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Abstraction And Libidinal Nationalism In The Works Of John Boyle And Diana Thorneycroft

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Visual Arts
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ABSTRACTION AND LIBIDINAL NATIONALISM IN THE WORKS OF JOHN BOYLE AND DIANA THORNEYCROFT

(Monograph)

by

Matthew Purvis

Graduate Program in Visual Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

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Abstract

This thesis examines the work of Canadian artists John Boyle and Diana Thorneycroft. It analyzes their imagery in aesthetic, political, and strictly materialist terms using the theoretical work of Wilhelm Worringer, Wyndham Lewis and Gilles Deleuze. Both artists have appropriated elements of Canadian history (historical figures, cultural archetypes and aspects of material culture) to create art works that are alienating and abstract. With Boyle, this has involved constructing a wall of noise to operate as a territorial marker, one that both parodies and reinforces the traditions of the nation. His art has been one devoted to nonsense, nihilism and a deliberate short-circuiting of communication. This is invested in advocacy for a Canadian nationalism that is both mournful and absurd. For Thorneycroft, it has meant a shift away from the production of absurd tableau dealing with Canadian nationalism, to an attempt to encounter the crimes of the country's history with empathy. However, her formal means have consistently short-circuited her attempt to create a morally therapeutic art.

Keywords

John Boyle, Diana Thorneycroft, Canadian art, history in art, Wyndham Lewis, George Grant, nationalism, abstraction, Gilles Deleuze, sexuality, London Regionalism, dolls, dioramas, photography, painting, Group of Seven, Jonathan Bordo, Wilhelm Worringer, Dennis Burton.

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Introduction

0.1. Introduction

My thesis examines London born painter John Boyle and Winnipeg based photographer Diana Thorneycroft. Boyle enjoyed notoriety in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an associate of the London Regionalists and the flamboyant painter of esoteric, often sexually charged, depictions of Canadian history and his daily life. In the 1990s, Thorneycroft emerged as one of Canada's most discussed photographers, creating work concerned with the body and representations of sexuality that often sparked public controversy. After the turn of the millennium, she turned most of her attention to examining Canadian culture, often with morbid humour. Each of their projects foregrounds the libidinal as a major constitutive factor in Canadian nationhood. Depictions of children have an emblematic role for each of them in this respect and their imagery sometimes directly draws from their own childhoods. Rather than confining their interests to the autobiographical or subjective, they have mapped their concerns with the body and sexuality onto the broader scheme of the body politic of Canada. Nation, sexuality, childhood and death are formally and thematically interwoven in their conceptions of history and art. However, both artists push the problem of the historical in art, and art as historical narrative, into radically different types of abstraction.

The topic of nationalism and the politics of representing history have been frequently broached in Canadian art historical writing. Such work tends to focus on narratives of group identity, imagined communities, minoritarianism etc.[1] These approaches privilege analysis of

1 Such approaches tend to follow along understandings on nationalism derived from Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) and

the institutional and social function of art works or art reception, assuming correlations between the content of works and their social milieu. They treat artworks as reservoirs for socio-political semantics.[2] While I would not deny that such things are at play to a degree, a major part of my interest resides in the challenge that the formal logic at work in the imagery of John Boyle and Diana Thorneycroft pose to such analytical models. For both artists, and with varying degrees of intentionality,[3] their visual rhetoric seems to function as a tool for evacuating semantic content or 'common sense' using the 'history' of the nation as the raw material for their imagery.

Nationalism and sexuality are understood within this thesis as two modes of territorialization. Ideas of nationalism as imaginary community and sexuality as a matter of personal or group identity do not concern me as anything more than derivatives of the primary process of territorialization. What is primary, and indeed foregrounded in the work of each of these artists, is the active force of this territorial process as it objectifies the properties of the specific bio-region[4] that each artist identifies as Canada.

Boyle's series *Yankee Go Home* (1973-1977) and Thorneycroft's *A People's History* (2008-2011) series will be focused on as exemplary intersections of these concerns. Works

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the works of Eric Hobsbawm. For a good recent rebuttal to many aspects of their work, see Azar Gat and Alexander Yakobson's *Nations* (Cambridge University Press Textbooks, 2012).

2 For examples of these tendencies displayed in Canadian art history writing, see Marylin Jean McKay's *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011); John O'Brian and Peter White's *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007) and Leslie Dawn's *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012).

3 I have done my best to chart the artists' publicly stated intentions through their interviews and statements about their works. Suffice it to say, while I hope that I have taken these statements seriously, this is not where my analysis halts.

4 I borrow this term from Boyle. Its significance will be developed further in the second chapter.

from throughout their careers are also referenced to illuminate them. These will be accompanied by readings of interviews with the artists, their exhibition statements and, in the case of Boyle, an extensive analysis of his substantial body of articles and unpublished manuscripts. Drawing from this material, I will contend that for each artist the importance of sexuality is matched only by that of satire. And for both of them parody and satire operate as essential tools in how they create their images. These images are objectivations of Canada.[5] By this I mean that (a) Canada functions as an object of libidinal investment, either attractive or repulsive, and (b) that the qualities of their works as art objects formalize what their images depict as constitutive of Canada. It is satire that provides both a method and a form for their work, ultimately determining how it functions.[6] In Thorneycroft, the use of satire unintentionally renders her narratives of historical 'evil' (manifest as colonial brutality) problematic, while simultaneously undermining the ethical and epistemological claims upon which such critical positions are predicated.[7] What logically results is a radically non-moral recounting of history as the perpetuation of farce through a series of mock moral dioramas. For his part, Boyle entertains two variations on the model of the historical in art. The first eliminates the ground of the socio-historical by suspending its figures in the fourth dimension,[8] where any linear or causal conception or narrative of historical development becomes questionable. The second model extends this rupturing of phenomenological

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5 The significance of Canada, both as an object and as a thing-in-itself, will both be dealt with at length in chapters one and three.

6 I am using *satire* in the sense that the term was understood by Wyndham Lewis and which is explained in detail later in this introduction.

7 Thorneycroft has been explicit about the moral implications of the images in *A People's History.* Among other references, she has stated that "Of enormous assistance to me as I consider doing this difficult work are the essays in an exhibition catalogue from *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery / Recent Art...*" http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php This theme will be deal with in detail in the third chapter.

8 The importance of the fourth dimension will be dealt with in the second half of chapter one by examining its theorization by Theosophical writers.

linearity by giving space priority over time and treating history's remainders with a form of mock archaeology. This is specifically the case in his *Canadology* (1988-1993) series of texts, sculptures and paintings, wherein Canada is presented as a mythical land of the dead being excavated and pieced back together in the distant future.

In the case of both artists, their filtering of historical events or personalities through satire allows them to create ambiguous images. These serve less as devices to relate a narrative, than as tools for the objectivation of place. Their images derive more from the *nature-morte* than they do from *tableau vivant*.[9] In Boyle, Canada is rendered as a wall of abstracted faces superimposed on sexualized bodies. For Thorneycroft, Canada is a flattened diorama of stereotypical figurines enacting sado-masochistic events. The image trumps narrative coherency in both cases, and sometimes to the detriment of the artists' intentions.[10] Yet, the image of the nation passes through the libidinal drive of each artist, forcing them to function as its organon. As Gilles Deleuze says "...we are tempted to conclude that bodies are but detours to the attainment of Images, and that sexuality reaches its goal much better and much more promptly to the extent that it economizes this detour and addresses itself directly to Images and to the Elements freed from bodies."[11] To examine these issues, their

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9 The *nature-morte*, or still life, is a pictorial genre that has generally consisted of compositions featuring motley objects, carefully arranged and frequently weighted with allegorical significance. The *tableau vivant*, or living picture, is a theatrical form involving a group of carefully lit actors in frozen poses. Both of these forms of picturing are displayed in the works of Thorneycroft and Boyle. The significance of the *nature-morte* will be dealt with in detail in chapter three.

10 The sometimes substantial disparity between both artists' stated intentions and the formal logic of their work will form a significant point of interest in the second and third chapters.

11 Gilles Deleuze; translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 313. The precise significance and structural importance of this will be relayed in chapter three.

limitations and surprising possibilities, I will be engaging with ideas taken from Wilhelm Worringer, Wyndham Lewis and Gilles Deleuze.[12]

0.2. Abstraction, Satire, Art

In *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* (*Abstraction and Empathy*) Wilhelm Worringer sets out two principle poles to art: empathy and abstraction (the transcendent). The former he associated with the organic and its representation; the latter with the inorganic and crystalline. While a desire to imitate forms is natural, he stresses that it should not be confused with art. Mimesis gives form, but formalization, strictly speaking, is production-in-itself. Though art is satisfying a need, it is the need of formation, not of imitation, that is at stake. The drive for form is cast as an unwieldy metaphysical battle wherein "all artistic creation is nothing else than a continual registration of the great process of disputation, in which man and the outer world have been engaged..."[13] Formal volition should not be confused with aesthetic experience, an experience which is only possible as a secondary occasion in the realm of the empathic.[14] The two poles are gradations of the Will to form, generating, as a byproduct, the "essence of all aesthetic experience: this is the need for self-alienation."[15]

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12 Deleuze and Lewis were both overt in their relationship to, and borrowing from, Worringer. Equally, they each built their respective perspectives out of esoteric readings of Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche. For a (flawed but useful) Marxist critique of the relation between Worringer and Deleuze, see Joshua Dittrich's "A Life of Matter and Death: Inorganic Life in Worringer, Deleuze, and Guattari," *Discourse* 33, no. 2 (2011), 242-262. A kinship between Deleuze and Lewis was also broadly established in Frederic Jameson's *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist,* (University of California Press, 1981). That said, there were still substantial points of difference between them, mostly in regards to their attitudes to Bergson's vitalism. Deleuze, particularly early in his career, when he was concerned with 'pornosophy' and philosophy as comedy, is quite close to mid-period Lewis. It is largely this Deleuze that I engage with.

13 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy; A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (New York: International Universities Press, 1963), 127.

14 Ibid., 33.

15 Ibid., 23.

Empathy designates a leap into an object: a differentiation without borders and a shift from reality to the idealization of the "I".[16] It is a programmatic anthropomorphisation of the world. In this sense, the empathic-aesthetic pole is far closer to the piety of religion than the productivity of art. The aesthetic experience of empathy finds its clearest manifestation in naturalism: "It was the happiness of the organically alive, not that of truth to life, which was striven for."[17] The empathic is to be understood in psychological terms as the objectification of self-enjoyment, or what might be glossed as a form of narcissism. From this position the viewer projects herself onto an object, revealing a particular psychological investment and feeling about the world: "Thus the various gradations of the feeling about the world can be gauged from the stylistic evolution of art, as well as from the theogony of the peoples."[18] Empathy is only necessary for organic and 'naturalistic' art, bringing with it a sense of vitality that is ultimately self-gratifying.[19]

Worringer contrasts this with the inorganic and the suppression of empathic possibility to be found in abstraction. Abstraction is a different *pitch* of self-alienation. (*Pitch* in the sense of both a level of intensification and an environmental embedding.) Manifest as a 'spiritual agoraphobia'[20] toward the phenomenal world, abstraction seeks to escape from the illusions of the arbitrary by insisting on the necessary. It is here that ornament and style dominate as means to refuse empathic projection. Worringer associates this drive toward abstraction with 'savage peoples' and 'certain Orientals'[21] as they struggle with an invasive pantheistic vitalism. In this respect, the autonomous drive of art is fundamentally antithetical

16 Ibid., 24.
17 Ibid., 28.
18 Ibid.,13.
19 Ibid.,14.
20 Ibid., 129.
21 Ibid., 15.

to what passes for social reality. Such a psychic situation results in a dread of space that he speculates was rooted in the evolutionary development of bipeds. Their reliance on touch and skepticism about the visual lead them not to a desire for projection into an object, but rather to the eternalizing of the object.[22] Art is a salvaging of *the thing* from the dissolving experiential field of phenomena: "To employ an audacious comparison; it is as though the instinct for the 'thing in itself' were most powerful in primitive man."[23]

While this initial instinctual drive toward the thing-in-itself is also rooted in the irrational, Worringer suggests that the insistence on removing the object from flux comes to serve a more calculated and complex function that ultimately becomes manifest in science, in which "What was previously felt instinctively has finally become a product of thought."[24] The abstract's effacement of the organic is also an escape from naturalistic representational space,[25] the isolated or harshly delineated object an attempt to avoid the slippery pathos of three dimensional relations.[26] Resulting from this is the domination of plane over space. This re-orients the sense of the 'whole' in a representation toward "a question of imagination, not of perception."[27] The abstraction of the whole "was possible only within the plane, within which the tactile nexus of the representation could be most strictly preserved."[28] In the abstract, tactile materiality and conceptual distance are both maintained in an art that denigrates both empirical experience and empathic reward. The tension between abstraction and empathic projection is basic to the formal qualities of both Boyle's and Thorneycroft's works. The disjunction between these two terms also possesses import for the nature of the

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22 Ibid., 16.
23 Ibid., 18.
24 Ibid., 130.
25 Ibid., 21.
26 Ibid., 39. These traits will have particular significance for Boyle.
27 Ibid., 40.
28 Ibid., 41.

analysis I am conducting. The denigration of the empirical and phenomenological pragmatically means treating any statement by the artists themselves as both speculative and secondary. Within this thesis, their statements are interpreted as either symptoms of a neurotic social game (Boyle's nationalism and Thorneycroft's moral panic) or critical interpretations.[29]

Worringer's scheme is supplemented by readings of two other theorists. His work serves as the crucial element in the art theories of Gilles Deleuze and Canadian born artist and critic Wyndham Lewis. For all three of them, "The feeling of the 'thing in itself', which man lost in the pride of his spiritual revolution and which has come to life again in our philosophy only as the ultimate result of scientific analysis, stands not only at the end, but also at the beginning of our spiritual culture."[30] As a result of the fluctuations of history, it is left to the artist to step "...outside this evolutionary upward march, and looking back into the evolutionary machine, he explores its pattern – or is supposed to – quite cold-bloodedly."[31] For Lewis, this cold-blooded exploration finds its most reliable epistemological method in what he terms *non-moral satire*.

Lewis' definition of satire is eccentric in that it does not designate strictly a form of comedy but an entire ontology:[32] "Satire in reality often is nothing else but *the truth* – the truth, in fact, of Natural Science."[33] Arthur Schopenhauer's concept of the impersonal Will or

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29 The value of statements as interpretation is particularly important for Boyle since so little non-journalistic secondary literature exists on his work.

30 Ibid., 129-130.

31 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 116.

32 It also shifted substantially in different periods of his career. For my purposes, I have tried to retain the most coherent variation as it appears in his writing, notably in *Men Without Art*.

33 Ibid., 121.

'unconscious' is what Lewis specifically associates with this truth.[34] Satire, in this sense, is Schopenhauer's metaphysics with his ascetic Idealism stripped away. The truth revealed to the artist's eye, as Lewis unfailingly insists, is quite ugly to human beings. This is because the truth of the sciences radically undermines what he regarded as the hyperbolic appreciation human beings have for their largely trivial consciousness and experience. Ambiguously, the best thing that can be said for consciousness, Lewis suggests, is that it is actually the 'deadest' part of the universe, or at least the part that has "gone to rot".[35] The Behaviourists, reducing human beings to sensual automatons, strip away the psyche and reveal the deadness of both subject and object, insofar as the two can be distinguished. "So it is *an ideal comedian's philosophy*, we shall find, the one composed by this type of psychology."[36] In terms of what is occurring in the world, bees or ants demonstrate a profounder relationship to truth than a human ever could, at least a modern one.[37] In her book *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art*, dealing largely with Lewis, Jessica Burstein formulates this issue quite succinctly:

> ...the premise of cold modernism is that there is a world in which the mind does not exist – or it does not matter, but in the physical sense. Not "merely" matter: for that would be a lament (or a complaint). There are no laments in cold modernism, for there are no characters who would conceive of themselves as subjects. Insofar as cold modernism engages a world without selves or psychology, it is not antihumanism, but ahumanism.[38]

Satirical art reveals a world where the human subject, at least as generically construed as an autonomous intentional agent capable of meaningful experiences, does not exist. Affectivity

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34 Wyndham Lewis and Paul Edwards, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 311.
35 Ibid., 311.
36 Ibid., 342.
37 Ibid., 303-313.
38 Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 2.

and signification are only relevant as material for a work of art and as formal properties. The satirist in not a 'beauty doctor' or a realist, but rather a 'materialist' who deals with the grotesqueness of the world.[39] This grotesqueness puts it at odds with aesthetics. It is not that satire cannot be beautiful, but it has the kind of beauty usually found in mathematics, for it is "...the shadow, and an ugly shadow at that, of some perfection."[40] Satire magnifies this ugliness. Lewis' materialism reverses Platonism and the Romantic tradition.[41] It is the ugly that leads you to truth and reveals a world populated by automatons and stereotypes functioning according to the dictates of an impersonal Will for which they are puppets. The majority of educators, artists and social scientists work very hard to keep the veil on this reality intact, resisting ugliness and captivating themselves with that 'romantic sensualism' that makes up the *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time or common doxa).[42]

Lewis argues that while the majority of works that fall under the term satire are indeed, intentionally moralistic, satire itself is not necessarily, or even logically, moral at all. This is for the satirical perspective rejects any moral significance, regarding morality as a purely tangential symptom of the *zeitgeist*. Art, he insists, is more 'primitive' than morality.[43] Positioned as paradox, art is at once more profound and more superficial than religion, morality or politics. For satire to be identical to art and for art to evince truth, it "*cannot* be moralistic at all."[44] It must be non-partisan; it cannot side with humanity or anything else – at least nothing other than the truth. "And, in a sense, *everyone* should be laughed at or else *no*

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39 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 103.
40 Ibid., 109.
41 For one of the rare reflections on how crucial satire was to early philosophy, see Clarence Whittlesey Mendell, "Satire as Popular Philosophy," *Classical Philology* 15, no. 2 (1920): 138-157.
42 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 122.
43 Ibid., 108.
44 Ibid., 108.

one should be laughed at,"[45] Lewis insists. There is no room for pity, terror or sympathy.[46] If we laugh, it is because we recognize, though we may not admit it, that there is a distinct lack of pathos. "Men are sometimes so palpable machines, their machination is so transparent, that they are *comic*, as we say."[47] Once the world is stripped of the illusions of a pathetic soul or empathic engagement, what is revealed is the deadness and the abstract quality of a world of things.

There are (at least) two different kinds of deadness for Lewis. The first is the deadness essential to art – the skeletal reality of things:

> ...deadness is the first condition of art. A hippopotamus's armoured hide, a turtle's shell, feathers or machinery on the one hand; that opposed to naked pulsing and moving of the soft inside of life, along with infinite elasticity and consciousness of movement, on the other. [...] The second is absence of soul, in the sentimental human sense. The lines and masses of the statue are its soul. No restless, quick, flame-like ego is imagined for the inside of it. It has no inside. This is another condition of art; to have no inside, nothing you cannot see. Instead, then, of being something impelled like a machine by a little egoistic fire inside, it lives soullessly and deadly by its frontal lines and masses.[48]

The second he explicates further in a discussion of nudity, both as it relates to the practice of art and to the nudist movement. "A naked person is much less *a thing* than is a dressed person,"[49] he states. In a strange way, the naked body is an escape to the 'disembodied,' an escape from the *thingness* of the body. The clothed body is a thing. In fact, it is "far more soul-less than the same apparition naked."[50] Dressed up, it is a doll; it has armour. But stripping down to the body means stripping something down to its soul. It loses its skeleton. However, this naked body "...reduces the 'soul' as well as the flesh, to a dead level, in

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45 Ibid., 109.
46 Ibid., 113.
47 Ibid., 116.
48 P. Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr* (London: The Egoist Ltd., 1918), 295.
49 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 155.
50 Ibid., 155.

practice: it spells the '*naked truth'* all right for us!"[51] This naked truth is the kind of void which nudity opens up. It is something no one wants, in particular social climbing artists, who work in the territory between the barrenness of the 'soul' and the armour that encases it. So, instead of stripping the world, they tend to take this void and transform it into a doll through "mechanizing the natural."[52] This process reveals an artificial truth rather than a naked one, though it is not necessarily any less true for that. In practice, it means the fashioning of another creature, one whose value is in its peculiar deathliness, its shell, which functions as a double to the deadness of the body itself. In Lewis' scheme, the body is an 'ant hill'[53] or 'aggregate'[54] – identical to the unconscious; the Will requires no brain.[55] Only the skeletal surface is really akin to art, though the deadness of the interior is scarcely far behind, albeit more sickly and at a different pitch. The Lewisian understanding of art can be further articulated in this statement from Deleuze and Guattari:

> Can this becoming, this emergence, be called Art? That would make the territory a result of art. The artist: the first person to set out a boundary stone, or to make a mark. Property, collective or individual, is derived from that even when it is in the service of war and oppression. Property is fundamentally art because it is fundamentally poster, placard. As Lorenz says: coral fish are posters. The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive; expressive qualities or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. Not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries and produces them. These qualities are signatures, but the signature, the proper name, is not the constituted mark of a subject, but the constituting mark of a domain, an abode. ... One puts one's signature on something just as one plants one's flag on a piece of land.[56]

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51 Ibid., 157.
52 Ibid., 157.
53 Wyndham Lewis and Paul Edwards, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 298.
54 Ibid., 300.
55 Ibid., 316.
56 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* ; translated by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 316.

Art is territorialization in the most animal, mechanical, or even vegetal, sense of the term. It precedes and conditions any possible ontology or subject. Art is appropriation and abstraction as a means to render expressivity in its most naked form. As Deleuze and Guattari state above, this could take the form of the establishment of a nation's territory (the having more profound than being) and the cultivation of local traditions and idioms. This expressivity is manifest as the objectivation of Will (or Desire) external to, and in unilateral determination of, a subject.[57] Lewis argued that art is the well-spring of impersonal productivity in the cosmos, a source of 'energy' and 'action' which concentrates in the structuring and stratification of things.[58] He identifies it with the body and matter, with an organic purposiveness which is fundamentally inhuman and, even while it plays an essential role in the production of societies, is quite indifferent to human needs or ends. "*...the artist is older than the fish* ... by this meaning the same as the statement that the intellect at its purest does not function in a specifically *human* way."[59]

The sense of art as territorialization, externalization and stratification of aggregate deadness is basic to the discussion that will unfold in this thesis, particularly in the first and third chapters. In the case of both artists, these are primary matters that will unfold both on the level of form and in the place their work takes in a macro political scheme.

0.3. Outline

My first chapter concentrates on the background for both artists. The works of Tom Thomson, Emily Carr and the Group of Seven serve as a major point of reference for each of

57 For a discussion of the genealogical relationship between Schopenhauer's Will and Deleuze's Desire in relation to art, see Nick Land's "Art as Insurrection" in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007* (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic; New York: Sequence Press, 2011), 145-174.
58 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 199.
59 Ibid., 231.

them. These canonical paintings provide a way to question what it means to produce art in Canada and art about Canada. For both Boyle and Thorneycroft nationalism denotes a strategic investment in territory as both border and noumenal realm. The paintings of the Group often, sometimes literally, function as the backdrop for both artists' work. To open, I provide a critical engagement with the work of Jonathon Bordo, one of the leading advocates of the empty landscape hypothesis centring on the nationalist paintings of Thomson and the Group. I critique this theory for being methodologically flawed and fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of paradox. It should become clear that there are two principle poles to the history of art. There is the history of the production of properties and their objectivations (e.g. works of art) and their sublimations by culture (e.g. reception or aesthetics). The latter is what Worringer derided as the superstition of "the verbal concept art"[60] and it is this superstition which Bordo embodies. Bordo explicitly places Thomson and the Group in line with Worringer's abstraction, giving them a negative cast while advancing an empathic projection intended to graft a hallucination of history onto "a landscape empty of human and animal presence..."[61] Bordo's reading is contrasted with a discussion of the theosophical discourse the paintings were embedded in. This foregrounds both the abstract nature of the paintings and their fundamental relationship to Schopenhauer's concept of the thing-in-itself. From there, I embark on a brief genealogy of the libidinal dynamics of theosophy and its relationship to the depiction of nudes in the landscape in Canadian painting. Finally, I conclude the chapter by contrasting the nude-abstract hybrids of Dennis

60 Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy; A Contribution to the Psychology of Style* (New York: International Universities Press, 1963), 122.

61 Jonathan Bordo, "Jack Pine - Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence From the Landscape." (*Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études canadiennes* (27:4) Winter 1992), 98.

Burton with those of John Boyle to reveal the way that abstraction, nationalism and sexuality coalesced within their images.

The second chapter concentrates predominately on Boyle. By analysing his work and the issues with which it engaged, I articulate a tradition and set of ideas that Thorneycroft is either functioning within or acting against. In the case of the painter, I have paid particular attention to the substantial written record which he produced. This includes examining his reviews, articles, interviews and unpublished manuscripts. The majority of this material has never received scholarly attention and sheds important light on the stakes of art production in the country during that period. These texts are dealt with in the context of both his own paintings and the intellectual milieu in which they were written. Because of this, I engage with some of the significant texts concerning Anglo-Canadian nationalism from the 1960s and 70s. In particular, the philosophical speculations of George Grant serve as a backdrop to Boyle's thematization of the fracturing of Canada by the rise of liberalism and the eventual death of the nation. Although Boyle is overtly passionate, it is not the empathic pole toward which his work gravitates. Rather, by embracing art as a means of claiming territory in a pitched battle against the spread of American and internationalist culture, and by embracing anarchic nihilism, he creates a form of painting that is radically abstract. As seen above, abstraction should not be crudely understood as non-representational, but rather as designating a specific form of libidinal investment. The nation as libidinal object is then contrasted with critiques of Canadian nationalism by post-colonial theory. Much of Thorneycroft's work follows a sensibility compatible with such approaches, even as it consistently undercuts the types of ethical and metaphysical assumptions which such theories tend to be predicated on. Rather than treating Canada as an erogenous zone, as Boyle does, she treats it as a space that has been filled with sexual traumas. This chapter will also

introduce the emblematic value given to child figures by both artists. For Boyle and Thorneycroft, the use of the figure simultaneously symbolizes the nation as orphan and the liminal realm and the union between sexuality and death. Using images of orphans, Arthur Rimbaud and pubescent boys taken from pornographic magazines, Boyle foregrounds childhood sexuality while deforming historical narrative (the development into maturity) and reducing it to nonsense. More recognizable historical figures are often literally disfigured in the presence of children and historical events are perversely superimposed.

The final chapter concentrates on how the libidinal contrasts between the two artists are played out formally in their bodies of work. It introduces Deleuze's theory of perversion as a means to understand the nature of image production and maps this onto the rubric of abstraction and paradox established in the first chapter. Sexuality is both intrinsic to the working method of each artist and frequently central to their content. In each, it functions as a means to create alienation effects and to fracture comprehensibility. In this respect their work unintentionally performs a similar operation to that Georges Bataille had attributed to Manet. Commenting on the painter, Bataille argued that the painter's clashing of form and content resulted in a type of sacrificial image: "To break up the subject and re-establish it on a different basis is not to neglect the subject; so it is in a sacrifice, which takes liberties with the victim and even kills it, but cannot be said to neglect it."[62] While the disabling of a linear causal narrative is fundamental to Boyle, it is played out most graphically by his emblematic use of children and their perverse challenge to the adult world of Good sense. Conversely, through disproportionately relying on pictures of institutional child abuse, Thorneycroft suggests a narrative of Canadian history as the perpetuation of traumas. Any clear moral

62 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 21.

interpretation of this narrative, however, is frequently undermined by her multi-layered use of satirical devices. The overtly pathetic figure of the child is always trapped in a rhetorical framework that demeans its pathos and transforms it into non-moral comedy. Her attempt to construct a moral narrative of 'nation building' is subverted by the perversity of her own methods. It requires an extraordinary amount of convolution to read the works in such a moral-empathetic manner. As the reviewers cited will make clear, it takes a concerted effort to ignore the work itself, to deflect from what it actually does in order to cathect it to currently dominant trends in narratives of victimization. Additionally, her reliance on the aesthetics of natural history displays opens up her work to a reading of Canadian history as natural history, following the rubric of Darwinian evolution.

In spite of certain points of overlap, Boyle and Thorneycroft tend to represent two largely irreconcilable poles of the relationship between image production and the narrating of Canadian history or its impossibility. In the works of Boyle and Thorneycroft, Canada designates a pre-personal expressivity that defines and exceeds subjective value.

Chapter 1

1.1. The extinction of the sign

For good or ill, the work of the Group of Seven, Tom Thomson and Emily Carr have been an important point of reference for both John Boyle and Diana Thorneycroft.[63] Their value has been both formal and thematic. The Group has frequently served both artists as either an object or as the literal background to their work. They have also operated as a test for the ways in which Canadian art has been defined by critics and historians and these definitions have, in turn, been points of contention for both artists. However, reviewing nearly a hundred years of criticism on the Group's work reveals how extraordinarily limited in variety the reaction has been.[64] Under the encouragement of Eric Brown, the director of the National Gallery of Canada, the Group was fostered to signal a turn against the more radical aspects of European Modernism that were derided interchangeably as 'Bolshevist' and 'Futurist'.[65] Preceding the First World War, and following the lead of Thomson, original members of the Group – several of whom were graphic designers and satirists – crafted a unique, highly nationalistic variation on the picturesque. Thanks largely to Brown's patronage, the Group developed a 'cultic'

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63 In Thorneycroft, this most clearly the case in the *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* (2007-2010) series as well as *A People's History* (2008-2012). For Boyle in works such as *Midnight Oil: Ode to Tom Thomson* (1969), *St. Paul West* (1969), *Eulalie* (1971), *Tom with Muskoxen* (1975) etc.

64 When reading McKay's review of the critical work on the Group in the 20s and 30s (chapters 8 and 9 of *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950)* side by side with contemporary interpretations collected in O'Brian and White's *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary A*rt, it becomes clear that there's been an update of the jargon if little of the substance in the debate around the Group.

65 Douglas Ord, *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 92.

following among some members of Canada's small art community, particularly in Ontario. In spite of this enthusiasm at home, when viewed from a more international context, their work took on a rather different hue. Leslie Dawn has suggested that their work amounted to a 'caricature'[66] of the genre's clichés which led to "complex and entangled hybrids, cobbled together."[67] This sense of parody resulted in excessive, often violent colouration that had more in common with advertising than traditional landscape painting and pushed toward a 'fracture' within the picturesque. Among European audiences, their work was confused with 'outsider art',[68] though the kind that possessed no cachet for the avant-garde artists, critics and collectors of the continent. "Even as naifs, then, the Canadian artists failed."[69] After the war, the press would declare that "...ultra modern art which had its birth in Germany had been killed by the war..." leaving Group member A.Y. Jackson to optimistically opine that the new society created by the war would allow Canada to triumph over the temptations of industrial materialism.[70] Members of the Group began stripping away many of the more decorative aspects of design that they favoured previously. This gave a new solidity to the image of the figure and the landscape. "...the stark, bleak, muddy-coloured landscape of the front [...] had given [...] a new appreciation for the irregular and barren landscape of northern Ontario."[71] By the mid-1920s the Group found themselves being chided for their nationalism by members of the art community outside of Brown's circle at the National

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66 Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), 42.
67 Ibid., 47.
68 Ibid., 84-85.
69 Ibid., 86.
70 Maria Tippett, *Art at the Service of War: Canada, Art, and the Great War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 7.
71 Ibid., 109.

Gallery, particularly since their images seemed to be conceived of as "[e]pics of solitude, chaos and snow" and derided as the "dehumanization of painting."[72] Even the Group's Lawren Harris at times found all of these images of wilderness 'weird' and 'unpleasant'.[73] Meanwhile, Emily Carr saw in them "...a world stripped of earthiness, shorn of fretting details, purged, purified; a naked soul pure and unashamed; lovely spaces filled with wonderful serenity."[74]

It is the 'lovely spaces' of the Group that have continued to cause the greatest consternation to art historians. The 'cult' which grew up around them has been conflated with ethnocentrism and racism and thus a drive toward the erasure of non-whites.[75] This erasure has been hypothetically traced in the pictures of an 'empty landscape' devoid of human presence. This hypothesis has had its most persistent and complex discussion in the frequently cited work of Jonathan Bordo.[76] While most uses of his work over the past two decades has focused on his theory's implications for colonial themes, what fundamentally under-girds his theory is a palpable anxiety about the possibility that art may have little to do with human experience or values.

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72 Marylin J. McKay, *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 179.

73 Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 166.

74 Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1990), 17.

75 See Dawn (passim), but also Mackey (23-49) and McKay (191-203) for an overview. The linking of the wilderness and racism is something that Bordo will also perpetuate. The previously mentioned authors cite him uncritically.

76 Bordo develops his theory in several articles starting with "Jack Pine - Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence From the Landscape," *Journal of Canadian Studies-Revue d'Etudes Canadiennes* 27, no. 4 (1992); "The Terra Nullius of Wilderness – Colonialist Landscape Art (Canada & Australia) and the So-Called Claim to American Exception," *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 15 (1997); and "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* (2000). I have concentrated my criticism almost entirely on the last article since it is the most coherent and fully formulated variation of his argument.

According to Bordo, the wilderness comes to Canada as a paradigmatic site to be constituted by "European tribal nations" in the new world to construct the "imagined communities of the nation-state",[77] whose mapping is predicated on a 'Scripture'[78] that goes uncited. He posits that, "[t]he *wilderness* marks its (auto)promotion as a linguistic sign, a sign for dislocation and gaps, as a claim to an exception to culture within culture, pure willfulness (from Germanic *wil*), beyond the law. It offers signification by emptying and dissolving significance. It halos a very human enunciation by declaring human erasure. The wilderness posits itself as a sign to threaten the extinction of the very human sign."[79] This sense of the wilderness, as the eraser of names and significance, he regards as a means for the violent capture of territory.

In spite of the fact that he explicitly refers to the wilderness as an 'ineffable condition',[80] he goes on to probe what this condition is. Whether it involves the extinction of meaning or of people, he seems traumatized by what he imagines is occurring. Speaking specifically to the work of the Group, Bordo states "I am concerned with witnessing as a general and determinant *doing* of modern pictures, how it works and the cultural implications of pictures to perform such a role."[81] In other words, he attempts to re-inscribe the picture of the wilderness within an ethico-juridical order that will restrain the nihilistic potential of the work of art as a manifestation of inhuman Will. By doing this, he can transform the picture into a *doer* of potential evil whose disruptive capacities

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77 Jonathan Bordo, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness," *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 26, No. 2 (2000), 225.
78 Ibid., 228.
79 Ibid., 227.
80 Ibid., 229.
81 Ibid., 228.

need to be carefully harnessed by the constraints of common sense language games.[82] To use the language of Worringer, what Bordo seeks to do is to shift the works from the abstract to the empathic; from the non-representational and non-phenomenological to the romance of history. It is the tension between these two models for looking at pictures that will persist in the majority of the works discussed in this thesis. Bordo's attempt to inscribe picturing with significance is a means of capture for the sake of his political interests, and these interests are endangered by what he terms a 'paradox'. The wilderness picture is such a dangerous paradox, though he never clarifies if this paradox is veridical, falsidical, antinomous or dialethetic.[83] "The wilderness as enunciated from Tom Thomson's *The Jack Pine* is a condition that in principle denies access to the presence of a Subject. It both denies the speculation and invites testimony to this situation or condition."[84] His insistence on the fundamentally paradoxical nature of the wilderness picture dominates his text. It is itself never more than speculative at best. He seems perplexed that art could erase the subject when the 'symbolic deposit' of their presence is the only sense he can make of it. Repeatedly, Bordo explains that the wilderness is the unrepresentable, yet it has been pictured, though this picture is not a picture of what it

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82 His earlier text, "The Jack Pine," excoriates anthropomorphization but he seems completely non-cognisant of the fact that his arguments are doing this in the most absurd way possible. This is not, of course, to claim that pictures of land 'for the taking' by new immigrants has not had, and continues to have, a significant role in the Canadian state's advertising of itself. But Bordo, and those who cite his theory as evidence, are not making this claim but a rather different one. Besides that, the images of Alberta used by the state to attract immigrants, much like images of suburban developments in Brampton or British Columbia, have little to do with the wilderness. It also, perplexingly, leaves out the importance of the presence of indigenes, either as traces, or as guides to the tourist industry. See Patricia J. Jasen's *Wild Things: Nature, Culture, and Tourism in Ontario, 1790-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

83 A *Veridical* paradox is one that appears false but may be true in fact. A *Falsidical* paradox appears absurd and in fact is. An *Antinomous* paradox is the result of true arguments on false premises. A *Dialethetic* paradox is both true and false simultaneously. The suggestion that the Canadian imagination as fundamentally of the dialethetical persuasion was put forward by Northrop Frye and will be returned to in the final chapter.

84 Ibid., 229.

represents. Thomson's painting, seemingly devoid of human presence, is understood as 'apocalyptic'[85] but it is a botched apocalypse because the picture is inscribed with a figural witness, which is the painting itself (as the painter's trace) with the tree standing in as his double. Bordo summarizes, "So at least for Thomson and the Group of Seven, the wilderness as picturing seems marked by a sustained effort to fulfill pictorially a metaphysical intention to deny systematically human presence, the pictorial analogue to the fifth day of creation."[86] Leaving aside the significant symbolic and theological problems of conflating the apocalypse with the fifth day of creation, there remains a nagging question: if the picture is a witness, what does it see? Keeping with his theological references one might wonder if it is not, like Lot's wife, just a pillar of salt? From the way he describes it, picturing only seems to see itself, if it is not blind. This is unacceptable for Bordo, who, like many of the Group's defenders, obsesses over an experiential contact that seems constantly undermined by the work itself. However, since the picturing in question is effectively 'dissolving significance' because it is predicated on disavowing the existence of a human subject, Bordo does his best to recode its vacuous vestiges to represent something possessing social meaning.[87]

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85 Ibid., 229.

86 Ibid., 230. It should be pointed out that even if one were to take Bordo's arguments regarding the significance of the solitary tree without reservation, they would still fall flat if applied to more than a handful of the Group's paintings, the majority of which contain inchoate masses of trees. That is not even to broach the problems posed by Edwin Holgate's work of figures in a landscape. Bordo ignores all of these complications and seems incapable of looking at a picture as doing anything other than presenting a severely over-generalized and linear narrative.

87 By his own logic, is Bordo not suffering from some severe existential trauma and just transforming the wilderness picture into a blank wall to project on, refusing to look and instead constructing a fabulation for his moral concerns? Judging by the way he breaks down the structure of fabulation (232-236), the answer is *yes*.

Rather than seeing the picture as a black hole, Bordo transforms it into a kind of totem pole, stacked with anthropomorphic significance. His entire analysis is predicated on giving agency to picturing and then avoiding the "philosophical question as to what it means to impute to pictures the agency of witnessing."[88] Bordo seems incapable of imagining that the picture's agency is anything but familiarly human. He refuses to notice the 'Otherness' of art and simply displaces the viewer onto the picture itself. Otherwise, how can we explain the indignation he expresses at the picture's indifference to recognizing how people imagine themselves to be? "Because the wilderness alleges the zero degree of history, the indigens [sic] who are imputed to dwell in the wilderness are considered to be in a wild or savage state, even deemed to be fauna and flora, and/or deemed thus to be not there at all."[89] Suffice it to say, Bordo does not realize the ramifications that if the wilderness picture does this, it does it every bit as much to Thomson or Jackson as to anyone else. That settler culture could be a rush toward oblivion concerns Bordo less than their reluctance to repent their (ab)original sins and leave a confession behind. In the picturing of wilderness, it is not simply that select historical events are erased, but that art production is rendered an act of nonsensical territorialization in the process. Bringing Freud in, Bordo patches up the instability of his earlier argument to state that, "To represent is thus a significant kind of negation."[90] The psychoanalytic notion of disavowal then allows him to re-inscribe everything into social practice (good sense) and to assert that the Cartesian idea of a 'savage cogito', the scientific world-view which stands on 'the rubble' of society, is just a fantasy about

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88 Ibid., 236.
89 Ibid., 231.
90 Ibid., 241. This should also prompt the question: if this is so, what would representing it otherwise negate? Would not representing indigenes as human agents still simply be negation?

objectivity, one that runs parallel to the idea of wilderness, functioning mimetically in relation to colonization.[91] The crux of his argument then becomes predicated on an absurdly over-literal interpretation of the Cartesian-transcendentalist concept of solitude. "The cogito of the new world wilderness is that very specular subject, a witness figure testifying to the condition of wilderness by marking itself as being there at the site of the wilderness. But ... the very act of being seen and the factum of the picture insult the condition to which the picture is the testimony."[92] Since the picture negates experiential pathos, Bordo pathologizes it as the product of trauma, to be "understood as 'an event without a witness' [that] finds in the wilderness a symbolic scaffolding, which actualizes landscape as a mise-en-scene for obliteration and the memoryless in contrast with classical representation where landscape is the mise-en-scene for history and historical narratives. Trauma makes the sublime forensic and historical."[93] The wilderness picture can then be interpreted as the erasure of traumatic events by refusing to accord them meaning and a sanctified place in history. The absence of the event in the picture illustrates that it is haunted by the event. The absence of evidence of the event is Bordo's idea of forensic evidence. If there is nothing there, something must be there *more profoundly*. The crime of the wilderness picture is that it denies that history means something and reduces it to layers of insensate sedimentary matter, much like paint on a canvas. It is here that what disturbs him is most apparent. He needs to insist on

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91 Ibid., 246. This is not an easy conflation. Is the suicidal drive for apocalypse that he tacitly accords the Group really a corollary with the interests of bourgeois colonial expansion? Although a contextual reading of the use of the Group's work by said class could have shed light on this possibility, he decides to 'deconstruct' Descartes instead. This is a crucial gesture for his argument, but one which is undermined by the evidence. See note 111.

92 Ibid., 243.

93 Ibid., 244.

ineluctable human presence in order to animate art, but what the art he discusses insists on, and what he tacitly seems to acknowledge and then disavow, is that the work of art is not a means of imbuing things with vitality, but the contrary. Attempting to instill vitality into deadness is absurd. Examining this matter from a different angle, Canadian born artist and critic Wyndham Lewis once called upon the thought of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in order to insist that the work of art is precisely immobilization and the destruction of relations beyond itself, that is, to the interests of people. Such an absolute deadness is akin to immortality. "It is an immortality, which, in the case of the painting, they have to pay for with death, or at least with its coldness and immobility."[94] The work of the artist is death. The work of art is dead, and the dead cannot be 'haunted' no matter how much Bordo wishes they were.

In spite of his quasi-instrumentalist approach to art, Bordo, with his condescension to science and dread of the meaningless, reveals a blatantly Idealistic bent which makes his writing of history more theological than materialist. At the heart of this is the fact that he predicates his argument on the insistence that human presence is a given rather than a secondary effect of non-human Will.[95] While Bordo's argument is both empirically unsound and largely irrational, what can be salvaged is his assertion that "*The Jack Pine* is art. It connects to human culture's oldest and deepest experiences at the very origins of art itself."[96] Taking up Bordo's appeal to Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit

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94 Wyndham Lewis, *Wyndham Lewis on Art; Collected Writings 1913-1956* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1969), 208. Lewis did not suggest that people do not exploit works of art for social and political purposes, quite the contrary, with this often leading to absurd results.

95 The latter will be dealt with in section dealing with Theosophy that follows below.

96 Bordo, Jonathan, "Jack Pine - Wilderness Sublime or the Erasure of the Aboriginal Presence From the Landscape," (*Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études canadiennes* (27:4) Winter 1992).

figure[97] I would suggest that the theoretical edifice he constructs can be readily inverted. As we shall see with the works of Boyle and Thorneycroft, a picture refutes history (the narratology of empirical qualia) and fabricates that which is non-empirical but real. It instantiates the materialization of properties that may or may not have any function in the phenomenal register. Additionally, I will argue that a painting or photograph also performs an action, though not one of mimesis, but of demonstration. This is to invert Bordo again and insist that an artwork is both culture and "an exception to culture within culture," if only because it is natural and culture is unilaterally determined by nature as Will or the objectivation of the in-itself. These arguments will be unfolded in stages throughout the rest of this thesis. Boyle and Thorneycroft's work are crucially impacted by the problem of the paradoxical picture since they both use explicitly historical images to radically dehumanize historical narrative. Like the Group, they create a form of highly abstract art whose representational suggestiveness functions as a decoy for what the works actually do.[98]

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97 Jonathan Bordo, "Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness," (*Critical Inquiry* (2000)), 236. The duck-rabbit is a pictorial illusion where two images can co-exist within the same figure, allowing the viewer to toggle between them. The fact that Bordo uses Wittgenstein's duck-rabbit is enough to indicate that he is aware that his entire argument can readily be flipped into something very different. It also indicates that the content that he alleges to be erased is not apodictically present but produced thanks to an optical illusion while the structural, and essentially meaningless and abstract nature of depiction is retained either way. This, in particular, will have consequences for Thorneycroft since her work is also about traumatic erasure, but where trauma is never real, but only a necessary rhetorical fiction for the production of a narrative riven with dysfunction.

98 This claim is developed predominantly in the final chapter of this thesis.

1.2. The pictorial paradox

We have just witnessed Bordo's severe anxiety around the apparent contradiction in the paradox he described above. But this contradiction in picturing may only be apparent. A paradox, as logicians know, and as Gilles Deleuze explains, is not properly a contradiction but rather "what allows us to be present at the genesis of the contradiction."[99] It allows access to logical facticity without phenomenal bias. It is to witness without being a subject. Contradiction does not apply to the paradox because it makes no claim on the empirical or the possible. Instead, it is a void where sense is subdivided ad infinitum and nomadically redistributed as pre-personal singularities. Roving in opposing directions, the elements of sense cannot cohere within the redundancy required to fulfil either the principle of identity or that of Good order. Each of these, like common sense, functions as an organ which subsumes all difference under the avatar of the "I". Language seems to necessarily rely on such a structure. This is, in effect, its chief blindspot and certainly the blindspot through which Bordo understands picturing. "Language does not seem possible without this subject which expresses and manifests itself in it, and which says what it does."[100] The paradox, therefore, places a language in a position of severe excess, yet where it can find a power in spite of itself, not as a form of communication but as the active decomposition of any such order. To be present as such, is to be the active force of decomposition, to be "as a single point...

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99 Gilles Deleuze; translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 74.

100 Ibid., 78.

inseparable from the event occurring at that point, always being zero in relation to its realization on the line of ordinary points, always forthcoming and already passed."[101]

In the paradox, sense is impenetrability (the zero). It is exhaustion only expressing its exhaustion. It functions like two mirrors facing one another, each holding an empty image of non-being: sterile division and its evanescent double (image).[102] The non-being of sense, its distinctness as that which is expressive rather than possessive, is associated with the *noema*, a thinking which is subsistent to any being. "One of the most remarkable points of Stoic logic is the sterility of the sense-event: only bodies act and suffer, not incorporeal entities, which are the mere results of actions or passion."[103] The problem can be reformulated along these lines: there is a distinction to be drawn between signification and designation or demonstration, that is, between meaning (Good sense) and the expressivity of sterile division and its evanescent doubles. The latter will always appear absurd to the former (a picture that pictures nothing). A paradox *refuses* resolution.[104] This is not deferral, however, but the praxis of paradox in-itself, a praxis which it designates and demonstrates in-itself and by-itself, indifferent to experience. The nature of this demonstration will be developed further as the formal logic of each artist's body of work is unpacked in the following chapters.

With this clarification out of the way, it is time to review another significant interpretation of the same problem. The following Theosophical episode is best

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101 Ibid., 80.
102 The crucial structural importance of sterile division and its evanescent double (image) is central to the final chapter of this thesis and is articulated in the terms of Deleuze's early theory of perversion.
103 Ibid., 31-32.
104 Such a refusal will be basic to Boyle's art practice. See chapter three.

understood as a more rigorous, in some ways less fantastic, aesthetic misapprehension of what is at stake in picturing than the Bordo case displayed.

1.3. Husk and objectivation

Bordo's suggestion that the wilderness picture 'alleges the zero degree of history' where humans are indifferentiable from vegetables and minerals is testified to by the literature around it.[105] Fred Housser's, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (1926), he spends several pages contemplating what it is to make art in Canada. Housser argues that in spite of significant departures from European Modernism, Canadian art must be Modernist because to be Canadian is to be Modern.[106] Favourably citing a critic, he claims that Canadian art "is not of the soil but of the rocks."[107] In Europe there were fantasies of cities and the peasantry, but in "Canada the race's mood still hovers in space over the natural forms of wilderness, and is a 'thing it itself'."[108] Or again: "There is an austere serenity in the rounded rocky island forms expressive of a baffling but superb identity. The spirit in them is a distinctly detected 'thing in itself'."[109] The term *thing-in-itself* contains the basis of the whole problematic at work in our discussion. Schopenhauer defined the thing-in-itself as the "substratum of all phenomena, and therefore of the whole of Nature."[110] This passage in Housser is instructive because of the degree to which it blurs what is at issue in picturing and how little of a metaphysical distinction can

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105 See note 27.
106 F. B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1974), 16-17.
107 Ibid., 14.
108 Ibid., 15.
109 Ibid., 54.
110 Christopher Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999.), 171-2. This is also the working definition used by Blavatsky.

be drawn between the 'Canadian race' and a rock. Housser couched this in terms that would resonate both with Theosophy and with post-Kantian aesthetic thought. In all likelihood, Housser was using it in the sense popularized by Theosophical writers, one that borrowed heavily from the thought of Schopenhauer and accentuated its mystical implications.[111]

Ann Davis' *The Logic of Ecstasy* situates the rise of Theosophy as an ambivalent reaction to Darwinism. Evolutionary theory spawned not only the spectre of a Godless world, but also presumptions that there was a teleological direction for human life toward betterment. Theosophy was founded on the assumption that through the study of all world religions, philosophy and science, the laws of Nature and the powers of the psyche could be revealed and channelled to promote Universal Brotherhood. Three of its principle theorists were H.P. Blavatsky, P.D. Ouspensky and London Ontario's Dr. Richard Maurice Bucke, a psychologist and author of *Cosmic Consciousness* (1901).

The key principles of Theosophy were known as The Secret Doctrine. It taught that there is one Absolute reality which is antecedent to Being. Phenomenal life is ultimately illusory (*maya*) and without intrinsic value. Value is culled from life's capacity to function as an organon to access the Truth of the Absolute. Human life, as incarnation of the Universal Over-Soul, has access to such knowledge through disciplined

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111 In particular, Blavatsky favourably cites this passage from the philosopher: "If your dead and utterly passive matter can manifest a tendency toward gravitation, or, like electricity, attract and repel, and send out sparks — then, as well as the brain, it can also think. [...] Thus, it is not the Cartesian division of all things into matter and spirit that can ever be found philosophically exact; but only if we divide them into *will* and *manifestation*.... body and matter — it transforms into a representation, and every manifestation into will." H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled: A Master Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology* (Point Loma, Calif.: The Aryan Theosophical Press, 1919), Vol 1., 58. As this quotation makes clear, the wilderness, as conceived by the Theosophically influenced Group and supporters like Housser, was quite distant from the Cartesian splitting that Bordo accused them of.

apprehension. Following from Hindu thought, there are two levels of knowledge: empirical knowledge of particular objects (like trees) and the higher insight that they are illusions hovering over the undifferentiated unity of the world. For a Theosophist artist the task of art was to reveal the latter through the former.

While Theosophical beliefs were certainly not shared by all, or even most, of the Group, they did find a vocal spokesman in Lawren Harris. In language echoing Schopenhauer, Harris wrote, "...if anyone is not to be put off by the hundred and one distractions of the screeching world of affairs, not by the power of the materialists, nor by the spurious reality of all the photographers of the husks of life, let him read *Tertium Organum.*"[112] It was this text by P.D. Ouspensky that Harris interpreted as a defence of artworks as visions of eternity and in which Jock MacDonald saw a "quest for a scientifically verifiable mysticism"[113] in the realm of the noumenal.[114] Ouspensky offered one of the most detailed theorizations of fourth dimensionality and was of particular influence on many visual artists. As Linda Dalrymple Henderson argues, "The ability to discern the four-dimensional world of noumena requires a sensitivity and a quality of emotion Ouspensky saw most clearly in art."[115] A key point of influence on the development of his thought was mathematician Charles Howard Hinton, who sometimes

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112 Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1990), 15.

113 Ibid., 16.

114 The noumenal, generally conflated with the thing-in-itself (Kant) and also the Will (Schopenhauer), is that which is outside of what is empirically knowable by a subject. In Bordo's terms, picturing can then be understand as being fundamentally noumenal since it presents a world without a witness or a subject and a knowledge external to cultural mediation. The space devoid of subject is what stands at the threshold of mystical experience for a Theosophist. This *absolute and abstract space* is that of the fourth dimension.

115 Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 251.

used the allegory of Plato's cave as an apt analogy for the fourth dimension, or hyperspace: "The association of the fourth dimension with the Platonic ideal and, subsequently, with Kant's 'thing-in-itself' was to become a standard feature of the hyperspace philosophy."[116]

At stake for these mystics was an exit from everyday human experience, whether on the side of spirit (*purusa*) or matter (*prakrti*). Blavatsky states that, "On the one hand, absolute abstract Space, representing bare subjectivity, the one thing which no human mind can either exclude from any conception, or conceive of by itself. On the other hand, absolute Abstract Motion representing Unconditioned Consciousness."[117] The issue for the Theosophist, and the artist, was the means by which to intuit the truth in this consciousness. No less attuned to Buddhist and Hindu thought, though bereft of Theosophical optimism, Schopenhauer articulated a similar point:

> The will as thing-in-itself is entire and undivided in every being; just as the centre is an integral part of every radius; whereas the peripheral end of this radius is in the most rapid revolution with the surface that represents time and its content, the other end at the centre where eternity lies, remains in profoundest peace, because the centre is the point whose rising half is no different from the sinking half.[118]

As Cheryl Foster glosses, for Schopenhauer, "Aesthetic contemplation reveals the forms of will most objectively, without in the process being subject to the exertions of willing. Thus, aesthetic contemplation as a means of achieving objective, intuitive

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116 Ibid., 30.

117 Ann Davis, *The Logic of Ecstasy: Canadian Mystical Painting, 1920-1940* (London, Ont.: London Regional Art and Historical Museums, 1990), 47.

118 Quoted in Christopher Janaway, *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 174,

cognition serves as a source for meaning in life."[119] The artwork is an objectivation of the Will individuated as an Idea.[120] The philosopher privileged the aesthetic over science precisely because of its capacity to embody the One of the Will, which would otherwise be incomprehensible in the plurality of the Will's striving. Schopenhauer's Idealism prompts him to argue that the sciences only study representations, or what he terms 'the husk' of things, while art illuminates the Will, objectifying that which can have no empirical witness. This insight, however compromised it may be by the rest of his aesthetic theory, still suggests that artistic products are tools for objectivation of the in-itself.[121] It is in these terms, which Bordo's analysis critiques that the picture can be read as *Will*, which for Schopenhauer is to be understood in phenomenal terms as dying. As the in-itself, the picture is not a signification but the vortex of dying toward death; the demonstration of non-being.

1.4. Love in the fourth dimension

In both Boyle and Thorneycroft, the wilderness picture is simultaneously quoted and transformed into the ground of their imagery. The presence and history of such imagery is built into their work in a collage-like way. The implications of the wilderness picture as outlines above are woven into the logic of their images. For both artists, the relation

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119 Ibid., 214. I would quibble about the use of the word 'meaning' and suggest 'understanding' or even 'structure' since the term *meaning* potentially suggests too much significance for life given its inevitable destruction by the Will's perpetual striving .

120 "...every natural cause is only an occasional cause, it only gives the occasion, the opportunity for the appearance of that one and indivisible will that is the in-itself of all things and whose gradual objectivation is this whole visible world." Arthur Schopenhauer; translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, Christopher Janaway, *The World as Will and Representation* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 162.

121 "The will is the in-itself of the Idea, which completely objectifies it; it is also the in-itself of the particular thing, and of the individual cognizing it, which together objectify it incompletely." Ibid., 203.

between the figure and the landscape takes on multiple levels of significance. These will be dealt with over the next two chapters, but for the moment, I will confine myself to one: the sexual. In Thorneycroft the wilderness picture is cast as the silent witness to crimes, frequently of a sexual nature. Allegorically it can serve as either the eternal indifference of nature to human feeling or the encoding of human activities within a state supported mythology, such as that which arose around the Group of Seven. The figures in her work are usually dwarfed by the wilderness picture. In Boyle, the tension between figure and ground functions differently. His use of colour often blurs the line between them. His figures are dominant, but fundamentally abstracted and rendered both monumental and inhuman. His use of substantial scale combined with the irrational co-ordination of figures from different time periods makes the relationships of his figures difficult to determine. Time is collapsed into space and the painting becomes an object that flattens time, unifying the objects of the world in a manner alien to subjective phenomenality. This places him directly in a long tradition of painting stretching back to the Group. For the Theosophists, objectivation or manifestation was an extension of divine desire. "Hence Cupid or Love in his primitive sense is Eros, the Divine Will, or Desire of manifesting itself through visible creation," Blavatsky states.[122] Ouspensky uses the term 'love' to discuss both the carnal and spiritual instances of an excessive cosmic energy ("there is *much more of this force than is necessary*. Herein lies the key to the correct understanding of the true nature of love."[123]) which moves through the dimensions being expended, whether in reproduction or various transformations on the

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122 H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy, Ed. 3* (London: Theosophical Soc., 1908), 69.

123 P.D. Ouspensky, Nikolai Bessarabov, and Claude Fayette Bragdon, *Tertium Organum; The Third Canon of Thought; A Key to the Enigmas of the World* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1922), 169.

"different planes of life; into symbols of art, song, music, poetry; so can we easily imagine how the same energy may transform itself into a higher order of intuition, into a higher consciousness which will reveal to us a marvelous and mysterious world."[124] Eros serves as the spur for most human action. The intensification it gives to life is manifest in the unfolding of human potency and potential through 'an ocean of sex',[125] fluctuating with genitalia where the surfaces of bodies become mirrored surfaces. However libidinal energy is contingently differentiated on the phenomenal level, it is always within a unilateral monism where Eros and Thanatos are interchangeable as objectivations of the Will. It is in this light that Ouspensky concludes his reflection with a quote from Schopenhauer: "I should point out how Beginning and End meet together, and how closely and intimately Eros is connected with Death [...] Death is the great reservoir of Life."[126] The sexual impulse is an impersonal manifestation of the Will, the truth of which is accessible through the abstract picture or image. Its collapse of beginning and end corresponds to Deleuze's explication of the paradox above, objectivated as a space without a subject.

Fourth dimensionality is displayed through the libidinization of territorial space. When Canada's industrialization got under way and the state expanded its horizon, this process was frequently encoded in terms of masculinity, particularly in the ambit of the nation's wild *northerness,* which even American writers envisaged as a primitive and dangerous realm.[127] "If the United States as south was effeminate, or even homosexual,

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124 Ibid., 170.
125 Ibid., 174.
126 Ibid., 175.
127 For example, see Elizabeth A. Galway, *From Nursery Rhymes to Nationhood: Children's Literature*

and Canada as north was masculine, the same sort of comparison was at work within Canada. Men who lived in the south were not seen as being as virile as those who lived in the north. However, they might achieve greater masculinity by penetrating the north, which was frequently envisioned as a sexually avaricious female lying in wait to destroy men."[128] Although the machismo of the Group has been commented on, often to the point of exaggeration,[129] the severely overdetermined gendering of either the artist or the north clearly displayed ambiguity, if not overt reversibility. Over the course of the 1930s, a substantial amount of anxiety about the landscape began to crystallize. From members of the self-identified left (such as Barker Fairely and Frank Underhill), it involved a critique of the incapacity of the landscape to adequately reflect social problems and political concerns. In cultural terms, the wilderness may have been a utopian myth, but it had relatively minimal use value for urban progressives. Additionally, it was criticized for having become 'repetitive' and 'sterile' in formal terms, thus its aesthetic usefulness had dissipated. Or, in crudely Freudian terms, it had gone beyond the pleasure principle. In the April 1936 edition of the leftist periodical *New Frontier,* Sophie Livesay stated that the 'refrain' of the Group's work was "as barren as [their] grey rocks. Still it is the call of the North, still those pure lonely landscapes; only now they seem empty and sterile where before they held promise."[130] In symbolic terms, for the urban progressives of the nation's

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and the Construction of Canadian Identity (New York: Routledge, 2008) pgs. 151-172 which also points to the increasing malleability of feminine symbolism in the nationalistic register.

128 Marylin J. McKay, *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art, 1500-1950* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 160.

129 For example, see Sherill Grace, *Inventing Tom Thomson: From Biographical Fictions to Fictional Autobiographies and Reproductions* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004).

130 Quoted in Marylin J. McKay, *Picturing the Land: Narrating Territories in Canadian Landscape Art,*

ruling class, the land had to cease being a vague primordial femininity and become maternal; it had to enter time and become efficiently reproductive. The inclusion of the female figure would modernize it by giving it a subject. This meant that nationalist imagery moved beyond being highly libidinized to become domestic.[131] The attempt to humanize space, transforming the wilderness into the landscape, required a new symbolic code that would sublimate Ouspensky's thanatological sexuality into an Oedipal frame; the meaningless thing-in-itself had to be translated into the Good object of common sense.

The attempt to 'afin de conserver, en principe, idéal humanité'[132] was manifest most strongly in Edwin Holgate's *Nude In The Open* (1930). This painting depicts a nude female figure resting on a white sheet against a rock, the landscape of the Precambrian shield spread out behind her. As Brian Foss has observed, this painting is not simply the awkward splaying of a nude over a generic Group of Seven style landscape. The human body quite literally dominates the landscape as Holgate transforms the wilderness into a primavera image.[133] This body, and the landscape it comes with, has another significant aspect. It is not following the same kind of rhythmic line that the most of the Group followed. Instead, Holgate opts for the "architectonically interlocking forms"[134] that were

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1500-1950 (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 223.

131 For a useful discussion of the tensions in this see Jane Nicholas, "Catching the Public Eye: The Body, Space, and Social Order in 1920s Canadian Visual Culture," PhD diss., University of Waterloo, 2006.

132 Michèle Grandbois, Anna Hudson, and Esther Trépanier, *Le nu dans l'art moderne canadien: 1920-1950* (Paris: Somogy, 2009), 85.

133 Rosalind M. Pepall, Brian Foss, and Laura Brandon, *Edwin Holgate* (Montréal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 2005), 49.

134 Ibid., 42.

so dominant in the cosmopolitan nudes of his contemporaries. His figures, actively engaging in tourism and the relishing of a health fantasy, operate as a paradigm for a kind of suburban subjectivization of space. The majority of Holgate's figures cast their eyes down in a domineering glance. Whether in *Early Autumn* (1928) or *Nude in a Landscape* (1930), the nude figure casts a stern maternal gaze down upon the world below, while often couched, quite literally, upon the sheets of domesticity.

Both clashing with, and exaggerating these tendencies, Prudence Heward's *Girl Under A Tree* (1931) mines similar territory. The primavera image is offered again. The body of the nude is muscular and painted in a style that hints at the influence of Art Deco, particularly the work of Tamara de Lempicka.[135] Deliberately erotic content is combined with the importation of exotic elements (tropical forms and European Modernism), resulting in a form of libidinization that isolates itself from the readily accessible. Formalization and style trump the sensuality of the figure. The image as an idea, one verging on abstraction, comes at some cost to the viewer's capacity to engage with it. Reacting negatively to this painting because of its alienating features, John Lyman wrote that, "When an idea becomes explicit it dies.... [Heward has] so concentrated on the volitional effort that she is numbed to the lack of consistent fundamental organization – relations and rhythms ... [it] is disconcerting to find with extreme analytical modulation of figures, [an] unmodulated and cloisonné treatment of [the] background without interrelation. Bouguereau nude against Cezanne background."[136] The question becomes:

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135 Natalie Luckyj, *Expressions of Will: The Art of Prudence Heward* (Kingston, Ont. Canada: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University, 1986), 73.

136 Quoted in Charles C. Hill, *Canadian Painting in the Thirties* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1975), 42.

to what extent, if any, does the inclusion of the figure in the landscape substantially alter what is at play. Does this indicate a shift to the empathic order or expand the realm of abstraction? The answer is seemingly contingent and, for the moment, unclear.

It is in light of this minor nude in a landscape tradition that I would situate the following works by John Boyle. Between 1973 and 1974, Boyle did a series of paintings under the broad heading *Yankee Go Home*. Done in a horizontal format, often on a large scale, these works conflated images of Canadian pop stars like Gordon Lightfoot with those of the beaver, First Nations chieftains, model and activist Kahn-Tineta Horn and *Métis* hunters as well as Cambodian child soldiers and models from the pages of child pornography magazines.[137] These figures were rendered in monumental size on top of landscapes. These images were taken from source photographs and transferred to canvas using the grid method. This technique became an explicit part of the composition with each square of the grid reproduced in a startling array of colours. What resulted was a strange amalgam of geometric abstraction, collage and the History genre without ever being any of these things.

These images are not totally without precedent. There are certain correlates between the Boyle paintings and Dennis Burton's *Niagara Rainbow Honeymoon* series (1967-68). In these 5x5 foot square paintings, Burton explored the scantily clad body of his female companion, both up close and at a voyeuristic distance. In *Niagara Rainbow Honeymoon No. 1 – The Bedroom* (1967), she is seen in a state of semi-dress, their motel bed transformed into the Falls. The figure is superimposed on a square of flat blue, the

137 The import of this is expanded upon in the following chapter.

rainbow of colours radiating around it to the edge of the painting. Burton explained "... the bed as the falls represents rushing emotional and sexual anxiety. [...] Behind her the spectrum of rainbow colours makes a frame as if she were before a mirror. The pose came from a skin-book photograph..."[138] These 'skin-books' had played an important role in Burton's compositions since the early 1960s when Gordon Rayner began bringing them to Canada from New York.[139] The overtly erotic content of pornography was conflated with Burton's experience of abstract painting from New York. On first encountering Willem de Kooning, Burton summarized it as "an erotic experience."[140] Blurring the lines between "flat Greenbergian abstractions" and eroticism had been a central concern for Burton over the decade.[141] In the *Niagara* series, he essays this into what he claimed was a form of tantric art. Besides the female figure framed by the colour spectrum, he also attempted to frame the aural spectrum. Between the thighs of the model in *No. 4* (1968), he placed the AUM of tantric yoga. Echoing the claims previously put forward by Theosophist artists, he stated that the "AUM as a whole represents the all-encompassing cosmic consciousness on the fourth plane, beyond mere sounds, words or concepts. It is the consciousness of the fourth dimension!"[142]

For Burton, the fourth dimension is something he can conjure from the banality of industrial society, whether in the tourist industry or porn. The construction of space in the Burton paintings indicates a free flowing of its subjects. Their delineations do not restrain

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138 Dennis Burton, *Dennis Burton: Retrospective: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Oshawa* (Oshawa: Robert McLaughlin Gallery, 1977), 26.
139 Ibid., 22.
140 Ibid.,16.
141 Ibid., 22.
142 Ibid., 26.

their contents. A bed is transformed into the Falls and a mirror becomes a rainbow. With the images explicitly set on the U.S.-Canadian border, they express a desire for the collapse of borders while retaining a hyperbolic sense of the tactile properties of desired objects. The fetishization of these objects is extended by his use of New York style abstraction, overtly conflating his obsession with garter belts and abstract painting. De Kooning and porn have an equivocal value. Boyle's work does something entirely different. Both series share something of the awkwardness of Heward's work as well as its overt eroticism, but Boyle goes the furthest in flattening things. The gridding of the image dominates. Boyle's *Yankee Go Home* series breaks up not only the outlines of each of the figures, but also interrupts the coherency of their colouration. Hardness of line is one of the most coherent elements in all of Boyle's work. Delicacy or softness is rare. Surfaces are built up as degrees of density, exaggerating their tactility and insisting on their status both as borders and marks. This highlights the act of painting as the creation of a spatial territory, giving it literalization from square to square. The sense of depth is both inconsistent and deliberate, rendered as an assembled surface where each element functions as a surface that is empirically incomprehensible. In *Elsinore* (1974) the collage quality is explicitly brought out by literally cutting one of the figures off at the knees and suspending his lower extremities in another part of the composition.

While Boyle's work carries many of the traits that we have been examining in other artists, he has never displayed any of the supplementary spiritualism that spans from Harris to Burton. Instead, objectivation was strictly a matter of coming to terms with "the husks of life" as they faced the possibility of immanent death, thematized as the erosion of Canadian sovereignty by the influx of American culture, whether in the form

of military conquest, Leftist intellectuals immigrating into the universities or artists into the galleries. In his notes, Boyle once pondered the relation between the investment in non-objective painting and nationalism among *Québécois* artists.[143] He wondered how art can be nationalist without having parochial content. His own work seems to function as nationalist and abstract. Both the monumental quality of the figures and their suspension on a plane extracted from empirical depth testify to the essentially abstract nature of his images. This is a form of abstraction far closer to that posited by Worringer than that espoused by the Automatistes. For while Boyle shares with the *Québécois* painters a scouring of his irrational mental processes, he never forces them into the *cliché*s of non-representational painting. In Burton, his abstractions and his garter belts were no more or less representational than one another: he was just using different source material. His abstraction is strictly rooted in a subjective fetish for objects, but for Boyle, in spite of his penchant for monumental figures, most of the libidinal investment is directed to an objectivation of space where the figure and the landscape operate on the same plane as if they were entirely etched on the same flat piece of rock.

Writing of Boyle's work in the 1970s, Paul Wilson finds something 'oddly disturbing' about these monumental figures "insisting on their right to be alive" as they seem to stare out at the viewer.[144] Yet, they have no apparent rational relationships within the paintings where they are situated and, while historical, are more familiar as names than as images. Pondering the strangeness this creates, he suggests that that Boyle's work

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143 John Boyle, "Canada as a Colony," Handwritten, undated notes in the John Boyle Fonds:AGO (undated), 18-19.

144 Paul Wilson, Typescript for exhibition essay "John Boyle: Paintings and Graphics" Feb. 6 - March 11, 1979 at The Gallery, Stratford in the John Boyle Fonds:AGO, 1.

is guided by "passion over reason," a passion he firmly tied to the concept of Will, and it is precisely this passion that yokes material together.

> And, if you accept the premise, as Boyle obviously does, that a country and a culture are more than just a rational agreement between consenting adults, then it is exactly the same kind of passions, and not reason at all, that in the end make the existence of the country and its culture possible. And, conversely, it is the lack of these passions that make its existence impossible. This leap from painting to patriotism is not far-fetched in the last [sic]: in John Boyle's case it is at the very centre of his creative urge.[145]

Boyle himself would typically, and strategically, downplay according much significance to his formal choices in order to concentrate on content.[146] "The overlayed squares are a literal echo of the way I work," Boyle points out. "And then again, I probably did it to keep myself awake. I don't think much in terms of esthetic [sic] theories or anything."[147] Yet, intentional or not, these choices are important. The grid provides the paintings with an exaggerated sense of porousness, allowing for the surface to function as both barrier and erogenous zone. The colour variation follows no clear pattern, but each point of the grid provides its own chromatic channel. Each channel suggests a radiation in or out, the undecidability of which reinforces the paradox of the picture which is "always forthcoming and already passed."[148] Each square radiates and flattens simultaneously. It

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145 Ibid., 3.

146 Critics tended to be disappointed with or confused about the frequently overwhelming formal traits of his work. For example, "...the concentric squares in garish colours over the buildings of St. Catharines, Ontario in such paintings as 'Yankee Go Home Rape of St. Catharines' are not meaningful at all. [...] The squares hark back to sixties psychedelic posters... and serve only to enliven some dead picture space but in a jarring way." Liz Wylie, "John Boyle plays off 'Pop' with polemic," *The Georgian*, Tues. March 7, 1978, 17.

147 Gary Michael Dault, "Romantic Nationalism Permeates Painting," *The Toronto Star*. Fri. May 14, 1976, E10.

148 Gilles Deleuze; translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, *The Logic of Sense* (New York:

is not just the flatness of the image that is fundamental. The substantial size of the work indicates that it is also a kind of wall. The artwork as wall, barrier, or decoy in space will be of recurrent importance to Boyle and it is this which separates him even further from Burton or the Automatistes, for whom the image was still something to be suspended on the wall and looked into. For Boyle it was increasingly a territory resisting penetration; a demonstration of refusal.

Most of the texts in the following chapter have been taken from Boyle's typed manuscripts and handwritten notes, many of which have never been published. Boyle's work is firmly embedded within the themes of the Anglo-Canadian nationalism that erupted in the mid-1960s before slowly eroding. I am reviewing these themes not simply to give his work context, but to highlight the extent to which the formal issues in his work, whether deliberately or not, respond to many of the ideas which would have saturated his environment. The majority of work on Boyle has concentrated on the blatancy of its content while not acknowledging the isomorphy between its thematics and its form. In fact, this aspect has been almost totally ignored, aided by his consistent refusal to discuss formal questions. Added to this, these ideas will form an important part of the background noise to Thorneycroft's work and provide a useful frame for interpreting how it functions in a Canadian society substantially different from the one that Boyle's paintings were produced in.

Columbia University Press, 1990), 80.

Chapter 2

2.1. Beavers

> For me Southern Ontario, Sou' West-O, if you like, is a nation with a rich and vital culture. Those people who still look to Europe or the United States for their standards are, to me, putrescent vestiges from the colonial era, and their dogma misbegotten piffle. New York built a sham culture on the long dead cadaver of European art and produced nothing of any consequence. Its missionaries knowingly or unknowingly represent the vilest and most noxious elements in the American business aristocracy and preach to an unaffected and unreceptive population.[149]
>
> John B. Boyle, 1974

As polemical as the above artist statement may read, it should be noted that it was printed on the underside of a reproduction of Boyle's *Yankee Go Home – Reclining Beaver* (1974). Like *Elsinore* in the same series, this oil painting is a broad horizontal with a naked adolescent boy at its centre. His body lays, legs spread, on a quilted surface. As with *Elsinore* (1974) the image is woven with a coloured grid, this time echoing the pattern of the quilt the boy is on. To his side is a beaver gnawing on a piece of wood. Noticeably, the beaver is not broken up by the grid. The boy's arm rests on the animal. His hand and feet are both exaggerated in size, presumably thanks to the skewed perspective of the source photo. The image suggests a typically evocative statement from the painter: "...American ownership of the key sectors of the Canadian economy overtook and suspended that of Britain during the 1920's and 1930's. Canada was virtually stripped

149 John B. Boyle, *John B. Boyle*, London Public Library and Art Museum exhibition card, 1974.

of all protections and laid naked and open legged for total exploitation by the American capitalist empire..."[150] This statement invites an allegorical reading of the work.

The subtitle of the painting is an unsubtle pun on the 'beaver' shot common to porn magazines. The presence of the beaver does not simply turn this into a joke. The beaver is there as a double of the boy, who also takes on the role of sexual object. The image of the boy was taken from a pornographic magazine found in the alley behind Boyle's studio in St. Catharine's.[151] The model is reclining in a sexually suggestive manner. In light of Boyle's statement, his body might symbolically double the Canadian natural resources alluded to by the beaver. Yet, with his exaggerated hands and feet and his outward stare, there is nothing vulnerable about him. Like another work in the series – *The Rape of St. Catharine* (1973) – this image pictures the violation of the country by American exploitation. It is notable for the fact that, both in this and *Elsinore*, Canada, as sovereign territory and resource base, is symbolically depicted as a highly sexualized boy.[152] Twenty-five years later, Boyle would state, "*The Yankee Go Home* series reflected the ongoing loss of sovereignty by Canada to the United States in our quest for greater access to American markets, and in their quest for greater access to our resources and territory."[153]

There is a problem with such a straightforward allegorical interpretation of the work. It provides far too neat a correlation between content and symbolic significance.

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150 John Boyle, "Canada as Colony," Unpublished typescript. (John Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 3.

151 John B. Boyle, "History Note," Michael Gibson Gallery, (1999), np. The extent to which the image differentiates itself from pornography, albeit retaining some its traits, is broached in the following chapter.

152 The possible significance of the erotic child or adolescent will be returned to at the end of this chapter.

153 Ibid., np.

As Boyle told viewers at the original exhibition of these works, "I don't think symbolically when I work. [...] I don't try to preach through paintings. The images all have to do with me, not with one another. I am not trying to teach history. I simply am using images I'm getting to know."[154] If we take Boyle at his word, and I will to a degree, we need to understand what "getting to know" refers to.[155] *Getting to know* seems to have been a basic part of his process in that period.[156] He transferred the photo onto a canvas using the grid method, a relatively tedious process. "I work until I have the feeling of completeness – which usually is that I am so sick of the painting I don't want to do any more on it."[157] In practice, *getting to know* is giving something skin to render it simultaneously a barrier and an erogenous zone, a space of excitation and for the exhaustion of production. "I like people to have flesh," Boyle would say.[158] The questions then become: to what degree does the physical program of the painting trump its symbolic function? To what degree has it passed beyond being a symbolic representation into being a thing-in-itself explicitly abstracted from history and extracted from time? And to what degree does this abstraction correspond to the political goal of the work? I will not answer these questions now, but they are important to keep in mind as we progress. When reviewing the written component of Boyle's work, the question of the extent to which it is formally separable from many of his paintings takes on increased relevance. As tempting as it may be to accord allegorical significance to Boyle's work, it

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154 Lenore Crawford, "John Boyle's One-man Show Significant Artistic Event," *London Free Press.* (Wednesday, March 13, 1974), 67.

155 Taking Boyle at his word is complicated by the fact that he was inconsistent, sometimes deliberately, as part of an overall strategy evaluated throughout this chapter.

156 John B. Boyle, "History Note," Michael Gibson Gallery, (1999), np.

157 Lenore Crawford. "John Boyle's One-man Show Significant Artistic Event," *London Free Press.* (Wednesday, March 13, 1974), 67.

158 Joan Murray, "Joan Murray Interviews John Boyle," *The Canadian Forum*, (March 1973), 35.

needs to be reiterated that while such a reading is available, something more fundamental than that is also at play. The signs in his work do not play out a discrete narrative, they create a cacophony. They have distinct features: they cannot be separated from their parochial basis without becoming unrecognizable, the caveat being that their recognizability is not ideal but material: you bump against them rather than resonate with it.[159] The iteration of figures seems entirely arbitrary. Typically, Boyle would claim, "I just like things that happen in my country and, of course, all around me... Louis Riel and Tom Thomson are both very close in my mind, and really they have nothing to do with each other."[160] Many of the figures could readily be moved from one painting to another without significance being lost. In this respect, they formally mirror the non-music of the Nihilist Spasm Band.[161] Fellow band member Murray Favro summarized what they did by stating, "I like destroying stuff. I like ignorance. I don't like intellectual shit. I don't like explaining things."[162] Another succinct summary would be the title of an early negative review of one of their performances: "Canada Represented by Garbage."[163]

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159 The same can be claimed for Thorneycroft's explicitly Canadian work, which would make even less sense to anyone outside of its immediate cultural context. This 'even less' is decisive since it is the work's capacity to *almost* make sense and fail at it that is crucial to how it functions.

160 Joan Murray, "Joan Murray Interviews John Boyle," *The Canadian Forum*, (March 1973), 35.

161 As an extension of the anarchistic activities of London Regionalists, the Nihilist Spasm band (featuring Boyle, Hugh McIntyre, John Clement, Bill Exley, Murray Favro, Archie Leitch, Art Pratten, and Greg Curnoe) was originally founded in 1965 as a joke. The band plays noisy, improvisational sound works on instruments they construct themselves. Exley recites nonsensical poetry over the cacophony they create. After acknowledging an absurdly eclectic variety of influences, Boyle once stated that, "...The Nihilist Spasm Band has always insisted on its own territory of interstitial investigations involving random sound emissions within the context of an incrementally sophisticated language of improvisation specific to the individual band members." John Boyle, "Funding Application to the Canada Council," (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1997), np.

162 Quoted in Dennis R. Reid and Matthew Teitelbaum. *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2001), 62.

163 Andy Neimers, "Canada Represented by Garbage," *The St. Catharines Standard*. (September 26, 1969), np. Boyle did not take this review positively to this and reacted with his usual contrarianism in an editorial for *20 Cents Magazine* in November 1969.

Boyle's loaded use of the beaver is given complexity by functioning as the double of a nude boy, providing it with an erotic dimension that provides the symbolic suggestion of the rape of Canadian territory. But as we saw, though both the boy and beaver seem to be overdetermined symbolically, the rhetorical framework of Boyle's working method and its deliberate arbitrariness undermines symbolic clarity in favour of an accumulation of *garbage*. Turning to another image featuring Canada's official national animal, Diana Thorneycroft's *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Beavers and Woo at Tanoo)* (2008) suggests something different than Boyle's use of the animal. Once again, everything in the image is loaded with allegorical significance, but expresses nothing coherent. It depicts a group of beavers destroying totem poles while a lumberjack stands aside. The figures are located before the painting *Tanoo, Q.C.I.* (1913) by Emily Carr, Boyle's most revered painter.[164] Her pet monkey, Woo, is shown flying through the air, having become the prey of a bald eagle, the national animal of the United States. Everything in the image is loaded with symbolic value, but expresses nothing coherent. The beaver, as the symbol of Canada, could be signifying the destruction of First Nations culture by settlers and industry. Conversely, these beavers could be taking their revenge on the First Nations for destroying their territories and butchering them during the heyday of the fur trade. For his part, the lumberjack is experiencing an awkward moment as he faces animals destroying human habitat in the form of explicitly reterritorialized trees (totem poles).[165] It is the sort of severe ambiguity that arises from these discordant

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164 The most explicit homage he made to Carr was *Passion Over Reason – Emily* (1976).

165 See Gregory R. Welsh and D. Muller-Schwarze's "Experimental Habitat Scenting Inhibits Colonization by Beaver, C*astor Canadensis*," *Journal of Chemical Ecology* 15.3 (1989): 887-893 and Marius Jasiulionis and Alius Ulevičius' "Beaver Impact on Canals of Land Reclamation in Two

possibilities that makes it unclear what the joke really is. The most interesting thing in Thorneycroft's work comes when the strategy of deliberate subversion becomes dysfunctional. As she explained regarding this series, "My first intention in using the work of the Group of Seven was a form of subversion. [...] ... but in the end they subverted me..."[166] In getting to know their work, using reproductions of it as material and fabricating her own variations, she claims that she learned to finally see it rather than tolerate it.[167] But how far does this subversion go and to what extent does it undermine the kind of critical position that she initially tried to take? To answer these questions, and those about Boyle above, we have to examine their humour and not simply in a subjective sense.

Humour is of crucial importance to both artists, but it is humour more as a structure than as a desired effect. Following Wyndham Lewis, I will divide humour into two primary types.[168] There is a humour that he associates with romanticism, subjectivity and the evasion of reality. He regards this as identical to pathos and bound to empathic fantasy. It might also be associated with irony and with self-satisfied political or social mockery. He contrasts this with satire, which is profoundly anti-social, opposed to the spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*), to common sensibility and taste. Satire is the satirization of common humours (doxas) that, in treating such phenomenal experiences as objects, gains

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Different Landscapes," *Acta Zoologica Lituanica* 21.3 (2011): 207-214 for examples of the creative/destructive impact of beavers.

166 Sharona Adamowicz-Clements, *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009), 52.

167 Ibid., 53.

168 For a succinct and relatively fair discussion of this contrast in Lewis, see Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy* (Greenwood Press, 1973), 211- 225.

a refined objectivity and distance from them. It renders the quotidian grotesque, but does so for the sake of a higher rational principle. He stresses that this principle is both amoral and inhuman. Satire, then, is a means of dehumanizing the world to escape the pathos which obscures epistemic clarity.[169] Both of these senses of humour will be displayed in the works under discussion. For both Boyle and Thorneycroft, humour provides a method for the structuring of their images, layering them in irony and paradox. Humour instills their work with a sense of absurdity that subverts pathetic projections onto history while it abstracts and objectifies human life. This results in a privileging of the artificial and inorganic, manifest strongly in her obsessive use of miniatures and his use of hyperbole and monumental scale as well as their mutual reliance on established tradition. More than this, it is basic to their rhetorical use of Canadian traditions.

2.2. Satire and tradition

Throughout his career, Boyle would frequently insist that he was not interested in art, but in what it did for life. He meant that he was not interested in the art world and the kind of formal or theoretical debates that occur in it. Art was strictly bound to everyday existence: "As I say, I don't know a lot about art and I don't care a lot about art except for the people who can get beyond just being an artist and become part of the world."[170] While he consistently shunned official party politics, he was equally insistent on the necessity of some form of nationalism. Being alive meant being embedded in a specific space, the consistency and limitations of which he understood as a nation: "My work embodies my Canadian and especially Southern Ontario experience, and speaks to the

169 Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art* (London: Cassell & Co., 1934), 289.
170 Joan Murray, "Joan Murray Interviews John Boyle," *The Canadian Forum*, (March 1973), 35.

sharers in this experience."[171] My contention is that to insist on this limitation, is to give priority to experience as delimited by space. In practice, space (as sedimentary accumulation) is privileged over time (as duration or narrative consistency) as the organon of perception and experience. This is manifest clearly in the fact that Boyle's images are formed by a method of accumulation and layering that denies narrative legibility while foregrounding the geometric properties of the picture plane.[172] In spite of the claims of commentators such as Wilson that Boyle does the unusual and places the figure front and centre, it is spatiality that is essential.[173] The figure functions specifically as a spatial anchor and device for articulating the nation as a territorial entity. This is to insist on its sedentary quality and that, rather than being mobile, it is strictly localized accumulation filtered through traditions. To privilege space over time is to cast doubt on the notion of broad contemporaneity. Art can never be globally contemporary; it can only be alien to such a spirit. This, as we shall subsequently see, is at the heart of a substantial part of Boyle's critique of Barry Lord. Boyle patently rejected the idea of universality in art and general models for history. Everything is strictly regional for him.[174] With culture flooding in from around the world, Boyle would declare that, "La vraie culture Canadienne est souterrain, des artistes étrangers chez eux."[175] It is within this context that local tradition would be a necessary strategic aspect of his art practice, this is true both in

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171 John B. Boyle, London Public Library exhibition catalogue, (1974), np.

172 Something comparable happens in Greg Curnoe's book *Deeds and Abstracts* where the singularization of a region becomes inseparable from understanding space as the concrete manifestation of strata of time.

173 Paul Wilson, Typescript for exhibition essay "John Boyle: Paintings and Graphics." Feb. 6 - March 11, 1979 at The Gallery, Stratford. (John Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 1.

174 This is also argued, in somewhat different terms, by anarcho-nationalist George Woodcock in "There Are No Universal Landscapes" in *Documents in Canadian Art* (Peterborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 1987), 257-269.

175 John Boyle, "Commentaire," Typescript. (John Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), np.

terms of Boyle's casting of himself in a genealogy of Canadian painters and the parodic appropriation of local customs practiced by himself and many of the other London Regionalists through the events of the Nihilist Party. Part of the insistence on tradition is because these are what establish the bounds of a territory and stabilize its surface. It is in light of this that I would argue that for a regional-nationalist such as Boyle, the value of traditions is not predicated on their empirical experience, but their abstract truth value as the material constitution of a space of which experience is a derivative. Traditions, however arbitrary, contingent or nonsensical, make up the life of a nation and their maintenance is essential to survival. "It is a mistake to consider John Boyle an intensely political artist. He is only concerned with survival, first for himself as he is entirely dependent upon his painting, and next for artists," Webb has argued quite bluntly, but without explaining precisely what this survival consists of.[176] For Boyle, survival is almost unthinkable without tradition.

The relation between survival and tradition is a major part of *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* by Barry Lord. His quasi-Maoist analysis of painting in the country traces the development of what he terms, care of the Chairman, *new democratic culture*. This would be a culture that is scientific, materialistic, historical and concerned with the documentation of an emergent people. Lord's analysis attempts to map out Canadian artistic development through the relations between figure and ground. This spans from shamanic designations of territoriality to imperial landscapes (the pastoral, the empty and the empty plane of abstraction), to the emergence of a folk

176 D. Webb, "John B. Boyle: Welcome Home," *Imprint* 2, no. 1. (Jan/Feb, 1978), 3.

culture evolving in relationship to geography and the struggle for production. "So from the very beginning in Canada we find ourselves looking at a landscape in which the figures have been added as an afterthought, and in which the style favoured by the patron classes in Europe acts as a kind of screen through which we try to perceive the face of the land."[177]

Lord contends that Canada has always been dominated by empires of different sorts. He extends this analysis to First Nations art practice, citing the degeneration of their traditional art thanks to compacts with corporate trade entities and their further degeneration into a form of cultural nationalism.[178] This declension will be iterated by all of the three primary nations – Aboriginal, French and English. According to Lord, the distinction between cultural nationalism and nationalism is that the former relies primarily on tradition, memory and internalization. Nationalism, however, is primarily concerned with self-consciousness, externality, institutions and the establishment of a material commonality. A properly new democratic culture would mark the advent of a realized nationalism, not merely as a cumulative moment in history, but as a definitive event in the reterritorialization of the earth and a constitutive break with preceding history.

Lord cites Thomas Davies as an example of the break from the imperial perspective of landscape best embodied by topographic painters. While his depiction of the space of North America borrows heavily from earlier English traditions, in the accurate rendering of the features of the colony, the image begins to be overwhelmed by

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177 Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art,* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974), 60.
178 Ibid., 21.

details of flora and fauna that give it an entirely weird appearance. The unwieldy appearance of this visual novelty in the space of imperialism causes the codes of the latter to backfire. In this instance, the image of professional artist becomes eerily close to that of Primitive or *naif* painters.[179] The shift from the Primitive to the properly new democratic comes about through a self-consciousness which serves to articulate this new culture.[180]

According to Lord, the development of a folk image begins with the shamanic markers on caves. It extends with the ex-voto paintings of settlers and is then taken up by some of the country's sparse array of history painters. Joseph *Légaré* is cited as a particularly important example. A *patriote*, he was also one of the first real history painters. This was not simply because of his depiction of historical events, but because he invested them with the "suffering and spirit of the Canayen people," ultimately producing a kind of secular ex-voto.[181] Lord explicitly ties *Légaré* into his trinity of history painters along with Tom Thomson and Ozias Leduc.[182] It is precisely this tradition which Boyle places himself within.[183] Boyle makes his appearance near the end of Lord's narrative. Along with Greg Curnoe and Jack Chambers, he is isolated as one of the few artists working to foment a national consciousness. This is cast in stark opposition to the 'decadence' of abstract art and conceptual or pop art. It is also contrasted with the 'cosmetic' nationalism of Joyce Weiland.[184]

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179 Ibid., 65.
180 Ibid., 72.
181 Ibid., 52.
182 Ibid., 51 & 54.
183 John Boyle, "Point in Time," *artscanada,* (June, 1975), 34.
184 Barry Lord, *The History of Painting in Canada: Toward a People's Art* (Toronto: NC Press, 1974),

While Boyle appreciated being singled out, and even praised the book as a "brave and magnificent document" brimming with optimism, he was disturbed by its politics.[185] "...Lord's flawed vision begins to make it increasingly difficult for the concerned reader to accept his thesis, or even to recognize the problems in a clear light."[186] He chastises Lord for refusing to recognize the extreme marginality of artists in Canadian society. "They are the poorest element of society on the whole, poorer than the fisherman, the unemployed, the Indians and Eskimos. They have no power at all and are laughed at by the people. They will respond to the revolution, they will not lead it."[187] The fact that Lord props up what Boyle regards as mediocre social realist painters for the sake of propaganda also incurs Boyle's wrath. "...art according to Lord must be an instrument of the revolution; it must shape rather than reflect the lifestyle of the people; it must invent, and therefore in the social context, deceive."[188] Though Boyle largely agrees with his critique of abstraction in Toronto and Regina, he is offended by what Lord says about the Automatistes and the book's significant downplaying of *Refus Global*. It is here in particular that Lord destroys his credibility in Boyle's eyes.[189] The attempt to apply a foreign school of analysis (Marxist or Maoist) to Canada is doomed to fail. What results

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185 John Boyle, Typescript of his response to Barry Lord, (John Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 1.
186 Ibid., 2.
187 Ibid., 12.
188 Ibid., 6.
189 Ibid., 8.

is a 'fantasy'[190] that yokes "well meaning but arrogant revolutionaries" in with American imperialists and their claims that "art is international."[191]

Boyle wrote a great deal, both about his own work and about what it meant to produce art in Canada. His writing displays a mixture of bitter humour, (sometimes deliberate) contradiction, hyperbole, invective and self-effacement. Much of what he writes of Canada is diagnostic. In spite of publishing in *20 Cents*, with its subtitle as the 'anti-American magazine,' he retains most of his contempt for the citizens of his own country. His patriotism is almost inevitably backhanded. A pithy autobiographical statement sums it up best: "John Bernard Boyle – born in London – educated in London and, consequently, knows nothing – hates London – left London at the earliest opportunity but keeps returning because he secretly loves the idea of London."[192] In his most generous moment he would state, "While I love Canada and the people of our history, I am not a romantic. We are very fortunate in Canada to have custody of this land and the heritage of its peoples. We have yet to show we are worthy of the trust."[193] His pessimism on this last point would deepen as the decades wore on, eventually resulting in the caustic satire of his *Canadology*.[194]

Boyle's contradictions allow him to exercise an unsettling satirical power. Following Lewis, what I will call *satire* is the means by which what is at stake for the work can be made most material. This materialization is manifest in the physical qualities

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190 Ibid., 8.
191 Ibid., 7.
192 John B. Boyle, "The Art of Pornography," *20 Cents Magazine*, (October 1966), np.
193 Oh Canada!: Catalogue (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1976), 24.
194 This series of images are dealt with more in-depth in the following chapter.

of his paintings and constructions. They are satirical objects in two senses of the term, both in that of Lewis, as broadly sketched above, and in the sense explained by Robert C. Elliott. In *The Power of Satire*, Elliot traces the historical development of satirical traditions from ancient times to the twentieth century. He discerns a consistent use of invective and mockery, arguing that the satirical is not 'meaningful' in a conventional sense, but needs to be understood as an, often illogical, act of aggression.[195] Springing originally from magic and forms of shamanism, satire functions as a form of ritualized violence as much as an aesthetic object or approach. It is a means of territorialization through the expulsion of a perceived evil presence. This demarcates the nation as Boyle tries to understand it. His Canada, in spite of his use of historical images, is not the historical Canada but a deliberately artificial one. As stated in the previous chapter, the tie between passion and the nation are essential to Boyle. The nation is not just a place but an erogenous zone. The production of his work is a love affair with a nation, and this includes all of the complexity and ridiculousness which that demands.

With few exceptions, the relationship between the figures in Boyle's paintings is deliberately predicated only on an esoteric, often random, localization within the grid, a grid that mirrors Boyle's own travels on the map of Canada. Their only resonance is that of the bounded artificial territory whose surface offers the hope of sanity or liberation. For Boyle, these things can only be sought in nihilism and anarchism. "Both hope to see the complete liberation of the individual by the individual, as quickly as possible."[196] According to Boyle, a nihilist acts as an individual and is, therefore, banished,

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195 Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 37.

196 John Boyle, "Nihilism., Manuscript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 3.

suppressed, or martyred.[197] On a practical level, however, in order to survive, liberation is only possible in conjunction with nationalism, since it provides a lever against the forces of homogenization and tyranny. In this respect, Wilson's contention in the first chapter that Boyle's nationalism advocates a passion over reason needs to be modified. Boyle's love of nation was one of pragmatic passion: "By paying attention to his polemic it becomes apparent that Boyle is against things that take bread from artists' mouths. For instance being anti-American is practical because so long as we consume popular entertainment and official culture from abroad our artists will be deprived of work."[198]

There are two principle directions in Boyle's conception of Canadian nationhood. The first, most predominant in his early career, is a deliberately paradox-laden and frequently absurd conception of Canada as loser and artists as Canada's ultimate losers. At times he is sympathetic to this and at others repulsed, often within the same paragraph. I take this, like the non-music of the Nihilist Spasm Band, to be a satirical gesture, a means of materializing the "nation of schizophrenics" that he inhabits.[199] It is in nihilism that he sees the primary hope for the nation. "I personally am committed to a policy of working toward the Canadian nation, largely because I know of no other country with the potential of Canada for becoming a satisfactory place to live, with no magic, no mystery, no myth, no blind patriotism."[200] The second direction, while no less satirical, is more morbid, and will be dealt with in the following chapter.

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197 Ibid., 3.
198 D. Webb, "John B. Boyle: Welcome Home." *Imprint* 2, no. 1. (Jan/Feb, 1978), 3.
199 John Boyle, "We live in a strange country, Canada..." Manuscript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), np.
200 John B. Boyle, "Queen's Paper: Continental Refusal/Refus Continental," *20 Cents Magazine.* (April 1970), np.

2.3. Americanadians

Because the border is unguarded and the distinctions between American and Canadian cultures were becoming increasingly blurred, some differentiation of their characters was necessary to distinguish them in order to maintain sovereignty. This sovereignty was a last bid to avoid falling prey to the full 'schizophrenia' of continentalist cosmopolitanism. In a text titled *Americanadians*, Boyle tried to dissect the distinction by rendering each nation in caricatured form: "[A]mericans are perhaps the most naive, bungling, obnoxious and disgusting people who ever blundered into a position of enormous wealth and power in the history of the earth. Canadians by contrast are a meek, mild and foolish lot who are too frightened even to blunder, captives of circumstance, ashamed of their lot, indecisive, greedy but lazy, and envious of their neighbours. Canadians believe they are Americans."[201] What makes it worse is that the Americans that Canadians believe they are, are not even real Americans. "I think it's quite appropriate that Walt Disney was a Canadian from Homesville, Ontario, because who better than a Canadian could conceive of Disneyland, the actualization of the American dream. Canadians live the American dream. Americans live in the American reality," Boyle would joke.[202] Mesmerizing as this virtual reality may be, Canadians frequently snap out of this empathic contagion to realize that they are not actually Americans, not even the simulated kind. This tends to cause them deep embarrassment so they dream of overcoming their perceived mediocrity by becoming successful abroad. Such a strategy ends badly. "Canadians live the

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201 John Boyle, "Americanadians," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1973), 2.
202 John Boyle, "Canada as Colony," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 7.

American dream, but, significantly, unsuccessfully."[203] Both the phenomenal and the fantasy life of Canadians has been a failed utopian dream of a foreign land. Success requires a degree of brutality, discipline, industriousness and inventiveness that Canadians are typically devoid of. Such debilitating mediocrity pushes most of the country's citizens into a bland parody of life. "We are scavengers and parasites on the prey of Americans... [...] Americans are hunters and killers, and we for all our evil thoughts are not. We are losers. We are failed Americans. Canadians are the most mediocre people on earth, and it is in the distinctive Canadian character that the heavy sense of failure and mediocrity manifests itself."[204]

Boyle's thinking here is not esoteric. It was a common way of thinking about Canada among many of the country's artists.[205] Written at approximately the same time, Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) surveys Canadian literature and suggests that the road to Modernity is paved with losers. "The heroes survive, but just barely; they are born losers, and their failure to do anything but keep alive has nothing to do with the Maritime Provinces or 'regionalism'. It's pure Canadian, from sea to sea."[206] Boyle could be mocking or embracing this. Statements like: "I love losers, underdogs, cowards and Canadians. May the day never come when Canada is a nation blinded by its own propaganda. May the day never come when we can no longer look with shame at our

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203 John Boyle, "Americanadians," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1973), 3.
204 Ibid., 3.
205 For examples see the essays edited by Ian Lumsden in *Close the 49th Parallel etc.; The Americanization of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970). An obsession with Canadian mediocrity frequently appeared in *20 Cents* as well. The Canadian hero as loser was also a common feature in films such as *Goin' Down The Road* (1970), *The Rowdyman* (1972), *Paperback Hero* (1973), and *The Hard Part Begins* (1974).
206 Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972), 34.

history and humility toward our future," are saturated by a sensibility too hyperbolic for the coolness of irony, yet too mocking to be entirely sympathetic.[207]

Failure, then, becomes a matter of diagnosis as well as a strategic tool or form of inoculation. To fail to fail would be to become American. To exceed in failure would be to become more Canadian. But what would come from this severe exaggeration of failure? For Boyle, the answer seemed to be found in a form of anarchic regionalist-nationalism that was born from the shock of realizing how severely alienated Canadians were from their own immanent existence. Rather than resulting in sober realism, what occurs is a delirious artificiality, but one that is severely materialist. Like the Group of Seven, the London Regionalists founded their own, even more inchoate, micro-society.[208] And, like the Group, their nationalism was ultimately based primarily on an obsessive drive toward the in-itself and the surface.[209] This surface is the outside of America. A text written in 1970 helps to clarify Boyle's aversion to American interiority, which he links to mind, suffocation, a foetus and guts all of which are in a state of movement and action:[210]

> ...Yankee go home, get out of my country. You're too fucking efficient. I don't need your money. I don't need your mind. I don't need your beauty. I don't need your philosophy. Draft dodger, fuck off. You want to bring your innate ugliness to my country. [...] Intellectual refugee stay home. Suffocate in your own horseshit. Go home and destroy us from your cybernetic foetus. Don't come here and make me destroy myself. You are a cancer. You yankee bastard.

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207 John Boyle, "Americanadians," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1973), 5.

208 This would include the members of the Nihilist Spasm Band along with Jack Chambers, Tony Urquhart etc.

209 See chapter one of this thesis.

210 In reading this text, it is also worth noting that Trudeau had described his reform of the country as a 'cybernetic revolution' starting at least in 1968 with the publication of *Federalism and the French Canadians*.

> [...] Get the fuck out of my loser virgin country because I love your guts. You have nothing to offer me. You are the most blatant human beings on the face of the earth.[211]

The failure to be an American is the failure to embrace the stance of action. There are two possible options then: to embrace a passivity that simulates action, which is what the majority of Canadians do, simply continuing on as failed Americans (or British or French or...), or to embrace impenetrability and abstraction. Though never stated in these terms by the artist, it is the latter option that I believe his work formally operates within.

2.4. Neo-imperialism and the decline of nationalism

In 1965, the Canadian philosopher George Grant published *Lament For A Nation*. The book declared that Canadian nationalism was dead. It died with the fall of the Diefenbaker regime and the return of the Liberal Party to power. Grant saw the Conservative's decline as the loss of the only consistent ideology and set of traditions that could provide Canada with a distinct purpose. The continental ambitions and technological adeptness of the Liberal Party would lead only to the destruction of the country's regional cultures and the loss of national sovereignty. The latter contention was substantially legitimated when Prime Minister Lester Pearson allowed the U.S. to place missiles on Canadian soil. But beyond the political issues, the underlying cultural and metaphysical problems were even more worrisome for Grant. These issues were developed further in the books that followed *Lament*.

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211 John B. Boyle, "I'm Still Losing my Humanity," *20 Cents Magazine*, (January 1970), np.

In *Technology and Empire* (1969), Grant glosses empire as the founding of citizenship on a common 'essence' rather than on particular ethnic or geographic lines.[212] Secularism rose as a form of rationalized Christianity, insisting on the abstract equality of all people, an equality which Grant identifies as the goal of the universalized homogeneous state imagined by Hegel scholar Alexandre Kojève.[213] Hegel came to replace the Bible as the summation of Truth, a truth now institutionalized through the progress of a revolutionary global homogeneity or universal values. Progress is the belief that conquest will give life meaning.[214] Philosophy ends because wisdom no longer needs to be loved, only technically accessed and deployed for the maintenance of immanent necessity. This instrumentalization of reason replaces the erotic contemplation of the Good found in Platonism with a liberal freedom rooted in Protestantism.[215] For Grant, the preservation of Canada is a 'practical'[216] ethical matter since conservative Canadian culture was one of the last means to resist the domination of instrumental rationality, embodied specifically in "the quintessentially Hegelian liberal" Pierre Trudeau. Liberalism needed to be refused for the love of the Good.[217] This love would make possible the continuation of tradition and the potential for a more selfless society, one devoted to the common good rather than to atomized self-interest. A nation state's only hope for survival is if it retains its original idea of itself and cultivates it. Failing this, it

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212 George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Empire; Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 87.

213 Kojève was a formidable Neo-Marxist Hegel scholar who served as a pivotal influence upon the American political philosopher Leo Strauss. To a substantial degree, Grant's work is a reaction to both of these thinkers, each of whom have been cited as the fore-bearers of neo-conservativism.

214 George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Empire; Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 77.

215 Ibid., 93-95.

216 Ibid.,77.

217 Robert C. Sibley, *Northern Spirits: John Watson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor: Appropriations of Hegelian Political Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 157.

has no reason to survive. As Boyle puts it, "What do we want from life if we do not want our own country?"[218] When the passion fades, reason leads elsewhere. Or as Grant said of Canada after the perceived loss of its sovereignty, "The church walls still stood, but the spirit was gone."[219] With the spirit of Canada dead, killed by the hegemon of progress, liberal nihilism takes over.

Grant writes that, "To describe the intellectual movement whereby the Y.M.C.A. and Nietzsche were brought together would require an art beyond me – that of comedy."[220] The farce that results from the combination of instrumental reason and institutionalized pluralism serves as a force for legitimizing 'monistic fact' which is only the cult of technological mastery.[221] "...an immense majority who think they are free in pluralism, but in fact live in a monistic vulgarity in which nobility and wisdom have been exchanged for a pale belief in progress..."[222] Progressivism is something that Grant sees rooted in Lutheranism and a drive toward action. This activity is regarded as part of a shift from natural law to contractarianism. The latter he associates with technological mastery, self-interest and an instrumentalization of reason cultivated to take advantage of the flux of time. The former he correlates to classical natural justice and its associations with the infinite and unchanging. The dogmas of historicism insisted on the privileging of

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218 John Boyle, "Americanadians," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1973), 4.
219 Quoted in Robert C. Sibley, *Northern Spirits: John Watson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor: Appropriations of Hegelian Political Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 124.
220 George Parkin Grant, *Technology and Empire; Perspectives on North America* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 1969), 119.
221 Ibid., 119.
222 Ibid., 24.

time over space for the satisfaction of immanent interests and the justification of new forms of political power as regimes of progress and individual right.[223]

Writing of the massive changes in academia he was witnessing, Grant mapped out these shifts as part of Canada's increased draw into the orbit of the broad imperial system of American liberalism. The institutionalization of dogmatic historicism, anti-nationalism and an obsession with individualistic self-realization was identified as part of a cynical will to power. The rise to dominance of psychiatry and the social sciences were key to this. Insistent on the cultural relativity of all values (other than their own), they were the last to feel the 'corrosive' effects of historicist nihilism.[224] As disciplines they were de facto corrupted by special interests and, operating with other regimes of knowledge, created a preponderance of interdisciplinary fields whose basic function was 'further master[y].'[225] Polemically, he would argue that these new social scientists were the administers of 'Oedipal fixations' as the former distinctions between the private and public realm were collapsed by the welfare state. "The household is now imperial and its management requires innumerable accountants..."[226]

Thanks to the dogmatic historicizing tendencies which come to dominate in both the sciences and humanities, any genuine scepticism[227] or thought becomes increasingly impossible in the face of the hegemonic 'public religion'[228] for which technocrats and

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223 Keep in mind that this is, in many respects, close to the position which Wyndham Lewis takes against the 'time cult' and his de-privileging of time in imagery in favour of classical space. While this is a common theme throughout his work, it had its most thorough exposition in *Time and Western Man.*
224 Ibid., 39.
225 Ibid., 118.
226 Ibid., 118.
227 Ibid., 128-9 & 15.
228 Ibid., 120.

social scientists serve as the priests. Because North Americans were bereft of profound traditions, their superficiality allowed them to be both *naive* and innocent. However, these two qualities also made them readily corruptible and incapable of deep contemplation or forming lasting traditions. In a pluralistic society, individuated existence becomes co-extensive with 'fun culture' as each atomized person pretends to realize themselves within a culture where this self-realization has already become a market demand:[229] "One is tempted to say that the North American motto is: 'the orgasm at home and napalm abroad,' but in the nervous mobile society, people have only so much capacity for orgasm, and the flickering images of the performing arts will fill the interstices."[230]

The love of the Good through "the love of one's own" would serve as a leitmotif for much of Grant's writing in the period. But this ethical aim meets some very substantial problems. Particularly since one's own, certainly among the country's settler populations, clearly is not. This idea is a current that runs through Grant's work that few of his commentators have touched, not least because it causes problems both for adversaries and friends: "The fruits of our own dominant tradition have so obviously the taste of rot in their luxuriance."[231] Or more bluntly: "Surely the deepest alienation must be when the civilisation one inhabits no longer claims one's loyalty."[232] This alienation goes deeper. It seems to be the defining factor of what, in all sobriety, being a Canadian consists of. "That conquering relation to place has left its mark within us. When we go

229 Ibid., 126.
230 Ibid., 126.
231 Ibid., 36.
232 Ibid., 76.

into the Rockies we may have the sense that gods are there. But if so, they cannot manifest themselves to us as ours. They are the gods of another race, and we cannot know them because of what we are, and what we did. There can be nothing immemorial for us except the environment as object. Even our cities have been encampments of the road to economic mastery," Grant notes.[233] If being Canadian consists of this radical form of alienation, then one can never have an 'own' to love.[234] The own that Grant loved, that of his slightly esoteric fictionalization of Loyalist history, was a kind of Platonic noble lie.[235] But with that lacy veil torn away, what could be left? And further than this, could this radical alienation actually bring one closer to the truth of a place, a truth devoid of sentiment?

The problems raised by the above questions are things that Boyle shrinks from, seeking instead a pragmatic concord with place for the sake of life. But even in this light, the importance of spatialization is still key. While the making of art may be universal, Boyle would insist that in its objectivation it must also be strictly localized. The idea that art could have international standards or significance would be absurd and artists who pretend otherwise are deluding themselves.[236] As Boyle points out, "It's as though they think there is a choice about nationalism, that they can choose to live somewhere other

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233 Ibid., 17.

234 Grant limits his discussion to settler culture, but it is not clear whether or not this extends to First Nations as well. This is a complicated topic I cannot go into here, but I would provisionally suggest that their alienation runs every bit as deep.

235 H. D. Forbes, *George Grant: A Guide to His Thought* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), Chapter. 7.

236 Curnoe put it this way: "The idea that art transcends borders keeps coming up, & everyone here seems to believe it... I know that water transcends borders & so does fucking & so does being cold & being warm. Clearly people from the most powerful nation in the world can afford to say that art is international because it is their art & culture which is international right now, eg. Viet Nam." Quoted in Dennis R. Reid and Matthew Teitelbaum's *Greg Curnoe: Life and Stuff* (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 2001), 66.

than in a nation."[237] If you are not loyal to your own, you have to be loyal to someone else's. Boyle regarded the love of the nation and the local as the only means of deprogramming colonial mentality and escaping from imperialism. However, he recognized that such a program was taboo among Canadians and resulted in the marginalization of nationalism within the nation and, even more specifically, within the arts and among intellectuals. These elites were purely functionaries of American imperialism. In a note, he writes, "...ironic – political art fashionable as always, agenda dictated externally... acceptable issues – homosexuality, feminism, aboriginal self-realization, ethnic issues, third world, environment – is our country the enemy? Canadian nationalism is unacceptable – worse than artists – art writers, validators – not a normal situation – few who do anguish over Canadian issues – in their work are labelled as regionalists or eccentrics and dismissed or accepted as though love of country were a stylistic device."[238] In this respect, multiculturalism and other liberal policies can be read as the perpetuation of the Canadian tradition of provincialism and cultural masochism. In light of this, Boyle jokingly suggests that if Québec were to actually separate, it should annex Ontario and treat it as a subservient colony in order to "preserve our colonial heritage."[239] It is no doubt partially due to such an attitude that this, quite overt, aspect of Boyle's work has rendered the uncomfortable implications of his ideas largely ignored by post 1980s art writers who were schooled in the period's obsession with post-Marxist identity politics. However tinged with humour, the severity of Boyle's attitude should not be underestimated. What he criticized has cast a pall over much of the country's art

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237 John Boyle and Barry Lord. *John Boyle: A Retrospective* (London, ON: London Regional Art Gallery, 1991), 12.

238 John Boyle, Untitled manuscript, (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), np.

239 John B. Boyle, "Visual Arts: Putting Artists First," *The Canadian Forum*, (September 1977), 18.

production and critical commentary, creating precisely the kind of intellectual terrain that Thorneycroft's work in rooted in. As Peter Hodgins observes, albeit in different terms, the schism between nationalists and imperialists is still basic to Canadian cultural discourse, with the latter holding the balance of institutional power.[240]

2.5. ParaCanada

Lament proved to be a source of inspiration for Canadian nationalists, much to Grant's bewilderment. "I was saying this is over and people read it as if I was making an appeal for Canadian nationalism. I think that is just nonsense. I think they just read it wrong."[241] Grant's severe alienation is shared by Boyle and some of his cohorts to varying degrees.[242] However, Grant would have regarded their entire project as absurd, so maybe it should come as no surprise that the cultivation of absurdity was at the heart of much of what they did. To a substantial degree the goal of the London Regionalists was to find a positive answer to the problem of cultural disappearance. As Boyle argues, "All that is needed is a certain rigour mingled with an internal honesty, because I believe that art begins as an individual reflective activity; and this makes it, or should make it, immune to the homogenizing effect of technological society."[243] For Boyle there was no other way; you had to make do with what was at hand. For the Regionalists, nationalism was not an appeal to an authentic self, nor was it an attempt at self-creation, but something

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240 Peter Hodgins. "The Haunted Dollhouses of Diana Thorneycroft." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 3 (1) (2011): 99-136. doi:10.1353/jeu.2011.0004., 119. See below.

241 Robert C. Sibley, *Northern Spirits: John Watson, George Grant, and Charles Taylor: Appropriations of Hegelian Political Thought* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 111.

242 For instance, Grant serves as a point of reference for Curnoe in his review of Dennis Reid's *A Concise History of Painting In Canada*. See Curnoe's "The Dilemma of Provincialism: A History of Canadian Painting." *The Canadian Forum*, (February 1975), 30-32.

243 John Boyle and Barry Lord. *John Boyle: A Retrospective* (London, ON: London Regional Art Gallery, 1991), 8.

else. "In Canada these artists are known as 'regionalists' because their interests and allegiances lie in the general area where they live or grew up, and because a larger national or patriotic allegiance is a problematic concept for the colonial mind."[244] It was a pragmatic reinvention of tradition deliberately exploited as an artificial means of abstracting themselves from the flux of contemporary (read: American) art and politics which dictated the common sense of society as such. This meant turning to the established cultural forms that were ready at hand and 're-creating' them.

> All of these things were alien to me, and, as I later discovered, to nearly everyone else. In fact, that was the point. We were all alienated from the events, the issues, the beauty, the mystery of our own home region, from our co-regionalists, by some force. By what force? By our ignorance of the region in which we lived. By our preoccupation with someone else's region, due, as I later discovered, to that someone else's occupation of ours.[245]

A lack of national identity has been suggested as the institutionalized form of Canadian identity. For example, this mentality can be seen in the Spicer Commission's statement that the country was a "nation without nationality" and is at the base of much of Diana Thorneycroft's humour.[246] Her use of famous Group of Seven paintings and kitsch figurines of Mounties, Bob and Doug McKenzie, Don Cherry etc. serve as a means for viewers to affect ironic distance, as if to say, "but that's not really us." Operating either by deferral or by subtraction, Canadian identity is, as Lawren Harris said, *weird*, both in the vernacular and Lovecraftian sense of the term. All of this adds up to Canada as a space

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244 "We are not Greg Curnoe": Materials From a Symposium on the Work and Life of Greg Curnoe, May 11-12, 2001. Robert Fones and Andy Patton eds. (London: Open Letter, 2002), 98.

245 John Boyle, "Building a Nihilist Universe," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1998), np.

246 Quoted in Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 9.

that is exterior to ontology; a mode of territorialization that is not being or becoming but only a subsistent having. On the level of praxis, this can be seen in so many of the heroes celebrated by Boyle and the anarchist poet, critic and historian George Woodcock: the various micro-societies, groups of rogues and vagabonds such as the *coureur de bois*, the Masterless Men of Newfoundland, radical *Québécois* nationalists, Doukhobors and *Métis* militias.[247] It is these anarchic, often militant groups, defined by their lack of concrete identity and statelessness that serve as models. For both Boyle and Woodcock, the nation is never identical to the state and the two may be, and often are, in polar opposition. The elements of Canadian history that they both celebrate are largely rural and pre-1940s, after which the state came to possess overwhelming significance in the country.[248]

The federal government embraced and codified the identity politics of the 1960s in law with their multicultural policy. "A settler colony with official policies of multiculturalism and bilingualism, Canada has an official national culture which is not '*homogeneous* in its whiteness' but rather replete with images of Aboriginal people and people of colour. The state-sanctioned proliferation of cultural *difference* (albeit limited to specific forms of allowable difference) seems to be the defining characteristic of Canada."[249] But, Eva Mackey notes, this attempt to foster a heterogeneous identity within homogeneous space has been remarkably unsuccessful, at least for white Canadians, who

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247 This tendency is seen throughout Woodcock's eclectic body of work, but particularly in *The Canadians* (1979).

248 As Deborah Cowen as demonstrated quite articulately, the development of industrialized Canada, its leap in the early decades of the twentieth century from being an almost entirely rural nation to a predominately urban one, was inseparable from the country's systematic militarization. The development of a welfare state coupled with immigration and education reforms in the post-war era was a direct by-product of the military workfare model. Deborah Cowen, *Military Workfare: The Soldier and Social Citizenship in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

249 Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 8.

have evolved an even deeper sense of cultural homelessness. As a result, they can either serve as the guardians of other people's non-whiteness, or regard themselves as victims of external Others, or of the multiculturalist policy installed by the state as a cynical business manoeuvre.[250] As Grant had already suggested in the 1960s, the manufacturing and management of difference has become a central part of state and academic power, allowing for the proliferation of cultural colours to accent the lines of liberal ideology (human rights, cosmopolitanism etc.). Mackey mistakenly assumes that this is a paradox rather than recognizing that, in light of Grant's account of the drive of liberalism, it is simply the dialectical drive of the Hegelian state.[251] Since much of this is played out in the symbolic realm, as Boyle notes, the arts have played a significant role in the perpetuation of state ideology as the erosion of any degree of homogeneous nationalism has coincided with the expansion of global capitalism. In the eyes of nationalists like Boyle, all of this has continued to perpetuate the role of Canada as a resource colony and space for foreign investment.[252]

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250 Ibid., 12 & 68.

251 Ibid., 62.

252 While she condemns Homi Bhaba style hybridism (transcontinental identitarianism) for simply being a materialization of the abstraction of global capitalist hegemony (164), Mackey also refuses the nationalist option, conflating it with *cliché*s about racism and fails to acknowledge the severely classist (and urbanist) position her argument is made from. Her work falters further from a lack of coherent working definitions and ideological naivety but even more seriously from being a distorted historical account. The Canada First movement, which dominates her early narrative, had little, if any, substantive political power or influence. A substantial portion of the country's racist and discriminatory policy ideas radiated not from the populist right but from the elitist progressives of the cities. Even a cursory knowledge of the eugenics movement (see McLaren. *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885-1945*) or suffragettism (see Bacchi. *Liberation Deferred?: The Ideas of the English-Canadian Suffragists, 1877-1918*) would demonstrate this. Her narrative also downplays, and severely underestimates, the continuous anti-nationalism of the Canadian state and its civil service (see Whitaker and Marcuse. *Cold War Canada: The Making of a National Insecurity State, 1945-1957*). The privileging of the Canada First argument couldn't be justified on the grounds that it strengthens her argument. It does the opposite. However, it does prop up state power, even more cynically and paranoiacally, as a mechanism to pre-emptively suppress any kind of populist nationalism on the grounds that it could be remotely tinged with racism.

For the Regionalists, freedom from a colonial mentality was sought in nihilism. For Boyle and some of his cohorts, *nihilism* was a code word for the establishment of a parallel parodic culture within the existing regime. They did not set out to replace the dominant culture but to "replicate a primal culture by re-embedding and engaging ourselves in our local bio-region and in the already extant regional culture."[253] This included adopting many of the standard *cliché*s of common Ontario traditions, such as a grassroots political organization (The Nihilist Party), picnics, banquets and trips to the cottage as well as the images of historical figures and even the game of lacrosse. This was not intended as a merely spiteful public farce[254] but an attempt to reinvest in established tradition, "to recontextualize them by means of memories of our own. We borrowed from cultural traditions of the region and modified them to meet the needs of the already marginalized sub-community of artists and creative thinkers."[255] To become a parody of what Canada had been was a way of satirizing what Canada was becoming, namely a cynically continentalist or internationalist corporate state. Parody, with its use of the pre-existent, provides a continuity with tradition, albeit while differentiated from it, ironically or otherwise.[256]

Thorneycroft's work has an almost equally intense relationship to tradition, but parody functions differently with her. Starting most explicitly with her two martyr series, Thorneycroft has built a body of work which relies heavily on parody in the sense of both

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253 John Boyle, "Building a Nihilist Universe," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1998), np.

254 Boyle was arguably guilty of this on occasion. See N. G. Poole, *The Art of London, 1830-1980* (London: Blackpool Press, 1984), 133-136 for some of his antics around the *Seated Nude* (1966) controversy.

255 John Boyle, "Building a Nihilist Universe," Typescript. (Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, 1998), np.

256 Boyle's often esoteric, yet still highly parochial, use of historical imagery plays directly into this as does his deliberate cultivation of a *naif* style that remains in the tradition of the country's first untrained painters as well as the history painters mentioned by Lord above.

hyper-textuality and mockery.[257] Moving on from parodically mimicking canonical depictions of Christian martyrdom, she began using poster reproductions of paintings by the Group of Seven as the backgrounds for suggestive narratives of acts of random and humorous violence. Both the *Canadiana Martyrdom* series and *The Group of Awkward Moments* series examined the oft-referenced survival themes and its cast of martyred losers and the problem of anxious figures in a landscape. "It's not the landscape that is awkward; it's the people in it that are awkward," she has explained. "Our failures, mistakes and stupidity are awkward."[258] Hodgins has argued that these works function as a form of satirical attack on corporate Canadiana, appropriating the imagery of Tim Horton's and the tourist industry and mocking it:

> In spite of the fact that many cultural intellectuals have willingly abandoned the project of defining the nation, they resent that the people whom they believe to be culturally and cognitively inferior to them continue to do so. Given this context, the delight taken in Thorneycroft's desecration of Canadian symbols might be described as a form of resentful reappropriation on the part of the gallery-goers: these are my toys and I will break them so that you cannot play with them. [259]

While I do not entirely disagree with Hodgins diagnosis of Thorneycroft's market success, it needs to be interpreted within the broader context of her work. Reviews of her early Canadiana series have focused almost exclusively on them as poking fun at the

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257 *Martyrs Murder* (2001-2002) featured re-imaginings of famous Christian martyrdoms in diorama form. *The Canadiana Martyrdom Series* (2006) featured Canadiana figurines being tortured and killed in a series of tableau.

258 Sharona Adamowicz-Clements, *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009), 48.

259 Peter Hodgins, "The Haunted Dollhouses of Diana Thorneycroft." *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures 3* (1, 2011): 99-136. doi:10.1353/jeu.2011.0004., 119.

symbols of Canadian nationalism. However, as mentioned above with *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (Beavers and Woo at Tanoo),* something more complex is at play.

Thorneycroft's *Group of Seven Awkward Moments – Algonquin Park* (2007) depicts a group of nine children in a frozen landscape. Tom Thomson's *In Algonquin Park* (1914) acts as the background and in the foreground are the stark shadowy silhouettes of trees. They obscure the actions in the distance and lend a sense of voyeurism to the composition. An adult, possibly a ranger, skis away, either in apathy or to get help. One child is face down in the snow. Another spits up blood while four seem to dance around him. To the side, another boy watches with his arms crossed as a little dog brings him a severed tongue. Presumably he took it from the flagpole nearby where one child gawks as another squats, his tongue frozen to the pole. Numerous severed tongues are stuck to the pole. The flag flies at full mast, painted in a way that makes it remarkably flat. The image has the sense of allegory to it, like something out of Brueghel's parable pieces, but no clear, or even vague, moral is being relayed. Is the adult turning his back on these children suffering in the Canadian wilderness? The flagpole might be a symbol of static phallic power that literally removes the tongue, and therefore voice, from the vulnerable. Is the viewer being asked to question their moral relationship to the image by being placed in such an overtly voyeuristic position? As we saw in chapter one, the photo seems to ask these questions, all the types of questions which Bordo would say the original Thomson painting erases but which are fundamentally there anyway. But there is something absurd in all of this. What about the happy puppy, wagging its tail with a second tongue in its mouth? It has three forms of articulation (the tail, its mouth and the severed tongue) yet the dog speaks no human language; it is

amoral and innocent. Likewise, the photo has three levels of articulation: the background (the fabled empty wilderness), the action of its figures (the parable figures losing their tongues) and its voyeuristic foreground (the viewer as absent witness), but this image is also innocent. In spite of the insistence of most commentators, and Thorneycroft herself, what she is displaying is not a narrative but a moment, one made up of a series of gestures that make no particular sense and which collectively function as nonsense. It is an image that mocks the idea of deciphering and the excess of signifying capacities. There is not enough context for it to have a functional meaning beyond the ridiculing of meaning. In this way, the awkwardness is also on the part of the viewer or critic who pretends that something sensible is at play here. What formally constitutes the work does not subvert the empty picture by interpolating a repressed narrative but subverts the potential of narrative to make sense, morally or otherwise, thus undercutting the potential for moral irony. It also points to one of the more blatant components of the work. In spite of using highly symbolic and historically significant icons, the images are patently unreal. Rather than functioning as documents, they function as traps for projection. This subversion is a common mechanism in Thorneycroft's work. If there is an allegory to her images, it suggests that figuration, symbolic or otherwise, fundamentally undermines its inclusion in a narrative. It is not that figuration represses an historical narrative, but that historical narrative represses the abstract nature of figuration by encapsulating it in doxa. The problems which this poses will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter where I will examine her attempt to marry her complex rhetoric to the presentation of specific historical events.

2.6. Orphans

The child rarely appears as part of a family in the imagery of either Boyle or Thorneycroft. They are almost inevitably orphaned, symbolically severing the Canadian body from that of its parent nations, their histories, cultures and pasts. This is also at the heart of his anti-Americanism, for continentalism means the return of the father and a severe lessening of the concentrated libidinal expressivity made possible in localized production. As problematic as any claim to narrative coherency in the work of either artist might be, both Boyle and Thorneycroft have displayed a noticeable tendency to foreground childhood or adolescent sexuality in their work. The figure of the child, more often than not, functions as a symbol of the nation and the artist, even if the meaning of the symbol is not entirely clear. Boyle himself appears as a child in the painting *Toward Paisley* (1976), while he adds images of Jack Chambers as a child or baby photos of Justin Trudeau into other works. Almost every image in his *Canadology* featuring human figures contains children, usually orphans, sunbathers or his daughter. For her part, Thorneycroft's reliance on child figures has been the mainstay of her photographic practice. Beginning with false re-enactments of her own childhood, this has moved on to figurines, persistently caught in gestures which suggest abuse and cruelty. Rather than using the child figure to offset the well-known figures of history as Boyle does, these anonymous figures, embodied in stereotypical miniatures, function symbolically as either objects of her sexual fixation or representatives of the country's oppressed. Their generic quality allows them to seem universal enough to be archetypes (such as the child in *A People's History - Prostitute* (2008) or the native girl in *A People's History - Burning Braids* (2008)).

The figure of a naked child or adolescent has functioned as a slippery emblem of Canada for more than a century. Erotic images of children date back most significantly to London's Paul Peel. In the paintings of Laura Muntz Lyall and John Lyman, they frequently take on symbolic associations with the rise of urbanism.[260] In the works of George Reid and Goodridge Roberts, child figures are occasionally saddled with symbolizing the nation. The latter's *Adolescent* (1924) toured the United States where it was referred to in the *Magazine of Art*, as "Equivalent to their (Group of Seven) interpretation of a young country is the inquiring sensitivity which makes Roberts' *Boy* seem symbolic of young humanity."[261] Even more blatantly, if less erotically, the work of George Reid consistently utilized children as national emblems. This was the case both in works such as *The Story* (1890), where the role of bard is given to a child, and his later murals where the orphan child stands in a position not totally foreign to those found in Boyle.[262]

To varying degrees, the child-nation nexus functions to give a representational form that is actual though non-empirical (concrete properties without necessarily having synthetic supplements i.e. human actors). The figure of the child and the wilderness can double one another, but they are not interchangeable because they demarcate different forms of investment, though orphan and wilderness could significantly overlap as zones

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260 For an account of the significance of the child in Lyall, particularly in regard to matriarchal feminism, see Elizabeth Mulley's "Women and Children in Context: Laura Muntz and the Representation of Maternity." PhD diss.,McGill University, 2000. I have not encountered any significant commentary on the symbolic value of the child or adolescent in Lyman.

261 Sandra Paikowsky, *Goodridge Roberts, 1904-1974* (Kleinburg, Ont: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 1998), 75.

262 See Loren Lerner's "George Reid's Paintings as Narratives of a Child Nation" in *Depicting Canada's Children* (Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 2009), 325 - 346.

of potential at the margin of being civilized.[263] In this respect, the orphan symbolically approximates precisely the type of anarchic anti-state groups that Boyle often celebrated such as the Masterless Men of Newfoundland. This symbolic overlap is accented by Boyle's longstanding interest in the work of French child-poet Arthur Rimbaud. The poet appears in the early painting *Arthur at the Lacrosse Game* (1965) as well as re-appearing in the *Chromatic Aberrations* (1988) alongside a self-portrait of the painter. According to Gerald Macklin, in Rimbaud's work the child is privileged for their ability to concentrate on a singular image and raise it above all else. Inevitably orphaned, the child lives on the borders of society, divorced from the interior world of the family. They embrace a language that muddies myth-making with the vernacular and takes joy in sex and scatology. This finds a clear echo in Boyle's expressed desire "to defile myself in public."[264] The poet rejoices in the child's weakness and their stench, taking this as a sign that they are closer to the wilderness than the world of adults. This orphan is "witness and participant in moments of fulfilment, but equally the disinherited mourner at times of relapse and disenchantment. Dispossessed in terms of being without family or friends, the child is also repeatedly deprived of his own rich imaginative realm."[265] The shadow of Rimbaud's figure is also present in much of Boyle's discussion of making art, spanning

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263 For a useful commentary on the orphan-wilderness nexus see Nick Land's "Spirit and Teeth" in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*. Ed. by Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier. (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic; New York: Sequence Press**,** 2011). Though ostensibly a discussion of the work of Expressionist poet Georg Trakl and Rimbaud, the essay provides a highly succinct rehearsal of the issues underlying the escape from dialectics into the wilderness. "Such is Trakl's 'accursed race' as well as Rimbaud's, communicating its dirty blood in wilderness spaces of barbarian inarticulacy. Eternally aborting the prospect of a transcendental subjectivity, the inferior ones are never captured by contractual reciprocity, or by its attendant moral universalism." (Land, 183)

264 National Gallery of Canada. *Heart of London [le coeur de London]* (Ottawa : Queen's Printer, 1968), np.

265 Gerald M. Macklin, "The Disinherited Child in the Poetry of Arthur Rimbaud" *Romance Studies* 14, no. 2 (1996), 52.

from his early career as a public school teacher to the chaotic noise work of the Nihilist Spasm Band. Boyle writes that, "We have a lot to learn from kids. Perhaps more than we have to teach them. Unrestrained egocentric vision, the nature of affection, energy, awareness, perversion, groping inquisitive..."[266] It is also in this view of the child that it doubles as the artist/nation as the doomed pariah and outcast from history.

Canada as a child or adolescent is a major theme of Penny Cousineau-Levine's *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* in which Thorneycroft plays a substantial role. Cousineau-Levine's central thesis is that "...the Canadian psychic landscape, as revealed in our photographs, is psychologically akin to that of an anorexic adolescent, and that Canadians unconsciously consider themselves to be both 'feminine' and stalled in a rite of passage toward autonomy as a nation."[267] Following Northrop Frye, she interprets art production in the country as falling under the rubric of a dialethetical paradox "where two incommensurate accounts of every entity, both true, both exclusivist, dissolves when one perceives that the anomaly is not local, but rather the expression of a condition of being, and hence itself a principle of rationality."[268] Cousineau-Levine's aim is to 'depathologize'[269] the Canadian unconscious so that what "appear[s] to have been without signification"[270] can be understood as a psychic block. Playing the role of the therapist, critics and artists can then orient the culture that the Canadian territory produces in a more socially progressive fashion toward

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266 John B. Boyle, "Why I Hate Acid Rock," *artscanada*, (Oct./Nov. 1968), 18.
267 Penny Cousineau-Levine, *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 7.
268 Ibid., 121.
269 Ibid., 55.
270 Ibid., 175.

self-awareness. With *A People's History*, Thorneycroft does something very close to enacting this. When she claims that she wants to challenge Canadians' self-perception as the 'good' by facing some of the grimmer moments of the nation's history, she places herself in the position of the artist/therapist working through the trauma of nation building.[271]

If the orphan is a figure of hope for Boyle, it is one of mourning for Thorneycroft. As stated above, Boyle believes the artist ought to embrace the recklessness and energy of the child to escape from the confines of a castrating civilization. Working from the other side of the ledger, Thorneycroft explicitly casts herself as both the mother and the child, deliberately placing the two roles in mirror reflection and gliding between them. For example, *Untitled (witness)* (1998) featured baby dolls linked to images of her, or depicted in photos with her, which were all displayed within a giant womb-like darkness. This was a major component of her *Slytod* installation. Depicted using high contrast black and white in a style that echoed early Expressionism, these images suggest something from a horror film concerning institutional torture. But the kind of horror at both parenthood and childhood that underlies them is considerably different from the overt moral concerns that dominate her later work. The child becomes not an escape from human meaning, but represents a demand for institutionalized empathic care, albeit care that an adult may find it hard to offer. This is one of the crucial paradoxical relations which she sets up, explicitly so in her early work. As Chris Townsend explains:

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271 "I find myself compelled to make work about documented crimes against humanity. Research coupled with my imagination direct me as I consider what conditions were at play that allowed these atrocities to occur. This work focuses on crimes that occurred in Canada; a country that views itself, and is viewed by others, as inherently 'good'. One of goals of this series is to challenge this myth." http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php

> The plastic infant has become a crucial trope in Thorneycroft's images and assemblages. Identity and sexuality are inscribed by the artist on these formerly asexual objects, as though it was not only a certainty of gender that was compelled upon the body by the effects of culture, but its very materiality. The exterior marking of the inanimate, of the unfeeling and unknowing, seems to be the sire of sadism and pain. [...] Thorneycroft's violence upon the doll can be understood as an act of self-portraiture. Each of these toys is an image of her infantile vulnerability, both as the subject of a rescuing but, to a child, seemingly cruel and cold-hearted medicine, and as the blank surface on which gender and sexual identity will be defined.[272]

In the *Doll Mouth* series, blown-up, close cropped images of doll's mouths, dotted with dust and smeared with lipstick, are lit with an ethereal glow and shot at angles to make them alien. As with her other works, they function essentially as tests for viewer projection. This is carried on, but substantially complicated in, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* and *A People's History*. Far from being non-sexual, these dolls display the ultimate in both reproductive power and erotic content (they are both industrially reproduced and symbolically reproductive). In the former series, her role is not to activate them through gendering, but to control them as much as possible, limiting their power as icons of both ungendered and indifferent reproduction. Even at that point of her career, she was stage managing the reproduction of deadness, doing her best to encapsulate and manipulate it into the aesthetic register through an increasingly explicit parody of natural history displays. It is this later quality that dominates the second series. So her history of Canada may be a people's history, but it is also the history of a territory whose material nature erases their quality as people. In other words, a history which, like art, is no longer existential but an *unlife* as Lewis would put it.

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272 Serena Keshavjee, Martha Langford, and Chris Townsend. *Slytod* (Winnipeg: Gallery 1.1.1., School of Art, 1998), 37.

Chapter 3

3.1. Loving Canada

Loving Canada is not a particularly obvious thing to do. As Robertson Davies once quipped, Canada "is not a country you love, it is one you worry about."[273] If post-colonial discourse has largely been a matter of rival romanticisms concerning liberation and self-realization, John Boyle and Diana Thorneycroft are remarkable for creating work that is fundamentally unromantic or even anti-romantic. Work that, in spite of claims by the artists that would suggest otherwise, features a reductiveness and denigration of pathos that makes it far closer to the logic of pornography than romance. This chapter is primarily concerned with the formal results of the objectivation process that Boyle and Thorneycroft undertake. It is not an account of their intentions but of what I believe that their bodies of work actually do as works of art. Intentional content does not determine expression; expression determines formalization of which content is an artifact. As indicated in the introduction, expression is the pre-personal production of properties, the libidinal organization of which is art. The result from this line of production is territory.

I use the term *pornography* in a limited sense. By pornography I am speaking of the formal traits of the genre as articulated by Lynn Hunt. Specifically in *The Invention of Pornography*, Hunt has advanced an understanding of the genre as a form of radical materialist philosophy, one often highly reliant on satire as a rhetorical and structural

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273 George Parkin Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), x.

device.[274] Although her work concentrates on the eighteenth century, the formal traits of the genre have remained constant. Gilles Deleuze's protégé Marcel Hénaff advances a similar understanding of pornography in the opening chapter of *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body,* echoing the majority of the formal and philosophical considerations offered in the introduction to this thesis. To summarize: both the pornographic and the satirical delineate specific ontological structures and means of understanding the world. They are both essentially demonstrative, insisting that all that *is* must be visible, and they both denigrate any notion of interiority, favouring a reductive materialism and an abstract formalism while refusing the significance afforded by narrative. As with the Theosophists, sexuality functions as an energy that pulses through a world of things-in-motion. It fuels, and helps to spontaneously organize, objectivation, manifest in grids coursing with regionalized properties (colour variations and parochial idiomatic signifiers) and a dramatis personae of types (archetypes or stereotypes).

The work of both Boyle and Thorneycroft suggests just such a sexuality of the surface, the organization of which folds in a whole series of materials, whether broadly historic or personal. In the works that I am discussing in this thesis, the artists' libido is primarily invested in the nation, revealing a sexual orientation that is found in the organization of space and its objectivation and only secondarily in any subjective redemption of affective value that can be extracted. The libidinization of a local material

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274 Hunt has built a career on an extensive analysis of the libidinal culture of the French Revolution. This has involved a diverse set of theoretical influences, though primarily the work of Freud and René Girard. Her major attempt to think through political culture in pornographic terms came in her *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). She has commented extensively on the role of pornographic polemics in the Enlightenment as well as edited and contributed to *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800* (New York: Zone Books, 1993) and *Eroticism and the Body Politic,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991).

culture is artificialization and territorialization. The attempt to render meaning from this process is more clearly evidenced in the work of Thorneycroft, in no small part because she has coded her work in didactic terms. In spite of this, and like Boyle, she has not shied away from the overtly erotic function of her imagery. Thorneycroft has stated that, "If you replace the word pervert with artist, it corresponds to how I feel about my own work."[275] She glosses this is terms of the Freudian understanding of perverse desire, manifest in a compulsive need for repetition in obsessive detail.[276] However, Gilles Deleuze's less familiar theorization of perversity comes far closer to what both she and Boyle achieve in formal terms.

Deleuze insists on understanding perversion as an ontological structure determined by the deviancy of ends. From the perspective of social phenomenology, the pervert is someone who acts against an Other. But from the perspective of ontological structure, the pervert is one who acts without an Other.[277] For "...the pervert is not someone who desires but someone who introduces desires into an entirely different system... The pervert is no more a desiring self than the Other is, for him, a desired object endowed with real existence."[278] The perverse structure indicates a world that eliminates the pathetic interior world of selves, replacing it with the exterior world of comedy. This

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275 Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (Interview) *Border Crossings.* (Vol. 15 (3) Summer, 1996), 31.

276 An interpretation of Thorneycroft's work through the idea of the Freudian death drive is advanced in Sharona Adamowicz-Clements, *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009), 13-21. The understanding of trauma as manifest in reiteration is most famously formulated in Sigmund Freud's *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), notably pgs. 8-31.

277 *Other* is, of course, a loaded term. Deleuze is using it in an implicitly polemical sense and his theory functions antagonistically to both post Hegelian phenomenology and Lacanian psychoanalysis while strategically refusing any open engagement with them.

278 Gilles Deleuze; translated by Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 304.

is a deviation, or even a revolution, of sight and perception from inter-subjective codification. The structural Other dictates the horizontal definition of the world, levelling all libidinal investment onto a single plane that continually returns to it as primary reference. It rules and defines perception and oppresses all investment into carefully constructed objects. The world of the Other is one constructed out of a dread of the non-human elements that make up the cosmos. The Other assuages this fear by providing a panoptical view of the world, a world radically limited by the possibilities that the Other determines. The world of the Other finds a ready analogue in that of empathic pathology as outlined by Worringer in the introduction. The structure of the Other controls all of the limits of the world, regulating the shifting of forms and the variations of depth while setting up the definitions of anthropocentric sense. This despotism extends to libidinal desire, forcing desire to pass through a string of Others and be subjugated to this structure. The Other renders a specific mode of perception possible, imprisoning the impersonal elements of the world within bodies and objects. This dictates experience by destroying the actual autonomy of subjects, objects and things, conditioning them within the current of contemporaneity and significance.[279] But the world of Others is just a world, if that, and certainly not *the* world. There is a different world, one of the pervert. "In the Other's absence, consciousness and its object are one."[280] Without the Other, what is revealed is neither the Platonic simulacra of the depths nor their replications in the social world, but the Image. This Image is a vertical double of the world, suspended over the earth, and this Image is the object of desire itself. "Consciousness ceases to be a light

279 Ibid., 310.
280 Ibid., 311.

cast upon objects in order to become a pure phosphorescence of things in themselves."[281] The perverse Image-world then sounds remarkably like what Housser stated in the first chapter when he wrote of the Canadian "race's mood [that] still hovers in space over the natural forms of wilderness, and is a 'thing it itself'."[282] It is the mirror world imagined by Ouspensky as being saturated with sex. The Image also structurally functions in a way almost identical to the paradox, as discussed in relation to Deleuze in chapter one.

An image world akin to that mentioned by Housser is also suggested in Boyle's paintings where his figures float as superimpositions on the landscape, completely divorced from chronic historical time. Instead, all times co-exist, vertically cut and superimposed. An even more explicit example of this sense of suspension can be seen in a painting like *Canadology: The Perpetual Motion Machine* (1992-93), which displays cowboys, milkmen, Rebecca Belmore, Marshall McLuhan, Harold Town, nudes, bowlers and swans fluttering in the wind. Writing of this image, Boyle states that the 'dead' Canadian race "...believed that outside of the observable manifestations of life within the boundaries of birth and death, there was a cumulative aura of the species that hung in the atmosphere that enveloped them. This aura existed independently from the people on the earth."[283]

All of this returns us once again to the themes that we dealt with in chapter one. It is necessary to appeal to the logic of a picture to determine what it is, rather than to either

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281 Ibid., 311.
282 F. B. Housser, *A Canadian Art Movement: The Story of the Group of Seven* (Toronto: Macmillan Co. of Canada, 1974.), 15.
283 John Boyle and Peter Denny, *John B. Boyle: The Canadology Series, 1988-1993* (Owen Sound, Ont.: Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 1994.), 21.

the subjective intentions an artist may have stated or the social imaginary that constructs public history and through which their work might be interpreted to give it meaning. While it is tempting to claim that the historical image – as a kind of residual of aggregate experience – is an appeal to collective memory or a folk image, this is problematic in Boyle. Although some of the images in his work relate directly to his life's events, the majority are fashioned from the detritus of the territory he inhabits, much like the scent mounds constructed by beavers. Their value is in their function as territorial markings, as a means of delineating space as exteriority and buffer zone, not interior reverie.[284] The labour of the work is the reproduction of the image, now assembled as an iconic wall. Though Boyle may operate as a medium for markings and their memorialization, the works themselves are objectivations of the in-itself of space. The fashioning of this wall or skin is an act of love, an erotics of spatiality invested in the qualia and properties of the plane that he determines as the nation.

While abstraction may not normally be associated with libidinal activity, as we saw in the first chapter with Burton and Boyle, it was a profoundly underlying aspect of the tendency for these artists. For to abstract, as Worringer noted, is to suspend from the flux of time and to isolate, to intensify a thing's power as an object or image. In this light, we can clearly see a relation between fetishism, as well as other forms of perversion, and the drive toward abstraction. The most basic trait of Boyle's work always comes back to

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284 Unlike most post-colonial thought, Boyle's is completely rooted in the external world. Inner experience is secondary at best. The notion that Canadian, or any national identity, is of value separate from inhering to its specific locale as an aspect of the territory is almost unthinkable. History is rocks, not our memories of them. For a succinct example of post-colonial thought that tends to interior reflection and the romance of storytelling, see Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 222-237.

the border (as line) and property (as severely artificial colour). In *Yankee Go Home – Elsinore,* the colours of each figure mark their territory, a territory occasionally disrupted in ways that intensifies the focus on specific regions (a finger, a shoulder, a piece of cloth etc.). Art is the formation of borders and the cultivation of qualities that can erupt, by involution or irrationality, within them. This directly mirrors his nationalism. Boyle's work is never one of protest or critique but of refusal,[285] an avowed rejection of dialectics, which, as we saw with the work of George Grant in the previous chapter, only run in one direction. To resort to them is not simply to be a loser, but to bask in your own defeat.[286] In refusing dialectics, however, Boyle does not turn inward but toward the outside. Refusal means no longer bothering to argue, negotiate or positively recognize. It is the refusal of the Other, which is to say, of mediatization, in favour of the abstract image.[287] What counts is an immediacy, one so potent in its gratification that narrative is not required to sublimate desire; pornographic saturation rather than romantic seduction. For this reason, the fusion of art and life, which was so fundamental to Regionalism, is a radical surfacing of the world. Refusal is a way to draw a line to make the region appear and the linear quality of Boyle's work is one of its most defining characteristics. Although

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285 I use the term refusal explicitly to refer to Boyle's *Continental Refusal,* a text which he wrote and performed at various venues in 1970. Greg Curnoe wrote a series of 'amendments' to read afterwards. This is discussed in Katie Cholette, "Derision, Nonsense, and Carnival in the Work of Greg Curnoe," *Revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review* 37, no. 1 (2012), 53-63.

286 This theme was dealt with at length in chapter two while discussion Boyle's *Americanadians.*

287 In the work of both artists, the elimination of mediation plays out in their methods of repetition – Thorneycroft's continual rehearsal and manipulation of tiny elements (see this chapter note 5 and quotation); Boyle's methodical gridding and fetishization of paint (see chapter 2). The metaphysical aspect of this is spelled out by Hénaff in regards to the materialism of pornography: "The Hegelian night is where 'Substance becomes subject,' where negation of the moment is the prelude to the truth of day and the recognition of the Other. In the Sadean night, nothing is mediated; a sexual pleasure is rehearsed, and a mastery is exacerbated, that rules out any form of otherness..." Marcel Hénaff; translated by Xavier Callahan, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 95.

he is clearly influenced, and openly so, by the linear simplifications of David Milne, their investment and logic is different.[288] For Milne, line was intended to drive toward "...love; not love of man or woman or home or country or any material thing, but love without an object – intransitive love."[289] In this light, we can describe Boyle's love as monotransitive – he draws a direct line to a singular object.

An artist is the consummate pervert because the production of art is fundamentally the creation of an image without an Other. While both Boyle and Thorneycroft ultimately create such an image-world in the formal and material qualities of their work, they do it continuous with a battle over space and its articulation, that is, with the Other. The latter is limited predominately to the public function (or dysfunction) of their work and their performances as artists. There is a mural world of the surface image and an intramural world of the Other–Image. The former is unilaterally determined and indifferently abstracted. The latter is a dialectical battle for differentiated power dynamics articulated through empathic agony. Although Boyle escapes further to the surface of the image, Thorneycroft continually tries to turn away from it and keep the dialectical machinery purring. This dynamic is an indicator of their fundamentally different sexualities. Boyle presents an erotics of space where abstraction finds its clearest articulation in line, in a play of colour that is simultaneously seductive and alien, and in a drive toward a collapse of the ego through an accelerated egocentrism, the objectification of which would allow for the artwork to function as a libidinal externality

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288 Milne served as an explicit point of reference in *Toward Paisley* (1976) and *Ark of the Continent - Decoy* (1993) both in terms of Boyle's use of hard line and his use of photos of Milne.

289 Quoted in David P. Silcox, *Painting Place: The Life and Work of David B. Milne* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), xv.

or erogenous zone. Thorneycroft's sexuality is dynamically sado-masochistic. It takes erotic pleasure in the reduction of narrative to postures of ambiguous libidinal encounters. As we shall see, her mantra of blurring lines between victims and perpetrators, much like her fetishistic projections on the mouths of dolls, indicates a process of egocentric objectification comparable to Boyle's, though the end is fundamentally different. Rather than seeking an erogenous externality, in *A People's History* she attempts to perpetuate an internalized melodramatic variation on the master-slave dialectic from which affective excitation can be redeemed as moralized pleasure manifest in public displays of piety.

3.2. Naked History

In Boyle, any pathos to be attributed to history is complicated by the overt sexual content he places in his pictures, transforming the image of history into a sexual object. The only author to wrestle with the issues this raises in regards to the logic of Boyle's work in general, and his nationalism in particular, has been Barry Lord. After making the claim that Boyle's works are about heroic figures, Lord notes that nudes tend to crop up in compositions as a levelling device that collapses the public and private.[290] Like the painter's persistent humour, they take on a potentially ironic role that balances the hyperbolic effects of heroism. This was a prevalent trait in his work for decades. For another example of the problems that arise here, examine *Killing Time in St. Catharines* (1967). This work consists of two freestanding paintings, literally tied together. Painted on both sides of each panel is the usual motley crew of figures, this time including

290 John Boyle and Barry Lord, *John Boyle: A Retrospective* (London, ON: London Regional Art Gallery, 1991), 26.

Egyptian King Farouk, blues musician Charlie Patton, Bob Dylan, Somerset Maugham, lacrosse players, a moose, naked children and a nude old man among others. Most are rendered as random heads. Some isolated limbs also float through the composition. The panels are not solid but have shapes cut out of them which can be spun around, shifting the body parts from one side of the panel to the other. They are not portraits since they make no statement of identity and provide no insight about what they portray. They are closer to relief maps or the private mythological drawings one finds among some folk or outsider artists. In this respect, Boyle's written polemics could be read as legends to many of his works. *Legends* both in the sense of the legend to a map that explains its territorial markings and the legend of folklore that vaguely, most often inaccurately, explains some local belief or tradition. Much of his work functions in this strangely iconic way. I stress the strangeness since the iconic value of the faces that dominate his work does not correspond to the general sense of the word. Even when the faces are recognizable, they are always mixed with a series of other people, places or things, usually with little discernible connection. To turn back to the earlier example of *Yankee Go Home - Elsinore*, the icon is sometimes shorthand for something (each of the figures could be a coded message to other Canadians) and just as often is an interruption (the irrational combination of figures and disorienting use of colour and scale indicate a deliberate erasing of Good sense). Superimposing these icons in this manner does not resonate as much as create noise. This is extended by his persistent use of three dimensional painting surfaces, a strategy that has been continuous throughout most of his career and has included the use of mechanical effects (e.g. a spinning disc in *Fifteen Mile Creek* (1971)), the superimposition of ceramic cast figures (e.g. *Canadology: Charnel Grove* (1989)) and

freestanding characters (e.g. *Little Daisy* (1974)). The insistence on the physical presence of the paintings, often large enough to dwarf a viewer, is matched by the overt presence of the human physique in his images.

Lord correctly asserts that within the context of Boyle's compositions, rife with historical figures and geographical sights, the nudes can act as a kind of alienation device: "Always there is an aspect of alienation, offsetting any tendency to sentimentality."[291] But then his argument takes an awkward turn. Comparing Boyle's nude figures to what nudity must be like in nudist colony, Lord suggests that,"[t]he result is a neutral, but by no means neutered, nudity – neutral in the sense that it has been perceived and painted as an objective reality, not as a subject for personal erotic fantasy."[292] Lord then goes on to explain that images from pornography operate in a very similar register to those of suppressed national history. "Like our heroes, these suppressed images require 're-mythologization' as objective reality in order to demystify them."[293] By this odd statement, what he is suggesting is that the works demand a reading that is no longer prurient or prudish, but strictly objective to restore the works to semi-detached contemplation. This way they can fuse the public and the private and provide a direct relation between an individual and history. As witnessed with his general history of Canadian painting in the previous chapter, Lord's Marxist prejudices force him into pushing the work into the aesthetic-empathic position while ignoring the abstract nature of the work and neutralizing its eroticism. To make this kind of dialectical miracle take place, he concentrates quite selectively on the nudes that Boyle produced and tries to

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291 Ibid., 25.
292 Ibid., 25.
293 Ibid., 26.

return them to a strictly public and social function. Lord's argument needs to be largely inverted however. Certainly the superimposing of the nude and the historical figure is alienating, at least to contemporary sensibilities. However, such a juxtaposition would hardly have been unusual in the historical imagery of Baroque painters where the inclusion of symbolic animals, putti and allegorical landscapes were all commonplaces.[294] One can also find such overlapping in the work of many folk artists and, for that matter, in Thorneycroft with her almost ever-present woodland creatures and sexual innuendo. But one of the crucial distinctions between Boyle and the age of high History painting is precisely the problem of allegory. Since Boyle's works do not offer a coherent narrative, even if one is aware of the literary supplements Boyle sometimes provides for them, their symbolic function comes largely from their orphan status and their capacity for creating alienation effects. When Boyle presents history, he frequently undercuts its grandness by grounding it in sexuality and the banal. One could also invert this and retain an identical surface: sex and the banal are made more grandiose by the looming figures of history. It is important here to recall one thing that was crucial to Boyle's project as established in the second chapter. As a Canadian artist, operating from the position of alienation, it is necessary to refuse the cosmopolitan or international by finding localized images and traditions to invest libidinal energy into. In this sense, Boyle is activating an erotics of history not as the subjective consciousness of history but as an

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294 This is clearly evident in the paintings of someone like Peter Paul Rubens (*The Horrors of War* (1637-8) or *The Allegory of Peace* (1629-1630)). This heroic style of History painting, evolving from the turn to Classical themes in the Renaissance, persisted well into the nineteenth century in increasingly sublimated and localized forms, eventually transformed into pictorial reportage. For one of the most import instances of this set of formal tendencies in the painting of Canadian history, see Edgar Wind's canonical essay "The Revolution of History Painting," *Journal of the Warburg Institute.* (1938): 116-127.

object with a palpable surface and borders. The historical image (of motley public figures and locations) and the nude image (of motley private images and locations) are intended to rub against each other, making sex monumental and making the monumental sexual, levelling everything onto one surface. The drive to create an erotic orphaned imagery – orphaned from sense, from narrative, or even presented as literalized depictions of orphan figures – will return subsequently, but first a few more remarks about his depiction of sexuality is required.

When I maintain that Boyle is a painter of space rather than of figures or landscapes, I am speaking of the eroticism of that space. The severe tactility of his work, either in the form of his cut-outs or the sometimes brutish impasto of his surfaces, testifies to the primacy of sensuality and the fact that its physicality is crucial. This is a way of extending the already monumental quality given to the body in so many of his larger paintings. In his critique of Lord's *Painting In Canada*, Boyle had accused the writer of deliberately avoiding reproducing his nudes. This shyness about the body rubbed the painter the wrong way. Boyle wondered, "Are we to have some asinine prohibition against nudity imposed on the people by the new oppressors as we have had by the old?"[295] Few Canadian artists have foregrounded sex and the body in their work in the way that Boyle has. Running through the handwritten manuscript for *The Peregrinations of A Young Artist In Canada*[296] one can find many carefully drawn penises, crude nude women and even graphic depictions of double penetration along with

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295 John Boyle, Typescript of his response to Barry Lord. (John Boyle Fonds: AGO archives, undated), 13.

296 After nearly two decades of substantial re-writes, this text went on to become the novel *No Angel Came* (1995).

the occasional landscape or portrait. Like his equally graphic depictions of oral sex in his illustrations for Dennis Tourbin's *The Port Dalhousie Stories* (1987), these works are not especially interesting on a formal level. By and large simple sketches, they point to the consistent and repeated return he makes to depicting the sexuality of the body. And it is the erotic component that is primary. "I'm quite interested in explicit sex in art," Boyle would bluntly state.[297]

The above is not meant to suggest that Boyle has a strictly prurient interest in presenting the body. Rather, it is to insist that his depictions of the nation and sex are intimately bound as means of objectivation. An element of this is clearly expressed in Boyle's artist statement for the *The Heart of London* exhibit (1968). After linking his art explicitly to childhood play, he proclaims that, "The day I can truly defile myself in public I will have accomplished everything and will no longer have a need to paint."[298] Boyle's desire for defilement is not purely erotic but also satirical.[299] The many flaccid or erect penises – often his own – that appear in his work have satirical functions. Satire, after all, originated in what were termed *phallic songs*; magical epithets intended to expel evil spirits that were occupying bodies or spaces. According to Robert C. Elliott, the phallic song operated as part of a fertility rite. The eruption of invectives, pelting with food and occasional butchering of *pharmakoi* would occur at the height of the ceremony's libidinal intensity and confusion of sense. This eruption was a means to extend the event

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297 Roger Bainbridge, "The Heroes of John Boyle: Painter Who's Learning art of Survival." *The Whig-Standard*. (Friday January 14, 1977), A1.

298 National Gallery of Canada. *Heart of London [le coeur de London]* (Ottawa : Queen's Printer, 1968), np.

299 Boyle's passion for defilement, while avowed early in his career and sometimes performatively carried out in confrontations with the art community (see note 254), falls significantly to the wayside as his career progresses.

and make the experience more intense. The intensification was also intended to purify and cast out evil pollutions in the midst of the orgy.[300] The legendary puffins in Boyle's *Canadology* became a vermilion colour from plucking out the genitalia of the country's men.

> While normally sedentary, the pink puffin was a formidable fighter if intruders encroached on its nesting territory. Legend had it that a party of fishermen seeking eggs was attacked by a pair of irate puffins. The men were found in their dory, apparently untouched except for gaping holes where their groins had been. They had all bled to death in their flight. From that day on, it was said that the puffins, still being advertised as the symbol of the Canadian nation, had got their distinctive colour from eating human genitalia. A concerted campaign of extermination was launched, and they were hunted to extinction. So powerful was the love/hate relationship Canadians had for the great pink birds, that when, many years after the last of the puffins was thought to have been killed, a small colony was located on a remote island, the people didn't hesitate to kill them all, making sure to save only two specimens for the taxidermist. The pink puffin adorned the coat of arms of ancient Canada, and its distinctive profile was imprinted on the coin of the realm.[301]

In Boyle's formulation, this emasculation was enough to make the puffin into a national emblem. On one level, this suggests a satire on Anglo-Canada's strange relationship to its own neutering. But cultural masochism also, ironically, comes to serve as the basis for the culture's evolution. While the puffins are slaughtered to the point of extinction, they are preserved as emblems of the nation, both on money and in taxidermy for public display. What births and defines the nation also kills it. Sense emerges as sensibility is eliminated. As the birds evolve to take on the colour of the species they neutralize, the two of them blur as they move toward disappearance, their disappearance from living

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300 Robert C. Elliott, *The Power of Satire: Magic, Ritual, Art* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 58-59.

301 John Boyle and Peter Denny, *John B. Boyle: The Canadology Series, 1988-1993* (Owen Sound, Ont.: Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 1994), 15.

preserved as objects of art. These two acts of sterilization (neutering and extinction) serve as the mythical basis for Canada, a nation that can only persist as objects or images that have an entirely ambiguous relationship to historical reality. While on its own, this fragment seems quite coherent, within the broader context of the *Canadology*, it is just one more myth with decidedly little evidence to back it up save for a sterile artifact about which only disparate conjectures can be offered. It also, unmistakably, suggests the more real history of the nation's history with the beaver, earlier alluded to in Boyle's paintings and also linked explicitly with nude male bodies. In recasting extinction in this manner, Boyle simultaneously suggests allegory and mocks how seriously it can be taken as a way to apprehend historical reality. What remains when you escape the trap of taking significance seriously is an alien object and an alienated perspective. In alienation, Boyle cultivates icons through a process of exaggeration that makes the familiar icons (such as the frequently recurring beaver) even stranger. But it becomes an alienation that distances the world by increasing its superficiality and therefore its tactile and erogenous value.

3.3. Decoys I - *Nature-Morte*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Boyle's curious choices tended to cause consternation to critics who were distracted by the icons without understanding how his works formally operated. The formal logic of the work is part of a decoy program, intended to be every bit as repulsive as it is attractive. Boyle's historical images are strictly abstracted and function as territorial markers. This is manifest clearly in the work *Ark of the Continent* (1990) and its double *Ark of the Continent - Decoy* (1993). Both of these acrylic paintings are stretched across a wooden armature resembling a blimp. They are suspended in mid-air. The former depicts the border between Montana and Alberta,

along with caribou, kayakers, swimming nudes, a baby, Boyle's mother as a child, and a SWAT team. The latter shows the Ottawa River, rowing teams, portraits of Greg Curnoe and David Milne (as children) and adolescent sunbathers. Even more explicitly than his wall-like paintings, these exploit the linear quality of the landscape depicted as a relief map, the lines of the territory woven into those of the figures. And unlike the earlier works, which tended to insist on their material presence *in* space and *as* space by being literally propped up on the ground, or with his figures facing the viewer at eye level, the sense of suspension takes over. The arks are functioning like mirrors, reflecting the life of the now extinct Canadians below. On one level, they literalize the objectivation process of the image as that which is captured and hovers above. Yet, the arks are also spoken of as surveillance devices sent from the South, popping up randomly to remind the population that they live under continental rule. This law system demanded the continence and 'absolute chastity' of the population.[302] Once again, this is woven with Boyle's sense of irony. He speaks of the Canadian propensity to simultaneously flout and earnestly enforce a ridiculous amount of laws, even if they will clearly lead to their own extinction. The ark and its decoy are interchangeable with the figures they reflect. Symbolizing both American culture and technological influx, the arks capture and

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302 "Although there is no record of an established religion in the lost nation of Canada, there were formal laws and tenets said to have been handed down by a supernatural power in the south. These commandments were issued in the mists of pre-history, but later written down and preserved in a great floating ark in the shape of an elongated egg, which would penetrate the ether at spasmodic intervals and apparently random locations throughout the land as a constant reminder to the population that they lived under the law and authority of the Ark of the Continent, so named, it is thought, after the first law: the law of continence. This law of absolute chastity was no doubt a contributing factor to the eventual disappearance of the Canadian nation, though it is well documented that the law was flaunted by nearly everyone in daily life. Indeed the Canadians showed a propensity for irrational, severe and unenforcible laws accompanied by an unhappy determination to attempt their enforcement. " John Boyle and Peter Denny. *John B. Boyle: The Canadology Series, 1988-1993* (Owen Sound, Ont.: Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 1994), 13.

fragment the territory they travel over. What 'survives' is a motley of things and a lack of sense. The suggestion of a meaning never fully articulated serves as a decoy to avoid meaning and thus refuse dialogue.[303] This hodge-podge quality, sometimes verging on suggestive allegory and just as often on nonsense, was always the backbone of Boyle's compositional strategy. The refusal of a coherent myth for the destruction of Canada mirrors his refusal of a coherent narrative for the country's history. At every step they are subverted in a performance that often mirrors the psychological picture he has drawn of Canadians across his career (see previous chapter).

In spite of occasionally doing relatively straightforward history paintings reminiscent of poster art, such as his *Batoche* series (1974-75) on the Riel uprising,[304] or the stamp design of Guglielmo Marconi commissioned by Canada Post (1974), most of his works involving historical figures have tended to be more unorthodox and less reverent. For instance, the hybrid painting/sculpture *Little Daisy* (1974) featured Billy Bishop, champion oarsman Ned Hanlan and John Diefenbaker all painted across the body of a three dimensional model airplane, cut in half and suspended across the image of a landscape from around Boyle's home in Elsinore.[305] Standing before these superimposed

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303 *The Canadology* texts that accompany the paintings seem to be deliberately elliptical and fragmentary, functioning more like random entries in a non-existent encyclopedia than the reconstruction of a narrative.

304 The *Canadian Heroes Series #1* was created for a play at Theatre Passe Muraille where actors interacted with the paintings. It is still notable for being invaded by members of the FLQ, random nude female figures and for depicting Gabriel Dumont having his erection stroked (*Batoche - Gabriel*). For a discussion of the series, see John B. Boyle, "Point in Time," *artscanada.* (June 1975), 33-37.

305 Boyle idolized Diefenbaker: "While in high school I wrote angry letters to the editor about what I felt was the Kennedy-inspired systematic character assassination of John Diefenbaker, who I regarded and still regard as one the great intuitive Canadian patriots, and about the rather myopic Liberals who advocated the abolition of British symbols without giving thought to an alternative social structure that would guard against further Americanization of Canada." John B. Boyle, "Queen's Paper: Continental Refusal/Refus Continental," *20 Cents Magazine.* (April 1970), np.

images was a freestanding wooden painting of Joseph Pujol 'Le Pétomane,' the infamous flatulist from France, who is poised to flatulate on the other figures. There is no straightforward significance to such an anachronistic arrangement of Canadian nationalist heroes with a French performer. This baffling quality is deliberate and consistently implied by his own statements. Boyle "... has often been heard to say that there is no hidden message behind his imagery. No particular meaning in the appearance of his baby daughter or London artist Jack Chambers as a young boy in a portrait of Will Donnelly... No special iconographic intent... the artist uses a technique he compares to stream-of-consciousness writing, bringing together unrelated images that happen to have impressed themselves on him."[306] While Boyle's refusal to engage in formal discussions concerning art seems to have been part of a polemical rejection of the norms of art discourse popularized in the United States, his refusal to discuss meaning and content distances his work from having a functional social or political value of any kind. The awkwardness of the latter position is strategically intrinsic to his anarcho-nationalism, manifest either as noise (The Nihilist Spasm Band) or as a nonsensical stream-of-consciousness imagery.[307] "I've always been a stream-of-consciousness artist," Boyle has stated.[308] The stream-of-consciousness technique presented the possibility to capture what is most immanent and least mediated, to allow him, like the Surrealists had hoped, to automatically capture the vicissitudes of his libidinal investments.

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306 Kate Taylor, "Relevance Versus Reverence." *The Globe & Mail*. (September 21, 1991), C13.

307 If Curnoe looked to Dada, Jack Chambers and Boyle came far closer to Surrealism. For a discussion of Chambers' relationship to Surrealism, see Bruce Elder's "Jack Chambers' Surrealism" in *The Films of Jack Chambers* (Toronto: Cinematheque Ontario/Indiana University Press, 2002), 87-115.

308 Sandra Coulson, "Celebrating Canada," *The London Free Press.* (Sunday May 9, 1999), D2.

Writing of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1918-20), Wyndham Lewis severely undermines the pretensions of stream-of-consciousness to convey vitality and privilege phenomenal duration or becoming in history. He argues that rather than putting on display the visceral and phenomenal world, what results from the drive toward the interior and the proliferation of sensory details and memories is just "an Aladdin's cave of incredible *bric-à-brac* in which a dense mass of dead stuff is collected... An immense *nature-morte is the result.* [...] It results from the constipation induced in the movement of narrative."[309] It is easy to see this at play in Boyle. His work scavenges the detritus of his experience and the society around him, cobbling it together as a giant still life, an image which can never be reduced to phenomenal experience for it is no longer experience at all but a thing-in-itself that gets in the way of being recuperated into narrative. In his earlier work, this detritus is collaged together to stand as the vital remainders of a local culture in a dying nation. It serves as the material he uses to construct his wall-like paintings. However, after the 1980s, his work acquires a decidedly more pessimistic air. The death of Canada that George Grant mourned could no longer be avoided. In *Canadology,* the narrative of the death of Canada is introduced farcically, as a satire of the very notion of anthropology and history. Its primary rhetorical conceit is to create a metaphysical myth of Canada that builds on the aura of the nation as both a territory prior to a people and one after the people have become extinct.[310] What remains is only *bric-à-brac.*

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309 Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 89. It is also worth noting that Lewis' evocative description places the stream-of-conscious technique in the realm of the scatological, and so, close to satire and Boyle's desire for defilement.

310 Its peoples are contingent objectivations of the will of space. See particularly John Boyle and Peter

Assembled from diverse materials and painted thickly, Boyle makes paintings that often verge on becoming sculpture. Diana Thorneycroft photographs sculptures. The first exhibits the material quality of the object, the second inhibits it. And yet the approchaes of both artists are fundamentally iconic and archaic in equal measure. Thorneycroft's strategy is different and in some respects the inverse of Boyle's, though still reliant on presenting history as a *nature-morte*. The pictures that make up *A People's History* have two basic levels. The first is as a diorama and the second is as a photograph. In the first instance, the still life – fabricated out of miniatures, toys and the miniaturized reproductions of paintings – is rendered as a tableau in a diorama, capturing a historical event only barely particularized by the imposition of a title (*A People's History - girl bride, Bountiful, BC* (2011)). This is complicated by the rhetorical traits of the diorama itself. While she is overtly playing against the rhetoric of natural history displays and the pedagogical tools that were once common to museums (see below), she simultaneously introduces an added level of complexity.

The best discussion of the miniature and the diorama is offered by Susan Stewart who, in spite of recognizing the radical departure from dialectical thinking which these forms indicate, still does her best to recuperate them within it.[311] Nonetheless, her

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Denny, *John B. Boyle: The Canadology Series, 1988-1993* (Owen Sound, Ont.: Tom Thomson Memorial Art Gallery, 1994), 21-22.

311 This is evidenced by her more than frequent recourse to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. And statements such as, "The miniature is against speech, particularly as speech reveals an inner dialectical, or dialogic nature." Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 67. The dread that the miniature can conjure as an image without an Other is well demonstrated in the statement, "We are thrilled and frightened by the mechanical toy because it presents the possibility of a self-invoking fiction, a fiction

primary analysis remains crucial. Miniaturization indicates a basic resistance to language and reflexivity. It functions through the continuous production of gestures that indicate "a shell-like, or enclosed, exteriority."[312] Although the miniature or diorama is representational, it is simultaneously utterly abstract because it is removed from empirical flux, shrunken to an alien scale and frozen in time. Not only that, but it is fundamentally non-recuperable. As Stewart writes "...the world of objects is always a kind of 'dead among us,' the toy ensures the continuation, in miniature, of the world of life 'on the other side.'"[313] This is part of a mimetic process that forces the content of the miniature into a form "whereby space becomes significance."[314] Shifting spatiality into significance comes at a cost to the logic of narrative or interiority. The miniature or diorama then functions as an event that occupies the distance between narrative and context, rendering itself closed and floating.[315] In light of this, and like Boyle's fragmented fake mythologies, it is analogous to an epigram or quotation "abstracted from the context at hand is such a way as to seem to transcend lived experience..."[316] At the same time, of course, being a miniature means that it does not speak at all, but rather possesses space. Its property as space rather than as a container of beings is primary.

Thorneycroft's presentation of colonial history in diorama form has two rhetorical functions. First, it speaks to the history of public museums and their occasional use of the

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which exists independently of human signifying processes." Ibid, 57.

312 Ibid., 45.
313 Ibid., 57.
314 Ibid., 47.
315 Ibid., 48.
316 Ibid., 53.

diorama as a means to relate historical events. While this mode of display has largely been relegated to natural history museums in Canada, one may still find instances of it in sites such as The Marguerite Bourgeoys Museum of Montréal or Le Musée du Fort in Québec City.[317] As a medium, the diorama "provides an ideal means to consider real conditions and speculate about imaginary situations" thanks to its ready capacity to include both the visual captivating and the didactic.[318] Originally patented by Daguerre in 1822, the diorama bore a great deal formally in common with its evolving double, the photograph. Both media have an 'intrinsically morbid' function that allows them to 'arrest life' and so provide the "opportunity to step bodily out of the flow of life and to consider crystalline moments."[319] Given the tendency for dioramas to be separated from the viewer by a pane of glass, their quality as three-dimensional sculptural spaces is eroded and they function much like a two-dimensional photograph. This point is made explicit in Thorneycroft's method and the presentation of her diorama as suspended photographic images. The diorama serves as a miniaturization and materialization of events, carefully constructed as a record that an audience may view either voyeuristically or as a witness. Secondly, the diorama as an artistic form plays into the history of childhood with its reliance on doll houses, models, and figurines. This aspect is also important due to the role that dolls and figurines have played in psychotherapy, particularly when it comes to dealing with childhood trauma.[320] All of these references are at play in Thorneycroft's

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317 Jacques Bélanger, "Revivre les grandes batailles de Québec," *Cap-aux-Diamants: la revue d'histoire du Québec.* (Numéro 25, printemps 1991), 68-70.

318 Toby Kamps and Ralph Rugoff, *Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art* (La Jolla, Calif: Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, 2000), 6.

319 Ibid., 7.

320 For examples see George Edington, "Hand Puppets and Dolls in Psychotherapy With Children." *Perceptual and Motor Skills.* 61, no. 3 (1985): 691-696; Jamshid A. Marvasti, "Using Anatomical

work as she orients her history of Canada around the central model of childhood traumas, doubling as the various violences of colonialism.

Accumulating so many three dimensional figures, the diorama is an aggregate of potentially excessive exteriors. The postures and gestures of the figures that fill it are in excess of the narrative that would contain it[321], something testified to by Thorneycroft's consistent insistence on the primacy of the surface details contained in her photos: "....I am totally enamoured with surface, even to the props that I have altered for my photographs. I've spent hours and hours working the surface of bones. Nobody sees that. So my fascination with surfaces is pretty integral to everything."[322] However, the three dimensionality of the diorama and its unsettling of a defining continuity or significance is then re-encapsulated by the photograph.[323] Though we have seen by previous examples that the final photographic image which she presents is inevitably rife with ambiguity, the

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Dolls in Psychotherapy With Sexualized Children." in *101 More Favorite Play Therapy Techniques Volume 2.* H. G. Kaduson & CE Schaefer, eds. (2001): 312-316 and Valerie Sinason, "Dolls and Bears: From Symbolic Equation to Symbol The Significance of Different Play Material for Sexually Abused Children and Others," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 4, no. 4 (1988): 349-363.

321 For a useful commentary on the ways in which gestures – particularly in the intersection of different media - fundamentally undermine signification, see Jill Bennett's "Aesthetics of Intermediality," *Art History* 30, no. 3 (2007): 432-450. For Bennett, the gesture is not an articulation or a communication of anything other than communication itself; it is 'no longer psychological' and registers as 'solipsistic babble' (441) as acts move "from 'meaningful' expressions into displaced symptoms." (448) The gesture is a line of intensity within an interaction which no longer has an external content, like an affect without a subject. But given that the floating gesture relies on a cinematic artifice for Bennett, the freezing of the gesture in the photograph would logically lead to a disaffected and subjectless object.

322 Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (Interview) *Border Crossings*, 15 no.3 (Summer, 1996), 31.

323 The idea that the photo is also a kind of death has been a commonplace, albeit a controversial one, in photo theory for decades. In particular, the photo's opposition to 'life' is a major feature of Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (New York: Dell Pub. Co, 1977) and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). Barthes' phenomenally biased analysis even goes so far as to tie it to a putrefaction process (Barthes, 5). For a view of the photo as an unassimilable and non-dialectical externality, see Francois Laruelle's *Le concept de non-photographie*. (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic; New York: Sequence Press, 2011).

photograph and its flattening of things into two dimensions still functions as a diminution of depth, be it psychic or visual. As noted above, a further level of diminution is imposed with the titling. Such singularization is intended to limit the excess of the diorama to the confines of a narrative event, either historical or imaginary, for which it serves as a kind of epigram.

For both Boyle and Thorneycroft, the inhuman wilderness that obsessed the country's earlier painters was replaced with the *nature-morte.* A world without a people was followed by a world where people are being extinguished or have gone extinct. Picturing designates precisely the erasure of the subject by the territory. He collages material history's garbage, she turns it into dioramas. As we saw for Boyle, the array of historical figures and quotidian objects that he collects in his walls function like a giant still life, one which is set up both to commemorate the death of the nation and stall the ingress of international penetration by refusing the narrative of historical progress (the force of liberal homogenization). The still life also comes explicitly to the fore in the works of Thorneycroft. If Boyle, in his satire, creates murals to articulate the libidinal surface of a fading nation, Thorneycroft, in her parody, dramatizes the intramural melodrama of the progress of homogenization. Given that Boyle was working in the shadow of Grant and the growing conviction that Canada was dead, it would be hard to work in any way other than the *nature-morte*. His later works betray the sense of mourning more profoundly, though still not without his requisite bitter humour. Meanwhile, Thorneycroft's attempt to commemorate the victims of Canadian history is filtered through a form of comedic rhetoric that undermined any attempt at pathos.

3.4. Decoys II – *trauma/arousal*

While I do think that the psychoanalytic model of the decoy within a perverse structure is intrinsic to the rhetorical game at play in Thorneycroft's work, I think that she has misjudged what is actually at play in the structure. The decoy is the idea of trauma. The fetish of the work is a trauma which is never really there. Speaking of her use of dolls, the artist states that: "There was a sense of identification with creating these things, with making them sexual, with their femaleness and their vulnerability. I identified with their being both victim and abuser, and then being victimized and abused by me so to speak. The arousal was also memory arousal as much as physical, though I'm not sure what that's about."[324] However, since there is no repressed memory to actually arouse, it is the idea of a hidden memory which serves as a shield from the primarily libidinal nature of the image, allowing her to pretend it is more than localized erotic fixation by suggesting it has broader socio-historical significance. In this fashion, moralization and the spectre of trauma serve as secondary forms of pleasure invested into a righteous narrative. This strategy keeps the pictures of *A People's History* strictly within the archaic tradition of satire as discussed by Elliott above, only now projected onto iconic miniaturizations of history.

The abstraction of an event and its transformation into an archetypal frame for an implied narrative has played a major formative role in Thorneycroft's work. Over the course of her career she has shown remarkable consistency in this respect. Her imagery has roved from the conscious fantasies about her own non-existent subconscious content

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324 Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (Interview) *Border Crossings*, 15 no. 3 (Summer, 1996), 30.

(*The Body, its Lesson and Camouflage* (1990-1998)) to her attempt to create a mechanism for hallucinating history as a form of public art therapy (*A People's History*). Even more than previously, childhood sexuality is foregrounded but it has been invested differently. In the early work, it was esoteric and deliberately obscure. By mid-period it would become deliberately ambiguous until finally becoming consciously overdetermined. This shift comes with a deliberate attempt to give the imagery didactic value, something that is frequently undermined by the formal language that she has evolved through each stage of her career.

For example, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments - Northern River* (2008) depicts a group of children playing in a park. A dog runs around with a ball while bears peacefully walk by and moose copulate behind a tree. Amidst this activity, two people sip hot drinks as a man shows off his model boat to a little boy. The man has his pants open. Pedophilia, the tourist landscape and childish games all coalesce, perfectly in harmony with the sexual pulse of nature. Far from offering a moral condemnation, the picture could as easily function as an apologia for child molestation. It is precisely this severe amorality which Thorneycroft and her commentators have a tendency to elide because it is so frequently present.[325] Instead, there has been a concerted effort to code her work in psychoanalytic terms to keep it within the scope of established theoretical tropes and

325 The amorality of her images has not gone completely unnoticed. In her exhibition essay for Thorneycroft's showing of the *Doll Mouth* series at Montreal's Art Mur, Marie-Ève Beaupré states, "Notre lecture des oeuvres s'avère ébranlée, embarrassée par l'accent amoral des photographies, et nos références esthétiques, perplexes devant la beauté de telles scènes et par l'érotisme des prises de vues." "The Doll Mouth series," Art Mur, accessed July 5, 2014. http://artmur.com/artistes/diana-thorneycroft/the-doll-mouth-series/

socially recuperable significance.[326] Controversies over her career have usually been dealt with under the guise of generic references to free speech and the ambiguity of art that provides no 'easy answers'.[327] Yet, is the work actually ambiguous? There is nothing ambiguous about amorality, yet there is certainly something very awkward about insisting that work which so effectively undermines moral pathos should actually contain any. To take a picture that is unmistakably similar to the one just described: *A People's History - Father Sylvestre* (2009) depicts a group of little girls playing around a swing set. To the side sits London, Ontario's Father Sylvestre, who pleaded guilty to sexually abusing nearly 50 girls.[328] He has a little girl in his lap and his hand under, or between, her legs (it seems deliberately unclear). It is a bright, highly saturated photo with an unusually dynamic use of line that still retains a sense of calm and warmth. Its major distinction from *Group of Seven Awkward Moments - Northern River* of the previous year is both this warmth and the lack of animals, due perhaps to its more urban setting. Without knowing the history connected to the picture by a title, however, no sense of its

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326 For most authors, this has been the standard way to deal with her work, either in interviews or essays. For examples see Vicki Goldberg and Meeka Walsh, *Diana Thorneycroft: The Body, its Lesson and Camouflage* (Winnipeg: Bain & Cox, 2000), Sharona Adamowicz-Clements, *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009) and Thorneycroft, Diana, *A Slow Remembering: an Exhibition of Photographs* (Winnipeg: Floating Gallery, 1994). Martha Langford also notes the degree to which this has been mapped onto a 'progressive' political discourse: "She participates consciously or unconsciously in the discourse of the body that feminism and gay politics have advanced." Serena Keshavjee, Martha Langford, and Chris Townsend, *Slytod* (Winnipeg: Gallery 1.1.1., School of Art, 1998), 12.

327 The value of art as a source of public controversy was a major theme in the articles which covered Thorneycroft in her early career. This was particularly the case with the "Monstrance" (1999) exhibition, which caused a public stir thanks to its use of animals putrefying mixed with entrails placed in stuffed animals. The work was rehabilitated by the media and arts establishment in language that directly mimed the notion of civic responsibility and citizenship essential to the liberal state. For an example, see Robert Enright, "Pulling Questions out of a Rabbit," *The Globe and Mail*. (Wednesday September 22, 1999), C1 - C3. Controversies over the 'S&M' content of earlier exhibits such as "Touching the Self" (1991) also served as suitable newspaper fodder. For example, Elizabeth Beauchamp's "Photography That Dares to Disturb" in *The Edmonton Journal* (August 13, 1991), R188.

328 Jim Gilbert, *Breach of Faith, Breach of Trust: The Story of Lou Ann Soontiens, Father Charles Sylvestre, and Sexual Abuse Within the Catholic Church* (iUniverse, 2010).

supposed moral lesson could be gleaned. Even then, barring a subjective curiosity about local sexual abuse cases, there is no didactic element at play to offer any information. In fact, given that it is even more low-key in its narrative implications than the earlier photo, even less moral significance is indicated by its formal traits.

Rather than capturing supposedly absent presences or the excavation of repressed memories, I would posit that her work creates a space where such psychodrama does not exist and whose formal logic bars its possibility. Further, her work's performative function demonstrates this. Her work needs to be taken literally because it is predicated on a reduction to objects with ambiguous of non-signifying value. But to do this is not possible without seriously undermining the kind of claims that she and others have made about her work. What I am offering over the course of the rest of this chapter is not an account of her intentions but a reading that fundamentally inverts what she claims her work does. To reiterate: picturing is the production of objectivation; the creation of an image that is detached from empirical qualia and memory. It is a witness without a subject. An image is a world without an Other, a space without a people. This is, to return to Jessica Burstein and Wyndham Lewis in the introduction, a cold modernist reading, one that insists that subjective and psychological experience only count for what they are in reductively physical terms and for how they function in an economy of things. If such a reading did not have to be explicitly made in regard to Boyle, it is because his work was, however unintentionally but thanks to his own humour, already driven in this direction and did not undertake the kind of public performance that Thorneycroft has to obscure it.

As already noted, there has been a concerted effort by both Thorneycroft and her critics to pathologize her images in order to give them depth, thus imbuing the work with a pathos that can rehabilitate its amoral content by humanizing it. For instance, among her most extensive commentators, Chris Townsend calls her work 'hysteric,' thus giving it both psychological depth and allaying it with the history of women in analysis[329]; Martha Langford interprets her work as demanding to be seen as outpourings of the unconscious, though perhaps false ones[330]; and Sigrid Dahle reads Thorneycroft's production in explicitly Freudian terms as dream-work.[331] The issue of pathos has been a defining factor in critical work on Thorneycroft, which she has displayed a consistent propensity to place her work in a psychoanalytic context.[332] She tends to feed this in her interviews, all the while maintaining that her works have no real basis in trauma.[333] I have problems with such readings, however. The problem of the role of supposedly unconscious content

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329 "Identity here is continually figured as the internal condition of a mutable and fragmentary psyche, composed not of one's self but a collage of possible selves, visited upon the body's surface through an excess which psychoanalysis might classify as 'hysteric'." Chris Townsend, *Vile Bodies: A Channel Four Book: Photography and the Crisis of Looking* (Prestel Pub, 1998), 72.

330 "These very much want to be treated as outpourings of the unconscious, felt, as Thorneycroft discovers them herself. She may have been hurt as a child or she may be working from experiences that would repel many of use, and that she just found interesting (she alluded to certain 'maggots' in her interview), or she may remember her childhood all wrong and be replacing the most ordinary memories with what Caws calls 'a quiet narrative, taken over by the female sensibility, and documented by the image.'" Martha Langford, "Fantastic Trauma," *Afterimage* (September/October 2000), 15.

331 "Dream material is intimately and inextricably connected to the details of the dreamer's personal history, so only she, the dreamer, can interpret her nocturnal reveries -- and even she may be sidetracked by the dream-work' amazing decoy ability." Diana Thorneycroft, *A Slow Remembering: An Exhibition of Photographs* (Winnipeg: Floating Gallery, 1994), 3.

332 For examples, see her interview in Sharona Adamowicz-Clements' *Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009), 46.

333 For instance, in explaining her work's continued borrowing from the Christian iconography of suffering, she relates her understanding of Christianity simultaneously to the reproduced images of art history and to a vaguely described instance of personal abuse (Sharon Adamowicz-Clements, *Diana Thorneycroft: Canada, Myth and History: Group of Seven Awkward Moments Series* (Kleinburg, Ont.: McMichael Canadian Art Collection, 2009), 46). In another interview, she insists that her work is not based in trauma or repressed memory at all but is only about the people around her and the objects she relates to them (Vicki Goldberg and Meeka Walsh, *Diana Thorneycroft: The Body, its Lesson and Camouflage* (Winnipeg: Bain & Cox, 2000), 13.

on display in art can best be illustrated by recalling the battle that broke out in the Surrealist movement in the 1930s. With her use of miniatures, dolls, distorted photographic techniques, fascination with taboos and gender ambiguity, Thorneycroft clearly owes a substantial debt to these largely French artists.[334] The Surrealist camps crystallized around André Breton and Georges Bataille. Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* rested upon an almost reductive formalization of metaphor and a relishing of the poetic capacities to be found in displacement (fetish objects and symbolic decoys). Objecting to this kind of circumlocution was paramount for Bataille because such a poetics meant not only a loss of directness, but, in effect, a siding with the law, either as censorship or as psychic castration. It was the desublimatory aspect of art that was of crucial importance to Bataille. This kept the work of art allied to anal eroticism – understood as a scatological drive toward anarchic indifference – and against the Phallic order of difference, operative either through cultural censorship or its indirect conduit: fetishism.[335]

The fetishization of difference (gendered or ethnic) has long been one of the central tropes of Thorneycroft's work, beginning with her overtly surrealist *The Body, its Lesson and Camouflage* (1990-1998) pieces and continuing with her examination of its role in the Canadian cultural industries. The earlier works tend to be spoken of by her critics in terms of their gendering since within these images she takes on the roles of both

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334 She has also admitted to this, citing Hans Bellmer as a significant influence. Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (interview) *Border Crossings*, 15 no. 3 (Summer, 1996), 28.

335 For a good account of the tension between anal eroticism and fetishism, see Hal Foster's "Violation and Veiling in Surrealist Photography: Woman as Fetish, as Shattered Object, as Phallus" in *Surrealism: Desire Unbound.* Ed. Jennifer Mundy. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 203-226.

her brother and father. This gendering has been ambiguous enough that it could be more readily understood as a de-differentiation. The artist herself has referred to it as a deliberate 'gender blurring' intended to arouse a 'bisexual' encounter.[336] The *Doll Mouth* series also testifies to this tendency in her work. This series involved close cropped, often slightly distorted photos of the mouths of dolls. The mouths occasionally have lipstick smeared on them.[337] Following the desublimatory logic above, the images give an anal-erotic quality to the mouths and mock the literally cosmetic role played by gender differentiation, speaking to this basic attack on identity and interiority. However unlike the Surrealists she borrows from, such as fellow doll enthusiast Hans Bellmer, Thorneycroft usually wants to play both sides of this and avoid reductive literalization. Her work can simultaneously suggest displacement into the symbolic and directness that mocks readings of latent content. She retains an ambiguous place between the two positions by using her interviews and public statement to frame her works in a psychoanalytic rhetoric, one so overdetermined and already institutionalized in art theoretical discourse that the notion that it reveals anything hidden begs extreme skepticism. She calls the fetish objects that began appearing early in her imagery *decoys*. Seemingly random, these innocuous items (action figures, Barbies, stuffed animals, bones, medical equipment) serve as distractions or interruption to the more dramatic suggestiveness of her body's make-believe trauma. "I think one of the reasons I like using decoys is that it gives the viewer a point of entry. And it gives me permission to deal with

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336 Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (interview) *Border Crossings*, 15 no. 3 (Summer, 1996,) 25.

337 For psychoanalytically infused reflections on the series, see the catalogue essay by Steven Matijcio in *The Doll Mouth Series* (St. Catharines, Ont.: Rodman Hall Arts Centre, 2006), 6-40.

something quite painful which is usually hidden. The real gut of the piece is hidden."[338] According to this logic of production, the image itself is the erasure of its content. This is analogous to the trauma logic we saw in the first chapter with Bordo. As Langford glosses:

> Thorneycroft's photographs are of this negative anti-world, grotesque, not because they reveal the grotesque, but rather because they cannot. The symbology of her work evokes collective and autobiographical memory: her performances allude to physical and psychological violation: somehow, these signs fail to coalesce. Some ineffable thing has placed Thorneycroft in a mnemonic vacuum. Elements rush in – the therapeutic process, the baroque intensity, the formal values – leaving no room for ugliness. The work is in a sense misleading, though not insincere, for its content lives behind a screen, beyond the frame, as a piece of Thorneycroft's psyche that she cannot reconstitute visually, verbally or otherwise.[339]

In such an interpretation, the blatant image then functions as a means to defer the latent picture, which only exists in some imaginary realm to be conjured by artists and art historians as a way of avoiding the actual presence of art and its indifference to experience. However, when Thorneycroft moved away from using her body with objects, the objects that formerly served as her decoys became the entire subject of the work. The decoy strategy had to alter significantly, driving her toward a more theatrical engagement with the audience, one that included a more blatant use of violent imagery than ever before.

Theatricality has always been a dominant part of Thorneycroft's aesthetic choices but finally reached its *reductio* in her diorama work. In her earlier work, the scenario

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338 Robert Enright, "Memory Feeder: Subjects and Objects in the art of Diana Thorneycroft" (Interview) *Border Crossings*, 15 no.3 (Summer, 1996), 26.

339 Martha Langford, "In The Playground of Allusion," *Exposure*, 31 nos.3-4 (1998), 20.

functioned through a basic disjunction. "In a perverse scenario the fetish object is often a decoy. It hides the person who's using it, to prevent them from consciously becoming aware of the trauma. So the whole history of the utility of fetish objects is implicated. I think I'm walking directly into that."[340] But once the human figure is removed, the dynamic fundamentally changes. The doll or figurine no longer serves to anchor the ambiguous presence of a human body as it had in *The Body...* This alters the dynamic of her imagery to a degree that Thorneycroft seems unaware of. Instead, the theme of trauma itself comes to serve as the decoy for an objectivation procedure that mocks the idea of human presence and pathos by presenting only things. If trauma is only recognizable as such because of the repression that follows from it, the lack of repression would indicate precisely that there is no trauma. Considering the already noted tenuousness of the relationship between her work and real life, this may have always been the case, but it is not until her diorama pieces that it is being rendered in its most naked form. *Naked* in precisely the sense that Lewis considered the nude in the introduction: nude as the body stripped to a soulless surface that nakedly reveals its mechanical nature. In other words, the use of the doll or figurine comes to serve as an ultimate denuding of the pathetic subject.

The style of depiction in both *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* and *A People's History* has become remarkably literal. It may be precisely because there is no trauma in the apparent misfortune of the images that the lack of it is mistaken for trauma to fit into a supplementary salvational narrative that requires it.[341] Her description of her working

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340 Ibid., 33.

341 This ties in precisely with her work's market value and the kind of audience it attracts. See Michael

process in terms of reiteration is the closest thing to trauma involved in her body of work because it continually reintroduces the spectre of a pathetic picture, but only aligns it with pleasure.[342] In other words, her procedure is dramatically masochistic and any distinction between pleasure and pain is rendered at the very least obscure, if not moot. As will be developed in the following section, on one level, this masochism is excited over the possibility of suffering. On another, it sublimates this enjoyment, supplementing it with the suffering aroused through moralization, whether according to the platitudes of aesthetic expression as a testament to the value of human life, or condemnations of crimes against human decency. The taboo and the guilt associated with these transgressions then function as a secondary pleasure, one that can be redeemed through shows of public righteousness, as we will witness in a critical reaction below. Literalness is coupled with a theatricality that obscures it to create a kind of publicly performable ritual of catharsis. This move to theatricality was part of the bridge between her early work featuring herself and her diorama images. The most significant instance of this middle period was *Monstrance* (1999), a two part installation constructed around the reliquary of Catholic saint and rabbits hung outside. Both real dead rabbits and plush toys stuffed with viscera were left to the elements to fester and decay. As Robert Enright argues, "...Diana Thorneycroft has said that – among other things – her installation

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Rattray's *C Magazine* review below.

342 The understanding of trauma as manifest in reiteration is most famously formulated in Sigmund Freud's *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961). Notably pgs. 8-31. As stated previously, this serves as the model for Sharona Adamowicz-Clements' writing on Thorneycroft and directly feeds into the artist's appeal to the pervert as the one who reiterates. Again, we point out that it is only a performance of trauma.

celebrates 'the gloriousness of putrefaction.'"[343] Thorneycroft went on to state that "*Monstrance* is about our fascination with and reverence for carnal remains... humankind's compulsion to leave behind physical evidence of out temporary existence, and with nature's insistence on returning lifeless bodies to the earth."[344] However, this moment of relishing organic destruction was soon tempered by an overwhelming push toward a kind of inorganic sterility, both in terms of her use of industrial plastic items and her far more traditional use of photo display. As has been reiterated throughout this thesis, it is precisely this turn to the image that designates a severing of art from the empirical world of subjects and their pathos.

3.5. The automation of empathy and vicarious victimhood

Without relying on the illusions of realism, Thorneycroft carefully selects her content in order to maximize empathic engagement. Rather than using the startling juxtapositions and overt absurdity of previous photo series, *A People's History* minimizes detail to focus on faces. While we get glimpses of an array of carefully selected multicultural victims in the small pox genocide, Louis Riel's hanging, Africville's destruction and Japanese internment camps, the majority of the works concentrate on child abuse of various kinds. Besides the Dionne quintuplets there are numerous cases of child molestation at the hands of priests (*A People's History - Night, Pine Island* (2008), *A People's History - View from Mount Cashel, St. John's Harbour (*2008)) and hockey coaches (*A People's History - Coach* (2010)), child brides in Bountiful (*A People's History - girl bride, Bountiful, BC* (2011)), cops murdering Aboriginals *(A People's History -starlight tour for*

343 Robert Enright, "Pulling Questions out of a Rabbit," *The Globe and Mail* (Wednesday September 22, 1999), C1.
344 Ibid.

Neil Stonechild (2011)), a serial killer (*A People's History - Col. Williams* (2011)) and more. If anything, Thorneycroft could be accused of playing it too safe in her choices. Objecting to child abuse and institutional racism hardly constitute a profound critique of the social order and public morals of a dogmatically multicultural welfare state. There is nothing of the destruction of unions and exploitation of the poor, the suppression of Québec, the legal and ethical dubiousness of the Constitution or the Charter of Rights, nothing of the several colonial wars the country has been involved with or the environmental devastation upon which our economy is predicated. Certainly, there is no hint of the substantial slave trade, massive infanticide, child abuse and species extermination that preceded European colonization and had been the mainstay of life in what became Canadian territory for centuries. Any of these things could have just as readily been presented in diorama fashion. Rather, the acts she selected form a kind of 'family romance' version of history, as Lynn Hunt might put it, one which fits comfortably within the account of Canadian nationalism put forward by Eva Mackey that we examined in the previous chapter. However, Thorneycroft's critique of colonial misfortune is complicated by her formal choices. In spite of the artist's claim that her images "speak of atrocities that eradicate all humour"[345] they also undeniably reiterate the formal aspects of comedy that defined her earlier works.[346]

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345 http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php

346 The lingering fact that while the artist's intentions may have changed, the formal qualities and rhetoric of the work has not followed suit is one of the leitmotifs of Hodgins' essay. However, like Thorneycroft and Rattray, he refuses to work through what the undeniably comic view given in such a presentation of history could actually suggest. See Peter Hodgins, "The Haunted Dollhouses of Diana Thorneycroft," *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 3 (1) (2011), 121-122.

Thorneycroft's penchant for the comically grotesque dominates her diorama works. *A People's History* is the central part of four photo series by the artist (the others being *The Canadiana Martyrdom Series* (2006), *Group of Seven Awkward Moments* (2007-2010), and *Canadians and Americans (best friends forever... it's complicated)* (2012-2013)). *A People's History* was created simultaneously with *Group of Seven Awkward Moments.* While all of these works share in the same aesthetic, it is only *A People's History* that she asks to be interpreted in a fundamentally different way: "Rather, my intention is to consider what took place, why it took place, why it took place here, and reflect it back to all of us for whom it resonates. From this angle, perhaps we can begin to understand these events, and maybe learn something about ourselves that we may not like; that we need to address."[347] The intentional comment in this set of pictures may be that minorities have been captured and treated as human playthings. In depicting this with the means she utilizes, she suggests that the *nature-morte* of the diorama can then be revitalized and transformed into a moral display.

A People's History was inspired by the catalogue for the Jewish Museum's *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery – Recent Art*.[348] This exhibition displayed the work of a variety of contemporary artists who attempted to deal with the holocaust in unorthodox ways. Closest to Thorneycroft in terms of intention and methodology were the works of David Levinthal and Zbigniew Libera, both of whom rely heavily on the use of toys and the idea of play. As Ernst Van Alphen argues, for them, the toy, whether it be a figurine

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347 http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php

348 "Of enormous assistance to me as I consider doing this difficult work are the essays in an exhibition catalogue from *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery / Recent Art*..." http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php

or LEGO, is intended to ask the viewer to identify with the victimizer (the player) rather than the victim (the toy). This controversial move was intended to create a kind of active pedagogy, engaging the viewer in an act of imagination. Allowing the audience to catch a mild empathic contagion from the forces of evil, it was hoped, would have a homeopathic result whose moral salve would be more profound than simply pitying the victim. What results is an art which "is not mimetic, but performative instead."[349] This performance creates the possibility of an active affective relationship to the material which is not based strictly on the cultivation of memory (historical or fictional narrative) or the notion of trauma (disassociated memory). Rather, the works create a drama that the viewer acts in as they *play* children *playing* at being evil. The 'subjugation'[350] of art to these ends was meant to force a moral *interestedness* upon the experience and to encourage a potent affective reaction to contact with evil thoughts. Or as Ellen Handler Spitz puts it, the work would "eject us feeling sick, stirred, titillated, sullied, betrayed, contaminated, and embarrassed. And shaken, perhaps, with deep, uncomfortable questions."[351] Presumably this ejection could only occur with the return of the moral narrative, though neither van Alphen nor Spitz make clear how that could happen.

Thorneycroft clearly wishes to emulate precisely this structure of melodramatic masochism. As she states, "In 'A People's History', I too am attempting to make work that allows identification, for the briefest of seconds, consciously or not, with both the victim and perpetrator. I feel it is essential to blur the distinction to remind the viewer of

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349 Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2001), 70.
350 Ibid., 79.
351 Ibid., 43.

the amazing/disturbing range of human capability, as a means of prompting empathy, and as an acknowledgement of the darkness that exists within the human psyche."[352] In framing her work in this manner, the artist openly takes on the role of therapist/manager that George Grant spoke of as being essential to the functioning of the liberal state.[353] She seeks a hyperinflation of affect where empathy functions as social currency. While I would not deny that on some level the works in the series do perform such an operation, they also perform at least one other, quite antithetical one that escapes dialectical capture.

As quoted above, she has consistently sought in her work to play the role of victim and perpetrator, but it has not been until she so bluntly faced historical events in her work that this became an explicitly moral position. And yet such intentions consistently fall flat. What would it mean if the work were the mimesis of 'evil' rather than a performance to extirpate it? Considering the remarkable formal consistency of her body of work, the former option seems far more compelling. Thorneycroft's failure to become an effective moralist is finally sealed when the safety valve of ambiguity completely falters. What results is a radically reductive objectivation that demeans the pathos she is attempting to evoke with her imagery. Almost an inverse of the homeopathy described above seems to occur.

As we have seen, her earlier work relied upon creating the sense of a narrative which was then undermined or rendered ambiguous. The images of *Group of Seven Awkward Moments,* much like many of Boyle's paintings, are deliberately absurd, jarring and nonsensical. It is a form of paradoxically functional dysfunctionality. However, in *A*

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352 http://dianathorneycroft.com/collection-history.php
353 See previous chapter.

People's History, such unmoored picture making finds itself complicated by implicating itself in an historical framework external to the work itself and to which it is expected to smoothly correlate in order to attain a didactic function. The complication arises when the awkwardness that this involves is no longer something she desires. The pictures of *A People's History* tie themselves to historical events by title as well as by iconic content. They are not simply fantasies on a historical theme. As discussed above, their embrace of the visual logic of natural history displays and museums muddles things further, suggesting that her parodic appropriation of them mocks the veracity of such a method. This gesture also undermines any claim by the work to actually deal with historical content in a straightforward manner. But is this where the satire in the works ends? Does the picture critically mock or rather extend the rhetorical power of museum displays? As pious as her intentions may be, the formal logic of the work operates against them at every turn, botching the attempt to perpetuate an empathic contagion.

Although *A People's History* has found far less critical adulation than her earlier series, it has received some accolades. For instance, reviewing the series in *C Magazine*, Michael Rattray seemed rather convinced by the artist's claims about her images. Looking at the work *A People's History - Indian Home* (2011) and its overtly fake museumological display aesthetics, he states, "What this fabricated allegory of the foundations of Canada makes explicit is how equally a fabricated allegory can be presented as historical fact. Through the act of display, histories are displaced and brought anew amid the discursive apparatus of the exhibitionary complex, romanticizing

by way of proxy."[354] It is this born-again romanticism that he cites as her great accomplishment that makes the series "an effective repoliticization of atrocity, reminding us that art can act, both historically and in the contemporary as a powerful tool of reflection."[355] While Rattray seems relatively certain that this reflection leads to an ethical and political encounter, I am not convinced that can occur unless one is bent on romanticizing things indifferently to the formal logic at play in the work itself. Rather, I think that the objective qualities of her work fundamentally de-romanticize history and any pretense of making it useful to contemporary political interests, displaying them as no less fabricated. In further irony, the use of natural history aesthetics could readily suggest that the events of human history, however traumatic, are not really discernible from animals grazing. Such a 'naturalized' reading of atrocity is readily available and could easily be assimilated to Thorneycroft's depiction of history as saturated with the trauma of children.[356] On a strictly biological level, A. Samuel Kimball has theorized the infanticidal drive as the primary logic of social and cultural evolution. According to Kimball, a realistic understanding of the nature and structure of cultural development necessitates a Darwinian analysis, one that highlights the inevitably grim recognition of what is at work in cultural evolution:

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354 Michael Rattray, "Diana Thorneycroft: A People's History," *C Magazine* (Spring, 2012), 44.

355 Ibid.

356 Thorneycroft's interpretation of history is not entirely eccentric. The American psycho-historian Lloyd DeMause has put forward a readily compatible assessment of cultural development. Operating from a critical revision of Freudian psychoanalysis and anthropology mixed with speculative neurology and cultural criticism, DeMause constructed a theory of history that relied upon setting up psychogenic modes. These were correlated to economic systems, religious ideology, and attitudes toward child care, discipline and the function of excrement within societies. Broadly speaking, for DeMause "The history of childhood is a nightmare from which we have only recently begun to awaken." (Lloyd DeMause, *The History of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974), 1) This nightmare is largely sketched out in terms of the fluctuation of infanticide rates in societies and their displacement through the development of welfare regimes and empathic parenting norms.

> The infanticidal implications of reproductive success, easy enough to demonstrate, are burdensome to accept, for they signal the mistakenness of the common belief that evolution is principally the set of processes by which life proliferates. To the contrary, evolutionary change gives rise to life only as that life economizes on - lives off of by destroying - itself within a thermodynamic horizon that condemns all living things to extinction.[357]

Rather than moralizing social history, Kimball's work naturalizes human activity, stripping it of any special agency and placing it squarely within the fluctuations of an impersonal biosphere. Evolution is economization; economization is sacrificial because it necessitates the deflection of costs onto others and the environment. What is more, this sacrifice is intrinsically infanticidal following the thermodynamic limit imposed by the evolutionary economy. Infanticide destroys lineages singly and collectively, in the present and into the future. This economy entails not only these ends, but "the inevitable end of life itself."[358] Terrestrial vital existence is axiomatically ruled by these principles. "The evolutionary program knows no other economy, and the economy it does know is sacrificial."[359]

Survival is either overproduction or overconsumption. In both cases, it entails "the direct or indirect sacrifice of life."[360] To paraphrase Darwin, living is only living insofar as it is the destruction of life. In other words, the infanticidal drive of evolution, the image and the wilderness picture all work in an almost identical fashion. From the evolutionary standpoint, the changes of history and the development of societies need to be understood as patterns of territorialization and micro and macro parasitisms. Without

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357 A. Samuel Kimball, *The Infanticidal Logic of Evolution and Culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 42.
358 Ibid., 37.
359 Ibid., 38.
360 Ibid., 38.

the 'checks' imposed by infanticide, excessive procreation would soon annihilate the biosphere.[361] Ironically it is also the drive to reproduce that serves to curb excess through the destruction it necessitates. "Ecosystems, then, are infanticidal matrices that support life by inducing mass death."[362] Life is the erasure of life; this is its factum, both teleologically and immanently. Reviewing the aesthetic spectacle of human destruction, Dirk de Meyer suggests that history may be only "a process of almost inevitable suffering, leading to decay, destruction and death."[363] But this could be too sentimental. After all, the world of supposedly vital cultures "look like [the] relics of an already lost civilization.... bearing the dark secret within them of a destiny, not only after nature, but after history."[364] Kimball goes this far himself, offering a detailed analysis of the attempt to sublimate sacrifice into salvation in Western society.[365] All of these issues are clearly at play in Thorneycroft's depiction of Canadian history[366] and, avoiding the grim consequences the logic of natural history suggests, she actively struggles to sublimate her material into something possessing social and political utility.

It is something like this which is at stake for Thorneycroft and Rattray: for the pictures to have a straightforward narrative quality that excites empathy, they would need

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361 Ibid., 41.
362 Ibid., 42.
363 Dirk De Meyer, "Catastrophe and its Fallout - Notes on Cataclysms, Art and Aesthetics, 1755-1945" in *Tickle Your Catastrophe!: Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. (Gent: Academia Press, 2011), 28.
364 Ibid., 29. The distinction between natural disasters and 'man made' ones rests on assumptions handed down from medieval Christian theology concerning human agency and stewardship of the world. From a materially reductive perspective, the distinction is largely moot.
365 See parts II and III of Kimball's book.
366 For a sampling of the literature on the topic of infanticide, albeit one dealt with in primarily legal terms, see William Beahen, "Abortion and Infanticide in Western Canada 1874 to 1916: A Criminal Case Study," (1978); June Hel, "Female Infanticide, European Diseases, and Population Levels Among the Mackenzie Dene," (1980); Marie-Aimée Cliche, "L'infanticide dans la région de Québec (1660-1969)," (1990); David Riches, "The Netsilik Eskimo: A Special Case of Selective Female Infanticide," (1974); and Kirsten Johnson Kramar, *Unwilling Mothers, Unwanted Babies: Infanticide in Canada*, (2005).

a realism more akin to that of George Reid, which in many respects (saturated colour, dramatic lighting, histrionic poses), they echo, only now in parody. The fact that they are so deliberately and determinately anti-naturalistic gets in the way of this narrative approach, but it also gets in the way of the attempt to inspire an empathy with the perpetrators of evil. As van Alphen notes, that would require an overtly empathic gesture, one only made possible by a romantic or novelistic act that theatricalizes empathy.[367] This would force it to become a functional part of both the viewer and artist's performances when engaging with the images. This is not offered by Thorneycroft's images, which, far from requiring completion by the viewer, are crystalline and finalized. As theatrical as her imagery may be, they do not activate duration in any way that makes dramatic involvement probable. Instead, they are distilled into a set of frozen, stillborn images. Rattray notes their surprising neutrality, but feels compelled to turn this into a moral comment without significantly evaluating how this can be the case.[368] The photos rely on a wholly traditional sense of composition, one so overt that its qualities as a construction trump the transparency that would allow a viewer to readily project themselves into them, or to view the figures in the dioramas as their potential playthings. If Rattray had not been directed by her artist statement to view them as he claims he has, it is hard to imagine what he would actually see. In attempting to place them in a functional tragic narrative, Thorneycroft tries to subvert their comedic logic. The problem

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367 The dominant example in *Mirroring Evil* is Roee Rosen's *Live and Die as Eva Braun* (1995), an installation piece that places the viewer in the position of Hitler's mistress before they made love and died. See Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2001),75.

368 Michael Rattray, "Diana Thorneycroft: A People's History," *C Magazine.* (Spring, 2012), 43. Yet, it could just as readily testify to the neutrality of 'evil' and to the complete negation of any moral significance to the picture.

is that comedy runs deeper than intentionality. As Hodgins suggested, it is possible to stop something from being funny but for it to remain uncomfortably comic. In a sense, it becomes even more comic precisely for attempting this, placing a greater emphasis on the mechanical nature of the response from the viewer. Performing his role on cue, Rattray reacts like a Pavlovian dog when clichés about colonialism are made to ring in his ear. As we saw in the previous chapter, this was also something that caused Hodgins consternation. *A People's History* does not succeed in assuring the viewer of their moral or intellectual superiority in the way that Hodgins suggested her earlier work did. The fact that they are not dioramas but photographed dioramas further accents the hollowing out of the pathos of its objects. The *nature-morte* is rendered dead again by the photo. While this suggests the logic of trauma, it equally suggests beating a dead horse. The mockery then is not merely of the artificial realism of the museum display but also of the documentary photograph as well as the pathetic clich*é*s of the History genre. They are all compacted here.

Both miniaturization and gigantism remind the viewer of their corporeality – their thingness in relation to other things – and intensify it. In both Boyle and Thorneycroft this is the case. His constructed freestanding images and monumental paintings do this as do her inflated and flattened dioramas. However, Thorneycroft disavows the overt *bodilyness* that Boyle's work insists on. Her pictures are finally presented as severely sterilized surfaces suspended on the wall. But her accumulation of alienation effects does not seem to suggest some kind of affect that cannot be captured by a representation, but perhaps that the affect amounts to substantially less than the image. Although she had been trying to cultivate piety, it is something else which results.

Returning to Stewart's argument on the miniature, recall that diminution implies the transcendence of time and the privileging of space. Commenting on their use in amusement parks, Stewart notes that "...the function of the miniature here is to bring historical events 'to life,' to immediacy and thereby to erase their history, to lose us within their presentness. [...] Its locus is thereby the nostalgic."[369] Canadian history as an amusement park finds its perfect instance in the story of the Dionne Quintuplets (*A People's History - Quintland* (2010)) and serves as the centrepiece for the series. The saga of the Quintuplets took place on the Precambrian shield, which had already been turned into the cardinal symbol of the country by the Group of Seven (which had officially disbanded one year before the Quint phenomena) and numerous advertising agencies. Between the 'inhuman' wilderness of Algonquin Park and the mystical North was Quintland, deposited in this rocky 'wasteland' along with the popular obsession with racial purification and nascent battles over multicultural identity.[370] As a social experiment, it was a radical antecedent to the social welfare and health care system that would eventually come to dominate Canada. As the *reductio ad absurdum* of the liberal therapeutic state, the Quint phenomenon has far more in common with Thorneycroft's stated mission than any criticism she could launch at it would assuage.

Aside from all of the cathartic convolutions that Thorneycroft has suggested, one could offer a literal reading of the works which sidesteps the role of artist as

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369 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 60.

370 For an account of the Quints' story and their significance in Canadian culture see Pierre Berton's *The Dionne Years: A Thirties Melodrama* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977). Berton puts significant emphasis on the ethnic, class and ideological issues involved. For a more conservative, largely feminist analysis, see the Dionne themed issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'Études canadiennes* (29:4 Winter 1994).

therapist/social worker and understands them as offering a comic rather than tragic view of history. They present a small, extremely artificial world where figures and objects have been imposed on a flat background which they never penetrate. Stuck on this surface, they enact ambiguous deeds with no discernible beginning or end. Considering that no supplementary historical material is offered, any causality to be imputed is purely imaginary. These events are serialized with enough consistency to suggest that they are a continual reiteration of a single process for which each incident is merely a superficial variation. Each figure operates as an expression of this without any meaningful congress with any other figure. Rendered stillborn by the photo, any alternative action would be impossible. As dolls they are the ultimate in artifice. In spite of literally being plastic, their expressivity, the abstracted affect they wear on their faces, is itself a blatantly mass-produced stereotype.

The images simultaneously present both the abstract and the concrete while leaving out the empathic. The last can only be imposed by social prescription as part of a role playing game. However, this game objectively presents the concept of traumatic events as something completely and deliberately constructed, not as that which is repressed but as that which is produced and performed. Empathic response is evidence of efficient socialization and a confirmation of political status, much as the derisive laughter which Hodgins detected in the reaction to the *Awkward Moments* pictures was. The entire theatrical machinery she sets in motion for the viewer is a direct mirror of the work itself. The moral panic of the viewer that she aims for, and that is evinced in some of the criticism, is a melodrama for puppets, made to eject them "feeling sick, stirred,

titillated."[371] In the process it demonstrates that such feelings are as fabricated and stereotyped as the figures in the picture itself. The demonstration exhibits the pathology of empathy and its status as a generic affect and a clichéd effect. Thorneycroft assumes the role of social scientist to pervert the perversion, to sublimate it back into the dialectic of empathy in order to hallucinate history as a moral fairy tale. But if the failure to hallucinate an Other happens, when the libidinal finds itself in union with the image and the in-itself, then what world does the image reveal?

According to Kimball's model – the thermodynamic horizon that determines the infanticidal drive of culture, both cosmologically and immanently – the production of deadness is what dictates the fluctuations of matter. This crosses through multiple registers. On the level of the brute materiality of things in the universe (from rocks to lungs), the multiplication of the dead thrives through aggregation and reproduction, sexual or otherwise. On the level of the aesthetic, it finds its purchase in the ephemeral being of objects whose senselessness exceeds their cultural domestication. And, as explained in light of Lewis' thought in the introduction, on the phenomenological level it registers as death, best understood as symbolic consciousness, the only purpose of which seems to be the acceleration of deadness through the libidinal power of affectivity.

The traditional gravity of the *vanitas* does not apply to Thorneycroft's images for nothing as palpable as a skull is on display. A doll's mouth could suggest a girl or an ungendered anus, but only cosmetics could make it seem human. Not that it matters. That which never was, and never can be, alive has no pathos. In this light, her continued use of

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371 Norman L. Kleeblatt, *Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery/Recent Art* (New York: Jewish Museum, 2001), 43.

dolls should be read as attempts to put an empathic face on things while inevitably undercutting it. Read literally, her work displays history not as a narrative, either melodramatic or pathetic, but as a ludicrous still life composed of a mass of dead objects.

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis I have sketched out a means for interpreting the work of John Boyle and Diana Thorneycroft. This means has been multi-tiered and has examined their imagery in aesthetic, political, and strictly materialist terms. By examining how each of these artists has, in disparate ways, appropriated elements of Canadian history (whether historical figures, archetypes, or aspects of material culture), I have attempted to show how art can depict Canadian history and demonstrate both the materiality of history and the art work. For both artists, this involves considering how the work of art operates formally and socially. And in both cases the result has been a fundamentally alienating and abstract form of art. In the case of Boyle this meant creating a wall of noise to operate as a territorial marker that both parodied and reinforced the materials and traditions of the nation. His art has been one devoted to nonsense, nihilism and a deliberate short-circuiting of communication, resulting in a kind of idiotic noise for a "nation of schizophrenics." For Thorneycroft it has meant a shift away from the production of nonsensical tableau, to an attempt to face history with empathy. However, her formal means have consistently short-circuited this attempt, resulting in a kind of nihilistic reduction to literalness. Her embrace of the aesthetics of natural history depiction also opens her work to a reading along the lines of natural history itself, a reading that undermines the kind of moral significance she seems intent on conveying.

To return to Susan Stewart's commentary on the miniature for a last time, she reminds us that "[t]he miniature is against speech, particularly as speech reveals an inner dialectical, or dialogic nature" and, as a result, reduces everything to the visual and the

surface.[372] As a dialectician in the manner of Bakhtin, she has a serious aversion to this, as would Thorneycroft, Bordo and Cousineau-Levine. In spite of their resolute attempts to morally recuperate the miniature and the visual into the social world of Others and a dialogics of meaning, the artwork seems to resist. The miniature "marks the pure body, the inorganic body of the machine and its *repetition* of a death that is thereby not a death."[373] Although Stewart tends to link this *thing*, abstracted from the flux of time, to nostalgia, she is not being careful enough. She is being sentimental and mistaking the aesthetic misapprehension of death *as a representation* with death as *the reality of objectivation*. An image, whether a miniature, a painting or a photo, is dead, regardless of whether or not the organic body hallucinates it as history, or conceives of it as an avenue for the experiential, when it is only a cog in the indifferent mechanics of death. As established in the introduction in light of the ahumanistic and non-moral satire of Lewis, the pathos of existential dying has no substance here. For Lewis, non-moral satire was the direct application of natural history to human affairs, objectivating living as a grotesque, dead thing.

For Thorneycroft, the re-creation of history is a bid to liberate material events from their impersonal reality by encouraging their entrance and activation in the present. She attempts to turn things-in-themselves into action-figures capable of interacting with the viewer in a hallucination of history. Formally, the calling up of Canadian history results in a sort of *nature-morte* that can operate as a space for empathic projection. Likewise, Boyle partakes of this creation of the nation as a *nature-morte.* However, his

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372 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 67.

373 Ibid, 69.

embrace of automatism (in the stream of consciousness technique or the impersonality tradition) and his deliberate refusal of dialectics is a refusal of the production of meaning; a kind of abortion or still birth in engagement. It is precisely the refusal of producing meaning that is intrinsic to the pictorial paradox discussed at length in chapter one. Such refusal is also essential to what Cousineau-Levine saw as the dialethetic paradox that was common to the Canadian imagination and its rejection of the Good sense of the adult world. This sort of infantile attitude has been essential to both Boyle and Thorneycroft, played out in formal terms in their use of materials and their embrace of imagery that seems obsessed with child figures. Boyle has consistently taken on the role of the *enfant terrible*. Thorneycroft gradually shifted from re-imagining her childhood to taking on the role of therapist to a nation that's history was re-imagined as a litany of childhood traumas. However, rather than opening up an abyss of psychic depth and melodrama, the work of art, its reality as a 'weird' and inhuman thing, divorces it from the pathos of subjects.

As my discussion of George Grant in chapter two intimated, Canada is a space that we belong to, but not one that belongs to anyone. That Canada is void of subjects has been one of the underlying themes of this thesis, whether manifest as an empty landscape or one populated by dead items. That it either has no people, or that those people are now extinct, has been one of the major issues that the artists under discussion have broached. Canada should not be conceived of as a subject, either singular or collective, but as a thing devoid of subjects. To be only apparently human is the paradox that is most fundamental to Canadian culture. In other words, in depicting the material history of Canada, Boyle and Thorneycroft present a world without presence. But, as my use of

Deleuze suggested in chapter three, this should not be considered a negative thing. On the contrary, the ahumanism of art demonstrates the possibility of revealing the impersonal truth of noumenal reality.

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