

Total Ellipsis: Zola, Benjamin and the Dialectics of Kitsch¹

Let us begin with the final paragraphs of *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) and *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883), two love stories by Emile Zola that take place in the environment of shopping.² The reason for starting out from these texts is not to engage in a specialised exegesis of Zola, perhaps building on the work of Jeanne Gaillard, Rachel Bowlby or James Miller. Rather it is to make place for a speculative discussion on why their unusually intense conflation of sex with shopping, of human identity and commodity, should, to all appearances, have been of little interest for Walter Benjamin.

The novels both come to their climactic endings with cries and embraces. In *Thérèse Raquin* the guilty couple have drunk their poison:

And suddenly Thérèse and Laurent broke into sobs. Broken by a final crisis, they flung themselves into each other's arms, weak like children ... It was a flash of lightning. Stricken down they fell upon one another, at last finding consolation in their death. The young woman's mouth sought out the scar on her husband's neck that had been left by Camille's teeth.³

And in *Au Bonheur*, as the great reopening day of record sales draws to a close, the couple finally admit their mutual love:

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- 1 This essay began as a lecture in the inaugural series of the Design Museum, London, some years ago, under the general rubric of *Commerce and Culture*. My thanks to Helen Rees, the then Director of the Museum, for inviting me to do it, and since to Frank Mort whose own work and discussions of mine have been crucial and sustaining.
- 2 In Jeanne Gaillard's major work of urban demography, Gaillard 1977, p. 547 for a study of the department stores in the light of Zola's notes. Also her preface to Zola 1980. See Miller 1981; Bowlby 1985. For *Thérèse Raquin*, all quotations here are my own translation from Zola 1971, but for an English translation see that of Andrew Rothwell (Zola 1992a). *Au Bonheur ...* is republished in the English translation of 1883 as *The Ladies' Paradise*, Zola 1992b. The most comprehensive edition of Zola's notes is Zola 1986. All translations my own.
- 3 Zola 1971, p. 317.

A last murmur was rising from The Ladies' Paradise, the distant acclamation of a crowd. Madame Hédouin's portrait was still smiling, with its painted lips. Mouret had fallen on his desk, on the million that he could no longer see. He did not quit Denise, but clasped her in a desperate embrace.⁴

Across this gulf between degradation and triumph, the two books share the narrative tension and suspense of the popular, money-spinning novels or serials of their time. Of course Zola achieves this through his well-known 'sociology' of commerce in Second Empire Paris, which, in its circumstantial detail, goes far beyond the work of his literary contemporaries who exploited the same kinds of material.⁵ Yet as with more popular literature, the metaphors of moral despair and economic bankruptcy which Zola was able to figure in his exposition of the decadence and ruin of the small, family shop, or their opposite in the rise of the department store, acquire such autonomy that it is they that drive the narrative, rather than the profound unfolding of History's inevitability, of deep structural forces, or whatever. Maybe this above all repelled Walter Benjamin. It is difficult to imagine him admiring the novelist's manipulations, so utterly unmodern in any Brechtian sense. For, while in the *Passagen-Werk*, the exposés, dossiers and drafts alike, Benjamin does flirt briefly with *Thérèse Raquin*, *Au Bonheur des Dames* is absent.⁶

Enigmatically, Benjamin reads *Thérèse* as marking the novelist's departure from Fourier, who '... introduced the idyllic coloration of Biedemeier into the severe world of forms of the Empire style ...' In the *Exposé* of 1935 he wrote:

The brilliance of this [idyll], while fading, lasted until Zola. In his book entitled *Travail* [1901] Zola took up [Fourier's] ideas just as he takes leave of the arcades in *Thérèse Raquin*.⁷

4 Zola 1980, p. 383.

5 The sociology of the *Carnets* has been astutely put in question as an ethnocentric rather than an ethnographic position by Alain Cottureau in his introduction to Denis Poulot's *Le Sublime* of 1871, translated by John Moore as *Denis Poulot's Le Sublime – a preliminary study*, in Rifkin and Thomas 1988. For a popular novel that works precisely the same streets, constructing their decay as the decor and the condition of crime, see Gaboriau 1876. According to Régis Messac in his all important *Le 'Detective Novel' et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* (Messac 1929), this was probably written by 1867; see footnote 2 on p. 503. The story connects a murder in Batignolles to a decaying, small shop in the Rue Vivienne which is represented as the moral climate of the crime.

6 All references to and translations from the *Passagen-Werk* are taken from Benjamin 1989.

7 Benjamin 1989, p. 37.