

“La curiosité oisive est surtout affamée de spectacles. Elle demande plutôt du nouveau que du bon”: New Hermeneutics of Visuality in Louis Sébastien Mercier’s *Tableau de Paris*

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to all the wonderful teachers who have helped me become the student I am today.

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ABSTRACT

“LA CURIOSITE OISIVE EST SURTOUT AFFAMEE DE SPECTACLES. ELLE DEMANDE PLUTOT DU NOUVEAU QUE DU BON”: NEW HERMENEUTICS OF VISUALITY IN LOUIS SEBASTIEN MERCIER’S TABLEAU DE PARIS

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This thesis aspires to study the way in which Louis Sebastien Mercier used description in *Tableau de Paris* to make commentary on issues of poverty, class division, and moral corruption in the streets of the capital city. By judging the space around him, in particular theatre performances, public spaces, and public spectacle Mercier brought to bear the issues of social inequality, economic hardship, and class conflict that underpinned pre-revolutionary tensions. My research focuses particularly on visibility in theatre as well as visibility in the public space. In this capacity this paper will contextualize Mercier’s description of society and how it interacted with all forms of spectacle. It thus aims to provide an aerial perspective that will situate Mercier in relation to the visual, showcasing his attitude towards both the bourgeoisie and the *tiers-état*.

CHAPTER ONE

1



Figure 1: Réverbères (Library of Congress)

¹ Self-digitized, from the collection of images that accompanied the *Tableau* in publications versions of the work. Etched by Balthasar Anton Bunker, this image was meant to illustrate the chapter, *Réverbères*, describing the advent of street lighting and how it illuminated all sorts of nefarious activities, like prostitution. Mercier despised and condemned painting and painters, so the gravures were published as accompaniment without his prior approval. It can be suggested this image represents Mercier's discursive concept of visibility and shows a Parisian society that concurrently sees and wants to be seen.

Introduction: Mercier, the Tableau de Paris, and Visuality in the French

Enlightenment

Written in installments between 1782 and 1788 Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* is a grandiose work of prose work which topographically and subjectively examines all echelons of Parisian society. As an Enlightened thinker, Mercier aimed to show the prerevolutionary city as it was a spark away from total chaos; consisting of more than two thousand chapters, Mercier's ambitious *painting of Paris*, designed to be a singular painting, was meant to realistically describe all details daily life, providing a route perspective which situates the reader in the shoes of the observer. In creating this work Mercier thought of himself as an enlightened observer, one who trusts his physical senses, and makes moral judgement of the world around him.

The above image lays bare the direct relationship between the physical space and the visual sphere, placing Mercier in the role a semiotician who translates to the reader all that he can see. As the street light, or réverbère, in the center of the above gravure suggests, the visual sphere expanded with the introduction of oil lanterns, ones which shed considerably much brighter light than their predecessor. As a result of illuminating previously unseen activities, the physical environment becomes entangled in the moral and political sphere, where the same lampposts become a popular place to hang aristocrats during the revolution (1789-1799).² Consequently, a close reading of the work uncovers the ways in which Mercier functions as commentator, cataloger of the urban

² Fierro, A., 2001.

space and master storyteller. Mercier was uniquely positioned to do this as he himself was born into the *petite bourgeoisie*, whose father worked as a skilled furbisher. This social station placed Mercier in the middle of society, where he could at once, be critical towards, and engaged with the public at large. Consequently, in order to understand the genesis of the *Tableau* and Mercier's approaches to visuality, it is necessary to ally the visual perception within its political and ethical connections, and situate oneself with the cultural practices of the eighteenth-century. In this way this essay will address Mercier's the moral judgment of society through astute examination of elements of visuality, defined here as both a quality of being visual and the formation of a mental image or view. As part of his focus on the visual and its interplay in society. it is vital to analyze the role of theatre and spectacle, as it was quickly becoming more accessible to the general public and played a large part in the visual interaction of *tiers-état* and the bourgeoisie. Mercier was not the first thinker to experiment with this connection; during the Enlightenment era there was increased interest in and exploration of the human mind and body (Condillac, La Mettrie, Hume), natural history and human diversity (Comte de Buffon, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck), the evolution of human civilization, arts and culture, and political institutions (Rousseau, Montesquieu), and the existence of natural rights (Diderot). In this way the links between sense perceptions were explored along with many other facets of human functioning—speech, judgment, imagination, empathy—as well as their implication for morality and politics. As the empirical interest shifted toward the examination of the machinations of the human brain, a new interest emerged that

questioned experience and emotion informed new and different ways of knowing.³ This led to the emergence of the idea of cultivating *sensibilité*, a notion which directly related the field of sentimental moral philosophy to sense perception, and became literary and philosophical movement.⁴ This interest in the physical senses contributed development of new genres and spheres of interest, one of which concentrated on the visual gaze that was held by the spectator, the excesses and functions of which were debated in the literary word by the likes of Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise*. Concurrently, on the scientific front, Denis Diderot's and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* followed this trend, featuring entries for *oeil*, *perception* and a lengthy treatise on *astrologie*⁵. The interest in bodily and emotional mechanics further engendered scientific and philosophical study as well as innovations in art forms in which the rhetoric of which the visual sphere became a foundation, in particular, the theatre. Throughout the eighteenth-century, the urban theater-going public grew along with number and types of venues for taking in plays and operas (royal [Comédie Française], commercial, local and private).⁶ The general audiences, or *le grand public*, became an increasingly powerful arbiter of taste and commercial success of theatrical productions. As well, common people were represented in art (Jean Siméon Chardin) and on the stage (Beaumarchais, Diderot) without being subjects of mockery, as had been the practice on comedies by

³ Condillac, E. B., Carr, G., & Carr, H. W., 1980.

⁴ As a result, there was an increase of scholarship and popularity in the sphere of intuitive knowledge. Accordingly, for the first time in literary and academic dialogue, the emotional response emerged as a sphere of knowledge that reconciled two seemingly opposite cognitive domains: passion and reason.

⁵ University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, 2017.

⁶ Popkin; 1999, p.6

Molière and others. What is more, discussions of educating this general public through different means, including the theater became more frequent subjects of debate.

As a result, these cultural and philosophical shifts fostered changes in theaters as physical spaces. Theater entrances for the public were made more accessible as the forestage was pushed back by the mid-eighteenth century. Unlike the theatres of England, the larger area in the pit expanded to form the *parterre*, which remained a standing area until 1782⁷. In this section, admission cost was equivalent of a days' salary⁸ for manual workers. Increased accessibility and proximity to the stage made the *parterre* a participatory space, especially for individuals who part of this *tiers-état*: the price of admission was all that was necessary to participate in the theatrical experience and by extension the larger discussion. The placement and participation of the *parterre* also fostered changes on the stage itself, loosening the grip of neoclassical doctrine regarding the three unities and the bienséances while encouraging more elaborate and frequent changes in set design.

These changes in the world of theater had political implications⁹. In his commentary on the *parterre*, Jeffrey S. Ravel describes it as a space for congregation and assembly¹⁰ where, for the first time, the common folk dictated the outcome of the day, stating that the “spectators who stood in the *parterre*...influenced and were influenced by, efforts to

⁷ The Comédie-Française installed seats in the *parterre* 178 and the Comédie-Italienne on 1788, while the Paris Opera kept the *parterre* standing throughout the Revolution

⁸ Lagrave, H., *Le théâtre et le public à Paris de 1715 à 1750*. 1972.

⁹ Modern historians (Mona Ozouf, David Bell, Deana Goodman, and Daniel Gordon) have developed a hypothesis that shows how the creation of this new public sphere led to as development of an emergent “public opinion” one which the Old Regime considered dangerous.

¹⁰ Ravel, J., 1999. 10-11

redefine French political sovereignty in terms of the nation.”¹¹ Theaters became places to see and to be seen and spaces in which members of all three orders of French society could observe one another and track one another’s reactions to the action on stage. Theater architecture reflected and furthered this practice with its horseshoe shape that allowed theater-goers to see each other as well as the main performance. Architects like Claude Nicolas Ledoux explicitly adopted this concept promoting their theatrical designs, claiming “In my playhouse, the spectator sees better while being better seen”.¹² This thesis will showcase opposing views of Mercier and his contemporaries by situating them within the context of the emergence of a broader theater audience and the societal transformation within these spaces. Within this framework it will also address classicist rules and their place in 18th century cultural sphere. In doing so it will position Mercier’s opinions in the Tableau within the particular context of Rousseau’s and Diderot’s works on similar topics.

Rousseau, for example, aligned himself with other antitheatrical polemicists¹³ while Diderot developed the idea of educating the masses by bringing realism to the main stage in the form of his *drame bourgeois*. It is important to note that this period was also marked by a transition in performance style, which evolved away from stilted neoclassical declamation on stage toward more realistic, emotive representation. Voltaire,

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Quoted in Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet’s *La Vision d’un futur: Ledoux et ses theatres* as referenced by Ravel, J., 1993 essay *Seating the Public* that focuses on the discussion of the Besançon theatre within the context of the parterre.

¹³ Rousseau, J., & Scott, J. T. , 2012.

for example, credited his favorite actors, like Henri Louis Cain, for the great successes of his tragedies.¹⁴

Furthermore, as a playwright writing in this dynamic theatrical milieu, Mercier fully understood the influence of visuality and the impact that spectacle has on the viewer. As a result, he viewed performance, or more importantly, dramatic stage presentation, as a unique way to reach and educate the masses on all spheres of human knowledge.¹⁵ As scholars like Joana Stalnaker have pointed out, Mercier advocated enthusiastically for the theatrical plot to be created as singular form of action¹⁶. from a point of ethical engagement, one that was easily followed by the spectator and accurately spoke to their experiences.¹⁷ As a result, Mercier's interest in the impact and uses of visual spectacle is foundational for his approach to the *Tableau de Paris*. An innovation in genre, the "tableau" brought together several characteristics that we have discussed. The educational power of theatrical performance is channeled into a text-based, narrative form through which general audiences can engage in realistic portrayals of—and socio-political questions relating to—life in Paris. The direct visual perception of a spectator

¹⁴ Carlson, M.A. 1998. 87-113.

¹⁵ Brown, D, 2005.

¹⁶ Carlson, M. A. 2000, 158-159.

¹⁷ In this philosophical frame Mercier supported Diderot's new conception of the drame and critiqued the classical French tragédie as both non-natural and fruitless. Describing his advocating for theatre's modernization, Joanna Stalnaker¹⁷ notes that Mercier's critique of the three unities also had a broader aesthetic implication for his practice of description and role of descripteur. She writes that his global description unfolded over time, offered varying points of view and reconfigured the space along with the reader. I suggest that, while Stalnaker may be speaking of Mercier's work in the genre of descripteur, it is valuable to also see how visual elements contribute to the reading of the *Tableau* as a theatrical work, where Mercier's commentary forms the role of *chorus*. It is valuable to establish this point of view because so much of Mercier's gaze as the author lies around the notion of the observer, encouraging them to partake in his textual experiment with their imagination.

watching theater is recreated in the reader's imagination. With each "tableau," Mercier thus intended to engage the reader's ethical imagination with the goal of engaging the public in critical questions. Much like spectators in the theater, the audience for the *Tableau* would reserve the right to make their own judgements on the imaginary painting and visual relationships that he created. Mercier developed these by exploring these visual relationships with inclusion of the emergent working class, where the *tiers-état* became a participant in the action of the story.

In this way Mercier furthered his writing experiment by inventing the role of the *descripteur* as commentator. Stalnaker and Jean Claude Bonnet have specifically catalogued this genre and Mercier's creation of a "poetics of description" where he contributed to the goal "to effect change through the precise and evocative description of social and political abuses."¹⁸

With respect to description, this dissertation examines Mercier's commentary upon and approaches to fostering the interior image¹⁹ or the visual imagination, with particular attention to his ideas concerning specific mechanics of visuality, presentation, and imagination, and how they were deployed and molded public opinion. I will first analyze Mercier's description of society in the streets of Paris and how they interacted with spectacle. This will provide an aerial perspective that will situate Mercier in relation to the visual, showcasing his attitude towards the bourgeoisie and the *tiers-état*. In the following sections I will analyze the vignettes that are located in or concern the theatre,

¹⁸ Stalnaker, J. 2010, 152-153.

¹⁹ *La peinture intérieure* is mentioned heavily in Mercier's *Nouveau Paris*, see discussion Ibid., 154-155

and I will focus on Mercier's own theatrical criticisms (*Du theatre*, 1773) and plays and how they place him in the context in the playwright. I will reference commentary from contemporary historians like Jeffrey Ravel (*The Contested Parterre*) in order to place Mercier's representation of theatre and the bourgeoisie within the context of class division. By doing these multiple inquiries I aim to compare Mercier to his contemporaries and Rousseau and their exploration and analysis of viewership, the audience, and the act of observation in the theatre. I will aim to thus place Mercier's views on spectacle and its significance in the late 18th century, as well as determine Mercier's role as a spectator.

Section Two: Contextualizing Mercier's Gaze: The Characterization and

Description of Paris

Truly a picture of private manners in Paris, but presented on the dark side and a little darkened moreover. But there is so much truth in its ground work that it will be well worth your reading. You will then know Paris, (and probably the other large cities of Europe) as well as if you had been here years.”- Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1802²⁰

As Thomas Jefferson suggests above, Paris was given character-like definition within this work, with the *Tableau* positioning the reader as an observant judge and viewer of the action being described and Mercier acting as the ultimate moral commentator, political philosopher, and critic. Written on the eve of the revolution, Mercier penned the work as a successor to *Du théâtre* (1773) and to *L'An 2440* (1770), both of which were meant to

²⁰ Jefferson, T. 1802 Source: The Jefferson Papers

commentate on social and philosophical dilemmas. As a result of having a gifted memory Mercier's urban journal is able to frequently criticizing the inequalities in Parisian society through the emerging lens of the citizen that views its every detail; a role that he developed for himself and others like the heroic Madame Le Gros. Within this context of philosopher-citizen he aimed to reveal all the underlying layers beneath the haziness, luxury, and appeal of Paris, which he characterized as an abyss into which the human species merges, an abyss that he describes that one is not free to leave, except under the permission of Argus Panoptes, a Greek multi-eyed giant.²¹ His goal was then to produce an authentic painting that shows the city for what it was, an image that was sometimes invisible to its own occupants; "Many of its inhabitants are like outsiders in their own city...The things we see every day are not those we understand the best."²² In this way his vignettes stand apart from other works of his time as they meticulously describe the colors, characters, and urban sounds to their minutiae, with him repeating to the reader that in the Parisian streets "all the senses are constantly stimulated...how can one's mind remain inactive?"²³ Mercier's objective became to recreate a single authentic image within the reader's imagination, one which was a true recreation of his times and could be used for future study.

Consequently, Mercier's formation as an *homme de lettres* and *philosophe* resided in creating a literary work that was specifically tied to his effort to meticulously depict the Parisian citizens; this was done by examining all level of details in their private life. His intention thus was; to visually, through the use of specific language, lay bare the

²¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, "Grandeur démesurée de la Capitale". Tome I, Volume I, 8-9

²² Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, "Préface". Jeremy Popkin translation 23-28

²³ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, "Coup d'œil général". Jeremy Popkin translation 29-32

inequalities and striking contradictions in urban markets and trades found in Les Halles, Marchés, Bastille, and Le Faubourg Saint-Marcel, which he saw as representations of eight distinct social classes. Mercier's focus primarily centers on the depicting what he dubs the act of *subsisting*. This involves avoiding hunger, living in congested buildings, avoiding rent collectors, tolerating arcane political laws, taking odd jobs, and following ridiculous manners and fashion trends. All these activities take place the city of mud, where the urban space is full of chaotic and unpredictable contradictions. For example, on the crowded streets of the city all classes, regardless of station, must attempt make their way to their destination while avoid the stampede of sheep, the hoofs of horses, and the sewage pots falling from above. Despite this, Mercier asserts us that the grands villes are more accommodating to philosophers like him because the chaos helps one get lost in the vagrant crowd and be able to choose his own world.²⁴

Furthermore, in order to develop his philosopher persona Mercier wanted to steer away from the trend of following the rigidity of classical antiquity in his writing and instead chose to veer towards the sphere of metaphysical thought, wanting to focus alternately on the intricacies of evidence found in the urban landscape, within personal experiences, and transaction. Following this thought it can be interpreted that his ultimate intention was to produce literary and theatrical works that lead the improvement of life for Parisians. This meant creating a schema that educated the reader with the vignettes flowing in and out of each other, creating similarity in patterns which ultimately force an inductive reasoning. In his own reflection, regarding the goal of this project he wrote;

²⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, "Patrie du vrai Philosophe". Tome I, Volume I, 14-16

Mon contemporain, mon compatriote, voilà l' individu que je dois spécialement connaître, parce que je dois communiquer avec lui, et que toutes les nuances de son caractère me deviennent par-là même infiniment précieuses....²⁵

This statement forms the basis of his argument; if one is to understand his purpose then one can better recognize the intricacies of his writing process in the *Tableau* and dissect intentional and intuitive principles within the visual sphere. Mercier's focus on the importance of education and enlightenment of the general public was closely tied to the viewpoints of his contemporaries, largely parroting ideas from Rousseau, Diderot and Baron d'Holbach. However, in forming his own philosophy he came to believe that a person's surroundings had a specific influence on their morality and social well-being. In the *Tableau* everything carries political weight; one can notice the importance given to specific physical objects like street signs, graves, sanitation, pavement, carriages, flower pots, and monuments. Mercier described these objects in detail as he saw that they not only greatly influenced the Parisian's citizen's quotidian experience but also had the ability to alter their enculturation of a moral ideal and educate them in all matters of life's truths. The *Tableau* can then be regarded as a handbook where the action of seeing and imagining is closely tied feeling and experiencing certain sensations which in turn act as the makers of good citizens. Mercier sets the example and advocates for using one's intuitive nature which he prescribes as a compass that can help one recognize right and wrong within the spectacle of city life. Within this scaffolding in many ways Mercier's ideas mirror

²⁵ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, "Préface". Tome I, vij-xvj

Rousseau's²⁶; in particular, with Mercier favoring the physical and practical knowledge that a person develops naturally through active participation with the world around them. By reaching this conclusion Mercier developed the goal to topographically and aesthetically examine all echelons of Parisian society, desiring that the spectator see his representation of Paris as a singular painting composed of living images.

In wanting to contribute to the realism of these living images, Mercier chose to write his novels, reflections, plays, historical dramas, and pamphlets in prose so that his ideas were clearly understood by all citizens. He did so by believing his works to be guiding lights that would offer the reader, especially one of the future, an opportunity for visual and moral examination. In this context, Mercier sought to emphasize the didactic form where the spectator followed a thesis, like the secular and antiroyalist play *Jean Hennuyer évêque de Lisieux* (1772) and the political theatrical production *La Destruction de la Ligue, ou la Reduction de Paris* (1782).

I suggest then that the vignettes including visuality should be regarded from a point of a heteroglossia, where the *Tableau* where viewership and visuality, within the entwined stories of its featured *personnages*, represent both observation and the act of being observed. As a result, a close reading of visuality, the gaze, and the representation of spectacle, warrants a renewed understanding in the ways in which Mercier's rhetoric exposes visuality as a tool of pedagogy; a method of constructing personhood and citizenship, and an exposition of bias and vanity. In consequence, the work places the reader in a world that paradoxically holds both enlightenment and artificiality. By and of

²⁶ Rousseau J.-J., (1839). *Émile ou l'éducation*

itself, this type of analysis elicits a moral reading of power structure, where using the reader's imagination, Mercier leads them on a peregrination where "everything should interest the attentive observer"²⁷. As such, each detailed and unreserved observation completes a piece of the larger moral puzzle, not through a direct ethical and political criticism, but through a technique of opposing gazes, where Mercier purposely places the reader in a unique position of observer and arbiter.

In this way Mercier's urban compendium transcends sociological barriers—it was able to combine the performative nature of the theatre with the discursive aspects of political culture. Just as the increasing popularity of the parterre let spectators express themselves in a public space, Mercier placed his public at the center of judgment of art and spectacle and entrusting it, in various degrees, to its own moralistic transformation as a product of their gaze. In the opening preface of the *Tableau*, it is clear that Mercier hoped that his grandiose work would eventually be read outside of bourgeoisie, as he hoped it would be found hundreds of years in the future.

As well, a new literate culture was slowly emerging in the late 18th century, which certain scholars contend allowed the diffusion of Enlightenment ideals to the population outside of the immediate elite, and as well, allowed mobilization, and increased capacity to send a message.²⁸ The idea of readership is also suggested with Mercier's publishing of his utopian work, *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1770) which touches on themes of perfecting Parisian society in the future.

²⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, "Coup d'œil général". J. Popkin translation. 29-32

²⁸ Markoff, 1986, 326

In both the *Tableau* and *L'an 2440* the common theme is visuality as the great equalizer, where everything can be communicated through the sense of sight. For the *Tableau*, in the context of theatre, performance and action could inspire singular ethical emotions and reactions. These emotions are witnessed by all the observers together. In one such instance Mercier asserts that performances and viewership create “widespread amusement ...builds memory, develops posture, and teaches one to speak clearly²⁹” where curiosity and taste are seen as a top-down diffusion, “being spread from the highest classes to the lowest” and helping “perfect education and reform it.”³⁰ However, in the *Tableau* Mercier does not limit his commentary on visuality to the theatrical stage, the bourgeois drawing room, or the grand public in the loges, it is, in fact, an act or privilege which each

²⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, “Théâtre Bourgeois”. Vol I Tome Premier 18

³⁰ Ibid. This statement must be viewed within the light of scholarship on the formation of a public opinion during the eighteenth century, which is closely associated to critical interpretations of Jurgen Habermas’ 1962 argument, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere – An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. This critical theory on democratic formation posits that during the latter half of the eighteenth century the European continent experienced a fundamental shift of power from the monarchical state to that of the formation of an opinionated public sphere, one which was cultivated in the salons and coffee shops. With regards to theatrical public the essay suggests that its formation must be always in a relation with, or merge around, a greater ruling power. In fact, even within the cultivated bourgeoisie in coffee shops and salons, Habermas states that “...typical of the salon of the eighteenth century, it was still impossible, in the prevailing climate of *honneté*, for reason to shed its dependence on the authority of the aristocratic noble hosts and to acquire that autonomy that turns conversation into criticism and *bons mots* into arguments.” Within this conversation scholars have divergent opinions concerning the concept of “the people” and their place with regard to theatre; Marie-Hélène Huet argues that the audience could be “disciplined and repressed by the means of the spectacle”, while historian Roger Chartier calls for a contrast between a “public” and a “people.” This dissertation’s interpretation of this topic aligns itself with that of Pierre Frantz³⁰ and Marvin A. Carlson³⁰, who presume that unlike the Habermasian elite distinctions of the literary public and the masses or the people, Mercier’s relationship with the people, and by extension theatregoers, broke away from their traditional vulgar association. With this in mind, I contend that the sphere portrayed in the *Tableau* does not necessarily adhere the rigid modalities of Habermasian concept of hegemonic dominance and inclusion: we notice instead an *état* more closely resembling O. Negt and A. Kluge’s proletarian public sphere.³⁰

citizen interacts with and has access to. To him the need for spectacle and visual entertainment pervades both the lower and upper echelons of Paris and drives ostensible corruption and degradation of all sorts, both economical and spiritual.

Section Three: Examining visibility: A Display of Discursive Representation of the Visual and Intersectionality between Visual Categories

By tying visibility to the act of seeing and wanting to be seen, Mercier explicitly criticized the auspicious and corrupt nature of the upper-class and the court. Mercier tried to separate himself from other *philosophes* of the late 18th century by trying to position himself as an unbiased and enlightened observer. However, in this effort, his personal biases often came through; his writing and his commentary on visibility and performative action oscillated between favorable and admonitory. As a result, Mercier did not necessarily shed his petit-bourgeoisie roots as his gaze both supported and deconstructed the common man in the social scene. In constructing these types of descriptive opposites Mercier's rhetoric of the visual occupies its own place in pre-revolutionary thought. It is worthwhile to draw attention to the distinctiveness of Mercier's aesthetic style and approach in comparison with those of certain contemporaries. Mercier's *Tableau* was quite different than the work of popular novelists of the era, like Choderlos de Laclos and Abbe Prévost, whose *livres amoureux* favored a popular style that strove to achieve a medium between melodramatic representation and moralistic realism. Despite this, the *Tableau* often references the work of Mercier's contemporaries, like his personal friend, Claude Prosper Jolyot de Cr billon, to whom Mercier offers his positive admiration and praise. Mercier's work is also an important backdrop against that of another literary

acquaintance, the Restif de la Bretonne³¹, whose works are discussed in the section entitled *Le Paysan Perversi*. Also, in contrast to his contemporaries, the development of Mercier's style treats the visual imagination as a product of description, striving for art to not only imitate nature but to reproduce it in an artificial and imaginary microcosm. Authentically speaking, his attempt to recreate one single general painting of the vibrant figures of Paris separates his work from the 18th century critical conception of Aristotelian mimesis³²³³ as well the movement that sought to sacrifice truthful representation in favor of beauty.³⁴ However, despite his seemingly divergent conversations towards visuality, Mercier is acutely aware of the role of the viewer as a necessary participant in any instance of production and evolution, one which he also uses for his own advantage. To this end, his critique for the ethics of policy of the Old Regime was tied to his understanding of physical space, availability of performances, and place of the working class. His view thus exhibited a layered approach that seems to both welcome and revile the working classes.

On one end of the spectrum, in most of the *Tableau* Mercier seems to be advocating for the agency of the individual that is typically not represented in art of print, focusing on the development of the citizen of the tiers-état. However, when paried with contiguous descriptions of the quotidian schedules of the upper classes his commentary

³¹ Though employing different styles, Restif is often seen as Mercier's salacious counterpart, see R. Laffront, *Paris le jour, Paris la nuit*, 1990

³² Henry Booke (*Universal Beauty*, 1735) , Henry Felton (*Dissertation on the Classics*, 1713)

³³ M. Kelly, 1999, "In 17th and early 18th century conceptions of aesthetics, mimesis is bound to the imitation of (empirical and idealized) nature. Aesthetic theory emphasized the relationship of mimesis to artistic expression and began to embrace interior, emotive, and subjective images and representations."

³⁴ Lawrence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

often presented a dualistic approach. While there exists strong condemnation in vanity, greed, and egotism, the condemnation of elite habits is sometimes cursory. This will be examined further below.

Along this thread thesis will also aim to uncover Mercier's relationship of visuality and the public space and how it relates to class commentary. In one example, the vignette "*Physionomie de la Grande Ville*" Mercier recreates the moral and physical attributes of his beloved city; its black and white plastered edifices, smoky skyline, the weather, and the purgative Seine, outlining that even where there is beauty, there are also restrictions; because open land largely belongs to the Princes, hunting is the most heinous offense a citizen can commit; one more strictly enforced than thievery or assassination³⁵. Presumably archaic, this regulation persists to this day in parts of the world like Kenya's historically colonial neighborhoods where conservation regulations persist more so to protect wildlife from lower classes so that the elite can enjoy the wildlife for themselves.³⁶

In another example, Mercier states that once the spectator walks on the Parisian pavement he can clearly see that there is not accommodation for pedestrians as the people are not considered in the lawmaking, stating that they resemble "...un corps séparé des autres ordres de l'État; les riches et les grands qui ont èquipage, ont le droit barbare de l'escarer ou de le mutiler dans les rues."³⁷

In this way this thesis will realte how Paris' physiognomy and access to its streets serve as an essential part of the viewer experience. In Mercier's eye the passages,

³⁵ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome I "Physionomie de la Ville" 10-11

³⁶ Mbaria, J., 2017

³⁷ Mercier, L.-S., 1783 *T.*, Tome I "Le Bourgeois" 32

faubourgs, alleyways, and troittoirs are the main access point to the public sphere, and also serve as the entrance point for the reader. For this reason, the physical composition of Paris is important in each interaction and transaction, functioning as a matter of cause and effect; because the spectacle forms the citizen, the citizen must have access to the spectacle. Physical restriction and censorship, as an extension of this idea, are therefore overtly criticised; in *Fusiliers aux Spectacles* Mercier states:

“Ce pauvre public paye néanmoins pour prendre ce qu’on lui donne
et non ce qu’il désire. Les fusils l’environnent, et lui est tout aussi défendu
de rire un peu trop haut à la comédie, que de sangloter un peu trop à la
tragédie.”³⁸

One can see how this passage condemns the Ancien Régime; the limit on the expression of emotions and the movement of one’s body is characterized as barbaric and abusive of authoritative power. This is an example where Mercier again takes the side of the everyman, advocating for open access to spectacle, participatory rights, and physical freedom.

In analyzing these discursive views, this thesis proposes Mercier’s commentary on visibility and wanting to be seen to fall into three intersectional categories that I will analyze in turn: 1) the *spectacular* and *excessive*, which Mercier asserts forms the superficial and corrupt exercises, ones that are sought out to fill a void previously occupied by the sacred, and ones that are sought out to be better recognized in society. In the vignettes *December 1st, 1783*, *Amour du merveilleux* and *Égoïsme des corps* the reader witnesses man grappling

³⁸ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T. Tome II* “Fusiliers au Spectacles” 184-187

with understanding of a larger power, while in vignettes like *Feux d'Artifice* and *Carnaval* one sees Mercier's criticism of a superficial need that drives man's behavior to be entertained 2) the second and analogous category is that of the *artificial* which applies mostly to the bourgeois classes in one in which Mercier critiques as a vain and self-serving need to be seen by others. This can be seen in the vignettes *Colisée*, *Diamans*, and *Longchamp* 3) the last category is that of the ethical , which I suggest includes a didactic message including the théâtre bourgeois, private performances, and to some extent the country playhouses. In this context Mercier suggests performances drive moral reflection and ethical pulchritude. This is evidenced in his plays, his treatise *Du Theatre* and in the vignettes like *Parterres Assis*, *D'un second theatre Francaise*, and *Spectacles Gratis* In the sections that follow, I will first investigate the ways that Mercier attended to the first two categories and their link to intersectional social forces in the public sphere. I will then examine his commentary on the ethical forms and draw comparisons to other enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau and Diderot and place these figures within the context of the theatre where issues of morality were often discussed and represented on and off stage.

CHAPTER TWO

While scholars have often studied Mercier's innovative use of description³⁹, they have neglected to expand on the modalities of his rhetoric when it applies to his conception of visibility as it relates to instances of spectacular temptations, sensational attractions, and growing popularity of the marvelous. I will define concepts of the spectacular by physical characteristics, tied to spectacle of any kind. The sensational will be defined in its capacity to attract a crowd and garner public attention and concepts of the marvelous will be analyzed as a cause of wonder, extraordinary attention and feelings of astonishment. In following this tri-fold approach, this chapter aims to study the way in which Mercier used his observations to create descriptions of poverty, inequality and moral corruption by judging the space around him. This analysis is important to the concept of visibility because it illuminates Mercier's own cognitive heuristics that are related to viewership. As such, these concepts will benefit from being explored as they relate to the human body will service as introduction into the importance of viewership, or seeing, as it relates to the *political* body. In this way, the spectacular, the sensational, and the marvelous will be tied back to the development of pre-revolutionary thought.

³⁹ Stalnaker, J., 2010 151-187

Section One: Visual Marvel and Spectacle and their Relation to morality within the
Public Space: Complexities within Mercier's View of the Spectacular and the
Excessive

While Mercier underlined the plurality of arts and sciences and attempted to align himself with the universalism of knowledge, he nonetheless exhibited hesitations and biases that informed his understanding of the visual experience. For the most part, his work separated theory and practice; his concept of the visual was inextricably tied to man's actions in which he created different responses between the sphere of the scripted theatre to that found in the streets. The common denominator between visuality in the theatre and in public spaces outside was the place of the working class; they played a vital role to the plot in Mercier's description. By including the public as an agent in the crafting of an ethics of policy where the manifestation of visuality in spectacular, marvelous, and sensational forms he mirrored pre-revolutionary thought as he advocated for the agency of the individual that is not typically present in art and literature.⁴⁰

For the most part the *Tableau* advocates for the agency of the public and the idea of the formation of the new citizen. However certain vignettes bring to bear Mercier's personal biases and understandings are exposed with regard to the visual sphere. In dissecting descriptions of the public sphere, it becomes evident that Mercier also subtly takes the point of the privileged observer and animalizes and debases the "hordes" of the people flow in and out of Parisian streets. This is particularly visible within the opposing

⁴⁰ Mercier exhibited a layered approach in which he paired the description of the citizen with the vivid descriptions of the schedules of the upper classes, associated with rituals of vanity and showmanship.

viewpoints presented by Mercier's rhetoric toward the spectator at the theatre in opposition to spectatorship outside of the theatre. It is also where Mercier's tendency to self-contradict becomes more apparent.

For example, it is evident that Mercier largely extolls the virtues of the parterre and even access of the public to the theatre space. However, Mercier never fully departs too far from academic louisquatorizian associations; for example, in *Pays Latin* he states that when the parterre was situated in the Paris' Latin Quarter, where it was surrounded by scholars and educators, and, as a result, the actors benefitted from the education of the audience members; "Ce parterre savait former des Acteurs". In the present Mercier laments that, having moved to other parts of the city, the actors of the Comédie "se pervetissent devant un parterre grossier...les courtauts de boutique de la rue Saint-Honoré...les petits commis de la douane & des fermes⁴¹". In this vignette Mercier also expresses the idea that the perfection of art benefits from the most invisible and rarely noticed places. With his rhetoric it appears that he is at once, criticizing the mismanagement of congested urban spaces and as well, establishing his place as part of the shifting urban space.

In addition, it is also apparent that within his vignettes on theatrical entertainment Mercier frequently advises the reader to avoid ostentatious behavior; he finds this behavior as part of the temptation and *sensationalization of* street spectacles. Instead Mercier suggests for the public telling them to instead go to the theatres for their daily entertainment.⁴² Visibly, it is evident that , on the vignettes that take place outside the

⁴¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome I "Pays Latin". Vol. I, 147

⁴² Mercier, L. -S., 1782, *T.*, Tome III "Théâtre Bourgeois" 18-19

theatre space, like street performances, impromptu plays, and unlicensed theatrical exhibit (e.g. *Treteaux des Boulevards*,) Mercier treats the spectacle as a scene of indecency and licentiousness which functions to attract *hordes* of people. As a result, he calls for an examination of these questionable street stages which he sees as a public affront on morality and decency; insisting that idle curiosity is damaging to man's educational progression; "c'est là qu'on peut voir combien la curiosité oisive est surtout affamé de spectacles. Elle demande plutôt du nouveau que du bon."⁴³

In his commentary to the reader, Mercier affirms that "everyone seems to despise" these theatres, but it is not clear whether he is talking from his own point of view or chastising the people of the streets. Seemingly, Mercier is able to exist in two planes at the same time; at once part of the bourgeoisie and as well, rejecting its structure. One explanation would be Mercier's fascination with Rousseau and the mimicry of his thoughts; in the Mercier's criticism against theatrical performances, with particular focus on street spaces that are open to all and uncensored- his commentary in *Spectacles des Boulevards* principally identifies them as obscene due to their lack of proper parameters and moral guidance calling them "ridicules pretention", "libertinage" and "de la sotisse". Like Rousseau which he believed took advantage of the naïve street public whom he found irresponsible in their consumption of entertainment and spectacle, "Le peuple, qui a besoin amusement, s'y précipite en foule"⁴⁴. Within this framework his voice paradoxically dehumanizes the people that he so eloquently uplifts in his theatrical treatises and vignettes;

⁴³ Mercier, L. -S., 1907. *T.*, "Treteaux des Boulevards". 88

⁴⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1782, *T.*, Tome III "Spectacles des Boulevards" 31-33

in this way one can assume that Mercier does not necessarily call for the abolishment of existing power structures and monarchical institutions, but instead, advises to reform them so that can control the source of “idle entertainment”.

In this way Mercier’s commentary presenting two separate discourses, articulating a support of the common folk and, as well, valorizing the view of the bourgeois classes. Mercier believes that viewership should be guided by a compass so he uses his *Tableau* to show an example of the unruly and unprincipled *foule*. The *foule* thus presents the topic of the physical body and how it relates to viewership as whole, in the sense of greed, perception, and appearance.

Section Two: The Presentation of the Visual as a Vehicle of Self-interest, Vanity, and Greed

On a dans la Capitale, des passions que l’on n’a point ailleurs. La vue de jouissance invite à jouir aussi. Tous les Acteurs qui jouent leur rôle sur ce grand & mobile théâtre vous forcent à devenir acteur vous-même. ⁴⁵

Within the *Tableau* it is evident how the bourgeoisie are the focus of Mercier’s most acrimonious descriptions; they are indubitably part of complexity of Parisian social theatre; exhibiting the city’s obsession with the looks, indulgence, and finery. Like the quote above indicates, pleasure is what attracts, entices, and recruits the would-be Parisian to participate in this social “theatre”. In the thirty or more vignettes addressing the bourgeoisie Mercier makes clear that he believes that all evil is rooted in the consumption and seeking of pleasure and the false value given to luxury and appearances, dedicating

⁴⁵ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome I “Préface” vij-xvj

various chapters denouncing the way money is spent for bolstering status and appearance. To elucidate this point Mercier builds upon a theme of deception where he positions the upper class as one that is constructed in mutual duplicity; in a vignette describing bourgeois women's' toilette for society, he begins with this remark to reader, "Undeceive yourself. Her hair is false. The head on which it grew is moldering, like as not, in a grave....⁴⁶" and in another vignette Mercier lets the reader know that at upper class evenings "women of very high rank sometimes cheat at the card-table with the calmest effrontery⁴⁷". He reveals these and other intimate details to build upon the theme of duplicity, one where the *specious* images take the forefront. He wants to show the reader that behind these beaux dessins there is an "unnatural" body that reveals itself. To that end I contend that Mercier believed that true philosophical illumination, in the context of enlightenment or performance, can only occur once the subject passes out of what Mercier terms as an "egoism des corps"⁴⁸, which he defines as a hauteur that positions itself in the center of the soul and prevents one from truly seeing or hearing anything that is outside of themselves. In this way Mercier believed that once a person's life is no longer guided by egoism and self-interest is no longer a driving force, then their soul can access a greater sphere of knowledge. It is important to his concept of visuality because it is one of the many filters that act upon the viewing process pathway; it is a way to navigate expectancy with reality with or without the act of sincere contemplation. For example, Mercier cites that in one instance of this phenomenon the general of the Capuchins arrived in Paris on the side of Pont-Royal and

⁴⁶ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, "False Hair". Jeremy Popkin Translation 102-103

⁴⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, "Commentary". Jeremy Popkin Translation 69-71

⁴⁸ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome 3 "Égoïsme des corps" 51

saw the beautifully illuminated Quai Voltaire and Quai du Louvre and firmly believed that it was lit up to herald his arrival. In this illustration the character's hubris and belief in his *point d'honneur* creates a skewed interpretation of the visual phenomena so that Mercier creates a thread of dubiousness that relates the viewer to the spectacular or marvelous. To add to this group of "*egoïstes*" Mercier includes university rectors, academics, painters, poets, and orators. As such, many of his observations of visual experiences outside of theatre are particularly condemnatory of viewership, and fit into the category of spectacular and excessive. In this group he assembles visions, miracles, and wonders while defining "marvels" by their rare and unusual class as visual phenomena, either artificial or natural. In this sense he sees participation in spectacular exercise as a corrupt practice. To further his point, various vignettes categorize these attempts as a way to fill a void or as a method to grapple with understanding a higher power than oneself. This theme is particularly evident in *Le Premier décembre, 1783*, a chapter which describes a day two physicists rose, for the first time, in a hot air balloon above the Tuileries Garden. This spectacular event attracted wondrous emotion the first time it was put on, which Mercier catalogued as such;

To an observer, the most moving part of it was this common emotion of pity and fear, by which admiration and joy became half pain; men there reproaching themselves for their own vivid pleasure in witnessing so fine, yet so dangerous.⁴⁹

However, during the third time the physicists made their ascent Mercier regretted that "*one short year, and the enthusiasm was over. A third ascent drew hardly a single watcher*" because, in short, he explains to the reader, "*A Parisian will not respond to the*

⁴⁹ Mercier, L.-S., 1789. "Le premier décembre," Popkin translation. 196

same stimulus twice.⁵⁰ Important of note here is the visual rhetoric that is disconsolate and critical of the visual experience of the common man not just with regard to the progress of sciences and arts, but to responses to stimuli as a whole. For Mercier, this is tied into the concept of contemplation and use of the senses where man is motivated by a “love of the marvelous” that the Parisian people “love ... to gape at” and thus will seek out in order to fill a “sickness of the soul”⁵¹. He lays blame on the people for their response as he suggests that they, the general public, should have control over their own bodies and mind. To this degree, in the category of the *spectacular* Mercier suggests that the viewer does not pass a liminal point and does not stop to pause and meditate, resulting in a process I would label as reduction where the visual functions on a surface-level understanding. For the characters in the *Tableau* this stems from a superficial desire for marvels that the viewer seeks out. Mercier categorizes this behavior as unauthentic and flat, condemning the seeking of enlightenment and ethical clarification through spectacle outside theatre. In one example of this phenomenon, Mercier describes that the chasers of spectacle attempt to come to closer to the “center” stating,

Pour pouvoir enfilet cette tangente, les spectateurs de ces idées creuses vivent dans la plus rigoureuse continence...afin de laisser à l'âme une liberté plus entière et une communication plus facile avec le centre de vérité.⁵²

In the examination of the visual in the public space it is noticeable how Mercier's criticism also directly addresses figures of authority in the Old Regime. In one example,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mercier, L.-S., 1789. “Amour du merveilleux” Popkin translation. 73

⁵² Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, Tome II “Amour du merveilleux”. 175-178

public spectacle is related to both the business of the church and the business of the law. In fact, using broad patterns of rhetoric, Mercier subtly hints that spectacles given freely to the public generally cause chaos, catastrophe, and moral decrepitude. Furthermore, Mercier proposes that the Parisian ordinary citizen cannot distinguish between a morally good performance and one that is cheap amusement: instead attracted to anything that is spectacular, ignoring true technological wonders and science ⁵³. In a vignette describing public celebrations and feasts, Mercier notes that fireworks, which charm the outside public with their radiance are given freely and “la populace Parisienne ne sait point établie l’ordre dans ses mouvements; une fois sortie des bornes, elle devient pétulante, incommode, & tumultueuse.”⁵⁴ Consequently, in these instances he employs more animalistic descriptions, like “foule emporté et rivale”. For him, the fireworks at *la place de la Grève* or *la place de Louis XV* pose a striking contrast between the bourgeoisie and the working class. As well, it is noticeable how Mercier’s rhetoric in this vignette, and that in *Feux d’artifice*, shows a large flexibility: he keeps his distance from the people by creating a vivid image of the “foule”. The enlightened working class⁵⁵ man previously seen at the theatre becomes, all of a sudden, an “insolent distributeur” part of the “hordes” and “terribles conquérants” and a “froide orgie” desirous for food and drink.

I contend that this more sordid rhetoric of visuality and imagery is deliberative.

The passages incite emotions in the reader: the hordes are paired with the bourgeoisie

⁵³ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, “December 1st, 1783”. Popkin translation 196-197

⁵⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Feux d’artifice”. 50-55

⁵⁵ Thorup, M. 2018 writes “Hereby, a power balance very unlike the one advocated by Gouges and Brienne is suggested. In Mercier the citizens are not merely inferior subjects; rather, they are guided by ‘reason’ and patriotic ‘love for the state’”. 114-115

class which becomes the “voyeur” ; Mercier asks “est-ce que ainsi que les anciens faisaient participer les citoyens pauvres a l’agresse publique ?”. The rhetoric employed contains similar imagery to that of the theatre space; however, the people of the parterre are now the performers on the metaphorical stage; a scene of tumult and chaos erupts and Mercier transitions to the gaze of the observer in the loge. His rhetoric is deceptively bendable; animalizing and vitiating citizens while distancing himself from them “Des furieux, des enragés, le visage sanglant et couvert de boue, fondent avec emportement⁵⁶” stating that “c’est une masse qui tombe et se relève” and suggesting to the reader that he must obliged to flee the tumultuous crowd and take refuge in his homes. His loss of confidence in the agency of the public is clear once the public is removed from the theatre, claiming that, without strict laws and parameters, the public becomes unguided, “The question of national character comes in; our people have been kept on a leash so long, they run wild without it.”⁵⁷ While the tone of his writing may seem surprising I suggest that this critique should be examined as an extended commentary of the *artificial* within the Parisian society. While access to this category escapes the common man, he is, undoubtedly, and at all times part of economy and politics.

Section Three: A Critique of the Elite of the Ancien Régime through the category of the *Artificial*

In analyzing patterns within Mercier’s approach to the visual it becomes evident that visuality and the importance of visual spectacle is intertwined to economic, social, and

⁵⁶ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Feux d’artifice”. 50-55

⁵⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1789. *T.*, “Portes des spectacles”. Popkin translation.

political spheres. This is particularly evident in Mercier's survey of the most upper levels of the "eight distinct classes" which reside above professionals⁵⁸, financiers, merchants, artists, artisans, laborers, servants and the poor who all live in a city where "*survival is the basic law*"⁵⁹ with his critique being aimed towards the Ancien Régime's political and judicial assembly. Within the category of the previously mentioned *artificial* there is rhetoric that shows how the visual experience can become both corrupted and vain. Using these optics it is easy to see how Mercier willfully captures the tiers-état and the people's place as victims of the structure of absolutism; "L'autorité préside à nos divertissements; on nous les arrange, et il ne nous est pas permis des modifier"⁶⁰ and offers a scathing appraisal of bourgeois vanity and self-serving need to be seen by others. Mercier sees the working people "the most fortunate of this group...without ambition and false pride"⁶¹, a public "excused from all pleasures" and kept in a "cage".

As a result, the visual experience of the upper classes of the Ancien Régime lends itself to vanity as "luxury has run the whole gamut of imagination". Mercier highlights this point by criticizing their behavior in the public space (places like theatres, churches, and the outdoors). Certain passages draw particular attention to the bourgeois need to be entertained and the appreciation of luxury as "pleasure is the chief public preoccupation"⁶². Mercier frequently makes fun of the bourgeois attitude of self-importance and conceit; in one example Mercier states that when a Parisian goes to the Province he wants the whole

⁵⁸ Lawyers, clerics doctors

⁵⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, Tome I, "Grandeur démesurée de la capitale " 8-9

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.,

⁶² Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, "Le Parisien en Province". Tome I. 50

world to reform themselves to fit his world view, stating “il parle de la Cour comme s’il la connaissait; des hommes de Lettres, comme s’ils étaient ses amis”⁶³, highlighting the ignorance of the city dweller to that of the country man. To this extent Mercier also makes commentary towards the conceit and arrogance which he believes play a large role in Parisian society, one which he asserts is easily duped by appearances. Regarding the theatre space for example, Mercier believes that the bourgeois is unwittingly attracted to a “temple(s) of idleness” where “the spectators are the play” as the “Frenchman’s sole pleasure is seeing and being seen”⁶⁴ and the Parisian women of this class only “live to be looked at”⁶⁵ where they believe that “appearances are everything in this world; they are the only reality.”⁶⁶

In another example, in *Diamans*, Mercier mentions that true philosophers should denounce all diamond dealers and jewelry makers as public plagues and “engines” of odious luxury, acknowledging that the diamond is the ultimate sign of “moral invulnerability” and instead of improving appearances it, in turn, hardens “all beings” who wear it. To a certain degree his rhetoric associated with the bourgeoisie fluctuates between satirical and deprecatory; while diamonds function as an action they do also possess a performative aspect.

In another instance of describing the bourgeoisie in the public space, Mercier recounts to the reader that for the Wednesday, Monday, and Friday of Holy Week all of Paris leaves

⁶³ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Carnaval”. Tome II. 396

⁶⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Diversités”. J. Popkin translation. 198-200

⁶⁵ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Longchamp”. J. Popkin translation. 46-47

⁶⁶ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Mariage à la Mode”. J. Popkin translation. 182-184

the city to go to the neighboring village of Longchamp. This is done under the guise of piety, but the real reason is not to hear the *Tenebraie*, but instead for the women to display their fine jewels, horses and carriages.⁶⁷ This can be interpreted as a clear criticism toward the seeking of spectacle in the religious space, marking it as different from religious freedom and practice⁶⁸ supporting the vanity of the bourgeoisie (Ibid., *Pain Béni*).

Furthermore, while stage performance is structured and stage rules are established, Mercier's work contends that the bourgeoisie is not too dissimilar from an actor on the stage; prearranged visual clues and rules of conduct represent social standing, wealth, and status. Similar to theatrical costumes, the upper classes don clothes and wigs that drastically change their appearance; artificial social representation then becomes a play where the poorer classes act as supporting characters. While much of Mercier's writing also focuses on the changing of fashion, he described Parisian *mode* as an exercise in vanity, tersely declaring "...keep your national flipper, in that silly livery talk your fill of nothing, vent your paradoxes and show forth the graces of your profound ignorance".⁶⁹ This is one of the few instances where Mercier directly addresses the reader and makes a brave accusation to his would-be audience.

Noticeably, the ideas of vanity and conceit are related to Mercier's concept of visibility because they are inevitably tied to the movement of the Enlightenment which dictated and

⁶⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, "Longchamp". J. Popkin translation. 46-47

⁶⁸ It must be noted religious figures, abbots, and bishops, are severely critiqued by Mercier for having dubious morals and benefiting financially from the pious. Tableau: *Abbés* "On se demande comment ils appartiennent à l'église, Car on ne devrait appeler ecclésiastiques, que ceux qui servent les autels...".

⁶⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, "Le fat à l'anglaise". Popkin translation. 148-149

preferred the visual process to be unencumbered by outside factors. Therefore, the goal of the writer becomes the unmasking of the deceptive veil between supposed reality and the truth. This is particularly true in vignettes where Mercier exposes the “laideur” of the bourgeoisie as they remove their clothing, wigs, and lace, employing a tone of abhorrence and revulsion; “I would also confess that it almost impossible to be content in Paris, because the ostentatious pleasures of the rich are too visible to the indigent”⁷⁰. Mercier positions himself as a *descripteur*⁷¹ one that is also able to comment on voyeurism and its role in Parisian society. This trend is visible in the works of Mercier’s contemporaries; almost a century later, Honoré de Balzac’s *Père Goriot* unrelentingly criticizes Parisian societal vanity, corruption, and greed with meticulous attention to detail.

Section Four: The Influence Visuality and the Artificial in the Daily Lives of Parisian Citizens

“Il est très-sûr que si les riches interrompaient pendant une année le cours de leurs folles dépenses, il y aurait la moitié de la Capitale, qui tout-à-coup ne pourrait plus subsister.”⁷²

As indicated above, within the *Tableau*, the bourgeois characters are depicted as regarding their lower-class counterparts as vulgar debauchers, occupying their spaces and controlling the movement of their bodies physically, economically and politically. Visibly this control was maintained in part to participate within the *social theatre* and maintain the status quo and existing structure. This type of rhetoric is most evident with respect to

⁷⁰ Mercier, L. -S., 1782. *T.*, “Préface”. Popkin translation. 23-28

⁷¹ Stalnaker, J. 2010, 152-153

⁷² Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, Tome Seconde. “Sort d’un Bourgeois” 100

Mercier's description of the economy of everyday life. In cataloguing the micro-transactions of everyday life Mercier saw commercialization embodied in the bourgeoisie's daily experience where aspects of the visual can be monetized, borrowed or purchased.

In one particularly significant vignette, entitled *Petits Negres*⁷³, Mercier discusses the late 18th century trend which dictated the upper-class fashion to employ people from colonial territories in aristocratic and bourgeois households. The servants, often very young, were most often dressed in fancy dress and carried with them a parrot, money or parasol. For reference; in one of the many instances catalogued by historian S. McCloy, it is known that Comtesse du Barry employed a boy named Zamore, given to her as a present by the Prince de Conti, often dressed in velvet and silk, and who was tasked with carrying her gown, serving the guests, and sitting for portraits⁷⁴ and that he later testified against her during her trial in 1793 at the outbreak of the Revolution.

This vignette is particularly distressing in its address of this trend because it lays bare the despicable bourgeois obsession of spectacle, fashion, and trend-setting which took precedence over human rights. Mercier speaks to the previous Parisian styles of ladies owning “(un) singe,” “la perruche, la levrette, l'épagneul, l'agnora”, and how, these creatures have lost their credit, the bourgeois women became obsessed with employing young children as their servants/pets. In this instance Mercier presents the upper-class in an extremely caustic tone, stating “Ces noirs Africains n'effarouchent plus les regards d'une belle; ils sont nés dans le sein de l'esclavage. Mais qui n'est pas esclave auprès de la

⁷³ Mercier, L. -S., 1907. *T.*, “Petits Negres”209

⁷⁴ McCloy, S. 1945, 278

beauté?⁷⁵”. The statement is sarcastic in tone and the vignette directly offers a criticism of the Ancien Régime and its heavy reliance on and participation in the slave trade. These optics continue as Mercier adds that while the *enfant noir* lives on the knees of women passionate about his foreign visage, caressed by the gentle hand whose any chastisement is soon erased by the *liveliest caresses* the enfant’s father “gémit sous les coups de fouet d’un maître impitoyable” adding that he works tirelessly to harvest the same sugar cane that the enfant drinks in his luxurious cup with his “riante matresse”.

This is particularly important because it is a direct address not only to the *precieuses* of the salons but the bourgeois institution itself and as such dismembers the concept of the beauty so cherished by the upper class. In many ways Mercier shows how the women were no gentler or sensitive than the men of the upper classes; they were capable of commitment vicious atrocity, disguised as fashion and femininity.

This occurs in another particular instance “Payer son terme” where Mercier describes how a poor housewife, knowing that her rent is due at the end of the month, sends her young daughter to the hairdresser where her hair is painfully twisted, contorted and singed for twelve hours by the new apprentices who practice the latest fashionable powdered hairstyles. After the ordeal Mercier comments about how the young girl, in a poor smock and bare heels, leaves the hairdressers with the luxury of three pounds of flour on her head. In this vignette, like others, Mercier employs a very particular imagery of contrasts to help stir emotion in the reader by bringing to light the inequalities and injustices he witnesses.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

Similarly, in *Petites Loges* Mercier laments the system of reserved box seating which is purchased out by the upper class in the beginning of each theatre season. He laments in stating that the bourgeois can afford to see one act and leave while the public is forced to wait outside, money in hand “à cause des petites loges louées à l’année, qui demeurent souvent vides, au détriment des amateurs...désespérés qu’ils sont de ne pouvoir plus frequenter le Théâtre national.”⁷⁶ This passage is another instance where physical space of the citizen is controlled by the upper class. Mercier’s description of the limitation, displacement and manipulation of space by the bourgeoisie is where visibility more commonly associated with theatre again intersects with reality. In this way his criticism of the upper class is not reserved to the condemnation to a certain group, but to the social theatre as a whole. Mercier comments on the economic disparity of the Old Regime lamenting that “...la pauvreté devient plus insupportable par la vue des progrès étonnants du luxe qui fatigue les regards de l’indigent⁷⁷”, creating the analogy of a tree which is disproportionately nourished, where outrageous opulence is paired with appalling crimes of poverty. While Mercier creates commentary on certain nefarious forms of viewership in the public sphere, he upholds various positive forms of viewership in his understanding of theatre and its power of the people.

⁷⁶ Mercier, L. -S., 1783 *T.*, 1783, Vol. II. “Petites Loges” 187-189

⁷⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, 1783 Vol. I “Au Plus Pauvre la Besace” 23-24

CHAPTER THREE

In this section I will attempt to show Mercier's views on the spectator and the role of the theatre and its ethical implications by comparing him to other prominent enlightenment thinkers. In particular, for him, the role of theatre was different from the performances and visual spectacles in the streets as it provided a structure where the spectator can participate in an emergent citizen community. Within this community the viewer was then able to engage, ethically, in the cultural debates surrounding absolutism and social inequity. Philosophers like Rousseau for example, believed that theatre has the potential to morally corrupt society and lead to its decay, while Diderot, on the other hand, envisioned the theater as a type of secular church, where transcendent experience is expressed and community engagement will prevent absolutism in the state.

Section One: Situating Visuality Within the Categories of the *Ethical*: the Relationship between Theatre and Authority

In the context of the *Tableau* Mercier acknowledges that a certain congruence must occur between fiction and reality so that in order to address the rhetoric of the visual one must establish the context in which visuality presents itself.

Mercier believed that all spectators are receptive to the works put on stage in the state theatres and, as a result were bound together by their common understanding of the plot and sense-driven visual experience. However, Mercier's rhetoric toward theatre is highly selective in the sense that he clearly differs on his definition of what constitutes a true theatrical performance. It is only with regard to classical theatrical productions by the

Comédie or other state theatres Mercier's rhetoric comes to praise the viewers experience as part of a whole didactic process. Only in these environments Mercier asserts that the "Spectacle", an artifice, is part of a larger machination that tries to bring the viewer closer to the ultimate "truth". This commentary is particularly evident in his philosophical treatise on state theatre, *Du Theatre*, where Mercier first separates the idea of "Spectacle" from that of the Theatre, recognizing that the former is a function of the latter. To him the goal of the visual performance then rests upon making the vision, or truth, clearer and purer⁷⁸ so that it is easily disseminated among a large crowd. The spectator is then bound by a "victorious"⁷⁹ emotion of compassion and pity. It is only then, through the visual contemplation of art, that Mercier considers the soul will experience an intimate feeling, where paradox is rejected and the truth survives.

Mercier largely aligns himself with other Lockean disciples and with Helvetius, believing that physical sensation, like that initiated by viewership, is man's ultimate way of perceiving the outside world and returning to his natural self. His rhetoric thus suggests that visual education is a way to uniformly reform society in a way that harnesses and mimics Rousseau's idea of the natural equality of intelligence. In particular, Mercier focuses on the idea of sensibility and the act of transmission of emotions with the awareness that that having a lack of soul and virtue can be remedied instantly by viewing a performance.⁸⁰ For him the ideal audience then becomes an attentive and engaged one, where law, order, and morality can be taught through a visual experience, regardless of the

⁷⁸ Meaning in this sense, more ethical, more Christian

⁷⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1773, *Du Theatre*, "L'art dramatique" 2-3

⁸⁰ Ibid. 4-15

social class. Using the L. Connor's analysis of early enlightenment theatrical science⁸¹, one can suggest that Mercier's opinion was in line with the philosophical trends of various art theorists and thinkers of the day who viewed feeling, or sensibility, as an intuitive path to learning.

Mercier's opinion in the vignette *Spectacles Gratis* is particularly evident of this idea. In his commentary he explores the nature of free performances given on national holidays by the court-sponsored troupes for the enjoyment of general public. He iterates that, at such events, it is commonplace for the general public, including the "charbonniers" and the "poissardes" to be seated alongside with the king and queen. In viewing a piece of theatre Mercier remarks that the economically varied public applauds at the right moments, even beautiful and delicate moments, stating, that the people "...sent, tout comme l'assemblée la mieux choisie. Quelle poétique, pour qui faudrait l'étudier."⁸² Here his rhetoric takes on a democratic character, creating the metaphor of a single class entity, the royalty and the people, which views the performance similarly. This is repeated again when he mentions that famous actresses of his time, like Melpomène, Thalie et Terpsichore, give their hand to the carrier and the mason, while the actors Preville and Brizard dance with the "fille de joie sur les memes planches où l'on a représentée Polyeucte et Athalie."⁸³ Here the free performance functions as a type of social domain, benefiting the public and momentarily erasing invisible class barriers that distinguish the actors from the audience,

⁸¹ Connors, L. J., 2020

⁸² Mercier, L. -S., 1782, *T.*, Volume II "Spectacles Gratis" 9

⁸³ Ibid.

and as well, the nobility from the tiers-état. This point is vital in understanding Mercier's politics of visibility and how this work goes beyond the basic transcription of events.

Section Two: Visibility and its Increasing Importance in Theatre

Increasingly in the latter half of the eighteenth century, theatre became a hot commodity for consumption and the Parisian public became hungry for entertainment. This frenzy eventually spread to the provinces, where theatres started popping up rapidly. The developing architecture under the late Ancien-Régime made this possible as theatre increasingly accessible; the French adopted the Italian architectural model, with its oval auditorium and decrease of loges, which made the theatre space more open to all classes of society, to both see and be seen. This also changed the dynamic of power in the theatre arena giving more agency to the parterre spectator. And to Mercier, the ideal public in these theatres became one that was diverse both socially and economically.



Figure 2: Comédie-Française, late 18th century

Source: KaiDib Films International, 2001

In the vignette, *Parterres Assis* Mercier's attitude toward the audience continues in this unrestricted manner, where like Denis Diderot, Mercier supports the theatre representing a sort of polis that uses the floor as a meeting place for the people, intertwining the spheres of politics and the arts, "It is in the pit which pays the nation's debt of gratitude, welcomes great men, and does what it can to reward them: greatness in any sphere here find recognition."⁸⁴ Of note here is Mercier's lack of the description of the theatrical action: he does not prescribe morality or ethics of what is exhibited or created by upper class, but instead states that the public develops these strictures by themselves. The visual act and the presence of others in the audience act on the senses in a way where their moral development is formed by physical sensation; Mercier states that "the feeling, the enthusiasm, is fired in a moment, and out breaks applause, unpremeditated"⁸⁵.

It is vital to underline here that Mercier is speaking to the audience members of the parterre, a public that consisted of common class which largely included wage workers, lamplighters, fishermen, who were, in his mind, still capable to understand and "seize" the "most delicate allusions". It is also important to note that, unlike Rousseau's idealization of the novel savage or country man, Mercier adopts a more patriotic tone stating that in the local Parisian parterre "no other people expressed itself so charmingly, with such vivacity and grace".⁸⁶ This rhetoric can be viewed within the context of Habermasian public sphere and the simultaneous development of public opinion. The ebb and flow of the audience and its dictatorship of what is happening on the main stage can thus employed to predict the

⁸⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, "Parterres Assis" Popkin Translation, 220

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

subsequent corpus of public pamphlets during the Revolution⁸⁷ and the imminent trends of Republican public theatre and fêtes that served a political role, to retelling and reframing historical events.⁸⁸

Accordingly, Mercier's rhetoric in *Parterres Assis* can be viewed within the parallel framework of Diderot's *Entretiens sur le Fils Naturel* (1757) and Rousseau's *Seconde Préface De la Nouvelle Heloise* (1761) which both dialogically discussed the efficacious nature of sensibility and authentic representation in relation to the recipient's imagination.

Dramatic Innovation in Stagecraft

To better relate Diderot's and Rousseau's works to Mercier's concept of visuality, the analytic focus must be transferred to Mercier's interpretation of the value of entertainment and the degree with which the gaze of the audience functions as product of stagecraft. When viewed from this angle, Mercier's *Tableau* benefits from a perspective that is more complex; where the ability to paint accurately the pace of the habitual is important to accurately represent the society in the minds of the spectator or reader. This is the reason one can surmise that Mercier went to great lengths to scrupulously detail intricacies in his vignettes. For example, in the introduction to his 1770 essay, *Du Théâtre*, Mercier acknowledges that the "Spectacle est un tableau mensonge ; il s'agit de le rapprocher de la plus grande vérité" but at the same states the spectacle is also a painting whose is goal is to present an image that serves "à lier entre-eux les hommes par le

⁸⁷ Chisick, H. (1993) 149-146

⁸⁸ See *La Fête révolutionnaire* by Mona Ozouf which focuses on typologies of Revolutionary fêtes and theatre

sentiment victorieux de la compassion & de la pitié”.⁸⁹ For Mercier, the theatrical spectacle then takes a completely different definition, functioning as an agent of representation of reality that reinforces social order and a system of ethics. In this way, Mercier’s conception of the theatre further elucidates the patterns in his writing, exposing the theme of the recurring mensonges and how they behave in limiting or creating agency for the public. When compared to *Diderot’s Entretiens sur le fils naturel* known in the essay as *Moi*, Mercier’s *Tableau* shows how performative action is real through its portrayal and recreation that the actors bring to life and suggests that authentic characters must reproduce living reality. Like Mercier, Diderot supports the erasure of an imaginative line between the performance and reality, but always maintains that there is a divide between the two stating,

J’aime mieux qu’une pièce soit simple que charge d’incidents. Cependant je regarde plus à leur liaison qu’à leur multiplicité. Je suis moins disposé à croire deux évènements que le hasard a rendus successifs ou simultanés[...] L’art d’intriguer consiste à lier les événements, de manière que le spectateur sensé y aperçoive toujours une raison qui le satisfasse.⁹⁰

In the same vein Mercier advocated for the established goal of theatre to convey action that is easily identifiable with the audience, where their expression and commitment to their characters is just as important as the scenery and text of the play. Like Diderot, Mercier acknowledges that his characters in the theatre are exemplary and unique in their

⁸⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1773 *Nouvel Essai*. “Introduction” 1-2

⁹⁰ Diderot, D. 1757, *Entretiens*. 88

roles and are meant to behave in a morally superior fashion, establishing and reinforcing a social order. In Diderot's *Le Fils Naturel* this arrives with the importance of characters, like Charles the valet, and virtuous Constance, who re-enact an idealized reality as well as function as a mouthpiece for the author. However, unlike Mercier's views on the accessible nature of the theatrical play, Diderot's drame advocated for the theatre piece to be performed in the bourgeois salon, one where he believes the genteel manners of the play will best be understood and reflected. Within this commentary, theatre historian Laurence Marie wrote that by showing the "personnages réels" within their proper context in the salon rather than "fiction représentée sur les tréteaux" of the theatre, Diderot wanted to expose the "le vraie" instead of "le vraisemblable". As well, of particular importance in his construction of the drame, is Diderot's distinction between the tableau, "disposition de ces personnages [...] si naturelle et si vraie, que rendue fidèlement par un peintre" and the coup du théâtre, an incident "imprévu qui se passe en action, et qui change subitement l'état des personnages"⁹¹. Mercier's work seems to reject this distinction, as he believed that the both the tableau and the coup du theatre could be one and the same, existing simultaneously in the reader's imagination.

Mercier and Diderot: The Role of the Ethical Between Art and the Spectator

Mercier's works represented the emergent public with a sense of autonomy in this participation, with him believing that the viewer is solely capable of their own transformative experience within the capacities of their physical senses. For example, just as he supported the reader of his *Tableau*, Mercier advocated for artistic participation in

⁹¹ Ibid., 94

the audience and particularly in the parterre because he saw it as facsimile of an emergent republic that showed potential of an intrinsic democracy. Unlike Diderot, he considered the artist to be inseparable from the crowd, using his technical skills to mimic the theatregoer and to build upon the energy of the foule.

Additionally, Mercier's philosophical viewpoints stood out from his contemporaries because he was not in favor of the classical unities and from a point of ethical engagement, and pioneered the idea for the theatrical plot to be created as singular form of action⁹². Diderot, in contrast, chose to support the three unities in the belief that characters should be reduced to their core selves⁹³ while conceiving of a drama that is more realistic. Like Mercier, he also conceived of the drame as having an authority of itself but called for a separation between the art and the spectator, the creator and creation (*Discours sur la poésie dramatique*). In Diderot's understanding of the function of theatre he expanded upon the idea of an artist needing to be in motion, and did not focus on the spectator as much as on the creation of the work, stating that in the poet should not be swayed by action of the parterre and not let the spectator become what he will by chance. It can then be suggested that for both philosophes the goal was then to avoid imitating the painter directly, who instead of attaching himself to rigorously representing nature as it is, loses sight of it when occupying himself with the resources of the arts, and thinks of not showing it in its true form but instead "à en disposer relativement à des moyens techniques et communs."⁹⁴

⁹² Carlson, M. A., 2000 158-159

⁹³ Diderot, D., 1758 *De la poésie dramatique*. 87

⁹⁴ Diderot, D., 1758 *De la poésie dramatique*. "Chapitre XI - De l'intérêt"

With the ambitious nature of the *Tableau* Mercier brought to bear the idea that art could mimic nature in its interaction with the viewer and, as well, that art should eventually be reoriented towards intimate engagement. With this I would suggest that this pattern of rhetorical thinking is contiguous with the wave of renewed interest in Aristotelian mimesis μίμησις⁹⁵ during the 18th century, as it places the imitation on stage and in writing. With respect to this framework, scholar Laurence Marie writes that Mercier preferred the simple sketch en lieu of the exactitude of direct imitation: in order to foster sentiment and emotional engagement, the actor must “parler à l’esprit et au cœur” in particular through the communication of the soul, stating that

...en insistant sur les pouvoirs de la suggestion visuelle , Mercier revisite la conception classique, aubignacienne, du théâtre, selon laquelle la déclamation du poème dramatique touche l'esprit et l'imagination rationnelle.⁹⁶

However, with regard to acting and the body, Mercier surprisingly did not favor the eye when discussing the sublime movement of the actor; he instead favored the foot and the hand, which Marie suggests is part of his belief in “integral body parts” that do not express “falseness.”⁹⁷ Moreover, it can be suggested Mercier’s views particularly echoed Diderot’s philosophical materialism in the vignette *Les Comédiens* by advocating for theatrical representation to be more honest and more genuine because it would pave way to “deeper sensations.” And politically speaking, I contend that Mercier saw the theatre as a place of

⁹⁵ See A. Lombard *L'abbé Du Bos, un initiateur de la pensée moderne*, P. Estève *L'Esprit Des Beaux-Arts*, C. Batteux, *Principes de la Littérature*

⁹⁶ Marie, L. 2019 318

⁹⁷ Ibid.

authenticity where the actor on stage must reflect the conception the viewer has of himself and his patrie. This is evident in the way that Mercier calls to mind the idea of the fourth wall, mentioning that “pour que l’oeil ou l’oreille puissant lui faire grace⁹⁸” the actor has to be in equilibrium with the stage, because his physical person is an important part of the performance.

Section Three: The Importance of Cultivating Sensibilité within the Visual

Experience

Resounding the benefits of improved sensibility, Mercier wanted the viewer to have a transformational experience, but regrettably stated that the tragedies of his day became “chantante, roide, ampoule, monotone...”⁹⁹. Of equal important note is Mercier’s attention to the concept of maintaining a truthful illusion in costuming so that the spectator can be moved through the theatrical piece through a cathartic crying or experiencing of strong emotion. He unequivocally echoes the calls of actors of his day, like La Clairon and Marie Dumesnil, for the support of historical authenticity in scenery, prescribing “Moins d’oripeau, plus de vérité.”¹⁰⁰ His call for an authentic theatre is bellied by the belief that viewership in general needs to be less superficial. Because the *Comédie Française* was sponsored by the King the tone Mercier develops can be viewed as hinting toward a type of resentment for the lack of political representation, where the garish actors and inaccurate set design can be seen as representing the out of touch politics of the Ancien Régime.

⁹⁸ Mercier, L. -S., 1783 *T. “Les Comédiens” Tome Troisième*. 7

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

In another vignette, the *Comédiens-Italiens*, Mercier repeats that excessive vaudeville pieces serve to mostly please the insatiable public and offer more decoration and naiveté than actual substance stating “L’ariette et le vaudeville tueront toujours Marivaux et ses successeurs.”¹⁰¹

In this way the Tableau expands on his egalitarian philosophy first witnessed in *Du Theatre* in the way that it prescribes a more sensitive approach to the conversation of the visual imagination. As R. Troino notes; both *Entretiens sur Le Fils naturel* and *De la poésie dramatique* show a model for a new kind of artistic treatment, one that interprets theatrical pieces not as finished works enacted from without but as pieces which offer raw material for private meditation and as well as, public discussion. In fact, Mercier’s condemnation of the Italian plays arises from the criticism of the songs which attracted spectators but did little to create meaningful rhetoric. It can consequently be suggested that Mercier’s tone in *Parterres Assis* and *Spectacles Gratis* mimics Diderot’s idea that “the theatre is a privileged space which, particularly in a time of religious intolerance and political absolutism, can serve as a vehicle for change and a source of social cohesion.”¹⁰²

Section Four: Mercier and Rousseau; The Power of the Visual Within the

Imagination

Rousseau, Mercier, and Diderot all believed in the didactic forms of their characters, however far removed their live counterparts. Furthermore, Mercier and Diderot’s introspective dialogues can be compared to Rousseau’s autoreferential essay *Entretiens sur*

¹⁰¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783 *T. Les Comédiens Italiens*” Vol. III, 23-24

¹⁰² Troiano R. 2012 6

les romans which analyzes the fictional sphere as it presents itself in the mind of the viewer and reader. From this point of view of one can assume that sensibility for all three philosophers existed as a source of knowledge through which one can have an instructive experience. Accessing this sensibility was done differently in Mercier's vision than in Rousseau's in the scope of the theatre, but, they held similar ideas about the power of imagination. For example, Mercier, like Rousseau, engaged new parameters being set by his work calling in question the literary divide that exists between fiction and reality. Similarly, in regards to the physical tableau, Rousseau contended that, while a painting may contain value through its mimetic characteristics however small, it is the imagination (tableau d'imagination) that must retain its roots in traits recognizable to man. This concept is very evident in Mercier's *Tableau* as he specifically rejects the art of painting, and insists that the words in his book create a truer and clearer representation of his ideas. However, it must be noted, that unlike his counterpart, Rousseau insisted on the separation of fiction from reality, maintaining that there exists a clear divide between these two spheres;

en ce cas ...Ces lettres ne sont point des lettres ; ce roman n'est point un roman, les personnages sont des gens de l'autre monde¹⁰³.

Perceptibly, while Mercier sought to inspire the reader visually through their imagination, Rousseau favored a clean break with reality preferring instead that the reader, knowing that the characters are not real, was able engross himself in the "roman" and be fully touched by the tenderness that sought to speak to the heart. Unlike Mercier, in holding

¹⁰³ Rousseau, J.-J., (1843) Digital Version

this view, Rousseau also purposefully broke from the idea of a bourgeois sphere and highly literate public, admitting that only the simple man,¹⁰⁴ one from the countryside, can feel the true effect of his book. Rousseau affirmed to the reader that the audience in the city has been corrupted by false virtue's having mistaken them for real ones.

Unlike Mercier's conception of the public sphere and emerging citizen, Rousseau's model audience is made up of the natural man, one who would be receptive of the moral lessons of the characters. The *Entretiens* thus is aligned to *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité* (1755) where Rousseau suggests, that for the public to reach to a moral ideal, it would need to separate himself from the corruption of the city. Regarding this topic scholars like R. Rozaik write that the theatrical performance has the function of justifying bourgeois ideology by objectifying it.¹⁰⁵ In this way the Enlightenment's objection to theatre can be seen not as a corrupting moral force, but, instead as one that reinforces current inequalities in society. The conception of this theory can be also found within Mercier's affection for understanding of the values and virtues of rural life (Tableau: *Pots de fleurs, Faux Cheveux, De la cour, etc.*). However, Mercier does not go as far as Rousseau in limiting the ideal audience to this milieu. His approach favors the idea of the Parisian aligning himself more with the country man by discovering a connection with nature and more simpler morals. Scholars like Jeremy Popkin have suggested that Mercier did not share Rousseau's distaste for city life and did not consider it "inherently degraded" but instead held an "ambivalence toward the spectacle of urban life, both fascinating and

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 10

¹⁰⁵ Roszak, R., 2016

horrible.”¹⁰⁶ In light of Rousseau’s acknowledgement that pure sentiment and imagination are prescribed to a certain *homme naturel* it is possible to understand the framework then that guides him in his stark difference of opinion on the corrupt nature of the theatre. Unlike Mercier, Rousseau’s idea of an immoral society is one where the actors are free to incite lies than truths¹⁰⁷, explaining that spectacles “sont faits pour le peuple, et ce n’est que par leurs effets sur lui, qu’on peut déterminer leurs qualités absolues”¹⁰⁸, and where the performance gives entertainment through visual pleasure and but does not offer utility.

Furthermore, while Mercier believed his work was a guiding light for the public, Rousseau considered the author manipulated by their audience, believing that they will always be swayed to follow their sentiment. In this sense Rousseau claimed that popular pieces never shocked the people or changed their moral sentiments: the slightest constraint on theatre would no longer make it enjoyable, as the theatre follows the laws dictated by the public and therefore is prone to excessive and unrealistic emotion. In his *Letter sur les Spectacles* Rousseau underlined this point by suggesting that instead of representation bringing people closer to reality it does, in fact, the opposite “trouve que tout ce qu’on met représentation au Théâtre, on ne l’approche pas de nous, on l’en éloigne”¹⁰⁹. Mercier, on the other hand, was in direct contradiction to the above two premises believing that 1) the people are brought close together in theatre spaces and 2) they are able to see an idealized vision of reality which helped them come to terms with their own morality and actions.

¹⁰⁶ Popkin, J. 1999 , “Editor’s Preface”

¹⁰⁷ With the exception of Paris and other large cities in Europe

¹⁰⁸ Rousseau, J.-J., & J.M. Gallanar (1758), 8

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 12

This theme is further expanded in J.T. Scott's essay on *Émile où l'éducation*, where he addresses vision as a function as metaphor for Rousseau. In his analysis he suggests that Rousseau's explicit mission was that he wanted the reader to become the spectator of his point of view, but at the same time convince them that they need to *learn* to see it anew, as well as view themselves in a "new vision", arguing that through rhetorical imagery, the education for Émile, and by extension the *reader*, is meant to guard him from the psychological maladies of anger, fear of death, and other passions¹¹⁰.

In Mercier's work there exists a certain similarity when addressing the command of literature, "the great works which do honor to the human mind...spring from the natural freedom of a broadminded spirit...in spite of tyrants."¹¹¹ The tyrants in Mercier's description are the agents of censorship who he describes as falsifying historical records and keeping a tight hold over the printing press.

¹¹⁰ Scott, J. 2014 533, 545

¹¹¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1773, "*Les Colporteurs*" ,38-39

CHAPTER FOUR

Section One: Mercier, Diderot, and Rousseau: Morality and the Theatrical Visual

Experience

Cependant le moyen le plus actif et le plus prompt d'armer invisiblement les forces de la raison humaine et de jeter tout-a-coup sur un peuple une grande masse de lumières, serait à coup sur le théâtre.¹¹² -Mercier, *Du théâtre* (1773)

Being a common thread in Mercier's works, the elevation of the working class and emergent public sphere is particularly notable when compared to his contemporaries' understanding of theatrical viewership. For example, unlike Rousseau's *La Lettre sur les spectacles*, both the *Tableau* as well as *Du Theatre* present public audience at the theatre in relation to virtue, righteousness, and ideas of good moralistic transformation. And, despite their bold nature these philosophies were still nonetheless much inspired by, and heavily borrowed from Rousseau's *Émile*, *Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Lettre à d'Alembert* and Diderot's *De la poésie dramatique*, *le Fils naturel* and *Bijoux Indiscrets*. This presents a certain complexity to scholarship on Mercier.

In fact, certain scholars have attempted to addressing the similarities within these works; R. Gay-Crosier suggests that in a general manner Mercier took from Rousseau the principal of moral sentimentalism and Diderot a series of dramatic precepts including a dialect of sensibility and "la conversion de l'hérésie en méthode"¹¹³ These philosophies are

¹¹² Mercier, L. -S., 1773, *Du Théâtre* ,3

¹¹³ Gay-Crosier, R., 1968 262

evident in Mercier's conception of theatre as it functions in the presence of the viewer, prioritizing his gaze above everything else.

As a result of this philosophical positioning, both Diderot and Mercier supported the standing parterre and lamented its removal as it they believed it led to a less engaged audience. The energy that it supplied was directly connected to the stage and created an electric tether to the performance where physical sensation and sensibility was coupled with an “expression libérée du sentiment, permise par un encadrement préalable”.¹¹⁴ In fact, for both philosophers, in the cadre of the theater, the viewer and his visual preference become more vital to the point of the performance. For one, Diderot, when promoting the physical importance of the space of the parterre in his epistolary response (1758) to the playwright Mme Riccoboni, grieves,

Il y a quinze ans que nos théâtres étaient des lieux de tumulte. Les têtes les plus froides s'échauffaient en y entrant, et les hommes sensés y partageaient plus ou moins le transport des fous... On s'agitait, on se remuait, on se poussait, l'âme était mise hors d'elle-même.

Mercier's rhetoric in support of the audience in the parterre is also a commentary of space and economy, a support of the “les classes «mitoyennes »” as defined by Marcel Dorigny as people who work by themselves, in workshops, factories, shops or other fields¹¹⁵. The aspect of engagement to observe a visual performance is so important to the connection and reception of the spectacle so much so that Mercier remarks that,

¹¹⁴ Marie L., 2019 234

¹¹⁵ Dorigny M., 1994 166

“ Autrefois un enthousiasme incroyable l’animait et l’effervescence générale donnait aux productions théâtrales un intérêt qu’elles n’ont plus. Aujourd’hui le calme, le silence, l’improbation froide ont succède au tumulte...”¹¹⁶

The physical space of the theatre and the connection to other theatregoers marked the pedagogical importance of the visual spectacle. In this way, Mercier believed that theatre could influence and educate the public and also acknowledged that the public was the main force deciding the play’s success or failure. In the “tumult” of the parterre, authority often became mixed as the passivity of the seated public was overcome by the energy of the male parterre spectators. It is important to note that Mercier makes a clear political distinction when discussing the need to create a second official troupe of comédiens in Paris, but is precluded by bureaucracy and class politics; “les comédiens en province appartiennent au public, au lieu qu’à Paris le public appartient aux comédiens”¹¹⁷; progress in art is stopped by anarchy in the government and “milles petits codes ridicules.” Despite this, there is also evidence that Mercier set the limits of theatrical entertainment, distinguishing between spectatorship and viewership. In his essay on Mercier’s theatre piece *Le Charlatan* (1780), Michel Poirson posits that Mercier also believed that the “nascent culture” of the Enlightenment gave way to a “society craving entertainment”, where the spectacular and the artificial were often overdone creating a sense of doubt surrounding “the public space structured by the play”.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, “Théâtre National”. Digital Version.

¹¹⁷ Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, “D’un Second Théâtre Français”. Digital Version

¹¹⁸ Poirson, M., 2012

While I contend this could be true in some instances, I also affirm that virtuous representation was shown to preclude ostentatious spectacle and as such, Mercier's rhetoric, in general, can be seen as lending itself to a discourse of specialization. This specialization was centered on the awareness of a highly moral nature, like Mercier's mention of Molière and Racine whose ideas stayed within the sphere of entertainment, but ultimately, resisted superficiality. One sees this in particular in the vignette *Theatre Bourgeois* where Mercier asserts that "beautiful verses" and virtuous actions on stage formed the memory, developed support, and taught the viewer to speak. He affirms that even the man with higher taste is still able to enjoy a play that is attempted by the actors with lesser training: each performance breathes new life into the pieces, and while the play may not do justice to the great works, "le spectateur s'amuse à la fois de la pièce & des personnages¹¹⁹". Mercier states that all this works to make the allusions more piquant where high taste was then distributed from the higher social strata to the lower echelons.

By going further than Diderot and Rousseau, I suggest that Mercier advocated directly for substitution of the instruction by the visual and the practice of the theatrical. In his own dramatic works Mercier often directly addressed the emergent public by creating a strong message that sought out to communicate his moral opinion. For example, in the opening scenes of a German village in *Le Deserteur* Mercier, through the dialogue of his characters, expresses a strong anti-militarist sentiment; when the French army approaches they are called a "milice avide" that practices "l'art du pillage" and are described as taxing

¹¹⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome 3, "Théâtre Bourgeois" 18-19

the poor and inflaming their villages¹²⁰. The play proceeds to show characters of rare virtue and bravery whose actions create commentary and criticism towards French foreign policy. In presenting two lovers separated by the theatre of war Mercier focuses on inciting sadness and despair in the imagination of the viewer by creating scenarios through the “puissance suggestive de la représentation”¹²¹.

In these particular vignettes Mercier’s view of theatre is based upon the premise that viewing a spectacle can influence opinion and function as an education model or “à en reformer une mauvaise”¹²². Substituting Paris at the center of the model reveals Mercier’s careful attention to the city center and its relation to modes of representation, a varied spectacle stating that the eye has to witness a fluidity in its elements that refreshes the mind. Thus, similar to Diane Brown’s analysis of Mercier’s anonymously published utopian novel *L’An 2440*, it can be posited that *Tableau* was a way for Mercier to show the ultimate ideal of what theatres were to become: “public schools of morality”¹²³ which effectively would replace other forms of traditional education where “Mercier’s heuristic city functions as an urban machine that obviates actual human teachers.”¹²⁴

In this way both in the *Tableau* and the *L’An 2440* Mercier’s conception of the future of Paris is tethered to his understanding of the Paris of the Ancien Régime. In his view of the everyman participant at the theatre, Mercier saw the theatrical space as functioning separately from other methods of visualization. Because of its Enlightened

¹²⁰ Mercier, L. -S., 1770 4-6

¹²¹ Marie L., 2019 318

¹²² Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome 3 “Théâtre Bourgeois” 18-19

¹²³ Brown, D., 2005 475

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 472

nature and strict parameters of observation, the theatre for Mercier held the capacity to create a type of ultimate education of the homo universalis. The fact that Mercier favored the pedagogical value of the city's monuments, theatres, and public spaces over the rigidity of authority of teachers, clerics and pedants, is indicative of the material importance of visuality. It can thus be suggested that Mercier further advanced Rousseau's concept in *Émile* by believing in the autonomy of the individual and abolishment of traditional pedagogical methods and classical instructors.

CHAPTER FIVE: THESIS ARGUMENT AND SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION

This thesis attempted to contribute to the academic discourse already present on Mercier by analyzing the concept of visibility in the *Tableau*; examining the balance between the pedagogical values of the visual imagination and the specious pursuit of spectacle. In my analysis these two antipodes are seemingly opposite in their relation with respect to the viewer. While I contend that these opposites exist, I will conclude that Mercier's treatment of the people is one of proletarian nature, and like J. Popkin, I will reject the Habermasian theory of an authentic public that is contiguous with medium of print and the engaged bourgeoisie and I will instead insist on the idea that political culture of the Old Regime was profoundly impacted by the emergence of an opinionated *Tiers-état* in particular through their viewership. While scholars have often studied Mercier's innovative use of description¹²⁵, they have not expanded on the interdisciplinarity of his discourse when it applies to visibility and imagination. Underlining the plurality of arts and sciences, Mercier aligned himself with the universality of Enlightenment thought where his concept of the visual is inextricably tied to different fields; he separated theory and practice; his debate for the ethics of policy of the Old Regime is tied with his understanding and representation of the revolutionary public. In using a gaze that is both critical and reconstructive, I contend that he is advocating for the agency of a new citizen. With that thought, I would like to posit that Mercier's visual vocabulary is his way to converse with the citizen of Paris as well as the future reader. Rebuffing the rigidity of

¹²⁵ Stalnaker, J., 2010. 151-187

classical literary structure, Mercier's unique prose let him enter bluntly in the *ut pictura poesis* debate, creating a strong precedent for his contemporaries and future realists.

Conclusively, it is through this melding of the philosophy, ethics, and politics that Mercier creates his own hermeneutics; the *Tableau de Paris* engages the viewer's imagination through his description of a repugnant Paris full of consumption, luxury, filth, and covetousness. As Joanna Stalnaker states¹²⁶, Mercier invites the reader of the future to deliberately participate in his experiment, one which he hopes will result in a more generous state of economic and social equality. In this way his *Tableau* is Mercier's hope that the reader will make good on their end of the contract; campaigning against inequalities, advocating for isonomy, economic parity, and urban reform.

Section One: Placing the *Tableau* within the Institution of Eighteenth-century

French politics

In addition to situating Mercier's biases, it is important to view the writing of the *Tableau* within the framework of Gregory Brown's historical analysis, *A Field of Honor*, which positions Mercier's writing of this work as part of larger self-fashioning of a personal and political gain. In his survey, Brown points out a duality in this process; while playwrights like Mercier wanted to gain clout and establish identity at court they also had a specific and unselfish goal of addressing the public. It can then, to some extent, be posited that the Mercier's formal disregard and dichotomous view on different nature of *spectacle* as a direct appeal to the general public in his quest to become a recognized man of letters,

¹²⁶ Stalnaker, J, 2010 170-171

“Mercier by the early 1770s claimed recognition as a man of letters based on the acclaim of the public to whom he sought to speak in the “diversified voices ... of the human race” rather than the Alexandrine couplets favored in classical dramaturgy.¹²⁷

Brown suggests that more distinction is needed when studying and understanding the role of intellectuals during the transition from the Old Regime to the modern period. He reveals that by appealing to public opinion, which highly favored criticism of the Old Regime, Mercier aspired to cultivate membership inside the elite intellectual and aristocratic salons of the time which were held by the pulse of public opinion, “Mercier by the early 1770s claimed recognition as a man of letters based on the acclaim of the public to whom he sought to speak in the “diversified voices ... of the human race” rather than the Alexandrine couplets favored in classical dramaturgy.¹²⁸ Using this method, Mercier was able to redefine himself as a both playwright and as a man of letters and a patriot playwright. It can then, to some instances, be argued that the Mercier’s dichotomous view on viewership how it functioned within pre-revolutionary is a direct engagement with the exercise of cultural power. The vignettes in the *Tableau* and their intention to directly appeal to the general public can then be viewed as part of Mercier’s quest to become a recognized man of letters: a profession which he was fond of and mentioned in his works, often distinguishing it from the other artistic endeavors “...the *bourgeoisie* confuses artists

¹²⁷ Brown, G., 2000, 44

¹²⁸ Brown, G., 2000, 44

and men of letters: there is a great difference between them. The man of letters is far more.”¹²⁹

Section Two: Mercier’s intention of the *Tableau* and his contribution to the Enlightenment genre

Nous sommes, pour ainsi dire, condamnés dans cette ville immense à nous voir sans nous connaître ; nos faux jugements sont encore plus connus que nos sujets d’infortune.¹³⁰

Louis Sébastien Mercier’s contribution to the Enlightenment genre was to create a working and abundantly detailed visual representation of the public sphere. As a *descripteur* he wanted to represent the different classes as they were, focusing on the daily habits, jobs, interactions of members of each social class. For this reason, modern analysts (Geneviève Boucher, Laurence Mall, Daniel Rosenberg...) place him in the category of an Enlightened thinker, subjective analyst and topographer. The detailed vignette therefore became the main image that Mercier wanted to convey, sparking the reader’s imagination. Perhaps no vignette is more representative of this process and style than *Les j’ai et Les je n’ai point vu* which presents a lengthy enumeration of everything that he has seen and has not seen, putting the analysis and mechanism of the visual at the forefront of his urban work. In writing about the public and their relationship to the state, Mercier formulated a balance between the pedagogical values of the visual imagination, physical presence, and the specious pursuit of spectacle. By illustrating each event with both realistic and utopian

¹²⁹ Mercier, L. -S., 1789, *T.*, “Les huit classes”. Popkin translation

¹³⁰ Mercier, L. -S., 1783. *T.*, 1783 Vol. I “Aveuglement” 173

imagery the chapters manipulate the path of reader, which unknowingly participates in a visual experiment. Mercier frequently implores the reader to think for himself and to visualize these detailed contrasts as they come to light,

Que de tableaux éloquents qui frappent l'œil dans tous les coins des carrefours, et quelle galerie d'images, pleine de contrastes frappants pour qui fait voir et entendre.¹³¹

In this way Mercier brings forth truths that he hopes will expose Paris as its true self; moving away from cliff of abstract philosophical rhetoric towards a more post-structuralist perspective that interpreted the production and existence of signs in their own way. As such the visual vocabulary was a means for *Tableau* to directly communicate with the citizens of Paris as well as the future reader. For this reason, Mercier was criticized heavily during his lifetime because his work was considered too subversive for the upper class. Even though Mercier himself rejected the idea that his work was of philosophical nature he clearly incites the us to ponder and engage with the visual. As Joanna Stalnaker notes:

Mercier sought to provide a single representation of the city within which multiple objects and scenes function in relation to each other. As such, a single moment of representation was part of a broader preoccupation with creating the aesthetic conditions for the beholder's absorptive contemplation of art.¹³²

¹³¹ Mercier, L. -S., 17823, *T.*, Vol I "Coup d'œil général" 4-5

¹³² Stalnaker, J., 2010, 152-153

Mercier's goal was to foster political culture profoundly impacted by the emergence of an opinionated *Tiers-état*, in particular through their viewership. The idea of transformation and physical puissance of the visual was important to the formation of the new citizen, one which was largely part of the rhetoric leading to Revolution. The inclusion of the common man in this experience was part and parcel of the formation of growing Tiers-État as it bolstered its agency within the previously not occupied social and political spheres. Ostensibly, Mercier tried to separate himself from the literary elite of the Ancien Régime during his process of examination and cataloguing of the visuality as it is experienced by the masses. This process was layered through many interpretative glances. For example, when focusing on the visual experience for those in the upper echelons of society Mercier's rhetoric took on a tone derision and contempt. Mercier was not interested in showing or depicting the moralistic transformation of the bourgeoisie and their educative experiences and visual processes. With regard to the public, Mercer sought to create a connection through their perspective and existence under waning power of the absolutist regime. In the case of the working class, Mercier support the individualistic aspects of the visual experience, writ large. Evidence in the *Tableau* suggests that Mercier believed that because transformational visuality is closely tied to the pureness of the soul. However, in doing so he maintained (1) that visual process does not reach its full potential without the stimulus of guidance or instruction, believing that (2) viewership can be morally guided.

On the account of believing that Paris was full of false "mechanical" souls Mercier surmised that the further the individual is from the city life the closer he is being uncorrupted in his viewing experience. In *Dangers* Mercier describes what will befall a

“cœur neuf & innocent” that escapes the Province to visit Paris, stating that their innocence will be swiftly devoured, and instead of authentic emotion they will only find its superficial image hiding under the “mensonge de la coquetterie¹³³”. As a suggestion Mercier refers that the scene could be a play; *Le Père de Province*, which will warn the viewers of these menaces. This again is calls to mind the erasure of the line between reality and theatrical performance. Whereas theatre functions a space that provides a liminal experience, Parisian society in the streets acts as a playhouse of a different kind, where existing social stratification underpins social roles and moral decay is reinforced.

The visual in the *Tableau* can thus be seen as knitting together three spheres: the political, moral, and philosophical, where visibility can be both passive and active in creating a response. To make progress beyond these functions Mercier dreamt of a world where visibility acted as a tool beneficial to community education and cohesion. He perceived the *parterre* as having a role in the transition of power where new establishment of personhood and engagement of absolutist authority clashed. In this fantastic conception, Mercier believed that in witnessing moral actions and beautiful edifices, the free citizens would then want to be good in “une société extrêmement policée”¹³⁴ where the “règles fines toujours observées¹³⁵” take precedence. For this reason, historians like Jeremy Popkin have suggested that Mercier’s writing likens him to the philosophers of the pre-Romantic

¹³³ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome I “Dangers” 20-21

¹³⁴ Mercier, L. -S., 1783, *T.*, Tome I “De la Conversation” 16-18

¹³⁵ Ibid.

generation, where “imagination was, he thought, a more powerful tool for reaching the essence of things...rooted in evidence from everyday life.”¹³⁶

In many ways Mercier took these views into his role as one of the twenty-four members of the Committee of Public Instruction (1793) of the Convention Nationale. Widely supported by Mirabeau and Condorcet, the idea of a robust national and secular education reform became a center of reform and debate. To this movement Mercier contributed the idea of inspiring citizens through sensation and emotion, where he conceived that contagious feelings could bring about personal understanding and enlightenment. Mercier’s goal was to represent society as he saw it, unhindered by expectation and interpretation, indebted to his reader and future public to create a powerful drawing. Therefore, in tracing Mercier’s commitment to authentic descriptions of these experiences, inequalities take the forefront of his commentative view. Pierre Frantz’s interpretative essay on Mercier as an author, *L’Usage du Peuple*, also witnessed this trend, stating that with the thorough examination of the rights of ordinary citizens, Mercier no longer associated them with contamination, adulteration, and debauchery¹³⁷.

In this way, Mercier paved the road for future novelists like Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, and to some extent authors like Georges Perec, who cataloged the details of the daily lives of ordinary citizens through their own specific way of description. With regard to visuality, one can particularly notice similarities in its form and function in Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens* which specifically focus on the urban

¹³⁶ Popkin, J., 1999, 6

¹³⁷ Frantz, Pierre. *L’usage du peuple*. in J.-C. Bonnet (ed.) 55-79

landscape and how it interacts with the city dwellers. However, unlike Baudelaire, Mercier did beautify or embellish the down-trodden, poor, and mud-soaked elements of Parisian life, he instead chose to amplify them to provide an internal gravure that would be so grotesque to the reader's imagination, that they would want to change it.

Section Three: Post-abyssal thinking: Applying B. de Sousa Santos' perspective to Dissect Limitation, Prejudices and Biases in the *Tableau*

Despite Mercier's intention to depict a realistic portrait of all aspects of Parisian life, including the social inequality and maltreatment of the working class, it may be suggested that Mercier's work does not exist beyond the realm of abyssal thinking. This concept, framed by Boaventura de Sousa Santos¹³⁸, aims to link social justice with cognitive justice, contending that that epistemological layer of colonialism endures as a blind spot that functions part of abyssal thinking. This process is characterized by a myopic, homogenous worldview that places Western art and science into the criteria of truth and ideal aesthetics while purposely and effectively suppressing other forms of knowledge, dubbed by scholars as *epistemicide*.

In the *Tableau* there are consistent distinctions and patterns this type of thought that slightly, albeit visibly and deliberately, make their way throughout the thread of his vignettes; a thread reinforces, creates, and builds upon, the impassible divide of civilization and classifications of humans whose world is informed by these different forms of knowledge. This concept and its further scaffolding into Mercier's understanding of

¹³⁸ De Sousa Santos, B. 2007. Beyond Abyssal Thinking: From Global Lines to Ecologies of Knowledges.

knowledge, sensation, and physicality is ruled by a dichotomous understanding of law, violence, and appropriation.

For example, this is particularly noticeable as Mercier compares Parisian second-hand markets to the wild nature of Amazon and the Parisian people to the Chinese, whom he categorizes as the most “meek” and “passive”. Mercier, having never been outside of France makes these assumptions based on the knowledge he believes is true, correct, and acquired from a place of authority. Furthermore, while Mercier, in the introduction, insists that his covers all of Paris, he consciously and purposefully does not explore the congested passageways of the city’s eastern *faubourgs*, an area characterized by lower income wood and furniture craftsmen as well as other artisanal workers.

The limitation in his view does not stop with this omission, it continues in the various remarks and reflections throughout the text. In the example of the beginning two chapters, Mercier compares life in eighteenth century to both the development of ancient Greek civilization and as well as simplicity of different indigenous peoples which rests upon recurring *topoi*.

It is true that Mercier’s *Tableau* is designed to be full of stark contrasts that emphasize dissimilarities and create shock, meant as part of his attempt to captivate the reader and create his own spectacle. However, these intentions do not orthogonally align his chosen illustrations and his ultimate objective. In his intended creation of literary comparisons, the visible line of Mercier’s understanding rests firmly upon the nonexistent and non-dialectical presence of unlawfulness in the world outside of Paris. He creates a clear distinction between his beloved metropolitan city and the “otherworldly” nature of savages and

colonial states which, in the loci of his mind, stay steadfastly as zones of no-mitigation, lacking any sense of political economy, by existing in free-for-all “natural” conditions. These pillars of assumptions become his way of knowing and making judgment of what is moral and immoral; where this lens is the main tool he uses to examine the events around him. For example, in *Coup d’œil général* Mercier boasts that a man does not need to leave Paris in order to encounter people *from other climates*; one can find “Asiatiques couchés toute la journée sur des piles de carreaux”, and the “Japponnais qui se font ouvrir le ventre à la moindre dispute”, the “Esquimaux, qui ignorant le temps où ils vivent”, as well “l’Arabe vagabond battant chaque jour les remparts” and finally, the “Hottentot et l’Indien oisifs sont dans boutiques, dans les rues, dans les cafés. ” His ambitious critique of absolutist societal institutions can only reach so far, as he adopts clear tones of louisquatorzian conception of the common man, the foreigner, and the Other, while simultaneously calling for more active and independent French citizenship. The analysis then creates a necessity for us as scholars to understand and further examine these frameworks when examining his philosophy and works at large. Mercier’s model of the visual is no doubt influenced by these biases, as his brand of *transformative enlightenment* is only accessible to certain individuals within specific social conditions.

Myths of the ancient world captivated eighteenth-century scholars and as a result, references to classical languages occupied a large place in literature, theatrical plays, and salon discussion. In describing Paris, he often compares the city to what he considered places as places at the height of human civilization and classical antiquity. References to Greek and Roman culture, like Athenian customs and public spaces abound in the text and

are central to Mercier's intellectual and moral arguments about Paris. He creates direct comparisons between Paris and classical cities with vignettes like *Colisée*, *La nouvelle Athenes*, *De L'Idole de Paris*, *le Joli* and many others that serve as a place of contrast in his imagination. The commonplaces that he creates in his imagination are formed to create contrasts; *developed* v. *primitive*, *clean* v. *dirty*, *educated* v. *simple*, and inevitably and most strikingly, that of *structure* v. *chaos* and the *civilized* v. the *savage*.

These contrasts exist for him to create a literary effect, to reaffirm his own views and biases, and to reinforce norms. This is where the bias in his rhetoric is most evident; in one example, Mercier describes the Parisian people, comparing them to those in foreign countries stating "Le baton regne à la Chine; c'est la populace la plus timide, la plus lâche & la plus voleuse de l'univers. À Paris, (la populace) elle se disperse devant le bout d'un fusil"¹³⁹ and as well, he states "...c'est que la vie Parisienne est peut-être, dans l'ordre de la nature, comme la vie errante des Sauvages de l'Afrique et de l'Amérique". The idea of the savage/simple man is expressed multiple times as point of juxtaposition.

This développement continues in the next passage, as Mercier tries to explain the bourgeoisie to the reader with stating that "Il ne faut pas plus étonné des recherches du luxe dans le palais de nos Crassus que des raies rouges et bleues que les Sauvages impriment sur leurs membres par incisions."¹⁴⁰ These statements beg the question that asks the reason for their inclusion. As colonial trade loomed large in the European subconscious the Enlightenment dialectic that explored the man in relation to the savage was ubiquitous.

¹³⁹ Mercier, L-S. 1783, *T*. Vol. I, 31

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

They functioned both as criticisms and fetishisms of the Other, natural man, “savage”, or peasant.

One popular 18th century philosopher to contribute such commentary was Rousseau, mostly through the propagation of the idea of the natural man. In fact, Mercier openly parrots Rousseau’s rhetoric, adopting the syllogism that the exotic, country, or provincial, man is truly free from society’s burdens, including the complications of deciding between truths and falsehoods. Following this mode of thinking Mercier reasons that this *being* must be taught the difference in the form of literature or theatre; an idea based upon the premise that *sauvage* or the natural man of the Provence does not prescribe to, and cannot physically understand, commensurable and established ways of knowing. Boaventura de Sousa Santos points out that invariably the ideas based on social contract, or for example Rousseau’s *Seconde Discourse*, are important for what they say but also for what they don’t say. This is because they are distinctly founded upon the European patriarchal ideal that sanctions occupation, defining, and dissecting the Other. In this case, as with other vignettes, the discussion of the Other is just another way of occupying the colonial body and erecting, physically and metaphorically, the personhood of the white male. This imaginative construction for Mercier and other philosophers is the basis upon which they affirmed themselves in relation to the others, a schema that underneath its veneer, is a fight for hegemony.

These discursive optics are also evident in the way that Mercier describes women; specifically, their dress, habits, and how they wear their hair. It becomes a territory of coloniality; a sort of expatriate zone, that in the material sense presents a desire of

possession and conquering. These types of physical descriptions are also evident in the previously mentioned “Petits Negres”, where Mercier commentates on the trend of having young men/children from indigenous areas as muses and servants (the vignette *Petits Negres*). However, while Mercier succeeds in creating a criticism of this perturbed fashion and of the bourgeoisie he, perhaps unwittingly, reinforces this trend by furthering a rhetoric that focuses on differences in physiology, one that describes the boy in the white woman’s arms as, “brûlé par le soleil, il n’en paraît que plus beau...il presse son sein de sa tête lanugineuse appuie ses lèvres sur une bouche de rose, et ses mains d’ébène relèvent la blancheur d’un col éblouissant.¹⁴¹” And while Mercier’s vignette is focused on exposing and vilifying this popular upper-class trend his words and descriptions fixate on material features and physical contrasts that create a sense of romanticism; adjectives like, “dents blanches”, “lèvres épaisses”, “peau satinée”, do not fully accomplish his objective of mockery, but instead, just like the passages that mention the natural hair of country women, create rhetoric that pivots on power and domination.

Borrowing again from Rousseau, Mercier echoes the support of separation from society, civility, and the idea of the natural state is what makes the country man the most viable recipient of philosophy and knowledge. This is further visible within the framework of representation of other populations that in Mercier’s gaze represent the alien. In his writing he purposely falls back on stereotypic tropes to use them as rhetorical devices where the exotic or oriental is always posed as a juxtaposition or comparison to the cultured Parisian. Just like his beloved plays, real humans serve for him as a literary tool,

¹⁴¹ Mercier, L. -S., 1907, *T.*, “Petits Negres” 209

supposedly to incite visual contrast and shock when describing moral authoritativeness. His writing thus lays out the straightforward denial of co-presence, placing distinctly a moral wrong and a right.

In these occurrences, Mercier stays firmly within his prejudiced mindset as an observer from the *petit-bourgeoisie*. In trying to build spectacle, he attempts to create visual hyperbole and exposes patterns of thinking that work to reinforce the social structure of the Old Regime. In reality, Mercier omits large chunks of society by writing them as figurines, stereotypes, and caricatures, being in actuality quite removed from his beloved *concitoyens*.

Recent scholarship of authors, like Dan-el Padilla Peralta, has aimed to move the narrative of antiquity away from its historical whiteness and its classical justifications of all aspects of racialization; slavery, colonialization, fascism and absolutist rule. Mercier, like most scholars of the era, calls on Athens and Rome to be his comparison for the “civility” and “society” of the successful French state where Western civilization is contiguous with the male and white narrative.

Furthermore, I contend that these ideas, coupled with romanticization of colonized peoples, underscore the power that Enlightenment rhetoric had in declaring its supremacy. Even in instances in the *Tableau* the body of the Other, foreigner, enslaved person, indigenous individual, country man, or a female, becomes the metonym for this conquering, being the vehicle used by European man to propagate his thoughts.

This warrants a reframing of Mercier's work both as a philosopher and writer. The application of a post-abyssal narrative is crucial to functional application and method of studying his body of work.

APPENDIX

Potential for Future Research

While this essay concentrated on understanding and dissecting visuality within three categories, (1) *the ethical*, (2) *spectacular and excessive*, (3) and *the artificial*, I will suggest further venues for research regarding Mercier. One school of thought is the further examination of these categories concerning the emergence of Longinian rhetoric and its influence in French society and scholarship during the early modern period. Mercier specifically references the *sublime* several times in the *Tableau* in passages that concern etiquette, city character, philosophy, divinity and others.

As an extension of this thesis, I suggest that further analysis may be conducted that examines the inclusion of the sublime as part of visual process of the common man. The findings could show the influence on this rhetoric on the plays and pamphlets during the Revolution up until the Thermidorian Reaction. This type of rhetoric would be most present in Mercier's later works like *Nouveau Paris*, *La Néologie*, the *Histoire de France* and others. One inquiry to further dissect could address whether the notion of the sublime was used justifying violence.

Another path forward for this research could consist in analyzing the pattern and existence of the chronotope in the *Tableau*. This research could be focused on the changing composition of time-space as Mercier intends to show one still image and changing scenarios in his vignettes as a matter of cause and effect. In addition, another area of study to be examined could be whether or not the chronotope exists within the context of his

abyssal thinking which will determine if time moves differently for the individual outside of Paris.

Limitations: A Study of Translation

Throughout the 18th century for political reasons, Mercier's work was condemned by the French court. Afterwards, due to censorship during Napoleon's rule and onward it remained largely in small editions and in private libraries. However, during Mercier's lifetime his work saw grandiose popularity abroad in places like Russia and in the Americas. Though, each edition carried a new meaning; translators often took special precautions when addressing the audience in the target language. Despite early translate versions, the work was largely forgotten by modernity until historian Jean-Claude Bonnet and other collaborators published the *Tableau* and *Le Nouveau Paris* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1994) as well as printing a large volume of critical essays on Mercier. As J. Popkin suggests, this is the point of departure for any scholar of Mercier (*Louis-Sebastien Mercier (1740-1814): Un hérétique en littérature* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1995). This event coupled with widespread access to information online has led a resurgence of interest in Mercier's work.

I suggest that these versions along with their 18th century counterparts present an interesting line of inquiry for further study.

For example, Kristen Block, a historian of the early modern Atlantic World, points out how small disparities in translation are highly indicative of the affirmation of power; Mercier's utopian novel *L'An 2440, rêve s'il en fut jamais* (1771), set 700 years ahead, has a section that describes the protagonist walking through a futuristic hall of

monuments dedicated to justice. The protagonist follows a compendium of statues, with the last being of Toussaint Louverture, dubbed by Mercier as the Avenger of the New World. The original text reads

“In going from this place, I observed toward the right, on a magnificent pedestal, the figure of a negro; his head was bare, his arm extended, his eye fierce, his attitude noble and commanding; round him were spread the broken relics of twenty scepters; and at his feet I read these words: To the avenger of the new world.”

while certain American translations read,

“ it was the figure of an **American** raised upon a pedestal; his head was bare, his eyes expressed a haughty courage, his attitude was noble and commanding, and his arm was extended and pointing to the shattered remains of twenty sceptres which lay at his feet; over the pedestal this inscription was engraven: to the avenger of the new world.”

In this way the methods of translation in Mercier’s work can be studied in historical context which signify the role of fear and power in political subversion where heroism had no place for those who were not white Americans. This inquiry is interesting and worth pursuing regarding translations of versions of Mercier and their interpretation by modern scholars.

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