

These Four Walls: Balthus Thesis Proposal

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Introduction

The work of Balthus, born Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, has long been debated, reinterpreted, and condemned. Many scholars have labeled Balthus as a painter who stuck only to the practices and techniques of the old masters like Courbet and Massacio. Others find him to be a ghost member of the surrealist movement. Some imaginative souls find him to be more of a storyteller than visual artist. Lastly, a large majority of critics believe him to be a privileged pedophile furthering his sexual fantasies through thinly veiled eroticism. It is easy to see why there would be such differing opinions on the puzzling artist that is Balthus. On one hand he does not give much clarity or verbal indication about what movement he belongs to (besides Realism), but on the other hand his works are highly dramatic and could not have existed in a bubble separate from the art of the twentieth century. A synthesis of critiques utilizing Realism, Surrealism, and illustration, are necessary when dissecting a silently ominous and solitary Balthus painting and to conduct further research on the subject.

As a young boy, Balthasar Klossowski de Rola showed an interest in visual arts; after his cat ran away when he was twelve years old, Balthus created forty wood cuts of adventures with him and the cat named Mitsou. Excited by his work, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke encouraged him to pursue his artworks and often had Balthus create illustrations alongside Rilke's poems. Thus, Balthus began his journey to becoming a fine artist: creating illustrations for Rilke as well as for Emily Bronte's, *Wuthering Heights*. He later copied the artwork of Pierro della Francesca, oil painted many young girls, created frescoes, and concluded with a retrospective in the Metropolitan Museum of Art after his death in 200 (Rewald, 2013). Balthus lived in France for most of his life, but briefly moved to Berlin during WWI. He kept contact with many different

artists within the Surrealist movement and was even close personal friends with Pablo Picasso. However, in many interviews, Balthus claimed that his influences lay in centuries past (Clair,1999).

State of the Field

Critique of Balthus within the Realism camp of thinking has the benefit of being iconographical. There is concrete evidence that Balthus was copying forms from paintings he witnessed in Museums. This is the most obvious in a painting such as *The Mountain* in 1937, in which there is a clear resemblance in the posture of the mountain guide to the posture of the man in *The Stonebreakers* by Courbet in 1850 (Rewald, 2002). Scholars such as Sabine Rewald and Jean Clair fall squarely into the practical Realism camp of critique. They both tend to focus on who exactly Balthus was looking at when he depicted his figures and what visual elements he was copying. They also take Balthus's words as absolute truth, not only because Realism is the only movement he ever verbally claimed affiliation to, but also due to the obvious visual evidence of a realist lineage in his artwork.

There is a certain amount of compassion in this way of understanding Balthus that is refreshing compared to other modes of thinking. By focusing on his exact words, and his physical practices of repurposing motifs from the old masters, this camp of thinking has opened up an understanding of Balthus that is anchored firmly to other "timeless" artists. In this, they have given Balthus the seat in the art world that he had always wanted to achieve. Their compassionate stance allows them a clear-headedness capable of analyzing his work without being overly disturbed by the potential sexual fantasies depicted.

However, there are multiple issues with this way of scrutinizing Balthus through Realism. One issue is that it does nothing to address the sexuality of the young girls, the eeriness and artificiality which unifies many of his paintings, and the psychology of which directly relates to Surrealism. Another critique of this description of Balthus is that one has to believe he was deliberately ignoring the work of his closest friends (most of them Surrealist visual artists). This feat would not be impossible, but certainly difficult when surrounded by potent influences. Jean Clair in his introduction in *Balthus: Catalogue Raisonne of the Complete Works*, claims that Balthus has achieved a timeless quality and that his work, “precedes the time of motors and machines” (Clair, 1999). Clair argues that because Balthus’s work never depicted any modern technology, it appears as if he is painting outside of his time and through this obstinance, he joined the legacy of other ageless artists that came before him.

Perhaps the most obvious interpretation of Balthus’s work categorizes him as a practicing surrealist even if he was never officially a member and did not mix with Andre Breton (Verwoert, 2002). Scholars cannot ignore the fact that the themes of dreaming and latent sexuality directly coincide with the Surrealist movement, which is why the largest majority of art historical writing on Balthus comes from this point of view. More than conceptually, there are many visual similarities to Surrealism as well: coloration, stillness, artificiality, awkward body positioning, the awareness the viewer has of their own body when viewing the work, etc (Penny, 2019). It seems as if Balthus was not unscathed from the relentless grip of Surrealism in France during the twentieth century.

Art critic Peter Schjeldahl adroitly placed the work of Balthus in conversation with Rene Magritte in the article *In The Head: Balthus and Magritte Reconsidered* in 2013. Both of these artists were unique in that they were using surrealist ideology while creating mostly figural work.

They are also similar in that they are dealing with eroticism not depicted in action, but rather within the mind (Schjeldahl, 2013). Balthus may not have used automatism like Magritte in his paintings, but Balthus depicted dreams from the point of view of observing a person trapped in the thralls of one. Overall, research and critique from this angle of Surrealism is extremely fruitful. However, it does seem unfair to Balthus to disregard his goals of becoming bigger than his time to pin him down into a movement he was never actually a part of. Writing about Balthus as a Surrealist tends to ignore his origins as an illustrator and his admiration for the artists of the nineteenth century.

Illustration as another avenue of thought takes into account Balthus's origins as a storyteller. From the beginning he was illustrating and creating narratives in his works. Balthus himself even admitted in several interviews that the illustrations he did for *Wuthering Heights* informed his style for the rest of his career (Clair, 1999). Throughout his paintings, one can pick out repeating characters which makes it feel as if it is one mythical, continuous storyline. Whether it be the grotesque looking cats, imp creatures, repeating sitters such as Therese Blanchard or Balthus himself; there is a quiet movie produced through the stills of Balthus's paintings.

This avenue of illustration quickly diverts one's attention to critiques of cinema at this time. Philosophies of the male gaze in the essay *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey come to mind when situated against a Balthus painting such as *Therese Dreaming* made in 1938 (Mulvey). The idea of a story playing out on a two dimensional surface can be easily subject to the methodologies of cinematography: creating characters, setting a stage, taking an authorial stance, and denoting action (Benston). These techniques are applied to Balthus's

paintings in the way he situates the viewer exactly where he wants them to be in order to witness the trepidatiously violent renderings of his subjects.

There is a dark side to Balthus's ways of visual storytelling. He can create characters and establish them as victims even if they are the only figure in the room. The audience of his paintings become the "voyeurs," witnessing the ominous happenings of puppet-like characters (Benston). Scholars of Balthus who fall into this illustrative and cinematic camp are Alice N. Benston and Timothy Hyman. Benston highlights the theatricality of Balthus's work, while Hyman examines the plasticky and doll-like iterations of Balthus's characters (Hyman). Overall, this camp of thinking fits nicely beside ideas of violent and erotic Surrealism and is ripe for more research using the vocabulary of theater to critique Balthus.

Lastly, the most popular and alluring camp of thinking about Balthus is through the lens of psychoanalysis and soft-core pornography. Many art critics, after Balthus's retrospective at the MET, considered his work offensive. One article that embodies the public's reaction to the retrospective is *Sugar and Vice and... Balthus: A Retrospective* written by Richard Flood. Flood scathingly criticizes Balthus and claims, "a drop of semen on a silk handkerchief is not really the stuff of great art" (Flood). In this, Flood is arguing that Balthus's paintings are a form of masturbation thrown into the face of the public while Balthus hides behind academic derision.

There is value in this kind of analytical critique because it pays close attention to the outraged reactions of the viewers. Critics with this standpoint tend to use psychoanalysis to interpret the relationship Balthus must have had with his muses, or "angels," as he called them (Benston). However, this angry attitude disregards many of the other artistic influences Balthus had and produces a grudge-like refusal for further research.

Thesis Proposal

The origins of my thesis came after reading “Sadomasochistic Spectacles,” a chapter in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* by Amy Hollywood. I read this looking for the philosophical relationship between Georges Bataille’s writings and Balthus’s paintings and ended up stumbling on something I did not expect: the idea of the fourth wall in cinema and translating it into a stagnant painting. This chapter deals with Bataille’s techniques of eliminating narrators, and Carol Clover’s ideas of horror illustrating the failure of men. Near the end of the chapter Hollywood describes how “reality effects” usually protect the reader (or viewer) from the breaking of the fourth wall (Hollywood). At first I was mostly interested in how Balthus was creating illustrations through his art. However, after further research I became more aware of the critical benefits that analysis through cinematic methods could offer such as the interconnected roles of audience versus artist, as well as the practicalities of setting a stage.

Through my thesis I would like to take this argument even further. I plan to describe how Balthus is playing with the idea of creating a scene in which a viewer can watch, but not enter. The intimacy of the interior spaces Balthus typically depicts heightens the sense of an enclosed space containing the young girls. This, coupled with the fact that the viewers are very much aware of their voyeurism, and the subtle danger surrounding the scene creates an anxiety in the audience. Uncomfortable in their forced role as voyeur partaking in the violence of the girls, yet unable to help them, viewers become more interested in the reactions of others around them to see if they are having similar experiences. The idea of the fourth wall comes into play here, not because Balthus is breaking it, but rather because he is inviting attention to it and not allowing it

to be broken. The girls are lost in thought, usually not keeping eye contact with the viewers. They seem distracted and not aware of any danger that may be lurking.

Further research is necessary for the believability of this thesis. In the future I plan to map out the relationship Balthus had to Antonin Artaud and especially the visual, experiential, and philosophical similarities to Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* (Tripney). Following the cinematography trail, I want to look deeper into tropes of Surrealist performance art and theater techniques Balthus would have been familiar with at this time. More research into the idea of looking through a horror movie lens and utilizing scholars such as Carol Clover would be beneficial. I would like to pinpoint exactly how Balthus is creating this sense of drama and dread within almost empty settings and hollow expressions. Overall, there is much digging left to be done in the surrealist and cinematic arena regarding Balthus and I plan to pick up a shovel.

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In this short description of the painting *The Card Game* made in 1948, author Alarco Paloma lists possible historical influences of Balthus, especially Piero della Francesca and Caravaggio. Paloma also describes how Balthus utilizes male figures in his paintings: at best they play secondary roles of impassive characters, at worst they are rivals or the object of fear within the painting. In *The Card Game*, the young man has his back to us and we can see that he is planning on cheating to win the game. Alarco places this trope of card games and cheating within the historical frame of past artists who have used the same motif.

Overall, this article was relevant to the research specifically for Alarco's description of women in Balthus's paintings. Alarco claims that the girls and women Balthus depicts are always the winners of their "game." The girls tend to have cocky postures and veiled confidence that makes them seemingly unafraid or unaware of whatever danger may be lurking beyond the canvas frame. This deep connection to history and realism supports the argument that Balthus somehow functioned outside of his time. However, the idea of the girls always being queens lends itself to the thought that Balthus is utilizing elements of characters and theater in his work.

I am not sure I agree that the women in Balthus's paintings are always winning in the scenes they are placed in because they tend to be seen as the target for violence as well. However, I will relent that they dominate the composition as all the focus is meant to be on them.

The girls do have peculiar inner power that makes them seem wiser than they are given credit for. Overall, this article was beneficial in creating a nuanced argument regarding the viewing experience of Balthus's painted girls.

Benston, Alice N. "Framing and Being Framed by Art: Theatricality and Voyeurism in Balthus."

Accessed December 2, 2022. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42945714>.

In this essay, Alice N. Benston argues that Balthus is utilizing several theatrical techniques within his work to shock and engage the viewer. Benston describes how Balthus is using ideas of characters, sets, authorial stance, and action to direct the viewer and have the audience feel as if they are a part of the play. Throughout the essay, Benston constantly refers to Balthus's son, Pierre Klossowski, and his claim that the only sexualizing taking place is on the side of the viewer, not the artist or the young women. This claim was hotly debated by critics such as Kay Larson and Ronald Paulson: both of which are used in Benston's essay to situate the idea that the reaction of the viewer plays a larger role in the experience of Balthus's work than one might expect. Overall, Alice N. Benston describes the interdisciplinary nature of Balthus's work and how he is using techniques, not just from painting, but also from literature, poetry and theater as well.

Ideas of impending danger from outside the picture plane and the eroticism of sadism come out of this article. Benston astutely points out; "Balthus's paintings represent the moment just before or at violence." The literary and cinematic influences are imperative as well. Benston isolates Balthus's friendship with Artaud Antonin and how his *Theatre of Cruelty* may have influenced the former. Benston also cites Balthus's interest in literary Surrealism and poetry, as Balthus has always been illustrating since he first did his forty woodcuts of his dead cat. This

combination of Surrealism and illustration through the lens of the theater plays into many scholars' interpretations of Balthus's work. The idea Benston puts together, that Balthus is not depicting people, but rather characters or "puppets" is a useful link between the two methods of understanding his style (surrealism and illustration).

Clair, Jean and Monnie, Viginie. *Balthus: Catalogue Raisonné of the Complete Works*.

Paris: Gallimard, 1999.

The entire catalogue raisonne was beneficial to the research because it was the first time I got to see a comprehensive collection of Balthus's work, including stage sets and theater designs that had not been mentioned anywhere else before.

The introduction by Jean Clair gives an extensive overview of the life and coinciding art work of Balthus. Clair gives several visual analysis of Balthus's paintings as he directs our attention to various movements that he existed on the fringes of. Clair does a good job of placing Balthus somewhat within the realist movement and also apart from it as the "real" he was depicting was much more like the surrealist, "metaphysical." Clair definitely falls into the camp that believes Balthus was working towards a timeless quality that could not be associated with any one movement. Clair spends a lot of time talking about the "strangeness" of his characters and how many of them are deformed in some way or exaggerated in another. Jean Clair ends his introduction on a philosophical note: saying that Balthus is a "solitary watcher," an achiever of great paintings of which no one in the present day could ever understand unless we one day get back to a more "self-confident" age.

This introduction was necessary for the research because it was such a comprehensive scope of Balthus's work and how conceptually it grew and changed over time. Jean Clair does

not shy away from Balthus's connections with several movements. In fact, Clair almost seems appreciative of the fact that Balthus stuck to his own signature style despite the changing attitudes of the period. From illustration and realism, to forays with Surrealists, through his friendship with Picasso, Balthus always remained the same. Of course some would critique him for this stagnation, including Picasso himself, but Clair seems to respect it.

Fer, Briony. "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism." *Art History*, vol. 17, no. 3, 1994, pp. 424–449., <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8365.1994.tb00586.x>.

Fer's essay discusses theories of Kleinian psychoanalysis and dualism, while referencing the economy of loss that is represented in the minimalist sculptures of Eva Hesse. Through the use of psychoanalysis and defining symbolic exchange, Fer explains how loss can be represented visually through blank space or illustrated "white noise." Fer also goes into depth about how representation itself can be a process of destruction or reparation based on one's own psyche.

This essay is relevant to the research because of its closeness to psychoanalysis and how it may specifically affect young girls. The ideas of Klein and girls always having the sadistic urge to destroy their mothers coincides with Balthus's depictions of young girls in which they are overly confident, and seemingly unattached to any adult figures. Sadism on the side of the young women, leads to a conversation on the autonomy that they have over themselves in Balthus's paintings. Are they in danger or are they the danger? Fer's analysis of Hesse's sculptures defined ideas of losing self-identity and narcissistic injury that come out of Bataille's writings. She goes on to point out the importance of bodily orientation when viewing Hesse's work. This awareness of the body reminds me of Balthus's paintings because of the visceral

reaction viewers have when experiencing his work. Compassion and pain are communicated through visual cues that elicit viewers to a personal reflection.

The Klienian model of dualism can be applied to Balthus's work in strange ways. The girls he paints are either extremely smart, clever, and lecherous or they are unaware, sleeping, or dead. Violence is apparent in most of Balthus's work even though it is never portrayed in action. Fer ends the essay talking about how restrained surfaces can still communicate violent fantasies. This could easily be transferred to Balthus's restrained and prison-like settings he places his characters in. He could be utilizing his stark backgrounds and limited color palette to communicate danger, much like Klein suggests.

Flood, Richard. "Sugar and Vice And...Balthus: A Retrospective." The online edition of

Artforum International Magazine, June 1, 1984. www.artforum.com/print/198406/sugar-and-vice-and-balthus-a-retrospective-35373.

Sugar and Vice and.. Balthus is a review in *Art Forum* by Richard Flood. It is an emotionally charged critique of the Balthus retrospective that occurred at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This is a scathing review, claiming that all of Balthus's work is nothing more than pornography that has been labeled as high art. Many Americans would agree with Flood considering the reaction to the show that occurred. Richard Flood argues that Balthus uses eroticism as a gimmick, and his art is nothing more than, "a series of compositional exercises." Flood believes that Balthus hides his true message so as to seem aloof and intellectual, when in reality he is depicting corruption through subtle, dirty jokes. Overall, Flood is accusing Balthus of forcing an adult libidinousness onto a child and pretending like it was generated from the sitter themselves, rather than being put upon them.

This was beneficial to the research because it embodies the reactions of the general public to the Balthus retrospective in America. People were outraged and there was even a petition for the MET to take down Balthus's artwork or cover it up. Many believe that Balthus's paintings are pedophilic and showing them only adds to his sadistic fantasies. Flood did mention how Balthus's work felt chilly and artificial, and he cited the influence of the Surrealism of Lautreamont in its "atmosphere of evil." However, Flood finally ends his visual and historical analysis quickly and comments that Balthus's work is not the stuff of great art. While Richard Flood's analysis is certainly passionate, I am not sure he is giving the sitters in the paintings enough credit. It is true that Balthus has set up a scene that is inherently sexually charged, however I am not sure that Balthus's only purpose was masturbation through painting.

Hollywood, Amy. "Sadomasochistic Spectacles." Essay. In *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

This chapter in *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* by Amy Hollywood focuses on the sadomasochistic fantasies of Batailles's work and his use of narration by using Carol Clover's analysis of horror films as a method of decoding it. In the chapter, "Sadomasochistic Spectacles," Amy Hollywood utilizes Carol Clover's ideas of horror to show how Batailles's success was made possible due to him creating uncomfortable confusion between who is the victim and who is the viewer by consistently changing the reality of the narrator. Clover's ideas discuss that the whole genre of horror is based upon "the failure of the male." This failure immediately elicits an anxiety in the audience that causes a need for victim-identification which is associated with a "sadistic-voyeuristic" look.

Amy Hollywood looks to Freud for further analysis, describing how Freud claims that sexuality was in itself traumatic. Out of Freud comes ideas such as infancy's nature of being susceptible to sexuality because of the selfishness of children and their lack of repressive responses. Hollywood claims that Bataille's writing emerges from this "masochistic infantile sexuality." Bataille purposefully links innocence, destruction, and eroticism.

The idea of analyzing Bataille based on horror is something I had not thought of regarding Balthus. However, it makes perfect sense considering the eerie and somewhat dangerous quality his paintings seem to have. The chapter ends with a strange description of how reality, within a movie, book, or in the case of Balthus: a painting, protects the viewer from breaking the fourth wall. This immediately struck me as important for Balthus because in a way he is drawing attention to the "fourth wall" by making viewers aware of their voyeurism, but he is also refusing to allow the wall to be broken. The reality of the scenes he paints is always kept in tact, effectively barring any entry into the scene. No one is capable of entering and perhaps helping the girls that are privy to danger.

Hyman, Timothy. "Early Balthus: A Puppet Master." *The World New Made: Figurative Painting in the Twentieth Century*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2022.

In this succinct chapter, Hyman describes how Balthus uses Expressionist and Realist artistic components to craft paintings such as *La Rue*. *La Rue* includes a street scene of several characters with their own mini stories all happening at once. There is a girl getting molested by a boy, a man carrying a large white rectangular object across the street, a woman holding a young boy with an overly large head in her arms, and several others. When viewing this work, one gets a sense of the very purposeful compositional decisions Balthus is making. Hyman argues that *La*

Rue is the most successful of Balthus's paintings because of its culmination of many of his successes. Hyman discusses the philosophy behind *The Lesson*. He argues that this painting is a reflection of Bataille's philosophy on the reality of sex being tragedy (mainly due to the girl getting molested). The main argument of Hyman's writing is that Balthus's figures are all doll-like, taking from Expressionist styles of depicting the body and influence from Surrealism. All of Balthus's figures remain in a theatrical narrative.

This was a cohesive critique of Balthus which was relevant to the research because it was one of the first times three movements were addressed in his work all at once (Realism, Expressionism, and Surrealism). This ties into the idea that Balthus somehow functioned outside of his time in the twentieth century. Also the description of each individual character in *La Rue*, was beneficial to understanding Balthus's approach in depicting girls versus men or boys. Hyman also described the sexual attitude overarcng all of Balthus's work as *La Rue* was originally supposed to show the girl getting raped, but he later censored it. Balthus creating work simply for the shock value was also mentioned as a critique, especially in the case of *The Guitar Lesson*, which even Balthus admits, was somewhat pornographic.

Jacobs, Joseph. "The King o' Cats." *More English Fairy Tales*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, London, 1894.

This is a collection of an old English fairy tale. The entire story consists of a conversation between a man, his wife, and their cat named Old Tom. The man comes home to his wife and his cat and tells them that he saw nine black cats holding a funeral. His wife did not believe him and the cat meowed along the entire time, increasingly annoying and loud. The man notices that the cat is looking at him funny but his wife makes him continue his story. He tells his wife that one

of the cats spoke to him and said, “Tell Tom Tildrum that Tim Toldrum’s dead.” Then the cat, Old Tom, jumps up and screeches- “What- old Tim dead! Then I’m the King o’ the Cats!” Then Old Tom climbs up the chimney and is never seen by the man or woman again.

Balthus made a self portrait where he is standing next to a cat, rubbing his head against Balthus’s leg. Next to the cat is a tablet signifying who is depicted and it says, “King of Cats.” This little story was important for studying Balthus because it links the nickname he gave to himself (King of Cats) to a literary text. This also gives concrete evidence of Balthus’s interest in children's stories and the idea of illustrating a character when he paints his portraits. Repeat characters such as himself, the cats, and the young girls are all in conversation with one another on the stage of Balthus’s paintings. Mentioned first in Sabine Rewald’s *Balthus Cats and Girls*, this falls into a camp of thinking that relates all of Balthus’s work to illustration. What started off with early childhood illustrations later became an inescapable need for the anecdotal. Despite the fact that Balthus said he was always afraid of becoming too anecdotal.

Li, XA. “A Distant Dream: Balthus, Henri Michaux, and the Chinese Aesthetic Tradition.” UCL

Discovery - UCL Discovery. Informa UK Limited, January 1, 1970.

<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10082495/>.

Li’s essay, *A Distant Dream: Balthus, Henri Michaux and Chinese Aesthetic Tradition* analyzes these two artists through the lense of Chinese aesthetics. Li gives specific attention to the theme of dreams and how that directly coincides with the philosophy of Zhuangzi and his notions of dream-like experiences. A dream-like experience is seen in Balthus’s work because even though a painting such as *Therese Dreaming* may seem as if she is asleep; due to her uncomfortable positioning, it is more likely that she is awake but in a dreamy state of mind.

Balthus is particularly familiar with Zhuangzian philosophy and Li traces the influence of Chinese lanterns on Balthus's work as well. Balthus even openly acknowledged how he derived inspiration from Chinese paintings, especially landscapes with their "delineation of form, restrained brush work, and painterly technique," found in the old masters. This is most obvious in the painting of *The Mountain* by Balthus in which there is a subtlety to the colors and a sharpness to the background.

One thing that particularly stuck out to me about Li's essay is that he used actual quotes from Balthus. Many other scholars have long since given up on listening to what he verbally said after his son claimed he never sexualized anything and was only ever a part of the realist movement. Li includes in the essay a quote from Balthus which was: "to assume there is a perverse eroticism in my adolescent girls is to stay at the level of material things." This does not deny the inherent sexuality present in the paintings, but rather accepts it and claims there is more to be seen and understood. Unlike many other surrealists, Balthus is depicting dreams from outside of the dreamer, rather than within the dream itself. Viewers only get a small taste of the unconscious from what they can interpret based on the positioning and expressions portrayed by the sitter.

Mahon, Alyce. *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros: 1938-1968*. Thames & Hudson, 2005.

This book follows the trek of Surrealism, from its birth, to during World War II, to how it survived in France after the war. More specifically, there is a focus on the erotic nature of Surrealism and how it has been interpreted in the past. Surrealists were very aware of the sexualized themes they were working with and the psychoanalytic techniques they were utilizing. However, the link between eroticism, the internal mind, and atrocity are permanently

linked after the war. Surrealism became nationally appreciated after WWII, not because people agreed with the concept, but because it was French and it had survived so it became tied to nationalism.

This was important for the research on Balthus because it helped to situate the time period and emotions around art in France during World War II. Balthus was friends with many Surrealists and the ideas of dreams, latent sexuality, and danger can be seen all around. Balthus does not claim to be a part of any movement except Realism, however the friends he kept and the themes of his work, coincide directly with Surrealism. This book also shed light on the influence of the war on Balthus's work. Balthus does not really get political in his paintings. However, in his painting *The Victim*, made after the war, one can clearly see the latent trauma that could have been in Balthus at this time. A woman's naked dead body is laid out with a knife by her side. One is unsure if she was murdered or if she used the knife herself, but the disturbance remains the same. It is important to remember that while many scholars believe Balthus maintained a technical style that was somehow "outside" of his time period, Balthus himself still very much functioned within French society. He was not unscathed after the war and it would be foolish to assume that his work was somehow unaffected.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 1989, pp. 14–26., https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3.

Mulvey's essay delves into the male gaze and how women are represented in cinema by men and for men. Using psychoanalytic techniques to pick apart films like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, Mulvey explains how women represent the fear of castration in men due to their lack of penis, and cinema has to ease that anxiety. The anxiety can be eased either by

demystifying the woman, or fetishizing and objectifying her. Voyeurist ideas of “demystifying” women are linked to sadism because the one doing the watching is infringing on the will of another. Sadism always demands a narrative of winning and losing: a battle of will and strength. In this case, the winner is the man doing the looking and the loser is the woman unaware that she is being watched. Mulvey argues that ultimately the meaning of women is sexual difference which makes them become an icon for men’s fear or fetishization.

This is relevant to two aspects of the Balthus research: the idea that Balthus has a set a stage for viewers to become the “voyeurs” of impending atrocities on these young girls, and the idea that Balthus may be thinking about psychoanalysis, of both the girls and the viewers. He could be using these ideas to link ominous scenes with thoughts of latent sexuality and the sexuality of children. Viewers are forced to watch what is happening to the girls and become somehow responsible for the wrongings that may be done to them. The audience is placed just so, where they can have the perfect view under the skirt of the young girls. The positioning is extremely purposeful and makes one wonder how much the girls know about how they are being looked at. Overall, this essay helped to situate the thinking about women psychoanalytically and their role in cinema from the point of view of the male gaze.

Nema, Nitansha. “Psychology in Art: The Influence of Freudian Theories on Surrealist Art.”

International Journal of Indian Psychology, vol. 4, no. 4, 2017,

<https://doi.org/10.25215/0404.119>.

Nema utilizes in depth analysis of Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte to pinpoint the influence of psychoanalysis on their representational work. Nema claims that Magritte is utilizing the psychoanalytic technique of automatism particularly in his painting *The Lover II* in

1928 which may be related to his witnessing the suicide of his mother as a child. Nema concludes with the statement that surrealist artwork is meant to make one aware of sonder and interpersonal connections, while trying to “unravel the mysteries of the mind.” Overall, Nema was making the connection that Dali and Magritte are using symbols to represent childhood experiences.

I started looking into Magritte because he is one of the few surrealist painters that worked mainly with figures. The two main themes that came out of this essay were the influence of automatism and the idea of “sonder.” Nema argues that automatism is the cause of visual elements that are both idyllic and nerve tingling at the same time. She concludes her statement by saying surrealist artwork enables us to seek connections with people and “unravel the mysteries of the mind” through the use of sonder.

The idea of sonder could be applied to many of Balthus’s works because many people have claimed that they wonder what it is the young girls are thinking about. The eerie settings that are mostly empty except for one or two young girl figures makes all the focus about them. Magritte also tends to have his figures be the biggest focus in his work and the center of every viewer’s attention. This call to make a viewer wonder about what a figure in a painting is thinking creates a compassionate link between the two of them. This could speak volumes about the outrage surrounding Balthus’s paintings of young girls, unaware of their sexualization and victimhood.

Nochlin, Linda. “The Urban Milieu: The City as Attitude and Viewpoint.” *Realism*, Penguin

Books, London, England, 1990.

In this chapter of Realism, Nochlin argues that the nature and characteristics of a city are reflected in the depictions of its citizens in realist artworks. With special focus on laborers, realist artworks highlight the interworkings of a city by depicting those that work in core areas within it. For example: *The Floor Scrapers* in 1865 by Caillebotte depicts the strenuous labor of the urban proletariat which is vital for the life of a city.

Nochlin also mentions how Realism changes to fit new modes of composition and notation. She mentions how realists began fulfilling the implications made by Theophile Thore: “The mission of art... is precisely to create plastic forms adequate to the ideas and mores of each era.” Nochlin is arguing that realism begins taking a political stance and focusing on message, rather than keeping to an absolute truth in painting.

This book was extremely helpful in that it allowed me to understand the philosophy of Realism and how Balthus may have tried to fit into it. I can understand why scholars immediately looked for Balthus’s other influences because Realism definitely does not seem to cover all of the techniques and themes that Balthus is including in his work (especially psychoanalysis). This idea of “plastic form” of everyday life is extremely similar to what Balthus is doing. Placing him directly in the realist camp: Balthus is creating artificial figures to represent the real. Like many realist artists: what they are depicting may not be true to life, but it is the truth of contemporary life. While Balthus's work may not have been seen as political, it was certainly controversial after it came to America due to its overt sexuality. The girls, and their settings are extremely austere and bleak, stripping them to a barren landscape and coarseness that is common in realist art.

Penny, Nicholas. “Surrealism à La Courbet: Balthus.” *London Review of Books*, 7 Nov. 2019,

<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n10/nicholas-penny/surrealism-a-la-courbet>.

In this article Penny describes Balthus's complex artistic relationship with Surrealism. Penny claims that, "Balthus's work helped reintroduce linear perspective and narrative content into avant-garde Parisian painting." Penny compares Balthus's work to that of Magritte and Dali in terms of his use of windows, mirrors, stillness and muted color. Despite all of these connections to Surrealism: Balthus denies all contact with the movement and instead cites his influencers as Courbet, Masaccio, and Piero della Francesca. The influence of the master realist painters can be seen in the sharpened edges and forms, and receding lines of pavement seen in Balthus's painting of *The Street*. However, Balthus is clearly emphasizing all of these elements which gives them an artificial quality that looks like the setting of a stage. Penny also briefly analyzes *The Guitar lesson* and says that it was influenced by nineteenth century magazine illustrations, specifically the kinds created by surrealists in collages.

Penny compares Balthus visually to other surrealist painters and seeks out their similar icons: windows and mirrors. This allowed for a clear-sightedness in the writing and strengthened his argument for a surrealist influence. However, Penny only goes so far, he does not mention eroticism or sexuality that links Balthus with Surrealism, but rather the dreamy and eerie quality of his work. Penny still very much believes that Balthus's main influence is other realist artists and the masters that he copied from the past. I get the sense that Penny thinks Balthus started practicing Surrealism almost by osmosis due to being in France in the twentieth century. This could be very useful in the research because it offers a different perspective on how Balthus may be practicing Realism on purpose, and practicing Surrealism on accident: giving reasoning for Balthus's claim that he is part of the realist movement, while never claiming to be a surrealist.

Rewald, Sabine. *Balthus: Cats and Girls*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2013.

Rewald's book is a comprehensive biography on Balthus and picks out many of his artistic and linguistic influences, such as Courbet and Emily Bronte. Starting with his early childhood with his forty woodcuts of his cat that had just died, and working all the way through his life and various artistic influences, to his death in 2001: Rewald analyzes Balthus's relationships with family members, other artists, and especially his young female muses. He would see them, mostly as they were playing outside, and then invite them to be his sitters if their parents approved. Balthus gave special attention to Therese Blanchard (and so does Sabine Rewald) who was Balthus's muse in his most famous early works and the one he painted most often. Rewald pulls together aspects of his personality through his writings, artworks, and gallery shows. The timeline of Balthus's artworks shows how he originally started with wood cuts, then oil paintings, and then fresco paintings by the end of his life.

Rewald's biography of Balthus was extremely helpful in understanding the timeline, and coinciding artworks, of Balthus. There was an underlying comparison to illustration throughout *Balthus: Girls and Cats*, as Balthus's art career started with it (cat woodcuts) and his *Wuthering Heights* drawings became largely influential to all of his work made after. Rewald takes pains to locate many of Balthus's literary influences, such as Rilke, a poet who was the first one to encourage Balthus to pursue art when he was just twelve years old. Overall, Rewald's chronological and descriptive overview of Balthus's life left me with many more questions as she only cites influences from the realist art movement and the expressionist art movement (in terms of depicting nude young girls). She says almost nothing about Surrealism, probably because Balthus himself verbally said almost nothing about Surrealism.

Rewald, Sabine. "Balthus's Mountain Guide Revisited." *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, vol. 37,

2002, pp. 315–319., <https://doi.org/10.2307/1513098>.

This is an in depth analysis of Balthus's painting *The Mountain* as an addition to Rewald's *Balthus: Cats and Girls* to give further attention to the visual analysis of one singular painting. This work holds many personal allusions for Balthus himself as multiple people depicted within the painting are people he actually knew. However the work also speaks to many of Balthus's artistic influences. *The Mountain* is extremely similar to Poussin's allegorical landscape of the *Four Seasons* in 1660. However, the main influence for this work is Courbet's *Young Women From the Village* made in 1852. This painting could also be an allegory for the writings of Pierre Jean Jouve who wrote a story about a woman who dies during "love-making" but is reborn in art (this is represented by one woman lying asleep on the ground, and the other is standing triumphant). The mountain guide himself also has a lot of facial similarities to Balthus and could be a self-portrait.

There is an iconographical nature to Rewald's analysis of *The Mountain* and she even references how the position of the mountain guide could be referencing back to the pose of Courbet's *Stonebreakers* in 1850. Rewald falls solidly into the Realism camp when interpreting Balthus, but she is also one of the most successful in identifying precisely who Balthus is looking at and what he is reinstating in his own artwork. One weakness of Rewald is she does shy away from much critique on sexuality or danger within Balthus's work. This is odd because even in *The Mountain*, which is a somewhat high spirited painting, a viewer is still unsure if the woman lying on the ground is asleep, or dead. Rewald immediately interprets the woman as being asleep, however if Balthus is truly taking from the writing of Pierre Jean Jouve, then the woman is most likely dead on the mountain.

Schjeldahl, Peter. "In the Head." *The New Yorker*, 30 Sept. 2013,

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/10/07/in-the-head>.

In this article, Schjeldahl compares the work of Balthus to that of Magritte and claims they share an equivocal sexuality that is defined by Surrealism and the avant-garde. Schjeldahl specifically looks at Balthus's *Girl in Green and Red* made in 1944 and claims that it is his closest approach to Surrealism in all of Balthus's career. Schjeldahl also mentions how he believes this portrait is a representation of liberated libido and that the inherent sexuality in his work is what will forever tie him to this time period. Schjedahl then gives a brief biography of Magritte and analyzes his specifically quirky sector of Surrealism through his painting *Treachery of Images* and *The Rape*. Studying these two artists together leads Schjedahl to the theme of "sex in the head" in which both artists are representing eroticism in such a way that feels purely mental or intellectual. Sexual acts not yet transformed from thought to action.

This article was valuable to the research because it highlighted Balthus's subtle relationship to Surrealism: like a love affair that never really came to fruition. Even though Peter Schjedahl states that Bathus's *Girl in Green and Red*, was his "closest approach to surrealism," I am not sure I completely agree with this statement. However I do believe it is the most similar to the work of Rene Magritte which Schjeldahl goes on to compare Balthus to.

One novel idea that comes out of this article is that Schjedahl argues the theme of sexuality in Balthus's art "anchors" it in a time defined by Surrealism. This eroticism that Balthus is employing is an anti-bourgeois statement and could be fighting for a "liberated libido." I agree with the idea that a liberated libido was one of Balthus's main purposes in the

way he portrayed his sitters. However this did not translate well when the works were shown in America, and the confusion may lie in the social values at the time.

Tripney, Natasha. "Antonin Artaud and the Theatre of Cruelty." British Library. Accessed December 1, 2022. www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/antonin-artaud-and-the-theatre-of-cruelty.

This article is mostly a short and tragic biography of Antonin Artaud. Natasha Tripney describes how Artaud died fairly young and was constantly in and out of asylums in France in the twentieth century. Antonin Artaud was a famous artist who created surrealist short films. Tripney describes Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* in great detail and his impact on cinema as a whole. One of Artaud's goals in *Theatre of Cruelty* was to disrupt the relationship between audience and performer. He attempted this by constantly shocking and confronting the audience with a cacophony of experiences, typically experiences that involved multiple senses such as taste, smell and touch as well as the typical visual elements in cinema. Tripney describes how Artaud was also a firm believer in the power of gesture and movement over that of text. The play itself should speak loudly enough without relying on the use of language. He claimed that theater should be, "an act of organized anarchy." This anarchy culminated in shows that were hard to describe using traditional means of cinematography critique.

This article aided in the research of Balthus because he and Artaud were friends before his death (Artaud's) and the idea of shocking the audience is certainly something they had in common. Especially for a painting like, *The Guitar Lesson*, in which Balthus is most clearly trying to shock the viewer into a passionate reaction. The idea of interacting with the audience is another characteristic of both of these artists that cannot be overlooked. Viewers of both Artaud

and Balthus were confronted in a way that was uncomfortable and reacted with backlash for the two artists. Antonin Artaud's name can be found in many of the texts surrounding Balthus's work. Whenever the influence of Surrealism is found in a Balthus painting, someone tends to bring up Artaud.

Van Dyke, J. A. "Modernist Poussin." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2008, pp. 285–292., <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxartj/kcn020>.

J. A. Van Dyke takes great pains to describe T. J. Clark's methods of using modernist aesthetics to interpret the work of Poussin. One might find it difficult to see a way to understand a work such as *Landscape With a Man Killed by a Snake* with only visual analysis and materialism as your tools. Clark claims there is a "luminous concreteness" to Poussin's paintings that distances them from the politics and economics of the time period. Clark also states that Poussin is not trying to be realistic and accurate, but rather using "cleverness" to portray all the tiny details in his paintings.

At the end of the journal article, Van Dyke starts critiquing Clark's methods of analyzing Poussin. Van Dyke believes that Clark was wrong to separate Poussin's life and mental state from the work that he created. Van Dyke cites parts of Clark's argument about Poussin where he briefly enters into psychoanalysis almost on accident (specifically when describing Poussin's snake in *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* as having "revolting formlessness and threatening eroticism"). Overall, Van Dyke argues that to understand Poussin's paintings, one must be aware of the stakes of the work for Poussin. Van Dyke does not believe that modernist aesthetics are strong enough to understand the work of a man concerned with allusions just as much as visual analysis.

This is helpful to understanding the work of Balthus because Poussin is one of Balthus's main artistic influences. It was also helpful because Balthus had absolutely no desire to bring attention to the texture of paint in all of his early, and most famous, works. He had an intense flatness and smoothness that refused to impair the illusion of reality within a painting. It was not until later in his life when he began fresco painting that texture became apparent. However, this could have been caused by the fact that he was reworking paintings many times over and the layering became immense.

Verwoert, Jan in Reviews | 02 JAN 02, et al. "Balthus." *Frieze*,

<https://www.frieze.com/article/balthus>.

This article is a review of Balthus's paintings in his retrospective that was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Jan Verwoert cites all Balthus's connections into surrealist groups including Giacometti, Antonia Artaud, Bataille, and Picasso. Verwoert also mentions how Balthus was never truly within the surrealist art movement, despite his drawings based on *Wuthering Heights* being included in *The Minotaur* in 1935 (a surrealist magazine). Balthus never mixed with Andre Breton, Surrealism's tyrannical leader, and thus could never truly be considered as part of the movement. Verwoert describes Balthus's early works as casting a sense of impending doom, while the figures remain strangely flat; all the while a cat is staring out knowingly. Verwoert analyzes *The Victim* and *The Guitar Lesson* as a Lacan-like suggestion that idealization generates violence and the internal wish to destroy what one cannot have.

Jan Verwoert puts into words why many scholars can't leave Balthus alone in the Realism camp: there is an "indescribable weirdness generated by his (Balthus's) myriad displacements of forbidden sexual fantasies." The "weirdness" that Balthus employs has to

come from somewhere and for him to be painting in the nineteenth century in France, it most definitely came from Surrealism. Verwoert also emphasizes the knowing and almost sinister quality of the cats in Balthus's paintings. Jan Verwoert, like Rewald, believes the cats are in on the joke that the viewer and the sitter are not a part of. No one knows the secret of the sexual fantasies produced in the painting, except maybe the cats and they are keeping it to themselves. Overall, this article pulls together the idea of danger and sexuality coming from the same source. The flat figures are on the verge of violence and stuck in a stifling and plain setting created by the corners of the painting.