

*Contributi/6*

## «*Mes pensées, ce sont mes catins*» Diderot's Contradictory Aesthetic Thought

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This paper explores the divergent forays made by Denis Diderot into aesthetic philosophy, focusing on the *Art* and *Beau* articles from the *Encyclopédie*, and the dialogue *Rameau's Nephew*. Two central currents are identified running through this work, one emphasising rationality and the other questioning the limits of that rationality. Particular attention is paid to the influence the work of Francis Bacon had over Diderot and the tensions that result from that influence. The category of 'genius' is identified as the core of these tensions and Diderot's disparate accounts of genius are shown to reveal the complexity and reflexivity of his thought. In this way, the aesthetic philosophy of Diderot indicates the internally inconsistent nature of much of his philosophy. At the same time it suggests that such inconsistency endows his work with a greater interest, pointing to and criticising certain vulnerabilities of enlightenment thought more generally.

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### 1. Introduction

Denis Diderot is perhaps most well known for his work on the *Encyclopédie*, a highly ambitious project spanning over 20 years of the latter half of the 18th Century. However, his work also includes a variety of other writings which are sometimes at odds with the encyclopaedic, particularly on the topic of aesthetics. Diderot was the main editor of the *Encyclopédie*, though worked with a number of collaborators in an attempt to collect and incorporate all knowledge and disseminate it to a reading public. This project aimed to build upon specific intellectual currents that have broadly become historicised as the enlightenment. This entailed a centering of rationality and empirical observation in their systematic presentation of knowledge. However, despite the outward appearance of systematicity and internal coherence, the *Encyclopédie* alone does not do justice to the range and variability of Diderot's thought. Examining Diderot's aesthetic thought reveals a knotted, complicated approach, but one that is far more interesting than it initially seems, hinting at cracks in the foundations of enlightenment philosophy.

Several writings of Diderot's emerged posthumously that have complicated the reading of Diderot as simply an *Encyclopédiste*. Rather, he has been revealed to

be concerned with the limitations of reason, and non-discursive communication, even to the point of reflexively questioning the basis of the *Encyclopédie*. Rameau's *Nephew* is possibly the most well known of these writings – and has itself been influential in the history of philosophy – but several other essays and fragments that went unpublished in Diderot's lifetime indicate similar concerns. This divergence in Diderot's thought is nowhere more clear than in his aesthetics.

Diderot's aesthetic writings touch on the production of artworks, the philosophical criteria by which something might be determined to be art, and most interestingly, on the elusive idea of the genius. Examining the more familiar aspects of Diderot's aesthetic thought, relayed in his *Encyclopédie* articles, is essential in providing a holistic account of that thought. How Diderot adopts and modifies the work of previous philosophers is of particular interest as his selectivity illuminates some of the tensions that later come to the fore. Following, those aspects of his thought that are at odds with the positions stated in the *Encyclopédie* articles are equally analytically valuable, with *Rameau's Nephew* being the primary point of reference. The category of genius is the locus of these tensions for Diderot and so particular attention must be paid to the various understandings of genius as they emerge across Diderot's writings. He wants to both account for genius rationally – according to empirically explicable and communicable categories – while also maintaining its irrational, incommunicable elements. I want to demonstrate that despite Diderot's best intentions, his aesthetic thought is not unitary, but is all the more interesting for it.

## 2. Encyclopaedic Aesthetics

In the production of the *Encyclopédie*, Francis Bacon is one of the most significant precursors for those working on the project. Diderot and the other leading editor of the *Encyclopédie*, Jean le Rond d'Alembert, were ardent in asserting the importance of Bacon's work. As philosopher Isabelle Stengers explains, they are «traditionally classified among [...] heirs to Baconian empiricism<sup>1</sup>». In his *Discours Préliminaire des Éditeurs*, which serves as an introduction to the entire *Encyclopédie*, d'Alembert expounds on Bacon's systematisation of knowledge as the model for their own. He states that «we owe principally to Chancellor Bacon the encyclopaedic tree [...] which will be found at the end of this Discourse<sup>2</sup>». This «tree» is a diagram that serves to illustrate the partitions and categorisations of knowledge made by the Encyclopédistes and, significantly, reproduces Bacon's

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<sup>1</sup>I. Stengers, *Diderot's egg: Divorcing materialism from eliminativism*, «Radical Philosophy». 144, 2007, pp. 7-15.

See also, J. Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot 1745-1763*, Paris 1973, p. 371: «One can say without exaggerating that the spirit of Bacon has passed into Diderot».

<sup>2</sup>J. D'Alembert, R. Schwab, and W. Rex. *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, Chicago 1995, p. 76.

own diagram of the same. This is most clear in their primary tripartite division: «memory, reason (strictly speaking), and imagination are the three different manners in which our soul operates on the objects of its thoughts<sup>3</sup>». Thus Bacon's influence is evident at a structural level within the *Encyclopédie*.

Diderot himself was not only the editor, but also contributed several of his own articles and Bacon's influence is particularly noticeable in Diderot's contributions to the *Encyclopédie* that can be characterised as aesthetic in focus. His article entitled *Art*, is an exemplar of this Baconism, as Diderot both quotes and alludes to him at several points. However, his exact relation to Bacon is not wholly clear; Diderot is not the disciple of Bacon that he presents himself as, but in actuality has a much more contentious relation with his predecessor. Analysing Diderot's limited and occasionally antagonistic uptake of Bacon's thought sheds light on the fragile nature of Diderot's understanding of aesthetics as presented in his articles. Fragile in that he is clearly conscious of the tensions that emerge when he diverges from Bacon, while also depending on him. Further, his article *Beau* does not engage with Bacon, though it examines the work of several other figures. Yet, in its espousal of empiricism, maintains an affinity with Bacon, only delineated through Diderot's rationalising category of «rapports». Examining these two articles demonstrates both the mode of Diderot's argumentation and the specificity of his interaction with the intellectual traditions he engages. Further, they serve to illustrate in miniature some of the general trends of the *Encyclopédie* and evince the normative side of Diderot's aesthetic thought.

### 2.1 Art

Diderot opens the entry on *Art* with a much abstracted definition, starting with art and science unified as «the centre or focal point» in which observations are linked «in order to create a system of instruments, or of rules which were all directed toward the same object»<sup>4</sup>. This generalised account is levied to demonstrate the unity and universality of reason, an approach consistent in the *Encyclopédie* as a whole. Indeed, Chouillet claims Diderot considered *Art* «a compliment to the *Discours Préliminaire*,» and the approach in this article is a model for the entire work<sup>5</sup>. Diderot proceeds through a process of categorical differentiations which increasingly specify his topic. Art is divided between the mechanical and liberal arts; the liberal are those that are primarily intellectual and the mechanical primarily practical. For Diderot, intent on unifying the rational and sensible, both are needed to successfully practise an art and so

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50. This must be read with reference to: F. Bacon and G. Wats. *Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*, Oxford 1640, p. 77: «History is referred to Memory, Poesy to the Imagination, Philosophy to Reason».

<sup>4</sup> D. Diderot, *Art*. *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, N. Hoyt and T. Cassirer (trans), Ann Arbor 2003. Originally published as *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 1, Paris 1751, pp. 713-717.

<sup>5</sup> Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot*, p. 369

«only an artist who can think logically can talk well about his art»<sup>6</sup>. Diderot chastises the historic privileging of the liberal arts and the conceptual over the sensible. This is the first clear instantiation of his Baconism as the critique of the denigration of the mechanical arts is done with reference to *Novum Organum*. In the quoted passage, Bacon is condemnatory of «vainglorious and prejudicial» opinion that «the dignity of the human mind is lowered by long and frequent intercourse with experiments and particulars, which are the objects of sense»<sup>7</sup>. Diderot comments that for Bacon «the history of the mechanical arts is the most important branch of true philosophy»<sup>8</sup>. Thus, in his preliminary remarks on the topic of art, Diderot makes a case for the vital place of sensibility in knowledge in a particularly empiricist mode.

A portion of the article concerns Diderot's instruction for the production of «a general treatise on the mechanical arts»<sup>9</sup>. He envisions a systematic account that would be directed towards increased perfection in the arts. With this, Diderot demonstrates his teleological approach, establishing a particular directedness towards a rationalised «perfection». This allows Diderot, following Bacon, to emphasise empirical experimentation as a necessary condition for the progress of the mechanical arts. To support his argument, Diderot quotes Bacon's *Cogitata et Visa* in which he suggests that experimentation «provides the foundations, not of any sect or school, but rather of great utility and further development»<sup>10</sup>. Diderot uses his citation of Bacon to suggest that though previous discoveries were by chance, now one might rationally pursue them towards the completion of human knowledge and artistic perfection.

For Diderot, understanding the historical developments in the arts is vital for maintaining an openness to the potentially revolutionary effects of new discoveries for society. He isolates three historical discoveries that have been particularly far reaching in their impacts: «The art of printing, the discovery of gunpowder, and the properties of the magnetic needle» have completely changed learning, warfare and navigation. Again, as he indicates, these three are taken directly from Bacon, specifically from the *Instauratio Magna*<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly,

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> F. Bacon, *The Works*. J. Spedding, R. Ellis, and D. Heath (eds). London 1857, volume 1, p. 190. [*Novum Organum*: LXXXIII] Citations from this source are henceforth given as *E.S.* (vol., page).

<sup>8</sup> Diderot, *Art*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *E.S.*, III, 618 [*Cogitata et Visa de Interpretatione Naturae*].

<sup>11</sup> is also worth noting here that Bacon's influence on Diderot extends beyond the *Encyclopédie*; Diderot had earlier published an essay entitled *Pensées sur l'interprétation de la nature*, which evidenced his regard for Bacon, not only in alluding to the *Cogitata* in the title, but also in the adoption of Bacon's aphoristic style in the form of the work. See H. Dieckmann. *The Influence of Francis Bacon on Diderot's Interprétation de la nature*, «The Romanic Review», 34, 1943.

<sup>11</sup> *E.S.*, I, 222. [*Novum Organum*: CXXIX]: «Again, we should notice the force, effect, and consequences of inventions, which are nowhere more conspicuous than in those three which were unknown to the ancients; namely, printing, gunpowder, and the compass. For these three have changed the appearance and state of the whole world: first in literature, then in warfare, and lastly in navigation; and innumerable changes have been thence derived, so that no empire,

Adorno and Horkheimer also cite Bacon's list of printing, artillery, and the compass on the first page of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to establish exactly what is meant by the category of enlightenment as the object of their criticism. For them, Bacon is the exemplar of an approach to knowledge that «would establish man as the master of nature»<sup>12</sup>. Enlightenment is understood as an epistemic mode of domination, and that privileging of power is seemingly cited with approval by Diderot in his article. Annie Becq recognises that Diderot's discourse in *Art* accords with the «the requirements of the nascent capitalist mode of production» – it is oriented towards the pursuit of efficiency through mechanical means – the material instantiation of Adorno and Horkheimer's notion of the subordination of nature<sup>13</sup>. Diderot understands this «technical inventiveness anticipates and upsets the state of acquired knowledge,» through his empirical focus<sup>14</sup>. However, this stress on the empirical is here tempered with the recommendation of complementary theoretical work: «we need the experimental and practical geometry of several centuries, assisted by the most subtle theoretical geometry, I am convinced that it is impossible to obtain any satisfactory result when these types of geometry are kept separate»<sup>15</sup>. So in the pursuit of a perfected arts, rational and theoretical work is still important and his commendation of the mechanical arts is as a corrective to their historical disparagement. Yet that work is still ultimately subordinated to a rationality that directs and impels it.

An aspect of Diderot's argument is developed without reference to Bacon, though remains entirely within his remit of prescribing a universally communicable discourse of the arts. He complains of the inconsistency in the use of language in the mechanical arts, in which names for tools proliferate, or vastly different types of object or machine are referred to by a single generic term. For him, the language of the arts is at times far too specific and at others far too general; it needs to be organised rationally. Diderot wants a pragmatic approach which privileges communicability, saying that even the most complex of machines «could be explained by a rather small number of familiar, well-known terms»<sup>16</sup>. This stems from his teleological perspective, understanding the complex arts to develop from the simple and thus possible to explain in simple terms<sup>17</sup>. He suggests the «grammar of the arts» should be described by a «good logician» in order to establish a universal language by which all relative terms

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sect, or star, appears to have exercised a greater power and influence on human affairs than these mechanical discoveries».

<sup>12</sup> M. Horkheimer and T. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, Stanford 2002, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> A. Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne*, Paris 1994, p. 757

<sup>14</sup> J.-L. Martine, *L'article ART de Diderot : machine et pensée pratique*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 39, 2005, pp. 41-79: 77

<sup>15</sup> Diderot, *Art*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> P. Antoine, *Gestes ouvriers, opérations et processus techniques. La vision du travail des encyclopédistes*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 13, 1992, pp. 131-147: 141

might be established. Diderot anticipates the need for far fewer words than are currently in use and so the language of the arts might be made more efficient, comprehensible and systematic.

This attitude to language is consistent with his overall project in the article. A systematised lexicon for the arts would assist in the production of a systematic «general treatise» and would allow for a more effective directing of empirical experimentation towards improvement. Diderot articulates a broader social context of the cooperative development of the arts. Ultimately he advocates for a division of labour for the sake of efficiency and thus also progress, something modelled in the *Encyclopédie's* own production<sup>18</sup>. Antoine Picon labels the approach to production outlined in *Art* «an analytical rationality,» emphasising logical and technical distinctions and abstracting from them<sup>19</sup>. Diderot justifies this use of generalised abstraction throughout: «abstraction consists in extending a truth by eliminating from its statement terms that particularise it»<sup>20</sup>.

Diderot's article *Art*, in its dependence on Bacon, contains many themes that are significant for understanding his aesthetics, i.e. his emphasis on sensibility and the systematic discursive framework. Yet due to its exclusive focus on the mechanical arts, it does not examine several matters that are vital for understanding the aesthetic thought of Diderot as a whole; questions of interpretation and form are clear omissions in this regard. However, Diderot does examine some of these questions in his article on beauty, or *Beau* in the original French. Though this article does not build on the work of Bacon in the same way as *Art*, it still accords with the work of the English philosopher and is thus valuable to examine as an exemplar of the encyclopaedic aesthetic philosophy Diderot sought to produce for the French public.

## 2.2 *Beau*

Surprisingly, Diderot's article *Beau* is classified within the *Encyclopédie* as metaphysics, rather than aesthetics. Jacques Proust explains that this is because «the French Academy did not admit the word *aesthetic* into its dictionary until 1835»<sup>21</sup>. Thus, to treat Diderot's aesthetic thought as wholly distinct from the rest of his philosophy would be to make an anachronistic error and this relation is clear in the *Beau* article. The article opens with an acknowledgement that the category of the Beautiful is much discussed in philosophy, yet there is little

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<sup>18</sup> P. Quintili, *Le rêve de l'industrie mécanisée dans l'encyclopédie*, in S. Albertan-Coppola et A.-M. Chouillet (ed.), *La matière et l'homme dans l'Encyclopédie*, Paris 1998, 247-276: 254. Frank A. Kafker et Jeff Loveland, *L'Admiration d'Adam Smith pour l'Encyclopédie*, «Recherches sur Diderot et sur l'Encyclopédie», 48, 2013, pp. 191-202: 193

<sup>19</sup> Antoine, *Gestes ouvriers, opérations et processus techniques*, p. 145

<sup>20</sup> Diderot, *Art*.

<sup>21</sup> J. Proust, *Du goût dans les arts mécaniques* in M. Groult (ed.), «L'Encyclopédie ou la création des disciplines», Paris 2003, p. 119-129: 119

if any certainty about it in all that discussion<sup>22</sup>. To begin trying to define the «Beautiful,» Diderot outlines a historical development of the term. This takes up the first half of the article and allows him to establish the philosophical context to situate his own definition, outlined in the article's latter half. This historical tracing is initiated with Plato and Augustine, with both characterised as emphasising unity. Diderot quickly advances to a discussion of Christian Wolff who identifies beauty with perfection. Diderot argues against Wolff that perfection itself is as inscrutable as beauty and so the Leibnizian rationalist does not assist in answering the question, but simply defers the answer. Jean-Pierre de Crousaz is similarly deemed to have a too-subjective idea of the Beautiful despite his attempts at greater rigour.

Diderot turns to Francis Hutcheson and provides a far more extensive explanation and commentary on his work. Hutcheson contends that each person is endowed with an aesthetic faculty by which they may apprehend the «Beautiful». This is a «reflex sense», in distinction from the external senses of sight and hearing; Diderot terms it a «sixth sense»<sup>23</sup>. Hutcheson's reasoning is laid out in detail with a focus on this internal faculty that is «our power of perceiving the beauty of regularity, order, harmony, an internal sense»<sup>24</sup>. Diderot claims that despite the complex argumentation, the necessity of this internal faculty is not demonstrated, rather «they only manage to demonstrate that there is something dark and impenetrable in the pleasure originating from the beautiful»<sup>25</sup>. Diderot proceeds to examine the work of Father Yves-Marie André, Abbott Charles Batteux, and Lord Shaftesbury, with Father Andre lauded as having best approached the problem despite the ultimate insufficiency of his definition, as with all the others, their various criteria failing to be truly universal. As Colas Duflo explains, Diderot provides this thorough account of the most important recent theories of beauty «in order to get rid of the classic definitions» by finding «a genetic explanation in our native faculties»<sup>26</sup>.

Diderot proposes his own definition, aimed at overcoming the shortcomings of those he has described. He wants to define beauty with certainty, clarity and universality, meaning it can be applied to every instantiation of that which is deemed to be beautiful – a truly reasonable definition. He develops Hutcheson's notion of an aesthetic faculty, arguing that this faculty is a result of our sensibility: our minds' attempts to compare, combine and distinguish sense perception leads to «abstract notions of order, proportion, or rapports, and harmony»<sup>27</sup>. As so many discrete things are understood as beautiful, any definition cannot be one

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<sup>22</sup> D. Diderot, *Beau. The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, N. Hoyt and T. Cassirer (trans), Ann Arbor 2003. Originally published as *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 2, Paris 1752, pp. 169-181.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> F. Hutcheson, and P. Kivy, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, The Hague 1973, p. 24.

<sup>25</sup> Diderot, *Beau.*

<sup>26</sup> C. Duflo, *Diderot Philosophe*, Paris 2003, p. 291.

<sup>27</sup> Diderot, *Beau.*

of those that constitutes the difference of these things, rather it must be common to them all if it is to be a basis for beauty generally. Consequently, Diderot selects «rapports» as the only notion sufficient to beauty: «I then call beautiful outside of myself, that which contains in itself what can awaken in my understanding the idea of rapports»<sup>28</sup>. Diderot clarifies that the ability to determine the exact qualities of the rapports is not necessary to determine the beautiful. Rather it is sufficient that one is able to sense that the object in question harbours rapports: «It is this indetermination of these rapports, the ease with which one can grasp them, and the pleasure that accompanies their perception, which led people to imagine that the beautiful might be more an affair of judgement than of reason»<sup>29</sup>. Thus Diderot can argue that apprehension of the beautiful is the sensitivity to the rapport of the composite parts of an object.

Diderot claims his concept of rapports in beauty to be a truly universal definition: «it is so general, that it proves difficult that something should not fall under its influence»<sup>30</sup>. Further, it is consistent throughout history and in different societies; his definition will «cover all beings, at any given time, for all men, at any given place». He attempts to preempt objections that there is a variety of opinions on what is beautiful in specific instances with the introduction of twelve diversities of judgement. These are mostly aspects of an individual's context, such as subjective experiential idiosyncrasies, termed «accidental ideas». This might be a personal negative experience associated with the beautiful object, leading to its beauty to be incorrectly depreciated. Notwithstanding these diversities, Diderot is assured that «the principle is no less constant,» and that the sensible apprehension of rapports is the universal condition for the discernment of the beautiful – in Duflo's words: «the perception of beauty according to Diderot is always a perception of rapports»<sup>31</sup>.

Despite Diderot's emphasis on the sensible in the perception of rapports, his definition ultimately centres the rational mind as the faculty making those rapports evident in its organisation of perception. Therefore, the notion of «rapport» connects the understanding and the senses by bringing sensibility into the intellect: «even though a rapport resides only in our understanding, it still has its basis in things, via perception». That «dark and impenetrable» faculty is laid out in the light of reason by Diderot. In his closing remarks, he indicates the central place of rationality in his system for determining what the beautiful is: «There might not be two men on the face of the earth that see exactly the same rapports in the same object, and who judge it beautiful to the same degree: but if there were a man who would fail to make out any rapport of any kind, he would be perfectly stupid»<sup>32</sup>. Appreciation of the beautiful is therefore indissolubly tied to the rational faculties and his claims of universality for his definition are wholly

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Duflo, *Diderot Philosophe*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Diderot, *Beau*.



contingent on that connection. Thus, as with *Art*, this article valorises empirical sensibility, but within the context of the primacy of the intellect. Significantly, this «analysis makes it possible to get rid of a first theological reference» and makes the operations of aesthetics quite explicable<sup>33</sup>. Both articles seemingly accord with Bacon's emphasis on empirical experience and indicate Diderot's continuity with the English philosopher. However, this continuity is not the whole picture and where Diderot diverges from Bacon reveals a deficiency in his aesthetics as presented in the *Encyclopédie* – a deficiency for which he tries to compensate elsewhere.

### 2.3 Diderot and Bacon

Diderot himself claims to have «taught my fellow citizens to read chancellor Bacon» and worries that his works are «too far above the average reach of the human mind»<sup>34</sup>. The undeniable esteem in which Bacon is held by Diderot and the “Baconism” of some of his work meant that from the initial publication of the article on *Art*, there were rumours around its authenticity. The critics of the *Encyclopédie* «made the most of what he himself told them, and tried at once to spread the belief that his article on "Art", [...] was copied verbatim from Bacon»<sup>35</sup>. Beyond the content of the individual articles penned by Diderot, the epistemic systematisation that directed the *Encyclopédie's* form came under similar scrutiny. Guillaume François Berthier, a Jesuit and editor of the *Journal de Trévoux*, ironically claimed to share in D'Alembert's and Diderot's admiration for Bacon. He suggested printing their taxonomy of the division of knowledge with that from Bacon's *De Augmentis Scientiarum*, reproducing them side by side «so that readers could compare them. The implication, plainly, was that the Encyclopedic had plagiarised it»<sup>36</sup>. Thus, in the midst of claims of intellectual appropriation, the contention that Diderot notably diverges from Bacon may well have been strange to his contemporaneous readers. However, it is specifically those areas in which this divergence is evident that are most interesting.

Twentieth century scholarship challenged the simplistic tracing of ideas from Bacon to Diderot. Herbert Dieckmann argues that despite many shared features of their thought, these are ultimately limited and an analysis of “influence” is unhelpful in teasing out the various affinities and contrasts between them. He claims «Diderot apparently contented himself with a rather cursory reading of Bacon. It is doubtful whether he ever came to a clear understanding of Bacon's philosophy as a complete system of ideas»<sup>37</sup>. For Dieckmann, Diderot

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<sup>33</sup> Duflo, *Diderot Philosophe*, p. 352

<sup>34</sup> D. Diderot. *Encyclopedia. The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, P. Stewart (trans), Ann Arbor 2002. Originally published as *Encyclopédie, Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, 5, Paris 1755, pp. 635-648.

<sup>35</sup> R. Cru, *Diderot as a Disciple of English Thought*, New York 1913, p. 245.

<sup>36</sup> P. Furbank, *Diderot: A Critical Biography*, New York 1992, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> H. Dieckmann, *The Influence of Francis Bacon on Diderot's Interprétation de la nature*, «The Romanic Review», 34, 1943, p. 327.

was able to appeal to Bacon as an historical authority on the progress of science without adopting his thought wholesale. Thus, even though the *Encyclopédistes'* consistent veneration of Bacon means that «at first sight the influence seems always to be very definite, [...] upon closer investigation it fades and becomes more and more vague»<sup>38</sup>. This vagueness is present even where Bacon's influence seems most established.

Primarily, their taxonomy of human knowledge contains some vital distinctions, though D'Alembert is explicit in acknowledging the prototypical role of Bacon's version. The *Encyclopédistes'* diagram entitled *Système Figuré des Connaissances Humaines* reproduces the tripartite division of Bacon's own diagram, *The Emanation of the Sciences*, into Memory/History, Reason/Philosophy, and Imagination/Poetry. However, Bacon's diagram contains an addition external to these three indicating the impossibility of subsuming it to any of the faculties of knowledge – «Inspired Divinity». For Bacon, this theologically informed element cannot be classified according to the categories of human knowledge, but indicates something extrinsic to them. Bacon wants to designate a space in his system for something *other*, that is to say, something that may not be explicable according to history, philosophy or poetry, but which might connect to any of them. Contrary to this, Diderot's categories are altered in the *Système*, which treats «revealed religion as a mere branch of *philosophy*»<sup>39</sup>. This decision and the notoriety it acquired are well known in the history of the *Encyclopedie*. Not only does it subordinate the revelation of the divine, it divides the other faculties from this revelation. For Bacon, a refusal to categorise divine inspiration into his system is the only legitimate account of the structure of knowledge. He would therefore consider its limitation to a subsection of philosophy a fundamental error. This undermines the idea that the *Encyclopédistes* are the philosophical heirs to Bacon. Rather, they are critics of his organisation of knowledge and seek to produce a corrective to Bacon's theological sensibility.

This disjuncture between Bacon and Diderot is revealing of a particular vulnerability in his encyclopaedic aesthetics. As Diderot disallows anything external to his system of knowledge, the possibility of the emergence of something different from that systematisation is radically limited. His article on *Art*, with its call for the efficient and directed development of mechanisation, aligns Diderot with the dominative enlightenment project criticised by Adorno and Horkheimer. In accordance with general trends in the enlightenment, in Diderot's work, «thought is reified as an autonomous, automatic process, aping the machine it has itself produced»<sup>40</sup>. Everything must be ultimately explicable according to the categories he has outlined, and thus must, in a sense, be always already known. With this limitation, Diderot's account of aesthetics presented in *Art* and *Beau* fails to consider originality as a significant operation in aesthetic production, beyond empirical experimentation. Bacon's provision for inspiration,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 330.

<sup>39</sup> Furbank, *Diderot*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 19.

while encoded in a specifically Christian formulation, allows for something external to knowledge to manifest within knowledge – something that is not reducible to rationally determined categories and so also remains inexplicable in Bacon's account. Bacon links his category of inspiration directly to originality in *De Augmentis Scientiarum*. Here he suggests that the novelty and difference of inspiration would cause it to be rejected; that which is not cognisable through the lens of prevailing thought will be considered meaningless unless presented through analogy. Thus Bacon suggests that «as hieroglyphics were before letters; so parables were before arguments»<sup>41</sup>. His notion of parabolic priority contends with the possibility that not everything can be discursively delimited. It is precisely at the point that the discursive is insufficient that aesthetics takes a central role, conveying the original, the strange, the *other*.

In accordance with his divergence from Bacon, Diderot's portrayal of the development of art and the judgement of beauty fails to make any such contention, treating its subject as though every aspect could be expressed in rational postulates. Diderot's aesthetics, as presented in the *Encyclopedie*, already has all the answers and so forecloses on the theoretical possibility of artistic innovation in such a way that Diderot himself realised its insufficiency. Stengers suggests that «the stake for Diderot is that science does not become a new temple»<sup>42</sup>. Diderot is sufficiently self-aware to recognise that such a denial of innovation can only result in a diminished account of both art and subjectivity. Outside the *Encyclopedie* Diderot tried to work through this problem and, in these writings, the figure of the genius emerges as the vector of originality. However, this is not as unambiguous as the encyclopaedic writings, but on the contrary seems beset by inconsistencies and contradictions. This is the other side of Diderot's aesthetic thought, a more troubled and enigmatic side that wrestles to fill the lacunas left by the *Encyclopedie*.

### 3. The Vicissitudes of Genius

Diderot is clearly anxious over the place of reason in his thought and through his considerations impelled by these anxieties, he anticipates many of the later criticisms that will be directed at the French enlighteners. He embraces Bacon's preference for the analogical and parabolic with regard to aesthetics, choosing to explore certain ideas through a fictional dialogue rather than the philosophical prose familiar in his encyclopaedic articles. This dialogue, *Rameau's Nephew*, is concerned with reason's relation to unreason, ambiguities of morality, and the place of genius. Genius becomes a highly contentious category for Diderot, oscillating between a scientifically explicable phenomena and something more mysterious. Nowhere are these vacillations more evident than in *Rameau's Nephew*, a text that centres uncertainty both in the disagreements

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<sup>41</sup> *E.S.*, I, 520 [*De Augmentis Scientiarum*]

<sup>42</sup> Stengers, *Diderot's egg*, p. 10

of its two main characters and internal to the characters themselves. It was first published in 1805 and seems to have been almost entirely unknown prior<sup>43</sup>. However, it became quite influential and is considered a central work of the French enlightenment with its impact tangible in Goethe and Hegel. Yet, it is a work that demonstrates a consternation over the efficacy of the enlightenment, posing difficult questions without providing resolutions.

It is in *Rameau's Nephew* that Diderot's epistemological separation from Bacon comes to a head and Diderot can reflexively problematise his own conceptualisations of knowledge. In this way, he begins to return to Bacon's perspective, though *Rameau's Nephew* leaves nothing so clear-cut or systematically presented as Bacon would have it. Bacon's metaphor of the division of waters is clarifying for understanding his taxonomy of knowledge: «Knowledge is like waters; some waters descend from the Heavens, some spring from the Earth [...] For all knowledge proceeds from a twofold information; either from divine inspiration, or from external sense»<sup>44</sup>. Such a conception of knowledge centres its ultimate unity and shared source, whilst maintaining the significance of its diversity. Bacon's philosophical taxonomy of knowledge is therefore also necessarily theological at every point, demonstrated by his addressing divine inspiration in the last book of *De Augmentis Scientiarum*. Diderot on the other hand does not think in such theological terms. His taxonomic sub-categorisation of revelation as an aspect of reason means that though his divisions align with Bacon's for the most part, they are far more disjunctive. Theologian Nicholas Lash comments that Diderot's deliberate dissociation of argument and reason from memory and experience «sets reason's quest, the quest for ordering and ordered sanity or wisdom, freewheeling in the void»<sup>45</sup>. Lash notes that this may have been embraced by Diderot as a freeing potentiality, yet the void also introduces a disquieting sense of arbitrariness. It is this disquiet that is explored in *Rameau's Nephew*.

### 3.1 *Rameau's Nephew*

Diderot's text takes the form of a dialogue between Moi, a philosopher and advocate of enlightenment ideals, and Lui, an anarchic and talented vagrant and the titular nephew. As the dialogue progresses, the reason of Moi is tested by the provocations of Lui and «reason, order, the enlightened mind, thus senses itself vulnerable to disorder, chaos, madness»<sup>46</sup>. The dialogue cultivates an overall impression of the essential fragility of reason. This is not a philosophical dialogue cast in the mould of Plato. Rather, Blanca Missé terms it an «aporetic text,» explaining that «it does not lead to a philosophical thesis» and «nor is such

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<sup>43</sup> D. Diderot, M. Mauldon, and N. Cronk. *Rameau's Nephew*, Oxford 2006, p. vii.

<sup>44</sup> Bacon, *Of the Advancement and Proficiency of Learning*, p. 131.

<sup>45</sup> N. Lash. *Reason, Fools and Rameau's Nephew*, «New Blackfriars», 896, 1995, p. 371.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

a conclusion expected from the reader»<sup>47</sup>. The text does not argue for a particular theory over another and so it would be a significant error to simply associate the character of Moi with Diderot and treat Lui as a hypothetical intellectual sparring partner. The fact that Diderot is referred to in the third person also indicates the author's desire for dissociation from either character within the text itself<sup>48</sup>. The theme of wisdom's relation to foolishness that the two characters personify is established from the outset with Moi admitting that «if one may be both a wit and a fine chess player like Legal, one may also be a fine chess player and an idiot [sot] like Foubert and Mayot»<sup>49</sup>. Over the course of the dialogue, a broad range of topics are addressed and disputed, but the primary concern throughout is this relation of wisdom and foolishness, reason and unreason.

In a key passage at which this tension is most explicit, Lui proclaims that «in high society there's no better role to play than that of fool»<sup>50</sup>. His foolishness is utterly self-conscious and the knowingness of his attitude begins to suggest an inversion. Lui brings the obverse of Moi's reason to bear, intimating their equivalence in his suggestion that as a fool is always a fool for another, he is «perhaps yours at this moment – or you, perhaps, are mine»<sup>51</sup>. The philosopher's self-assuredness in his own reason is tacitly intimated to be his folly, his certainty blinding him to the role he plays. Lash also picks up on the significance of this passage, noting that «the nephew knows (it seems) that he is a fool. But, knowing that, he's wise»<sup>52</sup>. There is a clear Socratic theme that permeates much of the text with a revelatory function of the fool that divulges the truth and upturns social norms: «He shocks us, he stirs us up; he forces us to praise or blame; he brings out the truth; he identifies honourable men and un.masks scoundrels»<sup>53</sup>. Diderot can be read as comprehending that the whole epistemic premise of the *Encyclopedie* is insufficient – there is always the need for something other, something from outside of its own system, the metaphorical «grain of yeast that ferments»<sup>54</sup>. But within the thoroughgoing rationality of the enlightenment, this catalytic agent must correspond to madness.

The exploration of genius in *Rameau's Nephew* always maintains this hint of irrationality, even Moi admits that «you can't have a great mind without a little madness»<sup>55</sup>. Lui is ostensibly written as a kind of genius in the dialogue. This is evident from both the irrational tone to his speech and its clearly aesthetic element. Lui is a talent in music and mime; there are relatively long excursions from the dialogue that are given over to evocative descriptions of Lui's

<sup>47</sup> B. Missé. *Rameau's Nephew as an Essay-Form*, «Romance Studies», 36(4), 2018, pp. 151-166: 153

<sup>48</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 50.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Lash, *Reason, Fools and Rameau's Nephew*, p. 372.

<sup>53</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 8.

performances. In these, Diderot plays with the tensions inherent to discursivity, the linguistic representation of that which cannot be reduced to language. It is the suggestiveness and vivacity with which these scenes are described that gives them their power, yet they necessarily fall short of that which they try to capture. In the dialogue, the purpose of these scenes seems more to be to convey Lui's genius and talent to the reader. Lui embodies the irrationality of the natural world, that which is not subsumed to the rational understanding of the philosophers, as Lui himself claims: «Geniuses read little, do a lot, and create themselves [...] It's nature that teaches those exceptional men»<sup>56</sup>. Despite Diderot's articles *Art* and *Beau* giving priority to nature, his dialogue hints at something else; the autogenic artist, not bound by rational systems.

The clear demarcation between reason and folly between the two characters is not as neat as it at first appears. Lui is inconsistent in his principles, at times jealous of Moi's talents in his desire for recognition as a genius, whilst denigrating the attributes of the genius<sup>57</sup>. Moi on the other hand seems to undermine his own philosophical detachment from the outset, referring to his thoughts as whores<sup>58</sup>. Beyond the strictly theoretical or intellectual, Moi engages in the activity of thinking sensually. Further, his thought has no loyalty to the principles of the enlightenment, but is taken in multiple directions - he is, as it were, not married to his rationalism. This attitude of Moi seems quite reflective of Diderot's own, demonstrated by his authoring the dialogue. He is not as committed to the enlightenment as his encyclopaedic articles suggest, but is instead "seduced" by his thoughts, taken where they will lead him, to ideas of genius and madness. This imagery is revealing of the political content of Diderot's thought with its use of gendered derogation. The thought that tempts away from rationalism is aligned with the feminine, allowing Diderot to restate a patriarchal normativity while at the same time acknowledging his own partiality for such allures<sup>59</sup>. «*Catins*» is thus an accurate image for Diderot's thought, oppositional to his rationalist commitments and with an unacknowledged political content. With this oppositional form, the whole dialogue takes on a distinctly dialectical quality - the significance of its reference in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is clear in its gendered presentations of a «negative attitude to that 'other'»<sup>60</sup>. In this dialectical form, the central issue of the dialogue is made evident, namely that wisdom is delimited by its other, by foolishness. The wisdom and reason of

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<sup>56</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 77 and 7.

<sup>58</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, 3. The line is translated as «In my case, my thoughts are my little flirts». But «flirts» diminishes the bluntness of the original «*catins*». Diderot's proclivity to obscenity is also evident in his 1748 novel *Les Bijoux Indiscrets*.

<sup>59</sup> Diderot's exact relation to sexism is another site of indeterminacy. As such, it is oversimplifying to identify a patriarchal tendency in his thought without also indicating that elsewhere he bemoans the cruelty of civil law towards women and the seemingly universal treatment of women as «childish fools». See *Sur les Femmes* in D. Diderot, *Œuvres Complètes*, J. Assézat (ed), Paris 1875, II, p. 260.

<sup>60</sup> G. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford 2013, p. 332

the philosopher Moi does not carry the day against the inspirations, agitations and temptations of Lui. If anything, Moi is shamed, his certainty shown to be misplaced and his ideas unoriginal.

Lash stipulates that the «fool's genius, lacking all complacency, has something of the character of a De Profundis»<sup>61</sup>. There is a genuine spiritual depth to Diderot's character with his inversion of Solomon's wisdom and his spurning of sense<sup>62</sup>. In line with Bacon's inspiration, Diderot has concerns about his own systematisation of knowledge and uses his dialogue to explore such doubts. Within this uncertainty, the figure of the genius becomes a central concern, provisionally apparent in the figure of Lui.

### 3.2 *Genius*

In her study of the idea of genius in French literature, Ann Jefferson argues that in the work of Diderot, genius is particularised and conflated with those individuals who evince the «resistance to rules and convention»<sup>63</sup>. As Diderot has his *philosophe* character, Moi, voice: «geniuses are usually odd»<sup>64</sup>. Though genius is individualised for Diderot, he doesn't isolate a privileged medium for its expression. In the short unpublished fragment entitled *Sur le Génie*, he claims that those designated geniuses may be «poets, philosophers, painters, orators, musicians». However, he goes on to admit «I do not know what particular quality of soul, secret, indefinable, without which nothing very great and beautiful can be performed»<sup>65</sup>. Genius is the necessary condition for beautiful aesthetic production, yet this cannot be exactly determined. It is «a human factor to which [...] Diderot hesitates to assign a name»<sup>66</sup>. He goes through an extensive list, denying variously that genius can be defined as imagination, judgement, spirit/mind [*esprit*], heat, sensitivity, and taste. He settles for accounting for genius as «a certain constitution of the humours» and «the observant spirit» [*l'esprit observateur*] but denies that anyone has a precise notion of exactly what this means. This idea of observation aligns with Jean-François de Saint-Lambert's explanation of the same; the observations of the genius are much richer and deeper than those not endowed with genius<sup>67</sup>. Diderot identifies it as a type of «*esprit prophétique*»<sup>68</sup>. Prophecy seems diametrically opposed to observation in temporal terms, but Diekmann explains this faculty might only be explained by its «penetrating more and more into the true and real essence of the object

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<sup>61</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 374.

<sup>62</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 32 and 67.

<sup>63</sup> A. Jefferson, *Genius in France*, Princeton 2015, p. 41.

<sup>64</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, IV, p. 26

<sup>66</sup> Becq, *Genèse de l'esthétique française moderne*, p. 712.

<sup>67</sup> Saint-Lambert was the likely author of the *Encyclopédie* article on the topic of genius, entitled *Génie*. See: J. Saint-Lambert (ascribed), *Genius*, in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, Ann Arbor 2007.

<sup>68</sup> Saint-Lambert (ascribed), *Genius*, p. 27.

observed,» distinguishing it from mundane empirical observation and taking on a prophetic character in the veracity of its observation of the object<sup>69</sup>.

The loose definition of genius as an observant or prophetic spirit establishes Diderot's conviction that genius is not something to be acquired, but arises naturally. However, this is not the same notion of the naturally endowed, fully-formed genius as expounded by earlier English literary critics such as Joseph Addison or Edward Young. For Diderot, the capacity for observation means that the genius «learns, he expands without studying»<sup>70</sup>. In this sense the genius is able to develop themselves, they are not born complete, but refine their genius through their penetrating observation of the natural world. This idea is echoed in *Rameau's Nephew*, with Lui's claim «Geniuses [...] create themselves»<sup>71</sup>.

For Diderot, it is this incredible insight into the object of examination that causes the recourse to spiritual language. However, this language is only ever figurative for Diderot and he would consider it a mistake to understand it as genuinely supernatural. He pertinently uses the example of Socrates to make his point, acknowledging that Socrates was clearly endowed with genius. Socrates' ability in the observation of his peers allowed him to «prophesy,» which is to say, to make accurate predictions regarding their futures. In the same way, the modern genius has «seen nature so often and so closely in its operations, that they can guess with enough precision what course it will take»<sup>72</sup>. Genius therefore, appears modelled on the empirical method – through repeated and careful observation, accurate predictions can be made consistently. This gives something of a scientific framework by which genius can be conceptualised as not necessarily in contradiction with the rationalising impulse of the enlightenment. It even seems congruent with Diderot's *Encyclopédie* writings on aesthetics, grounded in rationality and empirical observation. Further, in the Salons, Diderot writes of universal reason as «the origin of genius» and something that resides «deep in the heart of man»<sup>73</sup>. Though it makes use of an almost mystical language, the definition of genius is centred on natural observation and has no recourse to superstition. He instructs those who possess the propensity for observation «to look within himself to recognise distinctly what it is; substitute the familiar demon [*démon familier*] for intelligible and clear notions, and develop them for the benefit of others»<sup>74</sup>. However, despite this account of how the genius might conform to rationality, in the same text he seems to acknowledge the irrational content of the concept of genius. He writes of «this habit of unreason that is found to a surprising degree in those who have acquired or who derive from nature the genius of experimental physics»<sup>75</sup>. For Diekmann, this self-contradiction within

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<sup>69</sup> Dieckmann, *Diderot's Conception of Genius*, p. 172.

<sup>70</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, IV, p. 27.

<sup>71</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 43.

<sup>72</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, IV, p. 24

<sup>73</sup> Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot*, p. 11 and *Salon de 1767*, in Diderot, *Œuvres*, VII, p. 258.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Salon de 1767*, p. 25



the same short text is indicative of Diderot's broader thoughts on the topic<sup>76</sup>. His attempt to rationalise genius simply leaves him faced with the irrational elements of the concept that cannot be subsumed.

### 3.3 *Aesthetic Contradictions*

These irrational elements are particularly evident in aesthetics. For Diderot, writing in his *Réfutation*, «the sublime, whether in painting, or in poetry, or in eloquence, does not always arise from the exact description of phenomena»<sup>77</sup>. Aesthetic production is not reducible to an exactitude of observation and reproduction, but there is something more going on, something the genius imparts to the work that is not already present in nature. This addition, Diderot contends, is «the emotion that the spectator genius will have experienced»<sup>78</sup>. The artwork communicates the heightened state of emotional sensitivity to its viewer – they are transported by seeing the world as it is seen and felt by the genius. This turn to feeling introduces that which cannot be simplified by rational categories, nor accounted for through observation alone. It is wholly particular and fundamentally non-rational. Dieckmann helpfully summarises: «The belief in a general, universal reason as the source of all knowledge and of art renders impossible, I believe, the understanding of the genius»<sup>79</sup>. If Diderot wants to maintain the extraordinary quality of genius, particularly in the philosophy of aesthetics, it cannot be bound by rationality without losing its extraordinariness.

As Diderot's centring of feeling establishes the necessity of particularity over generality, he also introduces the necessity of originality as absolute particularity. «The genius feels; but he does not imitate»<sup>80</sup>. Because the genius does not simply reproduce nature, but introduces something idiosyncratic in their production, this something must be wholly new. If it were the imitation of a previous work, it would no longer be the work of genius. This is a major theme in *Rameau's Nephew*, in which «they break with that tedious uniformity which our education, our social conventions, and our customary properties have produced»<sup>81</sup>. This originality goes beyond the call for experimentation outlined in the article on *Art* in that the genius is not led by nature and does not proceed along a rationally guided course. Originality therefore indicates the inadequacy of tradition for the genius, but also points to the possibility of precipitating change through its reception.

In a 1762 letter to Sophie Volland, Diderot claims to «have always been the apologist of strong passions». He continues, writing, «the arts of genius are born and die with them; it is they who make the villain, and the enthusiast who

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<sup>76</sup> Dieckmann, *Diderot's Conception of Genius*, p. 173.

<sup>77</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, II, p. 330.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Dieckmann, *Diderot's Conception of Genius*, p. 175.

<sup>80</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, VII, p. 340.

<sup>81</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 43.

paints him with his true colours»<sup>82</sup>. The place of feeling is vital for Diderot's understanding of the production of art and so it is the passionate elements that make art what it is, give it its sublimity and raise it above mere representation. However, this is not assessed as unilaterally positive. There remain other tendencies in Diderot, in which the genius and its coextensive passions are thought of as a pathological condition. This conception demonstrates that in Diderot, the place of genius recalls both the classical ideas of a super-human endowment and as the madness and frenzy «venerated only by people plainly out of their wits»<sup>83</sup>. Genius is thus an abnormality or malformity in the individual, while also indicating a person of great ability.

It is helpful to recall Diderot's tentative definition of genius to examine the idea of it as a malformation: along with the observant spirit, Diderot named «a certain constitution of the humours» as a necessary quality of genius<sup>84</sup>. The notion of genius as entailing an almost chronic obsessiveness builds on the ideas of Abbé Dubos, who suggests that genius is due to «a happy arrangement of the organs of the brain»<sup>85</sup>. Jefferson argues this tendency to a pathological conception of genius arises from Aristotle's idea of those with outstanding ability as afflicted with melancholy. Melancholy is understood via the thinking of the humours to be an admixture of hot and cold, an oscillating temperament between the extremes of heat (indeed, Diderot often speaks of the *heat* of the genius when speaking of their passions). Aristotle praises the superiority of moderation against these excesses, though this moderation still entails «mixture, variety, and instability, rather than purity» in the outstanding individual<sup>86</sup>. The pathological connotation of genius in Diderot, understood as a self-defeating imbalance that leads to eccentricity, acts as a moderating impulse in the discussions of genius. A necessary moderation in the perpetual fluctuation that genius entails and which is reflected in Diderot's writings.

Again, this notion of genius as a mental aberration is a clear theme in *Rameau's Nephew*. The titular Rameau is widely believed to be a composer of some genius, yet this talent for composition results in a complete inability in other, quite ordinary areas of life. His nephew, Lui, complains that a genius is «good for one thing only. Other than that, nothing»<sup>87</sup>. The passions incurred by genius are thought to come at the cost of a more general aptitude. Given Diderot's consistent incongruity in the discussions of genius thus far, it is no surprise that on this topic he continually contradicts himself. For Diderot, ideas of expression, taste, observation and passion are all associated via the figure of the genius. In each regard, the irrational elements that set genius apart are purified of their theological impedimenta and relegated to the domain of the psyche - that

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<sup>82</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, XIX, p. 87.

<sup>83</sup> Dieckmann, *Diderot's Conception of Genius*, p. 168.

<sup>84</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, IV, p. 26.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Jefferson, *Genius in France*, p. 21.

<sup>86</sup> Diderot, *Œuvres*, IV, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 43.

might anachronistically be labelled the unconscious. Despite his attempt to deal with the genius in this manner, «as his mind is open to the unmistakable quality of greatness, he is recurrently brought back to a conviction of the irrational origin and the irreducibility of the genius»<sup>88</sup>. The contradictory characteristics of his engagement with the topic culminate in a rather self-conscious interrogation of genius in *Rameau's Nephew*.

In the text, the character of Lui contends that he is not a genius and even disparages the notion, saying «men of genius are detestable»<sup>89</sup>. However, he proceeds to agree that those who so hate genius tend to consider themselves to be one. As is the theme for much of the dialogue, there is an instability and equivocation surrounding Lui. His inconsistency is perhaps performing the irreducibility of his genius to any stable proposition. Furbank analyses this: «he cannot possibly rest in that proposition, any more than in any other proposition, and will move on – the hope that leads him on in this case being, perhaps, that frankness on this scale may actually amount to genius»<sup>90</sup>. Lui, therefore, serves to perform the attributes of genius in various ways, including «a gift for mimesis, sensibility, originality, imagination, inspiration, indifference to laws and convention, exclusive focus on a single preoccupation, ethical merit, a tendency toward extremes, an aversion to mediocrity, an association with insanity, and a basis in innate character»<sup>91</sup>. However, he never discursively affirms his status as a genius, leaving the question perpetually open. This is in contradistinction to the limply philosophical approach of Moi. Thus genius is not theorised as such, nor simply celebrated in the dialogue but on the one hand, performed and on the other, debated.

Lui's talented mimesis and performance is recounted by Moi:

He was a woman swooning with grief; a wretch overcome with despair; a temple rising up from the ground; birds falling silent at sunset; rivers murmuring their way through cool solitudes or cascading down from high mountains; a storm; a tempest, the moans of the dying mingling with the whistling of the wind and the crashing of the thunder; night, with its darkness; shadows and silence – for sound can portray silence itself<sup>92</sup>.

This certainly seems to embody the animation of matter and mimesis as the qualities of genius established in Saint-Lambert's article. They convey a sense of particularly sensitive observation which is deployed in Lui's performance and «the observer has his attention directed to the experience of the man of genius»<sup>93</sup>. The genius requires its other, the non-genius to be able to recognise it and designate it as such, it cannot proclaim the title for itself. For Diderot then,

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<sup>88</sup> Dieckmann, *Diderot's Conception of Genius*, p. 182.

<sup>89</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Furbank, *Diderot*, p. 249.

<sup>91</sup> Jefferson, *Genius in France*, p. 39.

<sup>92</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 69.

<sup>93</sup> Jefferson, *Genius in France*, p. 43.

it is the experience of the genius, or their productions that are philosophically interesting. The possibility of designating one a genius when the genius does not abide by aesthetic norms or can conform to rational postulates becomes a site of tension. Is Lui a genius or not? Lui demonstrates many of the traits of genius but Moi is not convinced. The knowability is a problem for the observer, not those being observed, as Lui questions plainly: «are virtue and philosophy suited to everybody<sup>94</sup>?» He must reduce all abstractions down to their concrete particulars, «all else is vanity»<sup>95</sup>. The conceptual problem of genius is thus challenged fundamentally; is it possible to have a theory of genius when genius is by definition anathema to the theoretical? This recentres the aesthetic and individual experience as the primary locus of engagement with the genius, a clear break from the universal approach taken in the *Encyclopédie*.

The central tension in Diderot's thought is thus reflexively performed in *Rameau's Nephew*, performed but not settled. Genius itself is taken to be in conflict with the intellect as a whole, constantly evading its categories and rationalisations, introducing difference and catalysing change. Diderot, along with his genuine commitments to the universality of reason and its communicability, wants to side with genius and its errors. In a reference to Socrates, he writes «Beware of people whose pockets are filled with intellect [*esprit*], and who scatter it about at every pretext. They have no daemon [*démon*]. They are not sad, gloomy, melancholic or silent. They are never clumsy or foolish<sup>96</sup>». For Diderot, aesthetic production entails a need for foolishness and error for the sake of originality and sublimity. These qualities are indicative of those who possess the demon, which is the Socratic genius. This formulation also recalls Aristotelian melancholia as the prerequisite for exemplarity in that a certain irregularity or distortion of the intellect allows for genius' ability.

For Diderot, the inclusion of an idea of genius and the appreciation of the original and extraordinary in art leads to a certain kind of incoherence. It is not possible to establish a system on the basis of that which refuses systematicity. Genius must be odd and deviate from the norm; art must be new and not reducible to the models of that which preceded it. Thus, this part of Diderot's thought, as it emerges in unpublished fictional works, fragments and letters, is itself not fully consistent, but performs the aesthetic contradictions as much as it discusses them. Chouillet even expresses disappointment that Diderot did not take his thought «even further in the direction of separation and contradiction, in that region of the mind where extremes, pushed to the limit, come together<sup>97</sup>». To return, finally, to Bacon's metaphor of the waters of knowledge, Diderot must concede that knowledge is not as univocal or congruous as he argues

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<sup>94</sup> Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, p. 32.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> D. Diderot, *Salon de 1765*, in J. Sez nec and J. Adhémar (eds). *Diderot, Salons*. Oxford 1957-1967, II, p. 71.

<sup>The</sup> «daemon» here is a reference to Socrates' genius as it is presented in Plato's writings.

<sup>97</sup> Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot*, p. 323.

elsewhere. Further, his aesthetic writings show Bacon's taxonomy to be too rigid for the vicissitudes of genius, despite its incorporation of the inspired and the unknown. The bifurcation of knowledge in Bacon is not sufficient to the contradictory elements inherent to the notion of genius as presented by Diderot. In this way, Diderot draws closer to the philosophy of Bacon while also revealing its inadequacy when it comes to questions of aesthetic production and interpretation. Bacon, as the enlightenment exemplar, is found wanting.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis of Diderot's writings on aesthetics demonstrates a fundamental contradiction inherent to his aesthetic thought when taken as a whole. The Diderot of the *Encyclopédie* wants to affirm that art is rationally explicable yet the Diderot that is interested in ideas of genius cannot make such an affirmation. The encyclopaedic side is intent on producing a theory of aesthetics that encompasses everything – that can be truly universal – while ensuring it remains coherent with the system knowledge outlined in the *Encyclopédie*. Further, this part of Diderot's writings have a specific approach to communication. In his encyclopaedic writings, he advocates a universal communicability and attempts to instantiate it through writing with the utmost clarity in his expository form. His articles *Art* and *Beau* demonstrate that he wants to minimise the interpretive work left to the reader, leaving nothing vague. He even explicitly argues for the necessity of a logically coherent vocabulary with which to approach the topic. Diderot's argument in these articles entail a distinctive directedness to a rationalised notion of perfection, primarily through developing an increasing productive efficiency or technological aptitude. Presumably his own articles are to be considered a part of this teleological process. His rationally deduced categories of «rapports» fits exactly with this communicative progressive approach; it is determined by a criteria of universality and clarity, theoretically applicable and recognisable to every subject.

Diderot's systematic and logical approach to aesthetics leaves the possibility of originality at stake. The question of whether art can be anything *other* than what is already understood is not answered by his characteristically meticulous articles. Indeed, how one might even approach a topic not yet congruent with rationality is a question unanswerable under the rubric of normative communicability. Therefore, with Diderot's awareness of the limitations of discursivity in the encyclopaedic form, the question of communication and the written form itself becomes the focus of his concern. With this, uncertainty becomes unavoidable, despite the attempts at certainty in the encyclopaedic articles; universality and clarity have diminished assurance when the categories themselves are in question. Therefore, in his engagement with these difficult questions, Diderot recognises the necessity for a different kind of communicability, a written mode that might convey something extra-rational which endows art with its distinctiveness,

originality and exceptionality. For Diderot, fiction, the dialogue and the fragment are forms that he takes up in pursuit of this alternative approach.

Chouillet claims «it is astonishing that critics are in general so little sensitive to this aspect of his aesthetics, they judge it a priori unassimilable or disconcerting»<sup>98</sup>. However, the unassimilable nature of Diderot's aesthetics is exactly the point. Recognising the breadth of Diderot's engagement with aesthetics reveals his thought to be full of contradictions. *Rameau's Nephew* and other texts disrupt easy readings of the encyclopaedic writings as representative of Diderot's thought on the subject. In emphasising particular juxtapositions, the divisions in Diderot's work should not be overstated; the variety of his thought cannot be so easily bisected. The various rational explanations of genius with which Diderot attempts to furnish his reader attest to his striving for unity. Further, internal to the *Encyclopédie* writings themselves, the relation to Francis Bacon is indicative of some of these contradictory outcomes regarding aesthetics. And perhaps most importantly, these contradictions are self-consciously performed through the various discussions in *Rameau's Nephew*. The figure of the genius in Diderot's thought is at once explicable yet mysterious, an endowment and a pathology, necessary for aesthetics yet unmentioned in his encyclopaedic aesthetic writings. Genius is thus the locus of Diderot's inconsistencies and of which he is keenly aware.

Diderot's aesthetic writings are some of his most interesting, intersecting a range of different philosophical movements and exemplifying his commitment to and anxiety over key ideas in the enlightenment, namely the universality of rationality and communication. In this sense, the aesthetic is a window into Diderot's thought more generally, illustrative of its depth, variability and sophistication and underscoring his immanent critique of the enlightenment.

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<sup>98</sup> Chouillet, *La Formation des idées esthétiques de Diderot*, p. 408.

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