Mouhy's *La Mouche*: A Case-Study of Literary Resistance Against Visual Control

In December 2010, Jean-Claude Vitran, head of the French Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés (CNIL) of the League of Human Rights, published an article on the problems posed by the spread of urban digital surveillance systems in France and in Europe.[1] In the article, entitled "Vous êtes étiquetés?", Vitran argues that the generalized practices of video-surveillance are not only threatening the basic rights and liberties of the citizens living in democratic countries, but, most importantly, that they are grossly inefficient. On the widespread use of video-cameras to spy on, detect, and visually control individuals accurately in order to prevent crimes, he states the following: "un rapport de l'INHES (Institut National des hautes études de sécurité) de mai 2008 confirme que la vidéosurveillance n'apporte pas de protection *a priori*… Le Royaume-Uni et ses 4 millions de caméras constitue le terrain d'expérimentation privilégié des chercheurs qui ne cessent de démontrer, preuves en main, l'inefficacité de la vidéosurveillance pour lutter contre la criminalité." (56). In addition, Vitran points out that one of the reasons for this failure has to do with the human factor: beyond the inherent resistance of citizens to a surveillance state, this effort to control the population fails due to the impossibility of reducing a multitude of diverse people and conflicting visual data to a norm.

Coincidentally, the same year of the release of Vitran's article, René Démoris and Florence Magnot-Ogilvy republished the chevalier de Mouhy's *La Mouche*, a mid-eighteenth century prototype of the modern French spy novel genre featuring a "mouchard" or undercover

[1] Jean-Claude Vitran, « Vous êtes étiquetés ? », *Revue Projet* 2010/6 (nº 319), 55-61.

spy who, much like the CCTV cameras today, is furtively watching every character everywhere.[2] Interestingly, this novel had been out-of-print since the eighteenth-century, which begs the question: why would it be brought back into print now? One answer may lay in the fact that by presenting visually deceptive characters and narrative spaces, this literary work explores the issue of individual resistance to categorical surveillance, an aspect that has not been fully tackled by the critics of Mouhy's work, and which makes the novel relevant to today's ongoing sociocultural debate in France and in most of the Western world regarding the capability of reaching an assertive visual control system.

The existing studies on this novel focus primarily on analyzing its link to the literary genre of the picaresque pseudo-memoir-novel or "roman-mémoire", a popular genre in the seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries which often features fictional autobiographical or documentary accounts of the adventures of a main character in a pseudo-realistic, historical setting. However, beyond the current analyses of French literary critics like Annie Rivara and René Démoris which claim that part of Mouhy's design was to create an effect of authenticity with his spy novel, we argue instead that *La Mouche* is, in fact, an experimental narrative example of visual deception that challenges the constraints of systematic literary and social order. To prove this, we analyze some textual examples of Mouhy's visual poetics in order to show the parallels between eighteenth and twenty-first century discourse on surveillance and visual control, and make the case for this novel's current relevance.

[2] Charles de Fieux, chevalier de Mouhy. *La Mouche ou les Espièglerie*s *et aventures galantes de Bigand*. Paris : éds. René Démoris et Florence Magnot-Ogilvy. (Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2010). The first editions of this novel, which were published originally in two volumes and four parts between 1736 et 1777, had this title. We will quote the 2010 definitive edition.

Beyond the pseudo-memoir novel: Mouhy's subversive approach to a literary genre

Charles de Fieux, better known as the chevalier de Mouhy, published the first edition of *La Mouche ou les Espiègleries et aventures galantes de Bigand* in 1736. This four-part, two-volume novel introduces readers to first person narrator and main character Charles Bigand, a peculiar young and mischievous amateur spy who, during the course of many adventures, pries incessantly into the lives of those around him by eavesdropping and looking through peepholes, windows, and cracked doors. Through his visual descriptions, readers are able to see covert objects and spaces, from the private rooms and dormitories of nobles and clergymen to the shady thieves' corners in the city. In the first page, as he narrates details of his childhood, he makes reference to the nickname he has been given : "la Mouche du quartier" (the neighborhood's Spy) : "C'est qu'il est important de savoir, c'est que j'étais d'une curiosité sans égale, j'écoutais à toutes les portes, je regardais à travers les serrures et rien ne se passait au logis et dans le quartier que je n'en fusse exactement informé… l'on me nommait l'Espion, la Mouche du quartier…'' (82-83). In the context of eighteenth-century French urban culture, a "mouche" or "mouchard" was the embodiment of the intricate surveillance system under Louis XV's regime. These sly, observant individuals who circulated through the growing city of Paris and whose identities were somewhat ambiguous, often worked as informants for the Paris police lieutenant and were recruited either amongst persons of quality (in fact, some writers like Mouhy were also spies), or former petty criminals and defectors.

At the time that Mouhy was developing his novel, spies had already appeared as main characters in several "romans-mémoires" or pseudo-memoir novels. Writers from the late seventeenth-century such as Gatien de Courtilz de Sandras and Giovanni Paolo (Jean-Paul) Marana, among others, had published pseudo-memoir novels which featured a mix of fictional

and historical characters involved in political espionage and courtly intrigue during the reign of Louis XIV.[3] The adventures of Charles Bigand were therefore joining the ranks of a popular, established literary genre and thus share some of its typical narrative elements. Just like its predecessors, *La Mouche* is a first person narrative that comes to us in the form of a memoir with a frame story—that of the narrator, who, just like the characters in previous spy novels, is a curious, observant individual. Numerous other characters such as Frère Ange, Monsieur D'Osilly, the Marquis de Sinecthon, mademoiselle Likinda, and Lusinette, among others, are consecutively introduced which make up the traditional "récits enchâssés" or the stories within the frame story. The novel also begins with a literary device commonly used by the genre: the documentary or factual approach. Seventeenth and eighteenth-century pseudo-memoir novels usually begin with a foreword in which an "editor" or "finder" recounts the fortuitous discovery of a manuscript containing the "authentic" account of an important, historical character. In the case of *La Mouche,* Charles Bigand's manuscript is found by chance underneath the ruins of a house in Rome, and in the foreword, the editor mentions Charles' close connection to a presumably historical character, the "famous" Italian alchemist Rametzy, who plays a major role throughout the course of Charles' adventures, thus showing the author's desire for creating a certain effect of authenticity. In addition, the novel offers detailed, realistic depictions of the narrative space, of its objects and characters, as well as careful rapportage of events and scenes witnessed by the protagonist. Yet, interestingly, this is where its pseudo-memoir's formulaic approach ends. Unlike the heroes in the novels of Courtilz de Sandras and Jean-Paul Marana, Mouhy's "la Mouche" diverges from the archetype of the "espion engagé" or the spy for hire

[3] Gatien Courtilz de Sandras (1644-1712) is the author of the *Mémoires de Monsieur le Comte de Rochefort* (1687) and the *Mémoires de M. d'Artagnan* (1700); Giovanni Paolo Marana (1642-1693) published *L'espion turc* or *Letters Writ by A Turkish Spy,* between 1684 and 1697. This epistolary saga was translated into French and English and became widely popular among readers.

caught in the midst of political intrigues. With the exception of being privately hired once by an ambassador in chapter 22, Charles Bigand has no political motivation, nor is he working in the service of a state. Moreover, the characters are not drawn from history, and rather than faithfully conforming to a generic pattern, the narrative constantly underscores a subversive approach to the authenticity effect that characterizes this type of fiction. Two examples of this can be found in the foreword and in the anachronistic description of the origins of the alchemist Rametzy. In the foreword, the fictional editor describes the finding of Charles Bigand's manuscript under some ruins in Rome as a ridiculous event and even mocks the readers who would believe "de pareilles absurdités".[4] In chapter 17, the Italian character Rametzy gives a detailed description of his origins and tells Bigand that he is the son of the famous Raimond Lulle, who according to Mouhy's historical footnote, had been an apothecary to the third Doge of Venice: "Je suis né à Venise, mon père était le fameux Raimond Lulle" (201). However, this detailed information soon becomes suspect, not only because of the consistent typographical variations of the apothecary's name that we encounter throughout the narrative—Raimond/Raymond—but also because a quick historical search reveals that Raimond Lulle was, in fact, a Catalan alchemist from the thirteenth-century and not the character that Mouhy anachronistically placed in the narrative. Examples like these serve to destabilize the conventional authenticity effect sought by this literary genre and thus suggest the author's intention to try a more unique, non-categorical approach when developing his spy novel. Contrary to tradition, Mouhy offers readers an unsystematic ensemble of stories within a frame story and an unexpected main character whose multidimensional point of view and numerous anamorphoses persistently challenge the possibility of knowing his true image, thus questioning the potential of reaching visual objectivity and visual control. What sets

[4] *La Mouche,* 81.

this novel apart from its predecessors is the fact that it casts doubt on the power of the objectifying gaze, and by doing so, subverts the concept of foolproof vision.

La Mouche and the poetics of visual disorder

One of the first examples of visual multidimensionality and subjective visuality that we encounter when reading Mouhy's *La Mouche,* and which hints at the novel's questioning of categorical surveillance systems, is the representation of the image of an enigmatic character named Madame de B. who first appears in chapter 7. In this episode, our young hero Charles Bigand is staying with a friend named D'Osilly after having escaped the monastery where he was sent as a teen. At his house, he engages in his customary spying practices, this time looking through a keyhole to watch Madame de B., D'Osilly's lover, at her dressing table. Surprisingly devoid of any sexual tone or connotations, this scene shows us instead a fragmented visual image of the face of a multidimensional feminine character that defies unequivocal descriptions:

> –Madame de B. par laquelle je commencerai, avait au moins quarante ans, elle n'en paraissait tout au plus que vingt-huit… Un jour que je regardais à travers la serrure de son cabinet, je la vis en chemise devant son miroir, elle s'était levée par précaution pour enjoliver son visage, elle avait un pied de pommade sur la peau… elle prit un frottoir, se le passa plusieurs fois sur le visage et je fus d'une surprise extrême après cette cérémonie, de lui trouver le teint d'un bis extrême, m'ayant toujours paru très blanche ; Je le fus bien plus lorsque après s'être lavée d'une eau enfermée sous la clef, je la revis d'un blanc éclatant… Elle passa à une troisième couleur, dont elle mit légèrement sur ses tempes et sur sa gorge…Je remarquai avec admiration trois dents qui furent placées dans sa bouche…– (139-40)

As Charles furtively watches Madame de B. in her room washing off her face and fixing her make-up, he discovers that she is not the twenty-something she initially appeared to be, but a much older woman in her forties. As he sees her take off the layers of cosmetics with a cloth, he is surprised to find her complexion swiftly transforming from one tint to another (gray,

white, and rose, respectively), a detail that points to her elusive nature. The fast shift between different facial shades suggests a break with the concept of authenticity: the appearance of this woman is deceiving, and as such, cannot be readily trusted. Moreover, the fragmented image is further emphasized by two things: the fact that she is standing in front of a mirror, and the triad element—the three complexion shifts and the three false teeth that are placed in her mouth—all of which evoke the concepts of visual depth and duplicity, and the complexity of an individual that is not easily defined by her physical appearance. Unlike the accuracy sought by an objectifying spy gaze, this visual portrayal of the color-shifting face of Madame de B. challenges any straightforward rendering of this character in Charles Bigand's field of vision and announces Mouhy's artful approach to the representation of multidimensionality and visual deception in the novel. The effect is further enhanced by the amplifying of the image seen through a keyhole. In contrast to the circumscribed and fixed vision normally offered by a small hole in a lock, in this description the aperture allows Charles to behold a whole picture: the woman standing in her nightgown, a mirror, and the consecutive changes in her complexion, thus functioning like an optical device similar to a widening cinematic screen which lets the viewer see the whole scene unfolding. This narrative strategy which combines image manipulation and ambiguous visuality constitutes one of many examples of Mouhy's idiosyncratic poetics of resistance to visual truth. Thereby, this episode featuring the enigmatic Madame de B. shows us that there is more to the spying scenes in this "roman-mémoire" than first meets the eye.

As we read on, we discover that Charles Bigand's memoir, with its disorderly plot and suspicious characters, is more about creating doubt and confusion than accurately depicting the objects and people that he observes. Perceptive readers will particularly notice how

questionable Charles Bigand's identity becomes when he starts resembling other characters and vice versa all throughout the novel, so much so that at times it becomes difficult to confidently trust a visually unreliable narrative. In contrast to the spies who make use of unsubtle disguises and impersonations in previous works of this genre, the hero in Mouhy's novel is a character who breaks the traditional pattern because he is always in the process of creating, not only his own identity, but also the identities of the secondary characters through anamorphic constructions that defy trustworthy visibility.

Anamorphic doubles and elusive images

Similar to the distorted reflections that we encounter when entering a maze-like hall of anamorphic mirrors, the images of the numerous look-alike characters featured in *La Mouche* escape the limits of a single identity to become a series of disconcerting duplicates of each other. Close readings of this literary work will reveal that one of Mouhy's most skillful narrative strategies is in fact the use of mirrors as an analogy of visual multidimensionality. In chapter 37, we find one of several literal allusions to the multidimensional mirror effects that this author creates with the characters' duplicate images. In this particular episode, Charles Bigand is visiting the house of the alchemist Rametzy, and as he explores one of the rooms he sees the image of Likinda, Rametzy's wife, infinitely reproduced by multiple mirrors:

> –l'appartement où était le portrait de Likinda me parut le plus superbe et le plus magnifique de la maison ; le nombre de glaces dont il était rempli réfléchissant les unes contre les autres, rendait ce portrait mille fois ; elles étaient distribuées par des points d'optique si savants, que la vue n'était bornée…– (Bigand, 334)

In this scene, the room is filled with strategically placed mirrors, (les "glaces distribuées par des points d'optique si savants") that reproduce Likinda's picture a thousand times, allowing for a boundless kind of vision that destabilizes the concept of linear perspective. Just like Rametzy's

adroit placement of mirrors, Mouhy's use of his characters' duplicate reflections questions the logic of causality in the novel and the possibility of obtaining assertive visual data through surveillance practices.

Charles Bigand first reveals his ambiguous visual identity in chapter 3, when he says the following : "je ne sais pas encore moi-même ce que je suis, nous verrons dans la suite.'' (104) By avowing that he doesn't know what he is and that it will be disclosed eventually, he invites us to discover it through the process of reading—note the choice of the subject pronoun "nous" and the verb "verrons", which underscore both the inclusion of the implied reader and the action of seeing.[5] Charles Bigand's mysterious identity is to be discovered through careful looking.

Among all the elements pertaining to the theme of subjective visuality in this novel, there are three key central characters whose duplicate identities constitute an example of the poetics of visual disorder: Charles Bigand, Frère Ange, and Rametzy. All three become anamorphic reflections of each other and of several other characters who also resemble them, making us loose our point of reference in the narrative.

In chapter 2, readers are introduced to the story of Frère Ange, a young libertine monk that Charles meets while living at the monastery. As he recounts his origins to Charles, we learn that, in order to have the means to run away from home, he stole money and sold his father's canaries. In chapter 6, Frère Ange suddenly reveals that he is a nobleman named D'Osilly, a young libertine who is then duped by Bigand in a way much like D'Osilly (alias Frère Ange) duped his father, the bird breeder. In order to swindle D'Osilly out of his money, Bigand puts

[5] By "implied reader" we make reference to Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological theory of reader-response: the hypothetical role of someone assumed by the author to share the knowledge necessary in order to fully understand or interpret the text.

him to sleep by telling a story of a bird charmer named Monsieur du Lac and his lost canary that is taken from his cage. The three theft stories within the frame story are so similar that they create a disconcerting feeling of déjà-vu, as the following excerpts show:

–Une pratique de mon père devait deux cent Francs, je le vis payer en belles espèces, je savais où il les mettait…Je fus le lendemain au même endroit où je lui avais pris de l'argent, mais il n'y en avait plus…Je songeai à d'autres moyens pour en avoir, il avait deux sérins qu'il élevait depuis six mois qui commençaient à siffler fort joliment, je les pris et il ne me fut pas difficile de les vendre…– (Frère Ange, 91)

–Je regardai la somme promise comme un bien qui devait m'appartenir…je guettai avec tant d'ardeur cette remise d'argent que je la vis apporter un matin ; il l'enferma dans le tiroir d'une commode et je résolus de profiter de la première occasion pour me rendre maître de cette somme…Le jour suivant celui qu'on lui avait apporté cette gratification il vint se coucher fort tard…dès qu'il fut au lit il me demanda un conte à l'ordinaire pour l'endormir…je lui contai celui-ci…– (Charles Bigand, 142)

In the first excerpt, Frère Ange narrates how he saw a man bring a payment to his father and how he consequently proceeds to rob him by stealing his canaries; in the second excerpt, Charles recounts how he waits for a payment being made to D'Osilly so that he can steal it through a ploy involving a tale of a bird charmer nobleman and his stolen canary. As readers, we can see that these supposedly parallel stories actually converge in their striking similarities. Literary critics examining narratological elements in this novel could attribute this character interplay to nothing more than the humorous reversal of fortune often featured in a running gag.[6] However, there are two facts that should be taken into consideration when analyzing the narrative structure of *La Mouche*: first, the premise of the novel is a visual one as the title implies a reference to the surveillance system that existed under the regime of Louis XV. Mouhy's hero is a "mouchard" and his memoir centers on the characters, spaces, and objects that he observes. Second, these modified and disorienting reappearances of the characters evoke the duplicitous nature and

[6] A "running gag" would be our choice for translating the narrative device called in French "comique de répétition". It's a literary device that takes the form of a comical reference that appears repeatedly throughout a work of literature or other forms of storytelling.

subterfuge tactics employed by elusive spy figures like the ones that were circulating in Paris during the eighteenth-century. Hence, the effect of déjà-vu sought by Mouhy could very well be a narrative strategy used to create visual disorder and raise doubts in the mind's eye.

The characters' duplicate images reappear consistently all throughout the novel in varying forms and situations, creating a visual effect close to that of an array of anamorphic mirrors that interfere with the transparency of the narrative. In the case of Frère Ange, we see him as D'Osilly, friend of Bigand and lover of Madame de B.; as Monsieur du Lac, the canary charmer and lover of Madame de Coudrai (chapter 8); as Saint-Onge, secretary to the ambassador and lover of Mademoiselle Meralini (chapter 14); and Saint-Ange, a young character in the manuscript of Mademoiselle Meralini, also in chapter 14. It is not only the typographical variation of the character's name that baffles readers. The descriptions of Saint-Onge's misadventures are suspiciously similar to those of Frère Ange in that they have both lost their fortune in a manner that is almost identical, as the following textual examples show:

– Comme j'avais toujours de l'argent, je ne manquais point d'amis qui m'aident à le dépenser… Cette vanité fit tort à ma bourse, il ne me resta rien de ce que j'avais pris à mon père… – (Frère Ange, 90)

– ma fortune insensiblement baissa j'avais un peu trop donné dans le brillant, et sans prévoir l'avenir, je mangeais les richesses de ma femme en vaines ostentations… – (Saint-Onge, 183)

In the first excerpt, Frère Ange recounts how his extravagant habits led him to ruin. In the second excerpt, Saint-Onge tells Charles how an ostentatious lifestyle led him to spend all his riches. The mise en abyme mirror effect continues as we read the story of the chevalier de Rocfer in chapter 22. In this episode, an ambassador gives Bigand the mission of following Rocfer, a fugitive swordsman who goes by many names, and who is endangering the life of other

"mouchards" in Paris. The description of this individual, however, takes us back to the image and characteristics of both Frère Ange and D'Osilly, as the following examples show:

> – Cet homme se fait appeler le chevalier de Rocfer ; ce n'est pas son vrai nom, il en a plusieurs… Autrefois il fréquentait les académies où l'on joue, les cafés, les ruelles, et les promenades ; mais depuis qu'il a eu vent qu'on cherche à l'arrêter, il se tient sur ses gardes, loge tantôt chez un ami, tantôt chez un autre, et est toujours errant. – (232)

Readers will recall that after Frère Ange steals from his father in chapter 2, he becomes an errant adventurer, much like this chevalier de Rocfer and the wandering Charles who escaped from the monastery. In fact; Frère Ange has another name, he acquires a sword, becomes an amateur gambler, and frequents the promenades, the cafés, the billiard rooms, and an académie, just like Rocfer. He is also at one time pursued for stealing:

> – Je fus à la friperie, où pour cinquante écus l'on m'habilla comme un prince, j'achetai une épée, je me mis en chambre garnie et, n'ayant aucune connaissance, j'en cherchai dans les cafés et dans les billiards. Je fus produit peu de jours après dans une académie où l'on jouait les jeux de hasard… je sortis un jour de l'assemblée avec mille écus d'argent comptant. – (Frère Ange, 92)

Thus, the spendthrift and itinerant character traits become recursive from one character to the next, rendering an altered reflection of the same individual all throughout the novel. The effect is yet again amplified with the apparition of the character of Dom Carlos, a Spanish nobleman and boarder at a school where Charles Bigand is impersonating none other than a monk. The following excerpt about the Spaniard is from chapter 10 :

> –Je suis le fils du plus grand joueur d'échecs de toute l'Espagne; mon père était connu pour tel… Dès ma première jeunesse il me montra ce jeu, fatale science, vain amusement! … la passion que j'avais pour ce jeu, fut augmentée par mes triomphes…– (155)

As readers get to know this "new" character they can see that he shares the traits of Frère Ange (who is also D'Osilly): he is a gambler whose vanity and excessive practices get him into trouble

with the law, so that he has to escape and change his name and identity just like Frère Ange and Charles did when they fled from the monastery:

> –La partie fut longue…mon adversaire profita de mon trouble… c'était la première fois que j'avais été vaincu… je m'enfuis… Je pris dix mille francs en or ; je changeai de demeure et me fis faire l'habit que vous me voyez… je vins me réfugier ici sous un nom inconnu…– (Dom Carlos, 160)

In this excerpt, Dom Carlos is defeated while gambling, he then runs away and assumes another identity, one that is very similar to those of Frère Ange, D'Osilly, Saint-Onge and Rocfer. These recurring resemblances give us an ambiguous impression analogous to the one we may encounter as we enter a labyrinth of anamorphic mirrors that render misleading images of people.

As for the novel's hero, readers will also notice that his duplicate reflections are also a source of visual disorder. In chapter 11, for example, Charles Bigand declares himself to be a look-alike version of Dom Carlos when he first meets Mademoiselle Linette, the Spaniard's mistress, who mistakes him for her lover. As an extension, he then also becomes a version of Frère Ange, D'Osilly, Saint-Onge, and the chevalier de Rocfer. In this episode, Bigand is neither impersonating Dom Carlos nor dressed like him, but his features are nonetheless familiar enough that the lady is startled and confused, along with the readers. This unsettling mirror image effect is once again present in the chapters where the character of the alchemist Rametzy appears. Charles first notices a wandering Rametzy talking to himself in chapter 16 and decides to follow him. They enter a cabaret and while they sit facing each other, Charles gives us a description of the twofold aspect of Rametzy's face:

> –Pendant qu'il rognonnait, je l'examinais depuis les pieds jusqu'à la tête ; il paraissait avoir environ cinquante ans, avait l'air fort noble ; il était ridé d'un côté, et ce qui me surprit, c'est que de l'autre, on ne lui aurait donné que la moitié de son âge… – (Bigand, 192)

As Charles studies the character sitting in front of him, he sees that there are two sides to his facial features; one side of Rametzy's visage is wrinkled, making him appear as old as fifty, while the other side makes him look like a man half that age, that is, a man in his twenties. This physiognomic inconsistency, which calls to mind the episode of the multilayered face of Madame de B. and the multiple doubles of the same character that we encounter in the descriptions of D'Osilly, Saint-Onge, the chevalier de Rocfer, and Dom Carlos, constitutes yet another example of the fragmented and disordered visual poetics that Mouhy presents in his novel in an attempt to call into question the certainty ascribed to objective vision. In the case of Rametzy, he seems to be a duplicate reflection or an anamorphic double of Charles Bigand. When the alchemist is narrating his story to Charles in chapter 21, he declares that he is pleased to have found someone who resembles him, "un second lui-même" who has had similar life experiences:

> –j'avais résolu de trouver quelqu'un aussi malheureux que moi, en qui je trouvasse un second moi-même ; je vous rencontre dans un cabaret… je démêle que vous m'examinez, je me défie de vous ; cependant votre habit qui annonce la misère, votre histoire vraie ou fausse, votre égarement que je suppose se rapporter au mien, tout me détermine en votre faveur. – (Rametzy, 226)

Rametzy tells Bigand that he has been in fact looking for someone who is and looks like him, and when he sees Bigand in the cabaret, he recognizes the similarities in their attire and mannerisms, which gain his initial trust. In the scenes where they stare at each other, it is as if they suddenly looked in a mirror and found themselves to be one and the same individual, as it is implied in chapter 21 when Rametzy is scrutinizing Charles and recognizes himself in the young man: "Rametzy, lisant dans ma surprise, le fond de mes pensées, se reconnut dans les impressions dont j'étais agité…" (227). As we read on, we find many instances in which Charles Bigand seems to be a counterpart of his friend Rametzy and vice versa. Rametzy also engages in

the same spying practices and their approaches are almost identical as they look through a hole in a partition wall in order to keep a close watch on people. Thus, the two-faced alchemist character becomes an ambiguous entity, an individual whose countenance is both old and young, and whose actions mirror those of his younger reflection: Charles Bigand. Moreover, the feeling of uncertainty with regards to the identity of these two characters deepens as readers see the heading of chapter 25 which poses an unexpected question. In this chapter, Charles is yet again in a cabaret furtively watching and listening to a conversation about Rametzy's wife happening in an adjoining room. The heading goes as follows: *"Conversation écoutée dans un cabaret; par qui? Soupçons sur Likinda existante."* (253). The question ''by whom?'' raises doubts about the identity of the person listening to the conversation so that we become increasingly skeptical about what we read, even though in this instance the narrator seems to be Charles. Readers will then inevitably ask themselves the following question: Could Charles Bigand and Rametzy be one and the same person?

There are endless examples of these confusing, questionable anamorphic character reflections in *La Mouche* that play with the concepts of visual trustworthiness and generic foreseeability. Aside from the duplicitous characters of Frère Ange and Rametzy who appear to be altered duplicates of Charles Bigand, we find anamorphic doubles in countless others, such as in Mosaïde, a fictitious spy and mystic character from a story told by Charles and in whom we find the traits of Frère Ange, Rametzy, and Charles himself; in Monsieur Vinoncelli, an Italian senator who in chapter 32 becomes the tutor Fhiot-Celli; in the characters of Chebella and her brother Corbini, who in their beauty are mirrors of each other; and in Mademoiselle Likinda, Rametzy's wife, who returns in the features of the Marquise de Viatelly and Charles's sister in chapter 44. In the eyes of readers, the hero narrator becomes suspect when his memoir functions

in a manner similar to the multidimensional space of a hall of altered mirrors that thwart the authenticity effect. The fact that Charles Bigand and most of the secondary characters reappear constantly with different names and from different angles constitutes a metaphor of an uncontrollable, decentralized kind of vision that sees the world from a boundless perspective. In the context of the eighteenth-century culture of surveillance, *La Mouche* could be interpreted as an example of resistance against categorical visual profiling and the aspirations of the French state to systematically control individuals. It also constitutes an interesting optical metaphor of the disorganized French spy networks under the regime of Louis XV. Thus, these elusive images and fugitive identities, as well as the lack of visual control that we get from reading this novel, may be a narrative strategy used by the author to question the inefficiency of a surveillance system that was difficult to regulate.

La Mouche within the context of surveillance then and now

In her analysis of Mouhy's creative process, literary critic Annie Rivara says the following about the fragmentary nature of the characters of his novels: "Ce n'est pas un tableau unifié de société mais une série anarchique d'instantanés dont la juxtaposition dit les scandales et les singularités." [7] In the case of *La Mouche*, Rivara may be referring to Charles Bigand's idiosyncratic kind of vision: he is a multidimensional spy character whose unconventional narrative does not conform to a norm, but is instead questioning it. With this novel, Mouhy seems to be suggesting a reading approach that challenges, not only the conventions of a literary

[7] Annie Rivara, "Un écrivain caméléon, chevalier inexistant ou figure « d'auteur » hardie ? Lecture et création chez le chevalier de Mouhy'', *Le chevalier de Mouhy : bagarre et bigarrure.* Collection of essays published by Jan Herman, Kris Peeters &Paul Pelckmans. Amsterdam-NY: Rodopi, 2010, p.17.

genre, but, most importantly, the notion linking visibility to transparency. This can be understood if we consider the sociopolitical context in which Mouhy lived and wrote, which in some ways was not so different from the one we live in today, especially in regard to the issue of surveillance.

At the time that Mouhy was writing *La Mouche* between 1736 and 1777, France was experiencing a period of military unrest and sociocultural change. Several military conflicts with Austria, as well as the threat posed by Spain and Great Britain drove Louis XV to create the first official "Cabinet noir", a government office charged with gathering intelligence, reading, and censuring the correspondence of individuals suspected of crimes against the State. The creation of this office launched what Stéphane Genêt calls the "société de papiers", where the circulation of letters—and by extension, the circulation of individuals—was under State surveillance.[8] Social reformers, such as the Paris police officer and mechanical engineer Jacques François Guillauté, sought to reorganize the urban space by implementing what historian Grégoire Chamayou calls a "new rationality of government", through projects like Guillauté's "serre-papiers" or "Paperholder".[9] This immense archival machine, which didn't go beyond its blueprint stage, proposed a centralized and regulated command room with indexing wheels for storing reports that a new category of watchmen called "syndics" would gather on every citizen of Paris.

[8] Stéphane Genêt. *Les Espions des Lumières : Actions secrètes et espionnage militaire sous Louis XV.* Paris : Nouveau Monde éditions et Ministère de la Défense, 2013. p.299.

[9] Grégoire Chamayou, "Every move will be recorded": A Machinic Police Utopia in the Eighteenth Century", *Research Topics Max Planck Institute for the History of Science*, nº14, July 2010. https://www.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/en/news/features/features-feature14

At the same time, the capital was changing due to the constant growth of its population, which increased from approximately 19,600,000 in 1715 to 24,000,000 in 1730.[10] In *Les Cris de Paris*, Vincent Milliot indicates that between 1750 and 1790, Paris saw the arrival of 140,000 individuals each year.[11] Therefore, the city was becoming a space of enormous complexity in regard to maintaining public order and security. According to the *Traité de police* that Nicolas Delamare, commissioner at the Châtelet, published between 1707 and 1738, the police was in charge of eleven wide areas of competence ranging from public safety and street surveillance to regulating commerce, public health, and literary censorship, among many others.[12] These wide-ranging roles made this political organism too big and ultimately inefficient. Despite the efforts of the "Cabinet noir" and of the lieutenant général de police to thoroughly manage the growing urban spaces, the combination of both the constant flux of people and a problematic, albeit centralized, police system made these spaces and the people inhabiting them difficult to oversee objectively. This failure was particularly evident when it came to supervising and regulating the elusive and ambiguous "mouchards" who were recruited amongst diverse social backgrounds, and who often worked independently outside the system and, as a result, were difficult to identify and regulate. Notwithstanding its intention to impose a structured surveillance and control system, the police proved then to be a paradoxical instrument of repression and public assistance, a source of order and disorder. It is in the midst of this complicated system that Mouhy developed *La Mouche's* disorderly visual poetics. The multiplying, anamorphic, and

[10] Approximate figures of the Insee database, the INED, and of Jacques Dupaquier in *Histoire de la population française*. Paris: PUF, 1988.

[11] Vincent Milliot. *Les Cris de Paris ou le peuple travesti*. Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1995. p.25

[12] Nicolas Delamare (de La Mare). *Traité de la police, Où l'on trouvera l'histoire de son établissement, les fonctions et les prérogatives de ses magistrats, toutes les lois et tous les règlements qui la concernent,* (4 volumes), Paris : Jean et Pierre Cot, [puis] M. Brunet : [puis] J-F. Hérissant, 1674-1738.

ambiguous visual images of single characters and identities that we see in this novel mirror the multidimensional aspect of the police and surveillance system in 18th century Paris. As a mouchard working for Monsieur de Marville, lieutenant de police (1740-1747) and as a journalist and novelist, Mouhy was aware of the faulty and uncontrollable aspect of the system in which he lived and worked, and his literary creations reflect that reality.

According to Michel Foucault's thesis in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* concerning the establishment of order and discipline in the public sphere, the socioeconomic progress of the modern age is closely linked to that which he calls the "economy of visibility", and to a certain standardization of the instruments of power used to manage the State. For Foucault, the idea of the normalizing gaze that "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them" and ultimately controls them starts with the creation and the development of methodical surveillance systems in the eighteenth-century.[13] In France, this economy of visibility starts to gradually take hold with the project for centralizing the police system. This kind of monocular and objectifying vision demanded a plan for categorizing and ordering public spaces and people from a one-dimensional perspective. Furthermore, in conjunction with these sociocultural efforts and those of the Encyclopédistes, description, as claimed by Foucault, became a mainstream writing technique in the literary sphere during the eighteenth-century. For Foucault, the road to normalization was accompanied by a "whole apparatus of writing" that constituted the individual as a "describable, analyzable object" which would be easier to observe, document, and dominate.[14]

[13] Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. NY: Second Vintage Books Edition, 1995. p. 184

[14] Idem, pp.190-191

In the case of Mouhy's novel, however, this standard logic of visibility and of unequivocal describability is being challenged by a narrative structure in which visible truth is suspect and the concept of readability itself is put into question. As the precise contours of individuality disappear and so do the differences between the characters. As such, it constitutes an example of literary resistance against the visual control tactics of the sociopolitical regime within the dialectical discourse of spectacle and surveillance during the Age of Enlightenment. By presenting a novel in which subjective visuality and ambiguous characters create doubt, the chevalier de Mouhy questions the State's capability of reaching absolute command of the public space through a professedly flawless surveillance system in a dynamic urban society that was rapidly changing and becoming increasingly complex in regard to the circulation of people.

Moreover, with *La Mouche*, Mouhy's originality goes beyond breaking with the generic pattern of the "roman-mémoire" or questioning the efficiency of the police system of his time. He also managed to produce a lasting literary work whose main argument—that total visual control is unattainable—is still as relevant in twenty-first century discourse on surveillance politics as it was in the eighteenth-century.

In their most recent book entitled *The Watchman in Pieces: Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood*, professor Aaron Santesso and David H. Rosen analyze the theory and practice of surveillance in modern societies and its close relationship to literary culture from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century. According to them, modern literature "has been deeply engaged with and transformed by ideas about observation and control."[15] In the introduction, they make the following statement about surveillance practices: "surveillance, in its attempt to

[15] David Rosen and Aaron Santesso. *The Watchman in Pieces: Surveillance, Literature, and Liberal Personhood.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. p. 13.

grasp something about character, only renders character infinitely troublesome and perhaps unknowable." (17) This statement, which echoes Jean-Claude's Vitran argument about the failures of video-surveillance in an increasingly diverse and multifaceted Europe, seems to be in accordance with Mouhy's aim to purposely show that the power of the normalizing gaze is not without loopholes. By proposing a more liberal approach to reading and seeing the narrative space through disruptive visual effects, Charles Bigand's memoir shows readers that despite all efforts of the establishment—whether by means of documentation or observation practices—to visually control individuals, urban surveillance systems are not able to contain individual resistance which reacts against the power of the norm, nor a sociocultural reality that is ever changing, mobile, and multidimensional. One may argue that even after three centuries of technological advancements and the development of sophisticated visual tools, surveillance systems are nevertheless inefficient in their primary purpose of unequivocally anticipating and controlling human activities, as recent crime related incidents and terrorism events worldwide can attest. Analogous to the eighteenth-century French "Cabinet noir", we now have the sophisticated spy and security agencies that oversee surveillance data retrieval; homologous to Guillauté's centralized "Paperholder" we now use the internet, cellphones, and electronic databases which record and store information on every citizen in the world both for government and commercial purposes; instead of furtive "mouchards", we now find the surreptitious closed circuit television cameras in every corner of all public spaces. Yet, the power of the objectifying gaze, that persistent order-seeking agent, seems to consistently fail in its attempt to visually master each and every single individual, especially the ones who succeed in eluding the watchful eye of global surveillance systems or who do not comply with the prevailing standards of society.

Thus, it is Mouhy's disorderly visual poetics that make *La Mouche* an important literary work, one that should be studied, not only in relationship to eighteenth-century culture studies, but also for its relevance to today's visual culture and surveillance studies. The disruptive character images that we find in this novel reveal a narrative approach that experiments with its own representation within a literary genre, but most importantly, it brings to light an underestimated author who was conscious of the sociopolitical discourse of his time and of its influence on literary art. In essence, *La Mouche* allows us to see literature from an unconventional angle, and as such, it is worthy of further study. With our analysis, we hope to offer new research leads concerning the significance of Mouhy's literary works.

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