

# A 'Perverse' Stereoscopic Vision in Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*

---

JOOST VORMEER

Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* is often described in visual terms by mentioning similarities with paintings and movies. When analyzing a passage about the unhappily married couple during dinner, Erich Auerbach describes this as if it were a picture. Instead of narrating, the writer shows a series of pure pictures, revealing the uniformity and inescapability of Emma Bovary's provincial life, Auerbach writes (484-89). Ernest Pinard, representing the ministry of justice in the obscenity trial against Flaubert, uses the same metaphor, but according to him those pictures were lewd. He also deplored the absence of an 'author' or character who judged Emma's behavior (334, 335). Alan Spiegel, like Auerbach, confirms the absence of such a judging narrator. At first glance passages from *Madame Bovary* remind him of movie scenes because characters observe an object at a given time and place. So when for example Charles Bovary observes his wife Emma in the kitchen surrounded by different objects, seen object

It is interesting that Auerbach later acknowledges that we cannot simply speak of a picture. He writes: “The situation, then, is not presented simply as a picture, but we are first given Emma and then the situation through her” (484). Perhaps later critics – after publications by Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal in the seventies – would use the term ‘focalization,’ also a term borrowed from visual studies / film. Auerbach adds that Flaubert exemplifies Emma’s psychological condition by means of what she observes. This also seems to me a procedure widely used in film. In (classic) cinema a normal spatial style “affords a fluid set of guidelines for regulating subjectivity and spatial representation,” writes David Bordwell (126). To discuss these principles, Bordwell uses an analysis by Edward Branigan and an example from Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*. According to me many scenes from this movie employ the same visual subjectivity Auerbach reads in *Madame Bovary*.

and observer operate at the same moment and this ‘technique’ renders the illusion of a film shot.<sup>1</sup> Later in his article Spiegel explains the visual structure of *Madame Bovary* more clearly by stating that one can regard the visual descriptions not so much as an example of cinematographic writing, but rather as an example of *scenographic* writing. According to Spiegel, Flaubert presents his objects in the frame of a theatrical stage, that is, often as a whole and described each after another (230-33).

This view can be interesting if we focus on another novel by Flaubert, his second one, *Salammbô*. It is an epic story about the obsession of a military chief, Mâtho, for Salammbô, a high priestess in the city of Carthage. Mâtho is one of the leaders of the mercenaries who begin a devastating war against their former employer Carthage.

The novel, however well-received by the public, still made a somewhat dissatisfying impact on critics, writes E.L. Constable. After its publication in 1862, critics were puzzled by the detailed richness of the novel and complained that Flaubert had lost his eye on the overall story. These critics expected an encounter with another world, and in a sense they got one, but they were looking in vain for a clear framework (Constable 627-29).

In his introduction to the Penguin edition, translator A.J. Krailsheimer writes that Flaubert did use a historical source as a guideline for his narrative. Many elements from Polybius’ *Histories* return in *Salammbô*, especially the events on the battlefield. Polybius was a Greek soldier and a friend of Publius Scipio, the Roman general who won the last war against Carthage (Krailsheimer 11). But then there are the chapters on Salammbô and

Mâtho's destructive obsession for her. Krailsheimer regards these as a concentration of "sex and violence off the battlefield" and according to him these chapters provide a more personalized version of the conflict (12). But I think Constable is right when he asserts that Flaubert's Carthage does not give readers an encompassing frame: after all the story deals with a long forgotten historical event, namely the war of the mercenaries against the city of Carthage and the narrator does not introduce his story. So what remains, especially when the focus leaves the battlefield, is a profusion of signs and symbols, a chaotic shattered world, which in my opinion differs from the fixed 'images' of theatrical space. In this essay I will investigate the possibility of describing and interpreting some of the visual descriptions in *Salammbô* in different terms than Spiegel's notion of 'scenographic' writing, although his understanding of the influence of theatrical and cinematographic visual space on the nineteenth century novel is of course helpful. In fact my intention is to add a new dimension to this understanding. In my opinion, especially the visual descriptions in the sections dealing with Mâtho's erotic obsession undermine a clear scenic relationship between observer and object. But we have to keep in mind that the concept of literary realism in relation to vision / visibility is not entirely without problems, because the signs of language are different from those of images. Roland Barthes wrote about the 'reality effect' of literary realism. In his opinion, Flaubert's description of details, like the description of a barometer on the wall in *Madame Bovary*, creates an aesthetic verisimilitude and abundance isolated from the structural pattern of the narrative. In classical antiquity those descriptions had a clear aesthetic function in the context of rhetoric, but in modern times its function is only to create an illusion of the real. So a signifier (a term) like a 'barometer on the wall' does not denote anything, that is, does not refer anymore to a commonly shared concept, but only simply asserts that it is there as something 'real.' This illusion of the real can be called the reality effect, Barthes writes (449-55). Perhaps we are able then to connect the notion of vision from visual studies with this illusion of the real in literary realism.

The visual images created by a contemporary optical instrument like the stereoscope can cast a new light on some descriptive passages in *Salammbô*. In his study *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary shows how the development, technique and the epistemological implications of the stereoscope in the nineteenth century can provide an alternative reading of art history. According to Crary, conventional art history generally locates an important rupture in western visual representation

2 It is interesting to note that Spiegel uses a somewhat similar binary model when describing the visual tendencies in nineteenth century literature. He locates 'his' rupture at the rise of literary modernism. In his opinion the novels of the late Henry James, Flaubert and Joyce are examples of 'cinematographic form' because of their rendering of a more discontinuous and multiple visual field, while a realist like Flaubert presents 'whole vista's' (240, 241).

3 Crary's study is much indebted to the work of Michel Foucault. In my opinion especially the latter's genealogy of discourses and their subsequent ruptures in *The Order of Things* is quite important for an understanding of Crary's approach.

at the emergence of impressionism and a movement towards abstraction in the late nineteenth century. This emergence, mainly a selective enterprise of avant-garde artists, meant an important break with classical notions like perspective and mimesis. The development and popularity of photography and later film are juxtaposed to this rupture. According to conventional art history the supposed realism of those mass media coexisted with the emergence of new, more abstract representations in the field of the visual arts<sup>2</sup> (Crary 3-4). Crary summarizes this as follows:

Thus we are often left with a confusing bifurcated model of vision in the nineteenth century: on one level there is a relatively small number of advanced artists who generated a radically new kind of seeing and signification, while on a more quotidian level vision remains embedded within the same general "realist" strictures that had organized it since the fifteenth century. (4)

In order to reconcile this "confusing bifurcated model," Crary places his rupture around 1800 when new ideas about subjective vision, the instability of a human observer and the location of vision emerged.<sup>3</sup> He explains this paradigm shift by describing the epistemological implications of the camera obscura in relation to the older, classical models of vision, and those of the stereoscope to the modern reorganization of the observer, while emphasizing that those optical devices were embedded in overlapping "philosophical, scientific and aesthetic discourses" (8).

In the early modern period the camera obscura was used as a philosophical model to explain the classical notions of vision and

perspective. The small hole in this optical instrument resembled a mechanical eye through which light came in, reflecting the outside world and illuminating the pictures inside the box. It is important to note that the model of camera obscura revealed the early modern notion of an objective way of seeing, which could lead to a truthful representation of the outside world and that the body of the observer was excluded from this model (Crary 27-29, 38-42). This classical view on human sight, vision and knowledge would radically change at the beginning of the nineteenth century when vision became more connected with the physiological body and a study of object itself. Crary mentions Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* as the "definitive sign of a new organization and positioning of the subject" (69). More than anyone else before him, Kant paid close attention to the arbitrariness of appearances, which according to him conformed themselves to our modes of representation. In his study *Theory of Colours* Goethe also emphasized the notion of subjective vision by studying and analyzing retinal after-images. Their writings reflected the emergence of a general scientific interest in the human body of which the study of human sight formed a significant part (Crary 67-70).

The stereoscope can be regarded as a result of scientific research on human sight and like the camera obscura, it could also be used as an explanatory model. The British scientist Charles Wheatstone provided a convincing solution to the problem of binocular disparity, the fact that each eye registers objects from a slightly different point of view. After the successful measurement of binocular parallax Wheatstone showed how the human organism was able to unify those two different viewpoints into one image. But if an object is close enough to an observer he will still see a slight dissimilarity. The stereoscope, developed by the same Wheatstone and Sir David Brewster, was able to simulate a unified image by fusing the views in a kind of rapid succession of images. So the reality effect of the stereoscope was not a static one, but rather it unfolded in time (Crary 118-22). Moreover, the stereoscope didn't produce exactly the same images independent from viewers. It is important to note that this optical instrument exemplified the notion of subjective vision and that it is very much indebted to the idea of human sight as essentially a part of the physiological body.

But what did a stereoscopic image look like? Crary acknowledges that it is impossible to recreate those images on paper or to know what nineteenth century viewers really saw. The effect of the stereoscope increased with

the proximity of an object to a viewer. In a sense the stereoscope didn't give a mere simulation of the presence of an object, but it created a kind of visual tangibility and the impression of a "three-dimensional solidity." However, the 'reality effect' of the stereoscope depended highly on the specific structure of each instrument (Crary 123-24). According to Robert Silverman, the first stereoscopes pretended to re-create three-dimensional vision in a perfect manner, but later stereoscopes, which were devised to look at distant objects in the same manner as an observer would look at objects close to himself, created a more abstract and distorted vision. For that reason the stereoscope continually found itself in the middle of a much-heated (theological) debate on natural sight and artificial sight. Defenders of the older, 'reliable' stereoscope stated that it showed a perfect image of human vision as God had intended it. By artificially altering that vision for the pleasure of looking one deliberately manipulated natural, divine vision (Silverman 735-50). Especially this double idea of the stereoscope as both a simulation of 'perfect' realist vision and a 'perverse' means of distorting vision is an important aspect I would like to keep in mind when discussing the novel.

We've already taken notice of Krailsheimer's distinction between the chapters describing the events on the battlefield and the chapters providing a more personalized version of the conflict. In a sense the character of Salammbô could easily represent the level of the personal because she is the daughter of Hamilcar Barca, one of the main political and military leaders of the city. But as a high priestess she is totally absorbed in the secluded cult of the moon goddess Tanit. Only when Mâtho and his slave take the holiest relic from the temple of Tanit she becomes involved in the conflict. In the third chapter of the novel the narrator makes two important statements about Salammbô's religious duties. In the first place they are surrounded by a sphere of abstinence: Salammbô is a virgin and she isn't familiar with the obscene images of Tanit. In the second place Salammbô worships the goddess only in its astral and virginal appearance and the narrator assures: "An influence had come down from the moon upon the maiden. When the star was on the wane Salammbô grew weaker. She languished all day long, and revived in the evening. During an eclipse she had almost died" (Flaubert 55). Salammbô's being is regulated by the orb of the moon, which is only one of the many and possibly obscene appearances of the goddess. It is important to realize that Hamilcar's daughter draws strength from the *appearance* of the moon, while in my opinion the essence of the heavenly body itself is less important. The example of the solar eclipse speaks for

4 In my opinion, Salammbô's confusing vision of the moon literally exemplifies what Roland Barthes means with the illusion of the real. In this passage a signifier (the moon) does not refer anymore to a stable signified, a commonly shared concept, and more or less becomes an 'empty' sign.

itself: in that case the moon doesn't disappear but is temporally made invisible. But even this appearance, which is not obscene in itself, does not form a fixed and stable image and is able to contain a perverse quality. While Salammbô is praying, her eyes scanning the horizon, the narrator tells:

The moon's crescent was then on the mountain of the Hot Springs, in the gap between its twin peaks, on the other side of the gulf. Beneath it lay a small star, and all around a pale circle. Salammbô went on: It is through you that monsters are produced, fearsome spectres, lying dreams. Your eyes eat up the stones of buildings and monkeys are sick every time you are renewed. Why are you going then? Why perpetually change your shape? (Flaubert 53)

A realist description of the moon above the mountains is followed by the imagery of someone who is also looking at the sky in a state of bewildered frenzy. But this observer 'sees' something different.<sup>4</sup> In Salammbô's perception the surface of the moon is not longer just reflecting light or embodying the appearance of her goddess, but rather it creates its own autonomous and fearsome debts. So beneath the supposed realism of mere description leers the distorted vision of an observer for whom the moon, creating 'fearsome spectres,' has become an independent producer of images. Silverman notes that the first close-up stereographs of the moon caused some controversy, because "they transcended the capabilities of human vision" (750). For example: a critic was appalled by the detailed relief of the moon which he had not registered before (753). This somewhat religious debate on the politics of observing had another interesting side. According to Jan Matlock, in nineteenth century France women were not

5 According to Crary, one of the main reasons of the demise of the stereoscope as a “mode of visual consumption” was its close association with pornography (127).

supposed to look too much, that is, it was not appropriate for women to actively *scan* an object or room. So when new visual technology was introduced in the early nineteenth century especially the social ‘health’ of female viewers was at stake. Contemporary pornographic images showed women behind new optical instruments like kaleidoscopes and telescopes, simultaneously warning and entertaining the general public (Matlock 513-21).<sup>5</sup> There is also something transgressive in Salammbô’s strange relationship with the moon / Tanit. In the same chapter the narrator reveals that she is obsessed by the idea of looking at the statue of Tanit, which is forbidden for all citizens and especially for a priestess like Salammbô. It is not even allowed to look at the *zaimph*, the holy veil covering the statue of Tanit in the temple. Furthermore, at some places in the text the mirroring planar surface of the moon is projected upon Salammbô: “She raised her arms as high as possible, arching her body, pale and light as the moon in her long robe” (Flaubert 54). Later in the story Mâtho becomes associated with Moloch, the god of the sun and destruction. So the protagonists are connected by the act of looking: for Salammbô it is a taboo, while Matho’s erotic gaze turns out to be ultimately destructive.

In order to weaken the morale of the citizens of Carthage, the slave Spendius and his master Mâtho steal the *zaimph* from the temple of Tanit, deliberately questioning the religion of the Carthaginians and transgressing a religious border. Immediately after their nocturnal adventure in the temple Mâtho wants to visit Salammbô. When he approaches her bed, the narrator gives a detailed description of the objects in the room:

Mâtho barely touched the floor encrusted with gold, mother of pearl, and glass; and despite its polished surface, it seemed to him that his feet sank in as if he were walking on sand (...) Flamingo wings, mounted on black-coral branches, lay about among the purple cushions and tortoiseshell combs, cedar-wood boxes, ivory spatulas. Antelope horns carried rings and bracelets; and clay pots kept cool in the draught, in the gap in the wall, on a trellis of rushes. He stumbled, for the ground had levels of uneven height, forming in the room, as it were, a succession of apartments. (Flaubert 82, 83)

This dense visual description creates an almost hallucinating effect. The richness of the many exotic objects and the illusion of a space without scenic proportions adds to the dreamlike eroticism of this passage. The stereoscope provided the most intense experience in an object filled space, Crary writes (125). In this description even the polished floor with all its reflecting visual power and the strange proportions of the room add to the illusion of an unstable stereoscopic space. Then Mâtho has the chance to observe the sleeping Salammbô.

She was sleeping with one hand under her cheek and the other arm straight out. The flowing curls of her hair spread round her so abundantly that she looked as though she were lying on black feathers, and her wide tunic lay in softly curving folds down to her feet, moulded to the shape of her body. Her eyes were just visible beneath her half-closed lids. The bed-curtains, hanging straight down, enveloped her in a bluish penumbra, and as she breathed, the movement stirred the cords so that she seemed to sway in the air. A large mosquito buzzed. (Flaubert 83)

The draperies surrounding the bed hide – or in this context actually reveal – the virgin lying asleep in her bed. In this vague, bluish, erotic haze Salammbô becomes a floating object of desire. As we have seen one of the visual effects of the stereoscope could be a quite distorted vision. According to Crary, the stereoscopic image was planar and the experience of space between the objects so confusing because its depth had no unifying logic. As a consequence the three-dimensional objects floated in a kind of “absolute airless space” (125). Such an image is entirely different from looking at a photograph because in that case we are able to focus on a central point of convergence. When we’re looking at a stereoscopic image our gaze moves between different three-dimensional zones, while not exactly grasping the perspective of the space in between (Crary 125, 126). In the same manner the image of Salammbô is projected on a dense and unstable visual field, which lacks

the visual logic of perspective. The “flowing curls of her hair” suggest the shape of her body in depth, but the blue haze isolates it in a quite uncertain and planar space. In this passage (and perhaps throughout the entire text) her body only serves as the autonomous visual centre of Mâtho’s obsession.

In the chapter “The Tent” both protagonists meet again in another moment of erotic tension. The male priest Schahabarim, who is a eunuch and for that reason suitable for the worship of Tanit, forces Salammbô to bring back the zaïmph. The young girl has no other choice than to follow his order and she leaves the city in the company of a guide, who brings her to the camp of the barbarians. When finally Mâtho takes Salammbô to his tent the narrator notes that behind her the moon appears. Thus again the girl is connected to the astral appearance of Tanit. Mâtho is not able to recognize her face immediately, because she wears a veil and other garments that cover her whole body. Once in the tent Salammbô immediately hurries to the zaïmph and reveals her identity. Struck by this unexpected visitor Mâtho obsessively ‘consumes’ her body with his gaze:

Mâtho did not hear; he gazed at her and for him her clothes were fused with her body. The shimmer of the material, like the splendor of her skin, was something special and peculiar to her. Her eyes and her diamonds flashed; her polished nails were a continuation of the fine jewels on her fingers; the two clasps of her tunic raised her breasts a little and brought them closer together and in his imagination he was lost in the narrow cleft between them, (...). (Flaubert 183)

In this tense moment in the dark tent, when the two ‘opposite characters’ of the novel finally meet the observer fuses veil, body and eye into one attractive image. So Mâtho is not able to separate the body of Salammbô from her enchanting attributes. Eyes and diamonds become both sources of an enchanting light and simultaneously objects of desire. But Mâtho also seems to disappear into his role of the consuming, destroying god Moloch. When he kisses Salammbô, she calls him *Moloch*, experiencing his power as a masculine force unknown to her. In the darkness of the tent she notices his eyes, which are “like two embers in the night” (Flaubert 185). While she is consumed by a burning fire in Mâtho’s eyes, hers are like passive diamonds reflecting and disseminating light.

We’ve seen that the room with its bizarre proportions, mirroring floor and abundance of objects defies the scenic visual order of a stage. I have given just a few examples of the textual structure of this stereoscopic

vision but in my opinion many visual descriptions in this novel differ from those in *Madame Bovary*. *Salammbô* is much more a novel with a sharp focus on vague spaces filled with objects, lacking the logic of conventional space, while maintaining an illusion of a 'historic reality.' In a sense one can state that even the erotic interplay between the protagonists and their bodies – sometimes overwhelmed by their attributes – is dehumanizing. But this stereoscopic vision has also consequences for the relationship between observer and observed. When vision is more and more located in the observing subject and regulated by its own subjective powers, the idea of an objective view and realism itself becomes problematic. As a result the stable border between the fields of observer and observed collapses. Victor Brombert writes that *Salammbô* is essentially a story of *annihilation* (qtd. in Krailsheimer 15). On the level of the story this is true because in the end both characters die during a cruel spectacle. But it can also be applied on the visual level. While in the visual model of the camera obscura there was no room for the body of the observer, in *Salammbô* the bodies of observers are annihilated by their own subjective and often stereoscopic vision.

#### WORKS CITED

- Auerbach, Erich.** *Mimesis*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2003. Print.
- Barthes, Roland.** "The Reality Effect." *Madame Bovary*. Ed. Margaret Cohen. New York: Norton, 2005. Print. 449-55.
- Bordwell, James.** *Narration in the Fiction Film*. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985. Print.
- Constable, E.L.** "Salammbô's Orientalism." *Critical Departures* III.4 (1996): 625-46. *Jstor*. Ithaka. Web. 7 May 2011.
- Crary, Jonathan.** *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1992. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave.** *Salammbô*. 1863. London: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- Krailsheimer A.J.** "Introduction." *Salammbô*. 1863. London: Penguin, 1977. Print.
- Matlock, Jann.** "Censoring the Realist Gaze." *Madame Bovary*. Ed. Margaret Cohen. New York: Norton, 2005. 512-24. Print.
- Pinard, Ernest.** "Brief: By the Imperial Counsel Ernest Pinard,

Esq.” In: “Madame Bovary on Trial”. Ed. Brechtje Hartendorff-Wallach. *Madame Bovary*. Ed. Margaret Cohen. New York: Norton, 2005. 314-335. Print.

**Silverman, Robert J.** “The Stereoscope and Photographic Depiction in the 19th Century.” *Technology and Culture* 34.4 (1993): 729-56. *Jstor*. Ithaka. Web. 7 May 2011.

**Spiegel, Alan.** “Flaubert to Joyce: Evolution of a Cinematographic Form.” *NOVEL: A forum on Fiction* 6.3 (1973): 229-43. *Jstor*. Ithaka. Web. 7 May 2011.

## SUMMARY

This article investigates the possibility of a stereoscopic vision in Gustave Flaubert’s novel *Salammô*, a gloomy narrative of erotic obsession. Referring to Jonathan Crary’s study *Techniques of the Observer* in which the author explains the epistemological differences between eighteenth century and nineteenth century notions of vision, I will apply the notion of vision to this literary text. Crary’s understanding of the stereoscope as a pivotal optical instrument in the context of nineteenth century vision and visuality, enables me to analyze some of the many visual descriptions in *Salammô* with the technique and the larger cultural implications of the stereoscope in mind.

**Joost Vormeer** (1983) rondde in 2008 de masteropleiding Literatuurwetenschap aan de Universiteit van Utrecht af. In 2010 werd een door hem geschreven recensie bekroond met een basisprijs van de Prijs voor de Jonge Kunstcritiek.