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In 1913, John Collier contributed *A Fallen Idol* (Fig. 1) to the annual Royal Academy summer exhibition. The painting depicts a young woman crouched in grief or shame at the knee of a slightly older man, who looks up and out into the distance, presenting his impassive face for our inspection. Viewers seized on the picture and its title, offering competing – and often facetious – answers to

Fig. 1. John Collier, *A Fallen Idol*, 1913, oil on canvas, 167.6 × 137.1 cm (66 × 54 in.), Mackelvie Trust Collection, Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tamaki, Auckland, New Zealand.

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doi:10.1093/oxartj/kcp018

the question of which of the two was the 'fallen idol'. The *World* noted that there was 'always a little crowd of speculators' before the picture, and even after nearly three months of exhibition, public interest remained high enough that *The Times* published Collier's response to 'a correspondent who asked him to "solve the riddle of his picture"'.[1] When the tabloid paper the *Daily Sketch* sponsored a competition for the best interpretation of the 'problem picture', the editors were inundated with responses ranging from the serious to the satirical. Readers suggested that the woman was 'a bridge fiend who had become overwhelmed by debt . . . The unhappy lady was also alleged to have: neglected her dying child; confessed that she was a militant suffragist; ruined her husband's digestion by her bad cooking'. He, in turn, was 'held to be a gambler, forger, cheat at cards, victim to drugs or drink, and even a Cabinet Minister'.[2] While the majority of respondents believed adultery (usually the woman's) was an issue, even this did not resolve the picture, as viewers debated questions of motivation and likely outcome. Had the husband neglected his young wife? Would he accept his share of responsibility for their marital difficulties, or would the matter end up in divorce court?[3]

This rich mixture of playful speculation and moral evaluation bears all the hallmarks of gossip. And, indeed, the best way to describe the reception of *A Fallen Idol* is to say that viewers gossiped about the depicted characters as if they were real people. The *Daily Sketch* competition was, of course, an attempt to generate publicity and attract readers, and the rhetorical device of gossip offered a veneer of respectable distance from lowbrow responses. Yet the very fact of the paper's reliance on gossip as a publicity device suggests that the possibility of this kind of reading was a significant part of the painting's appeal. Such press accounts thus provide tantalising evocations of the picture's ephemeral social life: exhibited before large crowds at the Academy and widely reported on in the press. In this article, I suggest that taking gossip seriously as a mode of engagement with art both amplifies our understanding of the meanings, functions, and pleasures of narrative painting, and suggests specific connections between exhibition culture and the meanings of pictures.[4]

Gossip is a mode of conversation, 'idle, evaluative talk' about other people, fuelled by speculation and often containing a hint of scandal or impropriety.[5] While gossip is commonly identified with the discussion of people whom one knows, the term can also be extended to the discussion of people not directly known to the gossipers, such as celebrities, royals, or – I argue – the invented characters in narrative paintings.[6] As Reva Wolf and Gavin Butt have argued in their respective work on Andy Warhol and Larry Rivers, pictures themselves can be acts of visual gossip, displaying artistic identities, and constituting subgroups of viewers in the know.[7] Gossip is also, as the case of *A Fallen Idol* makes clear, a conversational mode of response generated by viewers, exchanged at exhibitions, in the press, and – it is perhaps safe to assume, though we have little direct evidence – in other social settings.[8] As recent scholarship in anthropology, sociology, and psychology has demonstrated, such gossip serves an important social function, creating and solidifying individual and group identities through the mutual investigation of social codes.[9] Recognising both the social function and the potential subversiveness of gossip, historians have begun to use gossip as a form of historical archive, suggesting that it may be particularly valuable for recovering the voices and perspectives of those generally excluded from more authoritative sources.[10] But gossip is, by its very nature, fugitive: filled with inside knowledge and jokes, generally communicated in oral conversation,

1. W.T.W., 'The Royal Academy', *World*, 6 May 1913, p. 658; 'Mr. Collier's Picture "The Fallen Idol"', *The Times*, 29 July 1913, p. 13.

2. 'Why the Idol Fell', *Daily Sketch*, 12 May 1913, p. 5.

3. For a longer discussion of *A Fallen Idol*, see Pamela M. Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity: The British Problem Picture 1895–1914* (Ashgate: Aldershot, England, 2003), pp. 129–37.

4. There is a small but significant body of art-historical work on gossip. Irit Rogoff's article 'Gossip as Testimony' suggests that gossip provides 'a radical model of postmodern knowledge' (59), calling attention both to the constructed categories of art-historical knowledge, and our own psychic investments in art-historical narratives, while Reva Wolf and Gavin Butt both use gossip as a source and a theoretical framework in their work on sexuality and the New York art world in the 1950s and 1960s. Wolf argues that ignoring gossip's impact on how art criticism and art history are written, as well as its impact on the production of art, diminishes our knowledge of 'the fullness of relations of people that make art a vital, human thing' (15). Her book on Andy Warhol reads the artist's work within a web of social relationships to argue, for example, that his two double portraits of Edwin Denby and Gerard Malanga 'served to spread a rumor that Denby was in some way intimately involved with Malanga' (19), thus becoming an act of visual gossip. Butt, like Rogoff, is less concerned with recovering the meaning of specific acts of gossip, visual or otherwise, and more with the challenge gossip presents to the epistemological categories of history and art history. Specifically, Butt argues that gossip – and its essential unverifiable nature – is central to the 'representational construction' (6) of homosexuality in the 1950s and 1960s, and his book investigates the role of gossip in both the construction of artistic identities and the production and reception of specific works of art. Irit Rogoff, 'Gossip as Testimony: A Postmodern Signature', in Griselda Pollock (ed.), *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts, Feminist Readings* (Routledge: London and New York, 1996), pp. 58–65; Reva Wolf, *Andy Warhol, Poetry and Gossip in the 1960s* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1997); Gavin Butt, *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948–1963* (Duke University Press: Durham and London, 2005).

5. John Sabini and Maury Silver, 'A Plea for Gossip', in *Moralities of Everyday Life* (Oxford University Press: Oxford and New York, 1982), p. 92.

6. On gossip about celebrities and other strangers, see Max Gluckman, 'Gossip and

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and only rarely preserved in written form. How, then, might we begin to recover a history and theory of gossip as a mode of engagement with narrative painting?

Located at the intersection of the Victorian narrative tradition with the modern mass media, the problem pictures of the 1910s generated a rich archive of gossipy reception. Narrative paintings of modern life had been perennial popular favourites at the mid-Victorian Royal Academy. The problem picture extended that tradition into the late- nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, transforming the highly detailed moralising paintings of the mid-Victorian era into ambiguous and often slightly risqué paintings of modern life that invited multiple, equally plausible interpretations. Viewers and critics responded enthusiastically, crowding the Academy galleries and filling the pages of newspapers and magazines with possible explanations. In the early years of the twentieth century, the term 'problem picture' was coined by the press to describe this phenomenon, a fact that points to the critical role of the expanding periodical press in creating, sustaining, and extending the conversations the pictures provoked.[11] Although the popularity of the problem picture peaked in the first decade of the twentieth century, artists continued to use the form in the 1910s and beyond in order to engage with topical questions of morality and politics, including divorce law, anti-Semitism, and drug use. Indeed, while the problem pictures of the 1910s – with titles like *Out of It* and *Cocaine* – were not granted much aesthetic legitimacy, this very lack of authority allowed for an even greater level of popular response and speculation, recorded in the chatty art coverage of the tabloid press, viewers' entries to newspaper competitions, and occasional letters to artists – in other words, the discursive traces of historical gossip.

Such narratives in the press were not, of course, identical to any actual viewers' vocalised responses, and the available archive is necessarily constructed within journalistic and critical texts. The press thus does double duty, constituting, at least in part, the mode of response it names as gossip, and serving as our primary representation of it.[12] But the consistent deployment of the rhetorical form of 'gossip' as a frame for the representation of problem pictures and their reception across a wide range of newspapers and journals – from working-class Sunday papers to Society magazines, from tabloids aimed at the lower-middle classes to the solidly established dailies – does point us to the visual and historical particularities of these pictures, which encouraged such a mode of response. In what follows, I use these pictures and their reception to establish a taxonomy of gossipy modes of engagement with narrative painting, and to investigate the specific functions of each mode. The result is both an examination of a specific set of pictures and a case study that illuminates some of the complex relations between the social experience of viewing art, the media reporting of exhibitions, and the meanings of narrative pictures, at the very moment of their apparent eclipse in the early twentieth century.

Gossiping at the Royal Academy

Exhibitions were, of course, far more than collections of pictures. The physical space of a gallery, the kinds of pictures exhibited, the hanging of the pictures, and the composition, density, and motivation of the audience all shaped an exhibition's culture, the physical and social environment that influenced viewers' interactions with the art on view and with one another. Narrative

Scandal', *Current Anthropology*, vol. 4, no. 3, June 1963, p. 315. On the uses of popular culture in gossip, see Gary Alan Fine, 'Popular Culture and Social Interaction: Production, Consumption, and Usage', *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1977, pp. 453–66.

7. Wolf, *Andy Warhol*, p. 33; Butt, *Between You and Me*, pp. 74–105.

8. There is scattered evidence to suggest that at least some such conversations did, in fact, take place. In a pair of letters written in 1902, a correspondent from North Devon identified only as 'E.A.R.' implored John Collier to explain his problem picture, *The Confession*: 'I want to know *very* badly which (*please* to tell me) is confessing in your Royal Academy picture – the man or the woman? Some people think one and some the other'. Writing again, presumably after Collier had responded, she apologised for her first 'asinine letter' and explained, 'Being egged on, I wrote as a fool in my folly'. In her memoir *The Educated Pin*, Marjorie Mack recalled a visit to Collier's studio in 1905 to see his painting *The Cheat*, identifying it as one of his 'so-called problem pictures which were to attract pondering crowds in future Academies and to provide topics of conversation for diners-out in several successive seasons'. 'E.A.R.' to John Collier, 1902, letter in possession of the artist's family; 'E.A.R' to John Collier, 27 June 1902, letter in possession of the artist's family; Marjorie Mack, *The Educated Pin* (Faber and Faber, Ltd.: London, 1944), p. 139.

9. Gluckman's article is the seminal work on the function of gossip in maintaining and ordering social groups. Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal', 1963. Since its publication, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have written extensively on the functions of gossip for social groups and for individuals. For overviews of these arguments, see Sally Engle Merry, 'Rethinking Gossip and Scandal', in Donald Black (ed.), *Towards a General Theory of Social Control. Volume 1: Fundamentals* (Academic Press: Orlando, 1984), pp. 271–302; Jörg R. Bergmann, *Discreet Indiscretions: The Social Organization of Gossip*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr. (Aldine De Gruyter: New York, 1993); and Erik K. Foster, 'Research on Gossip: Taxonomy, Methods, Future Directions', *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2004, pp. 78–99. Other significant discussions of gossip include: Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Gossip* (Alfred A. Knopf: New York, 1985) and the essays in Robert F. Goodman and Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (eds.) *Good Gossip* (University of Kansas Press: Lawrence, KS, 1994).

10. Melanie Tebbutt, *Women's Talk: A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-Class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1969* (Scholar Press: Aldershot, England, 1995); Louise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, 2000).

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painting, particularly the problem picture, flourished in what we might call the Royal Academy's culture of conversation, and the contours of that experience are critical to understanding its reception. While the Academy's audience and prestige declined over the course of the nineteenth century, it remained a major social and artistic event well into the twentieth century, as the extensive coverage of the 1905 opening-day private view attests: 'From ten o'clock onwards the great quadrangle . . . began to fill with carriages, and Watts' giant equestrian statue of "Physical Energy" was soon besieged with footmen and horsemen of another kind. The long and crimsoned staircase up to the vestibule was lined with palms and flowers – lilies, roses, and glowing geraniums'.[13] As reported in 1907, the crush of visitors continued inside the exhibition: 'At four in the afternoon the crowd was so thick that it was only possible to move round the rooms with the greatest difficulty. In front of many of the pictures, the artist, surrounded by a knot of friends, was modestly answering questions, explaining details, or receiving congratulations. Other knots of people discussed golfing prospects or week-end trips'.[14] Before particularly popular pictures, the conversation could be deafening, as the *Morning Post* reported in 1903: 'The noise at four o'clock in the Third Gallery, where everyone was talking at once, was extraordinary'.[15]

Discussion of the pictures extended beyond the physical space of the Academy and the day of the private view, continuing in other social settings and in the pages of the periodical press. The most commonly recognised motive for attending the Academy was to get 'conversation', and reviews of the Academy in daily papers often focused on this aspect of the exhibition, asking 'And what about the . . . pictures? What is going to be the most eagerly discussed, and what can we talk about, at dinners, or (if we are dancing men) to girls who are so hard to talk to about anything but the Academy, when one is "sitting out" with them'.[16] As a critic for *Reynolds's Newspaper* explained:

> The importance of the Academy is social rather than artistic. It has become a legalised and highly respectable topic of conversation. We must all carry about with us a stock of opinions about the works of the artists who paint for this exhibition. These opinions are as necessary for each gregarious individual as a pocket handkerchief or a cigarette case. They do to pull out and flourish on awkward occasions: the aged don't mind them and with the young they often serve as a prelude to sweeter things.[17]

While male viewers were jokingly encouraged to get conversation to fill up awkward moments or to advance their flirtations, women were instructed to take the social duties of conversation more seriously. As the ladies' magazine the *Queen* advised its readers in 1898, 'A Royal Academy exhibition, like a new play, creates conversation. It is a subject on which anyone can dilate at a dinner party or an afternoon tea'.[18] Popular pictures, it seems, served as topics of gossip among various kinds of social groups, from friends attending the Academy together to relative strangers meeting in a range of social situations. The periodical press both claimed to reproduce such gossip and participated in it, extending its reach beyond the walls of the exhibition. Located in both serious art reviews and in more popular coverage of the Academy as a social event, such reported gossip could both offer the uninitiated reader a view of the fashionable Academy and serve as a foil to the more elevated appreciation evinced by the critic himself.

The Academy's culture of conversation had important implications for how viewers approached individual paintings and the kinds of paintings to which they

11. Fletcher, *Narrating Modernity*, p. 20.

12. On theoretical approaches to the periodical press, see Christopher A. Kent, 'Victorian Periodicals and the Constructing of Victorian Reality', in J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (eds.), *Victorian Periodicals: A Guide to Research* (Modern Language Association: New York, 1989), pp. 1–12; Lyn Pyckett, 'Reading the Periodical Press: Text and Context', in Laurel Brake, Aled Jones and Lionel Madden (eds), *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Macmillan Press: Houndsmill, Basingstoke, 1990), pp. 3–18.

13. 'The Academy's Private View', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 28 April 1905, p. 7.

14. 'Small Talk at the Academy: What People Said and Saw on Private View Day', *Daily Mirror*, 4 May 1907, p. 5.

15. 'The Royal Academy', *Morning Post*, 2 May 1903, p. 7.

16. 'The Royal Academy', *Daily Mirror*, 4 May 1907, p. 7.

17. 'Royal Academy', *Reynolds's Newspaper*, 3 May 1908, p. 1.

18. 'M.C.S.', 'A Society View of the Royal Academy', *Queen*, 7 May 1898, p. 831.

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were drawn. The narrative paintings of modern life that became popular at the Academy from the 1850s onwards presented the contemporary world in naturalistic form, inviting viewers to relate to the picture through the lens of their own experience.[19] Writing about William Powell Frith's modern-life scene *The Railway Station* in 1862, Tom Taylor described the parameters of this kind of response: 'There is nothing here that does not come within the round of common experience. We all of us are competent to understand these troubles or pleasures, anxieties or annoyances: There is no passage of these many emotions but we can more or less conceive of ourselves as passing through'.[20] Such discussions tended to focus on emotional response and moral evaluation, as viewers engaged with even the most unlikely painted characters as if they were real people. In 1907, a report in the *Daily Mail* on the popularity of Frank Cadogan Cowper's painting of the devil disguised as a troubadour singing to a group of nuns offered a vivid example of this kind of reading, extended even beyond the parameters of what might generally be considered modern-life genre:

> "He has fascinated them," said one severe lady spectator with eyeglasses.
> "And they think they are converting him," said a young man by her side.
> "I think," said an American lady slowly, "that girl who is laughing is real fast."
> And so throughout the afternoon the comment went on.[21]

Such readings of paintings in terms of the depicted individuals' emotions and characters move aesthetic response into the realm of gossip in intent and function: 'idle, evaluative talk' about other people, exchanged to fill time and build relationships, and serving to test and demonstrate moral beliefs and values.[22]

If all narrative painting offered this potential, however, problem pictures deliberately foregrounded it. Artists used ambiguous narratives and topical subjects to situate their pictures in the realm of gossip, capturing public interest through their creative reworkings of contemporary scandal and media events. In return, viewers and critics generated multiple stories about the characters in the paintings, inventing motives for their actions, dissecting their characters, and predicting their futures. As one humorous account of a reading of *A Fallen Idol* indicates, such responses could become quite elaborate: 'The thing's obvious of course; the woman's done it. Her husband doesn't mind much either judging by his expression. He's simply trying to remember the address of his lawyer, and whether that rich American widow who gave him the "glad eye" over the table the other evening really meant matrimony or – or not'.[23] The tone of the comment is revealing of the differences between these pictures and earlier Victorian moralising narrative paintings. At a time of rapidly changing aesthetic standards, when many critics were urging attention to the formal and material qualities of the art work rather than its subject matter, at least some artists, critics, and viewers at the early-twentieth-century Academy were willing to treat narrative paintings of modern life as open-ended games rather than didactic lessons, while the expanding tabloid press opened the door to extended coverage of such playful interpretations. Eliciting readings such as this one, problem pictures became the quintessential example of narrative painting as visual gossip.

A survey of these late problem pictures and their reception suggests three major modes of engagement with gossip: topicality, intertextuality, and identification. Each of these three modes has roots in earlier narrative painting, making it possible to map the continuities and differences between

19. Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 2000), pp. 220–4; Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Ohio University Press: Athens, OH, 2004), pp. 115–23.

20. Tom Taylor, *The Railway Station* (London, 1862), quoted in Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, p. 223.

21. 'First Day at the Academy', *Daily Mail*, 7 May 1907, p. 5.

22. Sabini and Silver, 'Gossip', p. 92; Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal'.

23. 'The Creature and I Do Our Duty', *Tatler*, 21 May 1913, p. 226.

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the problem picture and its Victorian forerunners in ways that are suggestive of a longer history of gossip as a mode of engagement with narrative painting. Problem pictures pushed the boundaries of modern-life genre, featuring incidents of suicide, scandal, and crime inspired by the lurid stories of tabloid journalism. The pictures thus became acts of gossip in themselves and elicited gossip about individuals – real and fictional – in return. As part of their speculation about invented characters, viewers also engaged in intertextual readings linking different pictures, and making identifications between the depicted characters and real individuals. In each case, gossip functioned as a linking mechanism, forging connections between viewers, between pictures, and between public and private interpretations of the world.

Topicality: Gossip and the Discourses of Morality

Three problem pictures were exhibited at the Academy in 1913 and each relied upon a topical appeal, drawing on contemporary events in the news. Collier's painting *A Fallen Idol* received the most coverage, both because the artist had pioneered the form in the previous decade, and because the exhibition of the picture coincided with a renewed attention to the question of divorce law. The much-publicised release of the report of the Royal Commission on Divorce and Matrimonial Causes in December of 1912 highlighted the question, among others, of whether or not men and women should be equally and legally culpable for adulterous conduct. Janice Harris has argued that the hearings of the Royal Commission opened up a cultural space in which to challenge the stock Edwardian story of divorce, in which the adulterous woman destroyed the marriage and was justly punished, and the picture seems to have provided a similar opportunity.[24] While responses to the picture rarely mentioned divorce directly, the question of adultery and its effects were central to the picture's reception. The solidly middle-class newspapers *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* concurred that 'the puzzle is this time no puzzle at all', assigning guilt to the young wife and assimilating the picture to the tradition of 'fallen woman' paintings.[25] In contrast to the inexorable narrative of sin and suicide that characterised the mid-Victorian fallen woman tale, however, the possibility of reintegration into the family and respectable society is suggested in these accounts, and *The Times* even proposed that the painting 'might also be called, "Will he forgive her?"'[26] The woman's magazine the *Queen*, in contrast, read the question of guilt as genuinely open-ended, asking 'Who is the fallen idol, the woman who crouches with bowed head by the man's knee, or the man who looks sadly towards us above her stooping form?', perhaps suggesting a breakdown along gender lines in readings of the picture.[27]

Tabloid papers aimed at lower-middle-class readers were the place where the picture's ambiguity was most fully explored in terms of gender and class. This was, in part, because the format of such papers – focused on human interest news snippets and readers' letters – was perfectly poised to exploit the playfully risqué gossip that the picture could generate. In an article announcing the competition for the 'most convincing explanation' of the picture, the *Daily Sketch* compiled a list of responses, with female respondents including 'Lady Bland Sutton' and 'a tea shop waitress' agreeing on the woman's guilt, while 'a City policeman' observed, 'Looks as if the gentleman had been owning up a bit, and his wife's fair upset to find he ain't a hero after all'.[28] In a later report on the results of the contest, the responses were categorised by verdict, shifting the focus to the probable

24. Janice Hubbard Harris, *Edwardian Stories of Divorce* (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, NJ, 1996).

25. Claude Phillips, 'Royal Academy', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 1913, p. 15; 'The Royal Academy II: The Vice of Prettiness', *The Times*, 5 May 1913, p. 5.

26. 'Royal Academy: First Notice', *The Times*, 3 May 1913, p. 11.

27. Martin Hardie, 'The Royal Academy: First Notice', *Queen*, 10 May 1913, p. 865.

28. 'Which is the Idol?', *Daily Sketch*, 5 May 1913, p. 5.

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nature of male and female weakness. Responses were equally divided between identifying the man and the woman as the sinner, but as the editors pointed out, 'it is interesting to note that while the woman's fall was in most cases attributed to passion the man's fault was almost invariably of another order', generally financial one.[29] Perhaps the strongest subtext of the article, however, is its emphasis on the inclusiveness of the phenomenon. The results were introduced with the comment that 'Fantasies based on the picture came in from readers of all sorts and conditions. The effort of a countess was followed by one from a pavement artist', reassuring the lower-middle-class readers of the *Daily Sketch* that their interest in the pictures was shared by the highest reaches of society. In contrast, the Society magazine the *World* distanced its readers from the 'average man or woman' to whom such pictures appealed, and prophesied that 'when the Academy supplements reach our Colonies and Dependencies Mr. Collier will receive again many letters from farthest India and Africa asking the nature of the crime of the lady', locating such viewers as far as possible from its fashionable readers.[30]

In the face of such speculation, Collier was eventually moved to intervene in the public discussion. In a newspaper statement about the painting, he identified the wife as the guilty party, but opened the door to conjecture about the causes and effects of the transgression: 'It is a young wife confessing to her middle-aged husband. The husband is evidently a studious man, and has possibly neglected her. At any rate, the first thought that occurs to him is, "Was it my fault?" I imagine he will forgive his wife'.[31] Collier's later comments on the picture suggest that the painting was a quite deliberate intervention in the debate over divorce law on the side of more sympathy for women: 'To judge from the correspondence I received, a good many people were interested in the question whether the husband should or would forgive his wife. I think most of my correspondents hoped that he would. Of this result of my picture I felt distinctly proud'.[32]

If *A Fallen Idol* engaged current social debates in a fairly substantive fashion, other problem pictures at the Academy in 1913 were more closely linked to tabloid narratives of melodrama and political scandal. Depicting a young woman in evening dress lying unconscious or dead beneath some bushes, *Out of It* by Alfred Priest (Fig. 2) resonated with two contemporary tragedies: the shooting and death of the Countess of Cottenham while hunting, and

29. 'Why the Idol Fell', *Daily Sketch*, 12 May 1913, p. 5.

30. W.T.W., 'The Royal Academy', *World*, 6 May 1913, p. 658.

31. 'Mr. Collier's Picture "The Fallen Idol"', *The Times*, 29 July 1913, p. 13.

32. 'A Page From M[cut off]: When I Painted Subject Pictures', fragment of an undated press clipping (probably 1920s), collection of the artist's family. The quote continues, 'for it suggested to me that the spirit' and is then cut off.

Fig. 2. Alfred Priest, *Out of It*, 1913, oil on canvas, location unknown. (Photo: *The Daily Sketch*, 6 May 1913. © British Library Board. All rights reserved. LON LD46 NPL)

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Fig. 3. Edgar Bundy, *Finance*, 1913, oil on canvas, 130 × 246 cm (51½ × 97 in.), Bass Museum of Art, Miami © Bass Museum of Art/CORBIS.

the murder of a young domestic servant, Winnie Mitchell, whose body was found buried in the woods.[33] The artist himself located this picture within the context of these two recent events, and justified its sensational aspect with the claim that 'life itself gives us these subjects'. He went on to say that his subject was drawn from a similar source: 'My picture was inspired by a newspaper report five or six years ago. A beautiful girl is supposed to leave the card-table after a dinner-party. She goes out, just as she is, in her evening gown, without a cloak or hat. A search party is organised, but the body is discovered, so the report says, by a village urchin's dog'.[34] Priest's eagerness to locate the picture's origin in a newspaper report suggests that the interest of the picture lay in the conversations it could generate about contemporary events and people in the news. Both of the recent deaths had generated substantial news coverage, and each was connected with a whiff of scandal: The death of the Countess – who had divorced her first husband, with the Count named as co-respondent – was surrounded by the innuendo of suicide, or worse; while the death of the young servant girl implicated a married man and was compared to a Hardy novel.[35] In each case, there is the muted suggestion that the woman's past has somehow caught up with her, an implication of retribution that provides the animating element of moral judgment to readers' and viewers' speculations.

A third painting exhibited at the Academy in 1913 extended the problem picture's topical reach into the masculine realm of politics and public life. Depicting a 'group of Jewish financiers' and 'a fair-faced gentile' facing one another across the aftermath of a luxurious dinner, Edgar Bundy's *Finance* (Fig. 3) enjoyed a popularity that was largely attributed to its 'topical interest'.[36] To many viewers, the picture seemed to refer to the on-going Marconi affair, a political and financial scandal in which the Jewish Isaacs

33. 'Tragic Death of Countess', *Daily Express*, 5 May 1913, p. 1; 'Mysterious Tragedies', *Daily Express*, 5 May 1913, p. 5. The *Daily Sketch* explicitly linked the picture with these two news stories: 'Mr. Priest's picture was an unconscious prophecy of the tragic discovery which the Earl of Cottenham was to make a few days ago, when he found his wife dead in a wood. It also suggested, in some way, the Wimbourne tragedy.' *Daily Sketch*, 6 May 1913, p. 1.

34. 'Who Buys the Problem Picture?' *Daily Sketch*, 6 May 1913, p. 7.

35. 'Who murdered the girl found buried in a wood?' *Daily Sketch*, 8 May 1913, p. 1.

36. Martin Hardie, 'The Royal Academy: First Notice', *Queen*, 10 May 1913, p. 865. An article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* also made explicit reference to the current scandal: 'Popular and topical for quite another reason will be Mr. Edgar Bundy's "Finance" (575), a group of Jewish financiers at a dinner-table, endeavouring to convince a young politician that the operation they propose is an Investment, and not a Speculation. The application to current affairs is so exact that one may omit for a moment to note the amazing cleverness of the caricatures, and the painter-like qualities of the confused mass of wine and fruit and flowers.' 'Pictures to Talk About', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 May 1913, p. 7.

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family was accused of nepotism and three cabinet ministers were accused of illegal stock speculation.[37] A cartoon by E.T. Reed published in the *Daily Sketch* made the connection directly, casting Winston Churchill as the affronted gentile with the three accused ministers and three heavily caricatured Jewish businessmen confronting him across the table.[38] As the cartoon's caricatured rendering of the Jewish men suggests, discussion of the scandal was fuelled by stereotypes of greedy Jewish financiers and fears of an international Jewish cabal whose influence on finance and politics exceeded any national government. Reviews of the picture accordingly focused on its depiction of Jewish character and power. In the mainstream press, many critics seem simply to have assumed the transparency of the characterisation of the Jewish men; the *Daily Mail* critic described the scene and commented: 'The crude display of wealth and the strained, keen expression on the faces of the Jews all turned on the young man are wonderfully realistic'.[39] Martin Hardie, writing in the *Queen*, noted some heavy-handedness in the representation, but defended it as ultimately true both to life and artistic intention: 'Mr. Bundy has chosen unpleasant Semite types because it suited his purpose; but they are types, none the less, and not caricatures'.[40] Such responses, however, did not go uncontested. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, Claude Phillips – whose mother had been raised an Orthodox Jew – noted that 'for these life-size figures of opulent financiers . . . the most repulsive types have been deliberately chosen and as deliberately exaggerated', and called the painting 'a passionate assertion in paint of anti-semitism'.[41] As viewers identified the represented figures with real political actors, their discussion of 'race', character and motive became a vehicle both for the evaluation of specific politicians and entrepreneurs, and for the confirmation or refutation of racial stereotypes and prejudices.

The strongest reaction against the painting came in a periodical aimed at Jewish readers. In a lengthy response to the painting entitled 'A Disgraceful Picture', the editors of the *Jewish Chronicle* reviewed the debate and charged the Academy with 'moral retrogression' for exhibiting the picture, accusing the institution of trafficking in journalistic public pandering and offering offence to Jewish viewers and artists.[42] But it is the Academy's location as a place for the formation and exchange of social attitudes that is the cause of the most serious transgression: 'The picture is blatant in its anti-Semitism and one has only to listen for a few minutes to the remarks of visitors to the Exhibition who stand in front of this picture to realise how unwise the Council of the Academy were in permitting this cartoon to find a place on their walls'.[43] As viewers are drawn to the picture by the contemporary scandal and use it as an occasion to gossip and air their opinions, their beliefs are being shaped and directed by what the editors of the *Jewish Chronicle* see as the anti-Semitic perspective of the image.

Problem pictures faded from the walls of the Academy during the years of World War I, but reappeared in 1919 with a subject unimaginable at the pre-War Academy.[44] *Cocaine* by Alfred Priest (Fig. 4) reverses the composition of *A Fallen Idol*, with the man's head in the woman's lap, as she looks out and meets our gaze with a troubled stare. But the circumstances are a world away from Collier's respectable middle-class couple in distress. The woman sits in her dressing gown, in a luxurious modern room in the early hours of the morning (the clock on the side table reads 4.50). A young man in evening dress is slumped in her lap, unconscious, returned home after a long night out on the town. The title signals his presumed vice: cocaine. The drug was much in the news in the spring of 1919. While it had

37. In 1912, the British Admiralty negotiated a contract with the Marconi Company to install a wireless communication system. Before the contract could be ratified by Parliament, two rumours began to circulate. The first was the accusation that the Attorney General Rufus Isaacs had improperly steered the business towards his brother, Godfrey Isaacs, the director of the Marconi Company. The second rumour was that three government ministers, including David Lloyd George, had profited from stock market speculation based on insider information about the contract. In spring and summer of 1913 – the time of the Academy exhibition – witnesses appeared before a Select Committee in the House of Commons and a report was issued and debated. In mid-June the three ministers were cleared of wrongdoing, and in July a new contract was signed. Frances Donaldson, *The Marconi Scandal* (Rupert Hart-Davis: London, 1962).

38. 'E. T. Reed's Bitter Parody of an Academy Picture', *Daily Sketch*, 9 May 1913. The caption reads: 'Mr. E. T. Reed, the famous *Punch* artist, contributes to this week's *Bystander* the above brilliant cartoon, which is a parody of Mr. Bundy's picture "Financial" [*sic*] in this year's Academy. Mr. Churchill, it will be remembered, indignantly denied that he dealt in Marconi shares. Above the three Ministers who did are seen facing him. People are wondering what Mr. Bundy's picture means; there is no doubt what Mr. Reed's means'.

39. 'Most Popular Picture: Crowds to See "Finance"', *Daily Mail*, 8 May 1913, p. 3.

40. Martin Hardie, 'The Royal Academy', *Queen*, 10 May 1913, p. 865.

41. Claude Phillips, 'Royal Academy', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 May 1913, pp. 11–12. Phillips's mother, Helen Levy, was the sister of Joseph Moses Levy, the proprietor of the *Daily Telegraph*. Joseph Levy's son Edward Levy-Lawson became managing proprietor of the paper in 1885, and hired his cousin Claude as the regular art critic in 1897.

42. 'A Disgraceful Picture', *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 May 1913, p. 10.

43. 'The Royal Academy', *Jewish Chronicle*, 9 May 1913, p. 15.

44. Such self-consciously contemporary themes continued to be treated in problem pictures in the 1920s, such as John B. Souter's painting, *The Breakdown* (1926), which depicted a black Jazz musician and a naked white woman, and John Collier's last problem picture, *The Brotherhood of Man* (1927), which represented anarchists gathered around a table with a bomb. But the problem picture was by then a curiosity rather than a popular fad, and there is comparatively little recorded response to these pictures.

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Fig. 4. Alfred Priest, *Cocaine*, 1919, oil on canvas, location unknown. (Photo: *Graphic*, 10 May 1919. © British Library Board. All rights reserved. LON MLD19 NPL.)

long been available by prescription, it was only during World War I that cocaine became identified with a drug underground and a subject of public concern. The overdose death of the young actress Billie Carleton in November 1918 and the inquest and trial that followed focused attention on the dangers of modern drug use, and created a public understanding of cocaine as 'a moral menace', particularly for vulnerable young modern women.[45] Contemporary responses situate the picture within this context, introducing its topic by noting, 'poor Billie Carleton can't be left alone'.[46]

But, of course, the picture does not follow the news account, as it is the man who is the 'dope fiend' here. As Priest explained in an interview with the *Daily Mirror*, the picture is based on a true story of a young wife who 'discovered suddenly that her idol had feet of clay'. Like Collier, Priest aimed to arouse viewers' sympathy as well as their condemnation: 'And you will observe that in the picture her hand protects and sustains as it falls across the shoulders of the crushed thing that is her husband'.[47] While the gender roles have

45. Marek Kohn, *Drug Girls: The Birth of the British Drug Underground* (Granta: London, 1992), p. 101.

46. 'Echoes of the Town: The Private View', *Daily Sketch*, 3 May 1919, p. 5.

47. 'Truth in a Tragic Picture', *Daily Mirror*, 6 May 1919, p. 2.

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changed, the dynamics of fallenness and forgiveness are the same as in Collier's *Fallen Idol*, challenging viewers' stock stories and inviting them to write new ones.

As these examples make clear, topicality and a symbiotic relationship with the press was central to how the problem pictures of the 1910s worked. The motives of individual painters of problem pictures varied, from Priest's self-conscious attention-seeking to Collier's interest in serious social and political questions. But they all shared the desire to use the pictures to spark discussion, allowing viewers to engage with contemporary 'moral panics' and media scandals, ranging from the most intimate matters of marital life to the motivations and weaknesses of politicians and public figures. Artists drew on popular news stories and scandals to engage viewers in their pictures and the press publicised – and 'problematised' – the resulting pictures. The press was thus a critical component in the circuit of meaning and interpretation, providing the raw material for the pictures and then reporting on (and thus helping to create and sustain) the conversations they generated.

This multi-layered relationship with the press is one key difference between these problem pictures and earlier examples of topicality in Victorian art. While major current events such as the Crimean War and the 'Indian Mutiny' sparked spates of paintings in the mid-Victorian era, they tended to use individual incident and anecdote primarily to convey a larger theme – such as patriotic sentiment – rather than to explore or dramatise the nuances of an individual's life or psychology. William Powell Frith's modern-life panoramas and his narrative series such as *The Race for Wealth* (1880), which rely upon viewers' knowledge of contemporary events for their legibility and evoke multivalent conversations, are closer in function, but still provide a legible and (over)determined arc from sin through deserved punishment, and thus provide a kind of moral and narrative horizon beyond which interpretation cannot easily extend.[48] The possibilities for reception differed as well, of course, as the gossip and scandal driven human-interest coverage of the New Journalism did not yet exist as either source or publicity outlet for these modern-life pictures.[49]

In contrast, the problem pictures of the 1910s fused the tradition of modern-life genre painting with new modes of journalistic sensation. Like the stories of murder, sex, and accident that filled the pages of the mass circulation press, problem pictures dramatised the everyday life of 'ordinary' people. The pictures' theatrically posed moments of suspense left the details of the characters' past, present, and future to viewers' imaginations, fuelled by the habits of gossip and scandal fostered by the tabloid press. The elusive key to each picture seems to turn on the psychology and motivation of the actors represented: Was the wife's infidelity justified, and will it be forgiven? Are the Jewish dinner guests shrewd businessmen or corrupt conspirators? How did this promising young man fall prey to a drug habit? As an article in *Truth* noted in 1878, such questions are the very source of gossip's popularity: While discussion of the facts of a case is necessarily limited in scope, conjecture about people's motives offered endless possibilities.[50] This kind of gossipy speculation plays a critical role in the formation and performance of moral values and social norms. As contemporary psychologists John Sabini and Maury Silver have argued, gossip 'involves taking a stance about another's behavior – behavior which could be our own, but isn't. To do that is to dramatize ourselves: our attitudes, values, tastes, temptations, inclination, will, and so forth'.[51] At a time when gender roles were under pressure from feminist challenges to Victorian ideals and

48. Earlier artists also seem to have been wary of too close a link to the everyday. Although always looking for suggestions of subjects, Frith rejected topics too directly related to contemporary events, such as the Tichborne Claimant and William Whiteley's new department store. William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* (Harper and Brothers: New York, 1888), pp. 296–302.

49. Joel H. Wiener, 'How New was the New Journalism?', in Joel H. Wiener (ed.), *Papers for the Millions* (Greenwood Press: New York, 1988), pp. 47–71.

50. 'Gammer Gossip', *Truth*, 21 February 1878, pp. 246–7.

51. Sabini and Silver, 'Gossip', p. 98.

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the growth of the middle class was creating fractures between its upper and lower reaches, class and gender were the primary axes along which interpretations of these pictures were generated, labelled and disseminated. As viewers indulged in the seemingly frivolous pleasures of gossip before these pictures, they were staking claims to their own identities and values, testing their moral codes against the problems of modern life and the values of their peers.

Simultaneously, this kind of gossip functioned as a link between the public and the private worlds, as political scandals and legal questions of divorce or drug use were understood and debated through the discussion of these invented characters' lives, psychologies, and motives. As Patricia Meyer Spacks has argued in her study of gossip and literature, gossip's power derives from its 'liminal position between public and private . . . Gossip interprets public facts in private terms: The senator will not run for re-election because his wife will abandon him if he does. It also gives private detail general meaning: The young woman's drinking problem exemplifies the strain on women trying to do everything at once'.[52] Drawing upon public narratives of law, celebrity, and scandal and using the techniques of narrative painting to evoke relational responses from their viewers, these topical problem pictures fused the public and the private through the medium of gossip.

52. Spacks, *Gossip*, p. 262.

53. 'Which Is the Idol?' *Daily Sketch*, 5 May 1913, p. 5.

Intertexuality and Identification: Gossip and Social Networks

While subject matter was perhaps the most obvious way in which artists engaged their audiences, the gossipy appeal of problem pictures was not limited to contemporary news events. As viewers focused on the characters in these paintings, they made other kinds of links and connections between the represented figures. A seemingly mundane 'human interest' story from 1913 suggests some of the ways viewers could relate to the painted figures. On 6 May 1913, the day after it ran a feature on *A Fallen Idol*, the *Daily Sketch* featured Alfred Priest's *Out of It* on its front page (Fig. 5). The story focuses on the fact that the pictures share the same model – one Miss May Fagerstein, who is pictured below the painting. While the article does not pursue them, there are at least two potential modes of using this connection to extend the discussion the picture aroused. On the one hand, viewers might follow the model through the stories of the different pictures, interpreting them as episodes in the life of a single character. On the other, the news story suggests the possibility of seeing 'through' the pictures to the real personalities involved in creating them. Both of these options – what I call intertextuality and identification – expanded the potential for treating the characters in the paintings as subjects of gossip and creating social networks of artists and viewers.

While the suggestion was not taken up in the accompanying article, the use of the same model opened up the possibility of reading the pictures in tandem, and attributing the young woman's death in *Out of It* to the crisis depicted in *A Fallen Idol*. This mode of intertextual reading was common in earlier problem pictures, as viewers turned the models into characters whose histories could be followed by attentive viewers. One reviewer recognised the unhappy husband of *A Fallen Idol* as a character in Collier's problem picture of 1908, *The Sentence of Death*, a scene of a young man in a doctor's office: 'Perhaps the clue may lie in the fact that the young gentleman who supports the weeping woman is the same youth whose case was given up as hopeless by the doctor two years ago'.[53] This identification, of course, opens up an entirely new area for speculation as to the

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DAILY SKETCH.

BEAUTIFUL MODEL WHO SAT FOR THE TWO MOST INTERESTING PICTURES OF THE YEAR.

Fig. 5. *The Daily Sketch*, 6 May 1913. (© British Library Board. All rights reserved. LON MLD19 NPL.)

couple's situation. The accused woman in Collier's problem picture *The Cheat* of 1905 (Fig. 6) was identified as appearing in several other contemporary pictures, including his problem picture of 1906, '*Indeed, indeed, repentance oft I swore!*' (Fig. 7). The *Daily Mirror* saw the narrative connection as an obvious one: 'Now we know that the cheat was the woman standing up. This year she is gazing into the fire, wishing she hadn't cheated'.[54] Reading the pictures as successive incidents added a stronger moral element, illustrating a narrative arc from crime to remorse, if not punishment. This kind of intertextual reading both extended viewers' understanding of the depicted personalities as characters with histories and psychologies, and created a community of viewers who followed the stories year after year.

A variant on this kind of intertextual reading put the characters into conversation with the individuals depicted in the portraits that filled the walls of the average Academy. A long notice in *Truth* in 1906 made much of who precisely was the recipient of the whispered confession of Collier's penitent, whose 'opulent physical charms' offered ample evidence of the direction her 'faults . . . must have probably tended'. The hanging suggested one scenario,

54. 'Private View at the Academy', *Daily Mirror*, 5 May 1906, p. 4.

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Fig. 6. John Collier, *The Cheat*, 1905, oil on canvas, 167.6 × 198.1 cm (66 × 78 in.), location unknown. (Photo: *The Art Annual*, 1914. © British Library Board. All rights reserved. P.P.1931 pc/2.)

Fig. 7. John Collier, *'Indeed, indeed, repentance oft I swore!'*, oil on canvas, location unknown. (Photo: *The Art Annual*, 1914. © British Library Board. All rights reserved. P.P.1931 pc/2.)

in which 'The elaborately "frocked" lady . . . is supposed to be exclaiming, just loud enough for "The Hon Mr and Mrs Douglas Carnegie with their sons John and David" to hear her in their full-size motor-car, "Indeed, indeed, repentance

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oft I swore!'" But the reviewer was entranced by another possibility, complimenting the hanging committee for 'having successfully resisted the temptation of moving [the picture] from Gallery VII to Gallery V . . . For then Mr Collier's *grande dame* would have been positively sighing out her vain expostulations in close proximity to the characteristic portrait of the Rt. Hon. Sir John Gorell Barnes, LL.D., President of the Divorce Division of the High Court of Justice'.[55]

The tight hanging of the Academy exhibition encouraged viewers in such readings of pictures in relation to one another.[56] Mark Hallett has traced this mode of response to the earliest Academy exhibitions of the late eighteenth century, arguing that the new exhibition format of the Academy 'fostered an equivalently novel form of interpretation in which paintings were defined as objects *interacting* with those hanging nearby'.[57] In his discussion of this 'dialogic' mode of reading pictures, Hallett focuses on the meta-narratives of artistic, social, and political power that the Academy hangings created, but, of course, such an approach also allowed for more individual readings, as viewers made their own connections and comparisons. As demonstrated in the example cited above, such readings made the Academy exhibition an imagined social space where the characters in narrative paintings could interact with the prominent society figures represented in the exhibited portraits. Was there a hint of scandal when the *Truth* critic imagined the penitent confessing to the Carnegies? A suggestion of titillation when the Honourable Judge's serious portrait was juxtaposed with the 'opulent physical charms' of one of his 'cases'? Such juxtapositions could also be used as a kind of critique of the élite whose portraits dominated the Academy. In his review of Tom Mostyn's picture of a doss house, A.C.R. Carter drew attention to the social impossibility of the intrusion of its subjects into the more rarefied space of the Academy: 'As Bridge is now more fashionable than slumming, the Hanging Committee has apparently shied at waking the consciences of its patrons, and has hung this powerful study of despair and callousness high above the head of the "Countess of Warwick!"' [by Sargent].[58]For some critics, this interaction between the pictures was precisely the problem with the Academy: as a critic in the *Art Journal* complained at the early date of 1856:

> In going around the rooms, the mind is called upon to be always jumping from great to little, and from grave to gay, and back again, and has to go through a series of sudden convulsions and transitions, in seeking to do justice to the labours of each artist. For my part, my powers are not facile enough to prance with ease from broad farce to pathos, or from pet lap-dogs . . . to a great historic or poetic effort; or . . . the ruins of Carthage, . . . to the broad business city face of Mr. —, with his well-brushed whiskers.[59]

His respondent, however, pointed out that he was speaking as a 'lover of Art', while the Academy was aimed at a wider audience, who 'go to see the portraits of their friends, or wile away an hour or two, or to say that they have been there, and to be amused, but not to think closely of or study the works; and the variety of images and characters in the very quick succession to which you object is part of the amusement and excitement to them'.[60] As many scholars have noted, the change from this kind of crowded hanging to the modern convention of a single row of widely-spaced pictures worked to highlight the formal qualities and autonomy of each individual image, but it also changed the social experience of the exhibition by diminishing the potential narrative contact between images.[61] Modern hanging practices create a different physical relationship between the pictures and the viewers,

55. 'Art Notes - Royal Academy', *Truth*, 9 May 1906, pp. 1129.

56. While by the late nineteenth century exhibition styles were changing at some venues, such as the Grosvenor Gallery and many commercial spaces, the Royal Academy still used a tight hanging style. In 1920, a review in *The Times* noted that the Academy had finally moved to only two rows of pictures. 'Royal Academy: Improvements on Past Years', *The Times*, 1 May 1920, p. 15.

57. Mark Hallett, 'Reading the Walls: Pictorial Dialogue at the British Royal Academy', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2004, p. 582.

58. A[lbert] C[harles] R[obinson] Carter, 'The Royal Academy', *Art Journal*, June 1905, p. 172.

59. 'A Few Words on Exhibitions: The French and Our Own', *Art Journal*, February 1856, p. 33.

60. 'A Few Words on Exhibitions', p. 33.

61. See, for example, Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*, expanded edition (University of California Press: Berkeley, LA, and London, 1999).

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and encourage a different pattern of movement and attention. Rather than standing in a conversational group and looking at a wall filled with pictures – a mode of viewing represented in countless illustrations of the Academy – the single row of widely spaced pictures encourages viewers to walk from one picture to the next, pausing before each individual work in turn, in a measured rhythm of diversion punctuated by attention, either individual or communal.

A second possibility opened up by the identification of Miss May Fagerstein as the model for both *A Fallen Idol* and *Out of It* was the link it made to the real people behind the pictures, whether professional models or identifiable public figures. Shared models were a way of linking artists and their aims in the public imagination. Defining *the* problem pictures of the year had become a kind of contest between different critics and papers by the 1910s, and one effect of the *Daily Sketch* cover was to define *Out of It* as a problem picture by virtue of its shared model with *A Fallen Idol*, painted by the 'Great Problem-Artist' John Collier.[62] Recognisable portraits of the artist's friends or public figures opened up even more scope for discussion. Collier's friend Reginald Barratt was recognised by critics both in the role of the doctor in *The Sentence of Death* and as the 'cheat's' partner. Critics played upon their recognition in various ways: While one critic for the *Morning Post* in 1905 explicitly identified the sitter and his connections to Collier – describing the figure in *The Cheat* as 'an excellent portrait of Mr. Collier's fellow artist and near neighbour, Mr. Reginald Barratt, A.R.W.S'. – others were more circumspect.[63] In 1908, the critic for the *Art Journal* simply hinted that the 'doctor is at once recognisable as a prominent associate of the old Water-Colour Society, who has several times played parts in Mr. Collier's pictorial dramas', while an article in the *Morning Post* used the crowd's ignorance as a foil to the critic's (and, presumably, the reader's) penetration: 'The artist who sat to Mr Collier for the physician in his picture was in the Sixth Gallery during the afternoon, but was unrecognized by the crowd despite the singular fidelity of his likeness'.[64] Recognition of the sitter located the viewer 'in the know', conversant with artistic circles and friendships and elevated above the unfashionable 'shilling public'.[65]

Artists had embedded portraits – of celebrities or friends – in narrative paintings throughout the Victorian period. Two of the most popular painters of modern-life genre – John Everett Millais and William Powell Frith – regularly included friends and public figures in their paintings, and artists such as Edwin Landseer, Daniel Maclise, Anna Mary Howitt, and Lawrence Alma-Tadema did so on occasion as well.[66] While at least some viewers must have recognised such references, there are few traces of such recognition in published reception. One exception comes from the American press. An article in the *New York Times* identified Kate Dickens, the novelist's daughter, as the female figure in Millais's *Black Brunswicker* (1860), and used the occasion to note 'she is engaged to be married to Charles Collins (the "Eye-witness" of *All the Year Round*,) brother of Wilkie Collins, and a great friend of Millais's'.[67] Though not made explicit, the subject of the gossip is appropriate to the picture's subject, young lovers embracing. An article in the *Saturday Review* entitled 'Newspaper Gossip' rebuked the American papers for 'print[ing] what in English towns is only said or whispered', but went on to repeat the identification of Kate Dickens and the news of her engagement as an example of the misguided American practice.[68] Other identifications played on contemporary scandal, such as Landseer's *The Taming of the Shrew (The Pretty Horsebreaker)*, exhibited at the Academy in 1861. The model for the 'pretty horsebreaker' was recognised as a famous horsewoman, but the

62. 'Problem and Story Pictures from the Royal Academy of 1908', *Illustrated London News*, 9 May 1908, pp. iv–v. A much earlier example demonstrates a similar, if more far-reaching, critical strategy. In the *Illustrated London News*' review of the Winter Exhibition of 1859, the recognition of shared models was used as a way of linking the Pre-Raphaelite painters, and dismissing their artistic ambitions and individuality through a derisive reference to the obviousness (and ugliness) of the repeated figures. 'The Winter Exhibition', *Illustrated London News*, 26 November 1859, pp. 515–16.

63. 'Art and Artists', *Morning Post*, 8 May 1905, p. 9.

64. 'Passing Events', *Art Journal*, May 1908, p. 157; 'The Royal Academy', *Morning Post*, 4 May 1908, p. 4.

65. Julie Codell suggests gossip fulfilled a similar function in Victorian artists' autobiographies. For artists writing decades after the peak of their popularity, 'Gossip about past inner circles reinstated them at the cultural center they no longer inhabited in reality'. Julie F. Codell, *The Victorian Artist: Artists' Lifewritings in Britain, ca. 1870–1910* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, 2003), p. 166.

66. Frith's painting *The Railway Station* (1862), for example, is filled with identifiable portraits, and the artist often used family members, friends, and servants as models. Millais also used recognisable models: Georgina Moncreiffe, a well-known beauty, appears in *Spring* (1856–1859) and Kate Dickens, the novelist's daughter, appears in *The Black Brunswicker* (1859–1860). While the inclusion of identifiable models might be a matter of convenience or personal friendship, it could enhance (or complicate) the meaning of the picture, as in the case of Anna Mary Howitt's use of feminist Barbara Bodichon as the warrior queen in *Boadicea Brooding Over Her Wrongs* (1856) and Daniel Maclise's study of *Caroline Norton as Erin* (c. 1846) for the fresco *The Spirit of Justice* in the House of Lords. The inclusion of art dealers is a particularly interesting instance of this strategy: the dealer Louis Victor Flatou appeared as a passenger speaking to the conductor in *The Railway Station*, while a portrait of Ernest Gambart dominates Lawrence Alma-Tadema's *The Picture Gallery* (1874). In these cases, the inclusion of the portrait signalled a business relationship between dealer and painter. Flatou had commissioned *The Railway Station* in 1860, and widely publicised the engraving, while Gambart had made Alma-Tadema's career, offering him a contract in 1865 for 24 pictures on a sliding scale as his fame increased. To those in the know, the inclusion of such portraits might signal the debt, or function as an ironic commentary on the artist's position in the market. Mary Cowling, *Victorian Figurative*

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precise identification varied. Reviews of the Academy identified her as the respectable Miss Annie Gilbert, but at least one group of viewers read the figure of the luxuriously reclining woman as the courtesan Catherine Walters, also known as 'Skittles'.[69] As viewers recognised (or mis-recognised) portraits within narrative paintings, the scope of gossip reached beyond pure fiction, blending real actors with invented scenarios.

The social significance of this kind of response is demonstrated by a fictional character invoked by the critic W.W. Fenn, writing in *Belgravia*: one 'Jack Knowington'. Presented as the narrator's fictional companion at the Academy, 'Jack Knowington' identifies the older man in Millais's painting *The North-west Passage* (1874) as 'Lord Byron's friend Captain Trelawney' and uses the identification as a starting point for a long gossipy digression:

> It's rather curious . . . now that cremation is being discussed, to find ourselves face to face with the presentment of one who actually assisted as high priest at such a ceremony; for you know it was Trelawney who brought home Shelley's heart . . . There's another funny thing, too, about the picture: it seems he had a great objection to sitting . . . but a lady interceded . . . and an odd bargain was struck. . . . The lady complained of a headache and looked ill. "Take a Turkish bath," said Trelawney, "and I'll sit to Millais."[70]

Knowington is a figure of mockery, as he uses the picture to demonstrate his social standing and inside knowledge. But he also allows the critic to ventriloquise the information, and the article's very title – 'Echoes from the Royal Academy, By a Listener'– suggests the importance of hearing (rather than seeing) at the exhibition.[71]

Conclusion

One final example pushes the historical archive to its furthest reaches, presenting an intriguing view of the more personal identifications modern-life narrative paintings could trigger. In March of 1915, a woman wrote a pair of letters to John Collier, in which she connects the genre of the problem picture to her most intimate personal experience. Her first letter begins 'For weeks I have thought of a picture. I wish you would paint it. . . . I would call the picture "A sleep he got of me," based partly upon the poem "Wedding Morn" by D.H. Lawrence and upon an actual experience'.[72] In a second letter (after an apparently sympathetic response from Collier), she emphasised the personal nature of the story: 'Shall you mind if I again tell you that it is an actual experience of my own? *And* I read Lawrence's poem *afterwards*. You understand?' D.H. Lawrence's poem is the meditation of a woman on her wedding morning, anticipating the next day's dawn after the consummation of her marriage, so it is not surprising that the writer goes on to say that it is difficult to speak of the experience, as it is 'intimate in the extreme'. If he is interested in painting the picture, he should read the poem and then, she promises, 'I will do my very best to fill in afterwards. It's a very human [illegible] in all its intensity. An everyday happening, but peculiarly vivid at the present-hour. My lover is a soldier. Would you consider the khaki setting too topical, too banal?'[73] While this was clearly an unusual letter, it suggests a dynamic of personal identification in response to Collier's problem pictures, hinting at a powerful if largely unrecoverable potential impact of modern-life genre. For this viewer, at least, the narrative impulse is a two-way street. She does not simply read narrative painting in light of personal experience and real social life; narrative painting and its conventions become a lens through which

Painting (Andreas Papadakis Publisher: London, 2000), p. 116; Jane Sellars, 'Frith's Women: William Powell Frith and the Female Model', in Mark Bills and Vivien Knight (eds), *William Powell Frith: Painting the Victorian Age* (Yale University Press in association with Guildhall Art Gallery, City of London and The Mercer Art Gallery: London and New Haven, 2006), pp. 131–44; Leslie Parris (ed.), *The Pre-Raphaelites* (Tate Gallery: London, 1984), pp. 171–2, 184–6; Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (Routledge: New York and London, 1993), pp. 188–9; Kieran Dolin, 'The Transfigurations of Caroline Norton', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 30, no. 2, September 2002, pp. 503–27; Edwin Becker, *et al.* (eds), *Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema* (Rizzoli: New York, 1996), p. 186.

67. 'Echoes from the London Clubs', *New York Times*, 26 May 1860, p. 2.

68. 'Newspaper Gossip', *Saturday Review*, 23 June 1860, p. 799.

69. In a review of the Academy, the critic for *The Times* identified the woman as 'Miss Gilbert', and used the picture to comment on gender relations: 'A tribute at once to Mr. Rarey and the fair horsetamer, Miss Gilbert, who has so mastered his system as to have brought the sleek thoroughbred on his side among the straw. The lady reclines against his glossy side, smiling in the consciousness of female supremacy, and playfully patting the jaw that could tear her into tatters, with the back of her small hand. For horse read husbands, and the picture is a provocation to rebellion addressed to the whole sex. It shows to what account genius can turn materials that commonplace rejects as impracticable'. Other viewers identified her as Catherine Walters, as in a letter in *The Times* complaining about the elevation of the demi-monde, which used the picture as an example. 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *The Times*, 4 May 1861, p. 12; Lynda Nead, *Myths of Sexuality* (Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1988), pp. 61–2.

70. W.W. Fenn, 'Echoes from the Royal Academy. By a Listener', *Belgravia*, June 1874, p. 421.

71. Fenn, 'Echoes'. Another article in *London Society* makes the point even more explicitly. In a review entitled 'Leaves by a Listener II: At the Royal Academy', the writer explains 'Never forgetting my system of studying "painting by ear," I have paid the greatest attention to all that has been expressed concerning the present exhibition, not only among the crowds of sightseers, the groups of *dilettante*, and the knots of artists assembled in the rooms of the Institution during the past months, but, "in the perfumed chambers of the great," in the stately-columned clubs, in the midst of social, suburban circles, and among the

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to interpret her own life experience, and – she anticipates – to put her own personal experience into a public frame.

I end with this example to call attention both to the range and depth of these more personal readings of narrative paintings, and the limitations of the archive in allowing us to recover them. Readings of narrative pictures in terms of gossip – responding to and discussing their characters and their situations as if they were real people – reached from the most personal experience to the political intrigue of financial scandals, but only traces of such responses are left to us today. If not entirely recoverable, however, such meanings were nonetheless a constitutive part of the experience of narrative painting for Victorian and later viewers. As anyone who has ever visited a 'blockbuster' museum or gallery exhibition knows, looking at art is a social and performative experience in most forms of modern exhibition culture. Narrative painting embraces this fact, and much of its meaning is created in those encounters, allowing for the performance of individual identity, the creation of social and artistic groups and subgroups, and connecting personal and public understandings of the world.

Gossip, then, is not only a mode of responding to narrative painting, but a model for how modern-life narrative painting functions. Spacks similarly argues that gossip is a useful analogy for the realist novel, which mediates between public and private life, and sets up a dialogic relationship with the reader.[74] In these narrative paintings, however, the dialogue takes place not only in a private exchange between the image and its viewer, but also in a public exchange between viewers. Identifying gossip as a model for the experience of looking at modern-life narrative painting thus links the physical and social spaces of exhibitions with the meanings of the pictures themselves. As Andrew Hemingway eloquently notes in his analysis of the social experience of the early-nineteenth-century Academy, 'the art of the past was also a particular type of experience – a function of social relations then prevailing, an effect of discourse, and a range of complex learnt pleasures'.[75] Academies and galleries are not just stages for social actors with the pictures standing in as props, nor are they mute backdrops for aesthetic experiences. The social experiences of exhibitions are a constitutive part of looking at pictures, or, to shift the emphasis, pictures are a constitutive and relational part of the social experience of a visit to an exhibition.

The reordering of priorities implicit in that last formulation runs contrary, of course, to the focus of much art-historical writing.[76] But I think it does suggest something important about the popularity – in the Victorian period and beyond – of narrative painting and its relation to modern exhibition culture. Modern-life genre painting creates a shared set of referents – invented characters and situations – for viewers to gossip about. Gossip most commonly concerns people known to both gossipers, and serves as social glue, allowing the gossipers to affirm their membership in a group and to reinforce its shared values. But as Max Gluckman recognised long ago, gossip about celebrities or royals can serve the same purpose in the larger, more anonymous social contexts of modern life: 'In the great conurbations the discussion of, for example, stars of film, and sport, produces a basis on which people transitorily associated can find something personal to talk about'.[77] The fictional characters in narrative painting provided common ground for the large diverse Academy audiences, offering a real but morally neutral way to engage in gossip and its creation of a sense of shared experience and group identity.

Bohemian coteries that take a practical interest in art'. 'Leaves by a Listener II: At the Royal Academy', *London Society*, July 1871, p. 70.

72. Jessie [?] Claridge to John Collier, 25 March 1915, letter in possession of the artist's family.

73. Jessie [?] Claridge to John Collier, 27 March 1915, letter in possession of the artist's family.

74. Spacks, *Gossip*, pp. 3–23, 258–63.

75. Andrew Hemingway, 'Art Exhibitions as Leisure-Class Rituals in Early Nineteenth-Century London', in Brian Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1995), p. 95.

76. There are, of course, important exceptions to this general art-historical focus. For insightful analyses of the social experience of particular exhibitions, and the connections to the kinds of work on view there, see Hemingway, 'Art Exhibitions as Leisure-Class Rituals'; Andrew Stephenson, 'Anxious Performances: Aestheticism, the Art Gallery, and the Ambulatory Geographies of Late Nineteenth-Century London', *Victorian Review*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2001, pp. 1–19; and David H. Solkin, 'Crowds and Connoisseurs: Looking at Genre Painting at Somerset House', in David H. Solkin (ed.) *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2001), pp. 157–71.

77. Gluckman, 'Gossip and Scandal', p. 315.

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