

## Staging the Act of Painting in Courbet: *L'Atelier du Peintre*<sup>1</sup> / A encenação do ato de pintar em Courbet: *L'Atelier du peintre*

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the occurrence and function of intermedial references in Marianne Nahon's *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* [*Courbet: The Painter's Studio*] within the theoretical framework of intermedial studies. With text and illustrations by artist Charles Matton, *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* is configured as a complex intermedial object composed of the three categories of intermediality established by Irina Rajewsky, namely: media combination, medial transposition, and intermedial references — the last of which is the primary focus of this study. The theories of Walter Moser regarding the relationship of an artwork to what he terms its medialities are also considered. The study aims to identify these references — especially regarding painting and theater — in order to evaluate the role they play, through narrative descriptions, in constructing the various literary *tableaux vivants* of the book, *tableaux* whose function is to dramatize or stage the act of painting.

**KEYWORDS:** Gustave Courbet; Marianne Nahon; Picture; Theater; *Tableau vivant*.

## RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa, sob uma perspectiva dos estudos da intermedialidade, as referências intermediárias presentes em *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* [*Courbet: O ateliê do pintor*], trabalho realizado por Marianne Nahon. O livro, constituído de um texto e ilustrações do artista Charles Matton, configura-se como um objeto complexo que envolve tanto a transposição, quanto a combinação de mídias e as referências intermediárias, como definidas por Irina Rajewsky, e que serão o foco principal desta reflexão. O referencial teórico é também constituído pelos estudos de Walter Moser a respeito das relações entre as artes e a ênfase em sua medialidade. Nosso objetivo é identificar essas referências – em especial à pintura e ao teatro – e avaliar em que medida elas participam, por meio de descrições narrativizadas, do processo de formação de *tableaux vivants*, quadros vivos literários que colocam em cena o ato de pintar.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Gustave Courbet; Marianne Nahon; Pintura; Teatro; Quadro vivo.

## 1 Introduction

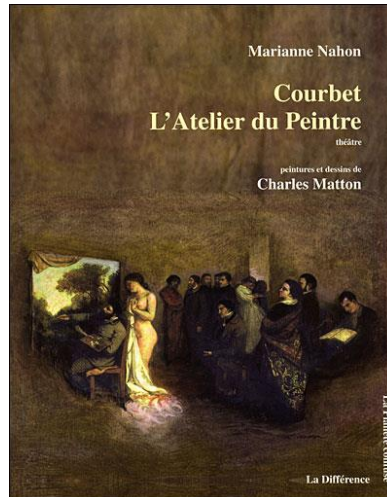
Published in 2008, Marianne Nahon's<sup>2</sup> *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* [*Courbet: the Painter's Studio*] (Fig. 1), announces in its title the explicit reference to the eponymous oil painting. This now famous work by French artist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) was painted between 1854 and 1855, and has since become one of Courbet's best known and most frequently studied pieces, as well as a key example of nineteenth-century Realism in art. Besides its reference to the work of Courbet, Nahon's book also includes text and illustrations by the artist Charles Matton. The final result is a complex intermedial object involving both *transposition* as well as *media combination* and *intermedial references* as defined by Irina Rajewsky in the essay "Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality" (2005). Given Nahon's reliance on the pictorial — in fact, the pictorial may be said to be both the starting-point and driving force behind her book — we may class *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* within the category of medial transposition, described by Rajewsky as "a production-oriented, 'genetic'

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the novelist and gallerist Marianne Nahon (1938–), see the official website of the Galerie Beaubourg, which she founded (<http://goo.gl/4paGfg>, accessed on 27/05/2020).

conception of intermediality” (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 51). Within this model, Courbet’s painting functions as “the ‘source’ of the newly formed media product, whose formation is based on a media-specific and obligatory intermedial transformation process” (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 51).

Figure 1: Front cover of *Courbet: L’Atelier du peintre*



In addition to medial transposition, Nahon’s book is also an example of media combination, since the text includes a total of twenty-eight illustrations by the artist Charles Matton,<sup>3</sup> thereby meeting the definition of a product that is “the result or the very process of combining at least two conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation” (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p.52). Matton’s illustrations bring additional meanings to the text in two ways: firstly, through their juxtaposition with Nahon’s narrative; and, secondly, through their juxtaposition with Courbet’s original imagery, which exists in a sort of dialogue with Matton’s own renderings and re-readings of it.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly, then, the idea of “intermedial references” is crucial to understanding Nahon’s work as a whole, since the references in question (both to painting and to the theater, as shall be seen) are not merely occasional, offhand quotations — rather, they structure the book and inform

<sup>3</sup> Charles Matton (1931–2008) worked prolifically as a painter, sculptor, illustrator, photographer, screen-writer, and film-maker. For more information see the artist’s official website (<http://www.charlesmatton.com>, accessed 27/05/2020).

<sup>4</sup> Matton depicts, for example, the many characters that appear in Courbet’s painting. As the characters enter the storyline they are rendered as illustrations in the book. Besides these re-readings of the figures in *L’Atelier du peintre*, Courbet’s work is also featured or transposed in Nahon’s book via the illustration (by Matton) of still other Courbet paintings, including *La Rencontre* or *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet* from 1854, as well as the controversial *L’Origine du monde* from 1866 (NAHON, 2008, p. 83 and 125). Although such reinterpretations are crucial to the book’s project as a whole, to examine them more fully would require its own, separate study, and is therefore beyond the scope of the present essay.

what might be called the book's imitation of pictorial and theatrical techniques via the "as if" process of artistic mimicry described by Rajewsky (2005, p. 54). Marianne Nahon's *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* may therefore be said to offer an array of potential lines of approach as concerns the question of intermedial analysis. Not unlike a work of cinematic adaptation, it brings into play all three of the intermedial categories listed above, and further confirms Rajewsky's statement that "the product resulting from a given medial transposition can exhibit, over and above the obligatory medial transformation process itself, references (back) to the original work" (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p.53). From the perspective of reception studies, layers of meaning are laid one by one through the reading of the text, through the viewing of the illustrations, and through the reader's previous knowledge of Courbet's painting, as well as through the constitution of the text itself, which is replete with references to the work *L'Atelier du peintre*.

With this in mind, the present study begins by presenting the eponymous painting by Courbet, and then moving on to a close reading of Nahon's text in terms of intermedial phenomena and especially the use of intermedial reference. As shall be seen, Nahon's references to panting and to the theater combine to form a series of *tableaux vivants* of the act of painting, where the *tableau vivant* is defined as the "staging of one or more actors who are immobile and fixed in an expressive pose suggestive of a statue or painting" (PAVIS, 1998, p.377).

## 2 Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre*: a metaphor of society and the artist's work therein

From the point of view of artistic production and intermedial genealogy, Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre* is the primary origin of Nahon's book, and therefore a natural starting point for our analysis of the text. As has been mentioned, the painting is one of Courbet's best known pieces of work, and often considered his *magnum opus* — not only for its technical bravura, its number of famous figures and impressive size (an astounding 3.59m by 5.98m), but also for its potential symbolism, given that Courbet's portrayal of the studio implies a social critique as well as a reflection on the work of the artist. As observed by Frédéric Gaussen, "the studio is a metaphor of society. It sheds light on the hidden face of things"<sup>5</sup> (GAUSSEN, 2006, p. 230, our translation).

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<sup>5</sup> "[...] l'atelier est une métaphore de la société. Il donne un visage à la face cachée du monde."

The complete title of Courbet's painting is *L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale*<sup>6</sup> [*The Painter's Studio: a real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life*], and the work was originally conceived as a potential entry for the 1855 *exposition universelle* or world fair. After its rejection by the jury, however, Courbet used his own funds to have it exhibited outside the Exposition along with several other of his works. In the capacity of engaged intellectual, he opposed the limitations set by the academic authorities, and championed artistic independence. In the same vein, his gesture also reaffirmed the rights of Parisians to free or low-cost access to the arts (FERRIER, 1991, p. 474).

As has been noted by Noël Barbe, the reception of Courbet's painting at this time raises important questions regarding its inherent complexity:

The painting has in fact given rise to a number of different "assessments", of varying levels of generality, which tend to fall into one of four different (but not mutually exclusive) registers: social or political expression, the stylistic approach, the theorization of the artist's place in the world, or the painting as self-portrait of Gustave Courbet. (BARBE, 2005, p. 5, our translation)<sup>7</sup>

The title itself, with its possessive "ma vie" [my life], stresses the personal and self-referential nature of the work, and would seem to encourage the final category of the self-portrait as its true interpretive key. This is compounded by one of Courbet's remarks in a letter to his friend Champfleury (1821–1889), a writer and art critic, when he says of the work that:

It is the world coming to me to be painted. [...] It is composed of two halves, with myself in between them, painting. On the right are the stakeholders, which is to say, my friends, and the workers and devotees of the art world. On the left is the other, trivial world, that of the common people, of poverty and plenty, of the exploited and their exploiters, and those who live off of death. (Quoted in BARBE, 2005, p. 11, our translation)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Since 1986, *L'Atelier du peintre* (under the shorter name by which it is now known) has been part of the collection of the *Musée d'Orsay* in Paris (see <http://goo.gl/TsSCpG>, accessed on 25/05/2020).

<sup>7</sup> "Le tableau a en effet suscité de nombreux « jugements », caractérisés par un plus ou moins grand degré de généralité, que l'on peut répartir autour de quatre registres qui ne sont pas nécessairement exclusifs: une expression sociale et politique, une approche stylistique, une théorisation de la position de l'artiste dans le monde, un autoportrait de Gustave Courbet."

<sup>8</sup> "C'est le monde qui vient se faire peindre chez moi. [...] Le tableau est divisé en deux parties. Je suis au milieu peignant. À droite, tous les actionnaires, c'est à dire les amis, les travailleurs, les amateurs du monde de l'art. À gauche, l'autre monde de la vie triviale, le peuple, la misère, la pauvreté, la richesse, les exploités, les exploiters, les gens qui vivent de la mort."

And yet, even with the artist placed in the center of the image, where he works at his easel on a pastoral landscape, the busy staging of figures all around him suggests a variety of meanings extending well beyond the self-portrait. As outlined in the above-cited letter to Champfleury, to the right of the artist stand the members of the art world, whose names are also given in the letter. As Courbet explains to his friend, these include Alfred Bruyas, his primary patron; Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, a philosopher and friend of Courbet's; Champfleury himself; the poet Charles Baudelaire; a model named Henriette; Mosselman, an art collector; Madame Sabatier, a former model whose *salon* was at the center of the Parisian literary and artistic scene; Courbet's sister, Juliette; as well as the writer Max Buchon and musicians Alphonse Promayet and Jean-Urbain Cuenot, friends of Courbet's who had also featured in previous paintings. On the left, by contrast, the figures are unnamed, but referred to by Courbet simply as a priest, a Jew, a republican, a hunter, a laborer, an Irishwoman, a peasant, and a grave-digger, among other enigmatic figures said by Courbet to signify everyday life ("la vie triviale"). Despite being unnamed, however, these supposedly archetypal figures do resemble certain public figures of the day, and have been recognized variously as the banker Achille Fould (in the role of the unnamed Jewish figure); the politician Lazare Carnot (as the republican); and even Napoleon III (as the hunter), among others (GAUSSEN, 2006, p. 229).

The composition is an example of the "*atelier vitrine*", an artistic-cum-commercial space in which the two sides of the artist's life collide: where the painter must negotiate, socialize, and otherwise interact with a series of different individuals (whether friends, art-dealers, or critics) who have penetrated the private world of the artist (ARBEX; LAGO, 2015, p. 13). Courbet described his painting as a sort of history of his studio encompassing both physical and moral events (BARED; PERNAC, 2013, p. 187). By placing himself at its center, he portrays the artist in the role of mediator between these two worlds, that is, between the brighter world of the artistic life and the often dingy one of the everyday. It is in this sense that we may understand the contradictory expression in his chosen title, i.e. that of the "real allegory", since his painting dramatizes his reflection on the task of the working artist, on the creative process and the act of painting, as well as on the necessary social obligations of the artist and his role as a social critic, as he exposes the failings or hypocrisies of the real world in which he must live. Both the good and the bad, beauty and misery, are portrayed.

### 3 Inside the studio: from canvas to text and stage

These are some of the many interpretive avenues that have been suggested by critics, and which are only briefly sketched here. For the purposes of the present study, it is the question of Courbet's *staging of the act of painting* which provides the most useful interpretive key to approaching Marianne Nahon's *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* and its transposition of both painting and drama into text. The importance of the former is obvious from the outset, but the latter is also suggested by the book's front cover, which features the label "theater" directly under the title (Fig. 1). This label may induce the reader to believe, at least at first, that the text at hand is in fact a script. Were this the case, Nahon's book would need to be considered as a process of transformation<sup>9</sup> of an object of one media (a painting) into a plurimedial object (a piece of theater), the performance of which requires multi-media components like a stage-set, costumes, music, lighting — in addition, of course, to the textual starting-point of the script. Upon closer inspection, however, one begins to doubt that Nahon's true intention is to have written a play, or at least a play that would be performable. Her choice of format, that of an illustrated book, seems to indicate otherwise. As we intend to show, Nahon's work is best understood as an example of the "as if" approach mentioned above, where the text is presented "as if" for the theater but is in fact better described as a "theatrical text" than a script.

In its current edition, the formatting and typographical elements of *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* do sometimes suggest a screenplay or script, with speakers' names appearing in the left-hand margin of the page, in upper-case letters and set off from the dialogue to follow. Blocking and stage directions, also indicative of the theater, are similarly set off by either parentheses within a paragraph or italics after a character's name. In the same vein, large spaces between each character's speech give the impression of a script rather than the traditional text of, for instance, a novel. But despite these visual cues, many elements of the work seem to preclude the possibility of its ever being brought to the stage. For example, in spite of its length (over a hundred pages), the text is not divided into acts, nor does it provide any pauses for either scene-breaks or an intermission. Another obstacle would be its lengthy, discursive stage directions, which expound exhaustively on the aesthetic implications of color, lighting, props, and the

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<sup>9</sup> Claus Clüver compares this process to that of adaptation: "The concept of medial transformation clearly applies to the process we call 'adaptation', generally towards a plurimedial medium (from a novel to film, from theater to opera, from fairytale to ballet, etc.), in which the new text retains elements of the source-text (such as excerpts of dialogue, characters, storyline and situations, point of view, etc.)" (CLÜVER, 2007, p. 18).

blocking of actors. These passages seem more like extended ekphraseis than any practical form of stage direction. Finally, there is also the problem of Nahon's reconstruction of historical context surrounding the painting, which includes such imagined effects as having characters suddenly appear to the left of the "screen" in a sort of cinematic overlay (NAHON, 2008, p. 111). Such trappings are common enough in film and television but one fails to see how they might successfully be incorporated into a traditional play.

On the other hand, however, the blurb chosen for the book's back cover seems to announce the work to follow as a theatrical one, a *mise en scène* or dramatization of Courbet's painting. The blurb names and describes the 1855 work, then goes on to explain its illusory character:

*L'Atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855) is both monumental and intricate, symbolic and realist.

The painting presents itself to the viewer in the guise of a *theatrical set*, with *Gustave Courbet at center stage*, painting a landscape in his studio with a nude model looking on.

Surrounded by his friends Charles Baudelaire, Alfred Bruyas, Champfleury, Alphonse Promayet, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Max Buchon, Jean-Urbain Cuenot... and other enigmatic figures, the painter appears as the protagonist at the center of a large cast of characters.

The silent characters of this *tableau presque vivant* are given voices by author Marianne Nahon, who imagines the opinions and conversations they might share. She has created a theatrical *trompe-l'œil* of sorts, whose effect is to *stage the act of painting*.

The paintings and drawings of Charles Matton mesh perfectly with this *double illusion*.<sup>10</sup> (NAHON, 2008, back cover, emphasis added, our translation).

By comparing the painting to a stage setting as well as a *tableau (presque) vivant*, and by characterizing Nahon's book as a textual *trompe l'œil*, the passage reinforces the intermedial "as if" nature of the book. As Rajewsky explains, "intermedial references by definition imply a crossing of media borders, and thus a medial difference [...]. This medial difference gives rise, or at least *can* give rise, to the so-called 'as if' character of intermedial references, as well as to a specific, illusion-forming quality inherent in them" (RAJEWSKY, 2005, p. 54). The vocabulary

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<sup>10</sup> "L'atelier du peintre, allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique (1855) est une œuvre monumentale et complexe où se mêlent réalisme et symboles. / Il se présente comme un décor de théâtre, mettant en scène Gustave Courbet en train de peindre un paysage dans son atelier, tournant le dos à un modèle nu. / Entouré de ses amis Charles Baudelaire, Alfred Bruyas, Champfleury, Alphonse Promayet, Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Max Buchon, Jean-Urbain Cuenot... et d'énigmatiques personnages, l'artiste s'impose dans le rôle principal. / Marianne Nahon donne la parole aux figurants de ce tableau presque vivant, et imagine les opinions, les réparties échangées entre les différents protagonistes. / L'auteur offre au théâtre, comme le ferait un trompe-l'œil, cette mise en scène de l'acte de peindre. / Les peintures et dessins de Charles Matton jouent à merveille avec cette double illusion."



used in the above passage reinforces the idea of a crossing of media borders, as the terms of one media are used to describe the attributes of another.

Nahon's references to theater consolidate the process that takes place in *Courbet: L'Atelier du peintre* of constructing literary *tableaux vivants* that aim to stage the act of painting as Courbet himself has staged it on canvas. The practice of the *tableau vivant* has, of course, always been an intermedial blending of theater and painting:

The *tableaux vivants*, extremely popular in the nineteenth century, were also closely connected to the theater and the opera, which were very much in demand in those days. The characters, displayed in "talking" poses reproducing a historically famous painting or scene, were set rigidly in, for instance, a rendering of *The Raft of the Medusa*, *Attila's Death*, or *The Oath of the Horatii*, often more appreciated than the paintings themselves. (LOUVEL, 2011, p. 94).

Particularly in vogue in eighteenth and nineteenth-century drama and melodrama, this hybrid genre was often employed for the dramatization of literary or historical scenes that might otherwise prove inviable or impractical for the stage, such as scenes on the battlefield. Immobilized in expressive poses and carefully lit settings, the actors reproduced in gestures and the appropriate costumes a specific sculpture or painting.<sup>11</sup>

In Nahon's text we find many examples of what Liliane Louvel has called pictorial markers (LOUVEL, 2011, p.89), which mark the presence of ekphraseis intended to arrange a *tableau vivant* in words, in this case the "theatrical" staging of the painter in his studio. And yet, as Louvel explains, these markers need not be limited to descriptive terms: there may also be situations in which "*tableaux vivants* provide narrative elements combining description and plot, and generating an action whose origin and consequences – that ending so dear to the reader – have to be imagined" (LOUVEL, 2011, p. 95).

The relationship of the *tableau vivant* to narrativization is also considered by Walter Moser, whose work on the presence of painting in film (via different "strategies" of varied complexity) may provide a useful analogy for our own study of the "theatrical text" in Nahon. The conversion of painting into a "theatrical text" implies at least two of the primary processes of narrativization found in cinema:

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<sup>11</sup> On the subject of the *tableau vivant* see also Márcia Arbex in "A Dialogue with Orientalists and *Pompiers*: On Convulsive Beauty" ("Diálogo com orientalistas e *pompiers*: a beleza convulsiva" in *Alain Robbe-Grillet e a pintura*: jogos especulares. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2013. p. 123-158).

b) In order to show the painting within the medium of film, it is transposed into the story of its “fabrication”, as the film shows how the painting came to be, which may culminate in filming the act of painting. [...] This is akin to the process of the narrativization of Achilles’ shield as described by Lessing. [...]

d) In lieu of immobilizing the film, for descriptive purposes, as a tableau (that is, in lieu of presenting a filmic ekphrasis), the tableau is animated and brought to narrative life (as we shall see in Godard<sup>12</sup>): the characters become characters of the film and take on a life of their own. (MOSER, 2006, p. 56-57)

In the case of Nahon’s work, which is a “theatrical text” whose sole setting is a painter’s studio, and whose protagonist is the painter himself, clearly the questions of painting, art, and the artist’s work are thematic focal points. The author has constructed a narrative centered on the “making of” the painter’s creation. She imagines and recounts Courbet’s project to capture the goings on of his studio, as he describes in detail how the monumentally sized work is to be composed. A large part of the text is therefore an ekphrasis of the painting itself. This ekphrasis is blended into the narrative of the work, as the project is shared with the different characters (the figures of the painting as listed previously), who are suddenly animated and take on — as Moser says — “a life of their own”.

Both the studio setting and the figures within it are described at length in Nahon’s text; and, as in the painting itself, Courbet is at the center of the cast of characters. He is the axis of Nahon’s narrative, which begins with a detailed set of stage directions describing how the studio space should appear, as well as the different props to be included:

*Courbet is in his studio.*

*Center stage, on an easel, is a painting under a sheet, as well as a chair, a low stool, and a stuffed cat. [...] To the right, a hammock, a mirror, and a window draped in green twill. [...] The backs of several paintings. Dimly-lit ambiance in sepia tones.*<sup>13</sup> (NAHON, 2008, p. 17, our translation)

The studio is initially empty but, as the narrative progresses, is slowly filled with its different characters, who enter and begin their dialogues. The first to enter the scene are Bruyas and Champfleury, whom Courbet welcomes warmly, and to whom he describes his ongoing projects. The trio also discuss politics and current events. The next to arrive is Baudelaire, followed by Henriette, the model. Champfleury then lifts the sheet off the painting and Courbet

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<sup>12</sup> Moser is speaking here of Godard’s film *Passion*, which includes several *tableaux vivants* and which is the focus of Moser’s essay.

<sup>13</sup> “*Courbet est dans son atelier./ Sur un chevalet au centre de la scène, un tableau masqué par un tissu, une chaise, un tabouret très bas, un chat empaillé. [...] À droite, un hamac, un miroir, une fenêtre surmontée d’un rideau de serge vert. [...] Des piles de tableaux retournés. Ambiance peu éclairée dans les tons sépias.*” (Italics in original to indicate stage directions.)

explains that the landscape it depicts is to be part of a larger work he is still planning, and which, in its final form, will include thirty or more figures, set in his own studio, including himself at the very center with palette in hand. The other figures discuss the proposed project:

BAUDELAIRE, *sarcastically*

I'm beginning to appreciate the realism! So you're going to paint a landscape in the middle of your studio. Why not? But what will our dear Henriette do, in the nude, if she is not to be your model?

COURBET, *annoyed*

She'll stay there, just behind me. (*He turns to her and arranges her into the pose of the final painting.*) Naked or nearly naked, since it's her flesh that I wish to paint. (*He sits back down and takes up his palette.*) And I shall be here, seated. (*Jokingly.*) Fully clothed! (*He assumes the position he will have in the final painting.*)<sup>14</sup> (NAHON, 2008, p. 50, our translation).

The different characters become progressively more animated, begin to speak and to describe the tableau which, little by little, is forming itself around them. The tableau is gradually “fabricated” before the reader’s eyes, who must imagine the work as “a painting put into motion, turned to life”, to borrow Rajewsky’s expression, which she uses in relation to a *tableau vivant* in a dance performance (2005, p. 57).

As the narrative progresses, it becomes ever clearer that Nahon’s intention is to recreate, on an imagined stage, a tableau identical in composition to that of Courbet’s painting. This recreation does not limit itself, however, to the visual or the aesthetic. Instead, it attempts to incorporate the wider socio-historical context of this particular moment in time, the same context to which Courbet himself alludes. As Nahon depicts him in her “play”, Courbet appears as a painter acutely conscious of his art, and who carefully justifies the presence of each character in the tableau, as well as the social, artistic, and commercial relationships they represent. Nahon also expounds on more technical questions of lighting, his painting instruments, the studio equipment, and the different members of the “theater”. In this way, through what Moser terms the “thematization of technique” (MOSER, 2006, p.61), the medialities of painting and theater are brought to the fore. In particular, we witness Nahon’s attempt to reconstruct the precise moment of creation, as she describes the following scene: “*Courbet is painting. The surrounding characters are silenced by the sound of brush and palette knife on canvas. We sense that he is*

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<sup>14</sup> “BAUDELAIRE, *ironique* : Je commence à mieux apprécier le réalisme ! Vous allez peindre un paysage au milieu de votre atelier. Pourquoi pas ! Mais que fera notre chère Henriette, déshabillée, si elle n’est plus votre modèle ?/ COURBET, *énervé* : Elle restera là. Derrière moi. (*Il se tourne vers elle et la place dans l’attitude qu’elle aura dans le tableau.*) Déshabillée ou nue, puisque c’est sa chair que je veux peindre. (*Il se rassied et prend sa palette.*) Et moi, je serai là, assis. (*Ironique.*) Habillé ! (*Il se met dans la position qu’il aura dans le tableau.*)” (NAHON, 2008, p. 50)

*fully immersed in creating. A heavy silence weighs on them. Baudelaire returns to his place. Courbet, absorbed in his painting, no longer speaks*<sup>15</sup> (NAHON, 2008, p. 140, our translation). This moment corresponds to what has been termed the “fertile moment”, chosen “in such a way as to compel the viewer to extend it in his or her imagination, to extend it both forward and backward in time; it contains within itself a potential temporality that may be vaster than the moment depicted in the image” (MOSER, 2006, p.46).

In the final scene, the reader witnesses the “finished painting” as the characters are all finally present and arranged in their respective poses, just as in the actual oil painting. The character of Courbet will verify that they have all been correctly placed, including the model Henriette, who is the last to be settled:

*Once each character has taken their place for the tableau, Courbet will take Henriette by the hand, and fix her in her pose behind the chair where he will later be seated... Examining the lights, he will signal to the technicians to dim them, until most of the characters, except for himself and Henriette, are in semi-darkness.*<sup>16</sup> (NAHON, 2008, p. 140, our translation)

It is at this moment that we experience what is called a spatialization of time, as the action is either slowed or stopped. Once Courbet and Henriette assume their final positions, the scene is immobilized and takes on the character of a cinematic freeze-frame:

*All of the characters have stopped cold, as if frozen in place. Seeing that they are all perfectly positioned, and having given the Studio the correct level of brightness, he will partially cover the landscape on the easel. Finally, taking up his palette and brush, he will be seated, with his Assyrian face in profile, and will move no more.*<sup>17</sup> (NAHON, 2008, p.140, our translation)

The exact reproduction of Courbet’s painting is achieved as the curtains are lowered and stage direction informs us that: “The curtain will then begin to fall very slowly..., it will be the exact reproduction of the *Studio*” (NAHON, 2008, p. 142).<sup>18</sup> This traditional marker of the ending of a

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<sup>15</sup> “(Courbet peint. Le bruit du couteau et des brosses sur la toile fait traire tous les protagonistes. On sent qu’il est en pleine création. Un silence pèse sur les personnages. Baudelaire a regagné sa place. Courbet, absorbé par sa peinture, ne parle plus.”

<sup>16</sup> “Lorsque chaque personnage sera tel qu’il est dans le tableau, Courbet prendra Henriette par la main, pour la figer dans sa pose ultime derrière la chaise sur laquelle il s’assiera tout à l’heure...Scrutant les éclairages il fera signe aux machinistes de modifier la lumière, en baissant l’intensité, jusqu’à ce que tous soient dans une demi-pénombre, en dehors de Henriette et de lui.”

<sup>17</sup> “Tous les personnages sont restés figés, comme en arrêt. Voyant que tous sont dans la position parfaite, après avoir redonné à l’Atelier sa tonalité exacte, il cachera en partie le paysage exposé sur le chevalet. Enfin, reprenant sa palette et son pinceau, il s’assiera, exhibant le profil assyrien de son visage, et ne bougera plus.”

<sup>18</sup> “Le rideau alors commencera de descendre extrêmement doucement..., ce sera la reproduction exacte de l’Atelier.”

play is co-opted to become part of Nahon's pictorial *trompe-l'œil*, and reinforces the ambivalent nature of the text as double illusion: the references to theater and painting begin to reflect back on one another in the same type of *mise en abyme* that is present in Courbet's original painting, the self-portrait of the artist at work.

### Final considerations

As suggested previously, in reading Nahon's work one cannot help but wonder whether or not it was intended by the author to be brought to the stage, though a possible answer is perhaps to be found in some of the author's textual strategies, which include simulating the writing conventions of the theater in order to narrativize the scene painted by Courbet and thereby to transfer the work from canvas to text.

One conclusion to be drawn from the work is just how successfully it manages to reappropriate one of the commonplaces of the relationship between painting and theatre — namely, the convention of the *tableau vivant* — in order to “render visible and recognizable the mediality of a different art form” (MOSER, 2006, p. 22), which is to say, to render visible the crossing of borders between media.

In choosing as her object for narrativization Courbet's *L'Atelier du peintre*, a work which illustrates the moment of creation and which, in a sense, alludes self-referentially to the process of its own coming into being, Nahon also highlights the potential temporality of painting, especially given the nature of the painting as self-portrait, which places the painter — as historical figure — at the center of the creative act. In the same vein, by simulating the theatrical text or script, and by taking the figures from Courbet's painting (those whom he names in his letter and who support him in the art world) and animating them as a living, talking cast of characters, who actively participate in the making of the tableau, Nahon draws our attention to the social dimension of painting. Finally, through her use of intermedial strategies to incorporate the painting into her book, Nahon's highly visual “theatrical text” succeeds in creating an “imaginary staging” of the work in the reader's mind.

As Solange Oliveira has observed, “the turn toward tradition as a possible source for new, creative works of art has been the subject of unflagging critical attention among post-

modern scholars and artists alike” (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 59, our translation)<sup>19</sup>, and Nahon’s reclaiming and reinterpretation of a nineteenth-century painting for her own contemporary work is a perfect example of this approach. It is through the process of reappropriation and transposition that these post-modern works are able to recuperate that which, even today, remains a site of conflict, not only for the painter but for artists of all types: the questioning of art, of the contradictions of creation, and of art as an object of reflection. The “theatrical text” *Courbet: L’Atelier du peintre* is not merely a *tableau vivant* of Courbet’s studio, since it depicts not only the finished painting but also (and perhaps more importantly) the act of painting itself. It depicts the thought processes that guide the painter-protagonist in his work, as well as his different relationships with the characters who comprise not only his painting but his social and historical mission.

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<sup>19</sup> “o recurso à tradição como fonte para novas criações vem sendo incansavelmente frisado pela crítica e pela criação pós-moderna” (OLIVEIRA, 2012, p. 59).

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