

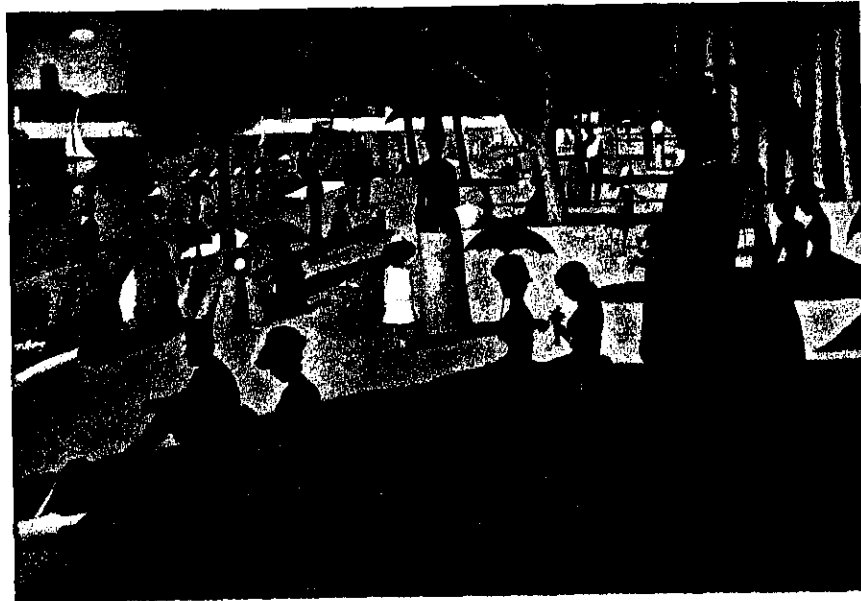
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Seurat's *La Grande Jatte*: An Anti-Utopian Allegory¹

Linda Nochlin, from
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The idea that Seurat's masterpiece *La Grande Jatte*[1] was in some sense anti-Utopian came to me when I was reading a chapter entitled "Wishful Landscape Portrayed in Painting, Opera, Literature" in *The Principle of Hope*, the magnum opus of the great German Marxist Ernst Bloch. Here is what Bloch, writing in the first half of our century, had to say:

The negative foil to Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, or rather its mood of gaiety gone sour, is embodied in Seurat's promenade piece: *Un Dimanche à la Grande-Jatte*. This picture is one single mosaic of boredom, a masterful rendering of the disappointed longing and the incongruities of a *dolce far niente*. The painting depicts a middle-class Sunday morning [*sic*]² on an island in the Seine near Paris; and that is just the point: it depicts this merely with scorn. Empty-faced people rest in the foreground; most of the others have been grouped into wooden verticals like dolls from the toy box, intensely involved in a stiff little walk. Behind them is the pale river with sailboats, a sculling match, sightseeing boats—a background that, despite the recreation going on there, seems to belong more to Hades than to a Sunday. A great load of joyless leisure is in the image, in the bright matt glare of its atmosphere and in the expressionless water of the Sunday Seine, the object of an equally expressionless contemplation. . . . As the workaday world recedes, so does every other world, everything, recede into watery torpidness. The result is endless boredom, the little man's hellish utopia of skirting the Sabbath and holding onto it too; his Sunday succeeds only as a bothersome must, not as a brief taste of the Promised Land. Middle-class Sunday afternoons like these are landscapes of painted suicide which does not come



1. Georges Seurat, *Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884–86, Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection

off [even at that] because it lacks resolve. In short, this *dolce far niente*, if it is conscious at all, has the consciousness of an absolute non-Sunday in what remains of a Sunday utopia.³

This anti-Utopian signification about which Bloch wrote is not merely a matter of iconography, of subject matter or social history transcribed to canvas. Seurat's painting should not be seen as only passively reflecting the new urban realities of the 1880s or the most advanced stages of the alienation associated with capitalism's radical revision of urban spatial divisions and social hierarchies of his time. Rather, the *Grande Jatte* must be seen as actively *producing* cultural meanings through the invention of visual codes for the modern experience of the city. Here is where the allegory stipulated in my title—"an anti-Utopian *allegory*"—comes in. It is through the pictorial construction of the work—its formal strategies—that the anti-utopian is allegorized in the *Grande Jatte*. This is what makes Seurat's production—and the *Grande Jatte*—unique. Of all the Postimpressionists, he is the only one to inscribe the modern condition itself—with its alienation, anomie, the experience of living in the society of the spectacle, of making a living in a market economy in which ex-

change value took the place of use value and mass production that of artisanal production—in the very fabric and structure of a picture.

Or, to put it another way, if Seurat rather than Cézanne had been positioned as the paradigmatic Modernist painter, the face of twentieth-century art would have been vastly different. But such a statement is of course itself Utopian, or at the very least insufficiently historical, for it was part of advanced art's historical destiny in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century to retreat from the worldly, the social, and above all the negative and objectively critical position iterated in the *Grande Jatte*—or Seurat's *Parade* or the *Chabut*—and establish the realm of the atemporal, the nonsocial, the subjective, and the phenomenological—in other words, a “pure” painting—as synonymous with Modernism. This paradoxical instating of pure visibility and the flat surface of the canvas as synonymous with the modern is, as we shall see, at the polar opposite of Seurat's achievement in the *Grande Jatte* and in his other works as well.

It had been the project of ambitious Western art from the High Renaissance onward to establish a pictorial structure which suggested a rational narrative and, above all, an expressive coherence relating part and part, and part and whole, at the same time that it established a meaningful relationship with the spectator. The painting was understood to “express,” to externalize by means of its structural coherence, some inner meaning, to function as the visible manifestation of a core or a depth of which the representational fabric constituted but a surface appearance, albeit an all-important one. In a Renaissance work like Raphael's *School of Athens*, for example, the figures are constructed to react and interact, thereby suggesting, indeed determining, a meaning beyond the mere surface of the painting, to create an expression of complex meaning that is at once comprehensible yet at the same time transcends the historical circumstances which produced it.

In a sense, Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* constitutes the end of that Western tradition of high art as expressive narrative: the shadow begins to thicken up, the priority accorded to the surface denies the implication of transcendence, the gestures fail of their usual dialogic mission. But even here, as Bloch pointed out in the same chapter in which he discusses the *Grande Jatte*, there remain Utopian emanations. Indeed, Bloch reads the *Déjeuner* as a counterfoil to the *Grande Jatte*, interpreting it as a “. . . wishful scene of epicurean happiness,” describing it in the most lyrical of terms: “Soft light, as only Impressionism could create, flows through the

trees, surrounds the two couples, the naked woman and the one undressing to bathe, the dark male figures. What is portrayed,” Bloch continues, “is an extraordinarily French, extraordinarily lingering situation, full of innocence, supreme ease, unobtrusive enjoyment of life, and carefree seriousness.” Bloch assigns the *Déjeuner* to the same category as that of the *Grande Jatte*—the *Sunday picture*; “its subject is: an immediate other world beyond hardship. Though this subject can no longer easily be painted in the nineteenth century, Manet's ‘Déjeuner sur l'herbe’ forms an exception precisely because of its naïveté and presence. Its wholesome Sunday would already hardly be possible [that is to say, in 1863, when it was painted] with petit-bourgeois subjects; thus it could not exist without artists and their models.” Then Bloch goes on to the negative description of the *Grande Jatte* with which I opened this essay: “The real bourgeois Sunday, even a painted one, thus looks even less desirable or varied. The negative foil to Manet's ‘Déjeuner sur l'herbe,’ in other words, the *merri-ness that has become powerless* is given in Seurat's promenade piece: ‘Un dimanche à la Grande-Jatte.’”⁴ Not until the 1880s, it would seem, was it possible to produce a work that so completely, brilliantly, and convincingly inscribed the condition of modernity itself.

In Seurat's painting, there is almost no interaction among the figures, no sense of them as articulate and uniquely full human presences: above all, there is no sense of a deep inner core to these painted personages. The Western tradition of representation is here undermined if not nullified by a dominant language which is resolutely anti-expressive, rejecting the notion of a hidden inner meaning to be externalized by the artist. Rather, in these machine-turned profiles, these regularized dots we may discover coded references to modern science and to modern industry with its mass production; to the department store with its cheap and multiple copies; to the mass press with its endless pictorial reproductions; in short, a critical sense of modernity embodied in sardonic, decorative invention and in the emphatic, even overemphatic, contemporaneity of costumes and accouterments.⁵ For the *Grande Jatte*—and this too constitutes its anti-Utopianism—is resolutely located in history rather than being atemporal and universalizing. This objective historical presence of the painting is above all embodied in the notorious dotted brushstroke—the *pointillé*—which is and was of course the first thing everyone noticed about the work, and which in fact constitutes the irreducible atomic particle of the new vision. For Seurat, with the dot, resolutely and consciously removed

himself as a unique being projected into the work by means of a personal handwriting. He himself is absent from his stroke. There is no sense of the existential choice implied by Cézanne's constructive brushwork; or of the deep, personal angst implied by van Gogh's; or of the decorative, mystical dematerialization of form of Gauguin.⁶ The paint application is matter-of-fact, a near- or would-be mechanical reiteration of the functional "dot" of pigment. Meyer Schapiro, in what is perhaps the most perceptive single article written about the *Grande Jatte*, referred to Seurat as a "humble, laborious, intelligent technician," coming from the "sober lower middle class of Paris from which issue the engineers, the technicians, and the clerks of industrial society," and pointed out that Seurat "derived from the more advanced industrial development of his time a profound respect for rationalized work, scientific technique and progress through invention."⁷

Before examining the *Grande Jatte* in detail to see how anti-Utopianism is inscribed in every aspect of the painting's stylistic structure, I want to examine what counted for "Utopian" in the visual production of the nineteenth century. It is only by contextualizing the *Grande Jatte* within that which was seen by Seurat and his contemporaries as Utopian that the oppositional character of his creation can be fully understood.

There is, of course, the classical Utopia of the flesh established by Ingres in his *Golden Age*. Harmonious line, smooth, ageless bodies, a pleasing symmetry of composition, a frictionless grouping of inoffensively nude or classically draped figures in a landscape of Poussinesque un-specificity—this is not so much a representation of Utopia as it is nostalgia for a distant past that never was and never can be recaptured—not so much Utopia as U-chronia. Completely lacking is the social message we usually associate with Utopian discourse. This is rather a Utopia of idealized desire. The same, incidentally, might be said of Gauguin's much later renditions of the tropical paradise. There, it is not distance in time but geographic distance that functions as the Utopian catalyst; but as in Ingres's version, it is the naked or lightly veiled human body, female above all, in noncontemporary costume, that constitutes the Utopian signifier; still, as in the work by Ingres, this is manifestly an apolitical Utopia, whose reference point is male desire, whose signifier is female flesh.

Far more apposite in constructing a context of Utopian representation to serve as a foil to Seurat's anti-Utopian allegory is a work like Dominique Papety's *Un Rêve de bonheur* (A Dream of Happiness) of 1843[2]. Utopian in form and content, this work is explicitly Fourierist in its



2. Dominique Papety, *Un Rêve de bonheur* (Dream of Happiness), 1843, Compiègne, Musée Vivanel

iconographic intentions and classically idealizing in its style, which is not very different from that of Ingres, Papety's master at the French Academy in Rome.⁸ Yet there is a significant difference between Papety's and Ingres's Utopian conceptions. Although the Fourierists considered the present—the so-called realm of civilization—depraved and unnatural, the past for them was little better. The true golden age lay not in the past, but in the future:⁹ hence the title "A dream of felicity or happiness." The explicitly Fourierist content of this Utopian allegory is corroborated by the inscription "Harmony" on the base of the statue to the left, which refers "both to the Fourierist state and to the music of the satyr" and a second inscription, "Unité Universelle," on the book studied by the youthful scholars, a direct allusion to Fourierist doctrine and the name of one of Fourier's theoretical treatises as well.¹⁰ Indeed, it is possible to read certain aspects of the *Grande Jatte* as an explicit refutation of Fourierist Utopianism or, more accurately, of Utopianism *tout court*. In Papety's painting, Utopian ideals were personified by a poet "singing harmony"; a group embodying "maternal tenderness"; another referring to friendship under the graces of childhood; and, at the sides, various aspects of love between the sexes. All are conspicuous by their omission in the *Grande Jatte*.¹¹ Papety's architecture is resolutely classical, although the painting

at one time suggested the futurity of this Utopian vision by the inclusion of a steamboat and an electric telegraph, later removed by the artist.¹² Once more, the figures are smooth and harmonious, classical, or, more precisely, neoclassical in their poses; the paint is conventionally applied; the signs of modernity, at least in the present version, erased in favor of a Utopian dream which, however Fourierist, is firmly rooted in references to a long-vanished past and an extremely traditional, not to say conservative, mode of representation.

More materially related to Seurat's anti-Utopian project than Papety's obscure Utopian image is the work of his older contemporary Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. Indeed, one might say that, without the precedent provided by Puvis, in works like the *Sacred Grove*,¹³ exhibited at the Salon of 1884, the very year that Seurat began work on the *Grande Jatte*, the latter might never have come into being, or might have been different. From a certain standpoint, the *Grande Jatte* may be considered a giant parody of Puvis's *Sacred Grove*, calling into question the whole validity of such a painting and its relevance to modern times—in both its form and its content. For Puvis's timeless muses and universalized classical setting and drapery, Seurat has substituted the most contemporary fashions, the most up-to-date settings and accessories. Seurat's women wear bustles, corsets, and modish hats rather than classical drapery; his most prominent male figure holds a coarse cigar and a cane rather than the pipes of Pan; the architectural background is in the mode of modern urbanity rather than that of pastoral antiquity.

A work like *Summer*[3], painted by Puvis in 1873, two years after the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War and the terrible, socially divisive events of the Commune and its aftermath, represents the Utopian vision at its purest. Although the recognizable depiction of a distant past, the imagery of *Summer* suggests, as Claudine Mitchell has recently pointed out, a more general, even a universal, time scale, the representation of what is true of human society generally. To borrow the words of the critic and man of letters Théophile Gautier, who pondered Puvis and his works deeply, "Puvis seeks the ideal beyond time, space, costumes, or particular details. He likes to paint primitive humanity, as they [*sic*] perform one of those functions which we could call sacred so close to Nature they are." Gautier praised Puvis for avoiding the contingent and the accidental, pointing out that his compositions always have an abstract and general title: Peace, War, Repose, Work, Sleep—or, in this case, Summer.



3. Pierre Puvis de Chavanne, *Summer*, 1873, Chartres, Musée des Beaux-Arts

Gautier suggested that for Puvis, the signifiers of a distant, primitive, purer past serve to define a more universal order, the order of Nature itself.¹⁴

This then, is the nineteenth century's prototypical pictorial version of classical Utopia, equating "u-troops" (no place) and "u-chronos" (no time) with the time and space of a rather vaguely defined classical antiquity. If Puvis's world is beyond time and place, Seurat's *Grande Jatte* is definitively and even aggressively of his. Indeed, one wonders whether the mundane specificity of Seurat's title—*Sunday on the Grande Jatte* (1884)—in its chronological and geographical specificity does not constitute an anti-Utopian critique of Puvis's and other allegorical classicists' vague and idealized names for paintings. It is, however, the Utopian harmoniousness of Puvis's construction that Seurat most forcefully challenges in his canvas. Although Puvis may have deployed his figures in separate groups, this in no sense implies social fragmentation or psychic alienation. Rather, the painting serves to idealize the value of the family and that of communal productivity, in which each trade, each age, and, above all, each gender serves its allotted task. In effect, Puvis's work functions ideologically to

produce an aesthetic harmony out of what in contemporary society is precisely a source of disharmony, conflict, and contradiction: issues like the position of the worker, the class struggle, or the status of women. Thus, for example, in the formal structure of *Summer*, the moral value of maternity for women and that of work for men are represented as inscribed in—indeed, indistinguishable from—the order of Nature rather than figured as highly volatile, contentious issues. In Seurat's painting, as we shall see, the classical elements are disharmonized: exaggerated into self-revealing artifice or deliberately frozen and isolated; this is part of its anti-Utopian strategy, its bringing of contradictions into focus.

But it is not only the classical and more traditional work of Puvis that offers a contrast to Seurat's anti-Utopianism. More advanced painters, like Renoir, had created semi-Utopian visions based on contemporary reality, images of the joys of ordinary urban existence posited on the pleasures of healthy sensuality and youthful *joie de vivre* in works like the *Moulin de la Galette* of 1876, where the melting colors, broken brushwork, and swirling, dynamic compositional rhythms play out in formal terms, in their joyous intermingling, the eradication of class and gender divisions in a context of idealized recreation in contemporary Paris. As such, Renoir's work offers the most pointed opposition to Seurat's sardonic view of the New Leisure. Renoir *naturalizes* daily life in the great modern city; Seurat, on the contrary, makes it strange and refuses this naturalization.

Paradoxically, it is the work of Seurat's disciple and fellow Neo-Impressionist Paul Signac that is most apposite in establishing a context of Utopian imagery against which the *Grande Jatte* stands out most forcefully. Signac was fully aware of the social import of his friend's oeuvre. In an article of June 1891, which appeared in the anarchist publication *La Révolte*, he declared that, by painting scenes of working-class life "or, better still, the pleasures of decadence . . . as the painter Seurat did, who had such a vivid perception of the degeneration of our transitional era, they [artists] will bring their evidence to the great social trial that is taking place between workers and Capital."¹⁵ Signac's *In the Time of Harmony* [4], an oil sketch for a mural of about 1893–95, created for the town hall of Montreuil, would seem to have been constructing a response to the specifically capitalist conditions of anomie and absurdity—in other words, the "Time of Disharmony"—represented by his late friend's most famous painting.¹⁶ In a lithographed version, intended for Jean Grave's *Les Temps nouveaux*, Signac created his anarchist-socialist version of a classless Uto-



4. Paul Signac, *In the Time of Harmony (The Pleasures of Summer)*, for *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 1895–96, Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund

pia, substituting wholesome recreation and human interaction for the stasis and figural isolation of the *Grande Jatte*, emphasizing the joys of the family in place of Seurat's muting of them, and replacing the suburban setting with a more pastoral, rural one in keeping with the Utopian character of the project as a whole. Clearly, the style of the figures, despite the more or less contemporary clothing they wear, owes more to Puvis in its flowing idealization than to Seurat's stylishness. The curvilinear composition and its decorative iterations suavely replay the theme of togetherness—of the couple or the community as a whole—in some Utopian future. Even the hen and the rooster in the foreground play out the theme of mutual aid and interaction spelled out by the work as a whole, and so deliberately excluded by Seurat's vision.

But it is not merely by contrasting Seurat's painting with appropriate Utopian imagery of his time that I have arrived at an anti-Utopian interpretation of the work. The critical reactions of Seurat's contemporaries also serve to corroborate a reading of the painting as a negative critique

of the modern condition.¹⁷ To borrow the words of Martha Ward in a recent catalogue essay, "Reviewers interpreted the expressionless faces, isolated stances, and rigid postures to be a more or less subtle parody of the *banality and pretensions of contemporary leisure* [emphasis mine]."¹⁸ For example, one critic, Henry Fèvre, remarked that after looking at the image for a while "one understands then the rigidity of Parisian leisure, tired and stiff, where even recreation is a matter of striking poses."¹⁹ Another critic, Paul Adam, equated the stiff outlines and attitudinizing postures of the figures with the modern condition itself: ". . . Even the stiffness of these people, their punched-out forms, help to give the sound of the modern, to recall our badly cut clothes, clinging tight to our bodies, the reserve of our gestures, the British cant we all imitate. We strike attitudes like people in a painting by Memling."²⁰ And still another critic, Alfred Paulet, maintained that "The artist has given his figures the automatic gestures of lead soldiers moving about on regimented squares. Maids, clerks and troopers all move around with a similar slow, banal, identical step, which catches the character of the scene exactly. . . ."²¹

This notion of the monotony, the dehumanizing rigidity of modern urban existence as the founding trope of the *Grande Jatte* inscribes itself even in the relentlessly formal analysis of the most important of the *Grande Jatte*'s critics, Félix Fénéon, when he describes the uniformity of the technique as "a monotonous and patient tapestry"—the pathetic fallacy with a vengeance. Yes, he is describing the brushwork, but the "monotony" and "patience" are read into the technique of Pointillism, allegorized as the dominant quality of modern urban life itself. The formal language of Seurat's masterpiece is thus skillfully elided with both an existential condition and a material technique in Fénéon's memorable figure of speech.²²

And what of Seurat's formal language in the *Grande Jatte*? How does it mediate and construct and, in some sense, allegorize, the social malaise of its time? Daniel Catton Rich was correct when, in his 1935 study of the painting, he stressed the primacy of Seurat's formal innovations in what he terms the "transcendent" achievement of the *Grande Jatte*²³—using two reductive diagrams—"Curved Line Organization of *Grande Jatte*" and "Straight Line Organization of *Grande Jatte*," diagrams typical of that moment of formalist "scientific" art analysis—to reduce further Seurat's already diagrammatic compositional structure.²⁴ But as Meyer Schapiro pointed out in his brilliant rebuttal to this study, Rich was wrong to

eliminate, on the basis of the precedence of formal concerns, the all-important social and critical implications of Seurat's practice. Equally misguided, in Schapiro's view, was Rich's correlative attempt to impose a spurious classicizing, traditionalist, and harmonizing reading on the work, thereby, in the best art-historical fashion, assimilating Seurat's provocative innovations to the peaceful and law-abiding "mainstream" of pictorial tradition.²⁵

The peculiarly modern notion of "system" must be dealt with in separating Seurat from that mainstream of tradition and approaching his formal innovations, "system" to be understood under at least two modalities: (1) the systematic application of a certain color theory—scientific or would-be scientific, according to the authority one reads²⁶—in his "chromo-luminarist" method; or (2) the related pointillist system of paint application in small, regularized dots. In both cases, Seurat's method would seem to allegorize modern techniques of mass production, and to produce thereby effects of distancing far from either Impressionist and Expressionist signifiers of subjectivity and involvement of the self in art production or from the harmonious generalization of surface characteristic of classical modes of representation. As Norma Broude has pointed out in a recent article, Seurat may actually have borrowed his systematic paint application from one of the most recent techniques of mass diffusion in the visual communication industry of his time, the so-called *chromotypo-gravure*. The choice of this "mechanical" technique served to critique the objectified spectacle of modern life and thereby, to borrow Broude's words, "proved understandably offensive not only to the public at large but also to many artists of the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist generations, artists whose attachment to a romantic conception of originality and spontaneous self-expression in painting was threatened by the apparently impersonal attitude of Seurat and his followers." "It was, in fact," as Broude pointed out, "precisely the 'mechanical' aspect of the technique, so foreign to contemporary notions of fine taste and 'high art,' that, in these terms, may ultimately have proved attractive to Seurat, whose radical political leanings and 'democratic' predilection for popular art forms had already become important formative factors in the evolution of his attitudes toward his own art."²⁷ One might go even further, and say that in some sense, *all* of the systematizing factors in Seurat's project, from his pseudoscientific color theory to his mechanized technique, to his later adaptation of Charles Henry's "scientifically" legitimated aesthetic protract-

tor to achieve equilibration of compositional factors and expressive effects—all could ultimately serve a democratizing purpose. Seurat sought a method—a foolproof method—of creating a successful art which, theoretically, could be available to everyone, a sort of democratically oriented, high-type painting-by-dots which would totally wipe out the role of genius, the exceptional creative figure, in the making of art, even “great art” (although the very term might become superfluous under the regime of Total Systematization).²⁸ This is a Utopian project indeed, from a radical standpoint, although a totally banalizing and anti-Utopian one from a more elitist one.

Nothing could be more revealing of Seurat's deliberate rejection of charming spontaneity in favor of incisive distancing than a comparison of elements from the large final sketch for *La Grande Jatte* (in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)[5] with those of the final version. Can anything be further from the generalizing tendencies of classicism than the diagrammatic concision and up-to-date stylishness of Seurat's construction of, say, the foreground couple, a concision as potent in

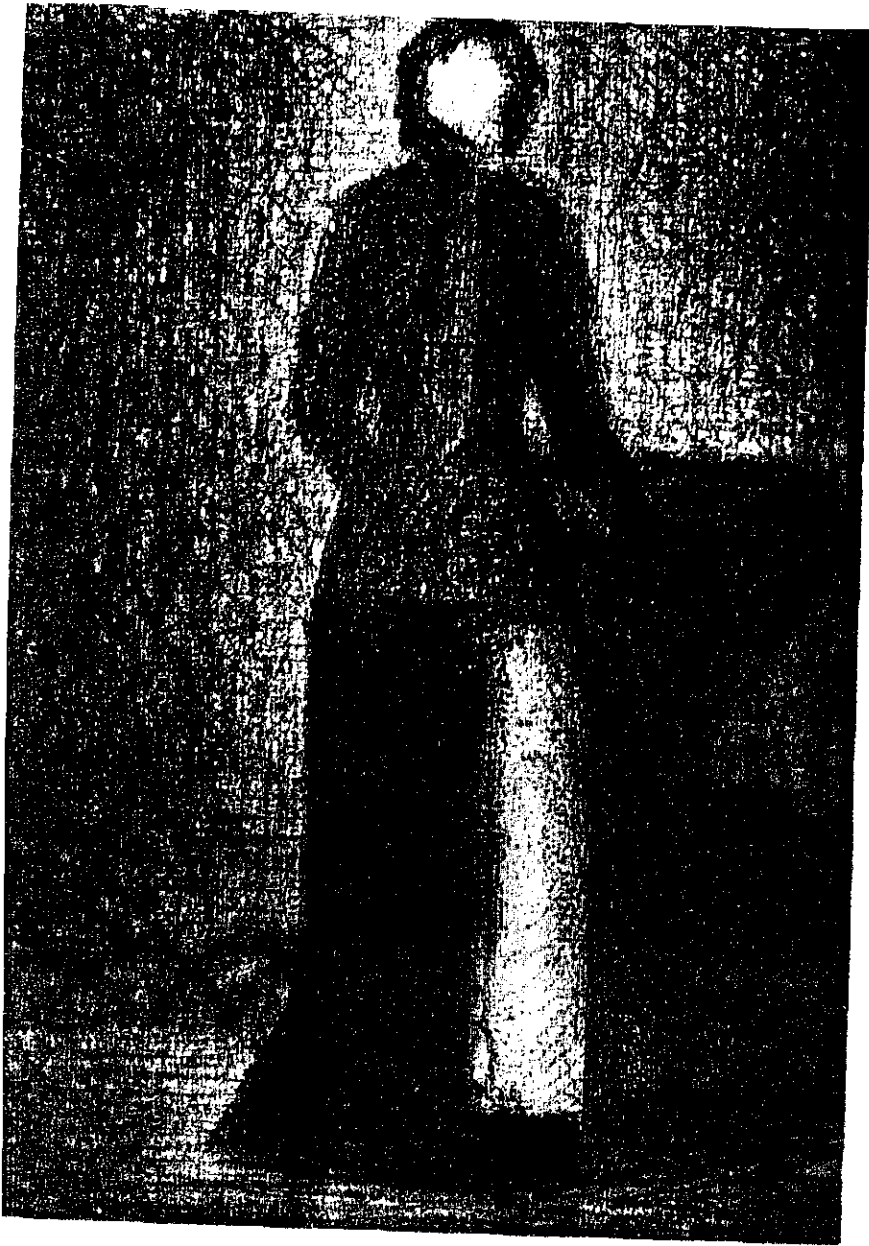
5. Georges Seurat, sketch of *La Grande Jatte*, c. 1886, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn



nailing down a concrete referent as any advertising logo? Can any image be further from the bland idealization of a late Neoclassicist like Puvis than the sharp critical detailing of the motif of the hand holding the cigar and the mechanical roundness of the head of the cane, both forms aggressively signifying the class-coded masculinity of the male “diagram” as opposed to the systematically circular shapes iterated by the clothing, almost topiary in its relentless shearing down of the living raw material, of his equally socially specific female companion? Gender difference, too, is objectified and systematized by means of obvious artifice.

I would like to demonstrate with one figure, that of the wet nurse, the way Seurat worked on one character in his sardonic pageant of frozen recreation, honing the image down to its signifying minimum, reducing the vital, and charming, irregularity of the original painted sketch to a visual hieroglyph. Martha Ward, in a word-picture as beautifully concise as the image itself, has described the final version as “a faceless configuration: an irregular quadrangle bisected by a triangular wedge and capped with circumscribed circles.”²⁹ The *nourrice*, more familiarly known as the “Nounou,” had become a stock character in the proliferation of visual typologies disseminated by the popular press during the second half of the nineteenth century. Seurat of course avoided the pitfalls of this sort of vulgar caricaturing, as he did those of the naturalistic representation of the wet-nursing profession, a relatively popular theme in the Salon art of the time. And unlike Berthe Morisot, who, in her representation of her daughter Julie being fed by a wet nurse, a painting of 1879, presents us with the activity of breast-feeding itself, and where the figure is frontal, exposed, spontaneously painted, and, although reduced as solid form, nevertheless evokes a vivid sort of biological immediacy, Seurat erases all concrete evidence of the wet nurse's professional activity, and her relation with a suckling infant, leaving us with a minimal sign, not a human process.³⁰

Seurat really worked on this figure; we can see the process of reduction in a series of conté crayon drawings, ranging from a relatively descriptive and empathetic one (now in the Goodyear Collection) to a monumental back-view one, *Bonnet with Ribbons* (Thaw Collection)[6]. Despite the fact that the body is constructed of a few black and white curves and rectangles, joined by the most subtle nuances of tone marking the wet nurse's identifying ribbon (doubling as a kind of tonal spinal column), the wet nurse is nevertheless represented as connected to her charge, pushing a pram. In another version (now in the Rosenberg Collec-



Georges Seurat, *Nurse with Carriage (Bonnet with Ribbons)*, c. 1884, New Jersey, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Eugene V. Thaw

tion), although the baby is present, it has become a faceless echo of the circular shape of the nurse's cap; her body, though still standing, begins to assume that symmetrical wedge-shaped form of the wet nurse in the final version of the *Grande Jatte*. The series ends with a drawing (now in the Albright-Knox Gallery), specifically related to the wet-nurse group in the *Grande Jatte*. Of this drawing, Robert Herbert has remarked: "The nurse, seen from behind, is as chunky as a boulder. Only her cap and ribbon, flattened into the vertical plane, make us sure she is indeed a seated woman."³¹ Seurat, in short, has reduced the wet nurse to a minimal function. There is no question, in the final version, of the wet nurse's role as a nurturer, of a tender relation between suckling infant and "seconde mère," as the wet nurse was known. The signs of her trade—cap, ribbon, cloak—are her reality: it is as though no others exist to represent the individual in mass society. Seurat, then, may be said to have reduced forms not to classicize or generalize, as Rich would have had it, but to dehumanize, to transform human individuality into a critical index of social malaise. Types are no longer figured as picturesquely irregular, as in the old codes of caricature, but reduced to laconic visual emblems of their social or economic roles, a process akin to the workings of capitalism itself, as Signac might have said.

I must, then, end as I began, reading the *Grande Jatte* darkly, seeing in its compositional stasis and formal reduction an allegorical negation of the promises of modernity—in short, an anti-Utopian allegory. To me, the *Grande Jatte* would seem, as it did to Roger Fry in 1926, to represent "a world from which life and movement are banished and all is fixed for ever in the rigid frame of its geometry."³²

And yet there is a detail which contradicts this reading—small, but inflecting its meaning with a dialectical complexity, and lying at the very heart of the *Grande Jatte*: the little girl with the hoop. This figure was hardly conceived in its present, obviously contradictory form in the large final sketch. In the earlier version, it is hard to tell she is running at all. The figure is less diagonal, more merged with surrounding strokes; it seems connected to a brown-and-white dog, which is displaced in the final version. The little girl is unique in that she is a dynamic figure, her dynamism emphasized by her diagonal pose, her flowing hair, and her fluttering sash. She exists in total contrast to the staid little girl to her left, constructed as a tubular vertical of passivity and conformism and related by dependency and a sort of cloning isomorphism to her umbrella-shaded

mother in the center of the painting. The running little girl is, on the contrary, free, mobile, and goal-directed, chasing after something we cannot see. She also constitutes one apex of a triangle formed by the prancing dog in the foreground and a soaring, reddish butterfly to the left.³³ This figure, I would say, signifies Hope, in Ernst Bloch's terms, the Utopian impulse buried in the heart of its dialectical opposite, the antithesis of the thesis of the painting.³⁴ How different is Seurat's dynamic figuration of Hope—not really an allegorical figure at all but a figure that can be allegorized—from Puvis's stiff and conventional post-Franco-Prussian War and Commune version. Puvis's hope, one might say, is hopeless, if we conceive of hope as the possibility of change, of an unknown but optimistic futurity rather than a rigid, permanent essence, couched in a classical language of embarrassed nudity or chaste drapery.³⁵

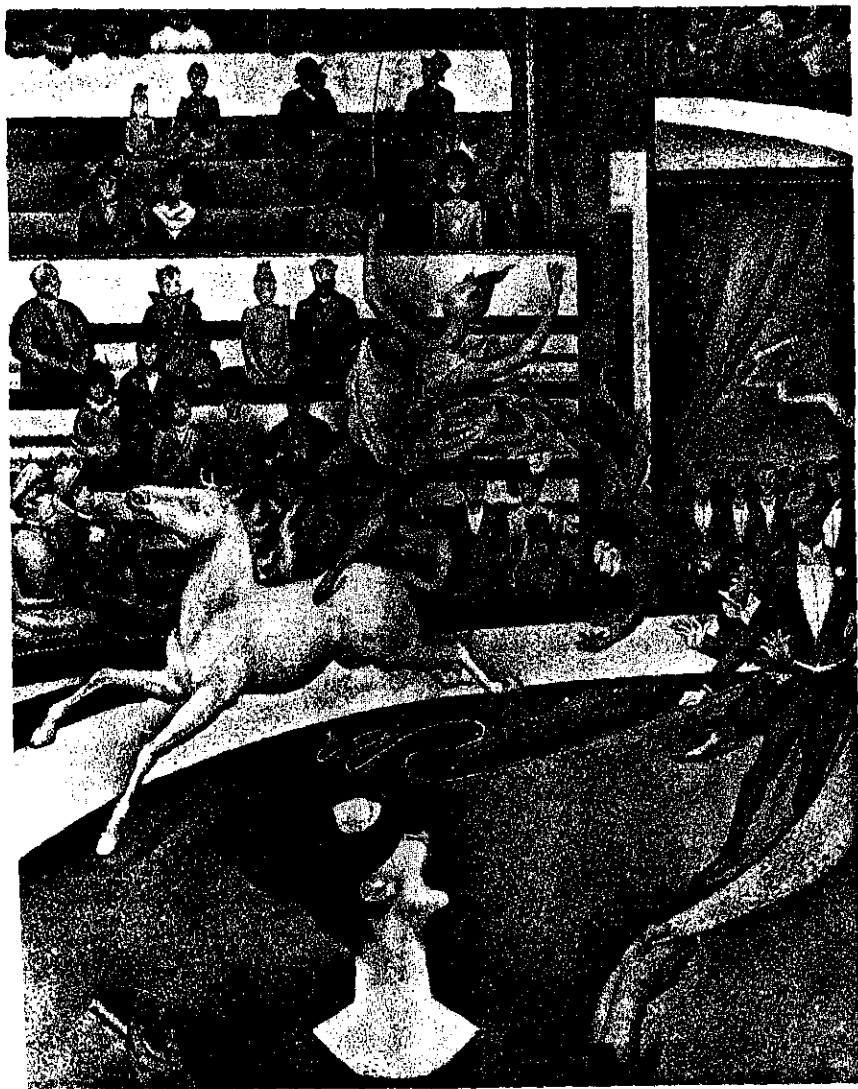
Seurat's figuring of the child as hope, active in the midst of a sea of frozen passivity, brings to mind a similar figuration: the child artist busily at work, hidden away in Courbet's *The Painter's Studio* of 1855, subtitled "a real allegory." [See Figure 1, Chapter 1.] It is the nineteenth-century work that comes closest to Seurat's in the way it envisions Utopia as a problem rather than a ready-made solution, as well as in its resolutely contemporary setting, and, paradoxically, in its static, frozen composition. Like the *Grande Jatte*, *The Painter's Studio* is a work of great power and complexity in its inextricable blending of Utopian and non- or anti-Utopian elements, and indeed, its representation of the Utopian and anti-Utopian as dialectically implicated in each other. In the gloomy cavern of the studio, the child artist, half hidden on the floor to the right, is the only active figure aside from the working artist himself.³⁶ His alter ego, the little boy admiring Courbet's handiwork and occupying center stage, according to the artist himself, stands for the admiration of future generations; like Seurat's little girl, this child can be read as a figuration of hope—hope as embodied in an unknown future.³⁷

Yet the negative vision of modernity, specifically urban modernity, predominates in Seurat's oeuvre. His project of social critique through the construction of a new, partly mass-based, systematized formal language continued throughout his short but impressive career. In the *Poseuses* (Barnes Collection), a sardonically humorous statement of the contradictions involved in modern society in the relation between "life" and "art," contemporary models peel off their clothes in the artist's studio, baring their reality in the presence of an art work, a fragment of the *Grande Jatte*,

which is more "contemporary," more socially circumstantial than they are. Which element stands for art? The traditional nudity of the "three graces," systematically presented in frontal, profile, and back view, or the grand painting of modern life that foils them?³⁸ In the *Chabut* of 1889–90 (Kröller-Müller Museum), commodified entertainment, the coarse product of a still-nascent mass-culture industry, is represented in terms of hollowness and artifice, rather than as spontaneous pleasure, as Renoir might have figured it, or even as spontaneous sexual energy, in the manner of Lautrec. The transformation of the nose of the man on the right into a piglike snout overtly emphasizes this greedy consumption of pleasure. The dancers are standardized types, decorative diagrams, high-class advertisements for slightly dangerous recreation.

In *The Circus* of 1891[7], it is the modern phenomenon of spectacle and its concomitant, passive spectatorship that are at issue.³⁹ The picture parodies the production of art, allegorized as a type of public performance, dazzling in its technique, frozen in its gestures, turning somersaults to gratify an immobilized audience. Even the performers seem frozen in poses of dynamism, coerced into standardized arcs, disembodied diagrams of movement. There are even more sinister readings available for interpreting the relation of spectators to spectacle in *The Circus*. As well as standing for the public of art consumers, that audience, fixed in a state approaching hypnotic trance, may be read as signifying the condition of the mass public in relation to its manipulative masters. Thomas Mann's sinister "Mario and the Magician" comes to mind, or Hitler and the crowd at Nuremberg, or, more recently, the American electorate and the performer-candidates who mouthed slogans and gesticulated with practiced artistry on television. *The Circus*, as an anti-Utopian allegory, has a certain predictive potential, in addition to inscribing the social problematic of its own day.

If, as I believe, the *Grande Jatte* and Seurat's work generally have too often been enlisted in the "great tradition" of Western art, force-marched from Piero to Poussin to Puvis, they have all too little been related to some of the more critical strategies characteristic of the radical art of the future. For example, in the work of an obscure group of political radicals, working in Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s—the so-called Cologne Progressives—Seurat's radical formulation of modern experience finds its inheritance—not its "influence" or continuation—in the twentieth century, although the Progressives went further in their anti-Utopianism



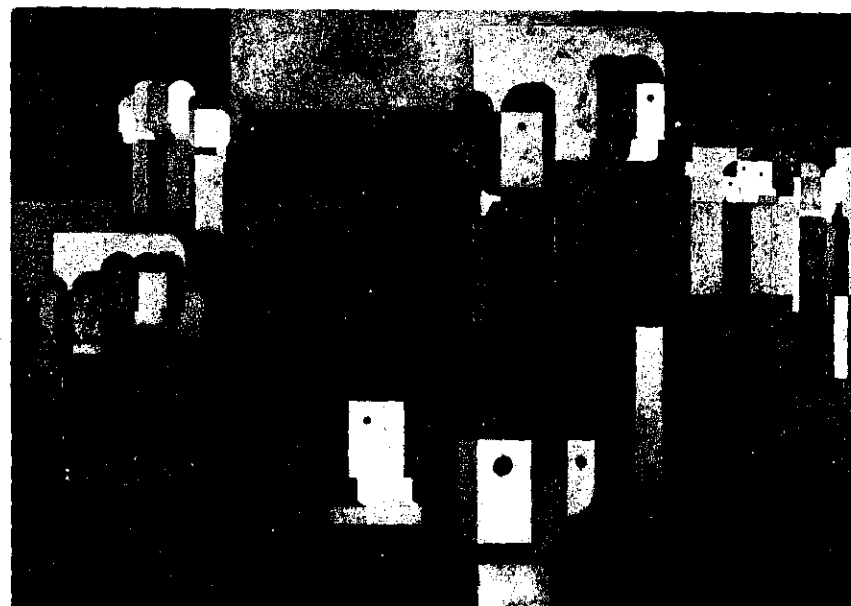
Georges Seurat, *The Circus*, 1891, Paris, Musée d'Orsay

man did Seurat. Political activists, they were equally against art for art's sake and the contemporaneous Expressionist equation of social malaise with agitated paint surfaces or expressive distortion, which they felt to be simply individualist hyperbole. The group—including Franz Wilhelm Seiwert[8], Heinrich Hoerle, Gerd Arntz, Peter Alma, and the photogra-

pher August Sander—turned to the dispassionate diagramming of social iniquity and class oppression in a style appropriated from the flowcharts used by capitalists, as a weapon of revolutionary consciousness-raising.⁴⁰

Anti-Utopians par excellence, they, like Seurat, used the codes of modernity to question the legitimacy of the contemporary social order. Unlike Seurat, they called the legitimacy of high art itself into question; yet one might say that this too is inherent in certain aspects of the artist's practice. With his emphasis on the anti-heroic rather than the gestural; on the "patient tapestry," with its implications of machinelike repetitiveness rather than the impatient slash and scumble of what Fénéon denominated "virtuoso painting";⁴¹ and on social critique rather than transcendent individualism, Seurat may be seen as the ancestor of all those who reject the heroic and apolitical sublimity of modernist art in favor of a critical practice of the visual. The photomontage of Berlin Dada or the collaged constructions of Barbara Kruger are, from this vantage point, more in the line of Neo-Impressionist descent than the innocuous oil paintings of those who happened to use little dots of paint to construct otherwise conventional landscapes or sea scenes and called themselves Seurat's fol-

8. Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, *Bauernkrieg* (Peasants' War), 1932, Wuppertal, Van der Heydt Museum der Stadt



wers. The anti-Utopian impulse lies at the heart of Seurat's achievement—in, as Bloch saw it, the “single mosaic of boredom,” the “empty-ced dolls,” the “expressionless water of the Sunday Seine”—in short, the landscape of painted suicide which does not come off only because it cks resolve.” And it is this legacy that Seurat left to his contemporaries and to those who followed after him.

Notes

1. This essay was originally presented in October 1988 as a talk initiating the Norma U. Lifton Memorial Lecture Series at the Art Institute of Chicago.
2. Seurat himself did not specify the time of day in the painting when he first exhibited it, at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition in 1886.
3. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1986), II, p. 814. This passage has also been cited, in a different context, in the recent catalogue edited by Erich Franz and Bernd Growe, *Georges Seurat: Zeichnungen*, Kunsthalle Bielefeld and Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden, 1983–84, pp. 82–83. The translation has been altered to render it more readable.
4. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, II, pp. 813–14. The emphasis is Bloch's. The translation has been somewhat altered.
5. The satiric exaggeration of structure itself constitutes an anti-Utopian strategy, allegorizing the failure of formal harmony in more traditional paintings of the time and calling into question, like the so-called social harmony it refers to, the whole idea of a “paradise on earth.”
6. Seurat did not simply remove the process of pictorial construction from the painting, neutralizing his handiwork into nonexistent smoothness and “universality,” as did a Neoclassical artist such as Ingres. The facture is, unremittingly, present. It has simply been mechanized, positively depersonalized, and made anti-expressive.
7. Meyer Schapiro, “Seurat and ‘La Grande Jatte,’” *Columbia Review* XVII (1935): 14–15.
8. On Papety see Nancy Finlay, “Fourierist Art Criticism and the *Rêve de bonheur* of Dominique Papety,” *Art History* 2, no. 3 (September 1979): 327–38. Finlay refers (p. 330) to the *Rêve de bonheur* as having “its message of Fourierist utopia conveyed by standard classical formulas in a classicizing style. . . .”
9. See Finlay, “Fourierist Art Criticism,” p. 328.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
11. Love between the sexes, if not totally omitted, is certainly muted: The only two figures who might be read as lovers are relegated to the background of the composition. Papety's painting also included other embodiments of virtuous satisfaction, such as the “laborieux penseurs” (working thinkers) engaged in studies, a beautiful woman asleep in the bosom of her husband, and a noble old man stretching his hand out in blessing over the head of his daughter and her fiancé.
12. Finlay, “Fourierist Art Criticism,” p. 334.
13. The *Sacred Grove* in the Art Institute of Chicago is a smaller version of the huge canvas in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyons.
14. Théophile Gautier, *Moniteur universel*, June 3, 1867, cited in Claudine Mitchell, “Time and the Ideal of Patriarchy in the Pastorals of Puvis de Chavannes,” *Art History* 10, no. 2 (June 1987): 189.
15. Anon. [P. Signac], “Impressionnistes et révolutionnaires,” *La Révolte*, June 13–19, 1891, p. 4. Cited in Richard Thomson, *Seurat* (Oxford: Phaidon Press; Salem, N.H.: Salem House, 1985), p. 207, and n. 82, p. 233.
16. The very use of the term “harmony” in the title makes reference to the specifically Fourierist and, later, more generally socialist and anarchist designation of social Utopia. A famous Utopian colony established in the United States in the nineteenth century was known as New Harmony.
17. Indeed, if we look at the criticism of the time, it becomes clear that it is the expressive-formal structure of the painting rather than the social differences marking its cast of characters—or, more exactly, the unprecedented juxtaposition of working- and middle-class figures so emphasized by T. J. Clark in his recent account of the work (T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* [New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985], pp. 265–67)—that made the most forceful impression on articulate viewers of the 1880s and made them read the *Grande Jatte* as pointed social critique. As Martha Ward has recently pointed out, contemporary critics “acknowledged diversity but did not attend to its implications. Most were far more concerned to explain why all of the figures appeared to be rigid, stiff, expressionless, and posed. . . .” Martha Ward, in *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886*, exhibition catalogue, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1986, p. 435.
18. Ward, *New Painting*, p. 435.
19. Cited by Ward, *New Painting*, p. 435, and n. 80, p. 442. Thomson cites the same passage, translating it rather differently, however: “Little by little one familiarizes oneself, one guesses, then one sees and admires the great yellow patch of grass eaten away by the sun, the clouds of golden dust in the treetops, the details of which the retina, dazzled with light, cannot make out; then one understands the starchiness of the Parisian promenade, regulated and stultified, where even relaxation is affected.” Cited in Thomson, *Seurat*, p. 115, and n. 30, p. 229. Thomson is citing H. Fèvre, “L'Exposition des impressionnistes,” *Revue de demain*, May–June 1886, p. 149.
20. Paul Adam, “Peintres impressionnistes,” *Revue contemporaine littéraire, politique et philosophique* 4 (Apr.–May 1886): 550. Cited by Ward, *New Painting*, p. 435, and n. 81, p. 442.
21. The entire passage by Paulet reads as follows: “The painting has tried to show the toing and froing of the banal promenade that people in their Sunday best take, without any pleasure, in the places where it is accepted that one should stroll on a Sunday. The artist has given his figures the automatic gestures of lead soldiers moving about on regimented squares. Maids, clerks and troopers all move around with a similar slow, banal, identical step, which catches the character of the scene exactly, but makes the point too insistently.” Alfred Paulet, “Les Impressionnistes,” *Paris*, June 5, 1886, cited in Thomson, *Seurat*, p. 115; n. 31, p. 229; and n. 33, p. 230.

22. Félix Fénéon, "Les Impressionnistes en 1886 (VIII^e Exposition impressionniste)," *La Vogue*, June 13–20, 1886, pp. 261–75, trans. by Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874–1904*, Sources and Documents in the History of Art (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1966), p. 110. Fénéon's striking figure of speech, bringing together as it does the idea of patience and that of weaving, of course brings to mind the gendered image of the patient weaver Penelope and a host of tales and metaphors implicating women and the textile arts, not the least of which is Freud's famous account of women and weaving, in which, in his essay "Femininity," he describes weaving as women's only contribution to civilization (Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. J. Strachey, 1933; Reprint, New York: Norton, 1965, p. 131). For a full account of the gendered tropes and narratives associated with weaving, tapestry, and the textile arts, see Nancy K. Miller, "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic," in her *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 77–101.

Fénéon's "patient tapestry" can also be read as a counterfigure to those more customary metaphors consecrating modernist creation by troping the masterful vigor, spontaneity, and emotionality of the (male) artist's creative practice, metaphorizing his brush as a thrusting or probing phallus, emphasizing the slashing, swirling rapidity, and, as it were, rapaciousness of the paint application or, on the other hand, its delicacy and sensitivity. Within this discursive context, Fénéon's phraseology may be read as a deconstruction of the master imagery of modern vanguard production, a deflationary figure in short.

23. Daniel Catton Rich, *Seurat and the Evolution of "La Grande Jatte"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), p. 2.

24. One need only think, for example, of the famous diagrams of Cézanne's paintings in Erle Loran, *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1943), diagrams later recycled by Roy Lichtenstein in such works as *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* of 1962. A portion of the book was published as early as 1930 in *The Arts*. See John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, rev. ed. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1961), p. 624.

25. Schapiro, "Seurat and 'La Grande Jatte,'" pp. 11–13.

26. For the most recent verdict on Seurat's "scientific" color theories, see Alan Lee, "Seurat and Science," *Art History* 10, no. 2 (June 1987): 203–26. Lee concludes unequivocally: "Far from being scientifically well founded, his 'chromo-luminarist' method was pseudoscience: it was specious in its theoretical formulation, and was applied with an indifference to any critical appraisal of its empirical validity" (p. 203).

27. *Seurat in Perspective*, ed. Norma Broude (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 173.

28. Ironically, Seurat could be quite fierce in defending his own priority in the invention of Neo-Impressionism and attempting to deny Signac and others the right to build on "his" technique. See Thomson, p. 130 and pp. 185–87, for a discussion of strains within the Neo-Impressionist group. I am here considering the possibilities inherent in Neo-Impressionism as a practice, not Seurat's personal protectiveness of his own position as the leader of a movement. Obviously, there was a contradiction between the theoretical potential of Neo-Impressionism and the particular interpretations of it made by Seurat and his followers.

29. Martha Ward, *New Painting*, pp. 434–35.

30. The choice of the back, rather than the front, view of this figure is in itself significant. From the front, a wet nurse can be read as any nursing woman; from the rear, because of the presence of the circular cap and the signifying ribbon and cloak, the figure can be read only as a wet nurse. The back view reduces ambiguity of signification along with human relationship. For a full-scale analysis of Morisot's *Wet Nurse*, see Linda Nochlin, "Morisot's *Wet Nurse*: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 37–56.

31. Robert Herbert, *Seurat's Drawings* (New York: Sherwood Publishers, 1962), cited in Broude, *Seurat in Perspective*, p. 129.

32. Roger Fry, cited in John Russell, *Seurat* (New York and Washington, D.C.: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), p. 157.

33. Indeed, the pose of the pug—like the running child, added late in the process of composition—seems to have been invented as a response to that of the dynamic contour of the little girl. But the dog's pose would seem to be a parodic version of the capriole, one of the traditional positions of equestrian dressage, and as such signifies artifice itself.

34. For Ernst Bloch's ideas on the Utopian implications of the part or fragment, see "The Conscious and Known Activity within the Not-Yet-Conscious, the Utopian Function" (1959) in his *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. by J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg (Cambridge, Mass. The MIT Press, 1988), p. 139.

35. See the two versions by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes: *Hope* (nude), 1872, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and *Hope* (clothed), 1872, Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

36. For the most complete analysis of the role of the child artist in this painting and in nineteenth-century representation generally, see Pierre Georgel, "L'Enfant au bonhomme" in *Malerei und Theorie: Das Courbet-Colloquium 1979*, ed. K. Gallwitz and K. Herding (Frankfurt: Städelschen Kunstinstitut, 1980), pp. 105–116.

37. For the negative contradiction of Courbet's figuration of hope in the *Studio*, in the form of the Irish beggar woman, see Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's Real Allegory: Re-reading 'The Painter's Studio,'" in Sarah Faunce and Linda Nochlin, *Courbet Reconsidered* exhibition catalogue, Brooklyn Museum, 1988, pp. 26–29.

38. In the seated profile study for the *Poseuses*, 1887 (now in the Musée d'Orsay), the formal language itself embodies contradiction, a clash of systems, so to speak, in the non-coincidence of the simple, diagrammatic form of the body, which is standardized in its curves and angles, with the systematized veil of multicolored dots which obscures the boundaries of the form with an atomized diffuseness.

39. For the concepts of "spectacle" and "spectacular society," see Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 9–10. Clark explains that they were developed in the 1960s by the Situationist International group in France, and especially by Guy Debord.

40. See, for example, Gerd Arntz's *Four Prints from Twelve Houses of the Age*, woodcut, 1927. For information about the Cologne Progressives and illustrations of their work, see the exhibition catalogue *Politische Konstruktivisten, 1919–33: Die "Gruppe progressiver Künstler," Köln*, Berlin, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, June–July, 1975.

41. Félix Fénéon, cited by Joan Ungersma Halperin, *Félix Fénéon: Aesthete and Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 83.