

# The Collector and the End of Beauty

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## ABSTRACT

In the twenty-first century to answer the question “Is it art at all?” has become a matter of heteronomy. The work of art is subject to historical accidentalities that define aesthetic criteria. Meanwhile, beauty is no longer part of the definition of art. John Fowles’s novel *The Collector* engages the reader with the story of a kidnapping, a postmodern enterprise where reality and fiction overlap, making it impossible for the reader to distinguish the boundaries of each. However, the dynamic relationship of Miranda and Clegg can also be read as the historical clash between the modernist avant-gardes versus the postmodern conceptual art, with Miranda’s final death symbolizing the end of art.

In Plato’s *Symposium*, we have the first philosophical inquiry into the nature of beauty. Plato believes that beauty is in the original forms, thus independent from mental representation. Some twenty-five centuries later we must discuss the end of art. What is art? Since Aristotle, until at least the twentieth-century avant-gardes, it was common knowledge for an artwork to be mimetic, that is, it had to be a representation of a sort of reality. The age of mechanical reproduction has however transformed “representation” into reproduction. Imitation has replaced creation as much as commodities for mass market are sold as art. What is art? According to Sondra Bacharach, “no art is capable of answering such a question (since artworks are too elliptical and disjunctive to mount the necessary coherent arguments)” (2002, 65). Likewise, Arthur Danto believes that this is a question for philosophers, not artists: “the artists have made the way open for philosophy and the moment has arrived at which the task must be transferred to philosophy” (1986, 111). It is becoming increasingly unclear to answer. Mine is not a discussion about comparative history of ideas but an

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analysis, from Western standards, of the aesthetic tendency of the Western world. Postmodernity has smashed the barrier between high and low culture, between art and the everyday. Since the Marxist structure and the superstructure collapsed into each other, thus aesthetic production becomes economic production, high culture is no longer authorized to pass judgment on reality. Instead, popular taste rules over aesthetic judgments. Dwight Macdonald's warning, "Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination" (1962, 9), has become a self-fulfilled prophecy: "what has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (Jameson 1991, 3).

More than a new zeitgeist we are facing a gestalt switch, a radical change in the world of art to an extent that one is allowed to wonder whether we still produce art at all. Elsewhere I have already expressed my position on the topic. The shipwreck into the world of kitsch has to do with a crisis of transcendence.<sup>1</sup> With this manuscript, I intend to produce an interdisciplinary study taking "the end of art" as reference theory and using John Fowles's novel, *The Collector* (1963), as symbolic, textual evidence. While the novel is not essentially symbolic, the butterfly collection, the continuous reference to art, Frederick Clegg's dullness, and Miranda Grey's death are all elements that call for a symbolic interpretation. Beyond the classic clash of opposition and its moral categorization, the two characters in *The Collector*, Miranda and Clegg, align with a split between modernism and postmodernism. Miranda, embodiment of modernist aesthetic, dies fully aware of her and life's tragedy; Clegg, however, archetype of postmodern practice, lives on, together with his cliché and nonsensical existence. In this sense, the text can be taken as a fictional representation of the end of art theory, a notion that is less about philosophy than it is about beauty. As scholars, our task today is to find beauty when artists no longer do. It is not about the death of painting or fiction; it is truly about the end of beauty.

### Modernist and Postmodernist Dynamic

Both modernism and postmodernism present themselves as historical moments projecting a cultural style and an associated malaise before economic application. Phenomena of the twentieth-century European and Anglo-American culture, they stood separate in spite of their common lineage. Modernism is rooted in European history, and it is clearly a sociophilosophical narrative that moves from individual identity to fragmentation; postmodernism takes off whence

1. See Castelli and Sonzogni (2022) and Castelli (2023).

modernism paused, and it is a discourse that overstretches the idea of fragmentation into dissolution. It is what was left after Hiroshima disappeared. In historical terms, modernism is the attempt to reconstruct a society that walks over contradictions and controversial principles: nationalism versus imperialism, capitalism versus class struggle, and liberalism versus colonialism. It tries to solve the issue by offering to free individuals from the structure of language, the chain of morality, the embarrassment of the instinct, the exploitation of workers, and the naturalism of the canvas. Modernism is a moment of rupture featured by a sense of disorder and an overwhelming anxiety. Thus, art, the aesthetic of modernism at large, becomes a metaphor for the gap between the self and reality. I do not consider modernism and avant-garde as synonymous, but I do consider the avant-garde movements to belong to the modernist culture. The world of the avant-garde was triggered by modernity. While modernism rendered the avant-garde possible with its critical stance, the avant-garde has an extreme artistic negativism, a systematic anti-aestheticism that the former does not have. Modernism, in fact, attempts an artistic reconstruction, salvation is still possible, it is a limbo between destruction and art. There is between them a relationship of dependence and exclusion more than reciprocity: while modernism asserts the autonomy of art, the avant-garde, despite its iconoclasm, attempts to restore the relationship between life and art. However, modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Luigi Pirandello have very little, if nothing at all, in common with avant-garde movements such as futurism, Dadaism, and surrealism, which, because of their status of parody, are the most natural bridge to the artificiality, ambiguity, and kitsch of postmodernism. Ergo, while it might be a truism saying that avant-garde and kitsch are both effects of the process of modernization, the premise of avant-garde is high culture, and academicism, while the postulate behind kitsch is the democracy of mass culture.

Indeed, mass culture made postmodernism possible. Postmodernism is a last step forward into nihilism. It has met the limit of reason; tragedy has sublimated the theory by materializing in Auschwitz, not an aberration but the logical consequence of the modern project. On the ruins of modernity, while awaiting annihilation, postmodernism no longer constructs society—it deconstructs past attainments, it duplicates, it clones, it pastes piles of models in a collage of images that pretend to be original. It does it with irony and cynicism, parodying life and treating death as a game for the dumb. Modernism, because it is a crisis of consciousness, carves a frame larger than life. It goes deep into life's mysteries without superstitious prejudice, and it becomes comprehensibly blasphemous

and arrogant—of course it does, since it carries man's ultimate questions and the deception of a generation that has no answers. It refuses the safe scheme of the realist tradition, offering, instead, an alternative representation, an experimental language that does not explain but hints at another beauty and a different order. Postmodernity, however, is the world after Auschwitz, and postmodernism is a depthless response to the inevitable. It is not interested in offering solutions, because it does not have any. It does not solve the tragedy, it takes it for granted; it has learned how to live with natural disasters and the threat of a nuclear event. It does not suggest alternative beauty or reachable peace, but it toys with the shallowest aspect of contemporaneity, consumerism, and daily issues. Modernist aesthetic still has an aesthetic of the sublime that postmodernism ignores. Modernism is referred to as an elite culture, while postmodernism is relevant to popular culture. And again, while modernism is involved in metaphysical meditations, postmodernism treats everything, including death, with indifference. One has a sense of depth, the other is depthless to the core; one is self-conscious, the other is searching for identity in a reality where everything is imitation. By way of example, Robert Rauschenberg's *Persimmon* (1964), far from being original, is an assemblage of significance stolen from tradition.<sup>2</sup> Rauschenberg's *Venus* resembles a postmodern collage by copying, on purpose, from Diego Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1648) and Peter Paul Rubens's *Venus at Her Toilet* (1608). He then combines them with an assemblage of images and objects of daily use that offer superficiality as its own stigma.

Given this framework, one must wonder about the nature of art. If contemporaneity is about erosion of culture, imitation, and invalidating uniqueness, are we still allowed to consider art as such? Not to fall into tautological and relativistic positions, perhaps the correct line of argument is questioning the very nature of art.

### What Is the End of Art?

For G. W. F. Hegel, who did not live to see the twentieth-century avant-garde, the period of German Romanticism would have seemed a culmination of freedom and self-determination. He considered the history of art as a sort of *bildungsroman* in which art struggles toward a philosophical self-understanding and had finally reached its ending point. History, as Hegel saw it, ended in the recognition that all were free; and how could there be history after that? The development of Romantic art, as Hegel describes it, involves the increasing

2. As far as I know, Douglas Crimp (1987), David Harvey (1990), and Fredric Jameson (1991) have all already highlighted the same visual phenomenon.

secularization and humanization of art. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (as in ancient Greece) art was closely tied to religion: art's function was, to a large degree, to make the divine visible. With the Reformation, however, the personal reading of the Holy Scripture, the binomial art-religion finally breaks. Religion turned inward and found God to be present in faith alone, not in the icons and images of art. Religion turns inward as a private experience, art turns outward, no more delivery of ultimate truth but ordinary daily life. Thus, while art became secular, the modern period, Hegel concludes, has moved beyond art. Famously, he wrote the epitaph of art: "Art no longer affords the satisfaction of spiritual needs which earlier ages and nations sought in it, and found in it alone . . . art, considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past. Thereby, it has lost for us genuine truth and life, and has been transferred into our ideas instead of maintaining its earlier necessity in reality and occupying its higher place" (1975, 1:11). Art satisfied our highest needs when it formed an integral part of our religious life and revealed to us the nature of the divine. In the modern, post-Reformation world, however, art has been released (or has emancipated itself) from subservience to religion and consequently no longer expresses divine or spiritual freedom. By saying that art is "a thing of the past" Hegel does not mean that there would be no new artworks but that art's historical role is over. Art is no longer the highest and most adequate way of expressing the truth. In his view, art plays now a more limited role than it did in ancient Greece or in the Middle Ages. Hegel was only partially wrong. He was merely ahead of his time.<sup>3</sup> As history unfolded, his definition became a label for postmodern societies, but it does not apply to the iconoclastic versions of modernism. The decades between the twentieth and twenty-first century witness, in a certain respect, the Hegelian end of art, in the sense that art is reduced to be the exploration of everyday contingencies, it no longer has the spiritual-cultural power able to form collective consciousness and legitimately claim universal significance. The age of late capitalism, corporativism, international banking, automation, and the overall condition of postmodernity comes with impersonal working in vast institutional structures. Individual deeds and fate can no longer disclose any totality.<sup>4</sup>

3. A similar position (and intellectual mistake) is held by Leo Tolstoy who considered the advent of symbolism as the beginning of the end of art: "The path on which art has traveled is like laying, on a circle of large diameter, circles of ever less and less diameter: so that a cone is formed, whose apex ceases to be a circle. This is what has happened to the art of our time" (1995, 219). Explaining the metaphor, art disappears in the age of modernism because it is no longer intelligible.

4. With reference to the relation between the individual and modernity, Hegel writes: "in the world of today the individual subject . . . does not appear himself as the independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment of this society, but only as a restricted member of it. . . . He is not, as he was in the

Autonomous from religion then but soon slave to the logic of marketization. Thus, there is no liberation. With the age of mechanical reproduction, art lost its autonomy as well as Walter Benjamin's aura. Because art is reproduced for the global village for the taste of the average consumer, it has lost its "auratic value" and thus the uniqueness and authenticity that have long been attributed to it. In a similar fashion Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer theorize on the "culture industry" as the framework of decline (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). Specifically, Adorno argues that in the era of mechanical reproduction, art has ceased being autonomous, for it is no longer free from the demands of the market. "Consequently, not only art's critical potential has been undermined by removing the gap between art and reality, but art has also been transformed into a tool of dominance, in pair with the realm of culture, meant to maintain the status quo" (Castelli 2023, 283). Then, given the trap of commodification, we should wonder whether we still need art.

Therefore, the end of art has to do not with modernity but with postmodernity and probably with Andy Warhol. In 1964, the art critic Danto visited an exhibition of Warhol in New York, *Brillo Box*, in which Warhol's boxes were indiscernible from the Brillo boxes of warehouses and storerooms. He must have felt the same as the public in 1917 when face-to-face with Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*: what is art? In the well-known essay "The Artworld," Danto writes: "What in the end makes the difference between a Brillo box and a work of art consisting of a Brillo box is a certain theory of art. It is theory that takes it up into the world of art, and keeps it from collapsing into the real object which it is. . . . It is the role of artistic theories, these days as always, to make the artworld, and art, possible" (1964, 581). That is to say, to see something as art we need an artistic theory. But it also means that whether it is a work of art at all depends on something external to it. *Brillo Box* reflects the postmodern collapse of boundaries between structure and superstructure, high and low culture. Specifically, Warhol disintegrates the distinction between art and reality by pretending to transform reality into art. Warhol's *Brillo Box* inside a museum brings back the clock of history to three thousand years ago, to Plato's imitation theory. The postmodern age has finally caught up with Plato, art is an imitation but of commercial, rather than ideal, forms. More than the end of art, we are detecting the collapse of the historical progress, as if the creative mind were saturated and events followed one

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Heroic Age proper the embodiment of the right, the moral and the legal as such. The individual is no longer the vehicle and sole actualization of these powers as was the case in the Heroic Age" (1975, 1:194). The sense of fragmentation Hegel describes here will become dissolution in the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, the agonizing face in Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893) will be replaced by Mark Rothko's empty canvas.

another in a state of indifference. In Jean Baudrillard's words: "Deep down, one cannot even speak of the end of history here, since history will not have time to catch up with its own end. Its effects are accelerating, but its meaning is slowing inexorably. It will eventually come to a stop and be extinguished like light and time in the vicinity of an infinitely dense mass" (1994, 4).<sup>5</sup> Fascinated about its significance, Danto concludes that with the *Brillo Box* art becomes its own philosophy, an "infinite play with its own concept" (1986, 209). For Danto, the issue at stake is not that art and religion went in different directions but that art has turned into philosophy: "in turning into philosophy, art had come to an end. From now on progress could only be enacted on a level of abstract self-consciousness of the kind which philosophy alone must consist in. If artists wished to participate in this progress, they would have to undertake a study very different from what art schools could prepare them for. They would have to become philosopher" (1987, 216).<sup>6</sup> The end of art, therefore, becomes for Danto a moment when the linearity of aesthetic evolution is replaced by a chronicle in which art can look like anything. That is, in the age of artistic pluralism art has ceased to move toward any goal, it has lost historical significance.<sup>7</sup> Aware or not, Danto must have in mind Jean-François Lyotard's statement about the end of metanarratives: "simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives" (1993, 72). A metanarrative is an all-encompassing view of history as the Enlightenment or Marxism can be. One explains history in terms of progress through knowledge, the other in terms of revolutionary struggle. Because of its character of pluralism, postmodernity, Lyotard suggests, cannot be explained by any referential metanarrative. Instead, these totalizing views of history are to be replaced with *petits histoires* that can evade the grand narrative by bringing into focus the local event. The end of metanarratives is thus a condition in which anything goes. Narrative and cultural life intersect each other producing new texts and a

5. The fascinating although ambiguous notion of "end of history" is retaken by the French leading theorist of postmodernity, Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) in *The Illusion of the End* (1994). The original key is the definition of hyperhistory, the complex nature of time, on the basis of which we are moving backward rather than moving forward. Rather than approaching the end of history, we are engaged in a process of historical obliteration. Baudrillard has changed the linear progression of history into an immense flashback, thus he concludes: "this inert matter of the social is not produced by a lack of exchanges, information or communication, but by the multiplication and saturation of exchanges . . . history is also cooling. . . . History comes to an end here, not for want of actors, . . . nor for want of events . . . but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction" (1994, 3–4).

6. Two years later, Danto returns to the concept by writing: "part of what I meant by art coming to an end was not so much a loss of creative energy, though that might be true, as that art, raising from within the question of its philosophical identity, was doing philosophy, so to speak, in the medium of art, and hence was transforming itself into another mode of what Hegel would term Absolute Spirit" (1987, 168).

7. This is what Danto terms "post-historical art," as far as definitions go: "art after art history, constructed as the progressive, developmental narrative of art's self-definition" (Carroll 1998, 20).

new culture, fiction becomes a collage, a montage of happenings borrowed from daily dynamics: mutilated bodies, dead children at the corner shop, a bed shaken after an orgasm, images of our contemporaneity dissipate every gap between art, life, morals, and pleasure. With this in mind, the relation between the novel's protagonists, Miranda and Clegg, recalls the one between modernism and postmodernism: one of continuity and discontinuity. Postmodern features such as contingency, fragmentation, ephemerality, and chaos are the very same qualities of modernism stretched far beyond the limits. Different then but somewhat connected as much as the two protagonists.

### Unreconcilable Oppositions

Within the modernism-postmodernism zeitgeist has to be placed Fowles's first published novel, *The Collector*, seemingly the drama of a kidnapping. Syhamal Bagchee defines the book as "intellectually limited" (1980, 220), an "instant book," a "timid book" (221). I see it as a postmodern compromise between fiction and reality. Not a crime fiction but perhaps "a novel about the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, life and death" (219). David Higdon considers the text as a "gothic thriller" that moves to "sociological class statement" and an "allegory of existential authenticity and inauthenticity of being" (1986, 570). While the novel is explicit on the question of (immoral) power, clearly represented by the male protagonist, Clegg, Pamela Cooper is correct in saying that it is a "struggle in its simplest form" (1991, 1). Andrés Jódar reads the text as an existentialist tale and Clegg as another fictional representation of *l'homme absurde*: "Clegg, like Meursault, the protagonist *L'Étranger*, is an isolated (anti)hero who struggles against his passions in an existence of the Absurd" (2006, 46).<sup>8</sup> The author, Fowles, understands his male character as an antihero of sorts who rebels against society without a solid reason. In his own words: "I also wanted to attack . . . the contemporary idea that there is something noble about the inarticulate hero" (Jódar 2006, 46). A few years later in his collection of philosophical aphorisms, *The Aristos* (1964), Fowles goes back to *The Collector* and makes of it a moral text, that is, the confrontation between the characters is also the confrontation between evil and good: "the actual evil in Clegg overcame the potential good in Miranda. I did not mean by this that I view the future with a black pessimism; nor that a precious élite is threatened by the barbarian hordes" (1980, 10). However, with a New

8. Jódar's interpretation is not an isolated case. Jeff Rackham (1972) also discusses the novel's continuity with existential philosophy.



Critical approach in mind, I shall argue that we should dismiss the author's intention because a literary text always offers a gap between what the author wanted to accomplish and what one did accomplish. A text, when there is a hermeneutic reading, can possibly be more meaningful, rich, and complex than the author realized. And sometimes the text's symbolic significance is simply different from the meaning the author wanted it to have.<sup>9</sup> In addition, if we believe with Roland Barthes that the author is dead, and if we accept the postmodern claim that the writer is nothing more than the one who writes, then the text can be deconstructed to reveal hidden structures of significance. It seems to me that the novel while being scarce in narrative terms is a powerful metaphor, implicit and muted, of a larger claim, that of the end of art. Hence, Fowles has underestimated, and to some extent misunderstood, his own novel.

Two narrative voices offer the reader an insight into two different points of view. Fowles first places the reader inside the mind of a seemingly ordinary character named Clegg, and then Miranda's diary becomes an overview of her captivity. He daydreams about her, observes her from a distance until, after having won a prize in the football pools, he decides to buy an old countryside house and enrich his empty life by kidnapping her. Miranda becomes his butterfly-victim kept in a claustrophobic cellar for some two months until she finally dies. Fowles wants us to believe that Clegg loves his victim in some sort of private, idealistic way, made of smell rather than touch. "She smelt so nice I could have stood like that all the evening" (2012, 70). As a matter of fact he is obsessed with the artificiality of an idea; besides the fact that she is an art student he knows nothing about her. Surely, *The Collector* is not a love story.<sup>10</sup> Of course, there is an association between love, violence, and death, but this is a narrative that cannot be paralleled to that of *Gatsby* or *Anna Karenina* were it not for the lack of one element: free will. Robert Browning's *Porphyria Lover* or *My Last Duchess* might come to mind, but again those are female victims who give themselves voluntarily to their murderer. *The Collector* is, and must remain, a story about a kidnapper and his victim. Clegg is the raw madman; Miranda is the innocent prey. The novel is grounded on the reader's perception of Clegg: is he a monster or not? A lonely, confused individual or a sexual psychopath? Miranda adds uncertainty and a tone of ambiguity when she wonders about him: "the

9. I am here referring to William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley's essay "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) in which the authors discuss the mistaken belief that the author's intention is the same as the text's meaning.

10. There is actually a scholarship line that places *The Collector* on the same level as the romance tradition. See, e.g., Binns (1973).

only unusual thing about him—how he loves me. Ordinary New People couldn't love anything as he loves me" (206).<sup>11</sup> Yet, as at the base of the narration there is a violation of human rights, it seems at least an exercise of bad taste to refer to love. Also, because of her death, it becomes difficult to consider him as a romantic idealist. Jódar's conclusion seems to me adequate: "he is a stranger in a strange land of Existence provoking the nausea, in Sartre's terms, both Miranda and the reader" (2006, 45). I consider Clegg a repressed psychotic, reclusive, and repelled by sexuality for he declares: "I never thought about women. . . . It's some crude animal thing I was born without" (Fowles 2012, 10). He is a monster who "frustrates the possibility of his own and of Miranda's self-maturation" (Onega 1989, 40). He does not directly kill Miranda, nor rape her, but that is not enough to make the narrative a story of unrequited love. He is not an absurd character, as Jódar maintains, but he remains a dangerous psychopath standing outside the realm of conscious behavior. The fact that he does not feel guilty reveals the whole extent of his dystopic mind: "I thought I was acting for the best and within my rights" (Fowles 2012, 97). Miranda scanned through his lifeless eyes, his unimaginative mind, and finally deciphered him: "the ordinary man is the curse of civilization" (2012, 108). And yet, to consider Clegg another of those victims of the "banality of evil," the notion that ordinary people commit atrocities without awareness, is to lose the sociopathic element that is self-evident in his relation to the Other.<sup>12</sup> That is, there is no relation at all. Clegg has literally no interpersonal relationships. He is not cut off from the world of human relationships, he chooses not to engage with it.

Clegg, whose father died and whose mother abandoned him, grew up with an old aunt and a cousin with a physical handicap. Even so, he is not a martyr but a psychopath who keeps repeating: "it was not my fault" (Fowles 2012, 95). In this sense, his moral blindness compels the reader to judge him less as an antihero than a mere criminal. Indeed "Clegg seems unaware of his pose, . . . Clegg never acknowledges his role as author" (Simard 1985, 76). A gray character,

11. In the economy of the novel, the reference to "New People" has a sociological connotation. Miranda, a snobbish character, comes from a well-off family, with extensive education and cultural heritage. The term is therefore used to indicate a type of human being less gifted and less prepared, as Clegg is. Rich but vulgar, this is a class that does not have the taste of tradition. Miranda's secret love, G.P., defines them as "the new-class people with their cars and their money and their tellies and their stupid vulgarities and their stupid crawling imitation of the bourgeoisie" (Fowles 2012, 181). Ironically, this is the very same accusation that the aristocracy moved to the bourgeoisie, the likes of G.P., just a century before.

12. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* is a 1963 book by the historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt. Arendt (2006, 135) conceived the phrase "the banality of evil" with reference to Eichmann who showed neither guilt nor hatred of Jews: "He did his 'duty' . . . he not only obeyed 'orders,' he also obeyed the 'law.'"

one of those who lives in the suburbs of life, socially awkward, an outsider without knowledge of the world outside his little garden, someone who can “never *be* in any real sense” (Fowles 2012, 163). He lacks formal and informal education, an ignorant with poor taste and a pathetic inadequate language. His speaking is made of cliché and stock phrases. Miranda does not pity him; instead, she despises him: “it’s so terrible not being able to speak” (117). A coming-of-age man with nothing but time and money. He collects butterflies as he collects her: “seeing her always made me feel like I was catching a rarity” (6). The action of collecting has to do with the attempt to freeze time, capturing something for some kind of eternity. As Robert Campbell masterly put it, “he won’t, refuses, to see her as a conscious subject who is constituted *as* a subject of her world; instead, she is, for him, only an object in his” (1983, 45). Thus, Miranda becomes an object to be valued not necessarily for her intrinsic worth, which he ignores, but for the illusion she represents. The beauty of her youth. I must agree with Rodney Simard, “it is the act of collecting and not the object which has value” (1985, 78). Accordingly, once she is taken prisoner, he does not touch her. He takes photos instead. He is not interested in her feelings, her mind, her will; only her appearance deserves care. He is overwhelmed by beauty. Disturbing but very becoming of him is a scene just before her death. A particular caught his attention: “she had nasty yellow pimples one corner of her lips. And she didn’t smell fresh and clean like before” (Fowles 2012, 232).

On the other side of the spectrum, Miranda is a twenty-year-old art student in London. Seemingly, an arrogant woman with a snobby attitude: “a stereotype of a stereotype, of the contemporary middle class girl of some education as we meet her on Sunday morning in the Observer” (Allen 1970, 64). And yet, as in a dialogue at a distance, Perry Nodelman replies: “it is these human flaws that make her more than a stock figure and allow us to sympathize with her” (1987, 335). We must sympathize with Miranda simply because she is the victim. He trapped her because of her rare beauty, and she knows she has been collected: “you’ve pinned me in this little room and you can come and gloat over me” (Fowles 2012, 36). The reader feels there is something peculiar in Miranda. While his disgust for sexuality seems to be an addition to his perversity, her chastity makes her, at least, unusual.

Why does he kidnap her? Rape, murder, and ransom are all hypothesis to be discarded. Psychological theories might be relevant: “you want to lean on me. I can feel it. I expect it’s your mother. You’re looking for your mother” (Fowles 2012, 50). There might here be a correlation, but surely not causation. Abandonment from the mother’s side does not necessarily create a kidnapper. The reason

is probably as trivial as his persona: if he keeps her captive long enough, she will grow to love him. A deeper analysis reveals that there is an element they actually share. To some degree both characters are obsessed with ideas of beauty, but of different kinds. He looks at her as someone admiring a work of art: “the shape of her head and the way the hair fell from it with a special curve, so graceful it was, like the shape of a swallowtail. . . . I wish I had words to describe it like a poet would or an artist” (54). Surprisingly, he is actually capable of clarifying her lightness: “everything she did was delicate like that. Just turning a page” (54). Yet, Miranda is a beauty he cannot master nor possess, not even understand. He observes her in silence as she draws, he nods as she explains Francisco Goya, Tantalus, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Thus, he engages her in a cellar transforming a human being into a caricature of herself. Miranda slowly decays, pales, becomes sick, and dies.

Modernist nihilist speculations formulated the death of God. Friedrich Nietzsche’s madman did not kill God but introduced a possibility. Accordingly, Stephen Dedalus’s confession in his religious-philosophical awakening summarizes what will come: “I tried to love God, . . . it seems now I failed” (Joyce 2000, 259). Similarly, Miranda is unsure about her faith but she does pray: “Oh God if there is a God” (Fowles 2012, 227). Hers is the God of the Hebrews, one that is yet to come: “I’ve been sitting here and thinking about God.” She is a war prisoner as a million others have been before her, “the Anne Franks,” thus, as no liberator comes, she must conclude: “I feel I *know* now is that God doesn’t intervene. He lets us suffer. If you pray for liberty. . . . But God can’t hear” (194). There is in her, the avant-garde, a metaphysical ambition that is nowhere to be found within the net of postmodernity. On the other side of the allegory, Clegg is a nonbeliever; his belief is a ruling chaos. In his simplistic view of the existence, the conclusion is rather plain: “because what it is, it’s luck. . . . You can’t ever tell how it will turn out. . . . That’s why I never believed in God. I think we are just insects, we live a bit and then die and that’s the lot. . . . There’s not even a Great Beyond. There’s nothing” (244). Yet, rather than conveying a sense of vulnerability in a world where we have little control, Clegg’s speech reveals his emptiness. He is not simply a person with no ideas about art but no ideas about anything at all. While she tries to engage him in conversations about art, books, family, adolescence, the H-bomb, and Christianity, he cannot avoid being obvious, almost primitive. “We don’t have any say in things” (113), he concludes when pressed by Miranda, thus displaying incapacity of extended logical thoughts. With reason, Simard writes, “language becomes the experience, and the shallow quality of his language parallels the same quality of his experience” (1985, 80). He has no substance, as if

reflecting the nature of Warhol's *Marilyn Diptych* (1962). Marilyn's silk screen suggests a sense of decentering by having the subject replaced by a dozen (endless) anonymous figures and reveals the contemporary tendency toward mass homologation. Depth is rewritten by superficiality while the modernist need for meaning abdicates for the pleasure of artificiality. From the side of the artists, it is an art, if art is at all, more pluralistic and less moralistic where popular and kitsch take over elitism and beauty. The audience or reader, however, is relieved from the moral duty of distinguishing between good and evil, beauty and ugliness, art and kitsch.

Clegg's house is decorated with a random pile of styles that clearly recalls the aesthetic of kitsch, by definition a form of aesthetic inadequacy. Miranda smashes to the floor a few china wild ducks hanging on the old fireplace: "a house as old as this has a soul. And you can't do things like that to beautiful things like this old, old room" (Fowles 2012, 45). He ignores taste and sense of proportion. "Ugly ornaments don't deserve to exist" (110), she utters; ignorant to her warning, all he can do is show her his butterfly collection and take raw photos of her: "I know why he likes the photographing business. He thinks it makes me think he's artistic. And of course he hasn't a clue. I mean he gets me in focus, and that's all. No imagination" (119). His "art of photography" is the attempt to reproduce a flat imitation of reality. Consequently, her death is no tragedy to him but the natural solution for fixing her permanently. His preference for all that is safely dead, such as the butterfly collection, reminds the reader of Warhol's *Brillo Box* but especially the *Death and Disaster Series* (1963), ironically made the same year *The Collector* was published. Warhol's fascination with death indicated his interest in its continual presence in our everyday lives but also our apparent distance from its impact. In his words: "when you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have an effect" (Goldsmith 2004, 19). Clegg's action, the collection and the photography, is one that exorcises meaning through repetition. It brings together superficiality, in a sense that he is not looking for any hermeneutic significance, and homologation, in a sense that all the pictures he takes are one and the same. In essence, Clegg stands for all of which postmodernity is accused of: imitation, cliché, reproduction, shallowness.

Miranda, however, embraces the *fin de siècle* atmosphere. She is at first a decadent art: "just think of things as beautiful or not. Can't you understand? I don't think of good or bad. Just of beautiful or ugly" (Fowles 2012, 72).<sup>13</sup> Yet far from being useless, her art comes with Hegelian finality. Art is somewhat

13. Famously one of Oscar Wilde's epigrams recites: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written" (Stromberg 1968, 243).

associated with beauty and freedom in a triangular relationship in which the aim of art is beauty because freedom can be reached (experienced) only through beauty. Accordingly, she writes in her diary: “I want to make beauty” (122) while planning her escape. As her captivity endures, she develops into a representation of the modernist *avant-gardes*.<sup>14</sup> In a telling scene, she draws a few bowls of fruit and asks Clegg to pick the best. His taste is made of obvious realism, hence, he picks the most realistic one; Miranda, instead, shows another one, made of colors and forms, thus provoking his astonishment “the one that was so good only looked half-finished to me, you could hardly tell what the fruit were” (51). She complains about the pettiness of contemporaneity, its uneducated and ignorant protagonists. She despises the age of imitation, “I love everything which is not . . . copying and dead at heart,” and the vulgarization of life, “everything mass-produced. Mass-everything” (181). Symbolically, her imprisonment and final death is the one of modernism “martyred by the great universal stodge around” of which she is the last emissary: “in this situation I’m a representative” (180).

One must not forget that the relation between modernism and postmodernism is one of continuity and discontinuity.<sup>15</sup> Depending on the aspect of reality we choose to examine, we may perceive minimal disparity, a clear divergence, or a profound disruption. Both draw inspiration from the irrational milieu of the twentieth century, with Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, and Sigmund Freud lingering as spectres shaping modernity, the embodiment of irrationalist philosophies. Yet they generate different artistic depictions of reality because of their engagement with distinct subject matters. Modernism emerges from the crisis of reason; postmodernism is aware that after Auschwitz there is no reason. Following the analogy, Fowles has placed the characters in a limited space: a cellar. Here most part of the narration unfolds. She is limited by a locked door, while he is caged in his distorted logic. Miranda knows that he is as trapped as much as she is: “You’re the one imprisoned in a cellar” (2012, 49), she says, referring to his obsession, the solitude of his past, the void of his days to come. As they are forced to stay together, her captivity assumes uncanny properties. Her loathing and contempt for him are blended with a mysterious something that is neither loathing nor contempt: “a strange thing. He fascinates me” (99). They are entrapped in a sort of relationship, as it were, a “linked destiny . . . not wanting

14. On the dynamics between modernism, *avant-garde*, and kitsch, see the chapter titled “The Idea of the *Avant-Garde*” in Călinescu (1977), and Burger (1984).

15. On the topic, relevant readings are Harvey (1990) and Jameson (1991). A recent anthology is Rudrum and Stavris (2015).

to be together. But together” (163), both doomed by the desire for things they cannot have. She needs freedom, he needs her: “You’re everything. I got nothing if you go” (224). Hence, a master-slave dynamic takes shape. In the Hegelian system, the dynamic between the two ideal types is the essence of the process of recognition. The master and the slave emerge as such only through the recognition of the other. The slave works with devotion and effort; through imitation applied to his own creativity and originality he begins to shape products for the master; in the end, he transforms the reality. He creates a world auto-sufficient, learns the mystery of nature, and realizes that the realm around him was created by his own intelligence. Thus, the slave is no longer in chains nor alienated from his labor and finally achieves a new self-consciousness. He becomes the master of the master. The master, however, in this unequal relationship is gradually losing power because he is becoming dependent on the knowledge and products created by his slave to a magnitude that the master is enchained by the labor of his slave. At last, he becomes the slave of the slave. Miranda recognizes the dynamic at stake for she writes in her diary: “he keeps me absolutely prisoner. But in everything else I am mistress” (118).

However, the fragile equilibrium breaks when she tries to seduce him and he cannot sexually react. “I could never cure him. Because I’m his disease” (218). The scene is less about sexual impotence than it is a moment of sexual inadequacy.<sup>16</sup> Not only does Clegg read Miranda’s desperate act as an assault on his dignity and probably fragile masculinity but also his revulsion for sex is now embodied by the object of his desire: “she had killed all the romance, she had made herself like any other woman, I didn’t respect her any more, there was nothing left to respect” (89). This is probably the novel’s climatic point, of which Miranda has a vague understating: “there is a great rift between us now. It can never be bridged” (194). For all that they share a common knowledge, sexuality is destructive: “we’ve been naked in front of each other. . . . We can’t be further apart” (87). As the invisible thread that keeps them in a sordid yet safe condition breaks, her will to gain power becomes hatred: “I wish I was a Goya. Could draw the absolute hate I have in me for him” (227) while his idolatry turns into indifference.

16. Bagchee, among others, hints at Clegg’s impotence: “as she has no foreknowledge of Clegg’s impotence, the risk Miranda takes is not abstract or symbolical but a very real one” (1980, 226–27). However, the text goes against this interpretation. As Miranda tries to seduce him, he does have an erection: “what happened then was most embarrassing, I began to feel very worked up and I always understood (from something I heard in the army) that a gentleman always controls himself to the right moment and so I just didn’t know what to do. I thought she would be offended . . . I got up, I was shamed, I had to go to the window and pretend to do something to the curtain” (Fowles 2012, 83–84). Thus, Nodelman is correct in writing that it is “his disgust with his uncontrollable lust here that leads to his impotence in the scene that follows” (1987, 336).



Indeed, he lets her die. The violence of his indifference, the brutality of his soul is condensed in his reaction after her death: "I went and made myself a cup of tea" (241).

"Why do you take all the life out of life? Why do you kill all the beauty?" (64). She dies. "Do not let me die" (230). She dies. Symbolically, her death represents the death of the modernist subject replaced by the anonymous consumer of postmodernism. Her bildungsroman has been interrupted, violently, irremediably: "the person I was and would have stayed if this hadn't happened was not the person I now want to be" (223). In the preface to *The Aristos*, Fowles himself seems to support her view. Had she not died, she "might have become something better, the kind of being humanity so desperately needs" (Fowles 1980, 10). So does modernism for modernism no longer is. Modernism was an ongoing experiment that arrived at a point of destination. It was institutionalized, and, consequently, it lost its shocking features. Miranda is well aware of it: "they pay thousands and thousands for the Van Goghs and Modiglianis they'd have spat on at the time they were painted" (Fowles 2012, 180). She dies searching for the sun: "the last words she spoke were about ten when she said (I think) 'the sun'" (241). A reader of Henrik Ibsen cannot but see here an allusion to *Ghosts* (1881). Just before his last epileptic attack, Oswald, motionless in the armchair, asks for the sun: "Mother, give me the sun" (Ibsen 1978, 275). As the sun finally rises out of darkness, Oswald pleads for sunlight, which he terms "the joy of life" (256), synonymous with openness and freedom of choice. Yet, there is no redemption in life. Modernism fades away with its promise of redemption. Clegg humiliates Miranda while she is dying; he first undresses her and then "bound and gagged me and took his beastly photographs" (Fowles 2012, 228). Does not postmodernism do the same with modernism? By having the *Mona Lisa* on a pillowcase does not kitsch humiliate the Renaissance? Miranda dies of a cold she caught from Clegg. He lets her die the moment he finds her no longer valid. She will be replaced by another victim, "someone ordinary I could teach" (247). Clegg, however, goes on living searching for a new victim, collecting new victims. Bluntly he tries to reproduce the original hoping that "the clothes would fit" (247): a postmodern imitation of the original beauty in a fashion similar to Rauschenberg's *Persimmon*. As the twenty-first century begins, Benjamin's aura as the quality of an authentic art seems to be outdated. Instead, the notion of kitsch remains essential in a post-Warholian world. What remains is postmodernity, the age of mass production, reproduction; a collage of significance given elsewhere. Therefore, Bagchee's statement "the world of *The Collector*, . . . is not our world; however, it is similar to the view of the world we have in our darkest



hours" (1980, 224) does not seem correct. Miranda's death is largely a reflection of our world, where beauty is replaced by some sort of message and the futility of Clegg's life recalls that of conceptual art.

### On Conceptual Art and the End of Art

The death of art is a phrase that describes the epoch of the end of metaphysics as prophesied by Nietzsche. For Hegel, the death of art means that art no longer stands in the religious or historical context in which it had emerged. In short, when art detached itself from religion it became an object rather than a medium through which a higher reality made itself present. Thus, art comes to an end in its highest vocation, and it becomes autonomous. While today it seems at least misleading to talk about autonomy and simultaneously be aware of external structures, the myth of "l'art pour l'art" became, at the end of the nineteenth century, a struggle for independence from any utilitarian function. "Art for art's sake" was not a selfish abstraction but an attempt to save art from the carnival of lifeless replicas. It was the attempt to preserve a sense of autonomy (as far as autonomy can possibly go), a response to the logic of commercialization. But then with the age of mechanical reproduction art lost its autonomy as well. The second half of the twentieth century brings art beyond institutionalism. Traditional places of aesthetic experience, such as concert halls, theaters, galleries, museums, and libraries, are replaced by new developments such as body art and street theater. The use of machines eliminates any argument about the genius of the artist and the halo that surrounds the arts and isolates them from the rest of existence. All in all, it is an art that does not have the metaphysical ambition of modernism but is more practically linked to contemporaneity.

As a reaction to the madness of twentieth-century ideologies, postmodernity is the end of things: the end of art (Danto), the end of the author (Barthes), the end of history (Francis Fukuyama), and the death of man (Michel Foucault). Prophetic diagnoses have been realized; moving forward involves turning systematically toward the past. What do we make of it? With *Fountain* Duchamp changed our understanding of what art or a museum is about and what the role of the artist is. His work also disrupts the notion of beauty. How far can I push our traditional definition of art and still have it be art? Is it the exhibition of the thing? The renaming of the thing? Is it its contemplation? And because *Fountain* drives the audience to ask these questions, then *Fountain* is art. Art is not defined by what the thing is but by its doing. If an object is art-ing then it is art. Just as when an object is used as a hammer, even if is not a hammer, it becomes, functionally, a hammer. So what is art-ing? For Duchamp, art-ing is

drawing an audience into contemplation and questioning of meaning. In other words, art is not the thing but the meaningfulness of the thing. The notion that the idea, not the artwork itself, is the artistic creation, this is the foundational stone of conceptual art. Let us start with the main question. What is conceptual art? It is an art movement begun in the 1960s in which the idea functions as the artwork itself, thus shifting the value and quality of the artwork from the physical object to the immaterial concept. Sol LeWitt's definition is commonly accepted: "in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art" (1967, 79). That is to say, conceptual art prioritizes the idea above the form; the form is only the vehicle for the idea. The artist is no longer searching for beauty, nor interested in the form but in the concept; it does not matter whether the artwork is made or not, to an extent that "all ideas can be work of art. . . . All ideas need not be made physical" (LeWitt 1969, 106). This is the groundbreaking notion of conceptual art, the fact that there can be nothing on display and it is considered art. Today, conceptual art artists work in factories but they do not create their artwork. They empower someone else to do it; they give instructions.<sup>17</sup> The outcome of Warhol's project updated in later years is Jeff Koons's *New Shelton Wet/Dry Doubledecker* (1981),<sup>18</sup> Tracey Emin's *My Bed* (1998),<sup>19</sup> and Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* (2019)<sup>20</sup> to name some. Post-pop, as far as definition goes. In the attempt to shorten the distance between art and life, postmodernism has in the end transformed life into a commodity. However, to say that Warhol's *Brillo Box* is art because as long as it can be sold it is a work of art is not enough. Essentially, it is considered art because the century allows it. Ultimately, historical considerations, the accidentalities of the present, define aesthetic criteria. Even so, to admit that judgment criteria of one era is not valid for another one is to allow cultural relativism whose ultimate step is an artistic and methodological anything goes. Here we are called to decide whether trash is merely trash or the evolution of art in the age of technology. I think that the problem is not the "artist" but the society that allows it. Thus, can we defend conceptual art? "Conceptual art is made

17. For example, LeWitt's *Institution for a Drawing*. He leaves instructions for everyone to make their own LeWitt. We can own the artwork without spending millions to buy it or without going to the museum.

18. Koons, for example, does not have a studio but a factory with eighty people working for him. He does not create artworks; he has someone manufacturing them.

19. With *My Bed* trash becomes art to the extent that it is hard to say where the commercial institution stops and where the cultural product starts.

20. *Comedian* is a banana duct taped to the wall. It was sold in 2019 for \$120,000.

to engage the mind of the viewer rather than his eye or emotions” (LeWitt 1967, 82). Are not most of those ideas banal? Can we be involved, interested in something that does not steer our emotions? If art does not engage the eyes, it is not historical, it is not skillful; should not we call it differently? Dave Hickey, in an essay originally published in 1993, understands nowadays vacancy of beauty summarizing artists’ antibeauty arguments as such: “beautiful art sells; if it sells itself it is an idolatrous commodity; if it sells anything else, it is a seductive advertisement” (2001, 47). Hickey believes that idolatry and advertisement are both forms of art and that the greatest works of art have a bit of both. Yet this is not the solution but the very root of the problem. Postmodern culture is antielitist because it is popular. Popularity has accepted the market; however popular success does not translate into credibility.

In 1796, a group of young philosophers, Friedrich Holderlin, F. W. J. Schelling, and Hegel, wrote an idealistic manifesto *Oldest System-Program of German Idealism* in which they wrote: “for I am convinced that the supreme act of reason, because it embraces all ideas, is an aesthetic act; and that only in beauty are truth and goodness of the same flesh” (Ferrer 2021, 22).<sup>21</sup> This is a view that today is devoid of meaning. Contemporaneity excludes aesthetics from the concept of art. Traditionally the beauty of classical art was understood in terms of a Neoplatonic theory. Nature has defects that art can detect; the painter adjusts the original, the deficiencies of nature, so to obtain ideal beauty and a glimpse of divinity. Today this theory, which depends on a pre-Copernican view that man is the measure of all things, is all but incomprehensible. Rauschenberg wrote that “a pair of socks is no less suitable to make a painting with than wood, nails, turpentine, oil and fabric” (Miller 1959, 58). He used a quilt, Coca-Cola bottles, automobiles tires, and stuffed animals in his art. Bringing reality into art, when reality had been what art was to represent, changed the way people thought of art. It brings us to the substance of the question of “what art is” today. Today good taste is optional, bad taste is artistically acceptable, and *kalliphobia*, literally fear of beauty, is at least accepted.<sup>22</sup> My understanding is that today’s aesthetics is not part of the definition of art. Today something is a work of art not when it is beautiful but when it has a meaning; if it is about something. In sum, while beauty may be necessary to a life worth living—we want beautiful things—it is unnecessary to art. Beauty is not a necessary condition in an adequate definition of art.

21. The document is fragmentary, and the authorship is unknown. However, the handwriting is Hegel’s, and Hegelian scholars today accept the idea that Hegel is the author. See Magee (2001).

22. *Kalliphobia* (after the Greek words for beauty, *kalos*, and fear, *phobia*) is a neologism by Danto on the modern sensibility of the cult of ugliness.

Why is that? Danto suggests that it is because we no longer find it acceptable to make beautiful paintings in the face of racism, repression of human rights, genocide, civil wars, nuclear threats, and the like. That to paint beautiful pictures in an ugly world would amount to some sorts of “collaboration” with the enemy, a de facto redemption of an ugly world with the consolations of beauty. “If there is to be art, it should not be beautiful, since the world does not deserve beauty” (Danto 2002, 51). In this vein, conceptual art is the end of art. The end of the cult of beauty is what I term the end of art.

Apologetics of postmodernity will surely say that this is not the end of art but simply another age of art history. Contemporaneity, “has ushered in an age of pluralism where thousands of different flowers may bloom” (Carroll 1998, 17). Indeed, neither Hegel nor Danto conceive the end of art in negative terms. For Hegel, the secularization of the arts is a positive moment because it shows an advance in human understanding of itself and the world: “art therefore has become a free instrument which the artist can wield in proportion to his subjective skill in relation to any material of whatever kind” (1975, 1:605). It means an on-going conquest by art of the object and content which is human life in its whole complexity and diversity:

art strips away from itself all fixed restrictions to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes Humans its new holy of holies: i.e. the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds and fates . . . nothing that can be living in the human breast is alien to that spirit any more . . . art does not need any longer to represent only what is absolutely at home at one of its specific stages, but everything in which man as such is capable of being at home . . . It is the appearance and activity of imperishable humanity in its many-sided significance and endless all-round development which in this reservoir of human situations and feelings can now constitute the absolute content of art. (1:607–8)

Art has therefore won for itself freedom of content to explore the infinity of the human heart, and of form, independent from all hierarchies of themes and styles. For this reason, there is little that Hegel can say about the path that art should take in the future; that is for artists to decide. What is it that remains in the post-Warhol world? Similarly, when Danto speaks of the end of art, he refers to a conquest: “freedom ends in its own fulfilment” (1986, 114). The end of the developmental history of art is not a collapse of civilization, for in the age of pluralism, self-direction is all that matters: “art-makers, living in what I like to

call the post-historical period of art, will bring into existence works which lack the historical importance or meaning we have for a long time come to expect. . . . The story comes to an end, but not the characters, who live on, happily ever after doing whatever they do in their post-narrational insignificance” (111–12). Liberated from history, art enters an era of freedom. But what type of liberation is one where everything is possible? I rather tend to believe the opposite. The *Odyssey* comes to an end, but wars do not stop. That is to say, the historical process moves necessarily forward in one way or another, but art does not. Hegel did not live long enough. Had he seen the past five or six decades he would have been horrified by postmodernism. Not because art no longer performs a religious function and so no longer fulfills its highest vocation but because artworks no longer express true humanity and they no longer are genuine artworks. Hegel insists that modern artists should represent “everything in which man as such is capable of being *at home*” (1975, 1:607). This may appear to be a fairly innocuous condition, but it has been ignored. The shipwreck of art into the bay of conceptuality produces a reader and an audience that is no longer infected by the artwork.<sup>23</sup> In other words, there has been a transfiguration of sorts in the artwork such that the artwork ceases to be a representation of beauty and is simply a representation. A thesis so to speak. But then, is not Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) a thesis as well? Is not the hand that blocks the view of her sex a thesis on the power of the female body? In Danto’s words: “anything, of course, can be seen interpretively as long as one supposes it to embody a meaning” (1998, 130). Thus, let us conclude that the difference between “before and after” is less about meaning and more about beauty. Today the chronic condition of art is one of stasis. Mutually exclusive aesthetics coexist in a sort of stalemate, no one being able to perform a leading role because everything is permitted on principle. The crisis of ideologies makes it more and more difficult to establish convincing hierarchies of values. Leonard Meyer believes we are in a “fluctuating steady-state” (1994, 103). Change is everywhere, but we live, culturally, in a perfectly static world. The contradiction is only apparent, for stasis “is not the absence of novelty and change—a total quiescence—but rather the absence of ordered sequential change” (102). As a result, beauty and ugliness have become through relativization almost meaningless categories. Meanwhile, postmodernity adds piles of rubble with no

23. I am here referring to Tolstoy’s view in “What Is Art?” Art is based on infection, that is the ability of art to communicate emotions: “if a man experiences this feeling, if he becomes infected with the author’s state of mind, if he feels his merging with others, then the object that calls up this state is art; if there is no such infection, no merging with the author and with those perceiving the work—there is no art. But infectiousness is not merely an indisputable sign of art; the degree of infectiousness is also the only measure of artistic worth” (Tolstoy 1995, 210).

direction at all. If Danto is correct and we live in a posthistorical phase, then we live outside history. Art vaporizes in a caricature of itself. Symbolically, *The Collector* does not provide a pathway forward, but it does capture the profound shift. Miranda battled against the vulgarization of culture. Accordingly, she is attracted to Georg Paston, an artist twenty years her elder, more by a feeling of admiration than love. It is an aesthetic attraction: “I know that G.P. in many ways represents a sort of ideal now” (Fowles 2012, 190). He is possibly more than that; he is “the romance, the mystery of it. Living” (189). His principles of art and morality give Miranda the strength to survive. Even so, she could not save herself from the postmodern Clegg. Perhaps, there is still time to save art from its ending by remaking it into something more than a theoretical item.

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