in the novel to construct a powerful image of both the individual female artist and femininity in general.

**Key words:** Neobaroque, major & minor strategy, theater, tableaux vivant, femininity

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The article aims to discuss three problems in precisely the same order as they appear in the title: starting with the definition of Neobaroque and the scope of the notion, including major and minor strategies as presented by William Egginton (2010); through the discussion of theatricality and performativity of life as the main principles of the Neobaroque approach, to finally illustrating the presented theory using the example of Miranda Glover's *Masterpiece*. Particular attention will be paid here to the transformed and re-defined form of parlor tableaux vivant performances, which not only allow for presenting and accentuating the alternative female point of view, but also facilitate the protagonist's self-exploration.

### 2. NEOBAROQUE AND ITS TWO STRATEGIES

The term Neobaroque was first used by the Brazilian poet and literary scholar Haroldo de Campos in the 1950s (Zamora and Kaup 2010, 11). Neobaroque, as the prefix "neo-" suggests, stems from the Baroque tradition and accommodates the Baroque as a

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historical period with its complexity and proliferation. The term Neobaroque is appropriate for the instances of reproduction and reusing or reworking of the ideas and the strategies of the Baroque in contemporary culture. It is “applicable to all reconstitutions of the Baroque and New World Baroque as twentieth-century aesthetics and ideologies” (Zamora and Kaup 2010, 13)<sup>1</sup> and is the consequence of “skepticism toward Enlightenment rationalism and realism” (Zamora and Kaup 2010, 5) visible especially in the culture of the turn of the 20th and the 21st century.

For Gilles Deleuze (1991, 227), a twentieth-century philosopher inspired by the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “[t]he Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic” manifested in the excess of representation. In other words, the Baroque<sup>2</sup> can be seen as trans-historical, universal “formal value resulting from a vital attitude” (Bazin 1993, 6). In such a case, the character of the Baroque is complementary to the Classical, the latter understood as the simple, the clear, the static, that which is in order and which remains within boundaries (Bazin 1993, 6). The two phenomena are complementary in such a way that “the entire history of forms is an alternation of Baroque and Classical” (Bazin 1993, 6). To put it in a different way, history of culture is a continuous interlacing or interchange of the features classified as the Classical and the Baroque.<sup>3</sup> Because in this understanding of the notion the Baroque is not restricted chronologically to any particular epoch or period of time, but is a set of certain characteristic features, its range can be easily extended and instances of the Baroque can be found in contemporary culture, bearing, however, the name of Neobaroque to mark the temporal distance from the original historical epoch and to emphasize a similar approach to the problems of reality, i.e. the state of things as they actually exist; representation, understood as a construct and illusion of reality; or one's place in the world. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that in the potential impossibility of knowing or determining what exactly underlies representation, as well as in the preoccupation with the surface or with the constructed nature of representation, Neobaroque intersects with postmodernism (cf. Hutcheon 1988; 1989). Arguably, the two movements share certain features, like the ones mentioned above or privileging the decentralized, local point of view over central and universal one, but cannot be identified with each other as they differ in many other aspects, the discussion of which would require a separate paper.

The return of the Baroque (cf. Lambert 2004) also addresses the problems related to the question of mind and body, and their recent extension which includes computers,

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth pointing out that Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup distinguish European Baroque as the Baroque from New World Baroque, that is, the Baroque brought to Latin America by and with the European colonizers, taken over and transformed by the culture of indigenous people. Both the Baroque and New World Baroque “designate historical period that mediates a vast complex of cultural encounters” (Zamora and Kaup 2010, 4) and are followed by Enlightenment neoclassicism.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Moser (2008, 21) presents two general approaches to the Baroque: according to the typology or the periodisation. The former approach consists of and emphasizes a set of features discernible in culture. A rather radical example of this approach can be found in Eugenio D'Ors's study *Lo barroco* (2002). The latter approach prefers the criterion of a fixed time frame. Chronological perspective is favored, for instance, by Jose Antonio Maravall in his seminal study *Culture of the Baroque* (1986).

<sup>3</sup> The idea was originally introduced by Heinrich Wölfflin (1964) in the study *Renaissance and Baroque*. His five pairs of concepts describing Renaissance and Baroque respectively (linear and painterly; plane and recession; closed and open form; clearness and unclearness; multiplicity and unity) were later used, for instance, by Arnold Hauser (1999) to characterize the Baroque and to distinguish it from the previous period.

artificial intelligence, automata, robots and various forms of synthetic life. As indicated by Anna Munster's study (2006), Leibnizian perception of the Baroque world restores the body, excluded by the pervasive Cartesian discourse, to the fold and emphasizes the significant role of the body in the contemporary digital culture and aesthetics. As will be shown later in this article, the artist's body is the basic tool to convey the unique message in Miranda Glover's novel, while Neobaroque strategies and theatricality of life described below and applied in the analysis of *Masterpiece* problematize art history and femininity as we know them.

The relation of representation, or appearances, to reality constitutes the essential problem of thought for modernity, a problem carefully considered by the Baroque (cf. Egginton 2009; 2010). As it is possible to approach the world only by means of representation (Egginton's "veil of appearances"), truth must be seen as a relationship between one's knowledge and the veiled world. The Baroque strategy, that is, an attempt to resolve the problem of thought outlined above, the strategy which presumes that because there is a veil of appearances, there must also be a space behind this veil where truth is located, is called by William Egginton (2010, 3) major strategy. The term, together with minor strategy that always accompanies it, is derived from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notions of major and minor literature, two concepts discussed in their work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986). For Deleuze and Guattari (1986), major literature is the established, the dominant literature of the "masters," written in the major, i.e. predominant language of a given country or cultural circle. It is contrasted with minor literature which has three characteristic features: "deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 18).

According to Egginton (2010, 5), major strategy offers a certain vision of reality – its illusion or representation – which screens reality in its actuality, that is, it screens the real space independent of the screen. The proposed model of reality makes the viewers convinced that they reside in the independent reality behind the screen, and that what is suggested or presented to the viewers is reality as it truly is, while, in fact, it is just another variant of representation and the viewers are captured within it. In other words, in major strategy reality is veiled by a screen of representation which creates an illusion of the world. Major strategy intends to conceal the frames of representation to maintain coherence of the appearance, all in order to persuade spectators and keep them assured that they occupy the real space. The examples of such manipulation of appearances not only date back to the historical age of the Baroque, but can also be found in politics and popular entertainment of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century (cf. Egginton 2009; Ndalianis 2004). The strategy creates excess or abundance of appearance(s) in order to hide the potential impossibility of ever knowing and learning what lies behind representation, misleadingly promising one that the appearances are the way to the uncorrupted truth (Egginton 2010, 26) and that there is truth or the real behind or beyond appearances.

Following William Egginton (2010), it can be said that every (Baroque and Neobaroque) text that employs major strategy also carries within itself sources that can be used to criticize that strategy. Hence, whenever one can talk about the major strategy of the Baroque, it is possible to identify minor strategy as well. Minor strategy neither refers to a different reality nor creates any alternative representation. Instead, it operates from the inside of the major text and dominant cultural tradition, and draws major strategy to its extreme, for instance, by means of parody, irony or grotesque, undermining

the proposed model of reality and one's ability to distinguish representation from true reality. Minor strategy points to the frame of representation and indicates its artificiality. It aims to remind one that one is always involved in mediation, that what is proposed is only a carefully constructed representation, and that "the truth hidden by the veil of appearance is already corrupted by the appearances, is itself nothing but appearance" (Egginton 2010, 27). As a result of the above features, minor strategy poses a threat to major strategy and institutions resorting to the latter by displaying conscious manipulation and purpose of the excess. As it is impossible to determine whether there is anything behind the appearance, minor strategy, contrary to the major, is not preoccupied with establishing the truth or getting to the reality behind representation. It does not explore what is behind the veil of representation. It does not seek what is truly true or real, but cherishes the surface of representation and appearances. Its main purpose is to make one aware of the play of appearances and to undermine the order suggested and proposed by major strategy.

There is, however, a risk that minor strategy may become major strategy. If the devices and procedures typical of minor strategy, like, for instance, irony or parody, are used consistently and on a regular basis, these devices and procedures take over the properties of major strategy and build themselves a veil of appearances, another vision of reality. In other words, when constant repetition of the gesture that undermines one's ability to distinguish representation from reality by pointing to the artificiality of that representation is a recurring phenomenon, it loses its minor character and becomes the prevailing convention. Consequently, what was once an attribute of minor strategy might become major, i.e. the dominant principle; and the other way round: what was once major may at some point lose its privileged position and become minor.

The tension between major and minor strategies can be clearly observed in Esther Glass's, the protagonist of *Masterpiece*, controversial artistic project called the *Possession* series. The artist chooses portraits of seven women painted by well-known artists, i.e. she takes works of art that are considered mainstream and belonging to the dominant cultural tradition, only to interpret them anew and present as performances focusing on the neglected and the dominated point of view of the selected female models. As will be seen below, in doing so the artist questions the legitimacy of the dominant conviction that the female sitters' role is one of a silent aesthetic object and hence draws major strategy to an extreme point. While the *Possession* project itself can be perceived as minor strategy undermining the dominant cultural system, Esther's pushing the limits of artistic expression and her constant use of the art of performance become her *modus operandi* – her major strategy in life.

### 3. THEATRICALITY OF LIFE

The metaphor of life as a performance and the world as theater was popular already in the Elizabethan era which was confronted with the relativity of human perception visible in the opposition between reality and appearance (Fischer-Lichte 2002). Shakespeare "used the stage as a 'laboratory' in which the question of man's identity could be tried out in an experimental manner" (Fischer-Lichte 2002, 54) and by going to the theater audiences could test these identities. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the concept of *theatrum mundi* was generalized further. Theatricality of life reached its peak or extreme point: "presence

at court was managed as if it were an appearance on stage" (Fischer-Lichte 2002, 81) and court feasts were the greatest exaggeration. Every courtier, including the king, had a role to play, which was far more important than one's social status (Fischer-Lichte 2002). Theatricalization of life in the age of the Baroque contributed to the thriving of theater itself (Fischer-Lichte 2002). It is no wonder that in *The Theater of Truth: The Ideology of (Neo)Baroque Aesthetics* William Egginton claims that "The Baroque is theater, and the theater is baroque" (39). It is in theater that major and minor strategies are primarily at work. Therefore, it is in theater, the organizing logic of the Baroque world, that the relations between truth and illusion can be explored. It is, in other words, the convention of theater and theatrical assumptions that negotiate spatial relations both in the Baroque and modern times. Theater is an institutionalized performativity, within which minor strategy becomes major strategy, i.e. the presumed governing principle. However, due to the performativity's potential to deviate from the ideal, norm or rule, by means of failure in copying or following those ideals, norms or rules, minor strategy is restored to its power.

Similarly to the Baroque theater, life, as demonstrated by William Egginton (2003), is a constant performance in front of the gaze and expectations of variously defined others. "Humans behave as if they were acting on a stage" (Egginton 2003, 20): every move is a controlled gesture and language is a carefully constructed artifact. Personality and the self are composed of multiple layers of adornment which are nothing more than countless layers of performance determined and motivated to a great extent by the presence of the other: an audience, real or imaginary. Identity is played out on the surface of the body, stereotypically constructed in relation to gender norms constituted and determined by the other who is constantly gazing. What is more, due to the presence of others and their desires, even a life stripped of all its attributes, like, for instance, a comatose human being, is never a truly bare life (Egginton 2010, 116), but an object of the projection of the desires of others. In such circumstances, in order to know a person, their emotions, desires or eventually self, it is essential to consider their relatedness to others, including the dead ones. One is not doomed, however, to be entirely determined by the gaze of others. Conversely, one can learn to recognize immediately the required role, to play diversified roles expected by the others on different occasions, and then to manipulate one's performance within the confines of the gaze and the desires of others (Egginton 2003, 19).

Theatricalization of life can be observed in Miranda Glover's *Masterpiece* in the fact that Esther plays herself or her self out on the pages of the novel. Her life and career as an artist are carefully staged and controlled performances – acts determined to a great extent by the desires and expectations of the public (Glover 2006, 29; Egginton 2003, 20), i.e. other, mostly male, characters of the book. However, for Esther her life is a constant act of hiding behind her art (Glover 2006, 142). It is an endless series of performances and taking on false identities to hide her private history from the public eye: "My work had been a way of disguising who I really was; by hiding inside fictionalized identities I had avoided confronting my own reality" (Glover 2006, 222). As a result, Esther constructs her self for the public view from countless layers of performance, by means of costumes and above all, by means of other figures, including the models from classical paintings. She becomes an appearance and a conscious illusion of herself. According to Richard Alewyn, "[t]he baroque illusion is always conscious and intentional: it refuses to seduce the soul or even to deceive reason; it wishes to seduce the senses" (quoted in Buci-

Glucksmann 1994, 60). Esther's performances are an example of such Baroque illusion: the seduction of the senses takes place by means of meticulously prepared (and described) costumes, specially selected make-up and carefully controlled gestures and words. Esther makes the impression that she knows exactly what she is doing on stage, what impact she intends to exert on the viewers and what reaction of the public to provoke. Being admired and followed by a younger generation of women, Esther recognizes the new, most recent role that is expected of her to perform – she is to set an example for other women, an example of having choice and making individual and independent decisions what to do and how to live their lives. In my opinion, she conforms her performance to that aim successfully.

The *Possession* series as well as Esther's previous artistic projects and the course of her private life also reveal and accentuate the main protagonist's constant performativity. The process of playing oneself out and constructing one's self never ends for Esther. It can be said that Esther – a person, a woman, an artist and a mother – is a perpetual project under construction or a work in progress. She continually dresses herself up and re-dresses, taking on identities of other women and disguising herself in costumes of other women. This, in turn, allows her to fashion herself, that is, to decide whom she wants to be. She has a choice to be whoever she intends and desires to be despite the restraints of the dominant culture and attempts to bring her under control. As a consequence, performativity allows Esther, and women in general, to turn the process of self-fashioning into minor strategy in the male-dominated world.

#### 4. NEOBAROQUE TABLEAUX VIVANTS IN MIRANDA GLOVER'S *MASTERPIECE*

The analysis of Glover's novel has come to a point where I deem it necessary to provide a short discussion of tableaux vivant, a phenomenon which was a popular theatrical form of entertainment in Europe and America in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and which is used in a revised contemporary version by Miranda Glover and her protagonist. Tableaux vivants, also referred to as “living pictures,” were series of short performances imitating compositions of well-known artworks (McIsaac 2007, 152). They were put on in public theaters as professional entertaining self-contained presentations and in private residences of upper classes – the latter amateur form was referred to as parlor or domestic tableaux vivants (Lewis 1988). The staging of tableaux vivants consisted of static scenes in which famous paintings, other art forms as well as literary and mythological sources were reconstructed by means of living figures, i.e. human bodies (Goddard 2002, 75). The actors, mostly females, were dressed in specially prepared costumes and posed in richly decorated settings so as to resemble the original source and recreate it as closely as possible. The audience's task was to guess the name of the original artwork or motif. Parlor tableaux vivants provided a rare occasion for ordinary women, especially ones climbing the social ladder and aspiring to a higher rank (Chapman 1996), to dress and act in a more provocative way than the dominant social order and patriarchal context allowed for (Elbert 2002, 235). They were also a socially acceptable opportunity for men to derive pleasure, both sensual and sexual, from simply gazing at the exposed female body, for women displayed themselves as goddesses, shepherdesses or queens in tightly fitting clothing (Elbert 2002, 244). As already mentioned, this form of entertainment was not only cultivated by the upper classes of the

society at their homes, but was also practiced and performed in cheap theaters where women were particularly perceived as sexual objects (Elbert 2002, 235-236).

Parlor tableaux vivants were predominantly staged by women<sup>4</sup> who remained silent during the performance and could operate and act only with their bodies. "Imprisoned in prescribed feminine behaviors" and narratives which presented them as powerless (Chapman 1996, 30), women were occasionally accompanied by men who played background role of subordinated admirers or helped with such technical aspects of the show as lighting or decoration (Elbert 2002, 239-240). Men were, above all, the implied audience as male look controlled the feminine spectacle (Chapman 1996, 30). It was the mute dressed-up female body that was literally the center of attention in a tableau vivant (Chapman 1996). Still, in order to be understood and recognized correctly, verbal interpretation, an adequate fragment of poetry or a commentary on the staged scene was delivered "typically [by] a male voice" (McIsaac 2007, 157). It can be easily noticed that, like in James Heffernan's (1993, 7) perception of ekphrasis – a literary description of an artwork – as an ongoing conflict between feminine silent picture and masculine voiced word, also in tableaux vivants similar dichotomy was expressed: "In spite of tableaux vivants' focus on female performers, their bodies could require male intervention to become truly intelligible" (McIsaac 2007, 157). In other words, the feminine picture required the presence of masculine word in order to be comprehensible.

Some elements and features of thus understood tableaux vivants can be traced in Miranda Glover's novel. The *Possession* series, the protagonist's, Esther Glass's, artistic project and the main subject matter of *Masterpiece*'s plot, is a series of short performances in which female figures are displayed by a female actor who at some point of each performance reconstructs the exact scene or pose from the famous painting. The seven elaborate tableaux vivants are performed in front of the buyer who wins the auction and turns out to be male, and who, as the owner of the project, provides the settings for Esther's performances: virtual view, public show, spiritual place, private view, tea with friends and dinner for two (Glover 2006, 260). But, contrary to traditional tableaux vivants, his overall role in the project, as well as the role of any other male character both in Esther's project and in the novel in general, is limited. Men are excluded from any form of contribution in the *Possession* series other than providing "performance environments" (Glover 2006, 260) or setting up cameras that record the performance, so that the project is solely Esther's enterprise. She prepares every performance by herself, provides necessary verbal commentary and insists on unassisted realization of the most important stages of her project which include performances themselves and the subsequent presentation of the results of her work in the Tate gallery. By insisting on individual and independent work Esther manages to eliminate the male element of the contribution and to present a totally female perspective which accentuates women's personality, intellect, emotions and careers. It is Esther Glass who provides Glover's, and by extension female, interpretation and commentary on each "master piece" (Glover 2006, 49), and on each performed scene. As Esther explains, "master pieces" are "artworks commissioned by men, painted by men and mostly intended for men to view" (Glover 2006, 49). What they neglect or omit is the female perspective or woman's view.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Chapman (1996) provides the exact numbers of male and female roles in parlor tableaux vivants in the United States. On average there were fifty percent more roles for women than men.

The “master pieces” referred to in the novel include: Holbein’s *Christina of Denmark*, Manet’s *Olympia*, Ingres’ *Madame de Sennones*, Raphael’s *The Madonna of the Pinks*, Whistler’s *Symphony in Flesh Color and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland*, Titian’s *Isabella d’Este*, Klimt’s *Judith and Holofernes II*, and additionally, Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*.

By bringing forward the stories of these depicted women, both the fictitious artist and the author of the novel provide an alternative version of art history, accentuating the value of individual’s account and the importance of personal history (cf. Hutcheon 1989). It is possible to do so despite the fact that the paintings of great male masters turned female models into masterpieces, that is, they reduced women to the representation of their bodies and turned them into mute objects of material and aesthetic value, freezing and suppressing their personalities, intellect and affects. What happens in the novel is that Glover’s protagonist makes those females speak again, unfreezing them from the frozen moment in time, i.e. from the time of sitting for the artist, by means of tableau-vivant-like performances, hence another artistic form which uses bodies. Still, as stated by Christine Buci-Glucksmann (1994, 133), “[t]his *figural* power of the stagings of otherness (of the divine, the feminine, or death) makes the invisible visible.” Esther presents and makes visible the female models’ point of view, neglected and forgotten by the mainstream, and tries to reconstruct their account of the events, presenting different aspects of a complex female identity. By doing research and preparing performances Esther Glass fills the gaps in histories of individual characters and in the history of art, providing a new fictional(ized) version of the events. In doing so, she moves on from the materiality of the bodies to the exploration of the minds and emotions, presenting different aspects of possession and femininity: status, desire, wealth, subjugation, purity, ambiguity and danger (Glover 2006, 260).

Yet, in reconstructing histories, feelings and emotions of other women, Esther recognizes similarities and traces of her own history, and finds reflection of herself and her own self. To provide some examples, with the first of her models, the Duchess of Milan represented on canvas by Holbein, Esther shares the sense of isolation and self-possession as useful tools of defense in the moments of crisis (Glover 2006, 109). Like Victorine from Manet’s painting, Esther began her career as a model for painters, “lying naked while artists painted” her (Glover 2006, 113). The third model, Marie Marcoz painted by Ingres, reflected Esther’s current psychological state of anxiety about the future and the unwillingness to share her past with anybody (Glover 2006, 169 and 173). Like the Holy Mother Mary, Esther’s artistic work gains cult status. The public adores her and young women follow her example. However, there are also some distressing elements she has in common with the models: “I thought of Mrs. Leyland, looking back over her shoulder with an expression of regret, and I realized I felt regret and, to a degree, shame for giving little consideration to the life of my father” (Glover 2006, 222). Additionally, like Mrs. Leyland, although artistically public-dependent on, for instance, critics and potential buyers, emotionally Esther tries to remain out of the public’s reach (Glover 2006, 225). Finally, with the penultimate model, Isabella d’Este, Esther has in common fame and the past habit of collecting various, peculiar, small objects; she also shares her last heroine’s, Judith’s, will to fight and take risks.

The above examples show that exploration of and the investigation into the lives of the models painted by great masters lead to self-exploration. Although Esther fully intends to hide herself behind the models and be a transparent vessel to carry their



message and tell their angle of the story, she ends up revealing her own story and exploring her own identity instead. As a result, Esther gains knowledge of herself, specifies temporary aims of her life, determines the next steps in her artistic activity, and is able to reconcile with the past. Paraphrasing Lina Bolzoni (2001, 245), by means of the external, which in this case includes research into other people's lives, costumes, make-up and performance, it is possible for Esther to get to the darkest, suppressed corner of her own interiority and to discover her self. In other words, the discovery and celebration of femininity starts with and results from individual exploration of the works of art, hence a local perspective which is at the same time external to the main character and explorer as she deals with other people's lives, and ends with discovering the universal truth – a message which is addressed to women of Esther's daughter's generation and which is embedded in Esther's introspection and her own experience.

According to Monika Elbert, tableaux vivants “offer signs promoting what is acceptable and conventional at the same time as they conjure up feelings that are unacceptable or unconventional” (2002, 250). In other words, they enfold the discrepancy between the common social norm and the real (Elbert 2002, 237), which remain in constant tension. By analogy, it can be said that tableaux vivants stage the tense interplay between major and minor strategy mentioned earlier. Esther's artistic project again perfectly illustrates the point here. Firstly, there is the issue of her participation as an item on an auction sale. On the one hand, the dominant common view is that auction is where famous and precious works of art, or other items, are sold to the interested buyers. By impersonating Marie Maroz, the figure from Ingres' painting, Esther becomes an artwork, hence, an object fit to be sold at an auction. By putting herself up for an auction to be sold as an artwork, Esther becomes a commodified object, an article, unique rather than mass produced, displayed for the purchase and consumption of those who can afford her (cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1994). But, on the other hand, as voiced by some background characters in the novel, she is still a living creature, a live person, difficult to be treated as an art object. In this respect, being sold at an auction is a manifestation of minor strategy, undermining the dominant system by bringing it to an extreme point. Esther's auction sale forces the public to look at her and her body without any emotions or affect, and to treat her like another work of art: an object/body to be sold and stored in relevant conditions. By selling herself at an auction Esther plays with commodification and opposes the dominant system. Standing proudly and daringly on the auction's stage disguised as Marie Maroz, Esther draws commodification to such an extreme point that it flips over and becomes undone. Major strategy is amplified to such an extent that it becomes minor.

Secondly, the tension between acceptable and unacceptable, and between conventional and unconventional is also manifested in Esther's staging of Virgin Mary. Although the latter character has been depicted and interpreted in numerous ways throughout history, the audience in St Mark's Church do not approve of Esther's interpretation. Taking a conventional, iconic theme, Esther presents it in an unconventional way, paying attention to Mary's point of view and presenting the other, feminine, side of the argument dominated by male “fathers” of the Church. Paradoxically, the viewers who distinguish religious painting from secular forms of art, including performance and tableaux vivants, do not make the distinction between theatrical performance and real life. For them the Virgin they see is not a theatrical act, not somebody acting out and pretending to be Virgin Mary, but somebody actually claiming to be her. They believe they see Virgin Mary and not a representation of her. As

their convictions are deeply rooted in patriarchal religious tradition, they do not accept a womanly, blasphemous point of view. In both examples noted above there is a constant tension between the common and dominant point of view and the unusual, marginalized perspective which is difficult if not impossible to accept by the majority as it undermines the ostensible stability of the dominant system.

As stated above, tableaux vivants described by Miranda Glover in *Masterpiece* transform two-dimensional forms back into four-dimensional bodies, for first the bodies of the models were transferred onto the canvas by male painters, i.e. they were immobilized and given particular visual form arrested in time, and now they are converted back into the bodies in time and space by means of the female performer's body. Christine Buci-Glucksmann in *Baroque Reason* states that "it is again the woman's body [...] which provides the metaphor for the extremes of desire and death, vitality and lifelessness, life and corruption" (1994, 104). Paraphrasing the above quotation in the context of *Masterpiece*, it is the woman's body which is a vessel, a tool, both subject and object, or simply a metaphor for the intricacies of beauty, politics, power, religion, sex, aesthetics and myth (Glover 2006, 259), all of which find reflection in the histories of women presented by Esther in her artistic project.

In the process of animation, the painted figures are raised from the role of mute models to the status of fictional characters within the narrative created and performed by the body of yet another fictional character, the female artist. But as the painting is animated and revived in the live performance, the body of the artist is petrified and frozen in a motionless pose. It is suspended and immobilized, even though for a brief moment, to resemble as close as possible the painted original. A trace of male desire "to petrify the female body" (Buci-Glucksmann 1994, 100) is visible, which suggests that the male element cannot be fully eliminated from the tableaux vivants form regardless of the artist's effort. It seems deeply embedded in the artistic form. What is more, the effect of petrification and objectification of female body in tableaux vivants is intensified in *Masterpiece* by means of the minute descriptions of costumes Esther wears in each reproduced scene. As stated by David Castillo, "[c]lose-up of garments and intimate apparel commonly contribute to the voyeuristic objectification of the female body" (2010, 114) both in literary and visual works. Detailed accounts of reproductions of elaborate garments focus attention on the body freezing the actions of that body in time and space.<sup>5</sup> There is, thus, a constant tension within a tableau vivant between the animated painting and female liberation on the one hand and the petrified body, a manifestation of male desire, on the other. The line between the two phenomena is blurred and impossible to determine.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Dealing, even very briefly, with the parlor tableau vivant form of theatrical performance, it is difficult not to notice specific gender relations and gender bias connected with the sub-genre. Miranda Glover reworks the form of parlor tableau vivant,

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<sup>5</sup> Compare Gerard Genette's (1982) distinction into description (spread in space) and narration (developed in time): description has the ability to suspend action of the narration and focuses on bodies/objects, while narration unfolds events in time.

which promotes the commodification of human body, and adjusts it to the contemporary context of feminist struggle for equal treatment. By becoming a work of art Esther undermines the convention. The petrified body is humanized in the event of spectacle (cf. Buci-Glucksmann 1994, 102-104). Despite the focus on the body as a vessel for meaning and communicating ideas, female models are freed from the restraints of mute paintings, emblems of a male-dominated world of art. Major strategy in Glover's novel is amplified to the extreme point where it becomes minor. What happens in *Masterpiece*, however, is neither a radical revelation followed by rejection of all sources of women's oppression nor a drastic and fundamental change of traditional gender roles, because the conventional interplay between the male gaze of the owner of the artwork and beautiful female picture or performance is still present in the novel, for instance in the artwork-buyer/owner relationship. Instead, there is a noticeable change in focus and emphasis – women and their concerns excessively predominate the plot. The mute and immobilized women are given voice and living body in order to be able to present their point of view to the mainstream culture. Esther's artistic project restores the neglected feminine perspective and insists on the recognition of female presence and attention to their value. At the same time, Esther's escape into art as a way of hiding her past and private crises is transformed into self-exploration. The portrayal of femininity becomes a self-portrait. Constant performing of oneself is a way to escape the confinement of major strategy.

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