

INTRODUCTION

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The articles collected in this issue of *INTERFACES* are a selection of the papers that were given at the international word and image conference held at the Université Paris 7-Denis Diderot in June 2007, co-organized with the College of the Holy Cross, Massachusetts.

The theme of the conference, *Representing Intimacy*, raises many questions which the present collection proposes to explore. As the different contributions to the conference show, intimacy is a complex, multifaceted category to which it is difficult to give one simple definition. Thus, the initial contradiction which seems to be implied by attempting to represent something often instinctively understood as naturally shunning exposure — intimacy pertaining to what is “most interior” as etymology indicates and being often construed as secret — should not obscure the opposite question raised by the elusive definition of intimacy itself and how this resistance to clear definition challenges the codes of representation.

Intimacy indeed is not simply linked to what is inmost or secret but also to the opposite, that is to familiarity, proximity, and communication. If one looks at the various facets of intimacy, one is thus confronted with seemingly irreconcilable demands: on the one hand what is interior, inner, inward, privy to the individual, linked to the self and subjectivity and on the other, familiarity, close contact, and even communion with another. Intimacy also spans somewhat opposed concerns of human life: it is related to the body and sexuality but is also linked to the immaterial, to interior life and therefore the spiritual, the intellectual and the religious.

The essays gathered in this collection strive to embrace the complexity and multi-facetedness of intimacy by looking at the ways writers and artists have approached the notion in their works. Discussing how they have used the relationship between words and images to do so proves particularly interesting in this respect as it enables to see how representational strategies often have to be adapted and played with to represent such an elusive notion as intimacy. The essays, in their variety, allow to look at different and sometimes apparently contradictory aspects of intimacy: sexuality and spirituality, communication and subjectivity, secrecy and disclosure. Another contribution of the collected essays is to show intimacy not to be the preserve of modernity but rather a trans-historical notion which has been variously constructed, mediated and experienced through time. The interdisciplinary nature of the collection, which gathers articles on medieval religious art, Renaissance landscape painting, poetry and

fiction from Jane Austen to Nabokov, eroticism in contemporary cinema, or the most recent theories of communication, shows the extremely diverse representations which artists and writers have given of intimacy. They are evidence of the enduring importance of this human category to authors and of its different interpretations and re-interpretations at various points in history and across different media.

The collection is divided in three sections that each explores the question of these representations from three different angles; starting with the issue of sex and the body, the first section explores the ambiguities and complexities surrounding the representation of the intimate. The second section, expanding on this first understanding of the intimate as located in the body, embraces religious, domestic, and subjective intimacy. It pays particular attention to the role of words and images and their interfaces to study how artists use different representational codes and modes to represent intimacy. Finally, the last section reverses the expected associations of intimacy with interiority, subjectivity or even an authenticity of the self to explore its link with a series of “Others” that complexify our understanding of intimacy; interiority is seen as necessarily linked to its opposite and the traditional boundaries between interior and exterior, the social and the personal, self and other are shown to be unstable.

I — FLESHING INTIMACY OUT: SEX, THE BODY, AND THE REPRESENTATION OF THE INTIMATE

In “**The Bower’s Secret: Intimacy in the Art of Dante Gabriel Rossetti**,” Béatrice Laurent studies how Rossetti’s paintings of mythical female figures in natural bowers enable him to break into the Victorian boudoir — this highly gendered room where a woman’s toilette took place. That this bodily care included the use of cosmetics despite the vocal condemnation of make-up is made evident by the extensive market for hair products and beautifying lotions that existed at the time. Though taboo, the highly intimate gestures attached to women’s bodily care and the products they might be secretly using to enhance their beauty are suggested in Rossetti’s art; by picturing this intimate reality, the artist also represented another, more sombre, reality of Victorian society. The boudoir and the bodily care it sheltered participated in turning beautiful women into the prized possessions of their husbands, their beautification ambiguously leading to their objectification.

Erika Baldt’s paper, “**Sex and Cinema in Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun***” looks at the 1929 novel by Harlem Renaissance author Jessie Fauset to see how love relationships and sexual intimacy are represented in the text. The novel raises issues of sex and gender by looking at the social constructs that shape individuals’ expectations of love and sexuality and how these often differ from lived experiences. As the novel traces the sentimental and sexual coming of age of its black heroine, Fauset’s style often borrows from the cinematic techniques of close-up or montage to convey the character’s sentimental and sexual expectations while also highlighting their inadequacy to the real thing.

Moving on chronologically, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney looks at another aspect of the representation of sexual intimacy in her essay **“Envisioning Sleeping Beauties in Doré, Wharton, and Nabokov,”**. Her essay traces the folktale figure of Sleeping Beauty and its visual interpretation in the nineteenth century by French engraver Gustave Doré in two twentieth-century American novels: Edith Wharton’s *House of Mirth* and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Here, a pre-existing text — the folktale’s climactic scene in which the prince kneels by the sleeping princess to kiss her back to life — and an image — Doré’s illustration of the scene — act as references to modern re-interpretations of this intimate moment. The scene of a man, who spies the woman he loves or desires as she is sleeping and who prepares to kiss her while she is unconscious, plays a key role in the two twentieth-century novels. Poised between sleep and waking, death and life, but also love and rape, the episode has very different outcomes in the novels though, so that the reader’s expectations are both raised and thwarted by the modern renditions of the climactic scene. And when Prince Charming is being replaced by Humbert Humbert doping his stepdaughter in order to molest her, the reader, who is unwittingly made to wait for the expected kiss, is also made deeply aware of his own voyeuristic position.

The following essay by Claudine Le Pallec-Marand, **“Du Sexuel. Esthétique de l’intimité dans le cinéma contemporain, À ma soeur, Intimité, et Ken Park”** takes the question of the representation of the intimate to yet another level by looking at three contemporary films which take as their main subjects the representation of the intimacy of sex. Since its early beginnings the cinema has had a complex, sometimes polemical relationship to the topic, reactions ranging from a total moral condemnation of any cinematic rendition of lovemaking to the celebration of an aesthetics of eroticism epitomized in the eyes of its advocates by the work of Luis Buñuel. But the three contemporary authors, Catherine Breillat, Patrice Chéreau and Larry Clark, although in different ways, seem to be inventing a new kind of eroticism as sex is not merely a thematic or formal aspect of their films but becomes its central topic. Analysing the specific aesthetics of each of the authors, the article shows that they all share not only common stylistic features — and in particular the graphic representation of intercourse and the filming of sexual organs — but more generally a common aesthetic ambition to make sex the very topic of their films.

After this exploration of the ambiguities of the representation of the intimate, the essays in the second section of the collection, while expanding on the definition of intimacy to include the spiritual and the psychological, pay particular attention to the specific workings of words and images in the mediation of intimacy.

II — MEDIATING INTIMACY THROUGH WORD AND IMAGES

In her essay “**Models of Intimacy in Late Medieval England**,” Annette Kern-Stähler studies domestic and family intimacy in late medieval England in a bid to challenge the traditional chronology of intimacy imposed by early-modern historians. Seeing “homeliness” as the medieval equivalent of what is understood today as intimacy, she shows how religious literature and art — statuary, illuminated manuscripts or stained glass windows — presented the pious with models of intimacy, representations of intimate family relationships to be emulated. When looked at through these religious representations, medieval parent-children relationships appear to be extremely fond and tender, a far cry from the somewhat stereotypical vision imposed by some historians who claim that intimate family relationships only appeared in the early-modern period.

A further challenge to the traditional chronology as well as to the opposition between spirituality and the body, Virginia Raguin’s “**Intimacy through Visual Touch: the World before Gothic Art**” studies the importance of the senses in medieval pious practices — and in particular of vision. “Extramission,” which was an optical theory derived from Plato that turned vision into a tactile apprehension of the world, enables to understand the role played by some liturgical objects in mediating intimacy with the divine. Objects linked to private as well as communal prayer such as reliquaries, chalices, and Books of Hours, which helped give access to the divine word, were often densely sensual. Made as they were in precious metalwork and stones, they made religious worship an intimate experience mediated through the senses.

Moving on to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Michael McKeon’s essay, “**Literary and Graphic Images of Intimacy in Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century England**,” takes as its starting point the Horatian *Ut Pictura Poesis* to confront the way image and text were each used differently to represent several aspects of intimacy in the early-modern period. His essay is both an exploration of the respective aesthetics and the different representational strategies of text and image and a survey of various aspects of the multi-faceted notion of intimacy. Starting from religious intimacy, the essay moves on to domestic as well as sexual intimacy to end with the role of words and images in the construction of subjectivity in what may be termed an “erotics of reading.”

Centering on D. G. Rossetti’s “double works of art,” pieces which articulate poetry and painting, as well as on his correspondence, the following essay, “**Rossetti’s Letters: Intimate Desires and Sister Arts**,” looks at the combined use of words and images made by the Pre-Raphaelite poet-painter. In her essay, Federica Mazzara studies the artist’s letters, which are often ekphrastic in tone, to unlock the secret of his intimate attachments and desires as his correspondence offers a key to partly decipher the mystery of the beautiful women in his paintings. But the letters, which were used by

Rossetti as a tool for self-analysis and reflection on his work as an artist, also give access to the very core of his creative interiority, what he himself called his “inner standing point.”

The question of subjectivity introduced here is further explored in the following section which contains essays that look at interiority and highlight the complexities and ambiguities that necessarily accompany psychological intimacy.

III – TURNING INTIMACY INSIDE OUT: INTIMACY AND THE OTHER

Michel Baridon’s paper, “**The Emergence of the Landscape and the Expression of Intimacy,**” proposes to study the emergence of landscape painting in Renaissance art as a phenomenon that was correlative to a growing interest in representing both domestic and psychological interiority — as if, in his own words, “the broadening of vision implied by landscape awareness elicited an interest in closed space.” Claiming that there can be as much intimacy in representing a busy street scene or familiar rural scenes as there is in representing a domestic interior, he makes interior and exterior meet. His paper looks at the political and the subjective uses of painting in conjunction with each other and shows the emergence of the landscape in the Renaissance to be inseparable from a growing interest in the mindscape.

Katherine Voyles’s similarly reverses perspectives when, in her essay ‘**Likeness: Interiority and the Miniature in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*,**’ she studies issues of scale in Austen’s work in relation to the question of “likeness.” Austen’s novel-writing style which has often been seen as intimate and diminutive, and has led her art to be compared to that of a miniature painter, is here studied to challenge a reading of her novels as merely decorous, or as pretty jewels that fail to embrace the bigger picture of the social and political realities of her time. The portrait miniature, which is sometimes used as a trope to describe her novels, plays an important, if slightly surprising, role in *Pride and Prejudice*. It sets Elizabeth on the path of understanding the true character of Darcy at the end of the novel when she visits Pemberley, but looked at in conjunction with the full-scale portrait also seen in the gallery, it effects a reversal of the expected associations between scale and interiority. The likeness it presents Elizabeth with is not so much centered on intimacy as it is on the social standing of Darcy and his respect of his duty as a landlord while the full-scale portrait traditionally associated with social position triggers intimate reminiscences and desire. This unconventional use of size invites us to see the diminutive scale of Jane Austen’s novels not as leading to a reduction of scope but rather as operating a compression that bridges the gap between the intimate and the social, between the particular and the more general.

Andrew Eastman's paper "**Reading as Intimacy: Susan Howe's *The Midnight*,**" looks at the work of the contemporary American poet Susan Howe to study the way she reflects on reading as a shared experience conducive to intimacy. Combining poem, text and photographs of her mother and uncle but also of some of their books where they left personal markings, *The Midnight* weaves together elements of autobiography, inter-textuality, and a reflection on the materiality of reading to interrogate reading as a form of intimacy. If her work, which centres on issues such as absence, distance, and transmission, puts into question language as a means to effect intimacy with another, it explores reading as a possible if not unproblematic meditation between self and other.

The last chapter of the collection "**The Cannibal Dances Alone – Intimacy as Misrecognition**" by **Kimberly Mair and Allen Ball** was written in conjunction with a video project, which is included on the CD that accompanies the journal. The essay and the video are used to challenge the common vision of intimacy as resting on the unproblematic, reciprocal communication between two discreet, self-knowing individuals imparting upon each other some kind of pre-existing authenticity supposedly located in their inner selves. This vision, which posits an interior and an exterior and locates communication in some neutral space outside subjects, fails to see communication as an inter-sensorial experience that involves speaker and addressee in a dynamic, kinesthetic process that transforms both. The authors further denounce the mystification of transparent, intimate communication suggesting instead that inter-subjective relationships might in fact be based on misrecognition and failure but that this very failure is central to subject formation. Combining words and images, their essay and video powerfully displace the imaginary topologies of inside and outside, self and other that habitually shape our understanding of intimacy thus showing intimacy itself to be a mere representation.

At the end of the collection, **Maurice A. G racht** presents the work of the French visual artist Fanny Pochon who has generously agreed to her work being reproduced on the cover of this issue. The series that frames the present collection and explores the contingencies of intimacy, is fittingly entitled *Variation sur le cadre*. While its being part of a series, a variation, in a way exemplifies the impossibility of fixing intimacy in one picture, the fact that this series plays with the notion of frame may also be taken to suggest that the frame it offers to the journal is not one that proposes to enclose but to open out. What better way to end a collection which has striven not to give univocal answers to the questions raised by the representation of intimacy than let Pochon's pictures have the last word and bring the discussion on the representation of intimacy to a necessarily suspended end.