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Incongruities
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Working Title: Diderot's art theory in the *Salons*: beautiful nature or grotesque caricature?

Abstract

In Diderot's work on the *Salons*, the eighteenth century French philosopher and art critic developed his art theory on the beautiful and underlying ideas on the ugly. While Diderot's criticism in the *Salons* is based on the representation of nature and its imitation through literary or historical foundation, the lack of verisimilitude or "vraisemblance" in a painting through incongruity on the one hand, and exaggeration on the other, can be the foundation of a grotesque aesthetic in the arts. Focusing on Diderot's *Salons*, this paper will seek to explore grotesque manifestations in the form of incongruous elements placed in a painting. This study will also question the meaning of imitation of nature and how the mimetic process should not be a mere copy of objects found in nature. It should rather involve observation and absorption of emotions on the part of the artist, so that he can translate them onto the canvas.

Examining Boucher's paintings such as *Nativité*, and *Pastorale*, I will argue that incongruity for Diderot embodies an element of disharmony that stems from a blend of fundamentally distinct elements, be it between subject and object, or between objects themselves. While Diderot claims that Boucher's paintings depict imaginary events that don't have a model in nature, I will show that the paintings illustrate some of reality with fictional undertones, and the incongruous blend of fiction and reality fosters the notion of the grotesque.

In contrast with the luxurious life that Boucher imagined, Greuze's paintings illustrate everyday actions of people of low social stratum. I will show that even Greuze's works, such as *L'Enfant gâté* or *Piété filiale*, which are known to embody a moral quality, can degenerate into a space of confusion because of lack of a clear subject for the former, and can illustrate grotesque manifestations in the pictorial representation of a debased social class, in its crude state.