DIGITAL PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN GEST
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IN THE FULSOMENESS OF THEIR SIZES, colors, and obsessive digital manipulations Ben Gest's images of named persons, such as *Erick in His Volvo*, address the complexity of photographic portraiture head-on, so to speak.[1] This complexity arises as a result of the interrelationships between portraiture's theorization as a genre and the histories of the two media of photography and digital technology. Gest's images call for an assessment of how digital photography and portraiture produce the visualized subject today.

When using the term "subject" I do not mean to refer to a specific individual, but rather to a critical category.[2] The nineteenth-century art historian Jacob Burckhardt wrote: "In a manner stronger than any of the other genres of art the portrait depends on 'the perfection of the given subject'."[3] Burckhardt most appreciated that the genre of portraiture could achieve the ideal of visual and theoretical correspondence between subject and medium without ostentatious individuation. For the art historian Burckhardt, as for his contemporary the philosopher Hegel, the subject in the portrait may be understood as a metaphysical being; a fictionalized paragon who nonetheless demonstrates in its visualization the meaning of consciousness.[4] This is the subject that Burckhardt saw not only in early Renaissance portraits, but also all around him in contemporary photographs.

The individuals portrayed in Gest's portraits occupy the preeminent site of the subject in our Postmodern era: the digital image. The people shown in the photographs enjoy intelligibility only to the extent that they are first established as subjects *through* the digital media. They become *who we see them to be* as a result of their visualization as portraits through this media. This *becoming* of the visualized subject—let's call it the subject's "dynamic"—must be understood as mediated through a durational process. As Hamza Walker states, Gest's practice "is a seamless combination of dozens of digital images of the sitter and their immediate environ," which appears at various passages in the photographs "to break down."[5] This breaking down of the image signals the effects of its durational process upon the subject portrayed. Inserted into *this* visual realm, subjected as they are to digital manipulation, the individuals that we have traditionally expected from the genre of portraiture become subordinated to other markers of Postmodern visualization: ambiguity, celebrity, and the image as commodity.

Lacking the individual, Gest's photographs also contain something else: overt references to Mannerist painting of the sixteenth century and to the tradition of portraiture since that time. Hamza Walker likens the photographs in their "subtle and not so subtle exaggerations of proportion and perspective" to Mannerist painting.[6] The term "Mannerism," used by art historians to refer to a period style in the history of art, derives from the Italian word *maniera*, or style, and designates a highly unnatural style of painting characterized by extreme foreshortening, acidic color tonalities, and elongated figures. Gest's photographs reveal all of these characteristics in the artful manipulation of the becoming subject. His effects of spatial distortion result from the incorporation and the manipulation of many digital images into each photograph, so that dimensional incongruities, such as the exaggerated foreshortening seen in the prominently displayed feet and hands of *Erick in His Volvo,* appear.

[FIG. 1]

Gehrhard Richter, ***Lisende (Reading),*** 1994, Oil on Linen, 28 1/2 x 40 1/8 inches

Historians of photography have often argued that the democracy and economy of the medium relative to the Beaux-Arts painting tradition appealed immediately to the rapidly expanding European bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, resulting in photography's immediate popularity for the portrayal of these newly enfranchised individuals.[7] But what of photography's effects on the concepts represented in and by the earlier portraits in European art? Anyone who has studied the portrait quickly realizes how pervasive painted and sculpted portraits were in Europe from the middle of the fifteenth century on.[8] Early twentieth-century art historians pointed out that by the seventeenth century the painted portrait could be connected to a more democratic inclusion of the merchant classes in the representations of individuals, of which Rembrandt's *Syndics of the Cloth Guild* is the most famous example.[9] The genre of portraiture ideally suited the portrayal of the Early Modern merchant classes, as well as Kings, artists, and families. Gest's photographs refer to an historical incongruity often pointed out by historians of the photograph: that the documentary effects of photography, associated from its beginnings in the middle of the nineteenth century with portraiture, forever affected our understanding of all earlier art forms, particularly the mimetic genres and representational media, such as portraiture and painting.[10] We do not normally think of a later art form's or medium's impact on a prior tradition, but this is precisely what I am claiming for photography in regard to painting. After photography, painting could never look the same again. Because early photography took on portraiture as one of its two primary genres—the other being landscape or the documentation of place—historical portrait paintings could least escape the pressures put upon their interpretation by portrait photography. Many of the paintings by the German artist Gerhard Richter provide excellent contemporary examples of the stakes involved in this historical incongruity. Richter's *Lisende (Reading)* [fig. 1] uses painting to simulate a portrait photograph, thereby playing with our knowledge of the techniques of oil painting and analog photography in the genre of portraiture. Art historian Rosalind Krauss has made a related and highly influential historical argument regarding early twentieth-century sculpture.[11] She argued that after Cubist sculptures and Ready-Mades, life-size marble and bronze sculpture, which traditionally had depicted the human body and the portrait, could never again occupy a prominent position in art. Marble sculpture could not look the same after Brancusi and Duchamp. For Krauss this meant that the traditional three-dimensional media could not offer the conceptual purity of nonrepresentational work. She argued for a clean break between traditional sculpture and modern sculpture, a parting of the ways that allows for an ontological divide separating modernism from the past. This separation bears directly upon the representation of the human body and its three-dimensional depiction in the older sculptures. According to Krauss, that three-dimensionally represented human body became relegated to the past because modern sculpture could

[FIG. 2]

Paul Gauguin, ***Tahitian Woman and Boy***, 1899, Oil on canvas, 37 1/4 x 24 3/8 inches

address more conceptually abstract issues, particularly the "tension" "between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing."[12]

However similarly changes in media may affect both what has been and will be depicted or portrayed, traditional painting in its representational scheme remained allied generically to the photographic image in ways that newer three-dimensional work did not to traditional sculpture. This supplementary aspect of painting's relationship to the medium of analog photography is particularly evident in the genre of portraiture, for, soon after its invention, painting began to borrow its "reality effects" from the portrait photograph. The genre of portraiture required exactly those mimetic, or documentary, values that photography offered in its portraits. In fact, for a photographic portrait to be made at that time, the technologies available required the absolute stillness or immobilization of the sitter during the shoot, and the construction of the portrait studio space so as to control light in a particular way, so that the clearest possible image of the individual could result. The best-known evidence of the pressures that photography placed upon the painted portrait may be observed in the work of the French Post-Impressionists: for example, Gauguin's 1899 *Portrait of Tahitian Woman and Boy* [fig. 2]. It is well known that the Post-Impressionists used photographs to paint from, but their portrait paintings also mimic the conditions of the photographic studio in the immobility of the sitter. In the commercial photographer's establishment the sitters required props and other devices to keep them immobilized for the long exposures required by the available technology. However unnecessary we know the chair to have been to a painting that could not have been made in one sitting alone, in the Gauguin double portrait it appears to be that which keeps both mother and son immobile, fixed and conjoined. We find this same frozen attitude of the figure evident in most of Gest's portrait photographs. For example, in *Alan With His Car Still Running* [fig. 3] the lid of the trash can anchors the body to a suburban landscape in which it otherwise appears to float, with feet hovering just above the pavement. So too, Alan's gaze, lowered and intent, freezes on the lid.

The immobility found in the photographic aesthetic of portraiture after the invention of photography goes against the earliest theories of the portrait as a genre of lifelikeness and liveliness. At the beginning of the Renaissance the Florentine Humanist Leon Battista Alberti wrote about the portrait in this way: "Through painting, the faces of the dead go on living for a very long time."[13] Gianlorenzo Bernini's 1666 *Bust of Louis XIV* in Versailles was said by a contemporary French source to have been done over the course of a number of meetings during which the King moved around the room speaking both to his courtiers and the artist about art and

other topics.[14] According to art historians, the lengthy process of portraiture that required the King's mobility and animation allowed Bernini to capture the liveliness of the King made visible in the finished bust through the exuberant treatment of the drapery with its exaggerated folds.

[FIG. 3]

Ben Gest, ***Alan With His Car Still Running***, 2006, Archival inkjet print, 52 1/16 x 39 1/2 inches

So too, the Italian Renaissance biographer Giorgio Vasari insisted in his description of the *Mona Lisa* that Leonardo da Vinci hired musicians or entertainers in order to obtain the lifelikeness, or liveliness, he desired in the portrait:

> If one wanted to see how faithfully art can imitate nature, one could readily perceive it from this head; for here Leonardo subtly reproduced every living detail. The eyes had their natural luster and moistness, and around them were the lashes and all those rosy and pearly tints that demand the greatest delicacy of execution. The eye-brows were completely natural, growing thicker in one place and lightly in another and following the pores of the skin. The nose was finely painted, with rosy delicate nostrils as in life. The mouth, joined to the flesh-tints of the face by the red of the lips, appeared to be living flesh rather than paint. On looking closely at the pit of her throat one could swear that the pulses were beating.[15]

While it is true that Vasari never saw the actual *Mona Lisa*, the theory of portraiture of his time imposed upon his interpretation of it a musical motivation for such a lifelike portrayal of the sitter as this.

Given the references to musical and artistic performance so often made in texts that speak of the processes of portraiture, it is useful to think of the traditional view of portraiture as a genre requiring an allusion to the performativity or potential action of the sitter for its successful achievement. This aspect of the genre, which related to the earlier theoretical literature, diminished to a significant extent in modern portraiture after photography, as I indicated above in my brief discussion of Burckhardt's views. What remained instead, even in the most abstract of modernist portraits, was the minimum of mimetic signs of resemblance necessary for the recognition of the individual portrayed. Picasso's 1910 *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard* [fig. 4] demonstrates that in such portraits all of the extra signage has gone; only the bare minimum

necessary for recognizing the individual portrayed remained. In the painted portraits by Picasso of the first decade of the twentieth century, the resemblance which had been expected of the portrait since the Renaissance had been effaced as far as possible without disappearing altogether; without the action or performativity that went with it in the earlier periods.

[FIG. 4]

Pablo Picasso, ***Portait of Ambroise Vollard***, 1910, Oil on Canvas, 36 1/4 x 25 5/8 inches

[FIG. 5]

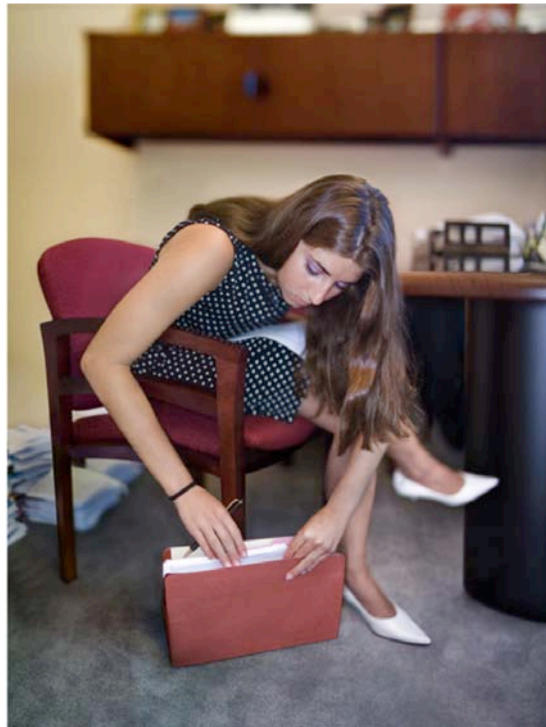
Pablo Picasso, ***Woman Reading***, 1932 Oil on Canvas, 51 1/8 x 38 1/4 inches

Long after Picasso's revolutionary Cubist portraits, Roland Barthes warned that the photograph's appearance as a "perfect *analogon*," or referent to, reality had actually prevented interpretation because of its "second meaning" as style, to be understood as its aesthetic and cultural context.[16] What more could this analogon be, asked Barthes, but itself, no longer the person represented but the portrait of the signifier? With their exaggerated signs of resemblance Picasso's later 1930's portraits of Thérèse Walter [fig. 5] illustrate Barthes' notion of the "photographic paradox" in which "two messages" simultaneously co-exist: the analogon to the actual person portrayed and the rhetoric of the image which conveys the style and culture of the artist.[17] The later portraits by Picasso reverse the effacement of signage so evident in the Cubist portraits. Barthes' theory of photography gives us another side of the modern subject—excessively signified but without the animating life force that allows for a sustained interpretation of the figure portrayed. This idea when applied to the portrait photograph served as the basis for celebrity photographs, the repetitious pictures of the star which in their analogical plentitude remain impenetrable as reality and only superficially known as style or culture.

But what of the photographs of Gest in the historical account that I have just constructed? Filled with signs of resemblance they nonetheless break down. The subject depicted freezes in action; yet the subtle variations in the depth of field surrounding them and between them and the viewer denote the passage of time, calling for a narrative to sustain the image before us. The reference to time in Gest's pictures unties the knot of Barthes' "photographic paradox." In the main, Gest's photographs depict a single full-length figure on a scale that art historians nominate as monumental, that is, the format of the medium, in this case the digital photograph, is outsize to the scale we expect from it. The enormous photographs far surpass the size of a computer screen, where we know that the image was digitally manipulated. This monumentality became a common aspect of the figure depicted in full-length seventeenth- and eighteenth-century painted

portraits. In Gest's photographs, however, the monumentality does something other than emphasize the power of the sitter; it expands the time-based medium so that we can recognize its narrative surroundings.

[FIG. 6]



Ben Gest, ***Tara Searching,*** 2006, Archival inkjet print, 52 15/16 x 39 1/2 inches

Gest's portraits depict someone who is named, but only by a first name, and seemingly intensely engaged in looking at something—something like her jewelry, as in *Jessica and Her Jewelry*; or a file folder on the office floor, as in the photograph of *Tara Searching* [fig. 6]; or sometimes, just looking at something not visible, off-frame, as in the picture of *Alice Waiting*. This "looking away" or "out of the frame" gaze can also be found in painted portraits of the later nineteenth century. In these kinds of portraits we cannot encounter the gaze of the sitter that the genre of portraiture traditionally uses in order to give the illusion that the viewer can know the person portrayed, as when the *Mona Lisa* appears to look back at us. Gest's figures look away from us and force the viewer to seek alternative interpretations of the image outside the frame. In such portraits by Gest as *Jessica and Her Jewelry* or *Alice Waiting* the title provides the viewer with help in the construction of an explanation for the looking away.

The expectation of lifelikeness given by the face in the portrait that looks back at us cannot be sustained to the same extent in Gest's portraits where the gaze focuses "off-screen," a word borrowed from film and that seems to fit these digitally manipulated gazes. In film a gaze off-screen denotes distraction on the character's part. In Gest's portraits when the gaze of the figure is focused off-screen, the viewer must concentrate on the body presented rather than on the gaze returned. There are numerous examples of this default to viewing the body provided by modern portrait painting, for example, John Singer Sargent's famous *Portrait of Madame X* [fig. 7]. Similarly, in Gest's *Laura on Her Side* [fig. 8], where the woman's sensuous body becomes the focus of our attention by virtue of the looking away of the subject in the portrait. The attention to jewelry or to clothing as both an adornment for the body of the woman in the portrait and as a distraction to our gaze upon her is also a familiar trope in painted portraits, such *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* by Vermeer [fig. 9], which relates in this respect to Gest's photograph of *Kate Fixing Her Earring* [fig. 10].

[FIG. 7]

John Singer Sargent, ***Madame X***
1883-84, Oil on Canvas,
82 1/8 x 43 1/4 inches

[FIG. 8]

Ben Gest, ***Laura on Her Side***
2006, Archival inkjet print,
39 1/2 x 49 1/2 inches

Gest's portraits often show figures in or near conveyances or vehicles that assume an important part of the photograph's composition, for example, *Kathy on a Windy Boat*, or *Curt Near the Underpass*. These machines intended to move the body through space contrast markedly with the frozen stillness of the figures. Shown in what appears to be a moment of reverie just before or after embarking in a car or wheelchair or boat, the inclusion of the vehicle imparts to the viewer the sense that the person has been depicted in a moment of transition from one space to another. The figure is in transit.

In these and other photographs, Gest's figures, with or without a vehicle, appear on a threshold (*Eric Coming Back Inside*, *Jennifer in Her Roof Garden*, *Samantha with Bags for William*). With named figures shown stepping or moving across the threshold of one space into another, Gest's images embody the Postmodern conception of intersubjectivity, theorized by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.[18] In his interpretation of the threshold as a transition between the interior and exterior, Levinas sought to think a way out of the problem of the alienated modern subject. The threshold could be a place of ethics and dialogue where transcendence might even occur. For Levinas, his philosophy of the threshold marked an end to an antiquated metaphysics of the subject, and a hopeful beginning for the Postmodern subject, one who could authentically recognize and be recognized by others. According to Levinas, subjects would achieve a reciprocal responsibility in this intersubjective space.

I do not know if Gest thought of Levinas' theory of the subject when he made his photographs, but in them the transition denoted by the vehicle or the architecture finds the potential for intersubjectivity in the placement of the figure on the threshold, whether of the house, the porch, or the car. These figures appear at these specific locations within the Postmodern landscape, without returning our gaze upon them. When Levinas used this philosophy of the subject to interpret Martin Buber's famous essay "I and Thou," he spoke of the other who comes to us from a distance.[19] This distance is indicated in Gest's photographs by the subject's looking away from the viewer. Yet, according to Levinas on Buber, the recognition of distance, of the impossibility of truly knowing, or seeing, the other, itself provides an awareness of the necessity of a new kind of ethics. This would be an ethics for the Postmodern era based more on an

acknowledgement of what we are before we crossed the threshold than on traditional ideas of recognition.[20] Levinas writes: "In my own analyses, the approach to others is not originally in my

[FIG. 9]

Johannes Vermeer, ***Girl with a Pearl Earring***
ca.1665, Oil on canvas, 17 1/2 x 15 1/4 inches

[FIG. 10]

Ben Gest, ***Kate Fixing her Earring***
2005, Archival inkjet print, 52 7/8 x 38 1/2 inches

speaking out to the other, but in my responsibility for him or her. That is the original ethical relation. That responsibility is elicited, brought about by the face of the other person, described as a breaking of the plastic forms of the phenomenality of appearance…."[21] The "breaking of plastic forms" returns us to Gest's manipulation and repetition of multiple digital images that cause distortions in the construction of the single portrait photographs. Just as Levinas argues, we cannot count on a prior understanding "of the phenomenality of appearance" in these photographs. When we stand before the monumental portraits by Gest, we must rely on what we encounter in the present of the subject portrayed in them, although we may understand their construction is durational, occurring through time.

In the most famous group portrait in the history of art, the picture of *Las Meninas* [fig. 11] by the seventeenth-century painter Velasquez, a figure on the threshold plays an important role in the interpretation of the meaning of the portrait of the King and Queen, shown in the mirror on the wall at the back of the room.[22] The artist is shown painting them, but we cannot gaze upon the royal couple directly ourselves. Our eyes encounter the forward gaze of the king and queen in the portrait format of the reflection on the wall, just as they encounter the face of the tiny Infanta or Princess portrayed with her court. On the threshold to the room, behind the figures of the Princess and her entourage, stands the figure of a man identified as a guard or escort to the ladies of the court. This position, although mainly honorific in the seventeenth-century court of Spain, has been portrayed in a more literal manner by Velasquez. The man holding the keys opens the door in advance of the procession of the absolute monarch, King Phillip, and his Queen, who will pass through the room depicted in the painting. When they do pass, their backs will be to us. This threshold in the palace cannot be broached by us or, presumably, by the painter. We will never know the absolute monarch of early modern Spain because we will not see his real face or receive his gaze.

[FIG. 11]

Diego Velasquez, ***Las Meninas***, ca. 1656, Oil on canvas, 125 1/4 x 108 3/4 inches

In contrast to the Early Modern figures on the threshold and in the portraits by Velasquez, I would argue that when we encounter the Postmodern subject in Ben Gest's art, despite all the echoes of an earlier tradition of portrait painting that I have found in it, we find a space where we can approach the other. Yes, this person has been manipulated through digital technology before our encounter, but we still acknowledge her relationship to our reality. While in transition on the sandy shore between water and land, holding the hand of a companion, she moves towards me. This portrait of another, of the artist's mother on the beach in Belmar, helps me to know better the historical problematic of how she has been constructed as a subject in the Postmodern digital world that I, too, inhabit.

NOTES

1. I am grateful to The Renaissance Society and Hamza Walker for the invitation to speak on Ben Gest's exhibition on December 7, 2006. Andrew Wegley provided me with research assistance of the highest quality in the preparation of my presentation. In addition, I wish to thank the Arts Research Institute, University of California, Santa Cruz for their support of the expenses associated with my work on this essay. In my recent book I explore at greater length some of the issues raised in this essay, see Catherine M. Soussloff, *The Subject in Art: Portraiture and the Birth of the Modern* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).
2. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 10-11.
3. Jacob Burckhardt, *Il Ritratto nella Pittura Italiana del Rinascimento*, trans. Daniela Pagliai (Rome: Bulzone, 1993), 32, with Pagliai citing Burckhardt's notes of 1863.
4. On Hegel's idea of consciousness in regard to Burckhardt, see Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the 'Phenomenology of Spirit' Assembled by Raymond Queneau*, ed. Alan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969).
5. Hamza Walker, "Cogito Sum," in *Ben Gest* exhibition poster, The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, n.p.
6. Walker, "Cogito Sum," n.p.
7. Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
8. Jacob Burckhardt, "Das Porträt in der italienishchen Malerei," in *Beiträge zur kunstgeschichte von Italien* (Basel: G. F. Lendorff, 1898).
9. The best known argument along these lines dates to 1902, see Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland*, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999). For further discussion of these historiographical issues, see Soussloff, *The Subject in Art*, 25-56.
10. This is one aspect of a complicated argument made by Walter Benjamin, see "Little History of Photography," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 1927-1934*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 507-530. See also, Catherine M. Soussloff, "Art Photography, History, and Aesthetics," in *Art History and Its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 295-313.
11. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977).
12. Krauss, *Passages*, 5.
13. Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans Cecil Grayson (London: Penguin, 1991), 60.
14. Paul Fréart de Chantelou, *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France*, ed. Anthony Blunt, ann. George C. Bauer, trans. Margery Corbett (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985. For my thinking here I am particularly indebted to a lecture on Bernini's working methods for the bust delivered by Genevieve Warwick at the Swedish Academy in Rome in September 2006.
15. Giorgio Vasari, "Life of Leonardo da Vinci Florentine Painter and Sculptor 1452-1519," in *Biography and Early Art Criticism of Leonardo da Vinci*, ed. Claire Farago (New York and London: Garland, 1999), I: 88-89.
16. Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message," in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 5-6.
17. Barthes, "The Photographic Message," 7-8.
18. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969).
19. Emmanuel Levinas, "Martin Buber's Thought and Contemporary Judaism," and "Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel and Philosophy," in *Outside the Subject*, trans Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 4-19; 20-39.
20. Levinas, "Apropos of Buber: Some Notes," in *Outside the Subject*, 40-48.
21. Levinas, "Apropos of Buber," 43-44.
22. For the primary interpretation of the figure in the background of the painting, see Jonathan Brown, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-century Spanish Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).