

## A Deconstructive Reading of Yasmina Reza's *Art*

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### ABSTRACT

This article is an investigation of Derrida's deconstructive strategies on Yasmina's Reza's *Art* in which concepts such as floating signifier, différance, paradoxes, and decentralization have been applied. Here the question of aesthetic values of modern abstract art is raised. Reza confronts us with a miscommunication as a shortcoming of the language and therefore a rift in a longstanding friendship. The play is about a white painting, but each character in the play observes the painting in a different color. It seems that the color acts as a sign which is caught up in a chain of signifiers that never rest on a definite signified. In addition, the painting which is the centre of the play is decentred and replaced by one of the characters of the play. At the end, it is demonstrated that the text of this play is indeterminate without giving us any definite meaning.

Keywords: Différance; floating signifiers; paradoxes; decentralization; miscommunication.

### INTRODUCTION

This article has been an attempt to examine Yasmina Reza's *Art* based on Derrida's deconstructive strategies such as of floating signifier, paradoxes, and decentralization. By applying these theories it has been proved that the text has no stable meaning and its ending is deferred, which is like a floating signifier always postponed. Moreover, there are some words in the play which change their place as they reach each character in the play and are thus constantly deferred. In addition, there are many contradictions in the play which make the text indeterminate and undecidable to interpret and this paves the way for the various interpretations one can have of the play.

The researcher has attempted to decenter the center of the play to open more interpretations of the play possible as each new center can open new perspective to the play, thus introducing the fact that a play can have as many centers as possible.

The play's story (*Art*) revolves around Serge's purchase of a modern painting for a huge sum of money. His friend Marc cannot believe that Serge, whom he has known and loved for 15 years, could possibly have spent out two hundred thousand francs on a white painting and he reacts by verbally attacking Serge. Yvan tries to placate both sides but ends up being himself the target of his two friends' criticisms. This simple plot sparks off a debate not just about contemporary art and its function and value in

modern society but also, and mainly, about the three characters' friendship. In fact, the disagreement about art is only one of the reasons for the tensions and conflicts experienced by this male relationship and "the plot itself is really an excuse to touch on universal themes: the fragility of human relationships, the failure of our aspirations in life, the conflict between being and perceiving, the value/ danger of sincerity, the loneliness inherent to human beings, the power of words" (Mateo, 2006, p. 176).

### Floating Color

The play, *Art*, begins with two friends conversing over a painting that Serge, one of the characters, has bought recently and it has cost him a lot. The painting seems to be white but practically speaking, everyone in the play seems to be obsessed with its color, observing it disparately. The color of the painting does not seem to be fixed as when it is handed to each character it seems to vary. The color of the painting is a sign, not standing on one certain signified. It is entangled in the chain of signifiers and forever floating and we as readers of the play are not sure which color it exactly is and who we should believe as every character is seeing the painting from different angles.

The word 'color' finds different interpretations by different characters of the play and as Fattal argues, "art can be all about words and reactions" to the words and not the painting itself (2004, p.14). It is

similar to the idea of Derrida that each signifier is trapped in the trap of *différance* forever floating. A sign is always moving on the chain of signifiers never reaching a definite signified and thus no absolute meaning can be given to a sign and it is there that the indeterminacy of meaning is created.

The play has three characters, Serge the owner of the painting and two of his friends Marc and Yvan, each viewing the color of the painting differently. To Marc, it is completely white with some white lines. White is the color he sees in the painting with grey lines going across it. This painting to Yvan is composed of various colors as he says, "**Yvan:** Various colors... There's yellow, there's grey, some slightly ochrish lines" (Reza, 1994, p. 32). It does not have one specific color like what Marc said. It is composed of various colors, yellow, grey, etc. To Serge, the owner of the painting it goes further than that, the painting finds different other colors as well.

"**Serge:** As far as I'm concerned, it's not white. When I say as far as I'm concerned, I mean objectively. Objectively speaking, it's not white. It has a white background, with a whole range of greys... There's even some red in it. You could say it's very pale. I wouldn't like it if it was white. Marc thinks it's white.... That's his limit... Marc thinks it's white because he's got hung up on the idea that it's white. Unlike Yvan. Yvan can see it isn't white. Marc can think what he likes, what do I care?" (Reza, 1994, p. 19)

Here, Serge sums up the ideas of his own with Marc, and Yvan's, each having diverse views about the color of the painting. As seen, to Serge the color is grey, red, pale, etc. It does not have one color, white, but it is established of diverse colors. Different characters show different views about the color which makes decision about the color of the painting difficult. It is weird that three persons have three different views about one single painting which makes the readers confused as what the right color of the painting is, but we cannot judge who is right as the text is the only evidence we have and it is filled with indeterminacy of truth.

Not only does each character have different views about the painting, but also the color of it changes like signifiers which are always changing place, never resting. For each character, it has a special color and when it goes to the other characters it changes as well. The color, like a signifier, is floating, constantly deferred, when reaching one specific character. As Knapp argues,

"Art "deeply" imbibed in the "flair of language" and the "method of burrowing into the inner core

of a word and theme, thereby drawing out their multiple meanings, revolves around a subject, which also seeks to discern motivations" (1999, p.112).

It shows how the words as being a part of language always escape the meaning but produce meanings. Here, the painting to Marc is white with grey lines; we hope it is the exact color but when it comes to Yvan it becomes other colors like yellow and again floating as one might ask what the connection between white and yellow is; and at the end when we are waiting to know what Serge as the owner of the painting and as the one who seems to know a lot about art, thinks about the color of the painting, it seems to find more various colors such as red, grey, pale, etc.

It gives us the impression that even the colors themselves are escaping from one another as it appears first white, then grey, next red, pale and so one. It is like finding the meaning of a word in a dictionary which always refers to other meanings and words. Likewise, no definite color can be given to the painting. Its color is like a hovering sign which does not stop at one specific color, always hanging and changing colors when it reaches a person. This floating signifier makes our attempt in determining a color for the painting impossible as it has already fallen into *différance* of meaning in which every sign is in a chain of signifiers never reaching a destination.

### Contradiction as an Indeterminate Factor

According to Derrida deconstruction as a theory does not exist as it is a demonstration that a text has already deconstructed itself. As the Yale deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller (1976) once put it in "Stevens' Rock and Criticism as Cure", "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself" (p. 341). It means that there is no need to apply a specific theory based on some certain rules to a text since a text when written or in the mind of an author has deconstructed itself as this very text is made up of language and language is not a certain and reliable device for communication. It has gaps inside itself without an author having any authority or control over it; the fault is on language.

Language never conveys what one says, and within the gaps it creates there are paradoxes and contradictions which disturb the meaning to be flawless. These contradictions actually promote various layers of meanings to come up so a text spontaneously contradicts itself. Likewise, in *Art*

whether intentionally or unintentionally the characters are contradicting what they say and do during the play which does not depict that they have lied and on which the author has no control as well, it might be said. It shows how much a text can be unreliable to convey a meaning and within a text there are a bunch of gaps hidden which spoil the presence and accuracy of meaning. Reza explained that the title "refers to the art of words, the art of keeping up human relationships, friendship" (Haro-Tecglen, 1998, p. 46), but "she also said she believes that words are utterly ineffectual since, rather than making relationships closer, they wreck them" (Mateo, 2006, p. 176).

The characters of the play, *Art*, in various parts are contradicting what they have stated or acted before. In one part of the play Marc and Serge are discussing over the painting Serge has bought. Marc speaks his mind and tells him what he thinks of the painting, calling it shit and that it is not so much valuable as Serge has paid hundred thousand francs for it. This makes Serge furious and argues with Marc that as to what criterion he calls it shit. "**Serge:** No. I'm not. By whose standards is it shit? If you call something shit, you need to have some criterion to judge it by." (Reza, 1994, p. 5) Serge here is speaking very reasonably, asking Marc for the reasons he has called the painting shit. But the same Serge when talking about Marc's wife turns out to be the most irrational person as he calls her "ugly, repellent and charmless" (Reza, 1994, p. 43) without any certain reasons. And when he is asked why she is repellent and charmless, he reasons that he hates her because of the way she waves her cigarette. Serge, a person who seems to be reasonable and who requires others to judge by reason, when it comes to him to give his reason of hating Marc's wife, brings the most irrational and unacceptable judgment as he has claimed. As Knap argues,

"Meanwhile, Serge, feeling attacked, takes umbrage. The vigorously intellectual tussle that ensues activates angry, hateful, loving emotions, thus accentuating the richness and the ambiguities of the personalities involved" (1999, p.112).

Even Yvan condemns him of his criterion for calling a person repellent,

**Yvan:** "You can't demolish someone because you don't like her method of waving away cigarette smoke! ...

**Serge:** Yes, you can" (ibid 44).

Serge here appears to be criticizing someone just for the way she smokes but, on the other hand, when his painting is called shit, he is talking of criterion for calling a work of art shit. He cancels out what he

previously said and therefore contradicts himself. He is an intellectual but the way he behaves is like a child who just wants to humiliate Marc.

In another instance, when Yvan meets Serge and sees the painting it seems to him nice as he does not call it shit, "**Serge:** You can't call this shit. **Yvan:** No"(Reza, 1994, p. 14). But at the end of the play he calls it shit,

**Serge:** "It is not white.

**Yvan:** A piece of white shit! ... That's what it is, a piece of white shit! ... Let's face it, mate...What you've bought is insane! ..." (ibid 54).

Moreover, he says that he does not like the painting and that he is not moved by it but in the middle of the play again when he is asked about his opinion on the painting he has another idea saying something completely in contrast to what he previously had said. **Yvan:** I didn't like the painting...but I didn't actually hate it" (1994, p. 17) ... **Marc:** "Were you moved by Serge's painting? **Yvan:** No" (ibid 19). This is when he argues that he does not like the painting and that he is not taken by the painting but further he denies what he has said before and says, "**Yvan:** Yes...I am quite...taken with it, yes...You're not, I gather" (Reza, 1994, p. 30).

As noticed, the characters are full of paradoxes in the play. In some parts the characters say something and do something and in other parts, they act and say something else. These contradictions and paradoxes in the text make the play more complicated to be understood. However, these contradictions in the text come from language which is an unreliable means of communication, since it cannot fully convey the meaning causing confusion and undecidability here for the texts and the readers reading the texts.

### Postponing Ending

One of the interesting things which add to the indeterminacy of the play is the open-endedness of the play. Each discussion that takes place between the characters is left unfinished. It is as if the play has no ending like signifier that does not have any ending and is postponed in the chain of signifiers. This never-ending of the play helps the process of generating meaning which has no stop. In each discussion characters do not reach a closure, it is rather left for the next discussion and interpretation.

First there is a debate between Serge and Marc over the painting in which Marc calls the painting shit and that Serge should not have paid this much money on it, that Serge does not agree and gets mad at him. This

conversation is left floating and the reader's attention is attracted toward the way Yvan will respond to it as Marc argues that he should discuss the matter with him, to tell him what Serge has done, "I must go and see Yvan, he's a friend of ours, I have to discuss this with Yvan"(Reza, 1994, p. 6). They have a talk over Serge's painting and that Yvan should talk to Serge and asks him why he has bought such an expensive painting completely white in color. Marc also argues that Serge has become kind of moody and does not laugh at all and the conversation ends with Yvan's remark that he will make him laugh: "He'll laugh, you just wait" (ibid 11). Again no result to the discussion is given and it is floating for the next person without reaching any conclusion. And in the next part when Serge and Yvan get together they seem to get along better than Marc and Serge and they laugh and Yvan tries to smooth the things over between them (Serge and Marc) which makes Serge furious again and asks Yvan, "Don't keep trying to smooth things over. Where d' you get this urge to be the great reconciler of the human race? Why don't you admit that Marc is atrophying? If he hasn't already atrophied" (Reza, 1994, p. 15). He tries to make reconciliation between them which makes thing worse and not only they do not laugh but also they do not reach any conclusion over their discussion and it does not end there about their relationship. What is the outcome of their discussion is not clear and we are left for the next part. Thus, as we see in the play no discussion or conversation ends completely but is left floating without any result. It is left for the reader to construct the meaning based on their own interpretation of the text, therefore, making various interpretations of the play possible.

Yasmina Reza's *Art* does not necessarily have any immediate discernible meaning. ... Freed from any obligation to carry the story forward, to present identifiable dramatic situations, speech develops in a textual space without constraints. It is not that the story is necessarily absent, but simply that it has become more discreet, and that it is up to the reader or spectator to construct it on the basis of the textual material supplied, whether that material is profuse or cryptic and elliptical (1994, p. 18-19).

The next part the conversation between Marc and Yvan does not either end with any clear ending but with questions, "Answer me this. You're getting married tomorrow and you and Catherine get this painting as a wedding present. Does it make you happy?... Does it make you happy? (Reza, 1994, p. 19). The discussion of this part ends here with question that can have many meanings. The same process is frequently repeated to the end of the play

when the characters seem to have found reconciliation. However, there are a lot left unanswered in the play as Yvan's relationship with his mother and the stepmothers. What does he do to reconcile them? What happens to the discussion between Marc and Serge over Marc's wife in which Serge insults her and calls her repellent and charmless. As Inas Messiha asserts, " a final gesture of good will reconciles the friends but leaves the issues unresolved" (n.d., p. 306).

Most of the discussions in the play are left without answer or ending. The ending of the play is depicted by what Marc states. It ends with a poem which is not clear what it is about. It can be about the white painting- the subject which has covered the whole play. It is said that the painting is white but some says that it is not white but there are some other colors in it as well. One interpretation can be that the last poem is what the painting might show which is a man skiing in the snow when the snow is falling and when the snow stops falling the man disappears in the landscape or it represents a man who moves across a space and disappears.... (Reza, 1994, p. 57). It can also be said that after they draw some pictures on the painting, the result is what is brought up in the poem. Nothing determinate can be said about the play as the play does not open its closure to us as it constantly makes us confused about what is going on in the play. Marc, the most straightforward of the three closes the play with a "cryptic verse", which ends:

My friend Serge, who's one of my oldest friends, has bought a painting. "It's a canvas about five feet by four. It represents a man who moves across a space then disappears" (Reza, 1994, p. 47).

"Marc's poem and the men themselves are, much like the painting, left open for interpretation" (Ryngaert, 2002, p.5). This demonstrates that the ending of the poem is also postponed and left for interpretations.

### **Decentralization of the Center**

Previously, it was held that the center is a place in which everything turns around it and it makes a balance among the structures of the text and therefore, a coherently unified, fixed system would emerge. Its task was to organize the whole system around a central place through which a text can be interpreted. Derrida in his well-known 1967 lecture argued,

The function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure-one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure-but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the *free play* of the structure.

No doubt that by orienting and organizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the *free play* of its elements inside the total form. (Derrida, 1978, p. 88)

This is what was claimed about center before Derrida's notions. However, as Derrida shows up with his deconstructive theory, he subverts the center and believes that the center prevents the free play of meaning as it makes one unified whole and does not allow other parts of the text which each can function as a center feasible; therefore, simply, he believes that the center can be everywhere in a text and everywhere in a text can establish a center from which the text can be read. As Derrida says, "the center is not in the center" (Derrida, 1978, p.89). When a center is deconstructed, everywhere in a text can substitute the previous center and becomes a center which can make many centers possible, which results in the free play of meaning. Thus, we can produce a number of centers that each can be considered as a center from which a text can be interpreted differently. Each center can produce a different view to the text and this makes the process of signification possible.

The very text, the play, can be viewed from various centers and not just the present center which is turning around the white painting, which causes the relationship between the characters to get worse. The whole play is centered on the white painting including every discussion, argument, meeting, and dispute they have with one another. The relationship is all that takes place in the play as Messiha says, "This play is more about human relationships than art" (n.d., p.307). The relationship between Marc and Serge, who has been close friend for years, gets worse and they insult each other over the simplest issues and even Serge calls Marc's wife a repellent, ugly person.

Therefore, the central center of *Art* is the white painting upon which the foundation of the play has rested. But as it was mentioned, according to deconstructive theory no center can dominate a text. However, the researcher is going to look at the text from another angle in which new look towards the play would emerge.

Yvan as the marginalized character who does not seem to be related to center of the play, -white painting- by a meticulous reading can become the center of the play whose actions and talks move the play forward. It is him who causes the relationship between two friends get worse. From the beginning of the play when Yvan is at Serge's house, talking about the painting and they discuss about their friend, Marc, and his opinion about art, Yvan opens the issue which makes Serge more sensitive about Marc's behavior.

Yvan calls Marc moody and that his taste is classy and does not understand the modern art, "His taste is classical, he likes things classical, what do you expect . . ." ... You know Marc is moody, there's nothing new about that... It's true he's a bit gloomy at the moment"(Reza, 1994, p.15). This is the beginning of what happens to the relationship between Marc and Serge as the play is the play of relationships. Yvan's opinion about Marc causes Serge to blame Mar, "what I blame him for is his tone of voice, his complacency, his tactlessness. I blame him for his insensitivity" (Reza, 1994, p.15). And even when Yvan tries to smooth things over, it becomes worse as he has already, intentionally or unintentionally, said that he is moody and sardonic.

Moreover, when Yvan comes to report to Marc what happened between him and Serge, and that they laughed and they were very happy when together, Marc gets jealous as he sees they have enjoyed each other but when he was with Serge, Serge did not laugh," **Yvan:** It was Serge who laughed first. **Marc:** It was Serge who laughed first. . . He laughed first and you joined in" (ibid 16). This fact that he sees Serge now away from himself makes him jealous and this is what Yvan has reported. Moreover, when he is with Marc he says that he did not like the painting and that he was not moved by it but when he is with Serge he says something different, that he was moved by the painting and that he likes it as a modern art.

**Yvan:** I didn't like the painting...but I didn't actually hate it" (Reza, 1994, p.17) . . .

**Marc:** "Were you moved by Serge's painting?"

**Yvan:** No "(ibid 19).

This is when he argues that he does not like the painting and that he is not taken by the painting but when he is with Serge he says something else. It may appear that Yvan is the minor character and the whole play is centered around the struggle Marc and Serge has with one another over the painting but actually it is Yvan who triggers this struggle between them. As Richard Hornby in "Ireland Your Ireland" explains, "a third friend, Yvan, is enlisted by both to support their sides. Yvan's vacillating and equivocating make up of most of the play's brief action, which culminates in fisticuffs" (Hornby, 1998, p. 563). Yvan now becomes the center of the play and this adds to the indeterminacy of the play as well as who or what can be recognized as the center; nevertheless, as we see the center can be everything and everyone, it changes place; now it can be Yvan who with what he says and does moves the play forward. Even when they try to make reconciliation and as Serge says, "All right, listen, it's just a picture, we don't have to get bogged down with it, life's too short. . . (Reza, 1994, p. 20).

When the name of Yvan shows up everything gets ruined since Serge quotes a sentence from Yvan in which it says that Marc has lost his sense of humor by this Marc gets mad and again their relationship starts to become weakened. Marc tries to make peace with Serge and begin to apologize as he thinks that he has been wrong about what he has said about the painting and that he has been harsh at that moment. He argues that deep down the painting has some sense and there is something poetic about it and this is the moment he tries to apologize.

Therefore, as noticed, this is not the painting which causes dispute between two friends as they try to forget everything and as they both agree that the painting is a work of art. The dispute starts over the fact that Yvan has said that Marc has no sense of humor and that he has lost it. Everything is going well between them and they have no problem with the painting until Yvan talks about Marc that he has lost his sense of humor. It seems the white painting is the center of the arguments between them as Tom Bishop says, "The painting serves as a catalyst in the play for drawing out unresolved issues and deep-seated emotions within the characters concerning their relationships to each other as the escalating argument over the painting leads to a downward spiral that becomes personal" (Bishop, 2007, p.4). But here it is clear that it is Yvan who ruins their relationship and who is at the center of the argument they have. It seems that even the discussion over Yvan leads to their fight with one another even questioning whether they have things in common or not.

**Serge:** Have you any idea what you and I have in common? ...

**Marc:** That's a question that could take us down a very long road... (Reza, 1994, p. 36).

Here again we see that although Yvan is not present physically, his presence is felt. Therefore, as observed, the privilege given to the painting as the center of the play has been subverted and it has been replaced with Yvan which now becomes a center from whose influence on the play, the play can be deconstructed and reconstructed as it subverts the binary in which the white painting is the center. It is the painting around which the whole work is organized and now a new center is introduced which itself can be deconstructed too as within this new center many gaps and contradictions can be found.

In one part of the play when a fight has been started because of Yvan, and when he wants to calm them down, Serge asserts that,

**Yvan:** I don't understand what's going on. Can't we just calm down? There's no reason to insult each other, especially over a painting.

**Serge:** You realize all this "calm down" and behaving like the vicar is just adding fuel to the fire! Is this something new?" (Reza, 1994, p. 40).

This is for the first time that Serge warns Yvan that whenever he decides to smooth things over between Marc and Serge their relationship gets worse. His role is adding fuel to the fire and that he is somehow guilty in what is happening between two friends.

In another instance, when Serge is insulting Marc's wife calling her "ugly, repellent and charmless", just because of "her method of waving away cigarette smoke condemns her out of hand" (Reza, 1994, p. 43), Yvan just says, "You're exaggerating!" (ibid 43), which raises Serge's satisfaction that someone else actually agrees with him: "You notice he doesn't say I'm wrong, he says I'm exaggerating, but he doesn't say I'm wrong. Her method of waving away cigarette smoke reveals a cold, condescending and narrow-minded nature" (ibid).

This implication by Yvan that Marc's wife is narrow-minded and repellent unconsciously marks a serious point in the relationship between Marc and Serge. At the end of the play, again it is Yvan who is targeted as the main problem-maker and the one who has ruined their evening as he comes late and from that time on he has created the conflict between them,

**Marc:** You arrive three-quarters of an hour late, you don't apologize, you deluge us with your domestic woes. ...

**Serge:** And you inertia, your sheer neutral spectator's inertia has lured Marc and me into the worst excesses. ...

**Marc:** You've been piping up with this finicky, subservient voice of reason ever since you arrived, it's intolerable. (Reza, 1994, p. 51)

Now Marc and Serge bombard Yvan with accusations that he is guilty of whatever has been going wrong between them. He is the one who arrives late talking about his domestic woes which does not let them to concentrate on their problem that can be solved. And his silence also adds to the fuel of their conflict. Serge believes that it is Yvan whose reticence puts them into the worst conflict. He becomes guilty of the charges which have ruined the friendship between Marc and Serge. He becomes the center of their attention that it is him who adds fuel to the fire when they have been discussing issues and wanted to reconcile with one another but his presence, his talking, and his reticence exacerbate their little problem, thus to be magnified, leading to their serious conflict.

As noticed, the white painting that was the center on which the whole foundation of the play is based has been subverted, given its place to Yvan's influence on the relationship between two friends. There are times when they want to make peace with one another and they confess that the painting is not what has held their relationship back as this is the minor problem they can have and it can be easily solved but when the presence of Yvan is felt, their friendship seems to get worse as he intentionally or unintentionally interferes in their discussion which intensifies their conflict. Therefore, he becomes the center of their problem as the play is the play about relationships. However, this very center can be easily subverted as it is located in language which is full of paradoxes and contradictions. For example, this very center can be deconstructed as Yvan who is guilty for worsening the friendship between them has been trying several times to reconcile them but they themselves rejected him as a minor character. Or as he is not present sometimes they start fighting.

Another center which can be viewed as the center of the play can be Marc's love toward Serge, and the fact that Marc does not want a painting to take his place and it is now when the argument begins as he believes his value is more than the money Serge has paid for the painting. He has bought a painting without consulting him, which infuriates Marc, as Bishop (2007) asserts,

"Marc has served as a mentor to Serge and feels betrayed and hurt by the fact that Serge has shown some independence and forward thinking about art without Marc's mentorship" (p.10).

Therefore, many centers can be established for the play, that each open different layers of meaning. therefore, the reader can look and read the text from different perspectives as Mateo (2006) says, " *Art* is endowed with the possibility of different readings and forms of enjoyment"(p.176).

## CONCLUSION

In contrast to the old view towards a work of art in which just one center was taken into consideration, in Derrida's view point the center is not in the center as it

can be any place in a work from which the work can be interpreted and this by itself can open many layers of signification as each center takes one perspective to the play and when there are many centers in the play, there are many interpretations as well. Thus, deconstruction helps dissemination of meaning possible. Having these many centers in itself makes the meaning undecidable as well.

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