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RUPERT GADERER 

Strategies of Tension

A. Boissier's *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (1797)

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ABSTRACT: The article analyses A. Boissier's image *Les Amants électrisés par l'amour* in view of the larger question of how something is able to arouse interest on first sight, but also in repeat encounters. Highlighting the engraving's didactic iconography, the article shows how it revolves around the solution to a riddle and uses a typical design of the Enlightenment to show the uncovering of a deception. As such, the engraving is part of a long tradition of showing (supposedly) supernatural events, more specifically the tradition of *Magia naturalis*. At the same time, the image contains dissonances and can be seen to simulate suspense through dichotomies that can be identified as antagonistic historical concepts. The article furthermore discusses the amalgamation of love and electricity in contemporary discourses and addresses the temporal dimension of the engraving, which constructs itself out of an absence, out of something yet unseen.

KEYWORDS: tension; electricity; love; history of science; enlightenment

STRATEGIES OF TENSION

A. Boissier's *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (1797)

Rupert Gaderer

Amor vincit omnia

A little-known engraving by A. Boissier *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (1797) depicts several kinds of tension: tension functions as the subject of the image, its narrative strategy, and the key to its epistemic operation.¹ This engraving, one of countless images of the allegory of love from the late eighteenth century, exemplifies the complexity of tension and the many ways it can be staged. There is very little historical information about the artist; attributions of other works are highly uncertain, and his engraving has never been the subject of wider scholarly analysis.²

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- 1 Throughout this article, I shall use the term 'tension' in the sense of the German word 'Spannung', which means both tension and suspense. For literary and media-related analyses of the phenomenon of 'Spannung' cf. Katja Mellmann, 'Vorschlag zu einer emotionspsychologischen Bestimmung von Spannung', in *Im Rücken der Kulturen*, ed. by Karl Eibl, Katja Mellmann, and Rüdiger Zymner (Paderborn: Mentis, 2007), pp. 241-68; Thomas Anz, 'Spannung durch Trennung: Über die literarische Stimulation von Unlust und Lust', in *Trennungen*, ed. by Johannes Cremerius and others, *Freiburger literaturpsychologische Gespräche* 13 (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1994), pp. 17-33; *Suspense: Conceptualizations, Theoretical Analyses and Empirical Explorations*, ed. by Peter Vorderer, Hans J. Wulff, and Mike Friedrichsen (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996).
 - 2 Cf. the short commentary on Boissier's engraving by Jean-Paul Bouillon, 'Liste des amants électrisés par l'amour', in *Aimer en France 1780-1800: Cent pièces tirées du Cabinet des Estampes de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, ed. by Jean-Paul Bouillon, Antoinette Ehrhard, and Michel Melot (Clermont-Ferrand: Bibliothèque municipale et interuniversitaire, 1977), pp. 68-69 (p. 69) and also the short expositions by Michel Delon, 'Die Elektrizität des Theaters: Theorie des Schauspiels und Elektrizitätsmetapher am Ende der Aufklärung', in *Mozart: Experiment Aufklärung im Wien des ausgehenden 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Herbert Lachmayer (Ostfildern: Hantje Cantz, 2006), pp. 29-39 (pp. 37-38).



Fig. 1. A. Boissier: *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (1797), engraving (*Gravure à l'eau-forte et au pointillé*), inscription 'A Paris chez Boissier, Peintre, rue des Fossés, M. le Prince n° 95 Faubourg St Germain', 27.3 x 58.2 cm, in *Aimer en France 1780-1800*, ed. by Bouillon, Ehrhard, and Melot, fig. 76.

In its composition the image (Fig. 1) is divided into two interdependent domains. In the very centre there is a statue of a naked youth with wings, who is drawing his bow in the act of shooting an arrow. Cupid (Gr. Eros), the god of love, aims his arrow at an approaching pair of lovers. A further allusion to the erotically-charged nature of the situation is provided by a second statue depicted in the background. Half-naked and covering her virtue with a cloth, Venus (Gr. Aphrodite) in her typical form as a *Venus Pudica* looks down at the scene. A nymph with her drapery characteristically blowing in the breeze – the *brise imaginaire* of Warburg's *Ninfia*³ – is accompanying the lovers, almost urging them forward while dancing and playing an ancient Greek musical instrument, the double reed (Gr. Aulos). Two lovers in mutual embrace approach the statue of Cupid. The male figure points with his outstretched left forefinger in the direction of the arrow of the ancient matchmaker.

3 Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ninfa Moderna: Über den Fall des Faltenwurfs* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2006), pp. 11-29.

Behind the statue of Cupid there lies a hidden chamber, which is bounded by three visible walls, lit by an oil lamp and accessible only by a ladder. This isolated domain itself portrays the process of generating tension, more precisely electrical tension: an experimenter touches a rotating glass vessel with his left hand while his assistant turns the wheel of one of the most important devices for generating electrostatics in the eighteenth century. By means of an electrostatic generator such as the one Boissier reconstructs in his illustration, it was possible to produce a high electrical voltage (at a low current) due to the separation of electrical charges. Beside this electrical generator there are also four Leydener (or Kleistian) jars present on the table, three of which are connected to one another in the engraving. This electrical device was a glass bottle coated with metal foil on the outside and filled with water inside. Through this medium electricity could be collected and stored to be discharged later. Next to the electrostatic generator, the Leydener jar was one of the prime advancements of the early science of electricity in the eighteenth century. The right side of the room is thus defined by technical apparatuses and distanced from the mythological scene on the left hand side.

I. THE LACK OF INFORMATION

These topological reflections on the technical and mythological domains make it possible to identify an initial moment of tension, which becomes evident through the didactic iconography of the engraving, namely the binary opposition of knowledge and ignorance. The focal point, the horizontal and vertical centre of the image, circles over the solution to a riddle and uses typical visual strategies of the Enlightenment to show the uncovering of a deception, the pre-enlightened state of two human beings and the bad faith of two charlatans. The domain of the erotic situation is bound to the domain of the hidden technology: unbeknown to the lovers, an electrical cable runs from Cupid's quiver through a hidden cavity in the wall and connects the two spaces with each other. The separating wall and the connecting cable suggest that the image is dealing with a tension due to the lovers' lack of knowledge. Like so many illustrations from the era of the Enlightenment, the engraving deals with the ignorance of the pre-enlightened lovers and the knowledge of the enlightened observers. With the knowledge of the darkened secret

chamber, the logic behind the erotic scene is explained as the result of electrical activity: as the assistant continues to crank up the electrostatic generator, an electrical charge is collected by a conductor situated above the glass sphere. This charge is passed through an electrical cable which is coiled around a massive insulated metal tube, to a pair of discharging tongs. At the end of the cable the experimenter uses the tongs in his right hand to complete an electrical circuit between the statue and the electrostatic generator. By opening and closing the connection he controls and presides over the charging and discharging of the Cupid statue. Should the man touch the statue's arrow with his forefinger, then the electricity would be discharged and the lovers would both suffer an electric shock.

II. ELECTRICAL ENCHANTMENT AND DEMYSTIFICATION AROUND 1800

The depicted scene draws on demonstrations in the field of electrical experiments from the eighteenth century, such as those described by Joseph Priestley in *The History and Present State of Electricity: With Original Experiments* (1767) as deceitful shenanigans and classified more specifically as 'entertaining experiments'.⁴ These intensely theatrical demonstrations of electro-technical knowledge, which used modern gadgets and electrified bodies as their centrepieces, were performed before large audiences in the salons and funfairs of Paris around 1800. At the *Boulevard du Temple*, in the wooden arcades of the Palais Royal, in Sieur Pelletier's *cabinet de mécanique, physique et hydraulique* or in Charles Rabiqueau's *cabinet de physique* on *Rue Dauphine* and later in the Hôtel Carignan on *Rue Bailleul* physical phenomena were showcased by experimenters using electrostatic generators or Leydener Jars.⁵ But also at the *Pavillon de l'échiquier* and later at a former abbey at the *Place Vendôme*, Etienne-Gaspard Robert (known as Robertson)

4 Joseph Priestley, *The History and Present State of Electricity: With Original Experiments*, 2 vols, 2nd edn (London: C. Bathurst, 1775), II, pp. 134-64.

5 Barbara Maria Stafford, *Kunstvolle Wissenschaft: Aufklärung, Unterhaltung und der Niedergang der visuellen Bildung* (Amsterdam: Verlag der Kunst, 1998), pp. 201-06.

displayed electro-technical experiments to the Parisian crowds for an admission fee of three to six pounds.⁶

With regard to Boissier's engraving, it is interesting to note that in 1800 the boundary between sorcery and experimental science was rather unclearly drawn in many respects. There was an underlying tension between experimenters and phantasmagorists, both of whom conducted performances using the same technical apparatuses and experimental procedures. While experimenters such as Priestley enlightened their *unenlightened* audiences about electrical phenomena, phantasmagorists never gave away their tricks and were therefore deemed to be charlatans and deceivers, the enemies of the Enlightenment. Magicians such as Paul Phylidor (also Philidor or Paul de Philipsthal), Jacob Meyer (alias Jacob Philadelphia) or Johann Georg Schröpfer (also Schrepfer) used electrostatic generators and Leydener jars to create supernatural events across Europe: Paris, Berlin, St. Petersburg, Prague, Leipzig, London, Stockholm and Vienna. After they were revealed to be charlatans they were frequently expelled from the cities.⁷

Boissier's engraving can be identified as part of a long tradition of exposing these supposedly supernatural events, more specifically as part of the tradition of *Magia naturalis*, which included treatises explaining mysterious occurrences through technological knowledge. Enlightenment treatises from around 1800 frequently imparted chemical, optical, mechanical and also electro-technical knowledge to laypeople, so that they would be able to recognize the deceitful intentions of charlatans.⁸

6 Etienne-Gaspard Robertson, *Mémoires récréatifs, scientifiques et anecdotiques d'un physicien-aéronaute*, ed. by Philippe Blon (Langres: Café Clima Éditeur, 1985), p. 58.

7 Thus for example the banishment of the phantasmagorist Paul Phylidor from Berlin in 1789. Cf. J. v. Schwarzkopf, 'Erzählung einer neulichen Geisterzitation in Berlin: Von einem Augenzeugen', *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 28 (1789), pp. 474-84 and E.F.C. Freiherr v. d. Recke, 'Nachricht von der Philidorschen Geisterbeschwörung', *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 28 (1789), pp. 456-73.

8 Cf. Christlieb Benedict Funk, *Natürliche Magie oder Erklärung verschiedner Wahrsager- und Natürlicher Zauberkünste* (1783); Samuel Christoph Wagener, *Die Gespenster: Kurze Erzählungen aus dem Reiche der Wahrheit* (1797-1802), Johann Wilhelm Andreas Kosmann, *Des Herrn Ritters Pinetti de Merci physikalische Belustigungen oder Erklärung der sämtlichen in Berlin angestellten Kunststücke desselben* (1796); and Johann Christian Wiegleb and Gottfried Erich Rosenthal, *Unterricht in der natürlichen Magie, oder zu allerhand belustigenden und nützlichen Kunststücken* (1779-1805).

Boissier's visual exposé and explication of an electro-technical sleight of hand operates within a threshold area that was essential for these attempts at demystification. The didactical iconography of the engraving visualizes the tensions of a paradigm shift, displaying for the observer the transformation from ignorance to knowledge. Hidden technologies are discovered, transforming divinely ordained fate into nothing more than a covertly administered electric shock.⁹

If the invisible becomes visible, if the divine power of Venus and Cupid is exposed to the observer as electricity and Boissier's engraving illustrates the deciphering and solving of a riddle, then the tension ought actually to be resolved. However, the image makes uncertainty evident and in this way achieves tension. It is not the unsolved riddle which is important, but the uncertainty surrounding the solution of the riddle which generates the potential for tension in the engraving. Tension grows out of the partial awareness of the lovers: their ignorance of the hidden chamber behind the wooden wall, their unawareness of the impending electric shock, but their knowledge that an event is about to occur. The observers, on the other hand, are informed about the layout of the scene: they have knowledge of both spaces, whereas the lovers only know of their imminent encounter with Cupid. The composition of the image suggests that the onlookers know more than the two lovers. The viewers are granted a privileged position in the hierarchy of knowledge.

9 Writers, especially in Germany, also applied themselves to the demystification of such obscure electrical occurrences: Friedrich Schiller, in his Thalia fragment *Der Geisterseher: Aus den Memoires des Grafen von O*** (1789) (*The Ghost Seer*), allowed a Sicilian to electrify a gathering of people during a demonstration of phantasmagoria, using an electrostatic generator hidden under the floorboards, and E.T.A. Hoffman's Meister Abraham, in *Lebens-Ansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler in zufälligen Makulaturblättern* (1819-1821) (*The Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr*), deploys a hidden electrical cable in order to disturb an engagement party. Also the lesser-known 'Geheimbundroman' *Der natürliche Zauberer oder Scenen aus dem Leben des berühmten Philadelphia* (1802) by Josef Max Czapek oscillates between veiling and unveiling, electrical enchantment and demystification.

III. DISSONANCES AND BINARY OPPOSITIONS

Dissonances, and with them the desire to bring chaos into order, can be regarded as a further element of Boissier's engraving. The image stimulates tension through easily recognizable dichotomies, or binary oppositions, which can be identified as antagonistic historical concepts. Ancient mythology and scientific progress are not only contrasted, but are compounded and interfused through an intentional undermining of chronology. The mythological past is relocated, transplanted and incorporated into the contemporary France of the engraving around 1800. From an iconological perspective, this is made especially clear by one of the figures in the engraving. The experimenter can be identified as Hermes Trismegistos, the ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic god who is the prime father of magicians and alchemists, and has been particularly well known since the Renaissance as a symbol of ancient wisdom and keeper of esoteric knowledge.¹⁰ In addition, the youth can be understood as part of the *hermetic chain*, as he pays attention to the informative movements of his teacher, who is initiating him into this arcane knowledge in the confines of the chamber. Taking Hermes Trismegistos as a symbol for modern science creates a dissonance that contributes to a strategy of confusion. It produces a continuous movement of evasion, obstructs the clear path towards an interpretation of the scene, and, even if it does not eliminate the boundaries between myth and the science of electricity, at least obscures them. These interwoven tendencies generate tension by creating anachronisms, the meanings of which demand to be deciphered. This breaking up of a linear, teleological concept of time is evoked most distinctly by having ancient figures operate recently developed technical devices such as the Leydener jar, developed by Ewald Georg von Kleist and Pieter van Musschenbroek in 1745/46.

The question of how these dissonances are identified and reconstructed is less significant than the desire of the observer to decipher and resolve them. The phenomenon of tension grows out of the need to explain these anachronisms (e.g. ancient gods – electrical devices). The Enlightenment image asks to be *enlightened* and thereby continu-

10 For Hermes Trismegistos cf. Florian Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus: Hermeticism from Ancient to Modern Times* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

ously opens up new space for interpretation. It is not the presence of dissonances alone, but rather the observer's desire to resolve them which plays an essential role in generating the phenomenon. Thus it is not surprising that the short expositions of the engraving devoted in particular to the desire to clarify these anachronisms, called into question the possibility of resolving them conclusively and thereby emphasized the polysemy of the figures, interactions and concepts depicted in the image.

The image's refusal to allow for a conclusive resolution of these tensions has a political significance in the historical context of the image, reflecting the struggle between science and religion in the period between revolution and restoration. In particular, the electrical trick was interpreted by the art historian Jean-Paul Bouillon, on the one hand, as the uncovering of religious charlatanism in pre-Enlightenment culture, and on the other hand, as a criticism of contemporary political circumstances and of the *new* priests and *new* religion in the time of post-revolutionary France.¹¹ The engraving originated in a time of unrelenting change, erratic displacement and feverish restructuring in intellectual thought, religion and anthropology, a period of turbulence which also affected society and politics. With regard to Boissier's *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* it is particularly interesting that a group of scientists came closer to the centre of power than ever before (or since), as the old power structures of clergy and aristocracy were taken over by these new scientists.¹² This, of course, had nothing to do with those experimenters who drew sparks from the fingers and noses of their audience at the *Boulevard du Temple* or in the wooden arcades of the *Palais Royal*, who meted out electric shocks or exhibited electrical glockenspiels, but it did involve those natural scientists such as Jean Sylvain Bailly (astronomer, first mayor of Paris and also first president of the constituent national assembly), Nicolas Lénard Sadi Carnot (physicist and chairman of the welfare commission), Pierre-Simon de Laplace (mathematician, physicist, astronomer and senator), Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier (physicist and prefect). In addition it included other prominent figures such as

11 See the short commentary by Bouillon, 'Liste des amants électrisés par l'amour', pp. 68-69 (p. 69).

12 Michel Serres, 'Paris um 1800', in *Elemente einer Geschichte der Wissenschaften*, ed. by Michel Serres (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1994), pp. 597-643 (pp. 608-10 and 623-31).

Étienne Lacépède (minister and author of *Essai sur l'électricité naturelle et artificielle*), Dominique François Jean Arago (minister and popularizer of galvanism), and also Charles Augustin de Coulomb (author of *Mémoire sur l'électricité et le Magnétisme*, inventor of the electrical torsion balance, member of the national institute and also director of public education). Made in the period between the end of the *ancien régime* and the beginning of the restoration, the engraving deals with these new scientist-politicians, who, just like their predecessors, possessed the power and the will to deceive, manipulate and keep the public in a state of ignorance.

IV. STATICS, ELECTROSTATICS, AND LOVE

The engraving can be read as an illustration of the laws of physics, in particular those of statics and electricity. From the perspective of statics the narrative and figurative aspects can be transformed into a diagram of forces: a construction of vectorial dimensions, or arrows in a coordinate system, which flow towards and away from a particular point, the statue of Cupid. This meeting of adversarial dynamics – the field of forces constituted by the gesture of striving and by the response of restrained activity – is the basis of the characters' figuration in the image. The horizontal force of the dancing and music-making nymph and the male lover's concurrent impetus towards the statue appear to be resisted by the dynamics of the female lover. Her crooked right leg and the way her toes are just about touching the floor imply a hesitation in her movement towards the statue of Cupid. She is exposed to external forces, as the right hand of the man is pulling her in the direction of the statue while her body stands in opposition to his forward-pressing impulse. A small detail also points to her attempt to slow down and hinder his movement in the image's system of bodily forces: her left palm, which rests on his left elbow and impedes his outstretched arm, causes a disruption in his concentrated movement, the aim of which is to make contact with the metal arrowhead.

These compliant and conflicting bodies pushing and pulling against each other, and the extension and compression of these spellbound figures, constitute a dynamic system of tensions and opposing forces, which simultaneously animate and obstruct one another. The lovers thereby instantiate a specific balance between energetic inactivity and

resolute stillness, and point to an oscillating back and forth of hesitation.¹³ The hesitation of the woman marks a caesura; the disruption of the chain of action brings about a dynamic equilibrium, a suspended order and an uncertainty that create a potential for activity. The engraving portrays a time interval that lasts until the incident, and the possible occurrence is held back from its realization. Hesitation is an active gesture of questioning and doubt, in which the execution of the electrical discharge is not realized in the engraving. Instead the process of its development and becoming forms a component that generates tension. The encounter with the electrifying Cupid, who in the logic of the image's left side stands for the electrifying love, is a hesitant and uncertain affair. The hesitating body, the depicted system of forces, holds within itself the potential to touch the arrow but at the same time precludes the possibility of contact, diverting and deferring the electrical *surprise* since it is never represented.

The invisible physical phenomenon in the engraving is electricity. Electricity – from an epistemological perspective an uncertain knowledge around the year 1800 – was found in medical, anthropological and philosophical discourses. The ambiguous classification of the phenomenon, and the multitude of different theories and conceptions of electricity, presented a number of points of connection and a wide area on which to project the theological, political and social imagination. From the eighteenth century onwards symbolic-aesthetic depictions of love were created: images, analogies or metaphors whose system of reference was electro-technical knowledge. Authors absorbed and created literature out of contemporary knowledge about electrical phenomena and thus developed new means of expression and modes of description for the emotion love. The tentative encounters of lovers in Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1782-1789) or Loasel Tréogate's *Dolbreuse, ou l'homme du siècle, ramené à la vérité par le sentiment et par la raison* (1783), and similarly the excessive pleasure and pain of the lovers in the Marquis de Sade's *Les 120 journées de Sodome ou L'École du Libertinage* (postum 1904) and *Aline et Valcour* (1795) were represented with reference to electro-technical phenomena.¹⁴ This discourse can also be identified in German literature around 1800, if one considers the poetics of electricity in Friedrich von Hardenberg

13 Cf. Joseph Vogl, *Über das Zaudern* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2008), pp. 22-24.

14 Cf. Delon, 'Die Elektrizität des Theaters', pp. 32-33.

(Novalis), Heinrich von Kleist, Achim von Arnim, Jean Paul or E.T.A. Hoffmann.¹⁵ These writers perceived the human body as a source that produced and emitted electricity, and thus created literary figures who released and transmitted their own natural electricity in the act of love. What is essential is that with the inventions and advances in the science of electricity during the eighteenth century, electricity and love found a common ground in the field of literature as well as in images, as Boissier's engraving clearly shows.

The title and the image are entwined and united by the theme that they address: *romantic love* as a cultural construction in the early nineteenth century.¹⁶ In Boissier's representation of lovers, physical and emotional stimulation is correlated through the amalgamation of love and electricity.¹⁷ Basic physical phenomena such as the electrostatic charging and discharging of organic bodies or the transmission of electricity from

15 Jürgen Daiber, *Experimentalphysik des Geistes: Novalis und das romantische Experiment* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001), pp. 109-13 and 227-33 and Jürgen Daiber, *Experimentalphysik des Geistes: Novalis als Experimentator an Außen- und Innenwelt* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2000), pp. 18-30; Hans Esselborn, 'Poetisierte Physik: Romantische Mythologie in Klingsohrs Märchen', *Aurora*, 47 (1987), pp. 137-58; Sigrid Weigel, *Literatur als Voraussetzung der Kulturgeschichte: Schauplätze von Shakespeare bis Benjamin* (München: Fink, 2004), pp. 173-91; Michael Gamper, *Elektropoetologie: Fiktionen der Elektrizität 1740-1870* (Wallstein: Göttingen, 2009); Frederick Burwick, 'Elektrizität und Optik: Zu den Beziehungen zwischen wissenschaftlichen und literarischen Schriften Achim von Arnims', *Aurora*, 46 (1986), pp. 19-47; Hans Esselborn, *Das Universum der Bilder: Die Naturwissenschaft in den Schriften Jean Pauls* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1989), pp. 85-89; Rupert Gaderer, *Poetik der Technik: Elektrizität und Optik bei E.T.A. Hoffmann* (Freiburg i.Br.: Rombach, 2009), pp. 37-68 and 91-151.

16 For the conception of romantic love around 1800 see Niklas Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion: Zur Codierung von Intimität* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 163-82.

17 Cf. one of the earliest discursive interconnections between love and electricity in the eighteenth century in Georg Matthias Bose's didactic poem *Die Electricität nach ihrer Entdeckung und Fortgang mit poetischer Feder entworfen* (Wittenberg: Joh. Joachim Ahlfelden, 1744). For the demonstration of his *Venus electricata* Bose connected a woman to an electrostatic generator in order to give her an electrostatic charge. The *Venus electricata* then granted a kiss to a (usually unsuspecting) man. Shortly before their lips met, an electrical spark would pass from one to the other and would lightly (at least usually) jolt their bodies. Once the female body had been discharged, the experimenter would again crank the flywheel of the electrostatic generator, the female body would once again be

one person to another – and especially the simultaneous occurrence of both of these electrostatic phenomena – acquire a symbolic significance. The moment of electrification, when two bodies simultaneously receive an electric shock, stands for one of the oldest themes of love, the unity of duality.¹⁸ The cultural formation of love appears as an aesthetic construct, which is based precisely on the unity of the lovers. According to the logic of the engraving, love does not arise from electricity and electricity is not the catalyst in the love affair, but rather the unity of the lovers is enriched and reaches its potential through electrical stimulation. Moreover, through the amalgamation of love and electricity a conception of love is formulated which does not follow the emotionally restricted discourses of the eighteenth century. Rather, the unexpected electric shock that is about to strike the lovers suggests a conception of love as an overwhelming and suddenly occurring event. The cultural formation of love is therefore not minted out of incorporeal rhetoric, but experienced as a physical act, as a painful stimulation of the body. The desire to be stimulated in close contact with the other and in a closed embrace of bodies – in fact by means of an electric shock – defines the representation of the two lovers. Through the logic of the image, namely through the electro-technical practices that are hidden from the lovers, electricity dominates as a force of nature. Electricity becomes their fate, and they unknowingly surrender themselves to it. The ‘amants électrisés’ named in the title exert very little control over their affections. In the mythological domain – indicated by Venus, the nymph and Cupid – they are electrified, and thus will lose the control of their bodies, which will be directed by electricity. For a certain time, their bodies will then not be subject to voluntary or logical control, but will involuntarily depend on the experimenter. Whoever is struck by an electric shock is spellbound: the electricity causes the muscles to seize up, and a moment of physical paralysis sets in.

charged, the next man to be electrified would enter Bose’s chamber – and the *Venus game* would begin anew (pp. xxviii-xxx).

18 Cf. also the electrostatic phenomenon of two oppositely charged bodies, which attract each other and consequently remain attached through their attraction when they are separated. This physical phenomenon formed the centre point particularly in experiments performed in the eighteenth century when an attempt was made to make electricity visible. Literary and artistic conceptions of love were also formulated with reference to this electrostatic phenomenon.



Fig. 2. Louis-Léopold Boilly, *L'étincelle électrique* (ca. 1791), oil on canvas, 46.1 x 55.3 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.

Boissier's codification of love by means of electro-technical knowledge was not unique around 1800, especially in Paris. In 1791 Louis-Léopold Boilly exhibited his nocturne *L'étincelle électrique* (*The Electric Spark*) in the *Salon de la Jeunesse*, which like Boissier's engraving linked together the themes of electricity, modern science, charlatanism, alchemy and love. However, in contrast to Boissier, he painted an open scene in which the hierarchy of knowledge between experimenter, lovers and observer is almost dissolved (Fig. 2). Therefore the dialectical relationship between obfuscation and enlightenment, as set out in the engraving, remains in the background in the case of Boilly. The electrostatic generator and the experimenter are visible to all concerned; they are not concealed by a wall, much less hidden in a secret chamber. In Boissier's case, the pronounced and visible concealment and disguise of devices and figures is given significantly more emphasis. Moreover, Boilly avoids any tendencies for amalgamation, or the overlapping and interplay of different layers of time. The figures are far more elegant



Fig. 3. L.-L. Boilly: *L'étincelle électrique* (detail).

and are dressed in the fashion of 1800. There is no blending of Greek mythology and modern science in the nocturne. The gender roles are switched, at least in terms of the one who is touching the arrowhead, even though the man uses his right hand to point the woman's arm in the direction of the arrow. She also does not make contact with Cupid's arrow, like the man in Boissier's engraving. Very much in contrast to *Les amants électrisés par l'amour*, the event which gives the nocturne its title is represented: a small, barely visible spark stretches between her forefinger and the arrow of the statue of Cupid, thereby depicting the technical realization and the moment of electrification (Fig. 3). The act of electrification is not postponed – the anticipation of a future event is not evoked – but rather the surprise, the brief moment of electrification, is made evident in the muscle play of the woman's face. The title corresponds to what is shown, whereas in Boissier's case it is clearly distinct, since the continuance of suspense and not the short moment of surprise is at the centre of Boissier's engraving.

V. BLANK SPACE – BETWEEN FINGER AND ARROW

The temporal dimension of Boissier's engraving, the postponement of contact with the arrow and the delayed electrification of the lovers, is essential. Suspense is generated by depicting the moment shortly before the surprise electrification of the lovers. The observers know that an electric shock is technically possible, but it does not take place in the image (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A. Boissier: *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (detail).

Even if the sleight of hand is graphically exposed to the observers, the question remains whether the electric shock actually happens. The image does not disclose whether the finger will make contact with the arrowhead and close the electrical circuit, or whether the hesitant woman – who is not gazing at the arrow but beyond it, seemingly through the wall in the direction of the experimenter – will uncover the sleight of hand before touching the metal arrowhead. This moment of suspense is increased by the title, since it speaks not of an imminent but of an actual electrification. But the Enlightenment image that craves to be *enlightened* also draws back from the desire for *absolute* enlightenment. Not the resolution of suspense, but rather its preservation and perpetuation is what corresponds to the aesthetics of Boissier's engraving: the anticipation of an event, and the withholding of its realization in the engraving. The outstretched finger not only points in a direction, but also indicates the intensity and meaning of the image by pointing to a future event.

This absence is precisely what constitutes the image, in that it *foresees* something. The image, like many images, constructs itself out of an absence, out of something *yet* unseen. The physical phenomenon of electrification that is absent from the image, leaving a blank space, belongs to the image and is already at its centre, precisely because this gap points to a future event. All movements, desires and interests of the figures are focused on this blank space, and its dissipation or continuation. Though the narrative structure of the image makes reference to a future electric spark, which will connect the finger and the metal arrow, it is not represented in the image. The absent presence of electricity is underlined by the title: *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (*The Lovers*

Electrified by Cupid). This description refers to what the image depicts as a future event and therefore stands in conflict with the moment shown in the engraving. This anticipated event consists in the diminishment of the space between finger and metal arrow. The image presents no conclusion, no startled lovers who are actually electrified, but only lovers who could be electrified. Thus something is revealed in Boissier's engraving which was never actually present. It portrays a possible event or action, which both will not occur and has not yet occurred.

Translated by Alan Suter

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Rupert Gaderer, 'Strategies of Tension: A. Boissier's *Les amants électrisés par l'amour* (1797)', in *Tension/Spannung*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey, *Cultural Inquiry*, 1 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 93–108 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-01_05>

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