

Marina Roy's Apartment

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Abstract

Apartment, a 58-minute 2009 animation by Marina Roy, addresses a timely posthumanist scenario confronting an array of social and political issues related to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and human and non-human life. In her exploration of the intersection of image, ideology, and language, she examines how images and language produce meaning. She brings to light ideologies that continue to perpetuate the status quo and texts that may assist in affecting change. Roy's *Apartment* loosely references Georges Perec's 1978 novel *Life: A User's Manual* (*La Vie Mode d'Emploi*). In Perec's novel, he leads the reader through the rooms of a Parisian apartment building, employing the concept of a knight's tour on the grid of a chessboard. Similarly, Roy's animation comprises 100 vignettes that unfold in a labyrinth of interconnecting rooms and stories, but her apartment building in an indeterminate space. Notions of boundaries, transgression, and contamination are explored, as are concepts of liminality, abjection, trauma, and binary oppositions such as interior/exterior, nature/culture, rational/emotional, mind/body, man/woman, and civilised/savage. The interior and exterior spaces created are fluid. The viewer experiences laughter and discomfort often simultaneously, as plants and animals slowly engulf the deteriorating apartments and the residents succumb to a mysterious virus. Concepts of numerous theorists are referenced visually, and through the animation's soundtrack, produced by Graham Meisner.

In the pile-up of language and spectacle which constitutes our amnesiac present, one role for art is to create a clearing within our petrified landscape, and, through a reordering all this new and obsolete stuff, through bricolage and play, construct new meanings, new conceptions of reality, shot through with historical memory, utopian aspirations, and pleasure (Roy 2011).

Introduction

This paper examines *Apartment*, a highly imaginative animation by artist Marina Roy that explores the intersection of image, ideology, and language. Roy teaches as an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. She works across a wide range of media including animation, video, painting, drawing, and printmaking. An important aspect of her work also is collaborative and she has authored several essays, reviews, and one book titled *Sign after the X*. In her 2009 animation titled *Apartment*, she furthers her sustained 'interest in the intersection between materials, history, language, and ideology' (Roy 2011), and her strong graphic sensibility and background in printmaking appears strongly evident. This text is an overview of several of the apparent themes and visual and conceptual strategies employed in her animation, *Apartment*.

Roy's *Apartment* loosely references Georges Perec's 1978 novel *Life: A user's manual* (*La vie mode d'emploi*). Reflecting on everyday life, and ultimately the 'imperfectability of life and art' (Kaplan 1996), Perec describes in elaborate detail both the rooms and stairwells of a Parisian apartment building and aspects of the building's inhabitants' multifaceted stories that range from across centuries to across the globe. Through a highly descriptive narrative style, Perec creates specific and vivid images that 'appear before us in a tableau' (Pantos 2010, 4). To an extent, this style of writing shields his use of numerous innovative literary games in the logical and systematic structuring of this novel. Wordplays and references to other writers and cultural figures abound, placed in his text for the reader to decipher as in a crossword puzzle.

Conversely, Roy's animation relies on the visual language with only a few images of text appearing on book pages, writing paper, signs, or in cartoon word bubbles. There are unnamable sounds and utterances, the sound of birds and of other creatures one may hear in the wild. No recognisable words are spoken. Roy's animation unfolds in a labyrinth of interconnecting rooms and stories, the bizarre and poignant places of life and play. She references visually and through the soundtrack composed for this work by Graham Meisner, specific texts and the concepts of many theorists. Not static, the interior and exterior spaces created are fluid. The viewer experiences both laughter and discomfort often simultaneously. In forms related to ironic comedy, comedy of manners, dark comedy, and racial, scatological, and sexual humor, we see irreverently displayed before us the ultimate consequences of the hypocrisies of life, and the theories that attempt to quantify existence.

In the production of *Apartment*, Roy used traditional cel animation. She combined printed matter, collage, painting and drawing in the thousands and thousands of frames she photographed for this 58-minute work. The 'backdrops' for the scenes were appropriated from a book of highly ornate interiors done in the medium of watercolour in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These interior scenes are of European palaces from Germany, Russia, Italy and Austria, which had been documented just before the invention of photography that made obsolete this type of representation. Roy noted in an email that, 'These type of watercolors were really a short-lived art form that aristocrats commissioned from artists. I can't help but think that it was a way of preserving these spaces, mostly empty of any representations of people, before the beginning of the rapid decline of aristocratic power in Europe' (Roy 2010).

Roy scanned these interior watercolour images, printed them in the UBC Print Media Digital Lab, and then animated the rooms by overlaying cel paintings of the characters she created and photographically reshooting them. Some background prints were manipulated either in Photoshop or by hand and then progressively all were altered by adding and subtracting elements of printed matter, and through tearing, painting and drawing on the print images. The figure-ground relationship she constructed is graphic, delineating form with blocks of colour or with blocks of color on which lines describe the characteristics of a figure. Her application of paint on the animation cels appears to have been applied layer by layer as one often applies colour and line in lithography or screenprinting. When I remarked in a conversation with her that the work appeared very print-like, she commented that earlier when working on a single print or painting, she had often wished that the figures would not be frozen in time and space, but rather would be able to move freely. Through animation, she has made this possible, forming a synthesis between that which is print-like and static in nature and that, which is capable of movement in time.

Upon a cursory viewing, Roy's animation seems quite outrageous, rude, indulgent, and wonderfully playful. It makes visible that which we know exists and may symptomatically discuss, theorise and at times condemn. Under closer scrutiny, the way in which intertextuality functions in Roy's *Apartment* becomes readily apparent, as the viewer becomes engrossed in the dynamic process of deciphering the puzzle Roy has constructed. We see intertwined historical and contemporary references from a wide range of images and texts related to myth, psychoanalysis, literature, economics, art, cultural theory, as well as biopolitics.

Intertextuality is a term coined by Julia Kristeva, Bulgarian-French psychoanalyst, and poststructuralist literary critic and theorist. Intertextuality 'replaces the notion of intersubjectivity' in which shared cognition and consensus is viewed essential in the shaping of our ideas and relations (Kristeva 1980), and points to the manner in which the meaning of an artistic work does not reside in that work, but in the viewer. In an interview with Kristeva conducted in New York City in 1985 by Margaret Waller, Kristeva explained that 'a textual segment, sentence, utterance, or paragraph is not simply the intersection of two voices in direct or indirect discourse; rather, the segment is the result of the intersection of a number of voices, of a number of textual interventions, which are combined in the semantic field, but also in the syntactic and phonic fields of the explicit utterance' (Waller 1989). The array of connotations attributable

Figure 93.1: Marina Roy. *Apartment*. Animation still. 2009. Reproduced courtesy of Marina Roy.

Figure 93.2: Marina Roy. *Apartment*. Animation still. 2009. Reproduced courtesy of Marina Roy.

to Roy's animation, of which Meisner's soundscape is an integral component, signal that as a negotiated process, meaning is in flux, 'a continuous movement back and forth in the space between the origin and all the possible connotative meanings' (Waller 1989).

The Open Façade

By opening the façade much becomes visible. The open façade of Roy's apartment building enables us to view its 25 interior rooms, each of which we visit four times within her four-chapter work of a 100 different and evolving scenes. The idea for the open façade is predicated on Perec's novel. Perec was a member of Oulipo, which roughly translated from French means 'workshop of potential literature', a group of French-speaking writers and mathematicians founded in 1960, which seeks to create works using constrained writing techniques. Perec employs a wide range of literary puzzles and allusions, problems of chess and logic, crosswords, and mathematical formulae in *Life: A User's Manual*. One of the most fundamental principles for the construction of space of the apartment building in his novel may be found in relation to a 10 x 10 chessboard grid that he uses in the 10 stories, including basements and attics, and 10 rooms across, including 2 for the stairwell; in the end only 99 rooms, each a chapter, are visited. The concept of a knight's tour on the grid of a chess board designates the order of the chapters of his book, necessitating that the knight must land on any square on the board only once, following the rules of chess and in accordance with the specific mathematical problem posed by the knight's tour (Harris 1994, 57–62).

Pantos noted that one of Perec's sources for the concept of an open façade was first mentioned in one of his earlier works, *Species of Spaces* (1974, 41), as a drawing by Saul Steinberg that appeared in *The Art of Living* in 1952. This drawing

shows a rooming-house (you can tell it's a rooming house because next to the door there is a notice bearing the words No Vacancy) part of the façade of which had been removed, allowing you to see the interior of some twenty-three rooms (Pantos 2010, 1–2).

Interestingly, as Roy's animation begins, a sign comes into focus that says 'No Trespassing'. It is on a black wrought-iron gate on which two monkeys sit, past which there is a solitary apartment building in an indeterminate space in the distance. Interestingly, this scene also references the first sight in Orson Welles's film, *Citizen Kane*. Although the 'No Trespassing' sign indicates one should not enter through the gate, the adventure begins as this boundary and then the building's façade are transgressed, and an image of the building's 25 apartment interiors fills the screen.

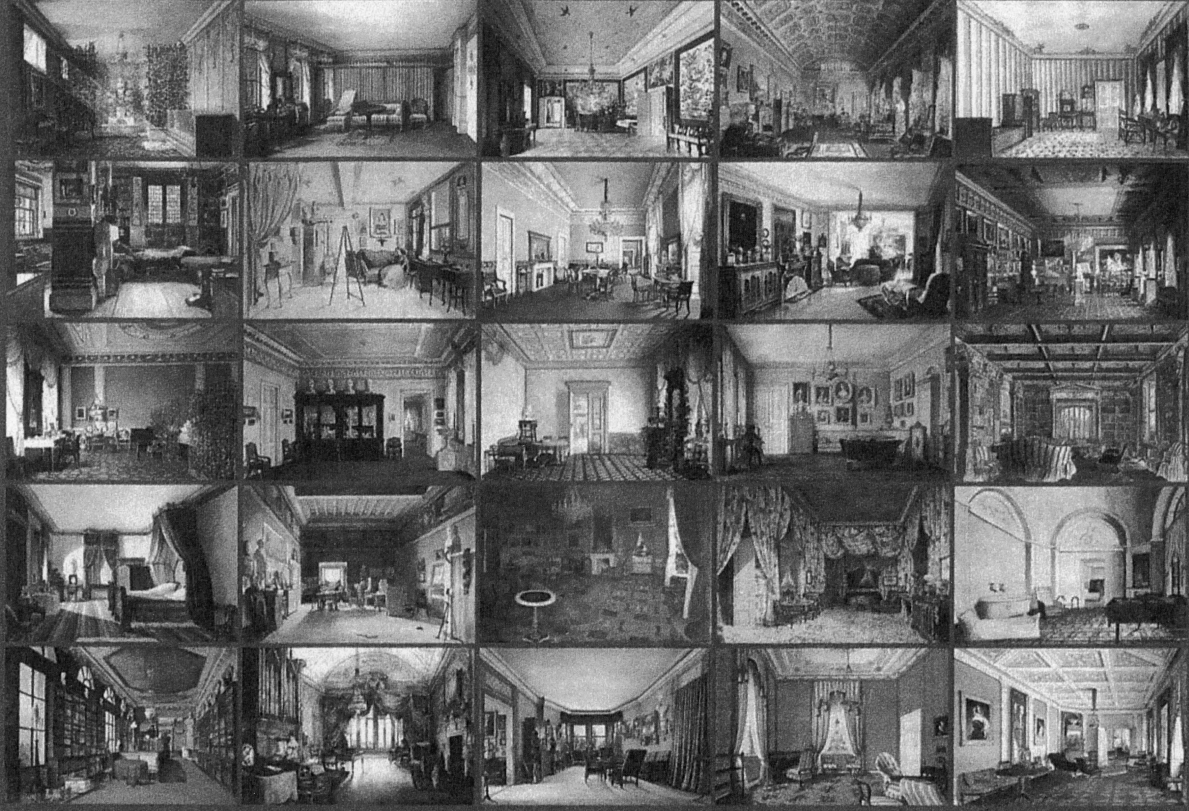
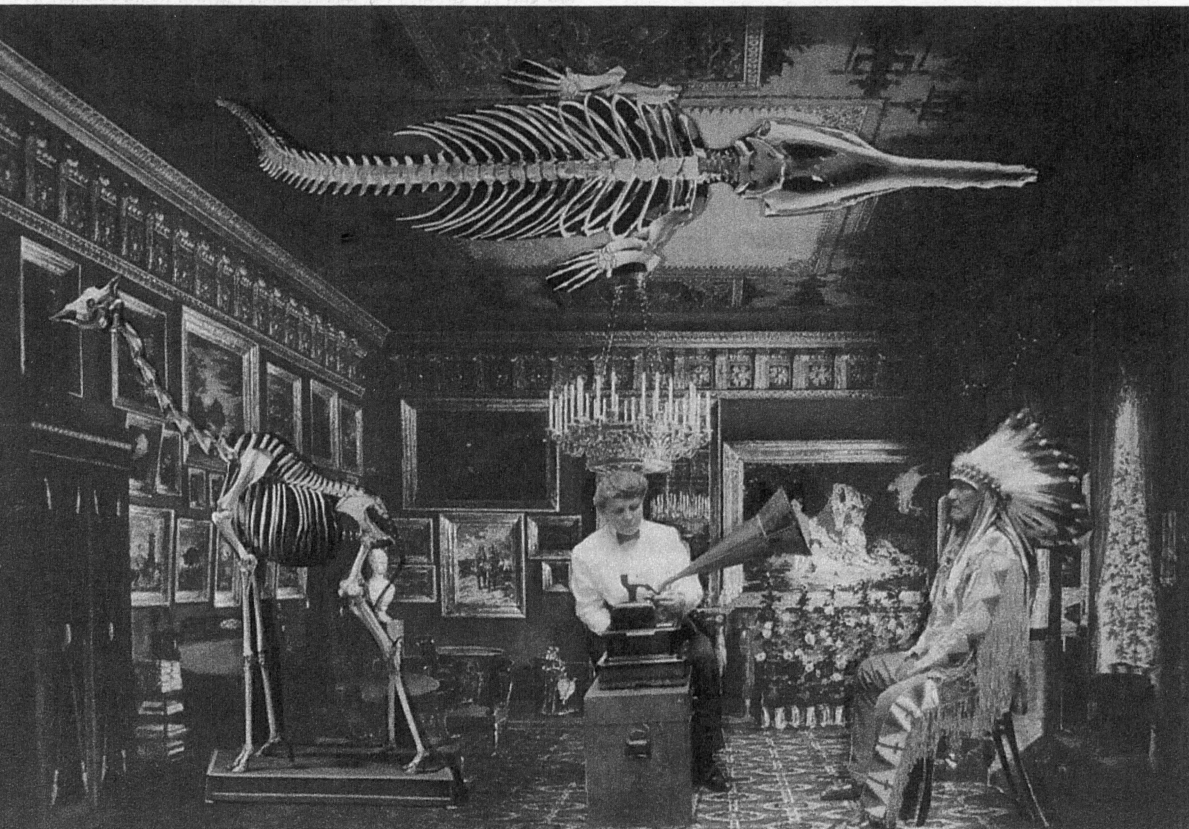


Figure 93.1 | ▼ Figure 93.2



In the second scene of the first chapter, we are confronted with an American Indian (North American indigenous man) in full headdress next to a Victorian woman. She is sitting and operating what appears to be an Edison phonograph, the type that came on the market in the late 1800s. The Indian sits with rigid countenance making small utterances with his lips as the force of the sound from the cylinder of the photograph pushes against his face. The skeletons of two dinosaurs are on display in the room, one on a stand and one suspended; they begin to move slightly. We begin thinking of the structure of power relationships, how information is transmitted, of the cultural ideologies fundamental to certain types of attitudes, research, documentation and knowledge, and of notions of progress in general. The scene also may mirror how humankind today might be viewed in the future.

Further, the setting of the room is one of observational study that references natural history. In *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald*, Eric L Santner (2006, 17–18) comments that,

For Benjamin, natural history ultimately names the ceaseless repetition of such cycles of emergence and decay of human orders of meaning, cycles that are, for him... always connected to violence... It [natural history] furthermore provides the key to the symbolic mode... as one of irremediable exposure to the violence of natural history: allegory... The great achievement of the allegorical mode of representation was, as Benjamin put it... that it rendered a sense of life bereft of any secure reference to transcendence, of life utterly exposed to the implacable rhythms of *natural history*.

Related to this, in other scenes within Roy's animation we see the repetition of the image of skulls that also relates to natural history and allegory. In the *Origin of German Tragic Drama* Benjamin states:

Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with *facies hippocratica*¹ of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face – or rather a skull (Santner 2006, 18).

The knight's itinerary... actively alters the texture of the space it is traversing (Harris 1994, 73).

In Roy's *Apartment* there are numerous explicit references to a horse/knight motif, as well as other possibly implied allusions to horses. Roy uses these as an expansion of the concept of the knight's tour noted earlier as one of the primary structuring devices Perec employed in *Life: A User's Manual*. It is important to note that horses have traditional associations with passion and excitement and, through Freud, with psychosexual development and the Oedipus complex.

In the third scene of the first chapter we see what appears to be an Arabian horse with a male acrobat from West Asia or North Africa on its back, performers that were 'most common in American circuses' (Nance 2009, 129) during the later part of the 1800s. Here and elsewhere Roy references Eadweard Muybridge's photographic studies. Muybridge's *Horse in Motion* when played through a zoopraxiscope clearly showed that at

one point in time the hooves of a galloping horse all leave the ground. He thereby was the first to make completely visible something that to that point was only conjectured, making the galloping horse an appropriate reference for the beginning of Roy's animation. Additionally, Freud's (1933) use of the horse and the rider in discussing the ego and the id in one of his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* would appear to inform the motif of the horse and the rider as follows:

One might compare the relations of the ego to the id with that between a rider and his horse. The horse provides the locomotive energy, and the rider has the prerogative of determining the goal and of guiding the movements of his powerful mount towards it. But all too often in the relations between the ego (rider) and the id we find a picture of the less ideal situation in which the rider is obliged to guide his horse in the direction in which it itself wants to go.

Many other references to the horse/knight motif are found in *Apartment*, many of which appear to have psychosexual overtones. Sea horses are seen and appear to mate. Within a display case a horse with a Dionysian figure on a frieze is brought to our attention. In a room filled with tall bookshelves, a cowboy struggles to hold on as he rides a stationary bucking horse. On the page of a book that children are reading, a traditional knight from chess with human legs straddles a tubular shape, possibly the barrel of a gun. In another scene, the appearance of a fox brings to mind the 'Fox and the Horse', one of Grimms' fairytales. The mischievous rhinoceros that we see on several occasions also carries traits related to the horse; in 2005, researchers mapped domestic horse genes to rhinoceros chromosomes (Naiman 2005).

In other scenes, references to the horse/knight motif appear to be related to power relationships, and to politics. A woman in a bed transforms into a centauride, a female centaur, after being overpowered by a horse. In Greek mythology, centaurs 'were described as 'wild beasts' by Homer' (Hall 1974, 16), and commonly they symbolise the dark, unruly forces of nature, often depicted as drunken followers of Dionysus. There may be a tongue-in-cheek reference here to the materiality of the canvas surfaces, wild brushwork, and strong expressive use of colour of the fauves (the wild beasts), the early twentieth-century painters. Additionally, Richard Howson in *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion* notes that,

the centaur, [is] for Machiavelli and Antonio Gramsci the metaphor that embodies the dual nature of power: force and consent, violence and persuasion. Both actions define political action... To Gramsci, the power and resilience of a socio-political order (the 'State') is defined by the individuation of consent and persuasion within concrete political and social structures. Hegemony is the institutionalization of consent and persuasion within both civil society and the state (Howson and Smith 2008, 101).

So, the inclusion of a centauride in *Apartment* may reference both the unruly forces of nature, as well as capitalist hegemony and the way it succeeds in exercising consensual power. If these are some of the references here, as the interior and exterior space unabatedly continues to merge, break down the existing structures, envelope the centauride and eventually

the entire scene, Roy may be signalling the need for new mythologies and new ways of conceiving socio-political order.

Lastly in regard to the itinerary of the horse/knights motif that passes through Roy's animation, Harris (1994, 73) in 'The Invention of Forms: Percec's *Life: A User's Manual* and a Virtual Sense of the Real' states,

A knight's itinerary does not just aim to connect the dots, to touch each space, but in its irregular move it actively alters the texture of the space it is traversing. In conceptual terms, this itinerary constitutes what Deleuze and Guattari call a 'nomadic trajectory'... In Deleuze and Guattari's constellation of troupes, a nomadic trajectory 'may follow trails or customary routes.' But in doing so, it '... distributes people... into an open space, one that is indefinite and noncommunicating... It is a very special kind of disturbance, one without division into shares, in a space without borders or enclosure.'

Boundaries, Transgression and Contamination

Notions of boundaries, transgression and contamination are very important in Roy's animation, as are concepts of liminality, abjection, trauma and binary oppositions such as interior/exterior, nature/culture, rational/emotional, mind/body, man/woman and civilised/savage. Themes and many of the characters introduced in the first chapter reappear throughout the entire animation. As we move from ornate room to room, we confront an array of characters ranging in ethnicity, sex and sexual orientation, some of which are human, some animal, some both. The familiarity and strangeness of the characters seen becomes increasingly evident through their displays of gluttony, signs of sexual frustration and curiosity, states of ennui, melancholia, and obsession.

Through Roy's use of images as well as the sound of birds and more unstructured sounds reminding one of wild and at times unruly places, the interior and exterior spaces before the viewer increasingly merge. Further, the phenomenon of the body begins to be taken out of the dualistic constraints on interior and exterior. The broad implications of this would appear to reference Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the continuity of interiority (the psychological life) and exteriority (the material world) (Sunny Press 2011). In an active merging of body and world, our bodies, and our lived experience of our bodies, deny the detachment of subject from object, mind from body (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xii).

'Your act is you,' Merleau-Ponty asserts, yet this activity is not a one-way subject-object pole: the world also acts upon, or holds us (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 456). First 'we are acted upon,' he writes, then 'we are open to an infinite number of possibilities' (Olkowski and Morley 1999, 61).

British anthropologist Mary Douglas discusses boundaries in regard to structured social power, and the energy found at its margins and its unstructured areas. In an essay titled 'External Boundaries' she states that:

The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or stir men to action. The image

has form; it has external boundaries, margins, and internal structure. It outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas (Douglas 2003a, 373).

Further, in *Purity and Danger*, Douglas talks of 'pollution beliefs' as they relate to contamination and society, stating, 'thus we find that certain moral values are upheld and certain social rules defined by beliefs in dangerous contagion, as when the glance or touch of an adulterer is held to bring illness to his neighbors or his children... I believe that some pollutions [sic] are used as analogies for expressing a general view of the social order' (Douglas 2003b, 3).

Of relevance here, too, is the theory of Julia Kristeva related to abjection. She describes a process of identity formation based on the rejection the maternal body, as the child strives to become autonomous. The child's rejection forms one type of abjection, but the child also begins to recognise and exclude sources of bodily contamination such as waste, dung, bodily fluids and the unclean. Kristeva (1982) states, however, 'It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. That does not respect borders, positions, and rules. The in between the ambiguous, the composite' (4). Here she is also relating the abject to the transgression of borders and boundaries, including moral contraventions. Additionally, disease and contamination are viewed as abject.

In a scene that occurs outside in a forested area, a strange shape appears that we come to realise is a virus. It is first seen when a monkey in the sky squeezes a flying penis, the substance from which lands on an elephant below. This begins the journey of the mysterious virus, back to and through the apartment building's interior spaces, to which the apartment building residents slowly succumb.

Lynne Marie Houston (2008) in 'Food Safety and the Abject', states that:

The process of rejection involved with the abject often involves references to physical processes of waste excretion or to emotions of horror or disgust, as that which was rejected often comes back to haunt the subject, troubling the boundaries of the self.

This specific concept is echoed through the virus and in one of the few instances in which written words are present in Roy's animation. In one of the scenes we see five men in trench coats. As the virus that is slowly overrunning the building enters that apartment, it lands on the genitals of each man. Each one is holding a sign on which the viewer sees part of the following phrase 'nature driven out the door comes back through the window'.

Further, David Sibley (1995) in *Geographies of Exclusion* discusses how the 'border between self and other is echoed in both social and spatial boundaries' (32). He also discusses abjection in relation to subjectivity and space. Influenced by Kristeva's work, he talks of 'liminal zones', indeterminate spaces that are characterised by the dislocation of established social and physical structures. Liminal zones or spaces of ambiguity and discontinuity are found where powerful groups have not been able to purify space through the construction of sociopolitical boundaries. They are sources of anxiety for

those socialised to believe that the separation of categories is essential and, therefore, are zones of abjection (33).

The apartment building in *Apartment* is located in a liminal zone, in an ambiguous borderland space. In multiple ways in this animation a connection is being made between space, desire and abjection. One example of this, that also references Muybridge, is found in three scenes in the animation of an androgynous figure in the stairwell spaces of the apartment building walking up and down the stairs. The figures are negotiating the indeterminate nature of the hallway stairs that, within the context of the building, are in between the public space outside and the interior private space of the apartments, thereby correlating sexuality with setting and reflecting aspects of repression.

Lastly, there is no dialogue in Roy's animation, but rather soundscapes made up of unnamable sounds, sounds that resemble those of very young children, rhythmic sounds, and sounds similar to those of birds or that would be heard in a jungle landscape. Kristeva saw a connection between language and its importance in the formation of the subject that led her to develop the theory of the semiotic that she distinguished from the symbolic, the sphere of representations, images and all forms of fully articulated language. This related to her idea of the subject-in-process, a subject that is continually reforming itself (Lechte 2008, 397). 'The semiotic thus becomes equated with the feminine chora, which is roughly the unrepresentable place of the mother. It is a kind of origin, but not one that is nameable; for that would place it squarely within the symbolic realm and give us a false notion of it' (398). On the side of the material, it is also the cries, singing, gestures, in rhythm, in laughter that are manifest during the child's acquisition of language. 'This is an extra linguistic dimension linked to a signifying practice: that is, to a practice capable of shaking an existence, perhaps ossified, form of the symbolic, so that a new form may evolve' (398).

Conclusion

In *Apartment* Roy is addressing a very timely posthumanist scenario confronting a vast array of social and political issues related to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and human and non-human life. Although Roy has structured what we are viewing, her structure is not closed. She brings to light in an innovative manner, ideologies that continue to perpetuate the existing status quo and texts that may assist in affecting change. Poststructuralist figures such as Deleuze, for example, regarded the impossibility of organising life into closed structures not as a failure or loss but as a

cause for celebration and liberation. The fact that we cannot secure a foundation for knowledge means that we are given the opportunity to invent, create and experiment. Deleuze asked us to grasp this opportunity, to accept the challenge to transform life (Colebrook 2002, 2).

Endnote

- 1 *Facies hippocratica* refer to changes in the face caused by such things as impending death, long illness, and excessive hunger.

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