



Article

Impressions on the Evolution of Naturalism: Interiority, Exteriority, and the International/Interdisciplinary Nature of Naturalism

Cameron Dodworth

Department of English, Methodist University, Fayetteville, NC 28311, USA; cdodworth@methodist.edu

Received: 29 May 2019; Accepted: 16 July 2019; Published: 23 July 2019



Abstract: Naturalism, as a movement and genre, was heavily influenced by the work of Émile Zola, particularly by his essay, *Le roman expérimental* (1880). However, despite Zola's strong influence, Naturalism was also significantly influenced by the ideas of others that go beyond and even predate those of Zola. As a result, Naturalism is generally accepted as having originated in France in the late 19th century, and having extended into the early 20th century, however it soon became an international as well as an interdisciplinary movement and genre. More specific examples of this international and interdisciplinary network of Naturalism can be seen in the writing of Zola, Joris-Karl Husymans, and Oscar Wilde, as well as the painting of Cécile Douard, Vincent van Gogh, Gustave Caillebotte, and Claude Monet. Furthermore, these examples reveal that Naturalism evolved into a more interior branch, as well as a more exterior branch, and they also reveal some strong evolutionary links between not only Naturalism and Impressionism, but also between Naturalism and Decadence/Aestheticism. These latter links have seen little discussion in relation to Naturalism, particularly on the basis of the roles that interiority and exteriority play in the international and interdisciplinary expressions of Naturalism.

Keywords: realism; naturalism; impressionism; Émile Zola; fin-de-siècle

In his 2007 article, "Sailing Under False Colors: Naturalism Revisted" Pieter Borghart accurately observes that "apart from the obvious etymological origin of the term *Naturalism* denoting a profound interest in the study of nature, its precise meaning in literary studies is still under debate" (Borghart 2007). This might also be extended to the study of visual art, as many of the same principles that govern the Naturalism of literature are present in the Naturalism of visual art. Borghart, while acknowledging the imprecision of the term, goes on to paraphrase David Baguley in stating that there is at least some consistency in the following viewpoints:

"Naturalism is often identified with at least one of three disciplines out of which historically the movement has grown: philosophy, science, and art. In the first case, Naturalism is broadly defined in terms of the positivist concept of "materialism"; the second definition can be traced back to Zola's manifesto *Le roman expérimental* (1879) and regards the naturalist text as a scientific experiment. In the last instance, Naturalism is merely reduced to the aesthetics of realistic imitation. A fourth and fairly common definition tends to identify this movement with the scandalous subject matter of some naturalist novels." (Borghart 2007)

These are certainly acceptable parameters, particularly in terms of the acknowledgment of the influence of Émile Zola. Fittingly, Borghart goes on to paraphrase Yves Chevrel in stating that "[he] tentatively defines Naturalism as a Pan-European literary movement, consisting of an international corpus of texts, published between 1870 and 1910, and inspired by Zola's oeuvre" (Borghart 2007).

Gabriel P. Weisberg also remarks upon the influence of Zola, while also characterizing Naturalism as a multinational genre, as he argues that “despite national boundaries, painters used a set of shared characteristics in establishing Naturalist imagery, which allowed for an interchangeable pattern or a ‘formula’ for the construction of such works. Among the traits were the isolation and sharpening of factual details, which were akin to Emile Zola’s method of highlighting facts to assist in creating a textual image” (Weisberg 1992).

Borghart, Chevrel, and Weisberg do well to point out that, even in acknowledging the seminal influence of France, Naturalism exists not only as a multinational genre, but that genre is also the result of a multinational movement in both literature and art. Furthermore, Naturalism was reproduced with enough consistency in methodology that referring to the genre as having been the result of a legitimate movement is justified. Weisberg writes of a “highly standardized, impersonal attitude, which made it possible for painters to share their method with other artists. This sharing meant that a style could be readily learned and passed on to others in an effort to continue a Naturalist outlook over a long period of time” (Weisberg 1992). Weisberg also observes that “[t]he Naturalists continually exchanged ideas across boundaries, providing a means by which their visual messages could be understood” (Weisberg 1992). Again, these traversed boundaries were not only international, but were also interdisciplinary.

In Zola’s lengthy essay, *Le roman expérimental* (1880), he sets down many of the principles of “l’évolution naturaliste qui emporte la siècle” (Zola 1880). However, Zola was not merely articulating “l’idée d’une littérature déterminée par la science” (Zola 1880), but also the idea of a *visual art* determined by science. As this current essay will address, a direct connection of influence clearly existed between Zola and Vincent van Gogh, acting as a specific example of a sharing of style across international and interdisciplinary borders. Yet, Borghart argues that a strict adherence to the influence of Zola in defining the genre of Naturalism is problematic, and as his argument progresses, he makes some perceptive observations of aspects of Naturalism that are clearly independent of Zola, and that sometimes even predate Zola.¹ Clearly, the Naturalist genre became more dynamic as it evolved over time and across other disciplines, but many of the principles that Zola articulated are still recognizable: “En somme, toute l’opération consiste à prendre les faits dans la nature, puis à étudier le mécanisme des faits, en agissant sur eux par les modifications des circonstances et des milieux, sans jamais s’écarter des lois de la nature. Au bout, il y a la connaissance de l’homme, dans son action individuelle et sociale” (Zola 1880).

Naturalism truly was an international and interdisciplinary movement and genre, as its influence spread throughout Europe and beyond. This can be seen in the novels of Zola in France, as well as of Arthur Morrison in England. Such influence is also evident in the paintings of the French artist, Jules Bastien-Lepage, as his style of Naturalism either directly or indirectly influenced essentially all of the Naturalist artists in England. Other networks of French Naturalist influence in Britain during the last decades of the 19th century include the artists of the Newlyn Art Colony, which was founded by English artist Stanhope Alexander Forbes in Cornwall in 1884, and the New English Art Club (NEAC), which was founded in London in 1886. Hubert von Herkomer and George Clausen were also influential Naturalist artists in Britain. Naturalism’s influence in America can also be seen in the writing of Theodore Dreiser and Stephen Crane. However, this particular discussion of Naturalism will focus almost exclusively on France, though Vincent van Gogh will take us on a slight excursion only as far as the Low Countries. Furthermore, this discussion will focus mainly on Naturalism as a genre, though reference to Naturalism as a movement has already been made. Émile Zola and Vincent van Gogh certainly embraced Naturalism as a movement in their artistic expressions, but the analysis of the other main writers and artists in this discussion will be performed on the basis of their connection

¹ “As to the question of periodization, there is little discussion among specialists (e.g., Becker; Pagès) about the proposed advent or *terminus a quo* of European Naturalism (1865–1870): the publication of the first novels by the De Goncourt brothers (Germinie Lacerteux, 1865)” (Borghart 212).

to the genre of Naturalism. In the interest of a narrow scope on which to expand with a sufficient level of specificity, this particular study of Naturalism will focus—with some ancillary exceptions—on Émile Zola's *Germinal* (1885)², Joris-Karl Husymans's *À Rebours* (1884), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Cécile Douard's *Coal Gleaners* (1891), Vincent van Gogh's *The Potato Eaters* (1885), Gustave Caillebotte's *Floor Scrapers* (1875), *Interior, Woman at a Window* (1880), and *Young Man at His Window* (1875), and also Claude Monet's *Morning Haze* (1888) and his *Grain Stacks* series (1890–1891).

As the exploration of these texts and paintings progresses, at least a partial revision of the genre of 19th-century Naturalism will emerge. Primarily, Naturalism will be revealed as having tendencies toward two branches of development: interior Naturalism and exterior Naturalism. Furthermore, Naturalism's thorough correlation to Impressionism will be made apparent through the study of those branches. Interior Naturalism and exterior Naturalism will be seen as intertwined to the point of near inseparability, and therefore both will be demonstrated as existing well within the genres of Naturalism as well as Impressionism, by extension rendering the two genres nearly inseparable. This discussion of the interiority and exteriority of Naturalism will also reveal a *de facto* correlation between Naturalism and the Decadent movement that often sought to distance itself from Naturalism. Clearly, the exploration of Naturalism's connection to Impressionism is not necessarily new, but the revelation of Naturalism's connection to Decadence and Aestheticism on the basis of these branches of interiority and exteriority indeed does justify a revision of the Naturalist genre, particularly in terms of raising the question: how truly natural *is* Naturalism?

As a movement and genre, Naturalism not only experienced its own evolution in terms of many of the non-Zolaesque qualities that Borghart explores—as well as the interiority and exteriority that this current discussion explores—but Naturalism was also very much a part of the overall evolution of 19th-century art. After all, Weisberg observes that Naturalist artists have traditionally been “[d]erided for following what was seen as a literal path devoid of imagination, these painters and their works were overlooked by collectors and critics who believed that the avant-garde—those artists in total opposition to an academic tradition—came to full ascendancy at the turn of the twentieth century” (Weisberg 1992). Weisberg also claims that “[w]orks not conforming to the stylistic traits of nascent modernism either have been banished from view or languish in artists' studios (or worse), far from the eyes of contemporary critics and modern-day historians”, as the artists of such works “are now found in the margins of art history—if at all” (Weisberg 1992). Impressionism—and even more so, its uninventively-named progeny: Post-Impressionism—is a genre thoroughly acknowledged and legitimated as a stage in the artistic evolution towards Modernism. However, Naturalism was by no means supplanted by genres more traditionally viewed as having possessed “stylistic traits of nascent modernism”, as Weisberg states that “the movement was not immediately pushed aside by more modernist styles” (Weisberg 1992). John Plotz agrees, while applying the point more specifically to *fin-de-siècle* literature: “in fact naturalist or partly naturalist novels are not anomalous at all in the period, nor are they mere weigh stations between the reigns of realism and modernism” (Plotz 2015). By revealing Naturalism as having been inseparably intertwined with Impressionism, Naturalism's own legitimacy as an integral part of the evolution towards Modernism will be made clear.

In terms of the origin of the evolution of Naturalism, specifically scientific naturalism began decades before Naturalism proper, even in the field of visual art, as the task of illustrating discovered species and their habitats was useful as a scientific tool as early as the 18th century, long before Charles Darwin's publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Eighteenth-century naturalists such as Leclerc, de Buffon, de Monet, de Lamarck, Cuvier, and Saint-Hilaire used naturalist observations to formulate their theories as early as mid-century. Robert Herbert observes of the following century that, “by mid-century, the model of investigation derived from the natural sciences had become all-pervasive.

² The discussion of Zola's *Germinal* will by no means be performed on the basis of its acting as the quintessential example of the Naturalist novel, but rather will act as a specific example of the direct connection of influence on Vincent van Gogh by Zola.

It thoroughly penetrated the arts, and lay behind the rejection of romanticism. Flaubert and Duranty stressed the need for the author to remove himself from the role of editor or judge of the action he described, and to acquire instead the precision and neutrality of the scientist" (Herbert 1988). One must always remember that, acknowledging the inevitable changes in Naturalist philosophy, this theme of scientific observation is at the root of the Naturalist movement. Even Zola, the quintessential Naturalist writer, has a method of scientific observation at heart in the settings and characters that he depicts in his novels. Concerning *Germinal*, F.W.J. Hemmings writes of Zola that he was able to make firsthand observations of a strike that broke out at Anzin (one of the biggest collieries in the north of France), just a few weeks before he began writing his novel. "Zola was able to visit the district and mingle with the strikers. He saw for himself the conditions in which they worked underground and in which they were housed on the surface; he was able to observe the stigmata of malnutrition and of occupational diseases, and the stunting of their spirit by the ugliness of the surroundings in which they lived" (Hemmings 1953). One can see the effects of these observations in Zola's early descriptions of Catherine, as she was "still very slim at fifteen years of age, she had delicate arms, whose milky whiteness contrasted with her face, which had already become sallow from the constant use of soft soap. A final yawn made her open her somewhat large mouth and show her teeth, which were splendid, albeit set in pale gums that indicated chlorosis" (Zola 1914). Catherine's physical sexuality is even negated by the conditions of the mines, as Étienne, when first meeting her, "kept looking at Catherine, who, with her chloritic complexion, showed whitely in the gloom; and he could not tell her age: he took her to be about twelve, she seemed so slight and thin" (Zola 1914). Such description is reminiscent of a scientist observing the pigment-less insects and reptiles that populate the deep recesses of underground caves. Even Catherine's complexion is consistent with her diet almost exclusively of bread, as any doctor might deduce that she is malnourished and iron-deficient after reading the above passages. Fittingly, Hemmings observes, via a disease metaphor, that Zola "preferred, as he would continue all his life to prefer, 'a "scientific" method in which society is conceived as a harmonious entity and the criticism applied to society formulated as a struggle against the diseases attacking its organic unity, a struggle against the "undesirable features" of capitalism"' (György Lukács, quoted in Hemmings 1953).

Perhaps, at this point, Naturalism might sound decidedly more militant in contrast to Impressionism, but with further analysis, strong points of connection between Naturalism and Impressionism are revealed. For example, one can sense the theme of physical exteriority in relation to the influence of the physical sciences on Naturalism, and also in relation to Impressionism's focus on light and its effects on physical surface. Impressionism's focus on contemporary issues such as emerging technology, civil reformation, emerging social and class issues, and images of work and leisure are all consistent with that of Naturalism, though one could argue that Impressionism's frequent focus on light and the attempt to depict a fleeting moment in time is less agenda-laden than many Naturalistic representations. After all, how could anyone read the melodramatic misery of *Germinal* or view the bleak darkness of Cécile Douard's *Coal Gleaners* (Figure 1) without assuming that there is a social agenda at stake? The extreme physical toll of the labor involved, inhumane poverty, unhealthy environment, and animalization of men and women alike are common themes in both representations of mineworkers.

With regards to Impressionism, there are several fleeting moments in *Germinal* that have a tendency to hover brilliantly before the reader. Zola uses in-depth descriptions of oftentimes rather complicated scenes in terms of the action that they contain and the sheer power of the pregnant moment. As Étienne and the mob move from place to place; as the soldiers fire on the miners on strike; as the old horse, Battle, gasps for a last drowning breath: including many others, these are all very picturesque, fleeting moments of the novel that are temporarily static in their description. Of course, perhaps with the exception of some of Édouard Manet's work, the subject matter depicted in these picturesque moments of *Germinal* is inconsistent with that of Impressionist painters, in general. However, perhaps the assignation of a social agenda to Naturalistic works is unfair to the scientifically-impartial intent of

the Naturalist philosophy? Borghart argues that Naturalism “seems to rely, above all, on a textual method—a common poetics—which aims at mapping out every facet of contemporary society as scientifically and objectively as possible, regardless of ideological preoccupations or invariable thematic topics” (Borghart 2007). So even though *Germinal* is fraught with human misery, and even though Douard’s *Coal Gleaners*—which looks to be a scene taken directly out of Zola’s novel—is executed with an almost monochromatic palette, looks like some sort of bleak, post-apocalyptic landscape, and almost breaks one’s back just to look at the strain on the bodies of the women depicted in the painting; Zola and Douard are merely executing, as Hemmings would argue, “a work which is a masterpiece of realist [art] but which, being carefully and intentionally neutral, evades the immediate significance of the social issues while it makes their existence blindingly plain” (Hemmings 1953). Weisberg would agree, claiming that “[t]he successful rustic or urban Naturalist veered away from socially upsetting themes or subjects charged with radical implications” (Weisberg 1992). Naturalism is, in general, more hard-hitting than Impressionism, but much of the respective intent of each movement is not that different from the other: the attempt to depict a revealing, illuminating (pun intended), natural representation of subject matter with particular focus on its physical exterior.

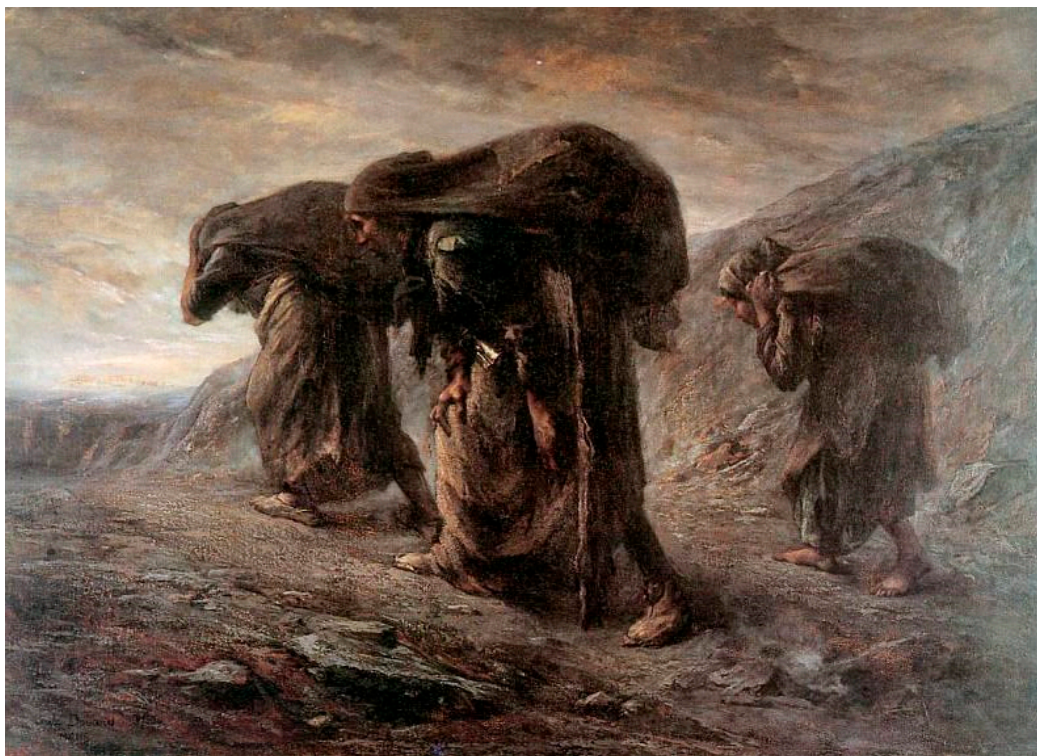


Figure 1. Cécile Douard, *Coal Gleaners*, 1891, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Mons, Belgium.³

The last passage taken from Hemmings uses the term ‘realist’ by no accident. In fact, Naturalism is generally accepted as a derivative of Realism. Using language similar to that used by Borghart and Hemmings to describe Naturalism, and even Impressionism, in the paragraph above, Robert Rosenblum explains that “the Realist impulse to record the facts of a here-and-now world continued to dominate painters working in the most adventurous styles of Impressionism” (Rosenblum 1984). He continues, observing that “the range of subject matter, from miserable city slums to fashionable boulevards, from the regimented activities of schools and sweatshops to the leisurely movements of cafés and wealthy drawing rooms, also expanded to match the complexities of nineteenth-century

³ All images in this essay are used under the public domain.

life” (Rosenblum 1984). Shedding light on the distinction and similarities between Naturalism and Impressionism, Rosenblum explains how the two schools indeed are branches that grew from Realism.

“The category of Naturalism, although generally implying a record, even an exposé, of the darker facts of the human condition in the later nineteenth century, is often used interchangeably with the category of Realism, not only by the painters, writers, and critics of the 1870s and 1880s, but by later historians.⁴ If such a distinction can serve any purpose at all, in the midst of the semantic confusion surrounding an umbrella word like Realism, it might be used to define the branch of Realism that concentrates on the reportorial account of lower-class life in a more literal style, as opposed to the branch of Realism that became known as Impressionism, which, in its pursuit of a more ephemeral and subjective experience of the seen world, evolved a style that tended to transform the slice of life selected by the painter into something that was more clearly art than social documentation.” (Rosenblum 1984)

Perhaps it is indeed the tendency towards physical objectivity in Naturalism and the tendency towards what might be perceived as a psychological subjectivity in Impressionism that really distinguishes the two genres from each other, but one also gets the sense that there is an aesthetic distinction at work, as well. Herbert argues that “a naturalist did not praise the environment he wrote about or painted, but treated its homely ordinariness as the only proper setting for his art” (Herbert 1988). However, Naturalism, aesthetically-speaking, oftentimes seems to go beyond the ‘ordinary.’ Returning to the tone of some of the excerpts from Hemmings and Zola, one can actually observe an aesthetic of ugliness in Naturalist depictions of subject matter. The world that Zola creates in *Germinal* projects a significant level of physical ugliness. The men and women in the novel are physical, sexual beings, as they are constantly off in the woods and by the piles of cinders having sexual intercourse, yet this seems ironic in light of the desexualized description of Catherine in the first two excerpts from Zola that have been explored. The physical features of the miners are distorted, scarred, and diseased, and the living conditions that they endure, especially during the strike, are no less than subhuman. One can almost smell the stench of cooked onions and poor hygiene emanating from the pages of the novel. The setting of the novel is bleak and dark, again like Douard’s painting. This is not a study of the effect of light, but rather an exploration of the horrors of darkness. Consistent with this methodology of Zola, David Trotter argues that “Naturalism does not delight, or arouse or broaden moral sympathies. It does not frighten or enrage. Naturalism makes you sick” (Trotter 2000). The aesthetic is not of beauty, but rather of ugliness. By relying on the principles of Naturalism, we are meant to trust that the ugliness of this physical world is natural and “real”, while beauty is just not indigenous to this natural habitat of ugliness. But then one must ask the question that is, as we will eventually see, at the very heart of Naturalism: Is this truly *natural*? The implications of the world depicted in *Germinal* are not forced upon us by any overt social agenda on the part of Zola, but the implications are observable all the same. After all, is ugliness truly indigenous to the coal country of France? Had it always been a black, bleak, scorched habitat since the beginning of time? The answer, of course, is: no. It was only by the physical manipulations of humankind that this exterior habitat of ugliness was created. Therefore, even though Zola’s intent is a scientific, objective exploration of the physical habitat of the miner, this habitat is no more natural than a contrived depiction of Monet’s cultivated gardens at Giverny.

Edgar Degas, like Gustave Caillebotte, is generally accepted as an artist that participated in both the realm of Impressionism as well as Naturalism. Quite revealingly, he defined his art in the following terms: “A painting is a thing which requires as much trickery, malice, and vice as the perpetration of a crime; make counterfeits and add a touch of nature” (Edgar Degas, quoted in Herbert 1988). This makes

⁴ Weisberg also observes that “writers during the 1860s and 1870s often used the concepts of Realism and Naturalism interchangeably, and critics and artists were similarly unable to isolate the characteristics of each tendency” (Weisberg 1992).

painting sound more like the work of a con-artist than that of a scientific naturalist, but perhaps Degas is revealing—granted, rather cynically—the real “truth” and “naturalness” of visual art as a whole, including the presumed objective and scientific approach of Naturalism. After all, it is well-known that almost all paintings belonging to either the label of Impressionism, Naturalism, or both, were executed completely, or at least partially, in studio. Even the majority of the most well-known and romanticized *en plein air* painters throughout history would perform touch-ups in studio. As a result—and as will be discussed in relation to Caillebotte later in this essay—the illusion of the physical exterior in *en plein air* works is complicated by the interiority of the artist’s studio. Essentially, observed and presumably objective exteriority is complicated by the artist’s subjective and interiorized revisions. Furthermore, the level of nature taken directly from the source must then be questioned not only in the genre of Naturalism, but also in visual art as a whole. However, this is especially relevant to Naturalism, because, beneath the physical surface of this objective, scientific, naturalist intent, lies a decidedly unnatural element of artifice, sleight-of-hand, and subjectively psychological manipulation. Weisberg observes, in reference to this dilemma, that for Naturalist artists, “the suggestion of offhand, unposed reality was quite a painstaking process. In essence, artists became explorers in their studios, *learning to produce objective, focused images*” (my emphasis, [Weisberg 1992](#)). Naturalism is caught up in a paradoxical duality of subjectivity and objectivity in this subjective fabrication of objectivity, in-studio.

Vincent van Gogh was well aware of this element of “counterfeit” that Degas so bluntly reveals in reference to visual art. Returning to a discussion of the quintessential Naturalist, Judy Sund reveals that van Gogh “recognized early on that for all of the author’s stress on documentation, Zola’s prose passages rarely were literal transcriptions of ‘reality.’ Van Gogh was impressed by the fact that Zola as author did not ‘hold up a mirror to things’ but instead ‘poeticized’, manipulating his subjects to a great effect” ([Sund 1992](#)). Perhaps we can read the term “poeticized” as a euphemism for Degas’s “counterfeit”. Van Gogh’s participation in Naturalism was neither deliberately objective nor necessarily scientific. Likely due to the fact that his methods no less than sprang directly from those of Zola, van Gogh’s Naturalism reads much like a visual representation of the scenes and characters from *Germinal*, with his own unique spin on them.

Van Gogh, like Zola, experienced firsthand the misery of the plight of the miners. However, as Zola sought to make his observations as an unbiased scientific naturalist performing a more exteriorized, physical study, van Gogh practically immersed himself in the mining community, performing a more subjective, interiorized study. In his 20s, as a probational lay preacher, Vincent moved to the Borinage coal-mining region of Belgium. According to Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson, van Gogh, in an almost Christ-like fashion, “moved into a hut drearier than the hut of the meanest miner” ([Hanson and Hanson 1955](#)).

“He gave away all that he had—it was little enough, but he gave it away—his bed, his few francs, all his clothes. He dressed himself in sackcloth, slept on the mud floor of the hut, lived on scraps of bread. He went down the mine, enduring the terrors, the discomforts that made up the miners’ daily life; he came up, like them, with his face black with coal dust; he left it so—he was not going to insult them and God with the white face of a man who preached but did no work.” ([Hanson and Hanson 1955](#))

As a result of being so immersed in this culture, there were “obvious signs that he was identifying himself increasingly with the miners—not now in appearance and style of living, but even more dangerously by taking their side politically” ([Hanson and Hanson 1955](#)). Van Gogh, in his drive to infiltrate the political and psychological interior of the world that he intended to study, seems to have transgressed the (apparently) fundamentally Naturalist principle of scientific objectivity. One might also assume that this effect of political alliance was achieved not just as a result of his immersion into the mining way of life, but also as a result of his immersion into Realist literature—such as George Eliot, Charles Dickens, and Harriet Beecher Stowe—and French Naturalist literature—such as Guy de Maupassant, Paul Alexis, and especially Émile Zola. Sund argues that it was “Zola’s fiction that

Van Gogh had in mind when, in 1885, he allied a group of peasant portraits he had made to Zola's descriptions of miners in the newly published *Germinal*" (Sund 1992). As evidenced by a 15 May, 1885 letter to his brother, Theo, Vincent van Gogh indeed began reading *Germinal* almost immediately after finishing his first version of *The Potato Eaters*, but still in the midst of this multitude of peasant portraits and studies that were very similar in style to *The Potato Eaters* (Van Gogh 1885b). The strained, distorted physiognomies of the figures with their unmistakably Zolaesque complexions, combined with the dingy palette and dark, cramped settings, are very familiar to the reader of *Germinal*. It becomes very clear that this particular novel of Zola had a direct influence on the painter during this period. Even van Gogh remarks of *Germinal* that, as soon as he received a copy, he "started to read it at once. I have read about fifty pages, and think it splendid; I once travelled through these same parts on foot. / Enclosed is a sketch of a head, which I just brought home". A few lines below he would also remark that "I hope to go and paint the miner's heads someday" (Van Gogh 1885b).

As Sund observes, "Van Gogh had adopted a high-keyed palette that was not only inspired by his experience of avant-garde Parisian painting, but encouraged by his desire to formulate a visual equivalent to the verbal 'richness' of Naturalist literature" (Sund 1992). As a result, he reconfigured his conception of what Realism entailed, morphing his style into one that was recognizably influenced by Zola, but also decidedly his own.

[Van Gogh] threw overboard his views about realism; he forgot his chastisement of the painters at The Hague for working in their studios; realism, he now told [his brother] Theo, "that is, exact drawing and local color, leads to a kind of uncertainty and narrow-mindedness. There are other and better things than literal truth". He abandoned his careful, labored paintings and struck out at a single comprehensive impression. He knew the peasants by heart, he had painted them dozens of times; he knew their cottages. (Hanson and Hanson 1955)

The language that the Hansons use above not only echoes Impressionism—a genre of painting that, at least to some extent, van Gogh both enacted and reacted against in terms of stylistic method—but it also somewhat reconciles some of the problematic issues that we have discovered in the Naturalist philosophy. According to van Gogh, literal / "real" / "natural" truth in Naturalism is, in a way, counterproductive. Perhaps van Gogh felt that the branch of Naturalism that dwelt on photographic style in representation was missing something essentially Naturalistic: that being a meaning or poetics that transcends not only the subject matter and the way that that subject matter is represented, but more specifically how that subject matter is stylistically depicted on the artistic surface itself. Therefore, photographic exactitude in artistic style is, according to van Gogh, philosophically inhibiting.

The Hansons observe van Gogh's efforts in terms of artistic philosophy in their discussion of his motivation for painting *The Potato Eaters*, consistently using language that not only reflects the artifice discussed in relation to Degas, but also that reflects the far more interiorized, subjective, psychological strain of Naturalism:

"He painted his "Potato Eaters" by heart "in the sense of using my imagination". The labored brushwork fell away into strong, sweeping strokes. "I want to make it *live*", he said; and he did. The subject is not a pleasing one, the heads have a suspicion of caricature, the monotonous tone ("the color of a good dusty potato") gives an effect of morbidity, the figures are sometimes preposterous, but the picture, though a failure as a painting, has life. It has also strong individuality; decidedly it had not been painted before". (Hanson and Hanson 1955)

The borderline caricature quality of the painting is difficult to deny, but the representations of the five peasants that van Gogh uses in the painting were based on the many study heads that he had executed during and shortly after his time in Nuenen. According to Sund, van Gogh "declared himself willing to forsake exactitude in favor of 'sentiment' and a truth to nature that was *felt* rather than optically precise" (Sund 1992), again echoing some of the sentient philosophies of Impressionism. The subjective, optically-imprecise element of *The Potato Eaters* (Figure 2) is perhaps also a result of the

fact that, as the Hansons observe, “the interior he painted from memory. / From memory! Here was a revolution indeed” (Hanson and Hanson 1955). Therefore, one would assume that the hovel-like environment of the cottage is a stylized representation, or even an amalgamation, of the interiors of the many poverty-stricken homes that van Gogh encountered while living in the Borinage and Nuenen. Also, the influence of *Germinal* is observable in the obligatory cups of coffee and the high-carb, low-nutrient diet that—instead of by bread—is represented by potatoes, and the effects of such a diet are noticeable in the complexions and overall physiognomies of the peasant figures. According to Sund, van Gogh acknowledged “that the heads [of the peasants] probably would be considered ‘unfinished’ or ‘ugly’ by most” (Sund 1992). Sund also argues that, “in a conscious attempt at synesthesia, Van Gogh sought to use color and texture to evoke not only the look, but the *smell* of peasant life—smoke, cooking odors, crops, manure” (Sund 1992). Van Gogh himself would write that “[i]f a peasant painting smells of bacon, smoke, potato steam, fine—that’s not unhealthy—if a stable reeks of manure—all right, that’s what a stable is all about—if a field has the smell of ripe corn or potatoes or of guano and manure—that’s properly healthy” (Van Gogh 1885a). These efforts of visual-olfactory synesthesia are, of course, reminiscent of the smells of cooked onions, coal smoke, and poorly-washed bodies that enjoy a strong olfactory presence in *Germinal*. Despite Zola’s apparent efforts to focus on a scientifically objective study of physical exteriority in his Naturalism, many scenes and images from *Germinal* betray a more interiorized, almost psychological intimacy, such as the multiple sexual encounters, the compacted living conditions, and of course the setting of the uncomfortable and claustrophobic interiors of the mines.



Figure 2. Vincent van Gogh, *The Potato Eaters*, 1885, oil on canvas, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

Among Zola, and the other decidedly Naturalist French writers that van Gogh read extensively, was J.K. Huysmans; a writer that, in his early career, formed a close friendship and philosophical alliance with Émile Zola, but as his own writing progressed, became more and more frustrated with some of the fundamental tenets of Naturalism that Zola held so dear. Sund observes that van Gogh “would always categorize [Huysmans] as a Naturalist, though Van Gogh can hardly have remained oblivious to Huysmans’s clear break from the movement with the publication of *A Rebours*, the quintessential Decadent novel” (Sund 1992). Sund makes a good point, because, as will soon be

discussed, *À Rebours* is, at its very foundation, a reaction against the Naturalism of Zola, even to the extent that the English translation of the title has changed from *Against the Grain* to the perhaps more fitting *Against Nature*. But perhaps van Gogh's retention of the Naturalist label of Huysmans is not so much a case of obliviousness as it is a reasoned and insightful definition of Huysmans's *de facto* method, regardless of any genre that the writer sought to react against. Before we explore this possibility in terms of *À Rebours*, perhaps it would be illuminating to explore some of the Naturalist aspects of arguably the one novel that can rival Huysmans's novel as enjoying the renown of being considered as the 'quintessential Decadent novel': Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891).

Wilde's novel might also be considered a reaction to—yet a *de facto* participation in—the Naturalist philosophy. This paradox can be most effectively represented by Lord Henry, when he states, “[b]eing natural is simply a pose, and the most irritating pose I know” (Wilde 1985). Ironically, Lord Henry—and even more so, the actual painting of Dorian—is the most blatant example of Naturalism in the novel. As irritating as it might be, Naturalism is the pose that Lord Henry strikes most often. Lord Henry is a Naturalist, in the sense that “[h]e had been always enthralled by the methods of natural science” (Wilde 1985). This is consistent with the fact that, in many ways, science had a major influence on Wilde. Heather Seagroatt observes that “[s]everal recent critics have shown that Wilde was not only conversant with scientific theory, he was keenly interested in many of Victorian sciences' most pressing questions. Philip Smith, Michael Helfand, and Bruce Haley argue that although literary critics overlook his engagement with scientific issues and discourses, science played a crucial role in Wilde's aesthetic theory” (Seagroatt 1998). Wilde constructs Lord Henry's relationship with Dorian as a scientific experiment: “the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions; and certainly Dorian Gray was a subject made to his hand, and seemed to promise rich and fruitful results” (Wilde 1985). This is, of course, reminiscent of the presumably failed social experiment that Des Esseintes performed on the young boy, Auguste, in J.K. Huysmans's *À Rebours*. Also, if Lord Henry is a Naturalist in the scientific sense, then Basil Hallward—the composer of the painting of Dorian—is most certainly a Naturalist painter. Each in their own way, Basil and Lord Henry “paint” Dorian into a Naturalist pose; both of them figuratively do so, and of course Basil does so literally.

Concerning the fate and symbolic significance of his character, Dorian Gray, Oscar Wilde writes in *De Profundis*: “[i]s not He who made misery wiser than thou art?” a phrase which when I wrote it seemed to me little more than a phrase: a great deal of it is hidden away in the note of Doom that like a purple thread runs through the gold cloth of Dorian Gray . . . At every single moment of one's life one is what one is going to be no less than what one has been. Art is a symbol, because man is a symbol” (Wilde [1948] 1999). This passage makes it very clear that Dorian's fate was set; his Doom was inevitable. Wilde comes to the realization in *De Profundis* that “the artistic life is simple self-development” (Wilde [1948] 1999). If man is a symbol, then Dorian Gray is most assuredly a symbol, as well, and this condition is worsened when he takes on the persona of art in the novel. Man is a symbol of self-development. Man suffers, experiences misery, and is the wiser for it. The life of man runs like a thread through the cloth of life, and misery makes its mark on the body and soul of man. Man is a symbol of observable misery; a true-to-life representation of the Naturalism of visual art. Man's Nature is to suffer and to self-develop through that suffering, and like a portrait of Naturalism, man bears the interior/psychological and exterior/physical marks of life as a symbol of knowledge and misery. Not a pretty picture, but again, ugliness has its place in the Aestheticism of Oscar Wilde just as it has its place in the Naturalism of visual art. The scarred, disfigured, sickly, subhuman transmutations that the picture of Dorian endures throughout Wilde's novel are reminiscent of the scarred, disfigured, sickly, subhuman characters of *Germinal*. The difference is that the characters of Zola can be read as having been socially and even morally *victimized*, while the social and moral transgressions of Dorian that mark his portrait are presumably a result of his having been the *victimizer*.

The influence of *À Rebours* on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is unmistakable, as even within the world of Wilde's novel, Dorian is directly influenced by the “yellow book” written by Huysmans. Wilde's

narrator describes the book as the story of a “wonderful young Parisian, in whom the romantic and the scientific temperaments were so strangely blended, became [to Dorian] a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it” (Wilde 1985). Eventually the reader is informed that “Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book. There were moments when he looked on evil simply as a mode through which he could realize his conception of the beautiful” (Wilde 1985). It is this privileging of living life through the senses and using life merely as a vehicle through which to experience aesthetic pleasure that parallels the attempts at scientific, objective observations of social squalor that came to be such an essential part of the Naturalist philosophy of Zola.

Huysmans, in his Preface to *À Rebours*, written 20 years after the novel, complains that Naturalism “was destined to perform the never-to-be-forgotten good service of showing real personages in accurate surroundings, was condemned to go on repeating itself, marking time for ever on the same spot” (Huysmans 1969). It was the afore-mentioned ordinariness of Naturalism that irritated Huysmans, and although he does not specifically state it, one could argue that, even more than the ugly, it was the ordinary that just did not interest him:

“Naturalism was getting more and more out of breath by dint of turning the mill for ever in the same round. The stock of observations that each writer had stored up by the self-scrutiny or study of his neighbours was getting exhausted. Zola, who was a first-rate scene painter, got out of the difficulty by designing big, bold canvases more or less true to life; he suggested fairly well the illusion of movement and action; his heroes were devoid of soul, governed simply and solely by impulses and instincts, which greatly simplified the work of analysis.” (Huysmans 1969)

Admitting not only a significant level of *ennui*, and also a fear of the exhaustion of subject-matter-resources, Huysmans perhaps also reveals an element of fear in general, when he declares that “the rest of us, less robust and concerned about a more subtle method and a truer art, were constrained to ask ourselves the question whether Naturalism was not marching up a blind alley and if we were not bound soon to knock up against an impassable wall” (Huysmans 1969).

Ironically, the main character in *À Rebours*, Des Esseintes, encloses himself within the walls of his suburban dwelling almost as if *they* were impassable. Des Esseintes, in an obvious reaction to the social Naturalism of Zola, is a social recluse, and throughout most of the book he experiences the world exclusively through literature, art, music, and science, all consumed within the interior of his home. Essentially, Des Esseintes studies the exterior world almost exclusively through his own interior. The few excursions that he takes away from his seclusion are incredibly short-lived, and even in their brevity they seem to be borderline overwhelming to the touchy nerves of Des Esseintes. For Huysmans, this literary construct of exploring the world not through social interaction and *externally* physical interchange, but rather through mental/intellectual interaction and *sensually* physical interchange, was greatly preferred. For Des Esseintes, “it appeared to him a futile waste of energy to travel when, so he believed, imagination was perfectly competent to fill the place of the vulgar reality of actual prosaic facts” (Huysmans 1969). As “there is no doubt we can, and just as easily as in the material world, enjoy false, fictitious pleasures every whit as good as the true” (Huysmans 1969). In a sense, we can certainly see in Huysmans an adherence to many of the *fin-de-siècle* artistic principles that Belinda Thomson explains in *Post-Impressionism*. In discussing the Rosicrucian Symbolist Salons of the 1890s, she observes that art in these exhibitions was meant to “rise above the banal realities of daily life and set its sights on lofty idealised subjects” (Thomson 1998). Thomson also points out that “in France the Symbolist poets, inheriting the philosophical outlook of Baudelaire and the Decadents, turned aside from the marvels or horrors of the age of science and its social and democratic upheavals, to focus inwards upon the human soul” (Thomson 1998). Huysmans, via Des Esseintes, displays a marked interest in the works of the Symbolist poets and artists, as well as the artists of the Nabis. However, even in his attempts to escape the confines of Naturalism by making reference to—and even sometimes

meticulously discussing—Symbolist and decidedly non-Naturalist art and literature, the method that he uses to explore these works is no less than Naturalist. In a veritably scientific manner, it is as if Des Esseintes is cataloguing various sensual experiences, various works of art and literature, and various mental/intellectual experiences, but he does so mainly on a more psychological—rather than purely physical—scientific basis. Similar to Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Des Esseintes is a Naturalist in the most basic sense of the term, despite any feelings of irritation that that reality might cause.

Therefore, perhaps van Gogh indeed was not inaccurate in his apparent obstinacy in regarding Huysmans as a Naturalist, even after the publication of *À Rebours*. After all, according to Weisberg, when one looks at the critical writings of Huysmans during the 1870s, the pre-*À Rebours* author preaches for the “necessity of abandoning old routines in order to become a true Naturalist” (Weisberg 1992). This argument certainly sheds light on some of the sentiments expressed in the Preface to *À Rebours* that have been explored, as it appears that, in the 1870s, Huysmans already felt the stirrings of a longing to abandon the old, but to do so with the intent of becoming a “true Naturalist”. Weisberg also writes that, “despite affinities with the Impressionists, Huysmans, like Zola, still awaited the ‘genius of the future’, a painter who would join Impressionist virtues with the strength of Naturalism” (Weisberg 1992). It is not likely that Huysmans ever would have claimed to be a “genius of the future”, or a Naturalist Messiah or something like that, but perhaps his critique of Zola in his Preface to *À Rebours* can be read as a true Naturalist manifesto. Perhaps, in reacting to the *ennui* of the Naturalism of Zola, Huysmans actually refurbished Naturalism, rather than discarding it.

But of course, Huysmans’s language, as observed in the last passage from Weisberg, expresses a yearning for a “genius of the future” painter, rather than an author. Although never specifically stated by Huysmans, and much less by Zola, it is possible to argue that Gustave Caillebotte might have been the closest to ever come to that “genius of the future”, Naturalist Messiah ideal that was able to join the virtues of Impressionism with the strength of Naturalism. Monet, too, successfully combines elements of Impressionism with that of Naturalism, but not to the extent, and not to the philosophical success that Caillebotte is able to achieve. Quite fittingly, Herbert argues that “Huysmans preferred Caillebotte to Monet, partly because he wanted clear images of the ‘imposing grandeur’ of industry, partly because he was one of those writers who responded best to figure pictures and their narrative potential” (Herbert 1988). Herbert then continues to claim that Huysmans “did not see that Monet’s ‘unclear abbreviations’ were the vehicle of his interpretation of steam, the underlying force of industrial power” (Herbert 1988). Whether or not Huysmans indeed did not see this particular aspect of Monet’s artistic intent, and whether or not these are the true reasons why Huysmans preferred Caillebotte to Monet, is debatable. Regardless, this seems like an oversimplification of Huysmans’s preference between the two. After all, it is clear that Huysmans indeed did find value in the art of Monet, and not just in terms of style and aesthetic appeal, but also in terms of Monet’s artistic philosophy and his no less than Naturalistic intent that can be observed in many of his paintings. The passage below, taken from *À Rebours*, can be taken as evidence to support these assertions:

“Sometimes, of an afternoon, if Des Esseintes happened to be up and about at that time of day, he would turn the taps connected with a system of pipes and conduits that enabled the tank to be emptied and refilled with fresh water, and then by pouring in a few drops of coloured essences, he could enjoy at his pleasure all the tints, green or grey, opaline or silvery, that real rivers assume according to the hue of the heavens, the greater or less ardour of the sun’s rays, the more or less threatening aspect of the rain-clouds, in a word according to the varying conditions of season and weather.” (Huysmans 1969)

Granted, in the above passage, Des Esseintes is engaging in a purely artificial reconstruction of the effects of atmospheric conditions on the perceived color of a river that would otherwise be observable in nature, but is this artifice any different than the “counterfeit” of the artist—as Degas calls it—applying and mixing pigments on a palette with the intent of capturing nature on a canvas in

a similar manner? Furthermore, the painting style of Monet permeates throughout the whole above passage. It is almost as if one is reading a description of the surface of the water that Monet depicts in his *La Grenouillère* (Figure 3).

However, the assumption that Huysmans preferred Caillebotte to Monet seems like a safe one to make. Michael Fried explains that Huysmans “reserved his most fervent admiration for paintings in which an absorptive thematics gave rise to an effect of more than ordinary realism. ‘That supreme quality of art, life, shines forth from this canvas with a truly incredible intensity’, Huysmans wrote of Caillebotte’s *Interior, Woman at a Window*” (Fried 2002). This emphasis on extraordinary realism is certainly consistent with the Huysmans that has so far been encountered in this discussion, and the introduction of the “absorptive” quality of *Interior, Woman at a Window* (Figure 4), as well as of *Young Man at His Window* (Figure 5), clearly illustrates one of the fundamental issues at stake in this essay: that being the interplay of exteriority and interiority in Naturalism.

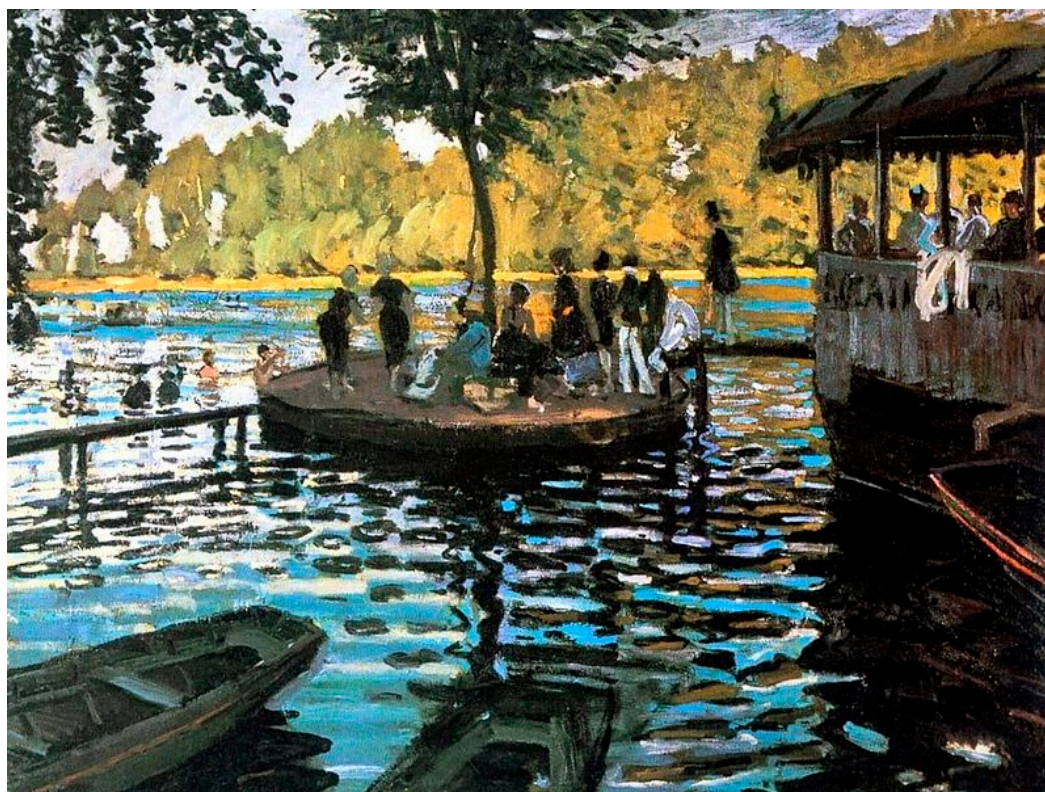


Figure 3. Claude Monet, *La Grenouillère*, 1869, oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Generally speaking, the Naturalism employed by Zola—though also possessing at least the aspects that we have discussed so far—is essentially a Naturalism of the exterior. Again, taking *Germinal* as the prime example, mental introspection is at a minimum in the novel; in terms of the characters, at least. These sentiments are observed by Huysmans in his critique of Zola’s characters quoted above, excerpted from the Preface to *À Rebours*. *Germinal* is vivid, emotive, painful, and even sensual, but these effects are achieved as a result of a level of exterior physicality that Zola constructs in the world of the novel. On the other hand, *À Rebours* seems to have more of a sense of the interior about it. Again, Des Esseintes could count on one hand the number of times that he actually left the confines of his home. In fact, any sense of exteriority was only achieved via the interior. The nautical interior decorating, the intellectual pursuits of literature, science, art, and history, and especially the inward mental journeys that Des Esseintes takes purely within the confines of his own memories, are all achieved not only within his own domestic interior, but also very often within the interior of his own mind. In terms of these two primary examples of Naturalist literature that we have explored,

the respective exteriority and interiority of each work is well-founded. However, as we move to our primary examples from the realm of Naturalist visual art, things become a bit more complicated.



Figure 4. Gustave Caillebotte, *Interior, Woman at a Window*, 1880, oil on canvas, private collection.



Figure 5. Gustave Caillebotte, *Young Man at His Window*, 1875, oil on canvas, private collection.

Both Claude Monet and Gustave Caillebotte participated in the execution of *en plein air* painting. Of course, as already mentioned, much of the work that they performed on these paintings, especially in terms of retouching and finishing, was performed in studio, but the efforts of each painter to get out in nature and apply their visions of the natural world to their respective canvases is well-documented. Therefore, in terms of exteriority, each painter has participated to at least some extent. However, in terms of typically more interior painting, such as portraiture and domestic life, Monet, even with his huge volume of works, falls short of the efforts of Caillebotte. Monet was far more interested in landscapes, and especially the effect of sunlight on objects in nature, than he was with the anatomical and even psychological studies of the human figure that Caillebotte frequently composed. Again, in terms of the number of paintings produced, Monet's *œuvre* outnumbers that of Caillebotte exponentially, not only due to Monet's frequency of production, but also because of the simple fact that he lived much longer. However, within the works that Caillebotte produced, the preponderance of emphasis falls on the interior rather than the exterior, and Claude Monet *vice versa*. Granted, there are obvious exceptions, as Monet, especially in his earlier work, executed a number of domestic scenes, and even a few portraits. There is also much overlap in terms of subject matter, exemplified by their unique depictions of le Pont de l'Europe, their stylistically similar views from rooftops, their mutual depictions of aquatic leisure activities, and also their mutual interest in the landscapes of rural France. However, percentage-wise, Caillebotte focused a lot more on the interior than Monet, and in turn, Monet focused a lot more on the exterior than Caillebotte.

Stylistically, Caillebotte is generally more exacting than Monet. Monet is obviously more painterly in terms of style, especially when comparing the exterior paintings of Monet with the interior paintings of Caillebotte. Caillebotte's brushstroke appears to loosen at times, but this phenomenon is almost exclusive to his own paintings of the exterior. In terms of his interior paintings, Caillebotte oftentimes executes an almost photographic realism. The difference in exterior and interior style is logical, as it is the specific details of his interior paintings that give them that absorptive, and even psychological appeal.

The Floor-Scrapers (Figure 6) lacks the significant level of the absorptive that has such a strong presence in *Interior, Woman at a Window*, and *Young Man at His Window*, but taking into account some of Michael Marrinan's observations, it becomes apparent that it is within *The Floor-Scrapers* that many of the Naturalistic aspects previously discussed in this essay intersect, related to labor, and an interiorized exteriority that would later be observable in *À Rebours*, and even *Germinal*. Marrinan remarks that the workers in the painting are actually preparing the floor for what would become Caillebotte's studio. Revealing the painting as an intersection between—and a reconciliation of—Naturalism's more interiorized psychology and a more exteriorized, physical culture, Marrinan claims that the "thematic insight of *The Floor-Scrapers* was Caillebotte's realization that he could mediate conflicting drives—private and personal against public and collegial—by painting the men at work finishing construction of his studio" (Marrinan 2002). The shirtless men work through the monotonous strain of the physical labor involved in scraping the floor, as their anatomical representation echoes that of the rowers in Caillebotte's *Canotiers* (Figure 7), yet tilted forward about another 45°. Although a much less grueling task, and with a far lower risk of death, *The Floor-Scrapers* can be read as a Naturalistic depiction of manual labor similar to that of the miners in *Germinal*. If Marrinan is correct, then many of the elements of *À Rebours* are at least implied in the painting, as this space will become a realm of artistic and intellectual pursuit, and therefore—though not as lavish or as quirky as the home of Des Esseintes—the room in the painting portrays a similar interior-based potential as the home of Huysmans's character. Though decidedly tamer than any one of the novels, *The Floor-Scrapers* is a successful execution of many of the inherently Naturalistic principles of exteriorized physicality that we have discussed so far, yet the setting is a decidedly interior one.



Figure 6. Gustave Caillebotte, *The Floor-Scrapers*, 1875, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



Figure 7. Gustave Caillebotte, *Canotiers*, 1877, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

However, most likely to the eventual appeal of Huysmans, Caillebotte rarely represented the irritatingly ordinary task of manual labor in his paintings. And as we have already seen, Huysmans was very much positively affected by Caillebotte's *Interior*, *Woman at a Window*. Rodolphe Rapetti would argue that Huysmans had a similarly pleasurable reaction to *Young Man at His Window*, as he claims that the painting, as a "psychological study bathed in a very modern light could have only pleased him"

(Rapetti 1995). Perhaps Huysmans had some form of this image of a man looking out of his window in mind as he crafted *À Rebours*. One can imagine Des Esseintes in a similar pose, peering at the outside world from the confines of his home, or even pondering the figure of the woman in the street, as perhaps something about her reminds him of the sexual conquests that he has had in the past. This painting depicts a very Des Esseintes-friendly—and by extension, Huysmans-friendly—environment.

Marrinan observes that “it is with *Young Man at His Window* that Caillebotte first tackled the problem of linking his imagery of domestic, interior spaces to the world at large” (Marrinan 2002). “The picture marks the point where Caillebotte balanced an objective analysis of the physical world against a visual power to shape that world” (Marrinan 2002). Like *The Floor-Scrapers*, *Young Man at His Window* is a reconciliation of conflicting factors. Rapetti observes that “Caillebotte’s windows open onto streets, rooftops, or courtyards. The landscapes they reveal, all crisply contained within architectural masses, can barely be termed exteriors at all. Only their skies allude to an unlimited space. These openings provide views of what is, in effect another interior: that of the city” (Rapetti 1995). In an interesting move, Caillebotte has interiorized the exterior. For not only is the exterior allowed only about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the composition, but it is very static, peaceful, and it is enclosed almost completely by the regimented, wall-like Haussmannian buildings. Rapetti also observes of *Young Man at His Window* that the “Impressionist intention to convey a sense of the open air is here wedded to a narrative approach more typical of Naturalism, which stressed the relationship between figures and their environment” (Rapetti 1995). Therefore, the painting not only reconciles the interior with the exterior, but also Impressionism with Naturalism. Again, like the insular home of Des Esseintes, the exterior penetrates the interior paintings of Caillebotte not with a physical presence *per se*, but rather as an intellectual idea that is inevitably filtered by the screen of interiority. On the subject of this phenomenon of exteriority existing only in terms of interiority in Caillebotte’s domestic paintings, Kirk Varnedoe observes that “there are basically two states of consciousness in Caillebotte’s world: either the person is intently absorbed by some activity within arm-span . . . or the person is staring across space at a (usually unseen) distant point . . . Caillebotte’s psychic world is one in which consistent internal isolation or self-enclosure is offset only by the loss of self-consciousness through focused activity or reverie” (Varnedoe 1987).

Des Esseintes isolated himself from the rest of humanity due to a nervous condition, and even more so as a result of a growing sense of frustration with human society. Nancy Forgione tells us that “Paris’s rapid modernization had heightened the contrast between public and private spheres. More than ever before, the domestic interior was understood as conducive to cultivating the inner self, while the exterior urban realm, with its crowds and its intrusive barrage of sensory input, was considered invasive to the psyche and abrasive to the sense of self” (Forgione 2005). Being a native of Paris, Des Esseintes would have likely agreed with the above statement, and would have used similar reasoning in order to justify his intent to shun society in the attempt to “cultivate his inner self” and soothe his nerves. But perhaps a similar philosophy is at stake in the interior paintings of Caillebotte. After all, from his windows, we can see the modern Haussmanization of Paris. Sometimes we get sparsely-populated streets that represent the widening of the boulevards consistent with the Haussmannian vision, but we also occasionally get crowded streets and squares where one might indeed consider the overcrowding of these spaces as “invasive to the psyche and abrasive to the sense of self.”

While the above passages from Rapetti, Varnedoe, and Forgione depict a cultural conflict between the bustling exterior world and the interior of the human psyche—which is consistent with the Naturalist methodology in its exterior and interior branches that have been established by this essay—there is clearly a psychological context that reconciles their commentary not only to the work of Caillebotte, but also to Naturalism as a movement and genre. Michael Davis observes that, in the 1880s, “a psychological tradition, which sought to read minds by reading the physical features of the body, and especially of the head and face, enjoyed ever-increasing influence” (Davis 2006). This is, of course, the *modus operandi* of Naturalism, as Naturalist artists and writers used external physicality to

depict interior psychology, which is consistent with Davis's discussion of ongoing *fin-de-siècle* "debates about minds and bodies, and the extent to which the latter can be used as means of reading the former" (Davis 2006). Coincidentally, according to Seagroatt, "human psychology was essential to Wilde's critique of Victorian empiricism in [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*]" (Seagroatt 1998).

"[Wilde] used psychology throughout the novel to confound the ideologues of science . . . who claimed that science could reveal universal systems . . . By casting their scientific endeavors in the service of both science and art, Wilde uses psychology to exemplify the ways in which the materialism of the 'hard' sciences (which cannot measure or assess aesthetic response) threaten to efface the impact of the arts on the individual psyche. Thus Wilde deploys psychology to resist the growing hegemony of scientific materialism." (Seagroatt 1998)

However, despite Wilde's evident intent to use psychology as a form of Aesthetic anti-science in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it was psychology's growth as a scientific study of the mind that coincided with the growth of *fin-de-siècle* Naturalism. This simultaneous growth is not merely a coincidence, as Naturalist writers and artists alike embraced psychology as a scientific study of the interior workings of the psyche, and also of the effects of the exterior world on that psychological interior. However, there is thankfully a physical mode of interaction that provides the possibility of mental self-cultivation as well as even the occasional intellectual stimulation: simply, taking a walk. Similar to Caillebotte's occasional depiction of *le flâneur* in his paintings—particularly in *Le Pont de L'Europe* (Figure 8)—merely taking a walk can be a both physically- and intellectually-stimulating exercise. Forgiione observes of walking that "its rhythms are conducive to contemplation; that the experience can render more vividly present the sense of the self; and that process helps integrate inner and outer worlds" (Forgiione 2005). Therefore, the interiority of the self does not have to be compromised by one's immersion in the exterior, and that principle is at the heart of the method of Naturalism in which Claude Monet—arguably the quintessential Impressionist painter—engages.

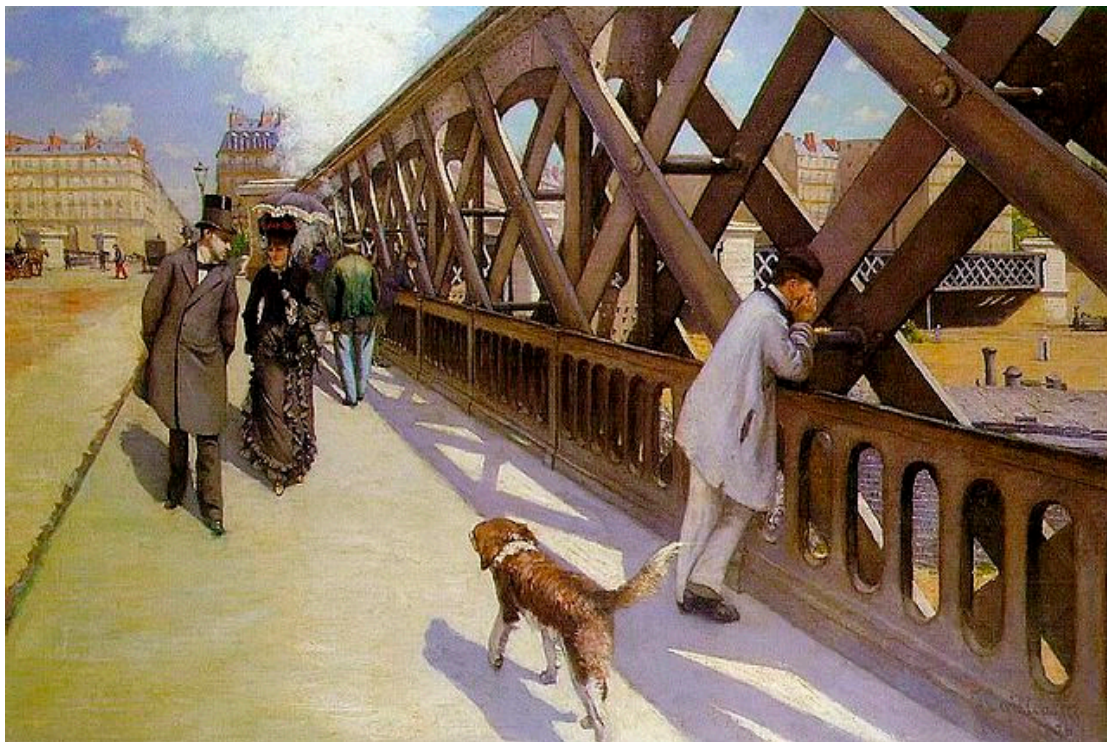


Figure 8. Gustave Caillebotte, *Le Pont de L'Europe*, 1876, oil on canvas, Musée du Petit Palais, Geneva.

One could argue that Monet's connection to Naturalism is observable in his occasionally no-less-than-scientific studies of light and surface, and how atmospheric changes affect our individual

perception of that light and surface. One merely needs to look at the bleaching effect that Monet employs in *Morning Haze* (Figure 9) to see this method of Naturalism at work. This is also observable in his *Grain Stacks* (Figures 10–15) series, as each painting is decidedly unique from the other due to atmospheric changes in light effect on surface caused by weather, time of day, and time of year. Again, this echoes Des Esseintes's artificial amusement with colored dye and running water in order to simulate the effect of light and color on a river.

One can even see similarities between the modes of Naturalism employed by Monet and Zola, respectively. John House observes that, “in trying to paint the *enveloppe* Monet was pursuing natural effects at their most ephemeral” (House 1986). House explains that “the term *enveloppe* and the verb *envelopper* became widely used by artists in the nineteenth century to describe the tangible, unifying atmosphere which surrounds objects” (House 1986). A similar effect can be sensed in Hemmings's description of Zola's intent to basically do the same thing with the world that he created in *Germinal*, as Hemmings observes that “the reader has the impression of being completely enveloped by the atmosphere, of being himself a denizen of this narrow world. With a little imagination he finds himself breathing the air laden with coal-dust, feeling on his shins and shoulders the sore places rubbed by the jutting pieces of schist, experiencing the nausea of hard physical labour on inadequate rations” (Hemmings 1953). In essence, this idea of the *enveloppe* is a very personal, subjective, decidedly interior concept, relying on personal sensation and the effect of the physical/ideological lens through which one views the exterior world.



Figure 9. Claude Monet, *Morning Haze*, 1888, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Again, at its philosophical foundation, these subjective factors seem contradictory to the presumably objective genre of Naturalism. But of course, subjectivity is no less than inescapable, and is in fact *natural*. Even if it is your sole intent, it is impossible to distance yourself from all of your social, personal, aesthetic, and ideological preconceptions in order to represent subject matter in a

purely objective, scientific, Naturalist fashion. Zola knew this, whether he cared to admit it or not, and those that branched off of him (like van Gogh), reacted against him (like Huysmans), or inaccurately were thought to have little or nothing to do with him (like Caillebotte and Monet), oftentimes chose to embrace this inevitability of subjectivity and use it to their unique advantage in their own participation in Naturalist principles. Whether their compositions tended towards exteriority, interiority, or a reconciliation of both, these artists aided in the evolution of Naturalism, revealing a pronounced correlation between Naturalism and the more avant-garde genres that have been traditionally viewed as having more thoroughly expressed “stylistic traits of nascent modernism”: Impressionism, and even Decadence and Aestheticism.



Figure 10. Claude Monet, *Grainstacks in the Sunlight, Morning Effect*, 1890, oil on canvas, Private Collection.

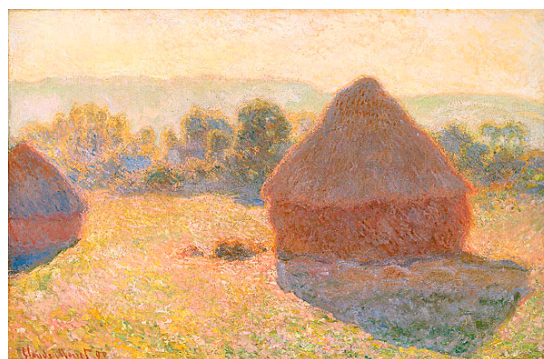


Figure 11. Claude Monet, *Haystacks, (Midday)*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

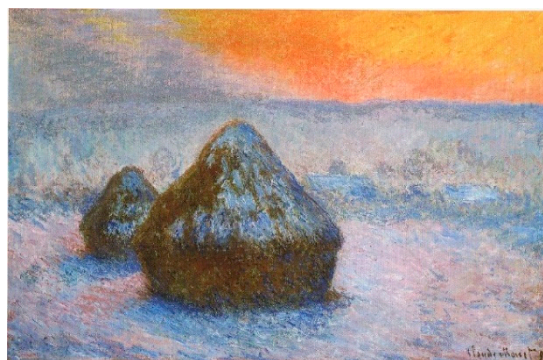


Figure 12. Claude Monet, *Wheatstacks (Sunset, Snow Effect)*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.

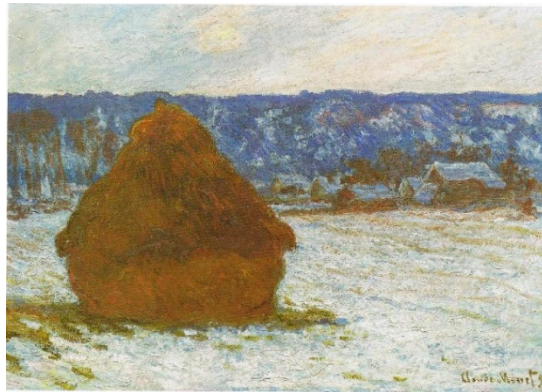


Figure 13. Claude Monet, *Wheatstack (Snow Effect, Overcast day)*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 14. Claude Monet, *Wheatstacks, Snow Effect, Morning*, 1891, oil on canvas, J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Figure 15. Claude Monet, *Haystacks at the End of Summer, Morning Effect*, 1891, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Borghart, Pieter. 2007. Sailing Under False Colors: Naturalism Revisited. *Symposium* 60: 211–25.
- Davis, Michael. 2006. Incongruous Compounds: Re-reading Jekyll and Hyde and Late-Victorian Psychology. *Journal of Victorian Culture* 11: 207–25. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Forgione, Nancy. 2005. Everyday Life in Motion: The Art of Walking in Late-Nineteenth-Century Paris. *Art Bulletin* 87: 664–87. [[CrossRef](#)]

- Fried, Michael. 2002. Caillebotte's Impressionism. In *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*. Edited by Morma Broude. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, esp. chp. 3. pp. 66–116.
- Hanson, Lawrence, and Elisabeth Hanson. 1955. *Passionate Pilgrim: The Life of Vincent Van Gogh*. New York: Random House.
- Hemmings, Frederick William John. 1953. Cry from the Pit. In *Émile Zola*. Edited by Harold Bloom. Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 15–36.
- Herbert, Robert. 1988. *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- House, John. 1986. *Monet: Nature into Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Huysmans, Joris-Karl. 1969. *Against the Grain (À Rebours)*. 1884. Translated by Havelock Ellis. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Marrinan, Michael. 2002. Caillebotte as Professional Painter: From Studio to the Public Eye. In *Gustave Caillebotte and the Fashioning of Identity in Impressionist Paris*. Edited by Morma Broude. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, esp. chp. 2. pp. 21–65.
- Plotz, John. 2015. Speculative Naturalism and the Problem of Scale: Richard Jefferies's After London, after Darwin. *Modern Language Quarterly* 76: 31–56. [CrossRef]
- Rapetti, Rodolphe. 1995. Paris Seen from a Window. In *Gustave Caillebotte: Urban Impressionist*. Edited by Anne Distel. New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, esp. chp. 4. pp. 141–75.
- Rosenblum, Robert. 1984. *19th-Century Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Seagroatt, Heather. 1998. Hard Science, Soft Psychology, and Amorphous Art in The Picture of Dorian Gray. *SEL* 38: 741–58. [CrossRef]
- Sund, Judy. 1992. *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thomson, Belinda. 1998. *Post-Impressionism, Movements in Modern Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Trotter, David. 2000. *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Van Gogh, Vincent. 1885a. Letter to Theo van Gogh. Written c. April 30. Nuenen. Translated by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. Edited by Robert Harrison. Number 404.
- Van Gogh, Vincent. 1885b. Letter to Theo van Gogh. Written c. May 15. Nuenen. Translated by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. Edited by Robert Harrison. Number 409.
- Varnedoe, Kirk. 1987. *Gustave Caillebotte*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Weisberg, Gabriel P. 1992. *Beyond Impressionism: The Naturalist Impulse*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1999. De Profundis. In *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: The Centenary Edition*. Edited by Martin Holland. Glasgow: Harper Collins, pp. 980–1059. First published 1948.
- Wilde, Oscar. 1985. *The Picture of Dorian Gray, 1891*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.
- Zola, Émile. 1880. *Le Roman Expérimental*. Paris: G. Charpentier.
- Zola, Émile. 1914. *Germinal, or Master and Man*. Translated by Ernest Alfred Vizetelly. London: Chatto & Windus.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).