Cultures of light: contemporary trends in museum exhibition

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CHAPTER TWO

ILLUMINATING NARRATIVES: PERIOD ROOMS AND TABLEAUX
VIVANTS ON DISPLAY

Light is the medium of communication between things and happenings in our surroundings, and their perception and understanding by the human mind. (xvii)
Louis Erhardt, *The Right Light*

[T]he manner in which light illuminates an object shapes our impressions and understanding of what we’re seeing. (2)
J. Michael Gillette, *Designing with Light*

In 2004, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (MET) organized an exhibition entitled *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, curated by Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton from the Costume Institute in collaboration with the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts. The exhibition took place in the museum’s Fifth Avenue building from 29 April to 6 September 2004, within the sumptuous suite of period rooms currently known as The Wrightsman Galleries. These decorated period rooms are situated on the Central Park side of the labyrinthine building and display the museum’s renowned collection of European furniture and related decorative arts pieces – many of which have a royal provenance. Furthermore, this exhibition was not only a presentation of decorated spaces but was, moreover, a spectacular display of costumes in dynamic interaction with their furnished surroundings. The exhibition showcased costumed mannequins comporting themselves in eighteenth-century demeanour. Because of its presentation techniques and its apparent quality of purposefulness to instruct viewers about various social practices during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The exhibition occupies a place at the intersection of theatricality and didactic display.

In more than one aspect this is not a regular exhibition. In addition to setting the costumes in period rooms rather than in conventional exhibition spaces, a story is being told aided by the effects of light. No doubt it was inspired by Choderlos de Laclos’ (1741-1803) famous epistolary novel *Les liaisons dangereuses* (1782). More specifically, the notion of seduction securely links the novel with the exhibition. With
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only a cursory glance, we as viewers see eleven scenes presented in the style of *tableaux vivants* (fig. 2.1a-k). They are offered here in a single illustration as a finite, cohesive and progressive ensemble of images so as to accentuate the narrativity of the exhibition. The story being told by the exhibition is one of rivalry between the sexes. The curators created a work that showed how the elegant artifice of eighteenth-century French design became a tool of seduction.

By and large, exhibitions are expository vehicles of display wherein works of art or artefacts are employed to teach or tell a story. The illumination techniques used in exhibitions have often been what I would call straightforward and utilitarian in nature in order to illuminate the artefacts under normalized conditions so as to present the object in a so-called neutral way. The illumination techniques deployed in this exhibition however, are not neutral, but are rather quite theatrical and uncharacteristic of ethnographic and art historical exhibitions in general.

In this chapter I first consider the museum’s period rooms as theatrical stages where the action of the story takes place. Here, I argue that long-existing decorated galleries within the MET have been transformed into expository dramaturgical spaces where mannequins enact ritualistic scenarios of seduction. As I will demonstrate, the curators and creative director of *Dangerous Liaisons* have imported theatrical techniques such as staging, lighting and the use of props to intensify the visual array of each exhibit situated in different but connected exhibitionary spaces. Theoretical aspects of lighting are examined though the lens of J. Michael Gillette’s formulations in his university textbook *Designing with Light: An Introduction to Stage Lighting* (2008). I found two other texts useful for understanding lighting in museums and the theatre, respectively: *Light For Art’s Sake: Lighting for Artworks and Museum Displays* (2007) by Christopher Cuttle, a professor of architectural technology who writes on the interaction of light with museum objects, and *Light Fantastic: The Art and Design of Stage Lighting* (2006) by Max Keller, who, as the title suggests, writes about and creates lighting designs for the stage, where he explores the relationship of light and colour to mood. Louis Erhardt addresses light as a communication medium in his book *The Right Light: A Study in Visual Communication* (1995) from which I gleaned my understanding of the communicative properties of light.

Secondly, I consider the presentation style and techniques deployed to bring this exhibition to fruition. In this section I suggest that the presentation style draws influence from painting, literature and the theatre of the period. Specifically, I propose that this exhibition is a narrative story partly told with special light effects; one in which chastity is metaphorically hunted, so to speak. I demonstrate that the exhibitionary story is, in fact, a pictorial text comprised of multiple chapters. In this
section I contend that the inclusion of specialized lighting effects and luminaires advance and even propel the narrative of each scene. I explore theatrical lighting techniques that have travelled into the contemporary museum environment from eighteenth-century painting and the theatre arts, to augment the exhibition’s narrative qualities through a discussion of changes in eighteenth-century theatrical lighting theory and technique. My analysis of the historical lighting conditions in eighteenth-century theatrical lighting history are informed by a range of sources from various disciplinary backgrounds, most importantly, Gösta Bergman’s posthumously published *Lighting in the Theatre* (1977).

Finally, I turn my attention to a close analysis and discussion of several key tableaux. Here, I will demonstrate the different ways in which light influences viewers interpretations and contributes to the narrative of *Dangerous Liaisons*. As for the exhibition’s narrativity, the history of art has a long tradition of paintings with a Christian didactic function that were meant to “tell” the gospels to an audience of illiterates. I will affirm that a biblical painting was as such a narrative, and therefore it can be compared to *Dangerous Liaisons*. The narrativity of these tableaux will be examined through the framework of Mieke Bal’s theory of narratology.

This chapter will discuss various aspects of illumination deployed in *Dangerous Liaisons*. I will argue throughout that light does indeed affect the viewer’s interpretation of contemporary museum exhibitions by conveying a mood, or a prevailing state of mind through the agency of light as a narrative and rhetorical devise. This chapter also engages with historicity of light, with the fact that its functions and meanings have changed over time, which needs to be taken into account when looking at how light functions in museums.
(a) The Connoisseur  (b) The Portrait

(c) The Levée  (d) The Music Lesson
(e) The Withdrawing Room  
(f) The Masked Beauty

(g) The Favorite  
(h) The Broken Vase
Period Rooms as Theatrical Stages

Period room displays are a type of exhibition where museum artefacts are drawn together across typological lines to recreate a decorated space for display purposes. Furniture, decorative arts, inlaid parquet floors, carved ceilings and wall coverings are introduced into a gallery where they are arranged to recreate a generic interior environment characteristic of a historical period. In the case of Dangerous Liaisons, an existing suite of period rooms was used for this temporary “costume” exhibition. These Baroquely-ornate eighteenth-century rooms with names derived from defining characteristics of their furniture, architectural elements and origin, include the De Tessé Room, the Cabris Room, the Paar Room, the Varengeville Room, the Bordeaux Room, and the Crillon Room, and house the MET’s renowned collection of European furniture, architectural elements and related decorative arts. The suite of rooms, named for Jayne and Charles Wrightsman who amassed one of the finest private collections in America of European decorative arts and interior architectural elements of the ancien régime, opened to the public individually between 1969 and 1977.

What makes this exhibition different from most period room displays is the inclusion of articulated mannequin figures attired in costumes of the period. “While clearly dummies, the figures were posed in naturalistic postures derived from period paintings and prints”, write Koda and Bolton (12). Within these dramatic vignettes figures with names such as “The Admirer”, “The Voyeur” and “The Connoisseur” allude to the visuality and the spectacle of the act of looking. “The Voluptuary”, “The Reckless Suitor” and “The Girl in Flight” collude to generate an interpretation of libidinous hunting and seduction. Generally, period rooms are denuded stagnant spaces, but in this exhibition the rooms come “alive” with scenes that “allude to the carefully cultivated appearances and accomplished behaviours in codified rituals that characterized the social activities of the French nobility of the period” (11). The exhibits show how people moved and acted within the confines of (social and physical) spaces and establish a discourse between objects. “To further emphasize the artifice and theatrical nature of the scenarios, [creative director Patrick] Kinmonth introduced footlights to the existing diffuse daylight and candlelight effects of the rooms resulting in an ‘up-lit’ effect of a Watteau painting” (11), such as in his Comédie Italienne from 1720 (fig. 2.2). ¹

¹ Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) is most known for paintings of theatrical subject matter such as clowns and fête galantes where his technique displays a theatrical uplight effect. In this painting, light is depicted emanating from below. Light from un-rendered footlights illuminates most strongly the torsos of the principal figures, creating an unnatural distribution of light and shadow.
In the exhibition, different sources of light combine in such a manner to create theatrically-inspired period rooms. Luminous atmospheres envelop the individual exhibits of *Dangerous Liaisons*. I understand these exhibition spaces as luminous environments where the effects of light actively interact with viewers’ interpretations of the exhibited artefacts, similar in function to theatrical productions. Viewers are completely immersed in a luminous space created by the exhibition’s authors that affects their sensorium. Within several of these luminous environments solar diurnal progression is simulated in the sun-excluded spaces of the museum with the aid of artificial electric light in order to give the impression of different times of day and night. In others, in contrast, candlelight effects are used to replicate the intensity and distribution pattern of the lighting of the period.

Architectural elements such as the carved panelling, doors, windows, ceilings and floors have been collected by the museum since its inception. Period rooms have been created from sometimes disparate elements to recreate “the way it was” during
the eighteenth century, within the framework of a contemporary exhibition. Traditionally, period rooms are exhibits which, in addition to furniture, contain only works of art such as paintings and sculpture. But Dangerous Liaisons is different. The curators, as if they were actual narrators of this exhibitionary story, have chosen to include “occupants” within the period rooms. They shift the focus from display of art and architectural elements to that of the interaction of decorative arts with costumed mannequins. The “population” of these enlivened spaces become actors in the story. The authors have transformed a display object “into [a] dramatic subject, a character in interaction with other characters” (Sandberg 70). By this rhetorical act, the period rooms have been transformed into theatrical stages where their costumed mannequin occupants become a spectacle for viewers.

Replete with posed figures these period rooms should, I maintain, be compared to stages where, in a theatrical sense, “actions” take place that tell a story. That is, in each gallery space a different aspect of the exhibitionary story is being told by the dynamic interaction of the arts and artefacts of the period rooms with the posed figures. We may say that viewers of this exhibition are thus turned into spectators at a theatrical performance. Rhetorically speaking, the period rooms become a series of *mises-en-scène*, the environments in which the exhibition takes place. The concept of *mise-en-scène*, as articulated by Bal in *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities*, is a conceptual metaphor borrowed from the theatre that “indicates the overall artistic activity whose results will shelter and foster the performance” (97). These period rooms “shelter” and “foster” the performance of the story by creating a visually-enriching theatrically illuminated environment. In “Limited Visibility” Maaike Bleeker makes a distinction between “theatrical” and “theatricality”. She invokes Barbara Freedman’s definition of theatre in her *Staging the Gaze* by writing that “[r]ather than define theatre as an unchanging identifiable object in the real, we might rethink it as a culturally conditioned mode of staging the construction of the real” (50). Bleeker argues that “[t]he theatrical apparatus as ‘vision machine’ stages ways of looking that respond to a particular culturally and historically specific spectator consciousness” and that “theatre and reality appear as parallel constructions appealing to similar ways of looking” (326-27). There is an uncertain pressure between similarity and difference which brings Freedman to define theatricality as:

that fractured reciprocity whereby beholder and beheld reverse positions in a way that renders a steady position of spectatorship impossible. Theatricality evokes an uncanny sense that the given to be seen has the power both to position us and displace us. (1)
In these theatricalised spaces viewers are separated by not only a physical barrier but also by an illumination devise. Footlights, or strips of lights arraigned in a linear form, demarcate one zone for spectators and another for the figures or actors. That is, they create a physical barrier for the spectators and a psychological barrier that contains the dramaturgical players. This separation of spaces was not always the case, as it is in today’s theatres and other types of exhibition spaces such as museums. During the eighteenth century private homes were also used to stage theatrical performances and many of these period rooms are examples of a type of environment that would be used for the staging of amateur productions at home.

Bergman tells us in *Lighting in the Theatre* that beginning in 1759 a well-known stage reform took place which fashioned “whole pictures [and] created atmosphere and illusion” (176). The acting area was slowly being separated from the spectator area which “furthered the way to a new, more mobile, expressionistic and pantomimic style of acting with the actors in some instances composed into ‘peintures vivantes’ (living pictures) as Voltaire wanted it […]” (175). These “living pictures” were to become known as *tableaux vivants*, a popular form of entertainment in French aristocratic circles of the period.2

**Tableaux Vivants**

*Dangerous Liaisons* consists of eleven exhibit groups presented as such *tableaux vivants*, or “living pictures”. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the French-derived term as “a representation of a personage, character, scene, incident, etc., or of a well-known painting or statue, by one person or a group of persons in suitable costumes and attitudes, silent and motionless”. That is, the actors strike a pose. The term describes a visually-striking group of figures carefully posed, arranged and, I want to stress, theatrically lit. These illuminated tableaux teach modern viewers not only about how people dressed but also how they acted in relation to their possessions and surroundings during the late eighteenth century. This approach marries the art forms of the stage with painting and exhibition design.

In the exhibition, modern *tableaux vivants* were created to re-enact scenes of everyday life of the French aristocracy during the eighteenth century. In *Dangerous Liaisons* figures appear as if they are posed as *tableaux vivants*. However, strictly speaking they are not actually a “living” tableau, as the mannequins are not alive. Rather, they are presented in the tableau style. The authors have invoked the “slice-of-life model” for their *mise-en-scène*, to borrow a phrase from Mark Sandberg in his *Living

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2 For a comprehensive study of *tableaux vivants* see K. Gram Holmström's *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770-1815*. 

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Pictures, Missing Persons: Mannequins, Museums, and Modernity (85). The parlour game of staging *tableaux vivants* in imitation of well-known paintings was a favourite pastime during the late eighteenth century, “conceived as a form of edifying sociable recreation among French aristocracy” (Grey 39) and spreading like wildfire in European aristocratic drawing rooms and in the theatre (Sandberg 209). As Holmström explains, “[t]he purpose of these tableaux was to visualize an historical or literary episode; imitation of the figure composition in some well-known painting was only a means to this end, not an end in itself” (223). Far from an isolated phenomenon, the *tableau vivant* is an act of prolonged or sustained stage direction that has clear links to the theatre, painting, and Neapolitan nativity cribs.

In the theatre, the technique is a representation of the action at some point in a play, created by the actors suddenly holding their positions or “freezing”, especially at a moment critical to the plot, or at the end of a scene or act; often as an applause eliciting devise. Holmström brings to light several possible origins of the genre when she writes that the first such presentation of a tableau vivant occurred in 1761 during a performance at the Comédie Italienne theatre in Paris of *Les Noces d’Arlequin*. The tableau occurred in the middle of the second act, “when the curtain was raised and the audience saw an exact copy of Greuze’s *L’Accordée de Village* […]” (218) (fig. 2.3).

Bergman explains that as early as 1760 the “art of *tableaux vivants*, now meant a transfer to a spatial, scenic picture of well-known paintings with groups arranged in harmonious attitudes and in the artificial illumination required by the imitation” (220). Writing about Jean-Baptiste Greuze’s (1705-1825) multi-figure genre paintings, Michael Fried describes the figures as “subjects in a narrative-dramatic mode whose ostensible verism of physiognomy, costume and milieu is accomplished by a psychological and emotional extremism almost without precedent in French painting” (10). A transfer had thus been conducted from painting technique to theatre performance, which included the practice of artful illumination.

An originating influence of *tableaux vivants* may have come from the devotional exercise of Christmas crib making, particularly in Naples, which reached its apotheosis between 1740 and 1770. “The aim of the cribs was to convey the message of the Gospel in modern terms, to make the spectators participate in the events portrayed. This was achieved by observing a meticulous realism in all the minor details and a perfect harmony in proportions and perspective” (Holmström 213).
In *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) specifically mentions the lighting of the cribs:

The whole room was nocturnal rather than dusky, and yet there was nothing unclear in the surroundings. The excellent thought that all light emanates from the Child had been carried out by the artist with the aid of an ingenious lighting mechanism which was covered by the foreground figures, who were in shadow illuminated only by flickering lights (Goethe qtd. in Bergman 221).

The makers of the cribs intended to create the illusion of life and movement; they were “dynamic” writes Holmström. In contradistinction to this, the tableaux presented on the stage and in residential drawing rooms “set out to create a piquant effect with living forms stiffened into immobility and they were static in character” (214; emphasis in text).

In the exhibition spaces of *Dangerous Liaisons* the *tableau vivant* was adapted as a vehicle to display period costumes in dramatic and reciprocal interaction with the
furnishings of the Wrightsman Galleries’ period rooms. From the tableau vivant as a parlour game it took the domestic setting and its inspiration for posing muslin-covered mannequins in “real-life” situations that demonstrate social mannerisms, etiquette and seductive rituals of the period. Further, the separation between the display and the exhibition refers viewers to the theatrical tradition of the tableau vivant and the dynamic element (the fact that instead of representing a frozen scene the displays aim to tell a story) which evokes the cribs. As in all these historical forms of the tableau vivant, light is central to the exhibition.

A difference between the exhibition tableau vivants and the historical forms concerns the fact that the MET figures do not re-enact an actual historic, pictorial or literary episode; they depict a generalized social discourse through the reciprocal interaction of mannequins. The figures in fact acquire, in Sandberg’s words, “an impression of life through the display’s relational structures (dead/alive, sleeping/walking, unconscious/conscious)” (91). Thus, in the exhibition, mannequins imitate eighteenth-century personages attired and posed in compositions similar to painted depictions and literary descriptions of the period, while at the same time drawing influence from the theatre of the same era. The art of display imitates “life” in a way that is analogous to both the art of painting and the theatre arts. Various media are at work in the exhibition that fuses theatre with “tableau” in the sense of painting. The raising of the curtain in Les Noces d’Arlequin is significant in this regard because in Dangerous Liaisons the figure in the opening tableau, or prologue (“The Connoisseur”, fig. 2.1a) ushers in the visitors and admits their entrance to the exhibition by raising his curtain out of their way allowing museum viewers to see the tableaux.

In this exhibition all of the figures are engaged with one another and not isolated as in storefront windows but appear as if they were “at home” in these spaces where acts of seduction take place viewed through a voyeuristic mode of looking. “Every amorous episode can be [...] endowed with a meaning: it is generated, develops, and dies [...] this is the love story” writes Roland Barthes in A Lover’s Discourse (7; emphasis in text). In this work Barthes compiles a list of what he calls “fragments” that are connected to the discourse of lovers, which Dangerous Liaisons graphically depicts. Amorousness and seduction are at the heart of each tableau or episode. With each successive scene the viewer is seduced into making meaning with the aid of the tableaux’s illumination. At the same time, while looking at this

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1 The use of this particular material for covering the mannequins encourages the viewer to compare it with the type of muslin used in the construction of the eighteenth-century undergarments on display.
exhibition, viewers’ libidinous desires are stimulated or satisfied by covert observation of the virtual socio-sexual activities of the figures.

In Reading Rembrandt, Bal describes voyeurism as “looking without being looked at” (123). In Dangerous Liaisons, depending on the viewers viewing position, “The Connoisseur” can be considered both a voyeur and a spectator, for the latter does not assume covert anonymity as does the former. Later, in a chapter entitled “Between Focalization and Voyeurism”, Bal discusses what she calls two “viewing attitudes” related to voyeurism, namely the gaze and the glance (142). On one hand, as opposed to the gaze,

the glance is the involved look where the viewer, aware of and bodily participating in the process of looking, interacts with the painting and does not need, therefore, to deny the work of representation, including its most material aspects like brush-, pen-, pencil work. The awareness of one’s own engagement in the act of looking entails the awareness that what one sees is a representation, not an objective reality, not the “real thing”. (142)

If we exchange the word “tableau” for the word “painting” in the passage above, the two can be seen as comparable. Therefore, viewers of the exhibition, through the mechanism of the glance, become aware that what they see is a representation and not the “real thing”. Bal argues that “the glance is the mode that emphasizes the viewer’s own position as viewer” (142; emphasis in text). Material aspects, in this case, can be said to include the illumination and staging of the tableaux, particularly the raised curtain.

On the other hand, Bal argues that “the gaze is the internalized social construction of vision” and that “[this construction is ‘looking back’ at the viewer in every act of looking” (143). She writes that the two viewing attitudes are not mutually exclusive and can be taken up at the same time while viewing the object. In the case of Dangerous Liaisons, the viewer may glance at, and gaze upon, the tableaux with a considerably different awareness of the exhibition. Before the insertion of the figures into the galleries, there were only architectural elements and furnishings in the spaces; one could say that the newly installed mannequins clothed these so-called naked spaces.
Another point I would like to make here is that the figures are depicted as being “absorbed”, in Michael Fried’s sense of the term. He defines this frame of mind as “the state or condition of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or […] absorbed in what he or she is doing, hearing, thinking, feeling” (10). In his book *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Fried argues that:

the depiction of figures involved in “absorptive” tasks or situations requiring concentration turns them inward on the depicted world; their apparent obliviousness of the painting’s beholder in turn frees up that observing position for a voyeuristic appreciation of the scene (Sandberg 87).

*Dangerous Liaisons’* tableaux are carefully staged exhibits which, I propose, include absorbed figures within extended theatrical scenes which facilitate a voyeuristic mode of looking at the exhibition (Bal 1991; Fried 1980).
A typical exponent of what Fried would call a painter of absorptive scenes is the eighteenth-century painter Joseph Wright of Derby (1734-97), famous for his exquisite rendering of artificial light in nocturnal scenes. For instance, his *Three Persons Viewing the Gladiator by Candlelight* (fig. 2.4) from 1765 depicts three men absorbed in the virtually voyeuristic act of inspecting a sculpture by the light of a single obscured flame. The men are depicted voyeuristically because they are presumably in the privacy of their own studio and are looking without being looked at. Furthermore, the men are glancing at the statue, admiring the material aspects of line and relief. Their body becomes involved by the way the illumination emanates from below and warms the surface of their skin, and, at the same time, lights the surface of the “skin” of the sculpture, thereby making a sensorial bodily connection between the artwork and the viewer. This painting can easily be considered as a typical expression of Enlightenment philosophy where three men are absorbed in the act of looking at art, or rather, comparing two works of art with one another. Upon closer viewing, we see that they are three men looking at another (naked) man from below, perhaps even at his penis. In her article regarding the sexual economies of vision in Wright’s work, Susan Siegfried writes:

The painting shows three men engaged in looking closely at the image of a nude male body, under lighting conditions that are very suggestive. The shielding of a phallic candle hides a symbol of potency, which casts its brightest light on youth, falling full on the statue’s genitals, and dims as it illuminates age, only to be countered by the motif of the old man’s spectacles, indicating that the force of his vision or understanding is in no way impaired. (50-51)

She suggests that “[t]he painting constitutes a textbook illustration of the kind of disinterested contemplation of art that defined aesthetic appreciation at the time and was felt to be appropriate for the apprehension of all art” (49). In this painting, light not only contributes pictorially to the cohesiveness of the artwork by binding the figures together but also rhetorically illuminates the three stages of human development. The light shining from below as depicted in the painting is not unlike the light deployed throughout the tableaux of *Dangerous Liaisons*. For example, in “The Connoisseur” (fig. 2.1a), the viewer upon passing the elevated mannequin, sees the figure also lit from below and from the same general perspective as two of Wright’s depicted voyeurs. In addition to the historical *tableaux vivants*, the curators no doubt have been inspired by the suggestive, meaningful operation of light in paintings like Wright’s when creating the exhibition.

For the curators Koda and Bolton, the manifestation of the *tableaux vivants* as theatrical stages are, as it turns out, only similar to Holmström’s definition which
includes live players in the visual narrative. However, the tableaux created for the
exhibition function also in relative similarity. They depict a generic historical scene and
not an actual event. Most significantly, directed artificial light shows itself to be an
important ingredient of both the early tableaux vivants and the ones on display at the
MET. This leads my attention to the narrative of the exhibition.

**Narrative Exhibition**

*Dangerous Liaisons* is comprised of eleven exhibits which actualize the dramatically
forceful tableau exhibition technique which, I suggest, is clearly narrative on several
rhetorical levels.” Bal, in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, writes that “[a]
narrative text is a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium,
such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof” (5; emphasis in
text). I consider the exhibition *Dangerous Liaisons* as a narrative text that utilizes the
medium of imagery. It is a story in images told through mannequins referring to
paintings and theatre. But, most of all, it is a story that is, in fact, “told” by the lighting
conditions that act as a medium. The imagery of the exhibition includes the lavish
costumes on the articulated mannequins, staged within luminous environments, within
the suite of eighteenth-century period rooms. The sequential ensemble of tableaux
takes us on a didactic visual journey and shows viewers a fictional day-in-the-life of
late-eighteenth-century French aristocrats engaged in their daily social endeavours.

In each tableau narrative messages such as chronology or a statement of
mood is transmitted by the carefully placed lighting effects and it is left up to the
viewer to imagine and interpret. These are also didactic displays which appear to
instruct viewers about the negotiation of eighteenth-century social protocols and how
the “inhabitants” interact within these spaces. “Inhabitants” is used here in a wide
sense, and includes the decorative arts, furniture, costumes, architectural elements
such as windows and particularly the lighting fixtures, or luminaires. In *Dangerous
Liaisons* the mannequins are installed actually making use of the furniture and other
decorative arts, not merely posed in front of them with the room acting as a backdrop.
For instance, in “The Portrait” (fig. 2.1b) one group of figures is seated, one
mannequin is on the floor with her dress splayed out around her and the male figure is
seated on an upholstered bench, as if carrying on a conversation. In the other group
of this tableau, the painter is “using” an easel and palette to render an image of the
sitter who is apparently lounging on a daybed.
Figure 2.5a. “Déclaration de la Grossesse” Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune. *Monument du Costume* [...]. 1789.
Figure 2.5b. “Le Souper fin” Jean-Michel Moreau le Jeune. *Monument du Costume [...].* 1789.
I consider each exhibit to be a chapter in this visual exhibitionary narrative. A story, defined by Bal in *Narratology* “[…] is a fabula that is presented in a certain manner. A fabula is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors” (5). Within the scope of this exhibition and the present study, I suggest that the story layer is not only comprised of the exhibits themselves, and written language texts that accompany images of the tableaux included in the exhibition catalogue, but also of the illumination used. In this case, the story layering is further complicated by the use of visual “texts” such as Jean Moreau’s (1741-1814) *Monument du Costume* (1784) on which the composition of several tableaux is based. This is particularly evident in the composition of “The Levée” (fig. 2.1c) corresponding to an engraving entitled the “Déclaration de la Grossesse” (fig. 2.5a) and “The Card Game” (fig. 2.1i) that is similar to “Le Souper fin” (fig. 2.5b).

In the latter case the resemblance in terms of setting is particularly striking. Figures in both scenes are seated around tables, in intimately dressed rooms primarily illuminated by candlelight. Both the engraving and tableau have the same number of figures who are attired similarly and poised in seductive poses. However, there are subtle differences such as the shape of the dining table and the form of the overhead chandelier. The main difference, however, is the fabula of the two scenes. In Moreau le Jeune’s engraving the occasion is a dinner party, and in the exhibition the event has been transformed into a setting for a game of cards.

It follows, then, that the fabula is the direct content of the visual manifestation of the story through a physical staging of the literary story, which, in the case of visual narratives, includes lighting. The fabula events are about social interactions and the negotiation of a ritualized personal space which includes the costumed mannequins, paintings, furniture and architectural elements all acting in concert as interlocutors. The sequential tableaux are the events of the story which are “the transition[s] from one state to another state” and form the chapters of the exhibitionary narrative text (Bal 1997: 5). Specifically, the tableaux of *Dangerous Liaisons* can be compared to the events in a libertine novel, a popular literary genre during the period under discussion here. Libertine writers like the Marquis de Sade (1740-1814), Denis Diderot (1713-84) and John Wilmot (1647-80) espoused ideals that in modern times are associated with sadomasochism, nihilism and free love. In eighteenth-century libertine novels, themes included anti-clericalism, anti-establishmentarianism, eroticism, deception, seduction and the corruption of innocence. In *Dangerous Liaisons*, each tableau expresses some aspect of libidinal life during the eighteenth century that could have easily found its way into libertine novels such as De Laefs’ *Les Liaisons*
dangeres (1782) or La Petite Maison (1758) by Jean-François de Bastide (1724-98), two acknowledged sources of the exhibition.

As Bal argues in “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting”, “[…] narratives exist as texts, printed and made accessible; at the same time, they are subjectively produced by writer and reader” (270). Moreover, “texts” are not limited to only pages in a book, but include what Bal calls visual texts, such as paintings, installations or entire exhibitions. These visual texts are capable of being true or false and are to be considered constative texts where “like affirmative sentences, they make a statement – describing situations and events, characters and objects, places and atmospheres” (270). This statement is not merely open to interpretation by the viewer, who subjectively produces meaning from the visual text presented but it is also performed, as on a theatrical stage. For example, with the expository act of curation, the tableaux become “printed”, that is installed, in the spaces of the Wrightsman Galleries, as opposed to impressed into paper. These visual texts are made accessible to the viewer by the act of exhibition. The narrative text becomes a visual text published in the form of an exhibition. Viewers subjectively interpret the visual statements made by the authors Koda and Bolton.

The staging and illumination of the tableaux make statements about the way courtship may have been conducted during the eighteenth century. For instance, in “The Music Lesson” (fig. 2.1d), the authors have placed a figure entitled “The Chaperone” peering from behind a screen to oversee the progress of the lesson (not shown). By placing “The Chaperone” in such a position, she leads the viewer to believe there is something going on that may be improper and requires surveillance. By deploying a light to increase the localized brightness on “The Chaperone”, the authors make a statement that she is important to the narrative. That is, the exhibition text, in my case the tableaux, are presented in such a way as to demonstrate to viewers not a mere display of clothes, but a drama set in motion by mannequin actors. This drama is a rich concoction of historically-based fiction supported by genuine costumes, props and set decorations of the period. However, this vision is “focused by a subjective point of view, an agent of vision whose view of the events will influence our interpretation of them” (Bal 1997: 270). I consider the mannequins to be agents of vision acting as rhetorical figures: the seducer and the seduced.

My reading of the exhibition as a text, a fictional text, or even a kind of novel “written” in chapters, is progressive and includes both a prologue entitled “The Connoisseur” (fig. 2.1a) and an epilogue: “The Shop: The Obstruction” (fig. 2.1k). The prologue visually and rhetorically points viewers to the action going on behind the curtain, on the “stage”, so to speak, and allows them to “enter” into the other
tableaux ahead. The so-called chapters take viewers on a visual journey from morning to late night which emphasizes different social aspects of eighteenth-century life. And in the epilogue “The Girl in Flight” is pursued (and perhaps apprehended) by “The Reckless Suitor”. In each tableau the mannequin “actors” are ascribed names relative to their function or dramaturgical part they play in the fabula, such as “The Voyeur” or “The Libertine” and the ones I enumerated above.

Unlike mannequins posed in a department store window, all of the figures are engaged in “talking” to one another, interacting socially and “using” the furnishings and other decorative arts included in each exhibit as more than a mere backdrop, but rather as a *mise-en-scène*. The figures are “at home” in the tableaux they stage. Furthermore, they are not limited to only dialogues with other figures in their own tableau but engage rhetorically with figures in other tableaux, similar to characters in a book that may never “meet” but still “speak” to one another just the same. They conduct dialogues, carry out secret intrigues, indeed, manage dangerous liaisons, but not necessarily with figures in their own tableau. The epilogue is the culmination of the fabula where the story of the seductive hunt comes to an intriguing end. The curtain which was raised in the prologue has now come down. Sheer scrim, acting as a translucent curtain, has been lowered into place and partially obscures the final outcome of the licentious hunt. We as viewers see figures in silhouette form, with “The Reckless Suitor” advancing on a girl who is attempting to take flight.

Viewers of this exhibition can switch viewing positions between their own and that of the seducer and seduced, or, in narratological terms, the focalizors. In *Narratology*, Bal defines focalization as “the relationship between the ‘vision,’ the agent that sees, and that which is seen” (146). In this case, viewers can “read” the exhibition from another subjective viewing position, as if from the position of the focalizing figures. The mannequin figures focus the viewer’s vision, so to speak. Bal ascribes the term focalization to this activity and focalizer to the subjective presence in narratives. She argues in her chapter “Between Focalization and Voyeurism” in *Reading Rembrandt* that the concept of focalization refers to “the narrative represented and its representation [...] by acting as the steering perspective of the events” (158). The focalizors “show” viewers a subjectivized visual array wherein they are the focus of the story, and, at the same time, focus our eyes through their vision of the action. Significantly, in a visual display, lighting takes on part of the task of organizing and assigning focalization. Although there are many differences between painting, theatre and museums, the impact of light on the way we as viewers perceive the represented story is one thread that runs through all of them.
Thus, in *Dangerous Liaisons*, the illumination is deployed in service of the narrative. That is, the illumination helps tell the story and focalize it through its effects. Through the effects of a theatricalised light, the deployment of strategically focused luminaires, the tableaux become lively and alive with activity. The addition of theatrical-style lighting into the exhibition galleries enhances the illusion of the reciprocating figures and propels the expository agency of the exhibitionary story. For example, in “The Withdrawing Room” (fig. 2.1e), a woman has fainted, allegedly from the heat and lack of oxygen created by the festively blazing chandeliers (which release copious amounts of noxious fumes) in the adjoining fictional ballroom, and is laying face-down on the parquet de Versailles floor with two other women about to attend to her. This dramatic action is highlighted by the localized pool of light that falls on “The Fainter” and the conical shafts of light in which “Friend 1” and “Friend 2” stand.

In order to argue this point, I distinguish three (rhetorical) levels regarding light and compare them to Bal’s narratological levels, which become the basis for my discussions of several key tableaux below. I will call the first rhetorical level the *technique level* which is compared to the narratological text level. On this level I place the luminaires and their physical position within the reinstalled period rooms in relation to the beholding viewer. For instance, the distribution, intensity or colour of the light used to illuminate aspects of the tableaux.

Light as tool is located on the second *agency level* which is compared to the narratological level of focalization. On this level I would like to suggest that light acts as a kind of agent, who makes choices about how and what is rendered visible, or conversely what remains unlit and obscured. As such, it not only influences the narrative through suggestion, or emphasis, or the degree to which the beam of light is narrowly or broadly focused, but it supports, or I prefer to say, propels the narrative to such a degree that it in fact assists in telling the story.

On the third rhetorical *elemental level*, light functions as a devise on the narratological fabula level. Various times of day are depicted in the fabula: from late-morning through to late-night and on to the wee early-morning hours. In *Dangerous Liaisons* light is deployed to develop the chronological perspective of the exhibition. Narrative chronology is created by the ways in which light is distributed within each tableau. Streaming sunlight through a window or the warm glow of candlelight orients viewers’ interpretation of a particular tableau. Visual chronology was also created

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4 For more on these controllable qualities of light see Gillette esp. chapter 1, “Controllable Qualities of Light”; Keller esp. chapter entitled “Choosing Lighting Angles” and; Cuttle (2003) esp. chapter 2, “Visible Characteristics of Lighting”.
presumably by using colour media in the luminaires: light-straw for sunlight and light-steel blue for moonlight, for instance.5

It is almost impossible to discuss one rhetorical level without touching upon another. These levels are not distinct but obviously interact and merge in various ways. For example, the technique level combines with the elemental level when artificial sunlight, projected through a false window, orients viewers’ perceptions of chronology, such as in “The Levée” (fig. 2.1c) and “The Music Lesson” (fig. 2.1d). And the agency level interacts with technique level when a decorative table candelabrum is “lit” and deployed to illuminate the colourfully ornate wooden inlays of an eighteenth-century side table, such as in “The Card Game” (fig. 2.1i).

Light in Painting and the Theatre Arts

Creators of tableaux vivants in the eighteenth century drew inspiration from paintings with depictions of historical events, and used the depicted lighting conditions as a basis for the illumination of their “living pictures”. As I mentioned earlier, beginning in the 1750s, stage architects and designers began a process of differentiating the auditorium from the stage which resulted in a new set of lighting conditions. In Lighting in the Theatre Bergman identifies “two early declarations of principle about differentiated stage lighting with reference to painting” (178). One was made by Count Francesco Algarotti (1712-64) in his Essai sur l’opéra (Italian edition 1755; French edition 1773) and the other is by the ballet-master Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810) in his Lettres sur la danse of 1760. “Algarotti dreamt of an art form, where all the elements: text, music, singers, scenery, [and] light co-operate to form a whole […]. Algarotti sees Rembrandt’s clair-obscure transported for the stage, the light and shade [….] that calls forth a sense of atmosphere” (178). A “sense of atmosphere” created by lighting effects can be observed in many eighteenth-century paintings, especially, as briefly mentioned above, works by Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) and Joseph Wright which are similar to lighting effects observable in the tableaux of Dangerous Liaisons.

Watteau is most notably known for paintings of theatrical subject matter such as clowns like Pierrot and fête galantes where his technique displays a theatrical uplight effect. We can see this theatrical technique returning in his Comédie Italienne (fig. 2.2), as a horizontal brightness, beginning approximately half way up from the bottom of the painting that can be observed on the costumes of the actors. This is most prominently seen on the white costume of the simple-minded valet and unlucky lover Pierrot.

5 See Keller for a full description of the physical and psychological associations of coloured light. For the complete range of colour media and effect filters available see the website of Lee Filters <www.leefilters.com>.
Watteau’s aim, according to Washington’s National Gallery of Art, was to evoke a mood, and not simply to describe a scene. He was evoking the theatrical mood of a comedy troupe gathered on stage, possibly at a curtain call, principally illuminated by footlights. The footlights, powered first by candles and then by oil lamps, would cast light up onto the actors and scenery, creating an unnatural distribution of light and shadow. Illumination from this direction can be observed in figure 2.7a which depicts a man lit from a frontal position. Here, the man is illuminated from below which creates a pronounced uplight effect. If we look at the exhibition tableaux, we see that a similar theatrical effect was achieved by the authors of the exhibition, particularly evident in “The Masked Beauty” (fig. 2.1f) and “The Late Supper” (fig. 2.1j).

![Image of Jean-Honoré Fragonard's The Bolt (Le Verrou), c. 1778, Musée du Louvre.](image)

Obviously, the authors of the exhibition also drew inspiration for their artistic illumination of the tableaux from eighteenth-century paintings. For instance, in “The Late Supper” (fig. 2.1j) a diagonal band of light is observable on the two figures as

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well as on the wall surface above and to the left of the female figure’s head. Her swooning pose and uplifted hand direct my eye to the part of the wall surface on which the brightness gradient appears. Narratively speaking, the light instructs me where to look, that is, at the part of the scene the authors have emphasized, indeed literally spotlighted. This is another instance of an up-lit effect created by footlights.

In Fragonard’s The Bolt (fig. 2.6), light foregrounds the bolt and a similar brightness gradient appears. However, this localized illumination is the result of a painterly beam of moonlight entering through an unseen window. In this painting, two lovers are depicted and framed by the shaft of moonlight. The light draws my “reading” eye first to the bolt on the door, the brightest area of the painting, then to the figures and finally to the apple and its heavy shadow cast on the table. A similar process, directed by light, takes place when I look at “The Late Supper”. My eye is first drawn to the brightly lit back of the seated male figure and then it is slowly drawn across the tableau and over the body of the female figure and finally to the patch of light on the wall to the left of the mirror. These two examples have shown that illumination in eighteenth-century paintings, as well as in the tableaux of Dangerous Liaisons, is not uniformly distributed and brightness intensity is varied on the basis of pictorial techniques that, as the Watteau picture demonstrates, attempt at recording a theatrical scene.

Differences in light and darkness, that is shadows, advance the narrative effects by creating an appropriate mood. Victor Stoichita writes in A Short History of the Shadow that the “shadow had been integrated into the area of a complex representation to suggest the third dimension – volume, relief, the body” (7). By rendering shadow in the tableaux of Dangerous Liaisons, creative director Kinmonth has not only integrated the bodily figures into the staged narrative but he has done so with the effects of the absence of light. Thus, darkness and light can be introduced as important elements to create the right atmosphere (Bergman 181). This creates an illusory, poetic style of lighting within the tableaux with a direct link to painting of the period. Shadow or “ombre”, in the eighteenth century was often used in extended senses, writes Michael Baxandall in Shadows and Enlightenment:

Even in the cool sort of lexicon the eighteenth-century Enlightenment used, established extended senses of Ombre include ghost, of course, and chimera; unreal appearance, diminished trace; secret, pretext, concealment; the domination of a destructive presence; threat. (144)

This quote gives insight into some ideas viewers could conjure up in their minds when contemplating various tableaux in the exhibition. The exhibition title explicitly picks up on the element of “threat” with the word “dangerous”. The shadows and areas of
low light intensity can also be seen as a symbol for a seductive presence on the theatrical stages of Dangerous Liaisons.

Many changes that took place in the theatre, particularly at the Comédie Française in Paris during the second half of the eighteenth century, are echoed in the production of Dangerous Liaisons. By 1760, the acting area or stage, “which now had become free, furthered the way to a new, more mobile, expressionistic and pantomimic style of acting with the actors in some instances composed into ‘peintures vivantes’ (living pictures) as Voltaire wanted it” (Bergman 175). The scenic elements were now interacting “to create a pre-romantic atmosphere and illusion, experienced by an audience with greater illusionary preparedness, in an auditorium separated from the stage” (175). The new conditions created by stage architects and scenery painters allowed the audience to see complete stage pictures, which created atmosphere and illusion.

In accordance with this new scenic environment, stage lighting also needed to function differently. It had to support and enhance the illusion of “historical and exotic milieus in atmospheric light” (177, emphasis in text). In the latter half of the eighteenth century, “[t]he new function of light was to help identify the spectators with the scenic environment” (177). I see these changes reflected in the MET’s exhibition. By the inclusion of footlights at the threshold between acting space and spectator space in almost every scene, the curators have formed a separation between the acting area behind the barrier in the period rooms, and the “auditorium” or the separated public walkway area in front of the barrier in which the spectators view the action of the fabula. These tableaux vivants utilize the separated acting/spectator space in order to create an atmosphere apart in which the lighting (footlights) enhances the illusion of this dramatically forceful exhibitionary technique.

As I mentioned before, footlights reverse natural daylight brightness gradients created by shadow and highlight patterns and this contributes greatly to the illusionism of the scene. This occurs because of the action of the patterns of highlight and shadow known as modelling. It leads the viewer’s attention by creating a mood, a psychological perception of the mind, created and augmented by the instilment therein by the staged luminous atmosphere. The effects of modelling light, it can be argued, can be compared with characters in a narrative. Consequently, these effects lie on the rhetorical agency level, where they influence spatial aspects and perceptions of the viewer. In the image of “The Connoisseur” the effects of modelling are evident on the figure and on the curtain. In the prologue that is staged at the entrance to the Wrightsman Galleries visitors to the exhibition encounter this figure first. The effects of modelling expose the surface attributes of his opulent garments. The pile of the
velvet has a matte appearance compared to the highly reflective silk embroidery on his waistcoat and along the perimeter of his suit jacket. The embroidery has depth, and this fact is brought to the viewer’s attention by the effects of modelling light.

![Figure 2.7a-b. The modelling effect of light: (a) face lit from beneath; (b) face lit from above (Gillette 9).](image)

Indeed, what we see in “The Connoisseur” is a modelling of light that gives volume to the scene or, as Gillette says: “[l]ight can be thought of as a plastic sculptural medium that is used to reveal form through the creation of a pattern of highlight and shadow” (8). The relief forms of the embroidery and, moreover, the cut and proportions of the suit are revealed by the creation of shadows, highlights and brightness gradients. In our childhood most of us have placed a flashlight under our chins to impersonate a monster by shining the light from below up onto our faces. Figure 2.7a-b shows two faces of the same man illuminated differently.

Lighting the face from beneath [….] reverses the normal and expected patterns of highlight and shadow [….] areas of the face that are normally shaded – the bottom of the nose, the eyebrows, below the chin – are highlighted, while areas
that are usually highlighted – the cheekbones, bridge of the nose, and brow – are shaded (Gillette 9-10).

Not only does this effect the areas of the face I selectively focus on, but it also affects my perception of the mood of the image. As Keller has it, “[l]ighting from below […] creates unrealistic, fantastic moods that are slightly exaggerated” (173). This happens in “The Withdrawing Room” (fig. 2.1e) where a “fantastic” mood has clearly been created.

Thus, the visual moods of the tableaux are altered to a great extent by this modelling effect. Gillette argues that “dramatic changes in meaning can be affected by simply changing or reversing the normal patterns of highlight and shade” (10). Supplementing this idea, I would like to suggest that the meaning of the tableaux is not just affected but even conveyed through a variation in lighting patterns. To some extent this technique is deployed in all of the tableaux of Dangerous Liaisons. The use of footlights adds a theatrical dimension to the tableaux, while still retaining a sense of realism requisite for this type of integrated ethnographic exhibition. As a result of the illumination, a message is conveyed that implies something, creates a mood and encourages visitors to engage with the narrative of the tableaux. The instilment of a disposition in the mind of a viewer facilitated by a voyeuristic mode of viewing propels the narrative momentum. Light adds to the illusion of the visual text by enhancing the exhibition’s narrative and visual attributes. It presents the viewer with a tool that can be focused to highlight different aspects of the exhibitionary story. For example in “The Withdrawing Room” (fig. 2.1e), there are, as I mentioned previously, pools of light illuminating both single figures and groups. These pools have a distributive rhythm and are therefore on the technique level of the narrative rhetoric. In some areas of the tableau they take the form of a solitary circular brightness, in others, luminaires are used in such a way that smaller pools merge to form larger pools to illuminate the figure groups.

Opening the story by pulling back the curtain, “The Connoisseur” allows us (and “himself”) to see the story also cognitively. The motif of drawing back or raising the curtain is familiar. Since Greek antiquity the veiling curtain behind which the goddess Athena sat on the Acropolis has been used to hide or obscure objects and people and even deities from the view of prying eyes (Smith 358-59). Moreover, it is the act of drawing aside the curtain in an act of formal revelation that is important here. Within the scope of this study it is significant that the act of unveiling is also a metaphor for enlightenment and the gaining of knowledge. A classical example is the inventor Archimedes (fig. 2.8), who is shown in an engraving uncovering a waterwheel.
and other inventions depicted in a landscape. He wants us to see what he has made and what lies ahead.

Figure 2.8. Anonymous engraver. *Archimedes*. Inventor drawing back the curtain to reveal various mechanical devices such as waterwheels and windmills, and especially the machinery inside them.  

In Watteau’s painting of the *Comédie Italienne* (fig. 2.2) we saw how the curtain being pulled aside reveals the actors. In “The Connoisseur” the gesturing mannequin beckons visitors to enter the exhibit, and in so doing, announces the “play” that this exhibition purports to “enact”. We enter the exhibition through this figure and he is a figuration of the viewer. He is “acting” in a voyeuristic and theatrical manner as are the viewers of this exhibition. He desires to see, as do we, but also to show. With this unveiling act the “The Connoisseur” permits us to see what is behind the curtain and the simple fact that something is covered-up or veiled, piques our curiosity. Along with us, the figure is expressing interest in what lies behind the curtain. This can be seen in his posture and in the way his head is oriented. While passing the usher, we as

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viewers now understand that this exhibition is to be viewed as a late-eighteenth-century stage production with all the trimmings such as sceneries, props, actors and lights. We are instructed from the outset on how and where to look.

Light in this tableau not only illuminates the scene in a theatrical manner but also acts as what Bergman calls a “binding agent” (11). It facilitates cohesiveness between the various scenic elements of the tableaux. On the level of technique, a focused light illuminates the figure and makes shadows possible. The figure is illuminated by strong spotlights that create sharp-edged shadows on the curtain and the wooden box on which he stands. Based on a consideration of the shadow patterns in the image, we see that the primary light source enters this tableau from stage-left, at a low angle and travels upward giving the scene an up-lit effect similar to Watteau’s painting and the engraving of Archimedes. Rhetorically speaking, light on the agency level makes connections between the scenic elements and the figure. The same light that makes the figure visible also strikes both the curtain and the wooden box. It thus creates a wholeness from disparate parts.

Light as agent further “conveys a lulling suggestion of illusory reality, the atmospheric light that helps the spectator to identify himself with the parts and settings of the stage” (13). Light acting in such a manner facilitates the figuration of the viewer. One way in which light propels the exhibitionary narrative is by facilitating a change of viewing positions. Viewers can enter into the narrative “through” “The Connoisseur”. The viewer can, by proxy, see him or herself through his eyes. Viewers’ interpretations of the tableau are influenced by the luminous atmosphere created by the active agency of light which binds the seen, seer and scene together. We now see what he sees, focalized from his point of view. What we now also see is the subjectivity of his looking, his libidinous desires percolate to the surface where viewers can grasp and understand the seductive game of the hunt for temporal and physical satisfaction that is unfolding in front of their eyes.

As I suggested above, the illumination of the tableaux propels the exhibitionary narrative. One way light does this is by transmitting messages about chronology on the elemental level. In “The Levée: The Assiduous Admire” (fig. 2.1c) replicated sunlight dominates the scene and is the key light. Narratively speaking, light entering through the “windows” in the background not only transmits the message to the visitors that the scene is set during daylight hours, but it also contributes to the mood of the scene by creating a relatively bright “sun-filled” atmosphere that creates a cheery mood inside the vignette with which viewers can associate. In this mid-morning dressing scene the admirer has been granted permission to attend the woman’s morning ritual. Here she is preparing, and being prepared for the events of
the day. The *mise-en-scène* depicts a morning toilette that “merged private ritual with public performance” (Koda and Bolton 35).

This performance is augmented by the distribution of light and sharp-edged shadows in the tableau because the patterns of highlight and shade are indicative of natural sunlight, despite the fact that this scene takes place within the sun-excluded space of an exhibition gallery. Every light has been placed intentionally to contribute to the performance of the story in one way or another. Viewers go through several stages of daylight illumination conditions which were created by the artifice of the authors. On the elemental and agency levels, light acts to produce the atmospherical mood of a bright sunny morning. Light on the agency level is vibrant and cheery; on the elemental level it signifies the early time of day. A mental image of an unseen morning sun is conveyed by the copious quantity of light entering through the blind-window apertures, but also by the highly contrasting and defined shadow patterns that appear on the figures. The light reflected from the floor is diffused and appears as if it is emanating from window openings.

Bright streaming sunlight is often indicative of a positively stimulating “look” to a theatrical scene. I equate the light in this scene to a golden-yellowish hue which imitates the colour of sunlight. “As such, gold tends to be toneless and thus soulless, but its density and magnificent radiance give it a festive, majestic quality. Like the sun, gold [colour] expresses the highest life force, in spiritual terms. It also expresses power and dignity” (Keller 41). With the narrative agency that sunlight lends to this tableau, sunlight acts metonymically by visually underscoring the power relations between the figures in the tableau. The female figure can be interpreted as having the powerful upper hand in this scene because she has admitted the male figure into her private space. It can even be argued that she is interviewing him in a preliminary courtship ritual. The replicated sunlight falls especially strongly on the female figure’s head and the intense sunlight-effect brings attention to the hairdresser who can be observed “crowning” her with bejewelled hair ornaments. In this exhibit, or rather, in this chapter of the exhibitionary story, light not only transmits messages about chronology and time of day, but it also transmits interpretable messages about feelings, moods and social relations.

As early as 1760, Algarotti was criticizing the static and evenly distributed stage lighting of the previous period where

> [t]he elements are poorly illuminated and always with insensitive shades, which do not make them stand out. Still, if they learnt the art of distributing the light, if it were concentrated *en masse* on some parts of the stage, excluding others,
Illuminating Narrative

wouldn’t it then transpose to the stage the power and vivacity of the clair obscure […] (Algarotti qtd. in Bergman 178; emphasis in text).

I suggest that the illuminations of Dangerous Liaisons echo a reaction to an even, unaccentuated style of lighting. This is dramatically evident in “The Card Game” (fig. 2.1i) where the luminous landscape is populated by pools of light amongst the shadows. The symbolic drama and excitement associated with gambling lie metonymically in these shadowy interstices. In “The Card Game” the unevenly distributed light punctuates or illuminates some areas more brightly than others. A diminutive table-top lamp, gilded girandoles and a central chandelier distribute light disproportionately across the visual array. In this small and intimate setting the distribution of light encourages intimacy by creating a dim candlelit luminous environment within which amorous encounters can be cultivated. And the secret act of cheating can also be veiled by the agency of light. This subdued environment transmits the message to viewers that more than just one unseen act can take place in the shadows of this lush salon.

In Bastide’s novella, La Petite Maison, the salon was fitted with mechanical conveyances such as dumbwaiters, tables machinées and tables volants. Through their negation of the presence of servants, they became participants that assisted in the seduction of its occupants. They are “[u]sed as an instrument of seduction”, writes Koda and Bolton (99). Apropos of this, Bastide writes that “Suddenly, the table dropped down into the kitchen in the cellar, and from above, a new table descended to take its place” (99). The conveyances were described in the Mercure de France as follows:

When the guests enter the room, not a single trace of the table would be visible; they see only a very open parquet with an ornamental rose at the center. At the slightest signal, the petals withdraw under the parquet and the served table springs up, accompanied by four dumbwaiters which rise through four openings at the same time.\(^8\)

Imagine the luminescent sight of the table set with glittering glasses and shiny flatware ascending through the floor already ablaze with fiery candlelight. The sight would surely be seductive.

The candlelight enhances the illusion of the tableau and rhetorically advances the seducer’s plans. In all the scenes, wall-mounted girandoles and central chandeliers create a visually stimulating and varied distribution of light and shadow patterns.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Quoted in Claude Bonnet. Écrits gastronomiques. Paris: 1978, 64-65. See also El-Khoury, n3, p. 112.

\(^9\) See Chapter 4 of the present study for a full explanation of kinds of shadows and the shadow patterns they create.
These luminaires function on several rhetorical levels. On the technique level they provide accent illumination for the vignette. On this rhetorical level, designers have used theatrical candles which replicate the relative intensity and other visual qualities such as the colour of wax or tallow candles to replicate how a room actually in use during the eighteenth century might have looked illuminated by candlelight.\(^\text{10}\)

The addition of footlights has skewed the scene visually by adding a light from an improbable position. This augmentation adds to the theatricality – breaching the illusion of seeing figures in their “homes” – and transmits a message that this scene is not to be interpreted as being “realistic”; it is a reconstruction and a theatrical effect, and the illumination tells us so. On the agency level, the variations in intensity instruct us where to look. “The Abbé” is cheating and he is more brightly illuminated than other figures. Moreover, the figures and their costumes are more brightly lit than other elements such as the walls and floor. The almost-twinkling brilliance of candlelight draws the viewer’s attention to the lighting fixtures; whereas, if they were unlit, they would not be so prominent, visually engaging or narratively telling.

The skewing of the scene and the highlighting of figures enriches the visual spectacle by reversing or altering the viewer’s perception of “normal” shadow and highlight patterns. Placing a light below or spotlighting a figure changes the viewer’s psychological interpretation of the scene and is a further example of light acting as narrator and agent. The deployment of simulated moonlight seen through the windows lies rhetorically on both the agency and elemental levels. The presence of the light beyond the window frame not only shows us that the scene is set during night time but that there is a so-called bigger world “out there” from where the moonlight emanates. I would argue that the moonlight rhetorically frames the tableau in this way. Moonlight often acts differently than modelling; it tells time and is consequently located rhetorically on the elemental level, where time and chronology reside. However, if the moonlight is understood as a mood setting effect, then it is located on the agency level.

Because this exhibition is just as much about architecture and the decorative arts as it is about costumes, the designers have highlighted particular decorative objects to entice viewers to look at more than just the costumes. The use of glowing simulated candles reveals object attributes that might otherwise have gone unobserved. The candles not only showcase the gold gilding applied to the chandelier and girandoles, but light from these luminaires also reveals visual attributes of the

\(^\text{10}\) See O’Dea’s *The Social History of Lighting*, especially the chapters “Light for the Home” and “The Materials of Light: Wax and Tallow”, for a comprehensive study of the properties of candlelight.
costumes, the parquet floor and the carved panelling. In “The Withdrawing Room: A Helpful Valet” (fig. 2.1e) pools of light populate the floor, leaving dark shadows in their wake. On the level of light as agent, light is acting to selectively focus cognitive attention onto particular elements of the tableau.

Directing the audience’s attention with light to a specific area of an exhibit entices our eyes to look selectively at different elements such as the costumed figures, furniture and architectural embellishments. In so doing, other areas of the tableau become less brightly lit and of secondary importance. This creates what Cuttle calls an “illumination hierarchy” (2003: 66) whereby the perception and subsequent interpretation of object attributes is significantly affected. A visual hierarchy was created in “The Withdrawing Room” that facilitates and improves viewer’s interpretative abilities by punctuating the narrative with light. Variable intensities of luminance within the tableau guide interpretations of the narrative in continuous dialogue with its viewers by constantly challenging our eyes to move about and search out the brighter highlighted areas of the tableau while allowing our eyes enough light to inspect the artefacts. But we are also intrigued by darkness, drawn to try and make out what remains hidden, in for example, “The Shop: The Obstruction” (fig. 2.1k). By selectively illuminating different aspects of a display, the authors create with light and darkness, writing the so called sentences of the exhibitionary narrative.

In “The Shop: The Obstruction” light works differently from the previous scenes in order to create a silhouette. On the level of technique, the silhouette effect produces a view of an object or scene, usually in black, consisting of a profile outline and a featureless interior. In this tableau the figures are seen nearly in silhouette against a brightly illuminated scenic backdrop. On the rhetorical level of agency this effect obscures our vision of the events. However, judging by the poses of the figures, it is clear that “The Girl in Flight” is attempting to extricate herself from the clutches of “The Reckless Suitor”. After the well-known stage reform of 1759 when the banquettes were removed from the stage of the Comédie Française in Paris, the stage lighting evolved to make certain things (i.e. actors, scenery), stand out in relation to other things in their immediate vicinity. Not only does the silhouette effect of the tableau add depth to the scene, but it visually separates the figures from the background.

This scene does not include props such as furniture; it does however employ another theatrical devise called a scrim, which is used in the theatre to create special effects. It is a lightweight translucent material often used for making curtains and when lit from the front will appear opaque. However, when lit from behind, such as in “The Shop” it works, in conjunction with light, to obscure details of the scene from
the viewer by blurring the visual array. With the scrim lowered into place, as if an actual theatrical curtain, the mannequins behind it become shadowy figures obscured by its translucency. However, at the same time their narrative “actions” are exposed by the silhouette effect of their darkened profiles seen against the background. This again demonstrates how light works both to obscure and to reveal.

On the basis of these analyses, I conclude that illuminations of all of the tableaux are not uniform. The lighting is differentiated and unevenly distributed across the visual scene, and many parts of the fabula (a figure, an object or grouping) are highlighted – or “spotlighted” as it were – through the use of lighting effects similar to those employed in painting and the theatre. That is, lighter and darker areas have been created within many tableaux in order to motivate the attention of the viewing public and to convey a feeling or accentuate an action. Light is often used to transmit messages through the use of distribution, intensity and colour by way of its controllable qualities, its effects on objects and the way it affects viewers. It creates and conveys a mood that can be manipulated by designers. “[L]ighting design is a process and a craft for creating an artistic result” (Gillette 4). I suggest that the luminous atmospheres of Dangerous Liaisons are just such a result of this artistic process where messages are sent to viewers. Lighting theories and techniques first developed in the eighteenth century have been thus transferred to a twenty-first-century museum setting by the artifice of curators acting as narrators. Most importantly, the narratology of light I have developed in this chapter allows an analysis of the narrativity of illumination itself. This formal description of light can be usefully applied to other exhibitions where light plays a leading role.