Surrealism and its Discontents

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A second-generation surrealist, recruited by André Breton in the early 1930s when still at high-school, Roger Caillois participated in the movement’s activities during the period of Le surréalisme au service de la révolution, before becoming, with Georges Bataille, one of the founders of the Collège de Sociologie. At the turn of 1955, Caillois published a particularly bitter attack on ethnography in the Nouvelle Nouvelle revue française, under the title ‘Illusions Against the Grain.’ Responding to Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Race and History, a booklet released under the aegis of UNESCO, Caillois denounced the ethnologist’s refusal to rank cultures hierarchically, according to their supposed positions on a single, continuous scale of development. According to Caillois, Lévi-Strauss (who published Tristes tropiques only a few weeks later) was merely the most recent and visible representative of a profession – ethnography – which, while claiming to criticise ethnocentrism, was in fact practising an undercover reverse-Eurocentrism, since for ethnographers their native culture (that of the West) remained the polarizing axis, even though they were committed to qualifying it negatively as often as they could. Most surprisingly, Caillois’s conclusion traced the source of ethnography’s crime against Western civilisation to surrealism, claiming that the latter was imbued with a cultural resentment that led it systematically to ridicule everything the West complacently prided itself on. Having denounced the ethnologist as a traitor, Caillois stripped away his mask and exposed... a surrealist.

In order to broaden his attack on the ethnographic profession as a whole, Caillois avoided singling out Lévi-Strauss, creating a collective subject: ‘The whole group,’ he wrote, ‘was surrealist or surrealising, before being ethnographic, and it is not by chance that the names of Claude Lévi-Strauss, of Michel Leiris, of Alfred Métraux and of Georges-Henri Rivière appeared on the cover of journals such as La Révolution Surréaliste, Documents and Minotaure (as did mine, by the way).’ ‘The whole group’? Was there, therefore, a set of ethnographers in France around 1955 who, around 1930, had been surrealists? Who had all collectively followed the same itinerary from Bohemia to the C.N.R.S.? The problem is that there is no record of any such group. In fact, whatever fascination James Clifford’s retrospectively tempting concept of ‘ethnographic surrealism’ may still exert, such a hybrid was never bodied forth. And Lévi-Strauss would have had no trouble retorting that he had never written in any of the journals mentioned by Caillois – at least under his own name. Moreover, that he was never a surrealist, and less than ever at the time when surrealism was at full strength; that his friendly relationship with Breton started much later, in the context of World War Two French émigrés in America. As for Métraux, he had always been an ethnographer, including in the heyday of surrealism, but never a surrealist, not even marginally. And if Leiris was both, it was not at the same time. It was only upon his return from the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, four years after having broken
away from the surrealist movement, that he became an ethnographer. As for Georges-Henri Rivière, no matter how close his personal and institutional relationships with the others had been, nothing in his CV fitted the definition of either ethnographer or former surrealist.

Caillois had two targets: on the one hand the cultural relativism purportedly ingrained in the ethnographic questioning of Western superiority; and on the other the scientific status claimed for the method on which ethnography founded its conclusions. Lévi-Strauss’s *Race and History* had appeared in a series of pamphlets, edited by Métraux at UNESCO, significantly entitled ‘La Question raciale devant la science moderne’ (‘The Racial Question as Judged by Modern Science’); the same series in which, in 1951, Leiris had published his *Race and Civilization*. What Caillois takes issue with most strongly is precisely ethnography’s arrogation to itself of the authority of ‘modern science.’ Caillois disputes the ethnographers’ claim that, like experimental scientists, they base their conclusions on observations: fieldwork, he argues, lacks every feature that makes an experiment scientific. The anti-Western conclusions ethnologists seem entitled to draw from fieldwork are in fact falsely experimental, falsely *a posteriori*, since the field trip they so proudly invoke teaches them nothing in reality; rather, it confirms their expectations and prejudices. They leave the West committed to condemning it, to demonstrating the superiority of the Other, and nothing they encounter will change their minds: ‘Rejection came prior to study; and inspired it.’

Caillois continues:

> What really matters, what is primal and irreducible, beyond any possibility of rational assessment or objective inquiry, is the passionate conviction that the civilization of which one is part, is hypocritical, corrupted, and repulsive.

He returns relentlessly to this point:

> The fact that these self-appointed experts had the opportunity to check what voodoo was about on the spot, and that even this was not enough to make them change their minds, or that having changed their minds they remained silent – such obstinacy exposes the gravity of the illness that plagues scientists such as themselves.

Or again:

> Those whose names I have just given did not love the masks from the New Hebrides, the Negro rhythms, and the trances of voodoo because their professional activities led them to recognize their cultural worth; on the contrary, they chose ethnography because a relentless need for defiance drove them to prefer primitive sculpture over the portal of Chartres, jazz over Mozart, and the spasm of possession by spirits in which they do not believe over the cult
of a God in which they probably believe even less. But one who is guilty of being the God of their father and which they are ashamed of having once believed in. Caillois gives one – and only one – specific example of these ‘illusions against the grain.’ Harking back to the heroic period of surrealism, he recalls a double-page spread from the memorable third issue of La Révolution surréaliste [fig. 1], edited by Antonin Artaud in April 1925. This composition confronts an address to the Pope on the left-hand page, with an address to the Dalai Lama on the right-hand one. The right-hand page, Caillois comments, ‘offered to the Dalai Lama the devotion that on the facing page was refused to the Pope in the most insulting terms.’ This is an accurate description. The front cover of the issue read, in capital letters: ‘1925. END OF THE CHRISTIAN ERA.’ Breton, too, wrote in Légitime défense that: ‘For nothing in the world would we defend an inch of French territory, but we would defend to the death the smallest conquest of the proletariat in Russia and China.'
Breton and Aragon’s invocatory outbursts, as well as Artaud’s – all of them utterly abstract – reflected the extensive contemporary political and ideological polemics that accompanied the self-destructive course on which Europe found itself embarked (one need mention only the Franco-German rivalry and the catastrophic war that ensued). For both artistic avant-garde and political extreme-left the model and inspiration for such an Orientalism was primarily the revolutionary defeatism in the name of which in early 1918 Lenin had signed the territorially disastrous Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany, which, putting an end to a war the Tsars had started, allowed Bolsheviks to concentrate on the consolidation of the October Revolution within Russia. As Aragon proclaimed, ‘we are the defeatists of Europe.’ One might term such defeatism a revolutionary masochism, and the French surrealists were, so to speak, jealous of the military defeat of both Russia and Germany.

In this context, India and China were essentially puppets behind which the Germanic, Slavic, or even Semitic world pulled the strings. Germany and Russia were seen as the propagandists of what the political right of the time often called the ‘Asiatic virus.’ Such an opposition between Western activism, both technological and military, and Eastern passivity, was regularly staged in contests whose protagonists, like tennis players, kept returning the ball into the other’s camp. Advantage changed after each publication. Oswald Spengler’s Decline of the West was followed in France by André Malraux’s Temptation of the West,20 or on the other side by the Maurrasian Henri Massis’s bestseller, Defence of the West.21 Breton quotes all these names in Légitime défense, together with those of René Guénon, Paul Valéry and the Count Herman von Keyserling.

In this debate, the Orient, relatively unanchored on the map, was as undefined conceptually as it was geographically, an Orient with no self-image, no objective credentials, defined simply by the unlocatable menace that some Western intellectuals feared, but that the surrealists were delighted to see hovering over Europe. In this context, to lay claim to any kind of fieldwork would have made no sense. Aragon apostrophizes India as Artaud does Tibet, and Breton China, without giving thought, however slightly, to any direct connection with those geographical and cultural entities. In that sense, however serious an individual’s discontent with his own civilization needed to be in the 1930s in order for him (or her) to become an ethnographer, it had nothing in common with such an abstract, global a priori rejection of the West. The imposition of the East versus West binary model onto the experience of alterity evacuates its concrete content. Alterity here is constructed on the basis of a mere rotation, a mere reversal, or a negative print.

Indeed surrealism, for the sake and pleasure of polemics, quite often indulged in the easy game of dual oppositions. Think of the reading list with its two columns of names that circulated in 1930. On the left side ‘Do read’ (lisez), on the right, ‘Don’t read’ (ne lisez pas). It was the same type of setting, in the most material sense of the term, that Artaud used in the double-page spread (one of the very few published by La Révolution surréaliste) that contains the two addresses: to the Pope on the left page; to the Dalai Lama, on the right – with the gutter in the middle. Conflating the surrealists’ reverse-Orientalist discourse with ethnography, as Caillois does, thus makes little sense. The fieldwork, one might even suggest, provides the ethnographer with the type of concrete experience
that should allow him to escape from the abstraction of the East/West binary paradigm: to escape the West, but not for its double; to escape it without essentialising the East. Orientalism and ethnography belong to two separate discursive systems between which interferences may without doubt occasionally take place, but whose syntaxes remain nevertheless totally independent.

The reaction of the surrealist to the 1925 Moroccan Rif insurrection is a telling illustration of the way that the binary paradigm almost necessarily leads to the suppression of any third term. This war was the occasion of their entrance onto the political scene, leading to their bonding with the journal Clarté and to their first attempts at getting the hierarchy of the French and international Communist movement to recognize the revolutionary value of surrealism. On the occasion of this African colonial war, they wrote, signed, and published their first political broadside, ‘La Révolution, d’abord et toujours!’ (‘Revolution, First and Always!’), in which, among other things, they once more paid due homage to Lenin’s revolutionary defeatism. Yet curiously the tract makes no explicit reference to the occasion that prompted it: not one allusion to the Rif conflict, no mention of the name of its leader, Abd el-Krim, nor of Morocco. Moreover, even though it was happening on the African continent, the motivating event was immediately dis-Africanized, cast in the mould of Orientalist logic.

Of course, the issue of the independence movements in colonial territories was addressed, and the broadside did not fail to celebrate ‘the awakening of the pride of the people who had been in servitude for so long and who, it seems, desire nothing else than to reconquer their independence.’ Yet not only are those people not geographically identified (these words might apply to Indo-China as well as Morocco or Madagascar and even colonies subject to the power of European nations other than France, such as India or the Dutch Indies), but moreover the ‘eyes’ of the counterblast’s authors ‘turn towards Asia.’ Then the slogan that still has a dire effect on the blood pressure of certain readers: ‘It is now the turn of the Moguls to camp on our squares.’ It is not certain that Abd el-Krim and his insurgents cared very much about the support the surrealists offered their struggle against the French and Spanish occupiers. But if this text ever reached the Moroccans, it is likely that their first reaction would have been to wonder if it had been wrongly addressed. This substitution of the Moguls for the Moroccans, of Asia for North Africa, is a telling example of the erasures that result from the forcing of alterity into the binary mould of the East/West conflict.

To my knowledge, the only text in which a certain loosening of the binary model occurs is Paul Eluard’s contribution to Artaud’s aforementioned 25th April 1925 issue of La Révolution surréaliste. The title of the piece is ‘The Suppression of Slavery.’ It is another of the surrealist texts that describe the imminent and bloody collapse of European supremacy. However, exceptionally, in this apocalyptic picture, the world is clearly divided in three: next to the West there is the East (‘its’ East, says Eluard) but also the colonies (‘its’ colonies). Eluard foretells in his own words the catastrophe called forth in ‘Revolution First and Always!’, but he considerately warns Parisians and their colonialist colleagues all over Europe that when the time comes for the Moguls to camp on the Place de la Concorde, they should not expect to use their colonies as fall-back positions. ‘British, French, Dutch, Italians, Spaniards, people of the high seas, people of the extreme West – it is not in
your colonies that you will find refuge when the throng of your Orient inexorably falls on you, coming from those countries with no colonies, more free, more strong, and more pure than you are; Germany, Russia, China.’ Thus, with the emergence of the colonial question, a third term might have managed to emerge and to displace the traditional Orientalist binarism.

Fig. 2: Map of the world at the time of the surrealists, from Variétés. Le surréalisme en 1929, Brussels, 1929.

In April 1929, the Belgian surrealist journal Variétés published a map of ‘Le Monde au temps des surréalistes’ (‘The world at the time of the Surrealists’), which has deservedly received extensive commentary [fig. 2]. Some of this has focused on the map’s centring of the world not on a continent but around an ocean, the Pacific basin, in which proportionally out-of-scale Pacific Islands such as Easter Island or New Guinea are embedded like precious stones. Others have focused on the Lilliputian size of Britain, especially next to Ireland, a shrinking which, together with the total erasure of the United States (with the exception of Alaska and Hawaii), and the reduction of the Italian peninsula to a mere pimple, diminishes the territory of World War One’s victorious Allies to a meagre portion of the map. Western Europe, consigned to the far-North-Western corner of the page, is atrophied like those organs that recall the prior life some aquatic species spent on earth. By contrast Eastern Europe constitutes with Asia the enormous and solid mass of an Orient that spreads from the right bank of the Rhine to the shores of the Pacific. What I would like to focus on here is how this map illustrates the fact that, in surrealist geography, the world remains caught in the East/West opposition. For it is primarily structured by the vertical gutter of the double page, as was the design of Artaud’s addresses, a page-setting that foregrounds the East/West polarization while the Equator, with its curvy trajectory, like that of an hesitant jet stream, is clearly in search of a direction and has no
truly structuring force. The North/South opposition is the weak axis of the surrealist map. Moreover, one will notice how with very few exceptions (such as the Pacific Islands), everything that belongs to the Southern hemisphere is drawn to an almost comically small scale: Africa, South America, Australia. The same is true for all the colonial territories, first among which is of course Africa, but also India, Indo-China, or the Dutch Indies.

To return to Artaud’s ‘Address to the Dalai Lama’: as we have seen, this perfectly fits the Orientalist – which is to say, anti-classical, anti-Latin, and Germanophile – register, which was from early on a key dimension of surrealism’s self-definition. It perfectly fits it – with one caveat: Artaud’s promotion of the Dalai Lama as an anti-Pope, an ‘acceptable Pope.’ And here, since Artaud’s text is the basis of his criticism, Caillois, it seems, might have a case. Exactly as Caillois says, Artaud projects onto the Dalai Lama a remnant of piety from which it might be said that he has not yet been emancipated. But such a gesture is an exception in the surrealist literature and it would be a misreading to have the movement as a whole bear responsibility for it. surrealism never played one religion off against another; and even if it is true that Christian figures held the monopoly on the anti-religious aggressiveness that was one of its specialties, this anti-clericalism never turned to the benefit of another religion. There is no acceptable Pope. 1925 marks the end of the Christian Era, period. It does not follow ipso facto that one enters the Buddhist Era. And here Caillois’s analysis misses the point.

Fig. 3: ‘Our contributor Benjamin Péret insulting a priest,’ from La Révolution surréaliste, no. 8, 1 December 1926.
Anti-clericalism is a motive to which surrealism remained energetically and unshakeably attached throughout its whole history. Surrealism never ceased practising an anti-clerical activism, which, even when it reaches extravagant dimensions, keeps something of Flaubert’s Monsieur Homais in its inspiration. Examples are many and often picturesque. Within a few pages of a single issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* we find the celebrated photograph of ‘our contributor, Benjamin Péret, insulting a priest’ [fig. 3]; the article Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes devoted to Jean Cocteau’s recent conversion to Catholicism (with the untranslatably punning title, ‘La Saison des bains de ciel’);27 and an exchange of letters between Marcel Noll and the wife of the Catholic critic Stanislas Fumet, vis-à-vis the latter’s recent book on Baudelaire’s Catholicism.28 Or, in the final issue of the journal, the text ‘Comment accommorder le prêtre’ (‘How to Make the Most of Priests’) by one Jean Koppen,29 two pages of uninterrupted blasphemies, most of them scatological, in the course of which one learns, among other things, that crucifixes ‘are the best conceived handles for the chains to flush our toilets,’ an interior design suggestion that was realized in the most literal way by two young recruits of the movement [fig. 4].

Fig. 4: ‘Decoration: At home with the poets Sadoul and Thirion,’ from *Variétés. Le surréalisme en 1929*, Brussels, 1929.
This anticlerical dimension would interfere with the colonial question at the time of the great International Exhibition that was held in the Bois de Vincennes during the summer of 1931. Two surrealist interventions occurred in its context. An initial broadside was distributed at the time of the opening (‘Do not Visit the Colonial Exhibition’), denouncing the taking into preventive custody of a communist Indo-Chinese student by the police prefect of Paris. A second one (‘First Assessment of the Colonial Exhibition’), was distributed a few weeks later, after the fire that destroyed the Dutch Indies pavilion and the primitive objects that were shown in it. The surrealists felt obliged to explain why they did not applaud the catastrophe: ‘During the night of June 27-28, the pavilion of the Dutch Indies was totally destroyed in a conflagration. Any visitor aware of the true meaning of the imperialist Vincennes demonstration will be tempted to say: “One down!” Perhaps some people will be surprised that, not being known for caring about the conservation of art objects, we Surrealists will not hold ourselves to this initial reflex.’

The first justification offered for this move follows a logic that in today’s language could be called affirmative action. Art objects are not submitted to the same criteria, according to whether they come from a colonizing or colonized country. Surrealism might advocate an art of the ephemeral, but colonized people have not reached the same advanced cultural stage; and they are entitled to an aesthetic delay. ‘Exactly as the enemies of nationalisms today must defend the nationalism of oppressed people so the enemies of an art which is the product of capitalist economy must dialectically oppose the art of oppressed people against it.’ This striking parallel rests on an analogy that is anything but obvious. It is hard to see what might align ‘primitive’ arts (or, as Breton preferred to say, ‘savage arts’) with the problems that the nationalist character of the independence movements developing in colonized countries posed for European internationalists; the first difference being that those movements were, by necessity, contemporaneous, if not posterior to the regime of colonial oppression against which they were fighting. Nothing of the sort holds with regard to ‘primitive’ objects, since they are situated in the reverse chronological sequence. ‘Primitive,’ according to one of the definitions of this much-debated concept, refers only to objects and practices that date from a time prior the first contact with the Europeans. The art of oppressed people thus necessarily predates their oppression; it is not an answer to it. The broadside itself, incidentally, describes the objects destroyed by the fire as ‘the rarest and most ancient known artistic specimens from those areas.’ Thus the first argument functioned mainly to furnish the polemic with a far-left veneer.

The true problem and the true argument lie elsewhere. A few weeks before the Colonial Exhibition blaze, the surrealists had adopted a vehement stance in response to a series of fires during which objects that some considered to be works of art were destroyed. Following the electoral victory of Republican parties that ended the Monarchy in April 1931, Spain had become the scene of anti-religious outbursts: arsons of churches and convents were spreading, and the new Republican regime, which was fundamentally moderate and as concerned with law and order as with its own respectability, tried to put an end to it. Against those leftist fire-extinguishers, the surrealists issued a broadside entitled ‘Au Feu!’ (‘Fire!’) in which, refusing to be blackmailed by aesthetic considerations,
they saluted ‘the great materialist flare-up of the burned churches’ that was illuminating the Spanish sky, putting Spain on the path of the great Soviet example.\textsuperscript{35}`Already the Soviet Union,’ the text continues, ‘where hundreds of churches have been dynamited, is in the process of transforming the religious edifice into workers’ clubs, potato silos, and anti-religious museums.’\textsuperscript{36} Thus all fires are not equal. Some are good; others are bad.

But how do we tell them apart? After having applauded the Spanish bonfires, why not do the same for the burning of a colonial pavilion? All the more so, since in both cases these are religious objects that were destroyed. Wouldn’t such a difference between these two reactions justify Caillois’s analysis too? The surrealist answer in this second argument no longer followed an affirmative-action logic. They did not say, as was the case with their art, that the religion of oppressed people should be dialectically opposed to the religion that is rooted in a capitalist economy. No, one had to oppose religion in all circumstances. There are good fetishes no more than there is an acceptable Pope. However, if the destruction of those primitive objects must be felt as loss, it was precisely because they were de-fetishised fetishes; they had been irreversibly decontaminated, desacralised, by being decontextualised. They had lost all their use-value and were exclusively endowed with an exhibition-value. Here lay the difference with the Spanish objects:

Fetishes from the Dutch Indies are endowed for us with an undeniable, scientific value and for that reason, have lost any sacred dimension, while on the contrary, Catholic-inspired fetishes (such as paintings by Valdès Leal, sculptures by Durrugute, alms boxes from the Bouasse-Lebel company) in no way could be approached from either a scientific or artistic point of view as long as behind it Catholicism has its laws, tribunals, jails, schools, and money, and until all over the world the many representations of Christ have melted into the masses of Tikis and totems.\textsuperscript{37}

This melting-down is exactly what ‘The Truth about the Colonies,’ the small counter-colonial exhibition organized by the surrealists, would stage in a room where religious, Catholic objects from Africa were presented as ‘European fetishes’ [fig. 5]. Some surrealists went even further, such as Jacques Viot, who, in a piece entitled ‘Don’t Clutter Up the Colonies,’ asserted that Oceanic totems and fetishes never had any religious dimension. Viot had just come back from New Guinea (where he went to look for objects for his boss, the collector Pierre Loeb): ‘Primitives,’ he wrote, ‘do not believe in God. They do not have a religion and without one there can be no God. God cannot exist if he is not praised. Neither in fetishism nor in totemism is there the slightest trace of religion.’\textsuperscript{38}
Fig. 5: *At the Exhibition The Truth about the Colonies*, from *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*, no. 4, December 1931.

No doubt such a relentless anti-religious obsession seems – at least in part – outdated to us. However, if I have focused on it, it is primarily because the most important fault-line that separated the people around *La Révolution surréaliste* and those around *Documents* during the crisis of 1929, was probably the issue of religion. It was, indeed, at *Documents* that Bataille started to develop his theoretical reflections concerning the sacred and its fundamentally ambivalent nature, high and low, pure and impure, following his recent readings of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, the ‘Essay on the Nature and Function of Sacrifice’ by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, and of course Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. A position such as Viot’s would have made no sense to any of the writers, whatever their cultural allegiances, who contributed to the journal. Not only was the belief that there exists a primitive religion one of their tenets, but the reference to the primitive world is a way of approaching something that had become intellectually taboo because, rightly or wrongly, it had been classified under the rubric of religion. It is thanks to the hospitality of the departments of History of Religion that ethnography, defined primarily as the study of the religion of primitive man, managed to wrest a position for itself in the academic system.

But for Bataille and his friends, religious primitivism did not connote so much a theology as it did a series of mystical, sacrificial as well as psychopathological (perverse) practices, which for the most part consisted in bodily techniques, not too remote from what today would be called body art, where the body is treated simultaneously as active and passive, subject and object, hovering between
sacrifice and self-mutilation. Ethnography, here, seems at times not be much more than a mask for fantasies that would better fit the tabloids of contemporary popular culture. This is obvious, for example, when Bataille and Leiris cite William B. Seabrook’s book on voodoo cults, The Magic Island. Among the many far-fetched declarations in which Seabrook indulges may be found the following:

If only we were to mix some blood spilled during a sacrifice into our cocktails, if we spiced them up with some Saint John’s Fire, our night-clubs would more easily reach their orgiastic goals. They would become consecrated places similar to the temples that used to be dedicated to Aphrodite and to Priapus.

Bataille refers to the latter passage in the famous ‘Abattoir’ entry he wrote for Documents’ ‘Critical Dictionary’: ‘It is curious to see a haunting nostalgia expressed in America: W.B. Seabrook, stating that orgiastic life has persisted, but that the blood of sacrifices is no longer mixed into cocktails, finds today’s mores insipid.’

As for Leiris, a year after the end of Documents, during his stay in Gondar (Abyssinia) on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, having witnessed a sacrifice during which the zar priestess had drunk the blood spilling from a slaughtered animal, he wrote in his travelogue, L’Afrique fantôme:

I think of my first communion: if it had been as serious as that, maybe I would still be a believer. But true religion only begins with real blood...

Here, no doubt, Caillois has a stronger point, though at the time Leiris wrote L’Afrique fantôme he was no longer a surrealist, and not yet an ethnographer. For that to happen his two-year-long journey around Africa had to be followed by a second one, no shorter and no easier, towards ethnography. At various moments in his autobiography, La Règle du jeu, Leiris returns to how he came to become an ethnographer. While he admits to a certain coefficient of chance, since it all started when Marcel Griaule, back from his first expedition to Ethiopia, suggested that Leiris join the sequel he was preparing, Leiris indicates nevertheless that, like many of his contemporaries, he had been interested in Negro art very early on. Which might be true, but such an interest left no written trace before his 1936 piece on Dogon sculptures, ‘Bois rituels des falaises,’ published three years after the completion of the Dakar-Djibouti expedition. On the other hand, his earliest, most active, and well-documented connection to the world associated with Africa, was with jazz. Leiris’s first Africa was not purely African, but Afro-American, originally syncretic. His Africa was out of Africa, as a brief survey of his ‘Negrophiliac’ contributions to Documents will demonstrate.

The first item is the well-known article ‘Civilisation,’ which Leiris wrote after having seen Lew Leslie’s Black Birds at the Moulin Rouge with some of his friends from the editorial team; the piece was a paean to the art of ‘American Negroes,’ by which Leiris essentially meant jazz. In the following issue, under the title ‘Negro spectacles from New York,’ there appeared a note announcing...
that *Documents* was ‘committed to keeping our readers up-to-date with the new Negro stage productions from the United States, which increasingly one must place in the top rank of everything the world offers us in sight and sound.’\(^{46}\) The note advertised two American negro musicals: King Vidor’s film *Hallelujah*, and another one called *Hot Chocolates*. Then in November 1929, Leiris published two reviews, one of Seabook’s *The Magic Island*;\(^{47}\) and another of the Parisian show of the Bambara painter Kalifala Sidibé.\(^{48}\) In the first issue of the following year, he commented on recently issued records (mainly by Duke Ellington), characterising jazz as the type of music most apt to induce a collective state of trance.\(^{49}\)

Later in 1930 Leiris contributed a note on a Senegalese dancer, Feral Benga, the male star in the last Folies-Bergères show whose performances Leiris described as ‘revivifying the music-hall scene, practically dead since the departure of the Black Birds.’\(^{50}\) In the same article, a revealing Freudian slip had Leiris announce a coming attraction, starring the black singer Louis Douglas, as *Louisiana*, while its real title was *Lisa*, as one learns from the review Leiris gave it in the following issue.\(^{51}\) Then there is a review of the New York journal linked to the Harlem Renaissance, *Opportunity*: ‘We will come back to *Opportunity* which seems to be, together with *The Crisis* (edited by W.E.B. DuBois), the most remarkable of the Negro American periodicals.’\(^{52}\)

But that was almost all, since *Documents* was on the verge of being terminated by its main sponsor, the art collector Georges Wildenstein. All of Leiris’s ten first contributions to the journal on the topic of Black culture deal exclusively with manifestations of some kind of African diaspora, mostly in America, both mainland and Caribbean, but some also in Paris, all of them being linked to show-business in one way or another (one of them to the art-show business). He was utterly absorbed, indeed infatuated, by not even African but Afro-American music and not even so much for its properly musical qualities as for the way it induced a certain state of mind he called trance. Needless to say, there was no place for anything like that in the surrealist culture since Breton, who did not care for music, hated jazz with a particular vengeance as he hated anything having to do with show-business. A last look at the map of the world at the time of the surrealists would be enough to show that there was no place on it where such tastes could be inscribed. Africa, as I have mentioned, is remarkably atrophied, reflecting the surrealists’ preference for Oceanian over African objects, as well as the fact that, as Jean-Claude Blachère has pointed out, they preferred the cannibal to the passive, colonised subject.\(^{53}\) But the fate of America – and thus of Afro-America – is even worse. It simply does not exist. The U.S. has been literally eradicated from the map. In the world of surrealism, there is no room for the birthplace of jazz, for the Louisiana cotton fields where the Negro spirituals of Hallelujah were sung. No room either for the Caribbean Islands where the trances of Voodoo were flourishing.

Leiris contributed one more piece, dealing with what would later be called negritude, to *Documents*. On the eve of his departure for Africa, in the penultimate issue, he published ‘The Ethnographer’s Eye (On the Dakar-Djibouti Mission).’\(^{54}\) But Africa will not have the last word. I have said that Leiris’s voyage towards ethnography was a long one. I would suggest that it was so because Africa never fully supplanted the fantasies associated with the Caribbean in his heart and mind. His
Africa always remained tinted, or mediated, by America. Already in 1932, when the Dakar-Djibouti Mission passed by Ouidah, the former hub of the slave-trade on the gulf of Guinea and therefore the historical ground of many aspects of Haitian voodoo mythology, Leiris (who had no direct experience of the 'West Indies') not only registered 'the voodoo side of Dahomey' (today’s Benin) in his travel diary, but also noted that the 'Martinique look grows stronger every day.' He became an Africanist by profession, but America remained the place where the African inscription first fascinated him. And it was as an Africanist that he was sent to the French-speaking Caribbean Islands in the late 1940s and early 1950s to do the field work of his mature age. These were his best professional moments, as Edouard Glissant was the first to remark in his 1956 article 'Michel Leiris, ethnographer,' the moments also when he felt most at ease with a profession that otherwise was frequently a source of discomfort if not discontent for him.

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1 Editor’s note: This essay is an edited transcript of the keynote lecture delivered by Denis Hollier at the conference ‘The Use-Value of Documents: Bataille/Einstein/Leiris,’ which took place at the Hayward Gallery and Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 23-24 June 2006. Annotation by C.F.B. Miller.


6 Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 67.


8 Lévi-Strauss was the author of the article signed by Georges Monnet, ‘Picasso et le Cubisme,’ Documents, no. 3, 1930, 139-40, when he was still a long way from being an ethnologist.’ See Denis Hollier, ‘The Use-Value of the Impossible,’ trans. Liesl Ollman, October, vol. 60, Spring 1992, 3-24; 6 n. 11. Lévi-Strauss was secretary to Monnet, a Socialist Deputy, at the time. See the editor’s note to Georges Monnet, ‘Picasso and Cubism,’ trans. Dominic Faccini, October, vol. 60, Spring 1992, 51-52; 51.


10 Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 67.

11 Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 67.

12 Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 66.
Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 67-68.

[Antonin Artaud], ‘Adresse au Pape’; ‘Adresse au Dalaï-Lama,’ La Révolution surréaliste 3, 15 April 1925, 16 and 17.

Caillois, ‘Illusions à rebours’ [pt. 2], 67.

André Breton, ‘Légitime défense,’ La Révolution surréaliste 8, 1 December 1926, 30-36; 36.

[Antonin Artaud], ‘Lettre aux écoles de Bouddha,’ La Révolution surréaliste 3, 15 April 1925, 22.


‘La Révolution d’abord et toujours!’ La Révolution surréaliste 5, 15 October 1925, 31-32; 31.

‘La Révolution d’abord et toujours!’ 31.

‘La Révolution d’abord et toujours!’ 31.

‘La Révolution d’abord et toujours!’ 31.


La Révolution surréaliste 8, 1 December 1926, 26-28.

Jean Koppen, ‘Comment accommoder le prêtre,’ La Révolution surréaliste 12, 15 December 1929, 30-31.


‘Au Feu!’ [May 1931], in Pierre, Tracts surréalistes, 196-97; 196.

‘Au Feu!’ 196.

‘Premier bilan de l’Exposition Coloniale,’ 199.

Jacques Viot, ‘N’encombrez pas les colonies,’ Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution 1, 1930, 43-45; 44.


Leiris, ‘Civilisation,’ Documents 4, 1929, 221-22.


Leiris, ‘L’Ile magique,’ Documents 6, 1929, 334.

Leiris, ‘Exposition Kalifa Sidibé (Galerie Georges Bernheim),’ Documents 6, 1929, 343.


Leiris, ‘Benga (Féral),’ Documents 4, 1930, 235.


Discipline and indiscipline: the ethnographies of *Documents*

Julia Kelly

Long feted as the acceptable ‘radical’ face of the surrealist avant-garde and recently celebrated with an exhibition devoted exclusively to it, the magazine *Documents* (1929-30) is perhaps most closely associated in Anglo-American scholarship with James Clifford’s famous definition of ‘ethnographic surrealism.’ A heterogeneous mixture of cultures and concepts held at a point of irreconcilability, patched together with a collage of photographic materials, represents the principle of cultural relativism and a fundamentally anthropological impulse, in this reading. The difficulties with this concept have been outlined in responses by Jean Jamin and Michael Richardson among others, and I do not intend to repeat these here. It is clear, however, that the afterlife of Clifford’s term as a convenient summation of a wide range of ideas and historical circumstances has not helped its cause; that ‘ethnography’ and ‘surrealism’ by definition do not belong together was a crucial, if slippery, strategic feature of Clifford’s analysis. Moreover, both surrealism and ethnography arguably only feature in *Documents* in modified forms: there are still those today who would question the presence of either surrealism ‘proper’ or indeed ethnography in the periodical.

‘Surrealism’ can have many meanings, as a term for a loose grouping of writers, for a body of texts and theories, for a ‘way of life’ and conceptual approach, all of which are arguably unconstrained by ‘official’ institutional boundaries. ‘Ethnography,’ on the other hand, was still fighting, in the late 1920s, for wide institutional recognition, and so much more was at stake in playing with its meanings and definitions. This was just one of the ways in which the two domains did not share the same point of departure in their notorious coming together in *Documents*. For a former surrealist poet like Michel Leiris, *Documents* offered a means to extend his intellectual activity into new areas and ultimately laid the basis for his subsequent career as a professional anthropologist. For the young anthropologist Marcel Griaule, the periodical was a site of experimental thinking, whose implications arguably needed to be tempered in his ethnographic practice in the 1930s and beyond.

Yet despite this, the presence of ethnography in the periodical still has much to tell us, particularly, I would argue, from the perspective of material culture. It is here, in the various means of understanding and categorising inanimate objects (rather than in the study of ‘man’ more narrowly) that ethnographic approaches in *Documents* overlap in interesting ways with artistic debates of the period. Unknown (and sometimes unknowable) pieces of African or Oceanic sculpture, or newly discovered archaeological finds, raised questions of how to deal with obdurate materials and provided intriguing parallels with the production in Europe of unclassifiable and ‘difficult’ art works (such as the surrealist object and surrealist sculpture). In what follows, I will examine the ethnographic approaches in *Documents* that point towards wider conceptions of the art object as implicated both in networks of institutional
and financial value (via the museum and the market) and in personal interactions with its users and viewers.

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As has been widely acknowledged, *Documents* encouraged new and provocative readings, but it also produced maverick readings. Ethnographic and archaeological principles were brought to bear on ideas in formation, rather than fully established theories: indeed one of the exciting aspects of the periodical was precisely this sense of openness and experimentation. Writing in 1963, Leiris would comment that the 'impossible' mix of *Documents* had in part been due to its 'diversity of disciplines - and of indisciplines.' This 'unruly' side to the periodical came in part from the fact that many of its contributors published articles unlike their usual scholarly work, on more obscure subjects, or using more daring arguments. The combination of respected 'experts' (particularly German scholars such as Eckart von Sydow, Leo Frobenius and Hans Mühlestein, or the classical historian Charles Theodore Seltman) and curators from major national museums (such as René Grousset of the Musée Guimet, Georges Contenau of the Louvre, Louis Clarke from the Cambridge Ethnographic Museum, Erland Nordenskiöld from the Goteborg Museum), with young ethnographers and art writers posed a challenge to any clear-cut 'professional' standing. Josef Strzygowski, at the time professor of art history at the University of Vienna, who himself has been described as a 'Grub Street' academic, pointed to this in the journal's first issue, when he claimed: 'an independent organ is indispensable so that those who belong to no school can express themselves.' The tension between the museum and a kind of more immediate experience also underlay *Documents*. Linked through its writers to European museums and collections, the periodical's closest collaboration was with the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum (and its assistant director Georges Henri Rivière), which in turn was juggling the demands of display and the preparation of ethnographers for field experiences, specifically for the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931-33.

In amongst the approaches suggested by different authors and the Trocadéro's needs, ethnography in *Documents* emerged primarily in relation to the analysis of non-western material culture, and its agenda in this respect was clear. Art works and artefacts as the potential illuminators of great civilisations outside the Greco-Roman tradition were paramount. More significantly, new approaches deriving from ethnography and archaeology could throw up a range of material which might test and upset conventions and expectations. According to Leiris, the journal's publicity material made its attitude clear: 'The most irritating works of art, yet to be classified, and certain unusual works, neglected until now, will be the object of studies as rigorous, as scientific, as those of archaeologists...' *Documents* would deliberately seek out the 'most irritating' material, which had not yet found a place in systems of classification, or had not yet been the subject of scientific research. To some degree, the concept of the 'irritating' piece of material as uncharted terrain, attracting attention, with the
ability to annoy and provoke, could be related to the perception of the 'curio' in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly with regard to its moral connotations. In both cases, something that might bother western notions of function, taste and decency, is suggested. The 'curio,' of course, ceased to be such when it became reclassified as 'ethnographic object' or 'non-western art work,' when it came into contact with the disciplines. Indeed, anthropological approaches in particular sought to divest the 'curio' of its negative connotations within colonialist and evolutionist schemas.

Documents' immediate models and precedents as a periodical consisted of specialist publications like the numismatics journal Aréthuse, or Herbert Kühn's Ipek. Its penchant for 'curiosities' may also arguably have owed something to Beaux-Arts, with which it shared Wildenstein as a backer, a magazine that termed itself a 'chronicle of the arts and of curiosity.' In terms of the presentation of a wide range of ethnographic and archaeological material, the most direct model for Documents was undoubtedly Cahiers d'art, the most prominent art periodical of 1920s and 1930s Paris, founded by Christian Zervos in 1926 as a vehicle for the promotion of an eclectic range of art from all periods, but with a particular focus on the art of its time. Cahiers d'art embraced especially art works from non-western cultures, initially from Africa and Oceania, in keeping with the interests of its editor: Zervos published a lavishly illustrated article devoted to 'L'art nègre' in 1927. It functioned in this respect as a champion of non-classical cultures, including in the same 1927 issue Georges Salles' justification for the inclusion of African sculpture in the Louvre. The periodical also drew upon professional anthropologists and pre-historians: Frobenius contributed a series of articles on South African rock art in 1929 and 1930, complemented by the work of Henri Breuil, the eminent palaeontologist.

Documents certainly shared Cahiers d'art's interest in non-western and archaic cultures, but it took this much further, actively challenging academic conventions. It shared some of the same authors, particularly German writers like Frobenius and Eckart von Sydow. Georges Pudelko, for example, wrote a glowing review of a study of Etruscan art by Hans Mühlestein (a frequent contributor to Cahiers d'art in 1929 and 1930) for Documents in 1930. However, where Cahiers d'art saw a future in the input of artists for the development of art historical approaches, Documents adopted a much more complex stance. Cahiers d'art's subtitle advertised its breadth of coverage of the arts: 'Painting - sculpture - architecture - music.' The subtitles of Documents, however, promised not a breadth of artistic media, but a combination of disciplinary areas: 'Doctrines - Archaeology - Fine Arts - Ethnography,' soon amended to Archaeology - Fine Arts - Ethnography - Miscellanies. Rather than pointing to a happy expansion of a field of enquiry, the combination of disciplines in Documents' subtitle openly risked friction and incompatibility.

A commitment to non-classical cultures was proclaimed in Documents from the outset. It was certainly implicit in the plans for the journal drawn up by one of its significant founding collaborators, Carl Einstein, and in his letters to potential contributors, as Conor Joyce has shown. In a letter of January 1929 to Richard Hamann at the University of
Marburg, published by Joyce, Einstein suggested the kinds of material the journal was seeking:

We’re going to put together essays from the most diverse research areas, beginning with prehistory, Mediterranean art, the early Middle Ages, up to Asia Minor, Egypt, Arabia, China and Japan; that means things from all countries and all times.¹⁵

To make such a claim in the late 1920s inevitably implied a shift away from the dominance of the classical canon. Ethnography and archaeology could play a role in bringing into focus material evidence that could challenge the authority of text-based classical history. In Leiris's recollection of *Documents*’ desire to examine the 'most irritating works of art,' cited above, archaeology provided the model for the kind of rigorous study now needed.¹⁶ *Documents* probably took as one of the examples of this approach the journal *Aréthuse*, whose articles were often premised on obscure and recent archaeological findings, and to which Georges Bataille contributed several articles and reviews. Excavations frequently provided the rationale for *Documents*’ contents: a Viking tomb found in Norway in 1904, Greco-Celtic vases found in the Lorraine in 1928, bronze objects found north of Baghdad [fig. 1].¹⁷ Prehistoric discoveries also played a role in *Documents* in the presentation of new rock art: Henri Martin described new finds in the Roc valley in 1927 and 1928.¹⁸

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Fig. 1: Bronze objects from Louristan (Iraq), collections David-Weill, Nazarea, Pierre, in *Documents*, 2:6 (1930).
Indeed, *Documents’* first issue opened with an article on Sumerian sculpture by Georges Contenau, a curator at the Louvre who had previously published studies of Phoenician and ancient Asian culture. Sumeria was still a hot topic from an archaeological point of view in the late 1920s, the object of numerous international excavations after the initial finds of the French consular agent Ernest de Sarzec in the late 1870s. Sumerian sculpture was also just beginning to be taken up by European artists like Alberto Giacometti in Paris (using the Louvre’s collection) and Henry Moore in Britain, as a new formal and intellectual source of inspiration. A series of authors whose other published work treated more obviously classical and canonical material also contributed studies to *Documents* of pre-classical or non-western works of art. These included classical historians like Valentin Mueller, Charles Theodore Seltman, and Paul Jacobsthal, writing respectively on archaic Greek statuary, Cycladic art, and the prehistoric sculptures of the village of Roquepertuse, in Southern France. Jacobsthal wrote of the recently discovered archaic heads of Roquepertuse: ‘…that mortuary gravity, that lethargic immobility which recalls rather the primitive Roman style, is far from any classical art of whatever period.’ René Grousset, assistant curator at the Musée Guimet and author of broad-based studies of Asian culture, such as his four-volume *Les Civilisations de l’Orient* and widely read *Sur les traces du Bouddha*, both of 1929, contributed an article on just one of the regions in which he specialised: Kafiristan in Afghanistan. The Kafir statuary he discussed also happened to be obscure in origin and iconography, as one of the less familiar areas of his scholarly interest, still under research through the expeditions of his colleague Joseph Hackin, an acquaintance of Rivière since 1923. Hackin’s finds in Afghanistan had also served as the basis for one of Bataille’s articles for *Aréthuse* on Sassanian numismatics. Significantly, Hackin, Grousset and Contenau, along with Salles, Rivière’s mentor, all taught courses at the Ecole du Louvre in the mid to late 1920s and early 1930s, which might be seen as one of *Documents’* institutional affiliations in its antagonism towards the Sorbonne.

Archaeological and ethnographic information was drawn upon in articles by these writers in diverging ways to throw light upon the unfamiliar works reproduced, especially with reference to their relationship to a classical figurative canon. Contenau referred to recent archaeological evidence to identify a Sumerian figure in the Louvre as female, comparing the position of its cloak, with the right arm and shoulder left uncovered, to the dress of a presumed queen found in an excavation of 1927-28. He went on to suggest that the figurative conventions of Sumerian sculpture might have their origins in a deliberate exaggeration of the ‘ethnic type’ familiar to the sculptor at the time, rather than being the result of artistic imagination. In this way, he related the sculptures illustrated to an imputed conception of ‘real’ Sumerian people, supported by archaeological finds. In contrast, Grousset in his discussion of the extraordinary articulations of the human form in Kafir wood sculptures, linked these to previous artistic conventions, such as the stylised physiognomies on ancient Iranian coins. One of the most striking of these, a seated woman in wood captioned in *Documents* as an ‘ancestral statue,’ had in fact just been given to the Musée Guimet in 1929.
by the Afghan King Amânoullâh, and so was a new 'arrival' to Paris and the West. This figure's head droops down over its chest and pendulous breasts, while face, hands, knees and feet are decorated with frontal incised designs. Lacking a neck, its shoulders sit higher than its face, just below a large carved turban, in what Grousset called a 'very curious anatomical conformation.'

Grousset’s conclusions, echoing Wilhelm Worringer's famous conclusions in *Abstraction and Empathy*, turned the evolutionist paradigm of art's development on its head, arguing that these works implied a 'regressive' shift away from naturalism, in the same way that African art could be regarded as an (abstract) development from (more naturalistic) Egyptian precedents. It was no coincidence that Grousset also related Kafir art to Oceanic art, with its striking lack of naturalistic references.

To some degree, these differences in position were a familiar outcome of the study of non-western material in this period, whose figurative unfamiliarity generated new interpretative models in its commentators. But they were also a key feature of *Documents*’ engagement with new, and potentially conflicting, approaches to art works, objects and artefacts. Contributors to the periodical appeared almost to be attuned to the desire to pick out 'irritating' objects for which disciplinary models provided no immediate illumination. Louis Clarke from the Cambridge Ethnographic Museum focused on pieces from the Solomon Islands whose ethnography was still apparently in a fledgling state. His account of the context of these works rather sensationally stressed the extreme 'otherness' of the Solomon Islands: 'They are inhabited by one of the most primitive races yet encountered. Not long ago, this race was still in the Stone Age and did not know any kinds of metal. Cannibalism is still practised there, except in places where a local police force is taking steps to prevent it.'

Eckart von Sydow, the eminent German specialist on West African art, in an article on the Janus masks of the Cross-River region on the Cameroon/Nigeria borders, also appeared to have deliberately singled out works whose historical evolution and meanings were unclear. What ethnographic information did exist was limited, according to the author. For example, von Sydow drew upon documentary materials in Berlin's Ethnographic Museum to suggest that these double-faced masks represented a male-female opposition, reflected in a contrast between dark and light-coloured surfaces. However, he was quick to point out the difficulties in applying this theory to all Janus masks. He also reproduced in his illustrations striking examples from German museums that directly eluded any available explanation. A mask from the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde, showing a male horned head surmounted by a bare-breasted female figure was included precisely because of its unusual appearance. This exceptional piece was clearly of more significance to the author than any typical piece, as he made clear: 'This mask deserves a particular interest as much because of its size as because of its construction...Through the freedom of its conception, this work is classed among the most curious of African art objects.'

Notions of uniqueness and 'curiosity' had a long history of association in the reception of non-western objects with discourses of novelty and commerce. *Documents* has been seen as operating in opposition to systems of 'exchange-value,' in Denis Hollier's preface to the
Jean-Michel Place re-edition of 1991, 'The Use-Value of the Impossible.' However, the periodical was not at all immune to the forces of the art market: indeed, these were one source of its energising tensions. Connotations of preciousness and financial value were implicit in some of the 'discoveries' Documents presented: 'A Macedonian Eldorado 500 years B.C.;' 'The treasure of Nagy-Szent-Miklosz.' The diverse range of works from ancient and non-western cultures shown and discussed in Documents came both from European museums and from private collections. For museums this was surely a chance to air certain pieces (often recently accessioned), while for writers it was an opportunity to pick out and reinterpret works subsumed into much larger collections, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale manuscripts discussed by Bataille and Leiris. In the case of private collections, the reproduction of newly acquired pieces by periodicals like Cahiers d'art or Documents could have a direct impact upon market value, and indeed often preceded the sale of those pieces. In some cases, private collections could provide more interesting material for scholarly debate than the corresponding museums, and this was reflected in some of the articles for Documents. The prolific and eminent Paul Pelliot, who had led an expedition to Central Asia in the 1910s, used David David-Weill's collection of pre-Han North Chinese bronze open-work reliefs to set out the arguments around the relative influence of Siberian on ancient Chinese art. These objects lent themselves so perfectly to his discussion because of their unusual appearance and as yet mysterious functions, making them unlike other North Chinese works in museum collections (in this case, the Hermitage).

The interplay between Documents and Cahiers d'art and the dynamics of the art market in 1930 came to the fore in their coverage of an exhibition of African and Oceanic objects at the Galerie Pigalle in Paris. The material on display underwent a strikingly aesthetically treatment in Cahiers d’art, in an article by Stéphen Chauvet on objects made from bronze, gold and ivory. The journal's editors conceived this article as a kind of supplementary 'guide' to some of the less familiar and less documented pieces in the Galerie Pigalle show. While Chauvet's text provided information about the uses and motifs of gold weights and ivory masks, its illustrations comprised a sequence of spreads of small, intricately-worked objects, laid out in ordered rows across the page, creating a jewel-box effect [fig. 2]. These carefully composed reproductions, combined with Chauvet's discussion of the qualities of different colours and depths of patination, served to load this article with an implicit statement of the high financial value of these particular pieces. The private collectors to whom they belonged were being construed as pioneers, seeing in these small bronze ornaments and ivory figurines what others could not see, but also as smart investors, amassing the rare and the precious. Naturally some of the works reproduced belonged to the article's author himself. A red ivory Warega mask from the Belgian Congo, owned by Georges de Miré, would raise 17,300 francs in the 1931 sale of his collection of African and Precolumbian sculptures, its second most valuable object.
Fig. 2: Masks and figurines, Tanganyika, Belgian Congo and Angola, patinated ivory and patinated red ivory, collections of Heim, Stora, de Miré, in *Cahiers d'art*, 5:1 (1930).

In *Documents*, the exhibition formed the basis of an article by Einstein on the iconography and functions of African objects. The plates to this article included three works from de Miré’s collection, one of which, a Dogon hermaphrodite sculpture, went on to sell for 14,000 francs in 1931.\(^4\) Clearly the reproduction and discussion of such works could bolster their market value, and *Documents* was no exception to this. The tension between the promotion of financial worth and disinterested analysis was unresolved in its pages, which
included advertisements for dealers in antiquities, such as Edgar Worch, alongside its publicity for other avant-garde journals. To some degree this was entirely expected, given the periodical's initial instigator, the dealer and collector Georges Wildenstein, who specialised in old masters, the most valuable and prestigious end of the market. The Viscount de Noailles and David and Pierre David-Weill, supporters of the art of their time, played important roles in the background of Documents, as well as being the most significant private backers of the Trocadéro museum. Leiris first encountered Giacometti's work at the home of the de Noailles, and reproduced the Gazing Head from his collection in his 1929 Documents article on the sculptor. Privately in his diary, though, he expressed doubts about his association with such a milieu. Rivière was a significant mediator between the world of the wealthy private collectors and the scholarly, 'scientific' realms of Documents and the Trocadéro, and the person who more than any other would represent this tension. Rivière orchestrated the commission by Pierre David-Weill, the brother of his former employer, the collector David David-Weill, of works by Giacometti and André Masson. He would also provide a preface to the catalogue of the sale of de Miré's collection, in which he regretted that the Trocadéro could not afford to acquire the works for sale.

Within this context, Einstein's article based on the Galerie Pigalle exhibition took up a deliberate stance. Although illustrated with visually powerful African and Oceanic pieces, his article avoided any direct discussion of them. He was keen to distance himself from any consideration of their artistic qualities: ‘…we must treat this art historically, and no longer only consider it from the point of view of taste and aesthetics.’ Instead, Einstein recommended the study of African mythology as the key to understanding African objects, putting together a series of diverse examples to support this, in which sculptures, masks and furniture all served to embody primarily attitudes towards sex and death. The contrast between this article for Documents and Einstein's 1915 study Negerplastik was considerable: by 1930, the question of the formal qualities of African sculpture seemed irrelevant. Nevertheless his article still maintained a link to the realm of the 'star' Parisian collectors and their implicit antiquarian values, figures such as Charles Ratton, Pierre Loeb and de Miré, as did Documents as a whole. To move beyond the non-western 'jewel box' to the ethnographic 'box of tricks' would require yet more extreme readings of material culture in all its forms.

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Documents' presentation of collectable things - such as Neolithic Japanese figurines, Greco-Celtic vases, Peruvian pottery, Macedonian coins and German evangelaries - was undermined in fact in its very first issue. Josef Strzygowski, professor in art history at the University of Vienna, condemned the close links between art historical research and museum collections, as well as those between private collectors and periodicals. Of course these were precisely the connections that on some level the journal cultivated, due to the personal networks described above. Strzygowski's antagonism was the result of a distinction that he
made between art history and what he termed 'research into the plastic arts.' The former had been and continued to be excessively concerned with extant monuments and objects, while new approaches of the latter could look to impermanent and now lost works of art from less familiar parts of the world. Examples of such neglected materials included nomadic art, architecture in unfired brick and wood, or wooden ornamentation, things that had not necessarily been conserved for posterity to enter the loaded realms of the museum or art market. Strzygowski argued for the decline of scholarly methods obsessed with dates and with juxtaposing cycles of artistic development, to be replaced with independent research into types of work rather than isolated monuments.

Strzygowski's position came out of his training as a medievalist: in part he related his distaste for 'art history' to the nineteenth-century destruction of Romanesque churches and monuments in line with then prevailing aesthetic values. It also had a distinct agenda, in challenging the centrality of Rome and Byzantium within accounts of art's development in Europe, an argument that Strzygowski had first established in his major 1901 study Orient oder Rom? (The Orient or Rome?). The book that he published in Britain in 1928, Early Church Art in Northern Europe, with special reference to timber construction and decoration, had proposed a revision of accepted versions of the origins of medieval European art based on his analysis of wooden architecture in Eastern Europe, Scandinavia and England. This ran directly counter to the theories of Henri Focillon, chair of medieval archaeology at the Sorbonne, concerning the 'Occidental' origins of Romanesque art, and indeed Strzygowski made a dig at the 'Sorbonnard opinions' he perceived as dominating art history in his article for Documents. The periodical held a deliberate bias against 'Occidental' values, perhaps resonant with Leiris's notorious outburst at the Saint Pol-Roux banquet, 'Vive l'Allemagne!'

Heinrich Ehl's article 'L'heure de naissance de l'art européen occidental' deliberately raised the conflicting theories of European art's 'Latin' or 'Germanic' origins, which, he argued, could only be seen as mutually interactive. However, his reproduced examples, manuscripts from collections in Munich, Cologne, and including the eleventh-century Prum lectionary from the Rylands Library in Manchester, clearly asserted the neglected significance of these Franco-Saxon and 'Germanic' sources in the development of Christian art. He cited Flaubert as having conceded that 'the best of the French spirit had always been "Germanic".'

Documents also carried an account of an Essen gold-working workshop of the tenth century, and a presentation by the Dutch scholar F. Adama van Scheltema of the royal treasure found at Oseberg in Norway in 1904.

Strzygowski's participation in Documents was significant. His subsequent support for the National Socialist regime meant a negative posthumous reputation (he died in 1941); nevertheless, Strzygowski's legacy can still be felt in current art historical approaches, as both Suzanne Marchand and Jas Elsner have pointed out. Against the dominance of the text in classical history, Strzygowski opposed the concrete evidence of the material artefact. Related to his interest in previously little-known or supposedly 'primitive' cultures, and his own vast specialised knowledge of artefacts, Strzygowski's emphasis on objects for which no textual
explanation existed could challenge traditional historiography. The art historian, he contended, should adopt methods corresponding to the particular needs of the objects under study, and as the visual arts, for him, predated forms of writing, the art historian could delve much further back into cultural history. In Documents, then, he argued stridently for the importance of once-extant artefacts, available now neither through texts nor through extensive material remains, but recoverable by archaeological and ethnographic methods.

Strzygowski, in his concern with object-types, did find a methodological ally in the comparative ethnographic approach suggested in issue three of Documents by Paul Rivet, the director of the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum. Rivet's article 'The study of material civilisations: ethnography, archaeology, prehistory,' proposed a unification of these three disciplinary areas. He argued for an ethnographic method that would treat civilisations as interrelated wholes, an implicitly functionalist approach deriving broadly from the work of Emile Durkheim (Rivet mentioned sociology as a potential model). His methodology, however, was mixed, attempting to reconcile evolutionism and the Kulturkreisen of ethnologists like Frobenius, while praising the diffusionism of Nordenskiöld. Within this melting pot of methods, perhaps symptomatic of Documents's overall confrontation of approaches, several key points emerged. Rivet posited the significance of the typical and the average as better indicators of a civilisation's make-up than the exceptional and the rare. He praised the 'exhaustive digs' of prehistorians and criticised the tendencies of previous archaeologists and ethnographers: 'It only takes a quick look at museums to confirm that their collections are too often made up of choice objects, remarkable either for their rarity, or for their artistic or careful workmanship.' Rivet contended, in an unintentionally comical example, that a map of distribution of the nose flute that included Paris because a blind busker happened to be playing one in the street there would be inexact ethnographically. By implication, the unusual, the unexpected and the 'curiosity' were to be excluded from 'serious' analysis. The qualities precisely that might attract an artist or collector to a piece of ethnographic material, and that additionally motivated the selection of certain objects for reproduction in Documents, were firmly rejected.

Importantly, though, these highly 'collectable' things were held in tension in Documents with objects that resisted preservation. In an article on musical instruments from the Trocadéro's ethnographic collections, the musicologist André Schaeffner drew the reader's attention to their variety and range. While a guitar or violin would easily fall within recognised western categories, the ethnographer, argued Schaeffner, must also study the most humble wooden box used to produce sound. He did draw particular attention to a few objects whose status as collectibles was already assured and whose meanings were enigmatic, including a Mangbetu anthropomorphic harp. Recent work on these objects has pointed out that they were in fact never integral to the Mangbetu musical repertoire and were produced primarily for the tourist market, which may have accounted for their ethnographic 'impenetrability' in the late 1920s. Mangbetu harps were well-known to artists and collectors in the 1910s and 1920s: Georges Braque had one in his studio, and Schaffner referred in a
footnote to a famous example owned by Jos Hessel and reproduced in Cahiers d’art in 1927. Schaeffner admitted the exceptional, rather than typical, nature of these harps, which often had anatomically detailed sexual organs and soundboards, covered in ‘human’ skin, attributing to the mysterious origin and function of these instruments a certain ‘troubled psychology.’ At the same time as dealing with increasingly prized objects like this, Schaeffner was also concerned with the least conservable of musical instruments: an Abyssinian ‘earth drum’ consisting of two holes in the ground of differing heights. This instrument could only be captured photographically, and indeed was virtually illegible in the dark photograph by Griaule published alongside the article, where only the position of the player’s hands and arms gave any indication of its existence.

The dissolution of the clearly delimited ethnographic or archaeological artefact which Strzygowski’s polemic had pointed to found an alternative formulation in Documents in discussions of technology and bodily techniques. Schaeffner’s ‘earth drum’ was constituted as much through a technique of the body (and the context of a performance) as through the physical configuration of the ground. The ethnographer Erland Nordenskiöld, a specialist of South America, in his article on scales and balancing poles used to weigh different loads, provided a similar example: ‘A primitive “scales” that we all make use of is formed by our hands when we compare the weight of two objects by placing one in the left hand and the other in the right hand.’ Nordenskiöld claimed that his wife had seen ‘Indian’ (South
American) children weigh out sugar in this way on several occasions. The elaborate decorated Peruvian scales he reproduced, from the collection of the Gothenburg museum, had their intangible counterpart in a practice that could only be observed at the moment of its execution: the children balancing their hands. The decorated scales were also accompanied by a drawing of a much more ‘humble’ balance made of a wooden stick carried on a man’s shoulders [fig. 3].

The examples in Nordenskiöld’s article traced a progression away from the concrete (‘precious’) artefact, via its more basic variant, towards its dissolution altogether into the techniques of the body. These in turn destabilised the basis of ethnographic research, with its previous emphasis on acquiring samples and evidence, and pointed to a much greater concern with ethnographic experience and its documentation. The collection and preservation of artefacts – arguably up to this point one of the main aims of anthropological activity - could lead to a neglect of their crucial contingent qualities, as Griaule argued in a dictionary definition of ‘Pottery’ in Documents:

The archaeologists and aesthetes are interested in the container and not in the contents, in the rural scenes and the animals on the surround, and not in the milk pouring directly from the udder; in the colour of the clay and not in the smell that it could give to this milk…We will admire the form of a handle, but be wary of studying the position of the man who drinks…

Griaule's short article pointed to the clay pot as simply the residue of something else, something more compelling with which it was intimately linked in a ritual of function. The apparently humble object could be impregnated with smell, touch and sound, the direct experience of which the ethnographer would hunt down.

The classification of such technological manifestations as the ‘earth drum’ or the ‘hand scales’ clearly relied to some extent on the ethnographer's perspective, as the observer and recorder of a moment of ‘authentic’ experience. To shift attention like this onto the ethnographer himself also had significant implications for the development of the discipline. In one of the most radical ethnographic articles for Documents, Griaule hinted at the problems of the ethnographer's vision, and tackled explicitly the notion of the cultural ‘purity’ of the objects of scientific enquiry. In an analysis of a Baoule drum from the Ivory Coast, a prime piece in the Trocadéro’s collection, Griaule picked out a detail of a man holding a rifle, which he claimed had been seen to devalue the drum [fig. 4]. He scathingly mocked the viewpoint of those who, he argued, did not realise that the ‘primitive’ public was interested in sixteen-litre petrol cans, cheap alcohol and good quality weapons. Griaule gave examples of the transformation of western industrial products in Africa: spears sold on Djibouti market made from stolen sleepers from the Franco-Ethiopian railway, and roof finials decorated with fragments of Chianti bottles thrown from passing trains. Griaule’s article deliberately challenged the myth of a ‘pure’ non-western ‘art’ free from the messy concerns of...
colonial contact, particularly those involving trade transactions. His examples were chosen to critique the values of antiquarianism, to which ethnography could be opposed, but they could also be interpreted in two different ways: as instances of the absurdity of revering the everyday and the throwaway as 'art,' or as ingenious re-uses and transformations of insignificant things. This ambivalence was arguably a central difficulty in ethnography’s approach to ‘rubbish’ and the ‘humble’ object.

Fig. 4: Detail of Baoule drum, Ivory Coast, wood, 198h x 48d, Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum, Paris, in Documents, 2: 1 (1930).
While Griaule's agenda was to expose the hypocrisies of western aesthetic attitudes, his article did also suggest the lability of the ethnographic discipline, as an approach whose methods might embrace contradictory positions, in taking up both the 'typical' and the extraordinary. Ethnography could go, Griaule claimed, 'as far as to think that the abuse of oak in the rooms of the Sorbonne is the sign of special conceptions of the aesthetic of wood.' His example was obviously barbed, and tallied with *Documents*’ general hostility towards the Sorbonne, but nevertheless suggested the fascination of culturally loaded objects, whose interest might lie in the fact that they were commonplace and hitherto overlooked. In fact, Griaule’s example might evoke the surrealist ‘discovery’ of the apparently banal, where something without obvious aesthetic qualities could become highly significant through its selection by the writer or artist. Ethnography, Griaule argued, was not only suspicious of the beautiful, as something rare and ‘monstrous’ within a civilisation, but it was also suspicious of itself as a ‘white science,’ ‘tainted with prejudices.’ His own approach had the potential to undermine itself, in Griaule’s warning gunshot across the bows of his own discipline.

In fact, the implications of Griaule’s vigorous critique of ethnography’s high-minded devotion to an untouchable anthropological past (the ‘other’ locked in its own ‘time,’ to allude to Johannes Fabian’s important analysis of this tendency), were taken up most evidently not by Griaule himself but by Leiris, particularly in his fieldwork diary of the 1931-33 Dakar to Djibouti expedition, *Phantom Africa.* Griaule’s subsequent ethnographic work amongst the Dogon in Mali concentrated upon ritual systems such as masking or cosmology to produce a complex and detailed account of their culture, but one that was largely self-contained and oriented towards the cultivation of ‘traditional’ practices. It was Leiris who brought to his first anthropological expedition an attitude of self-questioning and self-reflexivity, and a deliberate flouting of professional expertise and propriety, so much so that *Phantom Africa* alienated many of his anthropological colleagues upon publication. Leiris’s maverick approach was perhaps unsurprising when we read in the pages of *Documents* that his inspiration for visiting Africa was based on seeing Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa* as a child, and that one of his models as an ethnographer-in-training was the voodoo initiate William Seabrook.

Leiris’s accounts of the collection of objects for the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, marked by boredom, frustration, embarrassment and shame, would communicate above all the uneasy human transactions these could not help but involve. The ethnographic approach that the Dakar-Djibouti expedition would adopt towards materials collected, which had already begun to find formulation in *Documents*, would not only reflect the original contexts of their ‘discovery,’ in their ritual and everyday uses. It would also begin to make manifest the inescapable role of the ethnographers themselves in bringing meanings to the things they selected, analysed, reproduced and displayed, and raise the seemingly irreconcilable tensions so prevalent in the pages of *Documents*: between preciousness and worthlessness, the materially solid and the absent object, the principle of autonomy and the implications of use. Leiris’s account of fieldwork experience, itself a product of his own ‘impossible mix’ of ethnographic ‘discipline’ and poetic ‘indiscipline,’ would anticipate later processes of
anthropological self-critique by creating a model for encountering objects in which the ethnographer-collector was both physically and subjectively implicated. And the objects of *Documents* would suggest complex approaches to material culture where their own 'life' as nodal points in a web of institutional, interpersonal, and intellectual interactions came to prominence.

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5 Leiris, 'De Bataille l'impossible,' 28.


7 *Aréthuse*, a 'three-monthly review of art and archaeology,' was published by Jean Babelon and Pierre d'Espezel (one of the backers of *Documents* and an acquaintance of Rivière), and its remit included 'Coins and Medals. Plaques. Seals. Engraved gemstones. Archaeology. Minor Arts. Criticism.' *Ipek* was an 'Annual Review of Prehistorical and Ethnographical Art' whose collaborators included the Abbé Breuil, the Swedish ethnologist Erland Nordenskiöld (a contributor to *Documents*) and Paul Rivet.

8 *Beaux-Arts* had begun as a supplement to the *Gazette des beaux-arts* (also produced by Wildenstein between 1929-39). Leiris was editing manager of both of these journals as well as *Documents* in 1930.


12 Georges Pudelko, 'L'art étrusque,' *Documents*, 2:4 (1930), 223. Pudelko referred erroneously to 'Mühlenstein.'

13 The revised subtitle came into force in issue 4 in September 1929. The inclusion of 'miscellanies' ('variétés') may have echoed *Cahiers d'art's* own 'Feuilles volantes' section.

15 Joyce, *Carl Einstein in Documents*, 244.


22 Jacobsthal, 'Les Têtes de Roquepertuse,' 94.


26 Contenau, 'L'art sumérien,' 2.

27 Contenau, 'L'art sumérien,' 8.

28 Grousset, 'Un cas de régression vers les arts «barbares»,' 74.


30 Clarke, 'L'art des Iles Salomon,' 277.


32 Sydow, 'Masques-Janus du Cross-River,' 328.

33 Sydow, 'Masques-Janus du Cross-River,' 326.
Denis Hollier, 'La valeur d'usage de l'impossible,' Documents (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), vii-xxxiv.

Jean Babelon, 'Un Eldorado macédonien cinq cents ans avant Jésus-Christ,' Documents, 1:2 (1929), 65-74, and anon, 'Le trésor de Nagy-Szent-Miklos,' Documents, 1:6 (1929), 320-3. The gold vases and cup excavated in Bulgaria and held in the collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, also served Documents' anti-classical agenda, as the anonymous author claimed of their decorative motifs 'The subsisting Hellenistic elements are dominated, moreover, by the Asiatic elements,' 'Le trésor de Nagy-Szent-Miklos,' 320.

Paul Pelliot, 'Quelques réflexions sur l'art sibérien et l'art chinois, à propos de bronzes de la collection David-Weill,' Documents, 1:1 (1929), 9-21. The results of Pelliot's expedition were published between 1914 and 1923, following on from his study Les Grottes de Touen-Huang. Peintures et sculptures bouddhiques des époques des Wei, des Tang et des Song (Paris, 1914). In 1924 and 1925 he also published two books on Chinese antiquities based on the collection of C. T. Loo.

Pelliot, 'Quelques réflexions sur l'art sibérien,' 18. Pieces from David-Weill's collection also accompanied Bataille's short review 'Les trouvailles de Louristan,' 373.


Stéphen Chauvet, 'Objets d'or, de bronze, et d'ivoire dans l'art nègre,' Cahiers d'art, 5:1 (1930), 33-4.

Chauvet, 'Objets d'or,' 33.

Chauvet, 'Objets d’or,' 40. This mask was reproduced in the catalogue for the Georges de Miré sale, Sculptures anciennes d’Afrique et Amérique, Collection G. de Miré (Paris: Hôtel Drouot, 1931), no. 86, plate X. For the prices paid for works in this sale, see Charles Ratton, 'Les ventes: Collection G. de Miré,' Cahiers d'art, 6:9-10 (1931), 454.

Einstein, 'A propos de l'Exposition de la Galerie Pigalle,' 112.

The only living artist that Wildenstein dealt in was Picasso, representing him in partnership with Paul Rosenberg between 1919 and 1932.

Charles de Noailles ran the Société des amis du musée d’ethnographie du Trocadéro (SAMET). In 1929, David David-Weill was supporting the museum's staff with 9,600f per year, while his brother Pierre gave 40,000f to support its library. In 1932, de Noailles contributed 10,000f, David-Weill 17,000f and Wildenstein 7,000f for the museum's bulletin. Rivière himself gave 60,000f. These figures are from the memos of the Trocadéro Ethnographic Museum, former archives of the Musée de l'Homme [2 AM 1 G2c and e].


André Masson's murals for Pierre David-Weill were reproduced to accompany Georges Limbour's article 'André Masson: le dépeceur universel,' Documents, 2:5 (1930), 286-9.

Georges Henri Rivière, 'Préface,' in Sculptures anciennes d’Afrique et Amérique, Collection G. de Miré, I-III.

Einstein, 'A propos de l'Exposition de la Galerie Pigalle,' 104.

Bataille used the term 'boîte à malices' ('box of tricks') in his article 'Joan Miró: Peintures récentes,' Documents, 2:7 (1930), 399.


Strzygowski, "Recherches sur les arts plastiques," 22.

Strzygowski, "Recherches sur les arts plastiques," 23.

Strzygowski, "Recherches sur les arts plastiques," 23.

55 Strzygowski, "Recherches sur les arts plastiques," 23.
57 Ehl, 'L'heure de naissance de l'art européen occidental,' 9.
60 See Marchand, 'The Rhetoric of Artifacts,' 123.
63 Rivet, 'L'Etude des civilisations matérielles,' 134 and 132. On the 'cultural circles' of Frobenius, see Marchand, 'Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 32:2 (1997), 158. Nordenskiöld's diffusionist charts have been described as 'a thorn in functionalist eyes,' Robert Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (London: Harrap, 1937), 252.
64 Rivet, 'L'Etude des civilisations matérielles,' 133.
65 Rivet, 'L'Etude des civilisations matérielles,' 131.
68 Schaeffner, 'Des instruments de musique,' 254.
69 Schaeffner, 'Des instruments de musique,' 250.
70 The 'earth drum' is reproduced in Schaeffner, 'Des instruments de musique,' 253.
72 Nordensköld, 'Le balancier à fardeaux,' 180 and 179, note 1.
73 Marcel Griaule, 'Poterie,' *Documents*, 2:4 (1930), 236.
74 Griaule, 'Un coup de fusil,' *Documents*, 2:1 (1930), 46.
75 Griaule, 'Un coup de fusil,' 46.
The potential connections between Leiris’s work and concept of the ‘artist as ethnographer’ in contemporary artistic practice remain as yet largely unexplored.


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A Painting by Antoine Caron

Neil Cox

Alongside archaeological artefacts, Hollywood movies, ethnographical objects and the work of modern artists, Documents also made occasional forays into the history of Western art. This essay looks at just one example of the appropriation and deformation of heritage in Documents: its treatment of an obscure French Renaissance painting. Leaping back and forth in history, I am going to make a lot of this picture; more, it might seem, than its brief appearance on the stage of avant-gardism merits. Documents, like the Robespierre once described by Walter Benjamin, blasts moments of the historical past out of the continuum of history, charging them with a Messianic ‘time of the now.’ Michel Leiris spoke for the same tactic, if not the same strategy, when he declared in Documents that ‘we have little respect for anything that does not annihilate the succession of centuries in one stroke, and put us, stripped naked, in a more immediate and newer world.’ In this avant-garde criticism, the act of interpretation forged a temporal short-circuit, transforming the present with the moral forces of a distant past, a cultural otherness, an awesome worldview. At the end of this essay, taking my cue from its treatment by Leiris as a magical object, I imagine the picture as a spectre, or a tolling bell, that haunts the political imagination of Georges Bataille throughout the 1930s, constantly challenging it. The picture resonated, I think, with European politics in the 1930s, partly because its strangeness conjured the imagery of the confrontation of religion and modernity, of civil war in France, and of the profoundly problematic entwining of sovereignty, crime and political revolution. More importantly, the history of the avant-gardist politics of the 1930s pursued by Bataille and others in the wake of Documents, a politics mired in the challenges of ‘political psychology’ and the need for new symbols of popular revolt that resisted ‘fascist’ imperatives, might itself tell uncomfortable truths about the potential for radical resistance in the face of revolutionary religious movements in the present, or at least about the continuing viability of a rhetoric of revolution without a revolutionary theory of sovereignty and the state. In this context, the Renaissance painting resonates still.

* * *

In 1937, Antoine Caron’s Augustus and the Sibyl [fig. 1] featured in the Exposition Universelle as an example of ‘a masterpiece of French art.’ The scholar who discovered the picture, Gustave Lebel, had bought it in an auction at the Hôtel Drouot in December 1936. He rushed home to declare to his family that he ‘was the first to have identified a painting by Antoine Caron.’ This notion, that Lebel’s identification of the Augustus picture inaugurated the rediscovery of the entire painted oeuvre of Antoine Caron, was maintained down to the 1980s by his acolyte Jean Ehrmann, notwithstanding...
the fact that *Documents* had priority in the matter by some seven years. At the time of his discovery, thanks to *Augustus and the Sibyl*, of the painter Caron, Lebel was ignorant of the article by Leiris, ‘A Painting by Antoine Caron,’ the one that brought to light what remains the only known signed and dated work by the artist, published in *Documents* at the end of 1929 [fig. 2].

Fig. 1: Antoine Caron, *La sybille de Tibur/Augustus and the Sibyl*, c.1575-80, oil on canvas, 125 x 170 cm, Paris: Musée du Louvre (C) Photo RMN/© Gérard Blot.

From the perspective of the kind of connoisseurship practiced by Lebel, Leiris’s contribution hardly counted as an entry in the historiography: ‘The beginning of the article which accompanied the reproduction of the picture in *Documents,*’ Lebel wrote in 1938, ‘only provided a short historical note the contents of which were entirely borrowed from the monograph on Caron published in 1850 by Anatole de Montaiglon […]. The rest was devoted to commentaries on the inspiration (of a sadistic or masochistic order – those are the exact terms of the author) that guided the painter.’ As a description of Leiris’s essay this is not unfair. ‘A Painting by Antoine Caron’ occupies only seven pages of *Documents*, and is prefaced by an ostentatiously scientific ‘documentary note’ in italics that not only draws upon Montaiglon – an offprint of which was readily available in the Bibliothèque Nationale – but also on information that could only have come directly from the painting’s then owner.
Leiris’s essay is illustrated with four high-quality unattributed photographs [fig. 3], three of which show important details, and is divided into three quite distinct sections, no doubt echoing the form of the painting. The three sections are: an autobiographical reminiscence of childhood with no apparent relationship to the work at hand; a speculative exploration of the artist’s motives that suggests that the painting is bound up in practices of black magic; and finally, an extraordinary poetic evocation of the world of this massacre. As a piece of art criticism, the text strikes me as an exceptionally bold venture, aphoristic, heterodox and complex in its metaphors.

Some of the autobiographical material that constitutes the opening shock in the essay is drawn from – became part of – the text of Leiris’s self-analysis, L’âge d’homme (eventually published, after a period of self-doubt, in 1939). Claiming to have been obsessed with scenes of immolation, preoccupied by the idea of blood and dismemberment, and terrorised by the extravagant playground threats of schoolmates to murder him with an axe, or his elder brother to extract his appendix with a corkscrew, Leiris insists in his essay on Caron that this worldview is not at all unique, but constitutes the typical universe of childhood. At the same time, infantile horror is also made the model for understanding societies or historical epochs: ‘My childhood seems to me analogous to that of a people constantly prey to terrors and superstitions, and in the grip of dark and cruel mysteries.’ In this way, what seems an irrelevant series of recollections is turned in the direction of Caron’s painting. When he finally makes that scandalous assertion that the artist is driven by sado-masochistic

Fig. 2: Antoine Caron, Les massacres du Triumvirat/The Massacres of the Triumvirate, 1566, oil on canvas, 116 x 195 cm, reproduced in Documents, December 1929, 349.
fantasies, Leiris does so by connecting them back to childhood brutalities: ‘As a child tortures domestic animals and decapitates flies, bites his nails until they bleed, or again plays in order to terrify himself, Antoine Caron […] by painting alone kills old men and makes frenzied women flee.’

The scene that above all prompts Leiris’s observation is in the immediate foreground of Caron’s painting [fig. 4], where a gracefully painted soldier crouches over an inverted headless corpse, and gropes blindly in its torso. By painting alone… The brutality reaches such a pitch that painting becomes a black art.
The context for Caron’s supposed sadism is the French Wars of Religion, the first phase of which can be said to culminate in the massacre of St Bartholomew’s day in August 1572 – an episode that, for Leiris, expresses the mentality of a terrorised society, an imagination of ‘immeasurable horror’ producing extraordinary barbarism. The Wars of Religion is a term that not only encompasses military conflicts that were in effect civil wars – of which there were three between 1562 and 1570 – but also the continuous unrest and brutal mob violence that were the complement of and inspiration for a series of inept or ill-judged royal attempts to enforce order and achieve lasting peace. The propaganda war that went with the religious schism turned on hyperbolic representations of acts of cruelty and injustice, and especially of a series of massacres. Following a tightening of the laws on heresy by Henri II, in September 1557 a Calvinist meeting in a house on the Rue Saint-Jacques was broken up by a Catholic mob, and the authorities arrested one hundred and thirty-two Protestants. Three of their number burned at the stake in the Place Maubert. The Parlement of Paris resisted...
Henri’s pressure for greater zeal in stamping out heresy by commuting some death sentences, and one councillor who advocated tolerance, Anne du Bourg, himself fell victim to the king’s rage, strangled and roasted [fig. 5].

After the death of Henri II in a jousting accident, his ill-fated fifteen-year-old son François II, with Catherine de Médici as regent, had immediately to contend with a bid for power and influence mounted by the Prince de Condé, a Protestant with royal blood. The response to this plot – aimed principally at removing the hard-line Catholic Guise family from their position of influence at Court – was remarkably restrained. Nevertheless, the ringleaders were hanged and beheaded in the usual manner, their heads ranged along the scaffold in hideous rows, according to the visual record of Protestant chroniclers [fig. 6].

François died prematurely just eighteen months later, so his brother became King Charles IX at the age of ten, again with his mother as regent. Their attempts to institute a peace through colloquia, edicts and treatises failed to contain the paranoid and virulent clashes on the streets, or indeed the political rivalry at Court. Among the massacred were the dead of Sens and Tours [figs. 7 and 8]. In Sens, a fanatical Catholic friar triggered the destruction of the local Protestant temple. The Huguenots were then killed indiscriminately – and their bodies, dumped in the Yonne, eventually

Fig. 5: Tortorell and Perissin, *Execution of Anne du Bourg*, [21 Dec 1559], woodcut, 1569 © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
floated downstream to Paris. Similarly at Tours around two hundred Huguenots were beaten to death or drowned.\textsuperscript{14}

Fig. 6: Tortorell and Perissin, Amboise Execution [15 March 1560], woodcut, 1569 © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Fig. 7: Tortorell and Perissin, Massacre at Sens [April 1562], woodcut, 1569 © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.
This short history lesson can serve as the briefest indicator of the violent realities that Leiris sets against Caron’s invention. The observation is more accurate than we might think – for many of the vignettes we see in Caron’s Roman massacre, such as those neat rows of heads or the drawing out of organs, recur not only in the later pictorial representations of massacres in France that I have been referring to, but also in written accounts. Moreover, the imagery of Tortorell and Perissin’s suite of prints on the Wars of Religion finds its crude and yet more gratuitous counterpart in Catholic propaganda woodcuts representing the ‘Horrible Cruelties of the Huguenots in France’ of 1562. Here many fantasies of barbarism are entertained: horses are invited to feed on the entrails of Catholics, babies are dismembered, feet are boiled in oil, women’s wombs burnt, and innards pulled from living victims.

Leiris’s way of unlocking this terrorised and terrorising mentality, this imagination of horror, is not to recount the particular historical context for Caron’s picture in 1566, but instead to furnish, while acknowledging its fanciful nature, a gothic anecdote drawn from Eliphas Lévi’s important nineteenth-century work on magic, Dogme et rituel de la haute magie. In fact it is one of a large number of such stories that circulated from 1567 onwards among Huguenots who vilified Catherine de Médici as a sorceress, interpreting her habit of consulting astrologers and soothsayers as a full blown conspiracy with Satan causing the misfortunes of France. The central motif of the story, set in 1574,
decapitation conducted in a black mass with a view to gaining oracular pronouncement on the life of the ailing Charles IX. The midnight mass is conducted before the image of Satan. Two hosts (one black, one white) are consecrated, and the white one given to a child dressed for baptism, who is immediately decapitated. The child’s head is placed on the platter atop the black host, and brought before the dying king. After an exorcism calling up the demon to speak through the mouth of this grizzly head, Charles IX poses it a secret question. A husky voice responds in Latin: *Vim Patior*, which means ‘I suffer violence’ or ‘I am oppressed,’ interpreted by the King as an augur of eternal torment, the punishment awaiting him for presiding over the massacre of Saint Bartholemew, during which thousands of Huguenots were slaughtered in Paris in a few days.\(^{18}\)

The imagery of decapitation dominates Caron’s painting, and nothing could be more compelling for Leiris, who only a few months after writing his Caron essay would come across photographs of two paintings (now lost) of female heroines by Lucas Cranach the Elder. One depicted the suicidal Roman Lucretia, the other the decapitating biblical heroine Judith. In *L’âge d’homme*, Leiris supplemented this duo with a third Cranach femme fatale: the bloodthirsty decapitator beloved of Gustave Moreau, Salome. In his exploration of Cranach’s sublime women in *L’âge d’homme*, Leiris makes it clear that he identifies not with them but with Judith’s victim Holofernes, and there is profound masochistic eroticism for him in the castrative moment of his own imagined decapitation at her hands. It is the spectre of the severed head of Holofernes dangling from the hand of Cranach’s Judith that creeps into a photographic spread in *Documents*, which fills Leiris with exaltation in its connection to the ice-maiden. ‘Like Holofernes with his head cut off,’ he writes, ‘I imagine myself sprawling at the feet of this idol.’\(^{19}\) ‘Severed heads will fall like the rubbish in the morning streets and lick the shadows and the feet of statues…’ says Leiris in his concluding poem to the Caron essay. This image of the licking tongues of the dead, perhaps inspired by that lolling tongue in the calf’s head photographed by Eli Lotar at the abattoirs of La Villette, is a tough reminder of the point where words fail a severed head.\(^{20}\)

Crucially, the poem at the end of Leiris’s essay draws our attention to the key dramatis personae: the triumvirs, authors of all this death, seated beneath a canopy in the Coliseum, picked out in one of the details reproduced in *Documents* [fig. 9]. Leiris pays little attention to the textual origins of Caron’s painting, nor indeed its pictorial ones, tedious jobs for more conservative scholars. Nevertheless, the title given to the picture in *Documents* is *Massacre of a Roman Proscription*, and he clearly knew that the triumvirs in question are Octavian, Anthony and Lepidus, a triple dictatorship appointed with emergency powers in 43 B.C. by the Roman Senate, itself under threat from their three armies. The ostensible task for the triumvirs was to reorganise the state – but their objectives were revenge against the murderers of Caesar and a wider constituency of political enemies. The history of their proscriptions in Rome, during which their troops massacred around two thousand three hundred Senators and Equites, is told in chronicler’s detail in Appian’s *Roman History*.\(^{21}\) As far as I can tell, the story of the triumvirs seems to have entered the history of the visual arts in frescos painted by Nicolò dell’Abate in Modena during 1546 (Sala del Fuoco, Palazzo Communale).\(^{22}\) Modena was Roman Mutina, scene of a battle between Octavian and Anthony prior to their alliance –
but the image of the triumvirate was also an allegory of fragile European alliances: the Emperor Charles V personified as Octavian. Nicolò dell’Abate made his way to the court of Fontainebleau in 1552 – so perhaps he sparked the fashion for pictures of the triumvirate. Dozens survive: and we know that the Connetable de Montmorency, a leading Catholic, owned such a picture during the 1550s.23

Fig. 9: Antoine Caron, Massacres of the Triumvirate, 1566, detail, reproduced in Documents December 1929, 353.
In a large print of the epoch, with numbers corresponding to a lost key [fig. 10], it is easy to grasp the repetitive nature of the genre, where certain vignettes relating to Appian’s account, or others added in response to the colour of the times, are repeated. A man is chased into a well at the bottom right; a soldier on horseback reads out the proscription to a group of people; a man is asleep in a sewer at bottom left and is roused by a friend; a man’s tongue is cut out by a group of soldiers; victims are tossed naked from burning buildings; and on the steps before the triumvirs, Cicero’s head and hands are presented on a pike. There is even, in the left foreground, a scene corresponding to Caron’s soldier opening the chest of a corpse. If the triumvirate story had been appropriated in Italy due to its direct connections to the city of Modena, but had always been read as a contemporary allegory, what did it mean in Renaissance France? As far as we can tell, in the 1550s the theme resonated strongly with Catholics and Protestants alike, either as a threatening call to arms or a warning of the holocaust to come. This sense of allegory was heightened in an extraordinary way, I believe, when in 1561 three Catholic nobles (Montmorency, Guise, St André) declared their own triumvirate and issued a manifesto declaration against the Huguenot heretics and in favour of their armed suppression. Later that same year, one important Protestant negotiator in the peace process known as the Colloquy de Poissy recorded that:

There were then brought to the Court three large pictures, excellently painted, representing the bloody and more than inhuman executions once performed in Rome, during the proscription by the Roman Triumvirate […]. These pictures were bought at very high cost by the great; one of them was in the apartment of the Prince de Condé, on view to all those of the Faith, against whom, subsequently, equal or greater cruelties were soon to be committed.24 [figs. 11 and 12]

Caron’s representation of the massacres [fig. 13] is faithful in many respects to Appian, but for Leiris, it will be recalled, it also functioned variously as an avatar of the massacres of St Bartholomew’s day, an expression of profound sadism on the part of the artist, and an exercise in black magic. Caron’s painting is not merely a portent for Leiris, but a pictorial curse, an endless visual proscription, a spell summoning torturers. One year after Caron’s painting was signed, about eighty Catholic notables, monks and priests were slaughtered in a courtyard of the Bishop’s palace at Nimes, and many of the bodies were pitched into wells.25 Was this a case, thanks not merely to the ubiquity of the iconography of massacre, of life bewitched by art? In a curious footnote, Leiris tells an anecdote about Caron’s Massacre that could only have come from its then owner, the Marquis de Jaucourt.26 On armistice day the picture is supposed to have crashed loudly to the floor during the minute’s silence, its potency apparently still undiminished.

An unspoken question thus circulates in the gloom of Leiris’ rhetoric: what black curse, what dreadful violence, might this picture continue to visit upon the French people in 1929?27
Fig. 10: Jean de Gourmont, Pourtraict representant les massacres cruels & inhumains faits à Rome l’an 711 de la fondation, par le Triumvirat Octavius Caesar, Anthonius & Lepidus, woodcut, c.1550 © Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Fig. 11: Anon., Massacres of the Triumvirate, c.1550, Musée cantonal de Lausanne, reproduced in Jean Ehrmann, Antoine Caron, Paris, 1985, 25.
Fig. 12: Anon., Massacres of the Triumvirate, c.1550, formerly Vigny Collection, reproduced in Jean Ehrmann, Antoine Caron, Paris, 1985, 23.

Fig. 13: Antoine Caron, Massacres of the Triumvirate, 1566, oil on canvas, Paris: Musée du Louvre (C) Photo RMN© Gérard Blot.

* * *
In a sale catalogue of 1817 Caron’s *Massacre* was reinterpreted in light of more recent historical events:

The picture represents one of the proscriptions of the Roman Republic. We won’t undertake to describe all the horrible details of this picture [fig. 14], but they are the image of revolutions, and can serve as an example to their partisans, and disgust them forever.\(^\text{28}\)

In 1817, the terror of the Roman proscription that once stood for the Wars of Religion readily becomes The Terror of 1793, with its rows of heads on scaffolds, the summary justice of the Tribunals, the triumvirate of Robespierre, Couthon and Saint-Just.\(^\text{29}\) Taking our cue from this predictable reading in 1817, The Terror seen through the lens of Caron’s painting [fig. 15] becomes the model for a particularly modern species of the state of emergency – a revolutionary one – aimed at purging the social body of corruption in order to preserve its ‘imperilled unity’ in the face of enemies of the revolution.\(^\text{30}\) The endless process of purification was the mechanism – and this is the right word – for maintaining the sovereignty of the people, itself instated by the ultimate purifying act of decapitating the Sovereign, Louis XVI.

The Revolutionaries’ adoption of the imagery of the Republic that became an Empire, that Benjaminian blasting of the past in order to transform the present, was a subversion of earlier conservative appropriations of this imagery by the French monarchy stretching back to at least the time of François I. Such earlier appropriations required all sorts of allegorical manoeuvres to contain the meanings the association of monarchy with republic or empire might produce.

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Fig. 14: Antoine Caron, *Massacres of the Triumvirate*, 1566, detail, Paris: Musée du Louvre (C) Photo RMN© Gérard Blot.
In 1548, Henri II made his Royal Entry into the city of Lyon [fig. 16]. He was entertained by a re-enactment of a gladiatorial combat, one that thrilled him so much that he demanded it be staged again six days later. On its second performance, his return to Lyon was treated as if a Roman Triumph, complete with one hundred and sixty infantry wearing Roman uniform, and enormous triumphal arches symbolising ‘Honour’ and ‘Virtue.’ Similar principles were applied on Henri’s entry to Paris in 1549, and especially to Rouen in 1550. Here there was a procession of triumphal cars with hundreds of followers, and then the King passed through the city via a series of triumphal arches. The triumphal cars, preceded by soldiers, cavalry, musicians and standard bearers all in Roman armour, represented Fame and Religion. Spoils were carried on elephants, and prisoners dragged behind in chains. The imagery of these great official festivals was indebted to the art of Sebastiano Serlio, then working in France on his studies of Vitruvian architecture, and the circle of Italian artists in the royal palace at Fontainebleau including Primaticcio and Rosso.

The royal court basked in the grandeur that was Rome – but it also embraced the instruments of Imperial oppression. After his Parisian entry and before his trip to Rouen, Henri II organised a procession against heresy, a display of some of the city’s important precious relics such as the Crown of Thorns, pieces of the True Cross, and the reliquaries of the patron saints of Paris, Geneviève and
Marcel. The King and his wife, Catherine de Médici, carried candles behind these objects. The climax of the event was the burning of convicted heretics across the city. Henri II attended the executions in the Rue Saint-Antoine. In so doing he went a little further than his father, François I, who had organised a similar procession in 1535. While six heretics burned that evening, François dined with representatives of the city’s various authorities. He told them that he wanted heresy stamped out in his kingdom ‘…in such a manner that if one of the arms of my body was infected with this corruption, I would cut it off, and if my children were tainted with it, I would myself offer them in sacrifice.’ This bodily metaphor was of immense power during the paroxysms of the reformation – most particularly in Paris, long regarded as ‘the most Catholic of cities.’ The Lutheran heresy first arrived in the city in 1521, but religious hatred intensified in the 1550s as Calvinist congregations grew. As Barbara Diefendorf has pointed out, ‘we cannot understand the French Catholic reaction to religious schism unless we can comprehend that, for the sixteenth-century Parisian, religious unity – personally felt and publicly displayed – was not just an ideal, but a vital condition for individual and collective salvation. Society was perceived as an organic whole, “one bread, and one body”.’

Fig. 16: Anon., La Perspective du change, from La magnificence de la superbe et triomphante entree de la noble & antique cite de Lyon faite au treschrestien Roy de France Henry deuxiesme de ce nom, et à la Royne Catherine son espouse le XXIII. de Septembre M.D.XLVIII. Lyon: Chés Guillaume Rouille à L’Escu de Venise, 1549, 53, reproduced in Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, vol VIII, 1945.
At the same time, the fantasy of a *Pax Romana* was a powerful force in the French court, one that had to vie with the intensity of Catholic and Protestant religious worldviews. We could even suppose that the tension between these representations is what produces the bizarre forms of French painting in the period. In some cases this was a matter of the commingling of ancient Rome and contemporary Paris, of Emperor and King, in the most decadent of mannerisms. *Augustus and the Sibyl* [fig. 1] is one such dreamscape of enchantment, emblems and slogans, of Parisian and Roman monuments (such as the Tour de Nesle, the gardens of the recently constructed Tuileries palace, the temple and the obelisk). Based on a widely performed mystery play of the period that – bizarrely – concluded a cycle on the prophecies of the Old Testament, it shows Octavian, newly made ‘august’ by the Senate, consulting the Sybil on the question of whether or not to institute a cult in his own image, or whether to celebrate other gods. ‘Piety of Augustus,’ the text between two Solomonic columns, echoes their normal association with the two pillars of the reign of Charles IX that had come to an end in 1574, perhaps a few years before Caron made this picture. ‘Justice and Piety’ were the two pillars of Charles’s personal allegorical device, but in both the painting and the emblem Piety means respect for authority as well as for custom and the gods. The notion that Charles IX was a new Augustus, ushering in a golden age of peace in which the arts would flourish anew, was merely an element of an entire fantasy of renewal or even of a revolution in the cycle of time. Royal absolutism, neo-platonism, hermeticism and magic were brought together by Charles and his mother Catherine de Médici in an attempt to found a Christian peace: their vision was that of Ficino, of a reality shot through with the life of the cosmos. Their moderate vision of a radiant peace was far removed from the virulent opposition of Catholic and Huguenot belief systems, and the gap between the royal vision and religious sectarianism was the yawning space made for catastrophic violence. It was this gap that made it possible for Charles to ignore the religious warfare breeding paranoia and brutality among his subjects, and that eventually necessitated the ill-favoured proscription Charles issued in August 1572.\(^{34}\)

When the Roman triumvirs entered Rome, they published their proscription, listing ‘the worst and most guilty’ that should be killed. They also set out a table of cash rewards for those bringing the heads of the proscribed before them, and threatened anyone aiding the condemned with immediate proscription themselves. They made clear the need for purgation, a state of emergency threatening all: ‘this we shall do for your interest no less than for our own, for while we keep up our conflicts you will all be involved necessarily in great dangers [...].\(^{35}\) In the same way in 1562 a court ordered that Protestant heretics could be ‘torn to pieces’ by the people without fear of legal reprisals.\(^{36}\) By 1567, a witness tells us that ‘it was permitted to kill’ not only heretics, but also anyone who said a word in their favour.\(^{37}\) During the first officially sanctioned murders of St Bartholemew’s night in 1572, the Duke de Guise, whose soldiers had just stabbed, defenestrated and decapitated the body of Admiral Coligny, offered words of encouragement: ‘we have begun well; let us go on to others, for the king commands it.’\(^{38}\)

Caron’s painting is a paean to this world of officially sanctioned killing. A devout Catholic, Caron may well have been an agitator for the annihilation of the Calvinists. The architectural
representations in his painting nevertheless lend themselves to an allegorical reading closer to the royal vision of a *Pax Romana*. Among the panoply of monuments that make up the scene of the massacre, leading Triumvir Octavian Augustus sits in the presence of a statue of Marcus Aurelius that stands in front of the Capitoline Palace [fig. 17]. The two reigns of (Octavian) Augustus (beginning 27 B.C.) and Marcus Aurelius (ending 180 A.D.) marked the limits of the so-called *Pax Romana*. Charles IX’s Augustan ‘piety’ is underwritten by his Aurelian ‘justice.’ In other words, if this reading was possible to the contemporary audience, the proscriptions of the Triumvirs, so the picture says, are made necessary in the interests of a militarised religious ‘peace.’

Fig. 17: Antoine Caron, *Les Massacres du Triumvirat*, 1566, detail, Paris: Musée du Louvre (C) Photo RMN© Gérard Blot.
Caught in this vision of the *Pax Romana*, their own fantastical blasting of the continuum of history, the French royal family were party to a transformation in the nature of their power. The pogroms of the sixteenth century changed irrevocably the perception of sovereignty as expressed in the institution of monarchy. The Massacre of St Bartholomew’s night in 1572 had a profound impact on one humanist scholar, Jean Bodin. Bodin’s *Six Books of the Republic*, published in 1576, invented the term ‘political science,’ and argued that the only source of sovereignty was the power to make law, a power he regarded as absolute and divinely underwritten. Bodin thought that such a theory could demonstrate why the king’s law could not be questioned and thus guarantee stability. But in revealing power over the law alone as the basis of sovereignty, he also unintentionally unlocked the definitive character of modern sovereignty, intimately linked to violence, to power over life and death itself. (The dialectic of enlightenment is once again at work: it was Bodin, in fact, who was also the author of a hysterical manual on witchcraft, the *Demon Mania of Sorcerers*, which was the source for the story of the bloody head repeated by Lévi and recounted by Leiris. ‘I suffer violence,’ said the prophetic voice.)

* * *

Caron’s architectural vision and his exorbitant spatialisation of violence are representations of the state of emergency, and the state of emergency is itself arguably a spatial as much as it is a temporal politico-legal concept. That the state of emergency is the essential moment of sovereignty in its capacity to be both inside and outside law; that the proscription, the sovereign decision that licenses extermination of part of the population, is increasingly the paradigm of sovereignty in modernity – these ideas belong to Giorgio Agamben’s recent theorisation of sacredness. He argues that:

The sovereign sphere is the sphere in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life – that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed – is the life that has been captured in this sphere.

In Roman law, according to Agamben, the act of pronouncing a criminal ‘sacred’ with the phrase ‘Sacer Estö’ did not render him holy or prepare him for religious sacrifice, but located his sheer biological existence, his bare life, outside the sphere of normal law. Agamben then claims that this ancient bond between sovereignty and bare life, which was once the hidden contract that underpinned the law and bore witness to the violent founding moment of the social order (when power was acquired through acts of slaughter defining the limits of the kingdom), is brought to the centre of all the ‘calculations of the modern state.’ Thus the paradigmatic space of modernity is that of the concentration camp – where victims were exterminated, as Hitler put it, ‘like lice.’ Furthermore, Agamben insists that what in the days of Octavian, or of Charles IX, or even The Terror, was a temporary state of exception, is now in some sense a permanent one. Concentration camps are on
this view not hideously aberrant, historically localised inventions of the Fascist dictators; rather, they are a practical extension of a legal structure already developed by the state governments of Spain, Britain, Prussia and the Weimar Republic in managing colonial activity or controlling internal unrest. By 1933, when the Nazi regime made its so-called ‘decree for the protection of the people and the State’ that permitted the creation of their concentration camps, they did not even mention the notion of a state of emergency, since that might imply a temporary measure, and instead suspended numerous articles of the constitution indefinitely.44

We know that Georges Bataille was no stranger to theories of the sacred, sovereignty and violence. His reflections on the significance of the execution of Louis XVI – expressed, for example, in his discussion of de Sade in the Documents period; in his 1938 text ‘The Obelisk’ on the history of the Place de la Concorde, the site of the execution; as well as his founding of the secret society Acéphale in 1936 – all attempted to interpret the fate of sovereignty after this event.45 André Masson’s emblematic figuring of the acephalic religious project [fig. 18] is headless in mimicry of the last King of France, and thus re-enacts the literal removal of ‘the head’ of State. But this notionally ecstatic escape from the prison of law and order, reason and duty, is also an embrace of the sacred banishing of the criminal man – as if this could stand for revolutionary universality. Agamben’s critique of Bataille’s theory of the sacred draws attention to what he regards as its great achievement – the foregrounding of the very stuff of biological life as the subject of modern politics – as well as to what he regards as its grotesque error – the attempt to valorise this violated and vivisected bare life as the figure of a new or more authentic sovereignty.46

There is no doubt that Bataille understood the fundamental question posed by the beheading of the king: ‘how can the People take the place of the Sovereign?’47 The political meaning of the Acéphale emblem is in its refusal of the Jacobin or Leninist alternative: the revolution of the future, it says, cannot be made by replacing the lost head with another, even if in the form of a vanguard party. The problem is that its vision of sovereignty is a permanent revolt, ‘a world like a bleeding wound,’ that seems to reproduce rather than oppose the Massacres of the Triumvirate, even if it does so by identifying not with the Triumvirs, but with the fate of those subject to the proscription and with the violent practice of the soldiers. That this identification with the victims of violence and with the criminal was self-conscious – and self-consciously political – on Bataille’s part is evident from his use of a quotation from de Sade’s political tract, ‘One more effort, Frenchmen, if you would become republicans,’ as the rallying cry for the Acéphale manifesto ‘The Sacred Conspiracy’:

An already old and corrupt nation, courageously shaking off the yoke of its monarchical government in order to adopt a republican one, can only maintain itself through many crimes; for it is already in crime, and if it wants to move from crime to virtue, in other words from a violent state to a peaceful one, it would fall into an inertia, of which its certain ruin would be the result.48
If, in this context, Caron’s painting could be seen by Bataille as an orgiastic ‘massacre of the guilty,’ it is hard to see how at the same time he could have ignored its fundamentally apocalyptic vision of sovereignty in post-monarchical modernity. Bataille refuses the command and control version of the revolutionary state of emergency, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and in so doing anticipates the position of many a contemporary left-wing thinker. But this radical position that grasps the depths of the problem of sovereignty through a discourse of guilt and criminality leads, in the dire political context of the 1930s, to an intellectual quietism and acquiescence; it argues for a political psychology based on identification with an emblem of sacrificial self-destruction, and indulges in the fiction of founding a new underground religion. Agamben’s theory of the sacred man shows how criminality and the permission to kill are intimately connected by the sovereign power over law, but argues that the sovereign decision on the state of exception is fundamentally a suspension in specific cases of the criminality attached to killing. For this reason, Bataille’s double identification with executioners and victims, in its confusion of the sovereign decision with other notions of the sacred implying a shared criminality in killing the sacred man, is I think exposed by Caron’s painting, as is the fate of Bataille’s politics in ‘equivocation.’

Fig. 18: Front cover of Acéphale no.1, 24 June 1936, featuring drawing by André Masson © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2007.
Caron's architectural setting is an anthology of Roman monuments, much of it known to derive from engravings by Antoine Lafréry published in 1550; an essential tool, since Caron never visited Rome. The formation of the Catholic Triumvirate in 1561, an extraordinary instance of politics drawing upon imagery from Roman history itself mediated in paintings and prints, was a context for Caron's late intervention in the genre. All the other surviving representations show the triumvirs seated to the left or right under a baldachin or portico. Caron's painting is unique for shifting the location of the triumvirs to the distant centre of a strongly centralised tripartite composition. The shift means that sheer brutality comes to the fore. But it also reinforces the absolute nature of the presiding (literally centralised) powers in ways that respond, I believe, to emergent forms of sovereignty.

The decision to set the triumvirs back into the Coliseum, a structure resonant with acts of butchery, expresses the coincidence of power and violence. It also, of course, creates a literal image of the metaphorical space inside and outside the law that characterises the whole scene – and that defines the sovereign exception for Agamben. The bristling monumental stage is set for the massacre, and the blind indifference of Apollo and Hercules stands for the act of exclusion from the zone of the law of the proscribed that is also the emergency suspension of the law. In Caron's vision the chaos of lawlessness is the natural violence of massacres; the order of the law is the permanence of monumental Rome – and the efficient administration of the fee-earning decapitated heads. Sovereignty, so Caron shows, is made visible when it decides on the state of exception; when the distinction between natural violence and legal right is suspended in an act that, paradoxically, marks out the origins and consummation of the sovereign power over the law. Like the triumvirs, sovereignty is both inside and outside the scene of violence, because the scene of violence is both outside the law and at the same time only sanctioned through the sovereign decree of suspension.

Such a theoretical restatement of Caron's programme does of course overstep the mark. Yet we only have to recall the tenor of those phrases of legitimisation that circulated among the perpetrators during the Wars of Religion ('The King Commands It') and the attitude towards those proscribed (they could be 'torn to pieces' without legal sanction; that they were pollutants of the religious social body) to see, with Bodin, that the nature of modern sovereignty stood revealed – and ripe for representation.

* * *

1939: Leiris credited the origin of L'âge d'homme, his autobiographical performance of masochistic identification with the headless Holofernes, to Georges Bataille. Yet a vast gulf separates these two notions of identification: with Holofernes as victim of erotic desire or with the Revolutionary beheading of Louis XVI as vehicle for the advent of popular acephalic sovereignty based on criminal guilt. Leiris did not follow Bataille in his religious venture – the Acéphale secret society - that folded this same year. Meanwhile, Caron's Massacre painting, with which I believe Documents a decade earlier had enunciated a chilling allegory for the full horror of modern politics that was about to reveal
itself, made two very different appearances. It featured in an article by Georges Duthuit on the representation of death in *Cahiers d’art*; the same issue carried Bataille’s essay ‘The Sacred,’ with its exhortation to artists not to ‘flee from [their] heritage of divine power,’ a heritage that may ‘consume or destroy the one it consecrates.’\(^5\) And in 1939, the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the French Revolution, Caron’s painted curse took possession of France, entering the collections of the Musée du Louvre.

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3 The phrase ‘political psychology’ is borrowed from the recent polemic on the significance of the ‘War on Terror’ by the collective called Retort. ‘What… does the vanguard ideal mean? Maybe now we can frame an answer. We take the question to be ultimately one of political psychology (an underdeveloped art): meaning that what has to be explained is the depth and intensity of the ideal’s hold on individual subjects; and, above all, why the ideal makes more converts, not less, as modernity lives on.’ Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, London, Verso, 2005, 184. What the phrase means for Retort is a method with which to address the rise of revolutionary Islam and other forms of resistance that remain (paradoxically) Leninist, typed as ‘vanguard,’ and which will enable the Left to develop an alternative to that ‘ideal.’ By bringing the project of political psychology into alignment with French intellectual developments in the 1930s (in particular the Collège de Sociologie), I am suggesting that the challenge to the vanguard ideal itself has a long history in Leftist avant-gardism. Furthermore, this history ought to caution us against too much faith in the practice of ‘political psychology’ and other forms of ideological analysis – the Collège challenged Leninist and Fascist vanguards, but foundered when it came to thinking the grounds of an alternative mass movement. Such a comment is nevertheless only to draw out what is implied by the rich and highly reflexive historical analysis that Retort offer. One aspect of that analysis, of an amalgam of sixteenth-century religious zeal with the revolutionary politics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, all refracted in spectacle, is highly significant for my argument in this essay.
4 Jean Ehrmann, *Antoine Caron*, Paris, Flammarion, 1986, 34. The painting is now known as *The Tiburian Sybil*, dated to c.1580, and is in the Musée du Louvre.

5 Gustave Lebel, ‘Un tableau d’Antoine Caron: L’Empereur Auguste et la sibylle de Tibur,’ *Bulletin de la Société de l’histoire de l’art*, 1937, 20-37; and ‘Antoine Caron,’ *L’Amour de l’art*, December 1937, 317-325. Caron the artist, as opposed to the painter, was of course already known to art history as a draftsman and through the suite of prints on the subject of *La Reine d’Artemise*.

6 Ehrmann, *Antoine Caron*, 129.

7 Michel Leiris, ‘Une peinture d’Antoine Caron,’ *Documents* 7, December 1929, 348-355.


9 The dimensions given are more or less accurate (*Documents* has h.117 cm x w.200 cm, whereas the present accurate measurements are h.116 x w.195 cm), but the assertion that the support is silk is incorrect – the painting is on canvas.


11 Leiris, ‘Un peinture d’Antoine Caron,’ 350, author’s translation.

12 Leiris, ‘Un peinture d’Antoine Caron,’ 354.

13 Leiris, ‘Un peinture d’Antoine Caron,’ 350.

14 Such events were complemented by horrifying summary justice for now outlawed Huguenots at the hands of the King’s lieutenants, and Huguenot retaliations, usually not in the form of killing but in desecrations of Catholic churches and tombs.


16 Eliphas Lévi, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, Paris, Chacornac, 1930, tome 2, 235-238. Leiris refers to an 1861 edition that I have been unable to locate.


18 The phrase ‘Vim Patior’ occurs in the Latin version of Isaiah 38:14, though I do not know if this point of reference was significant.

19 Leiris, *Manhood*, 95. The masochistic fantasy for which decapitation no doubt stands here is, like sadism and other ‘vices,’ just a way ‘of attaining a more intense reality’ as Leiris suggests elsewhere in *Documents*, and repeats in *L’âge d’homme*, see *Manhood*, 138.

20 Some of Lotar’s photographs were reproduced with Bataille’s text ‘Abattoir’ in the previous issue of *Documents* (6, 1929); although the calf’s head did not feature, it seems very likely that Leiris had seen it during the process of selecting the images for the article. A print of the photograph is in the collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

21 *Appian’s Roman History*, [Book IV] with an English Translation by Horace White, Volume IV, London, Heinemann, 1928. This text was rediscovered in the fifteenth century, and translated into French in the sixteenth century by Claude de Seyssel. (See Jean Ehrmann, ‘Massacre and Persecution Pictures in Sixteenth Century France,’ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* VIII (1945), 195-199. Ehrmann points out that the French text went through five editions between 1544 and 1560, while the original Greek text was published in Paris in 1551.)

23 The surviving examples include several by Hans Vredeman de Vries (Tarbes, Musée Massy) and one tentatively attributed to dell’Abate’s son Camillo (c.1562, Beauvais, Musée Départemental de l’Oise). For Montmorency see Ehrmann, ‘Massacre and Persecution Pictures’, 195.

24 Théodore de Bèze, Histoire ecclésiastique, eds G. Baum and E. Cunitz, Paris, 1883, tome I, 743, quoted in Jean Adhémar, ‘Antoine Caron’s Massacre Paintings,’ Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, XII (1949), 199-200. The two paintings illustrated here are examples of the type. We do not know which three paintings are being described in the Bèze text – it is more than likely that they are now lost.


26 Jaucourt, Frédéric François Levisse de Montigny (1876-1969) married the daughter of a tannery owner in Manchester, and this English connection probably explains his rummaging in London antique dealers’ shops, where he found the Caron. He died in Buenos Aires.

27 Cf. an anecdote in Ehrmann ‘Massacre and Persecution Pictures,’ 199, which suggests an unsavoury appetite for massacre iconography in some passers-by in Paris when a reproduction of an example of the genre was displayed in a dealer’s window. Perhaps this was Ehrmann’s way of suggesting, like Leiris, that the imagery had an unpredictable resonance in modern France?

28 ‘Lot 80 – CARON. Ce tableau représente une des proscriptions de la République romaine. Nous n’entreprendrons pas de décrire les détails horribles de ce tableau; ils sont l’image des révolutions, et peuvent servir d’exemple pour en dégoûter à jamais leurs partisans.’ The Lugt number for this catalogue of the Jean-Louis Laneuville sale of 20 Oct 1817 (Hotel Bullion, Paris) is 9223. Until recently, Cécile Scalliérez of the Musée du Louvre did not believe that the painting listed is the Louvre Caron – she based this partly on her reading of Montaiglon’s 1850 text and partly on the measurements. The Laneuville measurements equate to 116 x 211 cm, as compared to the Louvre painting’s 116 x 195 cm. I believe that the 16 cm difference in the lateral dimension could be accounted for as lost surface if in 1817 the painting was intact and was only subsequently made into a screen or triptych (necessitating three new stretchers and removing three narrow strips of paint from view) – or indeed by the hinges that presumably separated the three sections if it had already been made into a triptych. I am most grateful to Mme Scalliérez for allowing me to inspect the back of the painting. Regrettably no evidence of the interventions made in the fabric of the picture survive.

29 I am grateful to Simon Baker for first drawing this particular revolutionary triumvirate to my attention. Robespierre, Couthon and Saint-Just were members of the Committee for Public Safety who in the brutal period of 1793-4 took control of political affairs. There was another Triumvirate formed just after the revolution in 1789 by the Deputy and great orator Barnave together with colleagues Duport and Lamath. Although a Jacobin, Barnave attempted to protect the Bourbon monarchy, and was executed in November 1793.


33 Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, 38.

34 Here I follow the revisionist interpretation offered by Denis Crouzet in La nuit de Saint-Barthélemy – un rêve perdu de la Renaissance, Paris, Fayard, 1994; see especially 253-263.

35 Appian’s Roman History, paragraph 10, 157.

36 Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, 65.

37 Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, 80.

38 Diefendorf, Beneath the Cross, 99.


44 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 168. The ‘War on Terror’ supposedly waged for the protection of the people and the state, the advent of detentions at Guantánamo Bay or of ‘Extraordinary Rendition’ - all are arguably contemporary examples of the permanence of a state of emergency. For an analysis of the state of emergency in the present, see the chapter ‘Permanent War’ in Retort, *Afflicted Powers*, 78-107.


46 ‘Unwittingly following the movement by which life as such comes to be what is at stake in modern political struggles, Bataille attempted to propose the very same bare life as a sovereign figure. And yet instead of recognising bare life’s eminently political (or rather biopolitical) nature, he inscribes the experience of this life both in the sphere of the sacred – which he understands, according to the dominant themes of the anthropology of his day taken up by Caillois, as originally ambivalent... and in the interiority of the subject, to which the experience of this life is always given in privileged or miraculous moments. In the case of both ritual sacrifice and individual excess, sovereign life is defined for Bataille through the instantaneous transgression of the prohibition on killing.’ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 112-113.

47 cf. T. J. Clark, ‘Painting in Year 2,’ 47, and note his discussion of the ‘sickness’ of the people from the perspective of the Jacobins.


49 For a perceptive treatment of this problem focusing on Bataille’s reading of Cervantes’ play *Numance* depicting the mass suicide of Spaniards besieged by Roman legions, see Denis Hollier, ‘Desperanto,’ *La part de l’oeil. Dossier: l’art et politique*, [Brussels], vol. 12, 1996, 51-59. For important reflections on Bataille’s position on the question of sacrifice and its relationship to sovereignty in the context of the revelations of Nazi atrocities, and for a response to Agamben’s critique, see Patrick ffrench, ‘Donner à voir: Sacrifice and Poetry in the Work of Georges Bataille,’ *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 42, no. 2, 2006, 126-138. Following Tzvetan Todorov, Michael Richardson has argued that the distinction between sacrifice and massacre is crucial for a proper reading of Bataille’s social theory, where (good) sacrifice is performed in the open, in the context of a close relation to the designated victim who is treated with veneration, and binds a community together; and (bad) massacre is performed secretively on strangers or aliens, and is the work of a modern imperialist and post-sacrificial society. The contrasts and tensions with Agamben’s reading are too complex to navigate here. See Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille*, London, Routledge, 1994, 82-5. For a defence of the politics of equivocation, see Denis Hollier, ‘On Equivocation (Between Literature and Politics),’ *October* 55, Winter 1990, 3-22.

50 An obelisk stands on the right-hand seam, while Trajan’s Column stands on the other; an exploded view of the Coliseum in the centre is surmounted by the Pantheon with the Septizonium to its right; the three columns of the Temple of Castor and Pollux are visible behind the Capitoline Palace mentioned earlier, and between it and the Coliseum is the Arch of Titus. On the other side of the Coliseum is the bridge across the Tiber leading to the Castel Sant’Angelo. The Triumphal Arch of
Constantine is on the right; that of Septimius Severus on the left. In the foreground on the left is the Apollo Belvedere, and on the right Hercules and Telephus. The source in Lafréry was first noted by Lebel, ‘Nouvelles précisions sur Antoine Caron’ (1938).

It is interesting to speculate as to whether or not Poussin knew Caron’s painting – but I am inclined to agree with Sheila Barker that the source of Poussin’s Plague of Ashdod, Rape of the Sabines (both Musée du Louvre) and grotesquely violent Massacre of the Innocents (Chantilly) is more likely to have been one of the many prints of the triumvirate subject generally available, largely because Poussin did not avail himself of Caron’s uniquely centralised massacre composition (‘Poussin, plague and early modern medicine,’ The Art Bulletin, vol. 86, no. 4, December 2004, 659-689, note 81.) Barker also points out that Poussin’s settings, deriving in part from the fantastic scenography of the massacre genre, may be self-conscious in their construction as if stage sets for tragedies, based on Aristotelian principles. The ingredients of the massacre compositions, partly deriving from the theatrical design of ‘pageants’ and ‘entries’ by Fontainebleau artists were thus sublimated in the new tradition of history painting.

In using Agamben’s Heideggerian-inflected language here, I am also struck by the coincidence with Jacques Derrida’s oblique take on Caron’s painting in the essay ‘Parergon’ translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod in The Truth in Painting, London, Chicago University Press, 1987, 15-147. A detail of Caron’s massacre is reproduced (124), and is related both to a discussion of the violent moment of Kant’s notion of The Sublime, and to a discussion of the sublime nature of a Colossus, and of the colossal in nature. With the latter, we are clearly being invited to see Caron’s absurd contrast of vast monuments (especially the Coliseum, of course) and incidental violence as an expression of a sublime gap. In the case of the former, Derrida leads us into a terrain that in part resonates with Bataille’s meditations of the war years: ‘The imagination turns this violence against itself, it mutilates itself… sacrifices itself…’; but also to Agamben’s formulations of sovereignty (‘But this mutilating and sacrificial violence organizes the expropriation within a calculation; and the exchange which ensues is precisely the law of the sublime as much as the sublimity of the law’) (Derrida, ‘Parergon,’ 131). There is no doubt a need to explore the mediation between Agamben’s sovereign exception, with its sublime confusion of the states of nature and law in the sacred decree, and Derrida’s sacrificial sublime in its double relation to the laws of judgement. One final curiosity: Derrida also reproduces a Cranach Lucretia (the Berlin version) in an effort to define the parergon through the visualised eroticism of the point of a sword. The legacy of Leiris’ writings is, then, palatable.


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Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso: Carl Einstein’s Ontology of Art at the Time of Documents

Sebastian Zeidler

Minor revisions aside, this essay is based on a talk I delivered at the *Documents* conference hosted by the Courtauld Institute, London, in June 2006, and in an expanded version at the University of Chicago later that year. Given my speaking time, I was faced with the stark choice of either describing a small number of trees or of tracing the outlines of a map, however sketchy, of the forest that was the mind of the art critic and historian Carl Einstein. In both those talks and this essay I have chosen a mix of the two: I will make some general observations about the frame of that mind, because that seems far more useful as an introduction for those who are unfamiliar with Einstein’s work; and also because even among those who have tried to engage it, a sense of befuddlement prevails regarding what, ultimately, Carl Einstein was all about.

By way of answering that question I will touch on some of the essays Einstein published in the pages of *Documents* proper, but also a number of related texts that are at least as important: the third edition of *The Art of the 20th Century*, his survey of contemporary art (1931); the ‘monograph’ he published in 1934 on Georges Braque; and the extensive notes from his Paris period (1928-1940) that are preserved in his estate and partly published in his posthumously collected works. I will range this widely — the datable material I cite was published between 1928 and 1934, and the issues I discuss extend from the art of Mesopotamia to Picasso’s surrealism, from Freud’s psychoanalysis to Mauss’s ethnography — precisely for sake of clarity. The puzzlement that continues to greet Einstein’s work is to a large extent caused by the fact that his thought consists of three inextricable strands: philosophy, art history, and contemporary art criticism; strands so inextricable, in fact, that they will constantly encroach upon one another — such that an essay on Analytic Cubism will be prefaced by a methodological rejection of neo-Kantian-style art history, followed by a rejection in turn of the naturalistic art of classical antiquity, an endorsement of the austere simplicity of Egyptian sculpture, and a celebration, finally, of Cubism circa 1912 in terms that are partly owed to the philosophy of Henri Bergson, partly to the art history of Heinrich Wölfflin, and partly to recent ethnography. All this, and more, in nine pages of *Documents*. But such discursive density is fascinating or frustrating, depending on where one is coming from; in any case it means that when trying to excavate the intellectual framework that generated it, reading Einstein text by text in chronological or ostensibly thematic order is often futile. And so, in what follows I will attempt first to disentangle and then reassemble, however schematically, the strands of philosophy, art history and criticism in his thought. In the process I will move from the abstract to the concrete, and, in due course, I will end up talking about actual works of art.
Carl Einstein’s art historical and art critical project at and around the moment of *Documents* was powered by a more fundamental philosophical project; and in order to get a grip on the former we need to understand at least the bare bones of the latter — the bare bones of his ontology: his philosophy of being, or of what he called the *real*. And in order to understand it in turn, it will be helpful to begin with a heuristic fiction, and argue that it unfolds on two closely related levels.

On the first level, there is the world in its immanence: a network of forces modelled on Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*, Ernst Mach’s fabric of functions, and the scintillating kaleidoscopic becoming described in the work of Bergson; an immanence that is inhabited not by conscious, rational *subjects* and their re-presentations of the real, but rather by pre- or non-rational *subjectivities* and their functional interactions *with* the real.\(^3\) On the second level, there are the conscious efforts made by humans at relating to this real, at locating themselves within it, and at rendering sensible such locating by means of human-made objects called, for example, works of art or of philosophy. Just like the subjects who produce them, these works are distinct from whatever else populates the real by what we might call their double imbrication with it. Even as philosophical concepts or artworks are immersed *within* the immanence of the real, they also arise *from* it as so many selective, invested, perspectivist interpretations of it — interpretations which, depending on the historically specific agenda of the interpreter, will sometimes deny — and thereby in effect *diminish* — the very existence of the real out of which they so emerged. Subject formation will be accompanied by the renunciation of subjectivity: such is the tempting option for humans.

Einstein summarised why they should be so tempted, and partly how they would go about it, in an undated note from the 1930s:

\[ T \]he petrification of the world and of being is one of our primary tendencies; that is, the struggle against death, against a massive movement that signifies life yet whose energy surpasses our own. Against this tremendous, vital movement of the world we oppose the repetition of our actions, of ritual, memory, abstraction, style: an arrestment (a barrier) by means of which we seek to inhibit and slow down this movement of the world; a means by which […] we compose and impose structures.\(^4\)

The first thing to observe about this quotation is how here a Bergsonian philosophy of the real as becoming is both invoked *and* crucially complicated: by the sinister presence of death. To say that the phenomenal world is ever becoming and as such is ‘a massive movement that signifies life,’ yet to add in the same breath that this, its interminable processuality, poses a deadly threat,
is to insist, against all naïve vitalisms, on what Einstein elsewhere calls Weltzwang, the ‘equally deadly and vital compulsion of the world.’ The doubly vital and deadly power of the real is such that the very movement of its becoming, simply by unfolding, will cause finite human subjects to emerge within itself; but it is also such that it will subsequently overwhelm them with the onslaught of its formless sensory richness and over time turn against and eventually kill them.

The compulsion of the world is not the compulsion to death, however; it is rather the compulsion to a decision in face of this, the world’s deadly vitality. Given the ‘unignorable’ fact that we are living insofar as we are ‘continuously dying’: will we yield without a fight to this becoming that brings death to the very life it spawns, and be absorbed by its flux? Will we, on the contrary, seek to flee from its immanence into an airless transcendental sphere of our own invention and embrace there a being without life? Or will we finally accept our own becoming towards death within the real, take up the challenge, and actively engage in its transformation? These are the three ontological choices in the face of Weltzwang that Carl Einstein mapped out in his philosophy of being and in the theory of art he based on it. I would like to examine them in turn, beginning with two false choices, and ending up with the right one.

To return to our quotation: repetition, arrestment, barriers, petrification, not to mention Weltzwang, a term that obviously rhymes but, crucially, does not match up, with Schicksalszwang or Wiederholungszwang — if Einstein’s terms sound vaguely familiar, that is because the first ontological stance he has in mind is clearly related to the behaviour of a certain protoplasmic vesicle in Sigmund Freud’s Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920). In Freud’s account, that behaviour stands for a much more general attitude towards the real shared by all organisms, humans included: an attitude that erects a stimuli shield against the external world so as to produce a barrier of complexity-reduction as protection against the onrush of a hostile, chaotic phenomenal world. And as we know, through this effort to impose a measure of stability and regularity onto their environment, both the vesicle and the Perception-Consciousness system in Freud betray the wish, not to protect a vibrant life against the deadly adversity of the real, but rather, to protect their desire to die peacefully, ‘after their own fashion’: to install, already in life, a static equilibrium modelled on a constancy principle that would be fully consummated at its end. ‘The aim of all life is death,’ as Freud so famously declared.

To which Carl Einstein would have responded: ‘Not really, but, given the history of art and ideas, it could certainly seem that way.’ A textbook example from the history of art will serve to make the point here; although, as Einstein explained to Michel Leiris and as he argued in Documents' Critical Dictionary, ontological choice number one, just like its cousins, extends across all historical periods and cultural practices, from ancient religion through nineteenth-century philosophical idealism to contemporary poetry. In a number of writings from the moment of Documents or immediately thereafter, Einstein located the first ontological choice as far back as the origin of sedentary civilisation. To his mind, the art and architecture of the city-states of
ancient Mesopotamia marked the victory of a post-nomadic humanity over the fluidity of a real in which these subjects were no longer immersed so much (they thought) as they were now striating it [fig. 1]. Typically, one of the versions of Einstein’s argument occurs in the somewhat counterintuitive context of the Braque monograph. There, he argued that a will to permanence had been the originating force of human civilization: by inventing the city (Stadt) as Stete, or steady terrain, and the home as Bleibe, or an abode that will remain (bleiben) the same and in the same place over time; and by populating this new environment with an architecture whose language of ‘repetitive formal elements’ further reinforced the structure of lives now organised according to a cyclical rhythm of work, ritual, and cosmology. A ‘settler conservatism’ has pacified the real with an elementary architectonic language, which, in virtue of its simplicity, regularity, and durability amounts to a veritable cultural ‘form shield’ (Formschutz) against the onslaught of what is perceived as an overly complex, dangerously unpredictable, and threateningly fluid real. According to Carl Einstein, I am saying, the true founder of Sumer and Babylon was the death drive.

Fig. 1: Babylon in the time of Nebuchadnezzar II. Reconstruction by Maurice Bardin after a watercolour drawing by Herbert Anger. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. (Photo: Courtesy of The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.)
Nowhere is this more so than in the numerous portrait statues which Gudea, ruler of the city-state of Lagash (c.2150-2125 B.C.), had commissioned during his reign so that his life and achievements might be commemorated millennia after his own death [fig. 2].\textsuperscript{13} Observing that many of Gudea’s statues bear the inscription ‘May his life be long,’ Einstein insisted that, contrary to their overt purpose, their production was motivated by a paralysing fear of perishing: ‘Terrified by death, men try to conserve life in the image, and the settler, afraid of chaos, uses tectonic forms to this end. The enduring existence of the deceased depends on the durability of the forms of the body; whence the popularity of solid stone.’\textsuperscript{14} Having had his motionless likeness carved in the near-indestructible hardness of diorite, Einstein implied, Gudea had achieved permanently what Freud’s trauma victims did only intermittently; namely, what he elsewhere called a ‘defence against death through the anticipation of death.’\textsuperscript{15}

Now, in Gudea’s case, the deadly constancy of the portraits’ subject was ensured by the immutability of the medium; but in Einstein’s thought the thanatophilia of the \textit{tectonic} had far wider applications: not just as a material property but rather as a \textit{structure of formal organisation}.
Einstein had initially stolen the concept from his hated teacher, Heinrich Wölfflin. The tectonic, as Wölfflin examined it in his *Principles of Art History* (1915) and elsewhere, pivoted on a specific reciprocal relation between filling and frame, which he saw achieved in the art of the High Renaissance:

In the tectonic style, the filling visibly relates to the given space [...]. Whether the field is rectangular or round, we find the classic epoch following the principle of having the given conditions become the rule of one’s own personal will, that is, the whole is made to look as if this filling were just made for this frame, and vice versa.

Wölfflin’s discussion of Brescianino’s *Venus* [fig. 3] is a case in point:

The figure has been comprehended into a schema so that [...] the formal elements interact with each other in elementary contrasts, and the totality of the image is governed throughout by tectonic forces. Picture axis and figure axis mutually reinforce one another.

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Fig. 3: Andrea del Brescianino, *Venus*, c.1525, oil on canvas, 168 x 67 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese.
As early as his *Prolegomena* (1886), architecture had served Wölfflin as the very paradigm of organised form, including the form of subjecthood: ‘What holds us upright and prevents a formless collapse? It is the opposing force that we may call will, life, or whatever. I call it force of form [*Formkraft*] … We assume that in everything there is a will that struggles to become form and has to overcome the resistance of formless matter.’\(^{19}\) In Wölfflin, for visual art to become tectonic, for the body to be configured *sub specie architecturæ* (his words),\(^{20}\) was for life to win the battle against death. But we are already prepared to understand that another way of putting this would be to say that, on the contrary, Wölfflin’s tectonic internalised the death drive’s impulse toward stasis as the formal reciprocity of filling and frame; such that a human subject here voluntarily submits to the rigorous limits of a pre-given order of his own making.

![Fig. 4: Josef Albers, *Tectonic Group*, 1925, sandblasted glass, 29 x 45 cm. Private Collection, Switzerland. © 2007 The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation/Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York.](image)

That at least was Carl Einstein’s take on the matter:

In the hands of most people the tectonic will petrify into a hopelessly repeated schema; understandably so, given that it is a sign of fear and an expression of the desire for permanency. Originally a means of power employed against nature, the tectonic in due course turns against man himself.\(^{21}\)

Einstein was not talking about the Renaissance here but about his own present. The passage just quoted comes from the third edition of his *Art of the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century* (1931), a book in which Einstein
indulged one more time in his hatred, deep and mostly misguided, for modern abstraction — all of it. He lambasted the most diverse practices, from Mondrian to Tatlin, as ‘kitsch rationalism,’ ‘Platonism of formal purity,’ ‘fetishism of the absolute,’ and, not least, ‘ersatz architecture.’ This latter term does indeed fit an image like Josef Albers’s 1925 Tectonic Group (sic!) [fig. 4], similar works by whom were included in a Zurich Kunsthau survey of recent abstract and surrealist painting that Einstein had already dismissed in a Documents review in 1929: ‘It’s an old story: generalization as a tool of power. The tensed and practically un-decomposable images of one’s predecessors are reduced to purified formulas, which is to say they are being emptied. What made modern abstraction loathsome to Einstein, that is to say, was that its thanatophilic tectonic was extrapolated, to his mind, from the skeletal armature of the grid of his beloved Analytic Cubism [fig. 5]. Abstraction had stolen the tectonic from Cubism and put it in service of the death drive; and as we shall see, for Einstein it fell to an erstwhile Cubist to reclaim it for the real.

Fig. 5: Pablo Picasso, L’Aficionado, 1912, oil on canvas, 135 x 82 cm. Kunstmuseum Basel, Gift of Raoul La Roche, 1952 (Photo: Kunstmuseum Basel, Martin Bühler.) © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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The transvaluation [of rational man] had already begun with Nietzsche, who had insisted on the primary influence of the drives, compared to which the role of reason would rather be that of a life-inhibiting force. This transvaluation was in turn powerfully promoted by Freud, who rediscovered in the dream and the unconscious the life of the drives, the forces that oppose the rational.24

Form against formlessness; stasis against movement; frame against filling; death (apparently) against life; reason against the drives: given this string of dual terms, and his rejection, in each case, of the first of the two, one might expect that Einstein would have unconditionally embraced the second one. One might expect, in other words, that, around the time of his engagement in Documents, Einstein, who was familiar with both the writings of Freud and the art of French surrealism since at least 1926, would have celebrated the surrealists’ exploration of that most anti-tectonic of territories: the Freudian unconscious.25 Even more so since Einstein himself, as the above quotation from the surrealism chapter of the Art of the 20th Century suggests, was a deeply Nietzschean Freudian, one to whom even the notion of the ‘complex’ already smacked of rationalisation, and to whom to conceive of the unconscious as something repressed was to take the sting out of its unbridled positivity.26

Fig. 6: André Masson, Automatic Drawing, 1924, ink on paper, 23.5 x 20.6 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Given anonymously. © 2007 Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.
And Einstein did indeed reserve special praise for that surrealist practice which seemed to render visible Dionysian psychic intensity unchecked by any rationalist agency of censorship. Again and again in his writings on modern art since at least 1928 he celebrated the surrealist practice of automatic drawing, or as he preferred to call it, the ‘psychogram’ [fig. 6]. Yet, again and again he would also go on to double back on himself, and reject the psychogram — on ontological grounds. ‘By and large, the art which I’m going to show you,’ he told his audience at a talk in Berlin around 1931, to which he had brought slides of ‘automatic drawings’ by André Masson, among others, ‘is being created and dominated by a passive type, a suffering subject.’

And in the Art of the 20th Century he added:

Stasis had been a product of the fear of death, of the effort to arrest the continuous process toward death; it was the life belt of the fearful. […] Today, yielding once more to process […] one paints out of cruelty against oneself, and such images are stages en route to death, symptoms of self-destruction.

In other words: if the immobilised form of the tectonic image is a deathlike defence against the real, then the breathless movement of intensity recorded by the psychogram, seemingly its radical opposite, is in fact, given its ontological stance, its twin.

Nietzsche had explained how this could be so in the Will to Power. There, the twin stances towards the real that Einstein saw manifested in the tectonic and the psychogram were described as two kinds of reactivity which opposed a single kind of activity; two kinds which, as Gilles Deleuze has shown, are only gradually, not categorically, different from one another. For Nietzsche, as Deleuze argued in his seminal monograph on the thinker, ‘passive’ is simply ‘reaction insofar as it is not acted. The term “passive” stands for the triumph of reaction, the moment when, ceasing to be acted, it becomes a ressentiment.’ If the stern formal order of the tectonic is a resentful — a violent but merely defensive — reaction against the onrush of the real by a human subject seeking to preserve its false integrity, then the psychogram stands for the moment in which that subject, instead of switching from reaction to action, retreats from reaction to passivity, and, overpowered by the flow of intensity, dissolves into it, as in the formless tangle of the psychographic record.

So it is that, hypostatised in isolation, both the tectonic and the psychogram must end in death: the death of the real in one case, the death of the subject, who is yet part of the real, in the other. And so it is that Einstein, who called the tectonic ‘sadistic,’ was troubled in turn by what he called ‘the downright masochistic attitude’ he saw at work in the psychogram. He was troubled, in other words, by the way in which the arrow of ontological violence had been not broken, but simply reversed. In such passages, Einstein both adapted and re-described the
theory of *Triebumkehr*, or inversion of drives, proposed by Freud in ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes’ (1915), according to which masochism is a primary sadism against the environment turned inward against the subject itself.\(^3\) For Freud, such *Triebumkehr* also entailed the reversal of a drive’s energy charge from active to passive, from violator to victim. Combining Freud with Nietzsche as he did, Einstein maintained that the reversal was rather from *re-active* to passive. What Leo Bersani called the ontology of hate in the Freudian subject circa 1915 is, Einstein helps us understand, nothing other than Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*.\(^3\)

\[\begin{array}{c}
\end{array}\]

‘Nietzsche had strictly separated Dionysian rapture from the Apollonian state of meditative purification, but the two do in fact complement one another.’\(^3\) Thus Einstein’s claim in the Picasso section of The Art of the 20th Century’s Cubism chapter. And it was indeed Picasso whom he had in mind as the artist whose works managed to dovetail these two complements, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, or, which is the same thing, the tectonic and the psychogram. There are, Einstein argued, two ‘decisive psychological poles between which these images [by Picasso] are oscillating [schwingen]’: ‘the pole of unconscious vision’ on one hand, the pole of ‘conscious construction’ on the other; ‘subjective hallucination’ on one hand, ‘collective tectonic forms’ on the other; a ‘zone of suffering’ on one hand, that of ‘active, willed construction’ on the other.\(^3\) It is this fusion of the two that Einstein believed Picasso had achieved in certain works from the later 1920s, through what he called, in a significant paradox, a ‘tectonic hallucination’: a formal imbrication of the forces of action and reaction in the immanence of a single work of art - an imbrication, which, it itself, like the Will to Power, is however active.

This begs the question: in which works from the later 1920s did Picasso achieve this? Einstein’s own answer presents us with a difficulty, because it is not satisfying. For the most visible *locus* at which he endorsed Picasso’s work as the paradigm of tectonic hallucination is his essay in the first *Documents* issue of 1929, ‘Pablo Picasso: Some Paintings from 1928.’\(^3\) The paintings in question are *The Studio* (1927/28) and *The Painter and His Model* (1928), both now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and *The Studio* (1928) in the Venice Guggenheim. And the problem is that Einstein’s theory doesn’t gain enough purchase to work as a truly incisive description of them. It cannot account for the static intensity of the *Studio* (the less so because Einstein’s general indifference to colour in art is sorely evident in this case); and it cannot account for the exuberance of heterogeneous forms that is *The Painter and His Model*. But rather than prove how his argument doesn’t work, I’d like to suggest some cases in which, in my opinion, it *does*.

The two works that to my mind fit Einstein’s theory much better were painted at a slightly earlier date - 1926 rather than 1927/28 - but otherwise share a number of features with his
examples: their monumental size, which parades them as major statements by the artist (they both measure roughly 68 by 100 inches); their panoramic horizontal format; their setting (they are both interiors, more precisely, a studio and a workshop: in other words, they are paradigmatic spaces for the production of form); and their *dramatis personae*: like Einstein’s examples they are both concerned with staging a sexually charged encounter between male and female. They are *The Painter and His Model* now in the Musée Picasso (1926), and the *Milliner’s Workshop* (1926), now in the Pompidou [figs. 7 and 11].

Both works are often considered examples of a Picasso, out at sea after his abortive flirtation with neo-classicist painting in the early 1920s, looking closely at the art of an emerging generation of surrealists for a creative shot in the arm. But for all the obvious inspiration Picasso found in Masson and Joan Miró, these works amount to far more than an eclectic mapping of automatic drawing onto the genre of the artist’s studio. Instead, Picasso, as Einstein will help us see, was prompted by the surrealists to revisit his own pre-classicist achievements, and re-articulate them in a way his sources were never able or willing to do: in such a way that the tectonic and the psychogram were here at once *fused* into a whole, and *activated* as engines for the production of a novel kind of form. I will begin testing this hypothesis by describing the *Painter and His Model*, which I consider the logical (if not chronological) first of the two.
We are looking at a crammed interior space almost filled to capacity with the expansive bodies of two monumental figures. At right there is the artist, sitting in an armchair hunched over a palette which he clutches with his left hand, and from which the brush held by his right is picking up some pigment. The artist’s head is framed on the left by a canvas tacked to a stretcher which displays what may be a rough sketch of the model in front of him; and on the wall to the right we find a finished black-and-white image showing one of Picasso’s trademark ‘double heads.’ At the extreme right a strip of primed canvas with underdrawing has been left exposed. And on the left side of the canvas there is the contorted shape of the female model, whose pin-sized head is propped up by her two arms close to the edge of the composition; whose giant left foot juts forward into its centre; and whose torso we are asked to imagine reclining somewhere in between, on an upended bed propped up by a row of floorboards.

But of course even this basic description of the image is already far too naturalistic and iconographic. Because the true ‘subject’ of the painting is ultimately not an encounter between artist and model as distinct individuals in the intimacy of a studio interior, but on the contrary the dissolution of their independent identities within a single continuous web of pulsating black lines or bands. This in spite of the fact that the web can be imagined to have originated in one of the figures: namely as a kind of gigantic doodle spreading out from the intersection of brush and palette (and, one feels forced to add, crotch) on the right. But that suggestion is powerfully countermanded by the final result: an all-over skein whose radical uncenteredness, directionlessness, and absence of hierarchy works against any sense of either an origin (the painter as wellspring of aesthetic form and sexual fantasy) or of a narrative chronology (the web unfolding from the right). Instead, our visual impression is of a looping back and forth between left and right, up and down, of the pulsating bands, from whose interaction every element in the image, including the figure of their creator, has emerged. The painter in his studio is here defined, not as the author of a desiring fantasy or of its representation, but as one more local event among others within a fantasy that is not ‘his’: within a network of unbound energy which produces individual subjects and their representations, as opposed to being produced, or represented, by them.

I shall explore the psychological implications of that productive network in a moment; but for now I want to stress how remarkable it is that it should hold together at all - that the network of bands pulsating across the canvas should be able both to spin forth a whole spectrum of figurations, from the nigh-abstract undulations in the centre all the way to naturalistic details like palette and thumb; and that it should nevertheless be able to sustain its own continuity: the continuity of an ambience or milieu that weaves depth, shallowness, and vastly divergent scalar relations and alignments in space into a single fabric. I say ‘fabric’ rather than ‘space,’ because space in this image is not an empty a priori medium that would subsequently be filled with bodies and objects. Rather, space here comes into being only locally, and together with figuration: it
adheres to objects, it does not receive them. That is why contrasts of proportion and pictorial
convention that would be gratingly incompatible in a unified homogeneous space can exist side
by side: among them the contrast between the model’s massive, diagonally foreshortened foot
and the artist’s two-dimensional leg in profile; or that between the bed wrenches up from the
ground plane by floorboards that refuse to recede as orthogonals on one hand, and the painter’s
armchair that is firmly resting on that ground plane on the other.

But ‘contrast’ is not the right word here, if that term means anything like a ‘rupture,’ anything like
an irreconcilable qualitative difference. Because Picasso has activated the one
formal device that produces figures and space in the work - the black line - in such a way that it
will function now as contour, now as surface ornament: now as an emerged figure, now as the
very medium of emergence; and this without there ever being a categorical break between the
two. The relation between network and figure is here rather like that between a body of water and
an eddy; or between a force field and a discharge: between a local eruption and a surface whose
turmoil has brought it forth. And yet, in the Painter and His Model this seamless continuity seems
to be threatened to a degree by the presence of the three large, upright polygonal fields whose
greyish, ochre and bright white shapes appear altogether out of sync with the black web. For
these fields are all colour, however ghastly; where the web is all line. The fields are shapes
without separate boundary, where the lines of the web are all boundary without field. And the
fields, it would seem, are without representational function, where the lines, as we saw, drift
between abstraction and figuration. But the very fact of their opposition provides a hint that black
line and coloured field once belonged together; and that only by 1926 they have become, or have
again become, the two halves of a totality to which they no longer add up… because they have
meanwhile joined to form a new one.

Now, this earlier totality had been that single unbroken visual plenum which is the three-
dimensional figure or object as it is conjured up on the canvas by means of contour on one hand,
chiarosucro modelling on the other. And as every modernist knows, this pair of formal devices-
black line as contour and chiaroscuro as illuminated colour - were not separated at birth in the
work of Picasso. That happened only at the moment of Analytic Cubism, and every survey of
modern art tells at least part of the story of their parting of ways [figs. 8-10]. The story would
begin with an image like Boy leading a Horse (1905/06), in which a thick black contour proclaims
the utter distinctness of figure from environment; and in which that figure’s almost sculptural
presence is suggested by the trademark Rose Period brushwork that combines a sense of
pigment as palpable substance with the visual illusion of a relief of light and dark cast on the skin
by a strong but scattered lighting. The story would continue by showing how in the following years
the figure’s totality as bounded chiaroscuro would be torn apart as its constituent elements would
be separated out. In iconic Cubist works like Girl with a Mandolin (1910) and ‘Ma Jolie’ (1911/12)
the artist, in the legendary words of his dealer and Einstein’s friend, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler,
‘pierces the closed form,’ driving a wedge between contour and modelling, line and colour, until a moment is reached when the former would become a scaffolding within whose compartments the fragments of the latter would be suspended like so many brilliantly sparkling facets of a broken jewel.\textsuperscript{38} The motivation for this project has been described many times: as an effort to purge the modern work of art of the received devices of three-dimensional illusionism, and instead redefine it no longer as window but as surface: a surface on which what used to be \textit{contour} would now become \textit{grid}: a configuration of lines that would no longer trace the outline of an imagined object but echo instead the shape and format of the actual object that is the canvas. To move from contour to grid, and from modelled body to illuminated colour facet was then to move from an illusion to the analysis of the formal devices which produced that illusion; it was to move, in a materialist reading of Analytic Cubism’s politics of form, from ideology to critique.\textsuperscript{39}

![Fig. 8: Pablo Picasso, \textit{Boy Leading a Horse}, 1906, oil on canvas, 220.3 x 130.6 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York; Fig. 9: Pablo Picasso, \textit{Girl with a Mandolin (Fanny Tellier)}, 1910, oil on canvas, 100.3 x 73.6 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York, Nelson A. Rockefeller Bequest; Fig. 10: Pablo Picasso, ‘\textit{Ma Jolie},’ winter 1911/12, oil on canvas, 100 x 64.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. All © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York.]

But from Einstein’s point of view that move came with a danger. As he put it in \textit{Negro Sculpture} (1915), in a brief aside on the task of the ‘artist of today,’ by whom he meant the Cubist Picasso: ‘an all too reactive strain is woven into his efforts; his critique, necessary as it is, reinforces the analytical side.’\textsuperscript{40} In other words, Analytic Cubism was in danger of having been merely critical: too occupied as it was with reactively destroying an old order of representation instead of actively constructing a new one. And the fact that modern abstractionists like Albers seemed to claim that by hypostatising the grid they had taken Cubism to its own logical conclusion seemed only to prove that the laying-bare of this device - which we will recognize as
the tectonic - was a deeply ambivalent achievement. The tectonic was in need of an activation that was affirmative first, critical second: one that got rid of the old order by the sheer force of its own positivity.

And that is indeed what Picasso in The Painter and His Model set out to do [fig. 7]. Instead of having the grid annihilate a figure composed of chiaroscuro and contour in the name of the tectonic, this painting preserves Analytic Cubism's separation of formal devices, yet transforms their function and the terms of their interaction. I have already suggested how the web is an avatar of the grid, but a grid activated now as a milieu for the emergence of form. And the same is true for the coloured panels. They are monumental versions of Analytic Cubism’s chiaroscuro facets; but with two crucial differences. On one hand, all highlights and traces of shading have been purged from them, so that their tectonic planarity is even less in doubt. On the other hand, the panels have cut loose from their former subservient role: they do not inhabit the network of lines but rather assert themselves against it even as they partly promote its cause. For the panels are glaring, unmodulated light, slices of illumination that single out sections of the web with the precision and randomness of beaming searchlights. Precision, as when the minuscule face and the hands of the woman are caught in the glare at the far left edge; randomness, when the illumination of the centre section by the most prominent panel only works to render its semantic emptiness even more evident; and a mix between the two, when, above the painter’s head, the light reveals a weird face with empty eye sockets and caricature grin.

All of which amounts to saying that with this image we are looking at a fusion of tectonic and psychogram in such a way that the fundamental pictorial devices which Cubism had analysed out are rearticulated in order to arrive at a specific kind of visibility: a visibility of the unconscious as an active, productive force. With its emphasis on process rather than epiphany, and on continuity rather than rupture, the unconscious at issue here is decidedly different from the intense stillness that characterizes the punctual moment of a traumatic encounter; and that is one reason why, in spite of tempting motifs like the female foot, I have not stressed at all the theoretical arsenal of fetishism and castration anxiety. Rather, the ‘tectonic hallucination’ generated here is one that resembles the pulsating force field of the primary process as Freud had described it in the Interpretation of Dreams: the incessant flow of raw, unbound energy as it moves, by way of condensation and displacement, from one intense yet brief cathexis to another; as when a black line will suddenly blossom (or condense) into the contour of a foot or the idiotic cartoon profile of a bird; or when a white light will slice a face in half down along the nose, displacing attention to the way in which that half, in turn, is made up of two more halves: one profile on top of another, both pivoting around a single vaginal eye.

What Einstein calls ‘tectonic hallucination,’ a merging of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, then more specifically takes the shape, in The Painter and His Model, of a formalisation of psychic energy. This formalisation avoids both the reactive order of immobile
form that had been the threat of Wölfflin’s tectonic to Cubism’s grid; and it avoids the inchoate discharge that is automatic drawing in its pure state. Instead, it charges up the former with the latter, and in the process activates the entire composition to become something like a force field: a shallow, volatile, non-hierarchical milieu composed of energy flows that join into provisionally concrete configurations, which however never cut their ties to that milieu. This last point is crucial, because it is on this level - on the level of what we might call the emergence of formal events within a world - that certain extraordinary statements by Einstein on Picasso will begin to make sense. These statements not only introduce us to a new discursive context that is extremely germane to the discussion of both *The Painter and His Model* and its companion piece; they also help us understand that far more is at stake in this discussion than yet another psychoanalytic reading of Picasso’s surrealism, however sophisticated. Psychoanalysis too was at stake for Einstein, to be sure: but insofar as it too was founded, as it was for Freud himself, in a philosophy of being: insofar as it helps us think through our ontological stances towards the real.

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Fig. 11: Pablo Picasso, *The Milliner’s Workshop*, 1926, oil on canvas, 172 x 256 cm. Paris, Musée National d’Art moderne. © 2007 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists’ Rights Society (ARS), New York.

By way of introducing this new discourse I turn to the companion piece to *The Painter and His Model*: *The Milliner’s Workshop* from 1926 [fig. 11], a work that has been incisively discussed by
Rosalind Krauss. An example of what she calls Picasso’s ‘Miróism,’ Krauss sees it sandwiched between two phases of pastiche - one neo-classicist, one Matissean - and she considers it a temporary creative shot in the arm for Picasso. Especially relevant for our purposes here is what she has described as the “quasi-automatic” infrastructure’ of the Milliner’s Workshop, a technique that corresponds to the characteristically surrealist flavour of both its mysteriously banal subject matter - the interior of a boutique opposite Picasso’s apartment, recorded by him from the fourth floor of his studio window - and of its supposed genesis. (Picasso, by his own account, painted it at the time of Juan Gris’ death and later claimed that he himself ‘didn’t know what it represented.’) We are then looking at an interestingly hybrid image: one in which the unconscious has been factored into the ‘all-over skein that forms the rhythmic armature of this still more or less Cubist work,’ which yet also ‘betray[s] the impact’ of a younger surrealist artist. What Picasso found in Miró, in other words, was a specific motivation of the very Cubist grid of his own invention - a way of turning it into the structure of a psychic automatism, the ‘unconscious impulses of the hand […] forming its compositional network.’

Another - Einsteinian - way of stating this would be to say: even more so than in The Painter and His Model, in the Milliner’s Workshop, an active relation towards the real causes the Cubist grid — an index of the tectonic surface — to be remotivated as the generative structure of a very specific kind of ‘hallucination,’ one that blends the unconscious with the world, psychology with ontology. In the Picasso essay in Documents, but by no means only there, Einstein phrased this crucial transformation thus: ‘Earlier on [in Cubism] transparent planes had cut into each other and created discontinuous forms [figs. 5, 10]; whereas these days one creates a certain continuity of analogical forms. […] The figures inscribed into the surface emerge from a Beyond [au-delà] of form. All their parts are rendered as analogies of the totality of the composition; their valeurs are derived from the telepathy of imagined analogical forms and their variations.’ Telepathy, analogy: terms that are unfamiliar from either Nietzsche, Freud, or contemporary Picasso criticism, and to which I’d like to add another from Einstein’s Documents essay on Cubism; a term which subsumes them both and which identifies the discourse from which he borrowed his art critical vocabulary: animism. With this I enter a territory that has recently been explored in a stimulating book by Christopher Green: the relevance of ethnographic concepts of magic for the work of Picasso around the time of Documents.

Early twentieth-century ethnography had theorised the ‘primitive’ worldview of animism as something that a hardcore Nietzschean could recognise, without blinking too hard, as a philosophy of the phenomenal world as Will to Power. Thinkers with whose work Einstein was familiar, like Lucien Lévy-Bruhl on ‘prelogical thought’ and Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss on magic, set out a theory of the real as a single, non-hierarchised continuum of inanimate and animate forces. Lévy-Bruhl, for example, insisted that the ‘natural environment of a certain group, tribes or family of tribes […] appears in their collective representations, not as an object or
a system of objects and phenomena governed by fixed laws, according to the laws of rational thought — but as an unstable ensemble of mystic actions and reactions, of which persons, things, phenomena, are but the vehicles and manifestations." These actions and reactions are governed instead by what Lévy-Bruhl famously called the participation of all phenomena in one another by way of modalities such as sympathy, telekinesis (remember Einstein on telepathy), transference, contact, projection, contamination, defilement, possession:" so many synonyms for an interaction of forces which, unlike modern Western metaphysics — for which the most convenient shorthand remains Martin Heidegger's 'world picture' — knows no finite, static identities of things or subjects nor any discontinuities between them but instead promotes their constant mutual influence, enabling all of them to turn into each other's property or effect.

Nowhere more so than in that peculiar mainstay of Melanesian animism which Hubert and Mauss had brilliantly analysed in the General Theory of Magic (1902/03) and which crops up again and again in Einstein's work from the 1930s: mana. What is mana?

*Mana* is first of all an action of a certain kind, that is, a spiritual action that works at a distance and between sympathetic beings. It is also a kind of ether, imponderable, communicable, which spreads of its own accord. *Mana* is also a milieu, or more exactly functions as a milieu, which in itself is *mana*. [...] It is the *mana* of the magician which works through the *mana* of the rite on the *mana* of the *tindalo*, and which sets other manas in motion and so forth and so on. In its actions and reactions there are no other forces involved apart from *mana*. It is produced in a closed circuit, in which everything is *mana* and which is itself *mana*, if we may so express it.

So that's what *mana* is: everything. It is, simultaneously and inextricably, a quality, a substance, an environment, and an agency: a 'power-milieu', in Mauss's own words, at once a static ambience and a mobile force that everywhere traverses and stirs it, both enabling and provoking the emergence of events within it. The *mana* of Melanesian animism, he said, is 'the active, distinct and immanent principle of the whole universe' - in short, the immanent rather than metaphysical cause of a thoroughly nontranscendental pantheism.

What Mauss's animism shared with Nietzsche’s ontology, Einstein must have realised, was, first, that both are accounts of the world in which form and flux, subjecthood and subjectivity are intertwined, and within which there are no safe havens of constancy for a reactive-minded subject to retreat to. Secondly, Einstein will have understood that at the same time this animist universe is not all formless and boundless contingency. It is an immanent, which is to say a finite universe: a closed circuit, as Mauss says. And it is a universe which, even as it repels its own striation by organized form, nonetheless governs the interaction of its elements by precise rules: the rules of sympathy according to Mauss, the law of participation according to Lévy-Bruhl. As
Einstein was reading ethnography while looking at Picasso, it must have dawned on him that in the former he had come upon a description of the interaction and emergence of forms within a bounded field that was eminently transferable to the latter.

‘We are dealing here,’ he argued in his Cubism essay, ‘with a formal animism.’ And he elaborated the point in the *Art of the 20th Century*, calling Picasso’s *Studio* the product of a ‘formal mythology,’ a set of configurations which, ‘so far from being illustrations, emerge from formal immanence itself.’ To Einstein’s mind, Picasso’s art stands for a modern, thoroughly secular animism; and it does so to the extent that, rather than re-presenting it, the forms of art internalise it as their very generative principle. Hence analogy, telepathy, and the rest. In Einstein’s book, to create an analogical composition is to do two things at once [fig. 11]. First, it is to anchor different elements within the overall similitude of a whole, thus making them communicate ‘telepathically’ with both it and one another all across a tightly organised yet thoroughly nonhierarchical surface like so many phenomena gliding through the smooth space of an animist universe. And yet, second, it is also to have these elements propagate themselves as ever so slightly different inflections of that whole: as inclinations rather than as instantiations of it; as differences emerging from sameness, novelty emerging from the given. So it is that the ‘form fields’ in the *Milliner’s Workshop*, uniformly painted in different shades of grisaille, are, on one hand, joined into a flat all-over pattern, which, nowhere particularised by either local colour or traces of modelling, marks them unmistakably as formal relatives of the flat, rectangular canvas - as so many analogies, that is, of the very master paradigm of organized form: the tectonic. Yet so it is, also, that these fields will gather locally to align into nontectonic figurations - generating three-dimensional pockets of figure-and-ground within the overall rhythm of undulating form and dispersed lighting, as in the case of the squat figure of a sewing girl attentively bent over her needlework behind a table at left.

Ultimately, though, the image is about the coming into being, through a process of centring and re-centring, of provisionally stable, recognisable, and thereby Apollonian constellations of form - and then about their Dionysian unravelling, as the analogical elements that compose them, pulled elsewhere, join into new, psychically-invested associations with their neighbours in turn. Such associations are at most loosely readable in a narrative sense, which always implies discontinuity, an arrestment of forms under the yoke of meaning; whereas in the *Milliner’s Workshop* local clusters of sense emerge within but are never permitted to disrupt an overall *continuity*. Such clusters are made visually compelling by the analogousness of - for example, and in ascending order of affective investment - four triangular elements converging into a star pattern at left of centre; three (or four) curved shapes aligning into a fleshy yet abstract blossom at dead centre; and that push and pull, ambivalently libidinal and violent, at the far right, where the ‘form fields’ have concretised into a Janus-faced shadow that projects an extremity through the door’s upper panel into the women’s space, which intrusion is reciprocated by the
equally tender and suffocating jigsaw caress that extends in the opposite direction through the lower panel.

This description will have indicated that what makes the Milliner’s Workshop a more austere yet also a more fully realised work than The Painter and His Model is the way in which colour and line have here been integrated in a much tighter fashion. No longer do coloured polygons illuminate a linear network; instead, both have merged into a single cohesive mosaic composed of tesserae that are able to produce a whole range of different formal events, from depth to surface, illumination to darkness, geometric rigour to libidinal flow. All of which goes to say that here, all across the surface of the image, the unconscious, originating in a ‘beyond of form,’ nonetheless manifests its productive force everywhere and only ever within form. Form here being understood as the product, not of the deadly tectonicisation, of a hitherto formless ‘psychic’ animism, but rather of the simultaneous imbrication of the latter with the former, of the unconscious with the tectonic, as the very principle of an individuation which in Mauss’s Melanesia governed the immanence of a natural world, and in Einstein’s Picasso, the immanence of the canvas.

Given this, it is neither contradictory nor sentimental to say, as Einstein did in the Documents Cubism essay, that ‘we consider tectonic forms […] the most human of all, for they are the signs of a visually active subject who creates his own universe and refuses to be the slave of given form.’ Action and reaction: a subject has here chosen to resist both the pull of the death drive - the tendency of organised form towards tectonic inertia - and his own capitulation before the onrush of flux. Instead, he has risen to the challenge of Weltzwang and become an agency that enabled the latter to acquire visibility in the medium of the former. Such then was the veritable formalist ethics of Einstein’s ontology, according to which to be an active subject means: in face of the real, of forces beyond one’s control, whether within or without, not to annihilate either them or oneself - and thereby the real - but rather to join them, as force among forces, by formalising them.

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In stating as much, I hope to have shown that it is neither inaccurate nor sufficient to consider Carl Einstein a relentlessly negative critic, as is frequently done, and most eloquently so in Georges Didi-Huberman’s account of his thought.58 To Didi-Huberman’s mind, Einstein was centrally concerned with a project of what he variously calls ‘decomposition,’ ‘deformation,’ ‘dissociation,’ ‘non-knowledge,’ or ‘anti-humanism.’ And to be sure, Einstein was concerned with all that: but not centrally. At stake here are two profoundly different approaches to a politics of being, whether in art or in life; and Einstein’s theory of action and reaction makes it clear which side he came down on. To promote the cause of an ‘anti-humanism’ and the rest is to promote a
model of critique that grants the object of that critique an ontological priority to the critique itself. For there to be an ‘anti-,’ there first needs to be ‘humanism’; for there to be a ‘decomposition,’ there first needs to be a ‘composition.’ Another way of stating this - in terms of Einstein’s very own philosophy of the real - is to say that under this description, a politics of being will conceive of itself above all as a merely reactive enterprise: as a negation of a prior affirmation; a critique which, ‘necessary as it is, reinforces the analytical side.’ Whereas Einstein’s work, including his work on Picasso’s surrealism, was founded precisely not on a thought of negativity in the first place but rather on one of positivity in the first place. ‘The given’ must be negated, to be sure: through an affirmation of the new. The ‘rational Self’ must be negated, to be sure: through an affirmation of subjectivity. The deadening arrestment of form by the tectonic must be negated, to be sure: through an affirmation of formal animism.

Einstein’s household god, in other words, was Nietzsche, not Hegel, and his thought was exploring the monist immanence of the Will to Power, where forces affirm themselves against each other’s positivity, not the dualism of a dialectic, where they annihilate each other by way of the negative. That is what renders all apparent parallels with Georges Bataille and Walter Benjamin, as opposed to Einstein’s still largely unrecognised kinship with Michel Leiris, moot at the most fundamental level. It is also what connects Einstein’s project to a conceivably fundamental issue of modern thought that decades later would become a major point of contention between the two most brilliant philosophers of the postwar era. Because one reason why the immensely productive alliance of Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault finally stalled in the late 1970s was, precisely, their disagreement over a basic, perhaps the basic, ontological question: what comes first — power, or else desire? ‘Subjectification,’ or else lines of flight? No doubt, both come ‘first’; but what is their exact (active/reactive) relation, and how will it be historiscised, all the way up to our own present? At the moment of Documents and to varying degrees throughout his career, in his notes on art history and his Picasso art criticism, Carl Einstein was coming up with answers to these very questions.

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1 For a more comprehensive (and more comprehensively annotated) treatment of the issues raised here, see chapters 3 and 4 of my Ph.D. dissertation: Defence of the Real: Carl Einstein’s History and Theory of Art, Columbia University, New York, 2005.

For the first and, for all its relative brevity, by far the most incisive discussion of certain parts of this intellectual territory see Heidemarie Oehm, *Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins*, Fink, Munich, 1976. The concept of immanence I use here is derived from the work of Gilles Deleuze. Its most strictly philosophical statement is his *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994.


*Verbegrifflichung heisst: Abwehr des Toetlichen und Lebendigen, unuebersehbaren Weltzangs* (Carl Einstein, ['Gestalt und Begriff,'] in *Werke*, vol. 4, 194-221; 195: this text was translated into English by Charles W. Haxthausen as 'Gestalt and Concept,' *October*, 107, Winter 2004, 169-176; 170 [translation modified]). The entire paragraph is crucial. The argument also recurs throughout the Braque monograph, to which ‘Gestalt and Concept,’ a posthumously published text probably dating from the time of the book’s writing, is closely related.

The presence of Freud in Einstein’s thought is underexplored, and the presence of the death drive, which is what is at stake here, has barely been noticed at all. Andreas Michel is the only author to have at least referenced *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Totem and Taboo*; see, respectively, his 'Formalism to Psychoanalysis: On the Politics of Primitivism in Carl Einstein,' in *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, ed. Sara Friedrichsmeyer et al., University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1998, 141-161; and ‘Zur Bedeutung des Tektonischen im Werk Carl Einsteins,’ in *Die visuelle Wende der Moderne: Carl Einsteins Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Klaus H. Kiefer, Fink, Munich, 2003, 257-271.


See the celebrated journal entry by Michel Leiris, one of the few sources available that show Einstein’s intellectual impact on his younger collaborators at *Documents*: ‘La poésie n’est qu’une longue lutte contre la mort (qu’on tâche de connaître, avec l’idée qu’on acquerra ainsi un moyen de la dominer). […] On se crée un monde poétique parce que dans ce monde tout paraît intangible et non soumis à la vicissitude des corps. A la base de toute évasion, ce n’est pas un désir de pureté qu’on trouve, mais la peur; et même quand on croit vraiment aimer la pureté, ce n’est pas parce qu’étant intemporelle elle est plus noble, mais seulement “intemporelle” au sens strict du mot, c’est-à-dire non assujettie au temps et à la mort (comme dit Einstein)’ (Michel Leiris, *Journal 1922-1989*, ed. Jean Jamin, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, 164 [15 May 1929]). A month later, Einstein’s Dictionary entry on the philosophical and religious notion of the Absolute would make the same point: ‘On a identifié l’absolu à l’essence et à l’être même, et c’est par l’absolu qu’on s’étémise. Quelle crainte de la mort!’ ('Absolu,' in *Documents*, 3, 1929, 169-170; 169). Klaus Kiefer was the first to have drawn attention to the importance of Leiris’s diary passages: ‘Die Ethnologisierung des kunstkritischen Diskurses: Carl Einsteins Beitrag zu *Documents*,’ in Elan Vital oder Das Auge des Eros, ed. Hubertus Gaßner, Munich, Haus der Kunst, 1994, 90-103; 91.


While the Braque monograph, in typical fashion, does not mention a single specific example, the present illustration has not been chosen randomly. Babylon in general and the cult of Marduk in particular (whose ziggurat looms in the far right background) are discussed, in a similar
context, in Einstein’s preface to an exhibition catalogue of sculptures from early antiquity: *Exhibition of Bronze Statuettes B.C. (Hittite, Etruscan, Egyptian, Greek)*, Stora Art Galleries, New York, s.d. [1933], 3-14; 5. (For the original German version of the preface see *Werke*, vol. 3, 611-630.)


12 Einstein, *Werke*, vol. 3, 350. Einstein’s *Formsschutz* is evidently derived from the *Reizschutz* (‘stimuli shield’) of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; as has been noted by Michel, ‘Zur Bedeutung des Tektonischen,’ 269. The same goes, moreover, for Einstein’s borrowing of the seemingly innocuous term ‘conservatism’ from the same text, in which Freud had claimed a conservative function for the death drive, because it is ‘an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things’ (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 36 and 38). In other words, according to Einstein reading Freud, Babylonian settlers are conservative insofar as they are thanatophiliacs: death is right-wing.

13 Einstein’s interest in Mesopotamian art may have been inspired by (or perhaps may have inspired him to commission?) a brief, matter-of-factly survey essay by Georges Contenau on the subject, which explicitly mentions the portraiture of Gudea: ‘L’Art sumérien: les conventions de la statuaire,’ in *Documents*, 1, 1929, 1-8.


15 ‘Dauer oder Ewigkeit bedeuten eine Todesabwehr, indem man den Tod in ihnen antizipiert’ (Einstein, ‘Gestalt und Begriff,’ 201).

16 It’s sometimes suggested that the notion of the tectonic in either Einstein or Wölfflin or both crucially depended on Karl Böttcher’s influential *Tektonik der Hellenen* (1852; 1874). In fact, Wölfflin derived it from his Munich teacher, Heinrich Brunn; and Einstein, from Wölfflin (although in certain rare and not necessarily felicitous moments Einstein’s definition of the term was closer to that of his friend Kahnweiler). See Heinrich Brunn, ‘Über tektonischen Stil in griechischer Plastik und Malerei’ (1883), in *Heinrich Brunn’s Kleine Schriften*, ed. Heinrich Bulle and Hermann Brunn, vol. 2, B.G. Teubner, Leipzig and Berlin, 1905, 99-141; and the instructive survey essay by Adolf Heinrich Borbein, ‘Tektonik: Zur Geschichte eines Begriffs der Archäologie,’ in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, XXVI, 1982, 61-100 (83-85 on Brunn).


18 Wölfflin, *Grundbegriffe*, 164; *Principles*, 139 (the early ascription of the painting to Franciabigio, originally endorsed by Wölfflin and followed by the 1932 translation, is no longer accepted).


20 Wölfflin, *Grundbegriffe*, 164; *Principles*, 139.

21 ‘Den Meisten erstarrt das Tektonische zu hoffnungslos wiederholtem Schema, begreifbar, da jenes als Zeichen der Angst und des Wunsches nach Dauer erfaßt wird. Das Tektonische, dies Machtmittel gegen die Natur, wendet sich dann gegen den Menschen, der, wenn einmal die


23 ‘Tout cela est une vieille histoire: la généralisation prise pour un moyen de puissance. On réduit à des formules expurgées les tableaux tendus et presque indécompensables des davanciers, ce qui veut dire qu’on les vide’ (‘L’Exposition de l’art abstrait à Zurich,’ Documents, 6, 1929, 342). It is unclear whether Einstein actually saw the show or whether he based his attack on the catalogue, which contained a shortlist of works and a representative selection of plates. On a side note, the catalogue preface, signed by Wilhelm Wartmann, the Kunsthaus curator, reads in part as though the author was working from a blurb provided by Einstein which he only half understood; there is even a side reference to Hercules Seghers à propos the frottages of Max Ernst. See Abstrakte und Surrealistische Malerei und Plastik, Kunsthaus Zurich, 6 October to 3 November 1929, 3-8.


25 Biographical facts on the relation between Einstein and Surrealism are surprisingly scant. It is not clear whether he ever met André Breton in person, but it is generally assumed (no doubt correctly) that he was closely following the debates within the movement. He certainly knew all major texts by Breton and Louis Aragon, and the chapters on Paul Klee and to a lesser extent George Grosz in the first edition of his survey of twentieth-century art (1926) are already informed by Breton’s First Manifesto (1924). The most useful discussions of Einstein and Surrealism are Klaus H. Kiefer, Diskurswandel im Werk Carl Einsteins: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte de europäischen Avantgarde, Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1994, 377-421; and Sabine Ebel, Engagement und Kritik: Carl Einstein. Ein Vermittler zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich, Ph.D. dissertation, Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, Bonn, 1989, 169-177.

26 Einstein’s take on Freudian psychoanalysis during his Paris years is a crucial and massively understudied issue; it is the key for understanding both his ontological objections to Bretonian Surrealism and some of the common ground he shared instead with the ‘Surrealism’ of Georges Bataille. See my (unpublished) Defence of the Real, chapters 3 and 4.


31 E.g. in Einstein, Georges Braque, 348 and 349.

33 Freud, ‘Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,’ in Standard Edition, vol. XIV, 109-140. Triebumkehr also inspired another Einsteinian neologism: Stilumkehr, or ‘inversion of styles,’ perhaps the most crucial methodological term of his late art history; for which see my Defence of the Real, chapter 3.

34 Leo Bersani, The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art, Columbia University Press, New York, 1986, 86-88. It should be noted that in his second major essay on sadism and masochism Freud explicitly refers to the ontological stance modeled on the death drive as a ‘will to power’ (‘The Economic Problem of Masochism’ [1924], in Standard Edition, vol. XIX, 159-170; 163). In doing so, Freud in fact subscribed to what Nietzsche himself would have called a very specific, perspectivist self-interpretation of one force among others within the composite, multiple agon that is the real as Will to Power: namely that force which sadistically seeks to arrest becoming into being, the unknown into truth, and so on — and which, in so doing, deceives itself into thinking itself as, in fact, the Will to Power tout court. ‘Contempt, hatred for all that perishes, changes, varies — whence comes this valuation of that which remains constant? Obviously, the will to truth is here merely the desire for a world of the constant’ (Nietzsche, The Will to Power, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, Vintage Books, New York, 1968, 317 [#585A], 330 [#617]).


39 This at least is one possible reading of the complex accounts of Analytic Cubism’s historical significance by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss which I have briefly paraphrased here.


42 Krauss, ‘Life with Picasso,’ 116; ‘Colour Wars,’ 139.


44 Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme,’ 155. To be sure, in this essay ‘formal animism’ is claimed as a hallmark of Analytic Cubism around 1912, rather than of Picasso circa 1928. But then, ‘Notes sur le cubisme’ tries very hard retroactively to surrealise parts of Analytic Cubism. ‘La condition d’un tel simultané est une vitesse sans temps, qui ressemble à la force synthétique et rapide des rêves’ (155): Einstein experts will instantly recognise how what in the first edition of the Art of the 20th Century (1926) had been the central and ultimately Bergsonian concept of Cubist visual ‘simultaneity’ is now folded into a Freudian, psychoanalytic dimension. The strategy of surrealising early Picasso, invented and perfected by Breton, evidently left an impression on Einstein.

45 Christopher Green, Picasso: Architecture and Vertigo, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2005, 189-223. Green has associated Lévy-Bruhl on ‘primitive mentality’ and Hubert and Mauss on magic with the art of Picasso in the late 1920s, and he pertinently refers to Einstein’s Documents essays in that context. More generally, the dualism that is announced in the title of his important study and explored in a chapter on Picasso’s Painter and his Model is clearly relevant to Einstein’s tectonic/psychogram dichotomy I am discussing here. Exactly how these two conceptual pairs map onto each other is a question which, having just studied Green’s book, I must postpone to another occasion.

46 Einstein had incorporated Lévy-Bruhlian ideas into his own work as early as Negro Sculpture (1915), specifically its anti-evolutionist argument. During Einstein’s Paris period, Lévy-Bruhl’s name resurfaces on a reading list preserved in his estate (Berlin, Akademie der Künste, Carl-Einstein-Archiv, Sig. 240, fol. 46). And as Christopher Green has emphasized, at the moment of Documents Lévy-Bruhl was avidly studied by the young Leiris, that member of the Bataille circle who was intellectually closest to Einstein (Picasso: Architecture and Vertigo, 200). As for Mauss, a contributor to the Documents special issue on Picasso: Einstein seems to have discovered him only during his Paris period - perhaps on the suggestion of Leiris? The most useful study of Einstein and ethnography is Klaus H. Kiefer, ‘Fonctions de l’art africain dans l’oeuvre de Carl Einstein,’ in Images de l’africain de l’antiquité au XXe siècle, eds Daniel Droixhe and Klaus H. Kiefer, Lang, Frankfurt am Main, 1987, 149-176; see also a number of observations in his Diskurswandel, passim.


48 Lévy-Bruhl, How Natives Think, 99.


50 Just one example - and an impressive one indeed, merging as it does Freud on the uncanny with Mauss on magic - from Einstein’s posthumously published notes on animist art: ‘[i]n these spiritualist cultures there is no sharp distinction yet between the living being — the occasion of the image — and the image as double; for both are traversed or inhabited by the identical mana force. The mana of the dreamer or of the spirit of the dead may pass into the image doppelganger, which thanks to the principle of sympathetic magic possesses an energy akin to that of the living being’ (‘in diesen spiritualistischen kulturen scheidet man noch nicht scharf zwischen dem lebenden wesen, dem bildanlass und dem bildhaften doppelgaenger; denn beide sind von der gleichen manakraft durchstroemt oder bewohnt. Das mana des traeumenden oder des totengeistes kann in den doppelgaenger bild ueberstroemen, das dank der magischen sympathie eine den lebenden wesen verwandte energie besitzt’), Einstein, Werke, vol. 4, 429. No
one has so far suggested that Einstein was even aware of Freud’s essay on ‘The Uncanny,’ no doubt because no trace of its nowadays most popular section, the famous (un)heimlich/heimisch discussion, can be found in his work. And yet, it is unthinkable to me that he should not have known a text which, like Einstein at various points in his art-historical notes, explicitly if only in passing ties animism to the magic system of mana, to the fear of the shadow and the double, and to Egyptian art’s deliberate choice of extremely durable materials for its portrait statues (Freud, ‘The Uncanny’ [1919], in Standard Edition, vol. XVII, 212-252; 240 and 234-235).


52 Mauss and Hubert, A General Theory of Magic, 138.

53 Mauss and Hubert, A General Theory of Magic, 144.


55 ‘Nous constatons une sorte d’animisme formel, à cela près que maintenant la force vivifiante ne vient pas des esprits, mais de l’homme même’ (Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme,’ 155).


57 ‘[I] nous semble que les formes tectoniques, n’étant pas mesurables, sont les formes les plus humaines, parce qu’elles sont les signes d’un homme visuellement actif agençant lui-même son univers et refusant d’être l’esclave des formes données’ (Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme,’ 155; my emphasis in the translation).


59 ‘Anti-Hegelianism runs through Nietzsche’s work as its cutting edge. We can already feel it in the theory of forces. In Nietzsche the essential relation of one force to another is never conceived of as a negative element in the essence. In its relation with the other the force which makes itself obeyed does not deny the other or that which it is not, it affirms its own difference and enjoys this difference. The negative is not present in the essence as that from which force draws its activity; on the contrary it is a result of activity, of the existence of an active force and the affirmation of its difference. The negative is a product of existence itself: the aggression necessarily linked to an active existence, the aggression of an affirmation.’ (Deleuze, Nietzsche and Philosophy, 8-9.)

60 Besides the well-known Critical Dictionary entries on metamorphosis and metaphor (which latter seeks to redefine metaphor in terms closely related to Maussian magic and medieval cosmology, not to reject it altogether à la Bataille), I am specifically thinking of Leiris’s Documents texts on Arnold Schoenberg (unpublished at the time) and Hans Arp as well as his review of Fritz Saxl’s catalogue of late medieval illuminated manuscripts on astrology. All of them describe the relation between a plane of immanence and the events emerging within it (the human body in the Paracelsian universe, tones in twelve-tone music, the forms of a wood relief) in terms of an interaction of corresponding elements that is very germane indeed to Einstein’s appropriation of animism.

Foucault, unlike Deleuze, operates without a developed notion of desire or its equivalent; thus Foucault’s body [sc., in the ‘Birth’ books - SZ] is only the prey of reactive forces - normalising and individuating forces - and Foucault’s genealogy remains incomplete’ (‘Genealogy and the Body: Foucault/Deleuze/Nietzsche,’ in Theory, Culture and Society 2, 2, 1984, 1-17; 7; emphasis mine). In our terms: Deleuze was worried by the way in which Foucault seemed to put the death drive (‘normalisation’) first, the body second; coercion first, resistance second; reaction first… and reaction second.

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‘Picture = Rupture’:
Visual Experience, Form and Symptom according to Carl Einstein

Georges Didi-Huberman
Translated by C.F.B. Miller

To shake up the figurative world is to call into question the guarantees of our existence. The naive person believes that the appearance of the human figure is the most trustworthy experience that a human being can have of himself; he dares not doubt this certainty, although he suspects the presence of inner experiences. He imagines that in contrast to this abyss of inner experience the immediate experience of his own body constitutes the most reliable biological unit.

Form as operative violence: ‘Every precise form is an assassination of other versions’

It was in terms of experience – ‘inner experience’, indeed – that Carl Einstein formulated his basic understanding of visual objects. The analogy with Georges Bataille’s vocabulary is certainly striking – but not, on reflection, surprising. Firstly it has to do with that element common to all those maverick interwar thinkers who, following Nietzsche and Freud, shook to the core our ideas of the subject, the image and history (consider Aby Warburg, Walter Benjamin, Robert Musil). Above all, it has to do with Einstein’s committed participation in the Documents project, on which he worked diligently with Bataille and Michel Leiris in a ‘theoretical common front’ – against positivism and idealism, but also against André Breton’s surrealism, which was deemed a specious alternative to the givens of academic thought.

Einstein’s precise function at the centre of Documents remains obscure. It will probably take the publication of new archival material to redress the silence, the bad faith even, that has dogged his contribution to the theory of the Parisian avant-garde around the time of Documents. After Bataille and Leiris, Einstein signed the most articles in the magazine’s two-year run. From the first April 1929 issue onwards his name appeared among the members of the editorial committee, and he most likely played a full founding role in the project. In an unpublished note from 1954, Bataille would even speak of the ‘German poet Carl Einstein’ as ‘nominal director’ of the journal – ‘against’ whom, without specifying unduly, he recalled positioning himself; and yet clear analogies appear between their respective approaches in the domain of aesthetic critique.

Of the three mavericks who decisively inflected Documents’ direction, Carl Einstein was the oldest – forty-four in 1929, while Bataille was thirty-two and Leiris twenty-eight – and probably not the least maverick or recalcitrant. His reputation as an experimental writer had preceded him in France, since a couple of his texts, including an extract from Bébuquin, had been translated in literary reviews. Having already authored several violently erotic texts, he had been able to read Bataille’s Story of the Eye without blinking. In short he was, as Clara Malraux put it, ‘the man for
all the new approaches: he had read Freud in the original; he was able actively to introduce German ethnology to France; he possessed above all an incomparable knowledge of the history of art and the theoretical advances represented by the names Heinrich Wölfflin, Alois Riegl or Aby Warburg. The Journal of Michel Leiris bears witness to this fertile intersection, and even to the influence that Einstein’s difficult, demanding mode of inquiry exercised on the two young refugees from surrealism.

But how to qualify that experience whose theory Einstein elaborates in fragments from Negerplastik, or even the ‘theoretical novel’ Bébuquin, onwards? One answer can be found clearly stated at the beginning of his book, The Art of the 20th Century: commenting on the radical transformation of vision produced in the trajectory between impressionism and cubism, Einstein wrote of a ‘collapse in the commerce of beauty’; on the ruins of this destruction, the visual object was then qualified as ‘manifestation’ (Äußerung), ‘event’ (Ereignis) and, finally, as ‘symptom’ (Symptom). Thus would experience be symptom – more precisely, the repercussion on the spectator, on thought in general, of forms emerging in the visible world as so many irruptions with the value of symptoms. A reading of the post-1926 texts, notably those written in 1929-1930 for Documents, up to Georges Braque (1934), should enable us better to discern the fundamental characteristics of this ‘symptomal’ understanding of visual experience.

The first of these characteristics is a dialectic of destruction, or, better, of decomposition. If the ‘formalist’ tone of Negerplastik can strike the contemporary reader, it would be disastrous to understand such a ‘formalism’ by the yardstick of art criticism today – where the term is almost always pejorative and almost always used in relation to the neo-Greenbergian debate. As strange as it might at first seem, Einstein identifies formal exigency strictly with form’s exigency for decomposition. From 1912 onwards, Einstein announced that there might be no authentic form that is not at the same time violence – to be precise, operative violence [violence opératoire]. He always thought of form-work as the ‘justified destruction of an object’. In this way he introduced a dialectics (although asymmetric, hence his critique of ‘lazy’ dialectical dualisms in visual analysis) capable of restoring to the notion of form its basic ‘traumatic’ capacity:

Evidently art-making comprises many elements of cruelty and assassination. For every precise form is an assassination of other versions: mortal anguish cuts the current. More and more reality is decomposed, which makes it less and less obligatory; the dialectic of our existence is reinforced [...] it is a traumatic accentuation.

‘Every precise form is an assassination of other versions’: this admirable proposition states the dialectical character of all form-work, that is to say, of all decomposition of form by itself. Yet it seems dialectical on a further level, since it enunciates both the cruelty (in a perfectly Bataillean tone) and the transformational ‘precision’ of a ‘version’ by relation to its precedents...
(and here Einstein’s tone prefigures Lévi-Strauss). Moreover it is in perfect syntony with that which is most radical in the Documents project: in that the decomposition to which it pertains is primarily a *decomposition of the human figure*. This figure, writes Einstein in his ‘Notes on Cubism’, appears as the traditional aesthetic system’s unity par excellence – thus par excellence as the unity to be ‘compromised’, to ‘decompose’.15

This is why, in the context of the figurative arts of past centuries, Carl Einstein could bring his attention to bear on that precise – yet by his account cruel – *deformation* manifested by anamorphoses, in which he saw much more than a ‘simple optical illusion’: a disruption of vision in general, a modification of the site of the subject, a phenomenon inductive of ‘ecstasy’.16 This is why Einstein could interest himself in Magnasco as *creatore della pittura di tocco e di macchia*.17 This is why the uniqueness of Hercules Seghers in Seventeenth-Century Dutch art seemed to Einstein so exemplary: not only did the dramatisation of thought and the model of the rebel obtain therein (Einstein’s article begins by evoking an artist ‘so poor that he had to make his paintings on his tablecloths and sheets’, so desperate that he ‘died drunk one night’),18 but, moreover, in Seghers’s work the *decomposition of anthropocentric space*, of ‘civilised’ space, found an expression analysed by Einstein in somewhat disturbing (and again quite Bataillean) terms:

It is a narrow, isolated revolt against everything that calls itself Dutch. For this attitude, Seghers paid with his life.

In his oeuvre, the organic continuity of Dutch art congeals into a kind of oppressive, petrified horror, or else it dissipates into a flight of planes that lacerate an eye wearied by flaccid, aimless parallels. Expansiveness, identified elsewhere with conquest, with hope, is here but a terrified escape. Everywhere the eye collides with densely crowded rocks, with piles of prisons. Such density betrays a despair that paralyses like a cramp, a kind of agoraphobia marks these etchings. Here we find a mournful contempt, a disgust with all sociability, a Holland against the grain [...].

The cliché *nature morte* has here recovered its naked meaning: nature grown rotten, petrified, nature as carcass. [...] Every rock, every leaf is isolated, asocial, decomposed, enclosed within itself. [...] In these landscapes of a shredded baroque, planes have been ground up into tiny pieces. Of lava, of mud, of crumpled trees and pebbled screes. A desert sliced by roads traced out by meteors, an airless, congealed hell, without man or beast. Never mind that any living being would be a paradox in such a world. [...] Tortured paths leading the eye into the interior from which it is quickly expelled.

The eye is at once attracted and repelled. This technique is a zero technique, a dialectic of forms under the sign of death, a reciprocal destruction of parts. In this
instance, totality results not from one element augmenting the other, but from their mutual extirpation.

Seghers’s nature is a rotted, petrified catastrophe. [...] These rocks form a distaff of writing in which one can disentangle the expression of an infantile dismemberment (witness the destruction of dolls), a joy in the definitive breaking up [dissociation] of parts. In sum, it is a question of the loss of the unified self and thus the appearance of a landscape signifies the destruction of the self.  

In the great classical century this spatial and subjective decomposition was only an isolated symptom. In cubism, in Einstein’s view, it achieves the status of an irreversible method; then the symptom affects all vision, it becomes the global symptom of a civilisation which has turned space, time and the subject itself upside-down. With Picasso, Braque or Juan Gris, ‘hallucination’, as Einstein says, no longer cuts the real, but creates the real. How so? By inventing an ‘operative violence’ specific to form, which requires a dynamic and dialectical redefinition of spatial experience. This redefinition is dialectical insofar as anthropomorphism is not excluded, but precisely decomposed; as with Juan Gris, where Einstein detects a ‘tectonic’ – a refusal of anthropocentrism – which is however made only out of ‘human elements’.

This would be cubism’s most shattering value, according to Carl Einstein: this dialectical inclusion of the very thing it breaks down – that is to say, anthropomorphism. The operative aspect of cubist forms certainly creates a space of autonomous contatenations. But Einstein detests closed, non-dialectical autonomy; hence he considers Russian constructivism and De Stijl to be academic and static (what he harshly terms an ‘accountancy of pure forms’), a formalism impoverished, according to him, because limited psychologically only to Gestalt-theory. Forms cannot be shattered, says Einstein, without shattering the mind of the subject, which is why the Freudian metapsychological model – notably that of the death drive – is not absent from his theoretical exigency concerning form: there is no operative rigour without the violence of a basic ‘assassination’. Cubist collage, a paragon of this subversive rigour, emerges as the disintegration of ‘every optical prejudice’, the ‘most audacious and most violent attempt at the destruction of conventional reality’.

Form as movement and dissociation: ‘Picture = rupture’
Here we touch on a second characteristic of visual experience according to Einstein: a dialectic of mobility, as formal as it is psychical. When Einstein repeats to Kahnweiler that cubism should not be considered a ‘simple optical speciality’, he elaborates his thinking by asserting: ‘A valid experiment, it encompasses much more, and I believe that to understand it is only a question of energy [es ist nur Frage unserer Energie].’ Let us grant this phrase all the overtones of the energy motif: energy required of the spectator to grasp the extent of the cubist disruption; but also...
psychical energy of which cubist forms are themselves the enactment. Here Einstein seems to me to go further in his formulation of the ‘dialectical image’ than the Benjaminian motifs of the image as ‘dialectic at a standstill’ or a ‘constellation formed in a flash’, for the formal analysis of cubist pictures permits the development, with relative precision, of a veritable energetics of visual experience.

In effect, if one attempts to comprehend cubist spatiality in its effects of simultaneity, of ‘compressed movements’, of ‘planes that intersect’, or of ‘tectonic dissociations’, one ends inexorably at what Einstein calls, in a play on words, form-fields. Obviously conceived according to the model, borrowed from physics, of force-fields, these release their specific energy by an effect of dissociation that one might summarise as follows: whereas classical representation creates a continuous space in which objects and persons are arranged as discontinuous entities, cubism invents a discontinuous space ‘which objects do not interrupt’. The relations between continuity and discontinuity, identity and difference, are here inverted – subverted – relative to the naturalist givens of traditional painting.

Now, what Einstein attacks in mimetic art is not so much the ‘realist’ attitude in itself. Rather, it is the substantification of the real, and the immobilisation of forms, and thus of forces, that he violently denounces, characterising Narcissus for example as a ‘conceited naturalist’, and Pygmalion as the poor ‘dupe of a mannequin’. At base, both seek only to fix the image. More generally, imitative realism is considered to be a ‘sort of conglomerate of taboos and cowardly fears’ that forever aim at an ‘eternally real’ of the represented – to which is opposed, in almost Deleuzian style, the ‘naturalism in movement’ of the nomad arts –, which renders humanist perspective a trivial ‘little goal of traditional metaphysics’.

Renaissance man accentuated in his pictures the resultant object. By contrast, for his part, the cubist accentuates the elements of the formation of the object; in other words, he has done with the ‘motif’ qua independent factor.

Thus cubism is nothing other than a radical questioning – loaded with philosophical consequences – of the substance in which objects and humans had seen themselves ‘fixed’ by classical metaphysics. It consummates ‘the end of the stable and determined subject’, the liquidation of the anthropocentric attitude and of a secular faith ‘in that stupid gewgaw we call Man’.

It is thus anti-humanist, not through a taste for ‘pure’ or resolutely ‘non-human’ forms, but through a taking into consideration of the symptomal character of visual experience, necessitating recourse to a new subject-position. In effect, from the point of view of visual experience, space is never that extended continuum offered by the visible or optical apparatus of classical representation. The latter eternises Man, fixes space, fossilises objects in a single ideal continuum. In short, it represses all fear – or rather anxiety – in the face of the crumbling of time
and the subjective dissemination of space: and so it invents that metaphysical ‘unshakeable lie’ called the ‘absolute’.\textsuperscript{32} Against this, cubism rediscovers the instability, the fundamental mobility of those ‘mixed experiences’ in which ‘a disproportion between psychological processes and natural processes declares itself’: it has understood and put to work that ‘mobile psychological function’ in relation to which space, the subject, or even vision, can never be substantified.\textsuperscript{33}

A \textit{form-field}, according to Einstein, is thus something wholly other than a simple ‘aesthetic formula of style’ supposed to restate the real or substance ‘in another form’.\textsuperscript{34} To invent a new form-field is to invent a \textit{force-field} capable of ‘creating the real’, of ‘determining a new reality by a new optical form’. A manner of saying that the picture – and primarily the cubist picture – does not have the job of representing, but of \textit{being}, of \textit{working} [travailler] (in the quasi-Freudian sense of the term, but also in the double sense of death-throes and birth-pangs).\textsuperscript{35} This work [\textit{travail}] only takes place in the incessant dialectic of a fecund \textit{decomposition} and a \textit{production} that never finds repose or fixes its end-point, precisely because its force resides in the anxious opening, the capacity for perpetual insurrection and self-decomposition, of form:

\begin{quote}
[...] images only retain their active force if one considers them as fragments dissolving themselves at the same time as they act, or rapidly decaying as do weak and mortal, living organisms. Images only possess a meaning if one considers them as sources of energy and intersections of decisive experiences. [...] Works of art only acquire their true meaning by dint of the insurrectionary force they contain.\textsuperscript{36}
\end{quote}

To be sure, it is this play of ‘insurrectionary’ decomposition and the production of ‘decisive experiences’ that constitutes for Einstein the great force of cubism; which is no longer a stylistic variant in the history of art, but a more fundamental revision capable of ‘determining a new reality through a new optical form’, capable of ‘radically modifying vision’ in ‘renewing the image of the world’.\textsuperscript{37} Its power is linked to the fact that it does not hesitate to enact, at the very heart of its original ‘tectonic’, a third characteristic of visual experience: what I will term \textit{dissociation}, a splitting of the gaze. This forms, at the centre of the aesthetic sphere, a principle of psychical negativity, an anxiety principle from which, however, the image draws all its power to shatter us, to affect thought itself.

We should understand, therefore, that Einstein’s ‘formalist’ and ‘energetic’ approaches go together with a \textit{metapsychological} point of view capable of apprehending the form-fields and force-fields proper to the image on an anthropological level comparable, for modern art, to that which \textit{Negerplastik} had developed on the level of aura and cultic value. Schematising, one might say that the religious image \textit{estranged} the subject, that humanist art \textit{recentred} the subject, and that the modern image has finished by \textit{dissociating} the subject, decentring without estranging it, or rather estranging it internally. Freud named this the unconscious, and Einstein – who also read
Jung, albeit to hijack [détourner] him – termed it the ‘fatal energies of the psyche’, the ‘fatal reality’ of the subject.\textsuperscript{38}

To speak of the unconscious is to speak of the scission of the subject. Carl Einstein ceaselessly sought to root out from aesthetics and art history the primacy of an ‘ego’ that he regularly described as ‘petit-bourgeois’.\textsuperscript{39} He notably criticised the Kunstwollen of Riegl, which according to him ignored the hypothesis of the unconscious, and because ‘will presupposes conscious knowledge of a model that one attempts to imitate or attain.’\textsuperscript{40} Not only does all modern ‘artistic production take place under the sign of a scission of the individual’,\textsuperscript{41} but henceforth images can no longer be considered as copies or reflections of whatever: they are only, affirms Einstein, ‘crossroads of [psychical] functions’, conforming to the anxious model – ‘active anxiety’, he specifies – of the chiasmus or the split.\textsuperscript{42}

To speak of scission of the subject is to speak of scission of representation, of symptom in representation. Against the Wölfflinian notion of artistic styles apprehended as ‘reflections’ of the ‘self-movement of the idea’, Einstein proposes the hypothesis of a symptom-image, an image that produces its objects not as ‘substances’ but as ‘labile and dependent symptoms of human activity.’\textsuperscript{43} Not as aesthetic appropriations of substance, but as disorders in substance which foreground not the objectivised result of a representation, but ‘the complex and labile process of the subject-object’, a conflict of heterogeneous forces which render the picture a crossroads of ‘limit-states’ in movement.\textsuperscript{44} This is to have done with the judgement of taste, that ‘idolatry’ of art as ontological accomplishment and the work as aesthetic bibelot:

One of the characteristics of this idolatry consisted in the fact that art historians concealed, or considered as historically insignificant, the ‘failed’ acts that determine the majority of artworks. The result was a rose-tinted, window-dressed selection, and perfection, the ‘jackpot’, was henceforth taken as the quotidian standard. We have recently indicated the opposite formula: in the artistic domain, the work of art properly called is in reality only an exception, a rarity, a monstrosity.\textsuperscript{45}

To have done with the judgement of taste? This is not to seek ugliness at any cost, to prize non-value cynically, to deprive form of rigour and construction – as the whole of cubist painting brilliantly proves. But it is, renouncing substances, to accede to the force-field of symptoms. It is to seek the ‘collapse’ of idealism’s cherished ‘repressions’; it is not to fear the analogy between a formal creation and a ‘mortal process’ or ‘anguish’; it is to render artworks ‘the depositories of forces’ by turns positive and negative, sexual and lethal; it is to regard the represented objects, not as reinforcements of certainty or eternity – as ‘still lives’ – but as ‘accents in the ensemble of becoming’; it is to open the image up to ‘efficacious shocks’ and ‘psychical trauma’; it is to render the work a crystal of crisis, something that arises in art history as
'abnormal'; it is to dare to produce the subversive advance of forms through a regressive attack of the formless.\textsuperscript{46}

For Einstein the \textit{force-image} would be the image capable of breaking with the illusion of duration, the image capable of not being the end of a process or the fossil of a process, but the continuing anxiety of the process in action. ‘We oscillate between murderous dynamics and ossifying fixation’, one reads in \textit{Georges Braque.}\textsuperscript{47} A cubist painting, a Braque collage, are force-fields because they offer the \textit{dialectical image} – the image simultaneously autonomous and unresolved – of murderous dynamism and ossifying fixation. Because dialectical, because unresolved, this image is therefore the \textit{image-symptom} of a fundamental relationship (anthropological, metapsychological) of man to the world:

All classical art was stuck in its tenacious pride, in [...] that rigid faith in complete form and the solid objects – creations of God – that one humbly imitated.

Facing this order of things, the cubists asked: how can space become an \textit{actual} field, a projection of our activity? Now, by itself this question put an end to all the guff of ‘substances’. Space ceased to be a pre-established uniform condition, in order to become the central problem of invention. Once this attitude had been acquired, in turn all form ceased to represent anything other than a \textit{symptom}, a phase of human activity, and the idealist superstition of a stable and immanent objective world was liquidated. Henceforth, it was no longer a matter of reproducing those objects, it was necessary to \textit{create} them. [...] In classical art, the unconscious and hallucination have been disdained as negligible qualities [...]. But now what mattered was to rediscover mysteriously felt forms, and to accentuate the dynamic centres of forces, instead of dissimulating them under the paraphrastic appearances of objects. [...] The decisive fact was not the advent, with cubism, of a new painting, but the transformation it wrought in the situation of man \textit{vis-à-vis} the world. [...] The corrupt traditional solution saw itself replaced by an \textit{actual} problematics, docile equilibrium by an active anxiety.\textsuperscript{48}

‘Active anxiety’ to ‘rediscover mysteriously felt forms’: this characterisation of cubism seems at least unexpected. And yet it draws on the strict consequences of the fact that, for Picasso and Braque, the \textit{space-condition} – that is to say extended, a priori space – gives way to \textit{space-problem}, which is not a soluble constructive equation, but a squaring of the circle, dare I say it, of inner experience and spatial experience. This is why the unconscious, and even hallucination, constitute an essential part of Einstein’s vocabulary on cubism. The author of \textit{Bébuquin} – who loved Miró and Giacometti, but loathed the flaccid mimeticism of Salvador Dalí –
had not waited for surrealism to advance a notion of ‘psychical spatiality’, of the *psychical sovereignty of forms* created in the ‘active anxiety’ of space.

One might say, to paraphrase a celebrated Cézannian formula,⁴⁹ that for Einstein form finds plenitude when hallucination attains abundance, or rather sovereignty. This is the case in cubism. Not only can the latter ‘only prevail if it has been created from psychical equivalents’, but even its very spatiality pertains to ‘transforming the content of subjective experiences’.⁵⁰ This is most particularly the case in the painting of Picasso: his ‘form-fields’ go beyond all ‘geometrical misunderstanding’, his ‘polyphonies of surfaces’ go beyond all ‘already-dead external appearance’, his ‘tectonic hallucination’ goes beyond all spatial architecture.⁵¹

Picasso signals everything that in our era possesses freedom. He is the strongest argument against the mechanical normalisation of experiences. [...] Picasso finds himself situated at the heart of a violent conflict between direct human structure – or immediate reality – and already-dead external appearances. For him, art is an enormous and incessant enlargement of self-knowledge, which amounts to defining it as the dialectical negation of nature. [...] Every work endowed with a human value as an attempt at liberation isolates and destroys the real, all form being equivalent to distinction, separation, anxious negation. In this way the artist arrives not at the void and the generality of Hegel, but at the creation of concrete and autonomous visions. Picasso continually separates himself from himself and lives in a state of permanent transformation. One might say that the fundamental condition of his researches and discoveries is the dialectical destruction of reality. [...] Picasso has understood that the death of reality is a necessary condition of the creation of an autonomous oeuvre, but on the other hand he intensifies it by projecting blocs full of imagination into it. He lays out what is psychically true, humanly immediate, and in this sense his realism is all the more powerful since his work is exempt from all naturalism. [...] For his fanatical abandonment to the visions that impose themselves on him [...], he compensates with the construction of forms. Against the fatality of the unconscious, he opposes a prodigious will of clearly intelligible figuration.

He knows no convenient peace of mind or constancy. His canvases are stretched between two psychological poles and in this regard one might speak of an inner dialectic, of a construction on many psychical planes.⁵²

In his book on Braque, Einstein finishes by stating this strange theorem: ‘*Picture = rupture’* ['tableau = coupure'].⁵³ How should we understand this? Firstly by recalling the phenomenological analysis of the *distance* that African fetishes, withdrawn into their auratic power, impose on the spectator. The cubist picture is ‘rupture’ in that it isolates itself from the
spectator, renouncing every psychological come-on [œillade], every simulation of ‘conversation’ (as Einstein disgustedly said of the baroque composti). The cubist picture is ‘rupture’, which is why, after the death of God, it was able to reinvent the power of beholding its spectator – the opposite of the come-on – as it withdrew from every sphere of familiarity; thus it could reinvent and secularise the aura. But the picture could also be said to be rupture in itself, dissociation with itself: dissociation of each plane from each plane, dissociation of space and object, dissociation of the tectonic and the hallucinatory, internal dissociation of the time of the work.

**Form as overdetermination and anachronism: ‘blocs of a-causality’**

Now, this dissociation anticipates a fourth characteristic of the visual experience theorised by Einstein, a fourth way, for form, of being symptom. I’ll call it a dialectic of overdetermination, a Freudian term for the critique of determinism, a Freudian word for the scission of causality. When they rattle the ‘always self-identical object’, when they open it ‘as one opens a box’ or as a child breaks a watch, Einstein’s cubists proceed, by that very gesture, towards an ‘annihilation’ of positive time (clock-time, positivist time, mundane time, metaphysical time). Because they have ‘shaken up the figurative world’, the cubist painters have ended up calling ‘into question the guarantees of existence’ itself; thus ‘spatial experience’ is confronted, more manifestly than ever, in the crisis and symptom of ‘inner experience’. Because they have shaken up the grammar of styles and the markers of fixed space, they have overthrown time itself. As have they ‘ultimately put causality seriously in doubt’. They have reinvented the word experience, consequently reinventing ‘the miracle without God’, the ‘explosion of logic’, a-causality. And if Einstein likes painters of the ‘romantic generation’ – his habitual nomenclature for those surrealists who interest him, principally Arp, Miró and Masson – it is precisely because their preferred temporal material is that a-causality which renders the picture a ‘distillation of dreams’, and the energetic crossroads of a ‘dissociation of consciousness’. A propos of Masson, Einstein expresses the reversal of traditional values, the exigency of ‘shaking up what is called reality’, by introducing once more that dazzling phrase, blocs of a-causality, which in representation ‘highlight the crisis’, or outline the symptomatic side, of visual experience:

The time seems to have come to identify the crisis, not to consolidate things as they gain stability, given that we are surrounded by idlers living off private incomes who placidly exploit outdated rebellions that have become innocent, surrounded by people who wish to live without being dead.

One thing really matters: to shake up what is called reality by the medium of unadapted hallucinations, in order to change hierarchies of values of the real. The hallucinatory forces make a breach in the order of mechanical processes; they introduce
blocs of ‘a-causality’ into that reality which has been absurdly presented as unified. The uninterrupted fabric of this reality is torn apart [...].

It is useful, I think, to locate this violent artistic claim in the same context that Einstein himself acknowledged, that is, an epistemological context. Because it modifies the subject’s relation to space and time, cubist painting poses a problem of ‘sensation’ and knowledge. This explains the philosophical reference-point, at first sight surprising, that Einstein gives for his own essays in aesthetics:

It is about nothing less than a modification [...] of the means of considering objects and sensations. On the theoretical level, it is perhaps Mach who is closest to me.

Why Mach? Why a philosopher of science, and why this one precisely? A reference to the psychology of William James would be more understandable, the influence of which on the cubists – via Gertrude Stein – is proven. But the theory of Ernst Mach presented for Einstein the inestimable advantage of situating itself directly at the level of fundamentals, in a debate with the great philosophical traditions where so many ideas on knowledge and art originated. Schematising, one might say that Einstein’s interest in this theory was linked to four great critical elaborations that Mach had never ceased to develop and popularise in his works.

The first might be qualified as the critique of transcendence, and it is readily apparent how Mach’s anti-Platonism and anti-Kantianism – he was the author of ‘antimetaphysical prolegomenas’ – might furnish Einstein with a basic conceptual toolkit. The second was a critique of subject-object duality, with regard to which Mach refuted the Kantian idea of a priori space and time: for him, space-time was nothing other than a ‘complex of sensations’; for him, the external object did not exist any more durably than the ‘ego’ of the knowing subject; it was necessary simply to envisage the relation between the two as a ‘crossroads’ of labile ‘functions’ generating a ‘physico-psychical’ articulation of reality.

The third Machian elaboration amounted to a critique of the intemporality of knowledge: it was founded on a simultaneously historical, energetic and economic conception of the development of science – a ‘historico-critical epistemology’ in which the supposedly intangible concepts of mechanics (for example the principle of the conservation of work) saw themselves rethought as the very effect of their historical constitution. All of this effected a critique of causality that evidently fascinated Einstein. Mach practically reformulated Newtonian physics in demythologising it, in rethinking its entire methodological scope on the basis of a sort of psychical economy that he termed ‘mental transformism’ (Gedankenumwandlung). In The Analysis of Sensations, Mach was already evoking the problem of causality and teleology in relation to complexes of spatial sensations. And in his celebrated synthesis on Knowledge and Error –
translated into French in 1908 –, he wrote that ‘the means of understanding causality has varied in the course of time and can still be modified; there is no reason to believe that it is a matter of an innate notion.’

This ensemble of ‘historico-critical’ propositions was nothing less than an open door to the scientific and philosophical modernity of the twentieth century. In this sense, Mach was without doubt the last of the great nineteenth-century positivists, the positivist of the ultimate crisis of positivism. His principal critics at first presented themselves as his disciples – and it is notable that they were, in their various fields, the very founders of contemporary thought. In 1909 Albert Einstein declared himself a ‘pupil of Mach’ and understood the Machian critique of Newtonian physics as an epistemological and historical justification of his own theory of relativity. Again, in 1911 Sigmund Freud signed a manifesto in favour of Mach’s principles; he had admired the work carried out by the German philosopher on the desubstantialisation of the ego – Mach had written that ‘the ego is irrecoverable’ (Das Ich ist unrettbar). We know that Lenin made Mach’s ‘empiriocriticism’ the privileged centre of his materialist critique of knowledge.

Even Musil wrote a 1908 philosophy thesis in which he sought directly to confront the doctrine of Ernst Mach. A propos of that thesis, Paul-Laurent Assou has shown the prominent role that the Machian critique of substance played in Musil’s formation of a ‘philosophy without qualities’. But to this well-known theoretical picture (Albert Einstein, Freud, Lenin), to this major literary corollary (Musil), must henceforth be added Carl Einstein and his ‘visual critique without concessions’. He too had understood that it was necessary, in the domain of aesthetics and art history, to ‘highlight the crisis’ opened up by Ernst Mach in the positivist regime of knowledge, and to invent, at the very heart of this crisis, a new notion of experience. He too should be counted among the ‘demolishers of substance’ in the first decades of the century, he too – though he has remained unnoticed – counts among the founders of our contemporary thought.

But Carl Einstein occupied that difficult position of being at once a modern thinker and a critical thinker of modernity (a conjunction that enters into Walter Benjamin’s definition of the dialectical image). Demanding a modernity without dogmatism (he would probably have refuted the ‘modernism’ of American art critics), he nonetheless demanded an unwavering and uncompromising modernity (he would probably have loathed the ‘postmodernism’ of a certain sort of art criticism today). Thus thinking the image, and thinking modernity, constituted for him two conjoint reasons to ‘highlight the crisis’ and to accentuate, as a consequence, one final symptomal characteristic of visual experience: for the dissociation of the gaze and the dissociation of causality could not go without a scission of time itself. The image, in its most radical definition, became the sensible crossroads of that scission itself: a symptom, a crisis of time.

Now thinking such a ‘crisis’ in the context of modernity amounted to Carl Einstein rediscovering – though in an inverted form – the theoretical intuition already realised in
Negerplastik: the ‘scission of time’ is another way of describing the dialectical image, it is only another version, which can without doubt be generalised in the history of art, of the dialectic of anachronism. In Negerplastik, the dialectical pivot [cheville dialectique] of modernity (from the cubist viewpoint) enabled understanding of an ‘immemorial’ art to expand, for the reason that the latter as yet had no history. In The Art of the Twentieth Century – and in the later texts written for Documents, up until Georges Braque – it is the dialectical pivot of a sort of prehistoricity that enables increased understanding of an art which also (but by the symmetrical reason of excessive ‘novelty’) still awaits its history. Thus for Einstein the constitution of a history of contemporary art often involves an acute focus on the phenomena of ‘regression’, ‘archaism’, ‘primitivity’, or ‘survival’ in the Warburgian sense of the term. It would be better henceforth to speak of modern anachronism rather than ‘primitivism’: the latter remains a matter of taste (a trivial aesthetic model), even of influence (a trivial historical model); whereas the former produces a dialectical and differential understanding of artistic modernity.

Therefore, in his ‘Notes on cubism’, Einstein relates the ‘murderous force of the artwork’ – vis-à-vis an assassinated reality, a pulverised ‘identity of objects’ – to the sudden interest of the cubist painters in ‘archaic, mythic and tectonic epochs’. Far from constituting a retreat towards the chrysalis of the archetype (which to Einstein’s eye appears as the ‘negative side of the taste for the primitives’), this relation puts at stake nothing other than the complication, the rethinking, of the history of painting itself; the test of anachronism plays here as proof that ‘history is not unitary’. With regard to Braque, Einstein would write the same: ‘The picture is “primitivised”, but that is unavoidable’ – a precise way of saying that it is insufficient. Certainly Braque abandons himself to some ‘regressions to primitivism’ and ‘violent hallucinatory states’, but he does it not to abandon himself therein: he constructs, he recomposes an absolutely new space-time, and Carl Einstein therefore specifies that we must speak of these primitivisms ‘in order to underline the complete independence of Braque in this respect.’

With Miró too, Einstein writes, ‘the end rejoins the beginning’; but this ‘prehistoric simplicity’ has nothing to do with a return to the caves or noble savages; on the contrary, it assumes the high dialectical function of collapsing the ‘anecdotal acrobatics’ of bourgeois art, and above all consummating the ‘defeat of virtuosity’ – for, according to Einstein, this is how to begin to be modern. André Masson’s ‘ecstatic procedures’ or ‘mythic reactions’ do not attend a nostalgic return to shamanic or mystical practices. In actuality they are deployed as dialectical triggers for a virulent anti-humanism that seeks to generate a decidedly atheological ‘eclipsed ego’. Finally, for Arp, the ‘rites of a prehistoric childhood’ are only mimed to produce, on the one hand, a ‘traumatic accentuation’ of forms – a perfectly modern necessity in the age of aesthetic politeness and the judgement of taste –, and on the other hand, that humour which makes of the ‘primitive’ an alibi, that is to say an uninterrupted strategy of displacement, which strips archaism of any sense of security or the homely:
In his works Arp repeats the rites of a prehistoric childhood. [...] Arp cooks, cuts up, carves out: necks bound with a tender tie; birds fighting in an egg; doll and moustache, etc. According to negro beliefs, a part signifies as much as if not more than the whole; since a more far-reaching condition is concentrated in the fragment, without which the magic forces would be dispersed in the accessories. This is an ecstatic isolation. By decapitation and dismemberment, one isolates that which is decisive: concentrated possession and sadism.

Thus children demolish their dolls, cars and horses, hide an ear under the pillow, with a lock of hair, a ribbon and a horse’s leg, or sleep, desiring an oracle, on the hemp entrails of a monkey that they exorcise and conjure nightly.

A virile and vain moustache (traumatic memory of the era of Wilhelm II) wraps itself concupiscently around a woman’s torso. Leaves cover navels which are sometimes eyes. A bird’s egg is aureola and mother simultaneously and the latter is broken by a schizophrenic kick. The detail is worth as much as the whole; it is even more intense and sharp: it is a traumatic accentuation. [...] 

Every theme provokes its contrary and slides insensibly towards it. Thus pictures decompose themselves psychically beyond form. In the opposite case, what boredom! It is true that before such a dialectic one often seeks refuge in the infantile primitives, but these efforts are in vain. All the forms are ambiguous, allowing the romantic to take from them a multiple humour. 78

As opposed to these more or less explicitly corrosive dialectics, we should recall that Einstein perceived in a certain surrealist practice that ‘avant-garde of the salon’ which he analyses, in a text on collage, along two complementary lines of attack: on the one hand, the collage-pun seems to him to forego cubism’s processual violences, which find themselves henceforth ‘recuperated’ in a self-satisfied iconographism of the subconscious; on the other hand, the psychoanalytic vogue seems to him to give up the anthropological violence of the Freudian project, which is similarly ‘recuperated’ in a new capitalisation of the Ego – an analysis which I think would require little adjustment to apply to a good portion of today’s contemporary art scene:

There was a time when papiers collés played the destructive role of acids. That time’s long gone! Back then an attempt was made to break with a cocksure craft full to bursting with confident artifice. [...] At that moment collages were but a means of defence against the fortunes of virtuosity. It is only today that they have degenerated into facile puns, that they are threatened with lapsing into the trumpery of a petit-bourgeois decor. [...] [A]ll the same this Dalí seems to me to be a virtuoso only in post-card forget-me-nots that he
employs as a collective base. Consciously the most facile language is chosen; Dalí puts academic media to work, which have the effect of exhausted paradoxes. [...] There are some gentlemen who believe it possible to protest seriously against one logic – a means of oppression – with another logic, or against some pictures with other pictures. This is only a substitution of fetishes. It is certain that precious and individual writing, the medium of charming bastards, was combated with the help of collages, as was that threadbare Pantaloon, the old Ego! [...] But the Ego reappears when the action dies down: it is the lifebelt amid the memories of continuity. The Ego is equivalent to a psychical capitalisation, a trust fund of sorts.

Aragon tells us of the black magic we encounter everywhere, as common as the Laughing Cow [...], a minor scandal that causes neither the rubber dolls of reader nor spectator to rise up; rather, they are enchanted by this devilish pompier-ism.

I’m surprised that music-halls aren’t yet offering psychoanalytic playbills. Things haven’t got vulgar enough.79

Make no mistake: these virulent ad hominem critiques, these case-by-case analyses, are something quite other than witty journalesque or simple judgements of taste. Their very virulence is articulated for a precise, elaborated, dialectical theoretical purpose. They aim to construct a new conception of the image-time relation, which is another way of saying that they trace the contours – or rather the streaks – of that flash of the image which Benjamin, contemporaneous with Einstein, isolated in the notion of the dialectical image.80

**Form as dialectic and destiny:** ‘Seeing means setting still-invisible reality in motion’

What temporal concretion do we form when we are engaged in the act of looking, in visual experience? Of which temporal concretion does the image at that moment make us a gift? Firstly, a very strange kind of present: this is not the present of ‘presence’ – if by that one means the presence of classical metaphysics rightly called into question by Derrida – but the present of presentation, which imposes itself before us with greater sovereignty than representational recognition itself (thus, when we confront Picasso’s Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, it is not Ambroise Vollard who is primarily ‘present’, but a pictorial space so specific that it reproblematises the whole question of anthropomorphic representation). Now, to speak of presentation – as one speaks of formation – is to speak of process, and not stasis. In this process, memory crystallises visually (for example in the history of the portrait genre until Picasso overthrew it) and, in crystallising, it diffracts, sets itself in motion, in short in protension: it accompanies the process and, so doing, produces the future contained in the continuation of the process (for example, after Picasso we are obliged to modify what we expect from all anthropomorphic representation). In visual experience envisaged in this way, there is therefore a
A crystal of time which simultaneously engages every dimension of what Benjamin termed ‘dialectic at a standstill’ – ‘that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation’.82

Carl Einstein’s vocabulary is hardly any different. In his Georges Braque one reads that the historical and ontological condition of man ‘oscillates between creation and adaptation, mortal temerity and security’; two lines later, the image already reveals its condition as a temporal crystal: in it, writes Einstein, history ‘spouts from the living present to flow back towards the vanished past. It scintillates like a simple projection of the present moment. The selection and appreciation of lost times [a fundamental problem of the discipline of history] are determined and formed by the structure and power of the present. It cannot, therefore, be a question of singular, objective history; on the contrary, all historical crystallisation is a perspective constructed along the sightline of the present’.83

Thus art history as a discipline should itself oscillate and scintillate, if it does not wish to lose sight of the temporal complexity of artworks. This complexity is constituted primarily by destructive and agonistic processes which make ‘a genuine combat’ of all visual experience, inasmuch as every form is the concerted assassination of other forms, and also inasmuch as, by its force-field, ‘the action of the artwork consists in the destruction of the beholder’ – at least the destruction of his prior ‘points of view’.84 On the other hand, the experience Einstein is addressing supposes a register of regressive processes which justify the role of ‘primitivism’ – or, in a more general sense, anachronism – as a dialectical pivot in formal invention, in novelty itself. This requires that ‘regression’ be on the side of the constructive processes of form,85 processes no longer defined as ‘progressivist’ or linked to some metaphysic of creation, but henceforth understood as dialectical, that is to say transformative. Thus Einstein’s defence of ‘realism’ ought not to be conceived as an engagement with a certain style of representation, but as the defence of a certain type of metamorphic process capable, as he often put it, of ‘creating the real’:

The fundamental error of classical realism seems to reside in the fact that it identified vision with perception, that is to say that it denied it its essential force of metamorphic creation. This positivist attitude narrowed the creative range of vision, just as it diminished the extent of the real. It was a pre-established taboo and vision was limited to passive observation. Now, this positivist conception only embraced a minimum of reality: the visionary world was beyond it, and the secret structures of processes appeared unimportant to it. All perception is only a psychical fragment. But against this tendency of patient adaptation is opposed the passion for annihilating conventional reality, the frenzy for expanding the real. […] True realism seeks to speak not of imitation, but creation of objects. […] A burgeoning reality will displace the old, rigid reality. Reality no longer signifies tautological repetition.86
Ultimately, a very simple – yet demanding – conclusion imposes itself on the present: to see only signifies to perceive in the field of trivial experiences, or rather the field of trivial conceptions of experience. If we want to perform vision (in artistic activity), if we want to think vision (in critical activity), then we ought to demand much more: we should require vision to assassinate perception, if we mean by that word what Einstein means here – a ‘passive observation’ of ‘tautological reality’. We should demand that vision enlarges perception, opening it literally ‘as one opens a box’, according to the expression already cited with regard to cubist space. But, to reiterate, we must understand this opening temporally: to open vision means paying attention – an attention which is not self-evident, which requires mental labour, permanent reinterrogation, constantly renewed problematisation – to the anticipatory processes of the image. These are probably, in Einstein’s eyes, the most fundamental, the most ethically and epistemologically necessary processes of every authentic image. To reiterate, they signal the particular importance of cubism in the culture – in the vision – of the twentieth century:

Then came the lightning-flash of cubism. At last it happened that some men wanted something other than to be limited to painting and confirming an aged world. [...] Without doubt these painters were scarcely aware of the transformation which was taking place in other domains. But what matters is that these men, possessed by a future reality, saw themselves reflected in their work. [...] It had been forgotten that space was only a labile intersection between man and the universe. Now, vision only has human meaning if it activates the universe and casts its turmoil therein. Visual divination is equivalent to action, and seeing means setting still-invisible reality in motion. [...] Art has too often been considered an attempt to organise the given image of the universe; for our part, art represents above all a medium that permits rendering visible the poetic, augmenting the mass of figures and the disorder of the concrete, and consequently increasing non-sense and the inexplicable in existence. It is precisely in destroying the continuity of becoming that we acquire a slight chance of freedom. In a word, we underline the value of that which is not yet visible, of that which is not yet known.87

Einstein speaks to us here of a vision which is not a faculty, but exigency, work: it rejects the visible (that is to say the already visible) and demands the oscillation of the visual; it rejects the action of the voyeur and demands that of the seer. This is the ultimate mode of comprehending the symptom-image: what is a symptom, in effect, if not the unexpected, unfamiliar sign, often intense and always disruptive, which visually declares something which is not yet visible,
something we do not yet know? If the image is a symptom – in the critical rather than the clinical sense of the term –, if the image is a discontent in representation, it is in that it indicates a future of representation, a future that we know not yet how to read, nor even describe. In this sense the notion of the image reconnects with an ‘ancient prophetic power’ which liberates the ‘future real’ in the ‘dissolution of conventional reality’. But it is only an image – wherein lies its fragility, its gratuitousness, yet also its pure effect of disinterested truth: in this sense it can avoid the dogmatism of religious or ideological types of prophecy. The image is a potential future, but it is not messianic. It is only, says Einstein, a ‘hallucinatory interval’: it ‘irrationalises the world’, realises only what it ‘urges’, and that is why Einstein wished, in these very lines, to set himself apart from all sociologism (the image as ‘cultural symptom’, as it was apprehended by Panofsky, and still is today) as he did from all Marxist ‘prediction’. To be sure imagery – iconography – delivers messages, so-called ‘signs of the times’. But the image scrambles the messages, delivers symptoms, delivers us over to the still-elusive. Because it is dialectical and inventive; because it opens time.

So what is it that opens and announces itself in this augural aspect of the image? Action no more than knowledge, to be sure: cubism neither motivates nor translates the Russian Revolution or the theory of general relativity. For Carl Einstein, what opens itself in the image, what the image takes its power of ‘being not yet visible’ from, proceeds from an intermediate zone between dream and waking – according to a new analogy with the category of ‘reawakening’ used by Walter Benjamin to describe the dialectical image. Therefore, what is opened in this ‘reawakening’ of the image remains in the order of a non-knowledge: the symptom-image is above all a destiny-image, in the metapsychological sense of the term. For Einstein it hovers at the edge between a repression and its lifting; it is a transition, a pivot of transformations. As in the case of Bataille, it should be thought through the sovereignty and potential exuberance – for knowledge [connaissance] as for action – of non-knowledge [non-savoir]. It thus requires that its unconscious dynamism be formulated beyond the trivial models of solely temporal retrogression: because it is a dialectical image, it must relentlessly combine ‘regression’ and ‘progression’, ‘survival’ and ‘novelty’.

At this level Einstein’s great epistemological bravery consists in implicating the discourse of art history itself in the very fragile force of the augural ‘reawakening’. What use is art history? Not a lot, if it contents itself with neatly classifying objects that are already known, already recognised. Plenty, if it manages to pose non-knowledge at the centre of its problematic and to make of this problematic the anticipation, the opening of a new knowledge, a new form of knowing, if not of action. Therein lies the greatness of Carl Einstein in the history of the discipline: he was not better than others at classifying or interpreting objects already integrated into the corpus of history; he invented objects, and in so doing anticipated new forms of knowing about art – and not only African and twentieth-century art.
This courage, this risk certainly involve a trade-off: the unrealised, unfinished, multifocal, even shattered – in the manner of a broken montage – character of his adventure in knowledge.\(^93\) ‘I am not speaking in a systematic fashion’, Einstein wrote to his friend Kahnweiler in 1923.\(^94\) An admission of fragility, but also a claim, against any spirit of system, of a certain relation between concept and image: to grasp the image with the aid of the concept (an axiomatic attitude) is to understand half of the image at best – and the half that is most dead. What Einstein demanded from art history was rather to make the image play or ‘work’ (a heuristic attitude) in preparation for unsuspected concepts, unprecedented logics. He had already written as much in 1912, in the angles of broken writing that diffract his novel Bébuquin:

And what if logic ever abandoned us? But at what point does it intervene? We know neither one nor the other. There’s the crux, dear boy. […] He told himself that logic was as bad as those painters who represent virtue as a blonde woman. […] [A] hall of deforming mirrors is more conducive to meditation than the propositions of fifteen professors. […] Don’t let yourself be fooled by those incompetent philosophers, who only blather incessantly about unity, relations between parts and their combinations, of which they would make a whole. […] Remember this. [Kant’s] seductive importance lies in having established the balance between the object and the subject. But he forgot one essential element: namely, what the subject does when it is working […]. This is the crux and the reason why German idealism has been able to exaggerate the role of Kant to such an extent. Non-creators are always exhausted by the impossible.\(^95\)

This, therefore, is the task Carl Einstein assigned the art historian: not to be exhausted, not to shirk the impossible, not to forget to create new forms of knowledge in contact with new forms of art. To be bound to the impossible and to make this link a demand of thought, even of method, that is to say a demand of \textit{gaya scienza}. Bataille is known for using similar language. But the double aspect of this challenge – a challenge to knowledge and action – finds particular expression in Einstein’s case. Already in \textit{Bébuquin} its hero was saying: ‘The concept wishes to go towards things and I, I want exactly the opposite. You know now that my telos should be considered almost tragic.’\(^96\) Einstein’s plainly was, insofar as he never renounced the demand, nor the impossible.

When he wrote to Kahnweiler that ‘I am not speaking in a systematic fashion’, Einstein at once specified: ‘Simply because I cannot give myself the luxury of thinking about such [exclusively theoretical] things, in the middle of all this continuously unfolding daily catastrophe.’\(^97\) That is to say, the catastrophe of history, history with a big H: of which the historians are victims like all the others. But the historian-victims of History – like Carl Einstein, Walter Benjamin, Marc Bloch – are peculiar in knowing a little more keenly what they are the victims of. A knowledge
which offered so little reassurance that Carl Einstein killed himself in 1940 – as would Benjamin soon after – to escape the catastrophe closing in on him.98

Three years beforehand, without even telling his numerous literary and artistic acquaintances, Einstein had tried to counteract the catastrophe by enlisting with the anarcho-syndicalists in the Spanish civil war.99 The letters he addressed to Kahnweiler during this period are at once harrowing and possessed of an absolute theoretical rigour, in relationship, it seems to me, with his art-historical project. ‘History of art is the struggle between every experience’? Well, there it is: on the one hand there is the experience of those who placidly await the death of an art to make of it a corpus (from which we get the word corpse), and later history.100 On the other hand, let’s say there is the avant-garde. Not the ‘psychical capitalisation’, the ‘trust fund’ of which Einstein accused the surrealist-Spanish-royalist Salvador Dalí,101 but the true avant-garde, which bares its chest before the enemy; that is to say, here, the art historian Carl Einstein, who risked his own life, risked being a corpus himself, a cadaver.102 Why should an art-historian take such a risk? Among other things, so that the object of his knowledge – art itself – remain living and free to invent its forms. In autumn 1938, Einstein wrote to Kahnweiler: ‘Send small packets of tobacco that don’t weigh too much. Some tobacco, some tobacco...’ Just before, and this is in the midst of war, he asked with love (and here is another of his great history lessons, which mind one of Marc Bloch): ‘Picasso and Braque, how are they working? Collect some photos or reproductions for me.’103

‘History of art is the struggle...’ – Einstein’s expression, the opening words of the 1929 ‘Methodological Aphorisms’, therefore took on a new and radical significance in 1938: a Jewish German art historian struggling in Spain in order that epistemological courage found its real ethical and political dimension. A Jewish German art historian fighting in Spain – without any proselytising, without seeking to manufacture disciples for a method he knew clung to the impossible – so that Picasso might continue to ‘decompose’ reality; that is to say, to paint Guernica.104

1 [Translator’s note: This is a translation of “‘Tableau=coupure”: Expérience visuelle, forme et symptôme selon Carl Einstein’, Cahiers du Musée national d’art moderne 58, Winter 1996, 5-27, which was subsequently incorporated into Georges Didi-Huberman, Devant le temps: histoire de l’art et anachronisme des images, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2000.]


3 He is however not mentioned as such by Denis Hollier in his preface to the reprint of Documents. See Denis Hollier, ‘La valeur d’usage de l’impossible’, Documents, Jean-Michel


6 I owe this information, concerning Carl Einstein’s unpublished texts, to the kindness of Liliane Meffre.


8 'One might speak of a poetic technique – technique not in the classical sense of a canon or rule of construction, but comparable to mystical techniques (what Carl Einstein calls the ‘training’ of ecstasy). [...] Spent the evening at Einstein’s, who talked about someone called Puech from whom he’s awaiting some articles on Gnosticism and Manicheanism. [...] At the base of all evasion is found not a desire for purity, but fear; and even when one truly believes in loving purity, it is because being other-worldly [intemporelle] is not more noble, but only 'intemporal' in the strict sense of the word, that is to say not subject to time and death. All that’s just religious cowardice (as [Carl] Einstein says). [...] Bataille, Babelon, Einstein: proofs of their articles for *Documents* no. 2. [...] Dined yesterday at Einstein’s with Zette and the Batailles.' Michel Leiris, *Journal 1922-1989*, ed. J. Jamin, Gallimard, Paris, 1992, 137, 154, 164, 167, 202; see also 139-40, 161. The limited time-period (May-September 1929) of these references might suggest, if one recalls Bataille’s solitary note and general silence, the hypothesis of a tension between Carl Einstein and his young collaborators at that time. This does not at all discount the circulation of a common type of aesthetic critique.


10 Carl Einstein, *Georges Braque*, trans. E. Zipruth, Les Chroniques du Jour, Paris, 1934, 12, where a note indicates that the text was written in 1931-1932. In his lifetime Einstein only knew the French edition, which moreover constitutes his last published work.

11 '[...] we demand that man possesses form and violence at the same time, [...] of which the work contains and creates the operative facts [faits opérants].' Carl Einstein, *Politische Anmerkungen* (1912), cited in Meffre, *Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes*, 33.

12 'Every destruction of the object is justified.' Ibid., 41.

13 '[...] the old game of dialectical dualism, which is perhaps only the sign of a lazy taste for symmetry [...].’ See Carl Einstein, ‘Léger: oeuvres récentes’, *Documents* 1, no. 4 (1929), 191-195, 191.

14 Carl Einstein, 'L’enfance néolithique', *Documents* 2, no. 8 (1930), 475-483, 479, 483.


19 Ibid., 202-204; 154-155. Author’s italics.

20 On Einstein’s conception of cubism see Heidemarie Oehm, Die Kunsttheorie Carl Einsteins, Fink, Munich, 1976, 70-86; Meffre, Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes, 37-65.

21 ‘The fundamental tectonic forms are none other than the forms of the human body, which accounts for our taking them as the measure of all things. The human body, standard of all things, contains in itself all the elements. The head is a ball, the legs cylindrical columns, the torso a cube, etc. We grasp objects and nature because they are constructed with human forms and tectonic art is only a setting into conformity of the external world with these fundamental elements that come from man.’ Carl Einstein, ‘Juan Gris: texte inédit’, Documents 1, no. 5 (1930), 267-268, 268.

22 ‘If I may be permitted a comparison: a stone thrown into water produces movements of concentric waves. These waves, stopped by the banks, are sent back to the central point and penetrate each other to lose themselves anew in the direction of the banks. Such is the kind of mysterious play enacted by forms concatenated [enchaînées] among themselves.’ Carl Einstein, ‘Exposition Juan Gris (Berlin, galerie Flechtheim)’, Documents 2, no. 4, 243.

23 Carl Einstein, ‘L’exposition de l’art abstrait à Zurich’, Documents 1, no. 6 (1929), 342; ‘L’enfance néolithique’, 482. See also Meffre, Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes, 31, which cites this unpublished note: ‘Gestaltpychologie – the most simple elements, thus impoverishment and exclusion of psychical complexity [psychisme complexe].’

24 Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 28. See also 101.


26 Carl Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme’, 155.

27 Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 57.

28 Ibid., 59-60, 69.

29 Ibid., 82.

30 Ibid., 61, 70.


33 Carl Einstein, ‘Aphorismes méthodiques’, 33, 34.

34 Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 25.

35 Ibid., 25, 71.

36 Ibid., 17.

37 Ibid., 25.

38 Ibid., 26.
Ibid., 15, 21, etc.

Ibid., 73.

Ibid., 19.


Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 58.

Ibid., 43-44.

Ibid., 14.

Ibid., 13, 45-46, 54, 65, 107-110.

Ibid., 48.

Ibid., 61-63.

i.e., 'quand la couleur est à sa richesse, la forme est à sa plénitude.' See M. Doran, ed., Conversations avec Cézanne, Macula, Paris, 1978, 36.

Carl Einstein and D.-H. Kahnweiler, Correspondance, 48 (June 1923).


Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 47. Author’s italics.

Carl Einstein, 'Notes sur le cubisme', 154.

Ibid., 147.

Carl Einstein, Georges Braque, 22, 64.


See L. Meffre, Carl Einstein et la problématique des avant-gardes, 77-82.


64 Ibid., 94-152 (on the specific problem of spatial sensations).


66 In 1866 Mach wrote: ‘Ideas are not formed suddenly, they need time to develop, like all natural beings... Slowly, progressively and with difficulty, one conception is transformed into another, just as it is probable that one animal species continues into new species.’ Quoted in Paul-Laurent Assoun, ‘Robert Musil lecteur d’Ernst Mach’, preface to Robert Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach* (1908), trans. M.-F. Demet, PUF, Paris, 1985, 28 (note).

67 Mach, *L’Analyse des sensations*, 161-172. On the philosophical influence of this work see J.-M. Monnoyer’s ‘Introduction’ in ibid., I-XXXI.


71 Musil, *Pour une évaluation des doctrines de Mach*, 49-170.


73 Einstein, ‘Notes sur le cubisme’, 152.

74 Einstein, *Georges Braque*, 76.

75 Ibid., 28-29, 128. Einstein proposes an analogy – borrowed from Riegl – with the Byzantine art whose ‘independence’ even implicates ‘a new primitivism’. Ibid., 27.

76 Carl Einstein, ‘Joan Miró (papiers collés à la galerie Pierre)’, *Documents* 2, no. 4 (1930), 243.


79 Einstein, ‘Exposition de collages (galerie Goemans)’, 244.

80 It goes without saying that this theoretical convergence between Benjamin and Einstein deserves more in-depth and nuanced study. It is also necessary to reconstitute historically, even biographically, the strange knot of relations and non-relations between these two thinkers of such parallel destinies. To my knowledge, the current status of archival publication does not yet permit this. [On this point see Sebastian Zeidler’s article in this issue of the *Papers of Surrealism*. Tr.]


84 Ibid., 53.
85 'In speaking above of archaism, we mean to designate by that word not formal regressions, but the return, under obviously different signs, of determinate psychical dispositions.' Ibid., 117. Author’s italics.

86 Ibid., 71-72.

87 Ibid., 66-67, 113-114.

88 Ibid., 31-33.


90 Einstein, Georges Braque, 33.

91 Ibid., 111. See Benjamin, The Arcades Project, C. 479. I have discussed this dialectic of the dream, awakening and reawakening in Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde, Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1992, 144-152.

92 ‘Let us briefly attend to the fact that by his definition of the Unconscious, Freud proves to have seen in the latter primarily a constant formed by the mass of repressions, that is to say a rather negative element. On the contrary we believe that it is precisely in the Unconscious that the chance of the New resides; that it reforms itself ceaselessly and that it can be considered a progressive factor. It is the powerful activation of the Unconscious during vision, as well as during the figurative labour [accouchement], which seems to us precisely to confer on artworks that inexplicable something, vision remaining, in the final analysis, a mysterious element.’ Einstein, Georges Braque, 118.


94 Einstein and Kahnweiler, Correspondance, 52 (June 1923).


96 Ibid., 28.

97 Einstein and Kahnweiler, Correspondance, 52 (June 1923).

98 For the story of this suicide see Malraux, Le Bruit de nos pas, 62-63.

99 ‘When I left Paris without saying a word, I knew very well why. I understood at a moment when others were not seeing clearly what is being played out here. I left my contracts, a publishing house in the process of being set up, and quite a lot of things. And I am happy to have done so. I left when all that should have begun to go very well for me. My manuscripts are on hold; whatever. I left without taking leave, since I did not want to give explanations. Leaving words behind; quitting metaphors. For I was never a poetic pen-pusher [rond de cuir] and never will be.’ Einstein and Kahnweiler, Correspondance, 106-107 (January 1939)

100 On the double – metaphysical and positivist – aspect of this mortification, by the historian, of his or her object, see Didi-Huberman, Confronting the Image, 42-52.

101 Einstein, ‘Exposition de collages (galerie Goemans)’, 244.


103 Einstein and Kahnweiler, Correspondance, 100-101 (Autumn 1938).

104 Ibid., 109 and 113-115 (letter to Picasso, 6 January 1939).
L’Art mantique of Picasso, and Documents

Lisa Florman

Although Picasso had already been well represented in the pages of Documents, in the spring of 1930 an entire issue was given over in hommage to his work. No other artist, indeed no other individual – either before or subsequently – received as much of the journal’s critical attention.1 Clearly there were strategic impulses behind this editorial stance: throughout the previous decade, André Breton had repeatedly claimed Picasso for his own, restricted version of surrealism, and much of the job of Documents’ special hommage (as of the journal at large) seems to have been to disrupt Breton’s hegemonic vision. Thus in his essay for the Picasso issue, Georges Bataille, surrealism’s self-described ‘enemy from within,’ pointedly adopted the very same solar imagery that Breton had used to characterize the artist’s work in Surrealism and Painting.2 But whereas Breton had described Picasso’s cubism as a river of light, ‘high above the summit of any mountain,’ a vision of ‘perfect resolution, of ideal reduction,’3 Bataille insinuated that that view was itself reductive and idealistic and, as a result, naively blinkered:

If we describe the notion of the sun in the mind of one whose weak eyes compel him to emasculate it, the sun must be said to have the poetic meaning of mathematical serenity and spiritual elevation. If, on the other hand, one obstinately focuses on it, a certain madness is implied, and […] it is no longer production that appears in light, but refuse or combustion, adequately expressed by the horror emanating from a brilliant arc lamp.4

The move here is one familiar to readers of Documents: in the face of claims to ‘perfect resolution’ and self-identity, Bataille uncovers instead duality and irreconcilable contradiction. In his own essay for the Picasso issue, Carl Einstein, another of the journal’s founders, one-upped even Bataille. ‘The shadow,’ he wrote, perhaps specifically thinking of Bataille’s two suns, ‘is itself not a double, but one of numerous emanations from man that are dialectically contrary to him. It is an antagonist…no longer the reflection of the self but a sign of contradiction and metamorphosis.’5

There were certainly significant differences between the intellectual projects of Einstein and Bataille, just as there are between their respective essays on Picasso; yet the two men shared a disdain for all conceptions of subjectivity (Breton’s included) that were rooted in self-identity. If the Bretonian wing of surrealism repeatedly pointed out how in the modern world subjects were constantly self-divided, cleaved in two by rationalism’s repression of the unconscious and its drives, they nonetheless hoped that in drawing attention to that situation a reconciliation might be achieved. Documents’ dissident surrealists were pledged, on the contrary,
to thinking *through* such self-division. And they saw in Picasso’s art – in its multiplicity of styles, its seemingly irreducible heterogeneity – a concrete example of the processes of self-differentiation at work. ‘The different periods in Picasso’s painting,’ Léon Pierre-Quint wrote in his *hommage* to the artist, ‘correspond to the different obsessive ideas the external world has induced in him.’ Similarly Einstein, discussing ‘the diverse periods of Picasso’s admirable life,’ saw in that mutability ‘the aim of expressing things [that were] psychically inassimilable and [that had arisen] because one is constantly separated from one’s self.’ Other artists, in the general constancy of their ‘personal style,’ only reinforced the notion that subjective experience was a matter of identification. Their work implied that style, like the subject of whom it was an expression, was at bottom unitary, grounded in an unchanging core to which various ‘non-essential’ properties were attached. Even if those properties changed over time, the assumption was that the essential core remained unaffected, self-identical. One could speak, then, of stylistic change in terms of seamless ‘development’ – and so also of a subjective identity that was not so much transformed by experiences as it ‘had’ or ‘made’ them. Picasso’s work appeared to exemplify, by contrast, complete metamorphosis and dispossession, a self riven by opposing forces. As Einstein declared: ‘Picasso is continually separated from himself and lives in a state of permanent transformation.’

In his *Documents hommage*, Einstein went on to gloss this transformative self-separation as Picasso’s ‘mantic obsession’ [*obsession mantique*], thereby implying not only a recurrent *ekstasis* but also something quasi-prophetic. The ancient Greek word *mantike* (from which *mantique* derives) referred both to an ability to augur the future and to that *daimonic* voice of strangeness that spoke through the seer and rhapsode alike. *Mantike* was considered *divination*, and so to be divinely inspired, only to the extent that the future seemed otherwise wholly unpredictable. I take it that something of this sort is implicit in Einstein’s reference to Picasso’s ‘mantic’ art: his work was a revelation of the unexpected, and, in that sense, the radically *new*. But its appearance was not to be attributed to the artist’s *personal* genius; on the contrary, it was a matter of dispossession or Dionysian rapture, of the kind that Nietzsche heard in the lyric poetry of Archilochus. In reading Einstein’s essay, one is insistently reminded, too, of Nietzsche’s definition of myth as an utterance performing an ‘orgiastische Selbstvernichtung,’ an оргiastic loss of one’s self. For Einstein concluded his *hommage* with the claim that Picasso was creating ‘for our epoch prophetic cycles of myths, with the result that one can assign to this art a profound and historic sense: that of a return to divination and mythology.’

To be sure, we can also hear in Einstein’s reference to mythology an echo of the various invocations of myth in ‘Soleil pourri,’ Bataille’s contribution to *Documents’ Hommage à Picasso*. There Bataille, following his antithetical descriptions of the sun, had observed that ‘[i]n mythology the scrutinized sun is identified with a man who slays a bull (Mithra), with a vulture that eats a liver (Prometheus); and, after a gruesome account of Mithraic sacrifice, he concluded the essay...
with the assertion that, like the slain bull, Picasso’s art was to be associated with the blinding sun.\textsuperscript{12}

Elsewhere I have argued the pertinence of Bataille’s ‘Soleil pourri’ – in fact, of many of his essays for Documents – to Picasso’s art of the 1930s.\textsuperscript{13} The minotaurs and blind minotaurs that inhabit the Vollard Suite, as well as the Minotaumachy etching of 1935, are inextricably caught up in the Bataillean labyrinth of thought. In turn, those works’ imbrication with mythology, sacrifice, and self-annihilation make Bataille’s ‘Soleil pourri’ read as one of the most effective pieces of Picasso criticism from the interwar period. Here, in the relatively brief time and space available to me for this paper, I would like to make a similar claim for what I consider the other great essay in Documents’ special Hommage à Picasso. Like ‘Soleil pourri,’ Einstein’s contribution offers brilliant insights into Picasso’s work – but, again, principally into the Vollard Suite and Minotaumachy, which is to say, into work actually done several years after the essay was written. In that sense, one might feel, there was something of the mantic not only in Picasso’s images but in the pages of Documents as well.

* * *

As Sebastian Zeidler persuasively argues in his own contribution to this issue of Papers of Surrealism, in order to appreciate Einstein’s art criticism of the period, it is necessary to understand at least something of his larger philosophy of being.\textsuperscript{14} To get a handle, in turn, on that philosophy, it will no doubt be useful for us, too, to avail ourselves of the ‘heuristic fiction’ so well narrated by Zeidler. According to that Einsteinian fiction, the world is comprised of two distinct, if closely related, levels:

On the first level, there is the world in its immanence: a network of forces modelled on Nietzsche’s Will to Power, Ernst Mach’s fabric of functions, and the scintillating kaleidoscopic becoming described in the work of Bergson; an immanence that is inhabited not by conscious, rational subjects and their re-presentations of the real [Einstein’s term for \textit{being}], but rather by pre- or non-rational subjectivities and their functional interactions with the real. On the second level, there are the conscious efforts made by humans at relating to this real, at locating themselves within it, and at rendering sensible such locating by means of human-made objects called, for example, works of art or of philosophy.\textsuperscript{15}

In his essay for Documents’ special hommage, Einstein implies that Picasso’s ‘hallucinations’ – the forms that he ‘mantically’ or ‘psychographically’ generates – are drawn more or less directly from the field of immanence, as actualizations of the real. And it is because of
Picasso’s ability to do this – owing, that is, to the ‘intensity of his mantic obsession’ – that he avoids conventionality and manages to evade the stultifying and pervasive ‘mechanical normalization of experience,’ which is to say, the constant denial of the real toward which modern subjects otherwise gravitate. Interestingly, in an earlier essay for Documents on André Masson, Einstein had made very similar claims for Masson’s automatic drawings (which Einstein referred to as ‘psychograms’). The evident mobility of Masson’s line, and the concomitant emphasis on a processual becoming, seemed to him to render visible the fully Dionysian nature of being, unchecked by any rationalist censorship. There is ‘no congruity,’ Einstein wrote, between

…the flow of ideas of the consciousness and the succession of [Masson’s] hallucinatory signs. We see a division between the spontaneous and causality […]. We continue to appreciate causality and consciousness as excellent instruments but we see them as obstacles to spontaneous processes. The rationalist, for his part, finds chaos in all psychological processes. But it is precisely in this incongruity between the hallucinatory and the structure of objects that one tiny chance for freedom lies: in the possibility of changing the order of things. Mechanism, which has become a veritable object of worship, is cast aside and mnemotechnic repetitions are suspended. The flow of psychologically direct signs is maintained as far as possible.16

If much of this argument is repeated in his hommage to Picasso, suggesting an implicit analogy between Masson’s automatic drawing and the ‘mantic’ genesis of Picasso’s forms, Einstein nonetheless seems to have changed his mind in one important respect during the year that intervened between the writing of the two essays. In the Picasso tribute, he states the matter bluntly: ‘The passive psychograms of intuition are no longer sufficient.’17 Rather, he argues, Picasso’s art is exceptional because it neither takes refuge in conventionality – indeed, it is said to continually shatter convention, to shake up the order of things – yet nor does it wholly capitulate (as presumably Masson’s work did) to the ‘hallucinations’ of the real:

[Picasso] compensates for his fanatical abandon to the visions that impose themselves on him – in other words, to his passivity before the obsession – by the construction of forms. To the fatality of the unconscious, he opposes a prodigious power of clearly intelligible figuration.18

‘To the fatality of the unconscious’: all of Einstein’s language up to this point had associated death exclusively with reified convention and static ‘tectonic’ form. These latter, he claimed, were impediments to any recognition of the vital flux and perpetual becoming of the real. In his ‘Picasso’ essay for Documents, Einstein substantially complicated that argument by
suggesting that the ‘unconscious’ – i.e., the stream of ‘hallucinations,’ in contact with the real, which provoked both the Massonian ‘psychogram’ and Picasso’s continual transformations – was itself possessed of a fatal power. Elsewhere Einstein would refer to that power as the *Weltzwang*, the ‘equally deadly and vital compulsion of the world,’ and he would do so with an ambivalence recalling Bataille’s *soleil pourri*. Zeidler, once again, has summarized the argument admirably:

If the stern formal order of the tectonic is a resentful – a violent but merely defensive – reaction against the onrush of the real by a human subject seeking to preserve its false integrity, then the psychogram stands for the moment in which that subject [...] retreats from reaction to passivity, and, overpowered by the flow of intensity, dissolves into it, as in the formless tangle of the psycographic record.

So it is that, hypostatised in isolation, both the tectonic and the psychogram must end in death: the death of the real in one case, the death of the subject, *who is yet part of the real*, in the other.19

Both in his ‘Picasso’ essay for *Documents* and in the section on that artist in the 1931 edition of *Art of the Twentieth Century*, Einstein singled out the Spaniard’s work as exemplary – perhaps even unique – in its ability to bring into conjunction the tectonic and the psychographic. The latter text cast the argument in explicitly Nietzschean terms: ‘Dionysian rapture’ complementing ‘the Apollonian state of meditative purification.’20 In the *Documents* essay, we read only of an ‘interior dialectic,’ of images ‘suspended between two psychological poles’:

It must be said: With Picasso, things and forms have a psychographic (mantic) genesis. But Picasso reinforces them in compensating for the isolation of the subject by tectonic construction and analogies.21

* * *

The principal frustration in reading the ‘Picasso’ essay – or any of Einstein’s criticism, for that matter – is that he rigorously avoided discussing specific works. Wary of the de-realizing figurality of language, especially in relation to art and other material objects, he allowed only a few photographs to accompany his texts, and even these he refused to reference.22 The burden of establishing any relation between his writings and particular works falls, as a result, entirely on the reader. Of course, there may be a sense in which looking for particular works, at least in conjunction with Einstein’s writings on Picasso, is somewhat misguided. As I suggested earlier, much of what Einstein and others seem to have admired in Picasso’s oeuvre was its apparently
irreducible heterogeneity, the way it made visible, from one painting to the next, the processes of continual transformation. It might be, then, that we want to see the ‘two psychological poles’ described by Einstein as, in effect, inhabiting different planes – let’s call them the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. In that case, the hardened forms of Picasso’s art of the late 1920s – that whole parade of ossified beings and personnages sculpturaux – might in fact appear, in their evident immutability, to be the ‘tectonic’ complement to the constant, ‘mantic’ metamorphosis played out in the images’ succession.

Yet there are certainly passages within Einstein’s text that suggest the existence of individual works exhibiting both the ‘tectonic’ and the ‘psychographic.’ As usual, though, the passages in question are devoid of references to particular paintings; and if we attempt to identify some for ourselves, few if any – even among those personally selected by Einstein to accompany his writings – really fit the bill. In ‘Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso,’ Zeidler claims that there is at least one painting by the artist from the late 1920s – The Milliner’s Workshop, now in the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Paris – to which Einstein’s analysis seems wholly adequate. The argument is compelling. And still we may feel a bit disappointed by the results. Does it – and should it – matter to us that Einstein’s criticism, for all its intellectual interest and nuance, is able to gain a purchase on only a single work of the period (and even then, apparently, one Einstein himself didn’t have in mind)? Would it have mattered to Picasso?

My own sense is that, at some level, it did matter to the artist; Einstein’s criticism did make a difference to his work. Indeed, as I suggested earlier, whatever its shortcomings in regard to Picasso’s art of the 1920s, Einstein’s text seems uncannily – or, better, mantically – appropriate to several ambitious works of the 1930s, above all the Vollard Suite and Minotaumachy. Obviously, there’s a danger of lapsing into causal or deterministic explanations here – a danger that would be lethal to any appreciation of the ‘hallucinatory’ aspects of Picasso’s art, in that, according to Einstein, the principal effect of such hallucinations is to ‘introduce blocs of “a-causality”’ into our understanding of the world. Rather than speaking in terms of ‘causes,’ then, we might want to imagine the relation of Einstein’s criticism to Picasso’s prints on a Bergsonian (or Deleuzian) model of recollection and memory. As one commentator succinctly explains:

In memory the past exists virtually as a collection of past instants or percepts in a state of ‘relaxation,’ i.e., in a condition in which these percepts are not organized in any particular way with relation to each other. They exist as a dissociated set of singularities [...]. Recollection is a process of actualizing this virtuality, of differentially repeating the percepts along a particular series, [...] a way of bringing the past to bear on the present. Moreover, we should note that for Deleuze this actualization of recollection is not intentional; it arises at the intersection of the demands of the present situation and the
virtual structure of the past. Even when we intentionally dredge up a memory we do not have control over the way in which the various elements are actualized.  

In light of this model it seems important to insist that, if Einstein’s criticism did help to shape Picasso’s work of the 1930s, it was only one element among a myriad of other, virtual ones inhabiting the field of immanence out of which those works arose. If his criticism was nonetheless not the least ‘influential’ of those elements – if, on the contrary, it seems to stand today in some sort of explanatory relation to Picasso’s prints – it is presumably because it also had multiple points of contact with several of the other (retrospectively important) elements actualized in the prints’ making. One might offer a similar argument for Bataille’s writings; indeed it could be said that those writings’ numerous points of tangency to Einstein’s aided in the prints’ ‘recollection’ of them both. One might, then, also be tempted to say that it is in just this sort of recollection that the two separate connotations of mantic – the ecstatic and the prophetic – are themselves brought into closest conjunction.

Let’s consider first the Vollard Suite. Produced over the course of many years (roughly from 1930 to 1939), and comprising some 100 separate prints, the Suite must be counted not only among Picasso’s most ambitious works but also as his most explicitly heterogeneous. In some ways we might see it as equivalent in that heterogeneity to his entire corpus of paintings from the 1920s, but now condensed into a ‘single’ work so as to force into the open questions of diversity and coherence. The Suite presents us with a multiplicity of techniques (etching, drypoint, aquatint) and an even greater range of subjects and styles – so great, in fact, that for a time the Suite’s status as a suite went largely unacknowledged. At issue, of course, was the lack of any theme or element common to all of the plates that would enable them to be seen as constituting a unified whole. In my earlier study of Picasso’s prints, I argued that, despite the fact that it had no unifying idea or theme – and so no single concept under which the whole might be thought – the Vollard Suite nonetheless constituted a cohesive group of images. Each of the plates, that is, can be tied to at least one other on the basis of shared characteristics, with the result that the entire Suite might be seen as comprising a vast, complex and irregular network of diversely interrelated images. In the earlier study I invoked Wittgenstein’s notion of ‘family resemblances’ – ‘for the various resemblances [among] the members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way.’ In the present context, however, it might be better to say that the Suite is a ‘totality,’ in the very specific sense given that term by Einstein: ‘For a totality exists only insofar as it is “concrete” – insofar as it resists being
subsumed under a concept – and only insofar as it is differential – insofar as it resists being conceived as an identity in the subject’s own image.26

In my previous study I also suggested that the Suite is, in effect, a ‘recollection’ of several earlier literary and artistic works, including, significantly, the Metamorphoses of Ovid. In 1930, when Picasso produced the first of the plates that were to become part of the Vollard Suite, he was just finishing work on a project undertaken with Albert Skira for an illustrated edition of the Metamorphoses.27 As Picasso would have realized in his own reading of that text, metamorphosis is not only the subject of many (though, crucially, not all) of the poem’s individual mythological tales; it also functions as a compositional principle, so that each story, no matter how divergent, manages to lead ingeniously and without pause into the next. That continuity is partially disrupted, however, even as the overall composition is more tightly woven together, by the numerous cross-references among episodes widely separated in the text. Some of these references Ovid created through the repetition of a particular motif or phrasing; others were provided more or less ready-made by the corpus of Greek mythology, with its complex latent structure of interrelated characters and events. As the anthropologist Marcel Mauss wrote in 1939, ‘[m]yth is the mesh of a spider’s web and not a definition in the dictionary.’28 By attending to this aspect of his mythological material, Ovid was able to produce a poem that was both amazingly heterogeneous and shot through with links of every sort, thematic as well as formal.

The similar structure of the Vollard Suite would seem to justify (again, albeit several years after the fact) Einstein’s claims for the mythological character of Picasso’s art, the assertion that he was ‘producing prophetic cycles of myths.’29 (It seems no less prophetic in this context that Marcel Mauss himself also wrote a brief hommage for Documents’ special issue on the artist.30) One could reasonably argue that the format of the Suite is even better suited than that of the Metamorphoses to bringing out the full complexity of the work’s web of interrelations. Because its plates are unbound, the Suite can be continually rearranged, with each rearrangement producing a qualitatively different experience of the individual prints.31

Indeed it seems likely that it was a desire for just this sort of constant mutability that, in 1930, suggested printmaking to Picasso (who had never been much of a printmaker before). Specifically, the Vollard Suite appears as a revival or recollection of the tradition of capricci, those open-ended, improvisatory series first produced by Jacques Callot and brilliantly taken up by Goya.32 Unconstrained by the thematic consistency demanded with other types of series, the ‘capricious’ artist could allow his imagination and attention to wander as they would. The individual plates of his series served both to track the course of those wanderings and to supply points of departure for others yet to come. In this regard, the production of capricci also shares much with the surrealist practice of psychic automatism – so that we might see the Vollard Suite as analogous to Masson’s ‘psychograms,’ except that its ‘hallucinatory’ aspect is extended over the range of dozens and dozens of images. Flux is built into its very structure. Shuffling through

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the plates of the *Vollard Suite*, one experiences a bit of the same ‘mantic obsession’ – the same ‘hallucinatory’ delirium – that presumably generated the images’ production in the first place.

There is, however, a group of plates within the *Suite* that constitutes something of an exception in this regard. I’m thinking specifically of the images often referred to collectively as ‘The Sculptor’s Studio’ (that collective thematic reference itself serving to demonstrate my point). The greater similarity among these images – and the fact that their differences tend to fall out into more or less ordered oppositional pairs (active/passive, human/bestial) – means that in and around them the hallucinatory intensity slows. What makes this relative quiescence all the more intriguing is that it occurs in relation to a series of prints depicting, specifically, the quiescent contemplation of art. Moreover, in the majority of plates, that art is figured as classical sculpture, its tectonic forms suggesting stasis: if not reification (the statues are always a bit more animated than that) then at least an ‘Apollonian state of meditative purification.’ The relative structural stability of the ‘Sculptor’s Studio’ images within the generally restless totality of the *Suite* seems perfectly captured by Einstein’s earlier commentary on Picasso’s art: ‘To the fatality of the unconscious, he opposes a prodigious power of clearly intelligible figuration.’ Yet at the same time, that clarity and intelligibility are constantly challenged. Even when focused on the ‘Sculptor’s Studio,’ our attention is frequently diverted to the *Suite*’s various competing images of bullfights or circus performers – led astray, that is, by other, digressive associations. As Einstein again presciently remarked: ‘But the closures [Picasso] thereby erects, he subsequently shatters, with a curiosity that they have made only more acute.’ In short, the *Vollard Suite* seems to have emerged out of, and continues to exist within, the tension between the ‘two psychological poles’ described by Einstein: there is, on the one hand, the tectonic stability both figured in ‘The Sculptor’s Studio’ plates and organizing their interrelations, and, on the other, the centrifugal pull of the *Suite* as a disorganizing, ‘Dionysian’ totality.

* * *

In my book I wrote at some length about Picasso’s minotaurs, which not only inhabit the *Vollard Suite* but also generally dominate the artist’s graphic production of the 1930s. Here, I will keep my comments relatively brief and, at least initially, on the level of review. In my earlier study, I was particularly concerned to trace the various, multiple threads linking the *Vollard Suite*’s blind minotaurs to Bataille’s writings on art and sacrifice. I argued that, although the figure of the blind minotaur was nowhere specifically mentioned in Bataille’s writings (including in ‘Soleil pourri’), because of its numerous connections to figures and images that were, it effectively created and came to stand at a major crossing within the Bataillean labyrinth of thought. Much the same could be said (and was) about the *Minotauromancy* [fig. 1]; I emphasized especially its figures’
inhernently self-divided nature and their numerous references to the sorts of sacrificial practices that had fascinated Bataille.

Fig. 1: Pablo Picasso, *Minotauromachy*, 1935, Etching on paper, 49.8 x 69.3 cm, Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. Photo RMN – Gérard Blot. © Succession Picasso/DACS 2007

In respect to the *Minotauromachy*, I also noted that many of its figures had, in effect, been repeated – albeit with some notable differences – from the plates of the *Vollard Suite*.\(^\text{36}\) Given the multiple ‘sources’ within the *Suite* for each of these figures, I suggested that we regard the composition of the *Minotaumachy* as having been overdetermined, in a fairly straightforward Freudian sense, by the imagery of the *Vollard* plates. It strikes me now, however, that the relation between the two works might equally well be described in light of the ‘heuristic fiction’ used to explain Einstein’s ontology. In this scenario, the *Vollard Suite* would serve to model the real, its field of forces and ceaseless flux finding their analogue in the ever-changing structure of the ‘totality’ of the prints. The *Minotauromachy* would then occupy the second level in our model, its group of figures recollecting and actualizing elements drawn from the field ‘below.’ Here we might also want to see the etching’s dense, overall cross-hatching as resembling, and so referring to, the chaos of the ‘psychogram,’ with the figural elements of the image appearing to individuate themselves, at least partially, from that formless tangle.
It’s important to mention, too, that, beyond its overdetermination by the plates of the *Vollard Suite*, the imagery of the *Minotaumachy* also recollects numerous works – the Hellenistic *Sleeping Ariadne*, for example, as well as Titian’s *Rape of Europa*, Rembrandt’s *Descent from the Cross*, and certain prints by Goya – disparately drawn from the larger history of art. The effect of such recollections is to make us aware that that ‘history’ also inhabits the field of immanence, precisely not as a linear sequence, but rather as a virtual collection of images existing in a state of ‘relaxation.’ The *Minotaumachy* weaves elements of this field into a wholly new and hugely compelling composition, though one that still feels in some sense only provisional; given its divergent, overlapping ‘sources,’ we can easily imagine the composition unravelling, its figures pulled elsewhere, to join into new, psychically invested constellations.37 At some level at least, the image seems to be about just this kind of process: creation as an act of largely involuntary memory, arising where the demands of the present intersect with the virtual structure of the past.

Again, part of that past for Picasso was the criticism of his work that he had read in *Documents*. Above all, what I hope to demonstrate in this paper was how Picasso's graphic work of the 1930s sustained that criticism, living up to its terms, though not quite in the way that they had initially been delivered. Another way we might phrase the point is to say that Picasso’s art was transformed by his experience of reading *Documents’ Hommage*. But of course that works the other way around as well: it is impossible to read the essays of the *Hommage* now, especially ‘Soleil pourri’ and Einstein’s ‘Picasso,’ as one would have read them in 1930. They have, in effect, been transformed through the experience afforded by Picasso’s prints.

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2 Miller, ‘Picasso,’ 214.


5 Einstein, ‘Picasso,’ Documents, no. 3, 1930, 156.


8 For a superb discussion of Einstein’s relation to this sort of ‘identity politics’, see Sebastian Zeidler’s introduction to the special issue of October on Einstein: October, no. 107, Winter 2004, 3-13. My own understanding and presentation of the matter is deeply indebted to Zeidler’s analysis.

9 Einstein, ‘Picasso,’ 156.

10 See Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy, § 5.


14 See Zeidler, ‘Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso: Carl Einstein’s Ontology of Art at the Time of Documents’, in this issue of Papers of Surrealism.

15 Zeidler, ‘Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso,’ 2


19 Zeidler, ‘Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso,’ 10.


22 In his ‘Nightingale’ entry for Documents’ critical dictionary, Einstein wrote: ‘What we denote with the help of words is less an object than a vague opinion; one uses words as though they were ornaments of one’s own person. Words are usually petrifications that trigger mechanical reactions in us.’ Einstein, ‘Dictionnaire critique: Rossignol,’ Documents, no. 2, May 1929, p. 117;


24 See my Myth and Metamorphosis, chapter 3.


27 Ovid’s Metamorphosis also attracted the attention of Michel Leiris, who was both a close friend of Picasso and one of the major contributors to Documents; Leiris specifically mentioned Ovid’s poem in his entry on ‘metamorphosis' for Documents' Critical Dictionary. See Documents, no. 6, December 1929, 333.


29 Einstein, ‘Picasso,' 157. In justification of the ‘mythological' claim, one might of course also want to point to Picasso’s collaged Minotaur of 1928, wherein a bull’s head is grafted onto a pair of human legs; that image was in fact reproduced in Documents’ Picasso issue. Nonetheless, it is the only figure among the reproductions (and one of the very few by Picasso prior to 1930) drawn from the repertoire of ancient myth, so that it alone seems insufficient to motivate the association of the artist's work with mythology.

30 Marcel Mauss, ‘M. Marcel Mauss,' Documents, no. 3, 1930, 177.

31 Hence the experience of those plates in book form, such as they appear in Hans Bolliger’s publication of the Suite, is obviously much different. The stasis imposed by the book’s binding is further exacerbated in the case of Bolliger’s Vollard Suite by the thematic grouping of its images into what amount to discrete chapters. See Bolliger, Picasso’s ‘Vollard Suite,' London: Thames and Hudson, 1956.

32 Goya and Callot are not arbitrarily chosen here; in addition to being the two names probably most closely associated with capricci, certain plates of the Vollard Suite make overt reference to their work. See my Myth and Metamorphosis, chapter 3, esp. 85 ff. For more on the capriccio tradition in general, see David Rosand, ‘Capriccio: Goya and a Graphic Tradition,' in Janis Tomlinson, Graphic Evolutions: The Print Series of Francisco Goya, New York: Columbia University Press, 1989.

33 For a much more detailed version of this argument, see my Myth and Metamorphosis, chapter 3.


35 Florman, Myth and Metamorphosis, chapter 4, 179-194.

36 The most obvious instance of such repetition is the figure of the minotaur himself. As he appears in the Minotaumachy – facing left, with that outsized arm stretched before him – he explicitly recalls the Suite’s series of blind minotaurs. (Thrust into this new context, the extended arm no longer functions as a gesture of the minotaur’s blindness, but such connotations have not
been wholly dispatched, either: to the extent that it blocks the illumination of the candle, that arm suggests at least a desire not to see.) The source of the candle can also be traced to the Vollard Suite, specifically to the aquatint that depicts a youth vigilantly watching over a sleeping nude.\textsuperscript{36} In fact, the entire triangular grouping of onlooker, candle, and recumbent female that formed the basis of that plate’s composition returns, just left of centre, in the composition of the Minotauromacy. Of course, that repetition has also brought with it some significant changes. The vigilant youth has been transformed into a girl – and a girl, moreover, who closely resembles the blind minotaur’s young guide. (There are in both cases the same calm features and classical profile.) Similarly, the Minotauromacy’s recumbent female owes as much to the toreros of the Suite’s bullfighting scenes as she does to the somnolent nude of the ‘sleepwatcher’ plate. She is, in effect, an amalgamation of those characters, a kind of collage, not so much representing their synthesis as suggesting her own heterogeneous ‘origins.’

\textsuperscript{37} I am intentionally drawing on Zeidler’s description of The Milliner’s Workshop here, to suggest that what that painting achieves in the realm of form, the Minotauromacy approaches through an evocative figuration. See Zeidler, ‘Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso,’ 17-21.
Bataille with Picasso: *Crucifixion* (1930) and Apocalypse

C.F.B. Miller

*History and the Science of Knowing* together, comprehended History, form alike the inwardizing and the Calvary of absolute Spirit, the actuality, truth, and certainty of his throne, without which he would be lifeless and alone.

G.W.F. Hegel

In the course of the ecstatic vision, at the limit of death on the cross and of the blindly lived lammasabachthani, the object is finally unveiled as catastrophe in a chaos of light and shadow [...].

Georges Bataille

Picasso is a problem in the postmodern reception of *Documents*. The historical contact between the artist and the magazine is well known; its radicality remains obscure. Recent work – Sebastian Zeidler on Carl Einstein’s art theory, T.J. Clark on Michel Leiris’s ultra-humanist Picasso – shows *Documents*’ use-value for Picasso criticism. Such interventions help correct the Bataillean bias in the dominant reinscription, promoted by Rosalind Krauss and others associated with the journal *October*, of *Documents* as the vehicle of the *informe*. But what is the relation of Picasso to the *informe*? The problem is that this reinscription, by means of a strategic set of negations and deferrals, has displaced Picasso from the historical centre of *Documents* to the margin of its theorisation; a decentring consistent with Krauss’s project for an ‘alternative history’ of modernism, whereby Marcel Duchamp trumps Picasso, ‘against the grain’ of Greenbergian teleology. As such the Kraussian *informe* suppresses the historicity of the moment of *Documents* in Georges Bataille’s theory, when avant-garde painting – Picasso’s in particular – was a privileged surface for the deconstructive operations that Bataille pursued thereafter through the fields of politics, poetics and philosophy.

In Krauss’s wake, art historians have reconnected Picasso with Bataille, often on the basis of iconography. This approach echoes art history’s inaugural (to my knowledge) ex post facto appropriation of *Documents*: the 1969 *Burlington Magazine* article in which Ruth Kaufmann set out to establish indices between the magazine and Picasso’s 1930 *Crucifixion*. Kaufmann argued that the *Crucifixion* [fig. 1] and ‘Soleil pourri,’ the piece Bataille contributed to the *Documents* ‘Hommage à Picasso,’ converged in the domain of what she called ‘primitive sacrifice.’ There is an heuristic spark in this, with apocalyptic potential; but Kaufmann’s adherence to reference smothered the flash, imposing fallacious iconographical ‘identification’ on the picture.
I’ll come back to the detail of this fallacy. Here I want to note the overarching illogic – the reaction-formation – of Kaufmann’s analysis. Faced with the _Crucifixion_, Kaufmann presupposed an iconographical aetiology, so that the ‘image evolved from Bataille’s article or perhaps from conversations he had had with Picasso about it.’\(^{11}\) It is unlikely that Bataille and Picasso conversed much in 1930; Leiris was Picasso’s inside man at _Documents_. What is beyond reasonable doubt is that ‘Soleil pourri’ was published _after_ Picasso painted the _Crucifixion_.\(^{12}\) So the priority iconography grants the word over the image has prompted the historian to reverse chronology. The logocentrism of which this subreption is a symptom has enervated the historiography of Picasso’s relationship with the interwar avant-garde. One might better reverse the paradigm and ask: what is the function of Picassian painting in the Bataillean text?\(^{13}\) I want to use Bataille to think Picasso; but I also want to use Picasso to think Bataille. Here the vector of this use-value is a painting: the _Crucifixion of 7 February 1930_.

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Fig. 1: Pablo Picasso, _The Crucifixion_, 1930, Oil on plywood, 51.5 x 66.5 cm, Musée Picasso, Paris. Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library. © Succession Picasso/DACS 2007.
A strange crucifixion this, and a strange Picasso. So strange, indeed, as to figure – or disfigure – a blind-spot in Picasso scholarship. Cruel and hilarious, anti-modern, radically inscrutable, this little oil-on-plywood painting (51.5 by 66.5 cm) has achieved a status of glaring obscurity in the artist’s reception: it gets reproduced in colour and large format, it has been the centrepiece of exhibitions, the literature in general extols it as exceptional; yet, in the scant commentary, timorousness undercuts the lofty claims, historicism defers to Guernica, discourse lapses without self-criticism. The bathos, displacement and disavowal are telling. In certain crucial (dis)respects, Picasso’s Crucifixion is an impossible object of conventional inquiry. The Crucifixion, it is written in the ledger of art history. But if it is the Crucifixion, with a capital C, then the predicate’s crossed out. It’s Crucifixion under erasure. It is/isn’t the Crucifixion: the copula bifurcates.

But it is La Crucifixion. What can we recognise (what can we know through iteration of the same), according to this name? In 1946 Alfred Barr laid out the recognisable parts of what he termed, in a rather too sweet-smelling evocation of the rotten, the Crucifixion’s ‘potpourri of traditional iconography’:

The figure on the ladder driving a nail, the miniature mounted figure delivering the lance thrust, the soldiers in the foreground throwing dice on a drum head for Christ’s cloak – these motives are fairly clear. At the extreme left and right are the empty T-crosses of the two thieves whose bodies, apparently, are those lying in the left foreground. The rough round shape in the upper left hand corner is perhaps the vinegar-soaked sponge, enlarged to gigantic size and isolated like one of the objects in the traditional paintings of the symbols of the Passion.

Barr’s itemisation of motifs already indicates the torment to which the painting puts the traditional crucifixion iconography. Picasso de-positions the thieves from their normative places, on their crosses, at either side of Jesus. In the Gospel narrative we hear nothing more of the thieves after they have had their legs broken, at which point Christ has already uttered the consummatum est; but Picasso’s Christ is still being crucified, while the thieves have met their doom. This subverts the Bible syntagm. And the low move with which Picasso jumbles the thieves’ bodies (a fall mimicked by the red bird at left – an unholy spirit) undoes the theological formatting of Dysmas and Gestas (to give the Good and Bad Thieves their apocryphal names), which bipolarised them according to the dexter/sinister logic of Christ’s right and left hands, the dualism between salvation and damnation.

Again, the Longinus figure spearing Christ may be ‘fairly clear,’ but he’s heterodox. Like the deposed thieves, he does violence to narrative time. In the gospel according to John the spear in the side comes after Christ is finished, whereas Picasso’s Christ seems as yet only to
have received two of his nail-wounds, so that his excruciation should be only just beginning.19 But if it is the wound, it is dry; it emits no salvific blood and water – the symbols of the Eucharistic and baptismal sacraments, the foundations of the Church.20 Similarly, Longinus’s role as a symbol of paganism’s redemption – tradition identified him with the centurion who realised Christ’s divinity – is immediately undermined by the unusually clear reference Picasso makes in the figure to the corrida picador, forcing analogy between Christ and the bullfight bull, in a piece of anthropological relativism.

The unstable ontology of Picasso’s Crucifixion, the fissure in its nomination, performs the double-coded operation of parody.21 The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the para- in the para-ode can signify both ‘beside’ and ‘beyond,’ adjacency and separation, similarity and difference. As against the unity of the theological symbol, this is scission in process: a cleaving. Yet it is not merely a matter of specific adjustments to the orthodox iconography. With a fissile compression that Philippe Sollers once described as ‘nuclear,’ Picasso exacerbates the force of the split between theology and its other through another double stratagem.22 On the one hand he deploys a painted variant of the collage method to intrude heterogeneous figures from his recent production into the closed system of the theological image, generating an excess of meaning unassimilable to that system. There is the lunar, clawed jaw of the feminine heads from the end of 1929;23 the screaming bacchante;24 the skeletal feminine face;25 the face with three dots for features;26 the frontal/profile woman.27 The grinning carnivalesque entity on the horizon at right is so weird as to displace any definition, a resistance that points to the second stratagem by which Picasso exceeds the iconography: by sacrificing the icon itself.

* * *

In 1933 Max Raphael submitted Picasso to ideology critique. His matter was the narrative laid out in the retrospective he had seen the previous year at the Zürich Kunsthaus. In Raphael’s eyes the unfolding of Picasso’s production described a trajectory of spiralling idealism. Whereas the papiers collés had staged the contradiction between idealism and materialism, the cubism and classicism of 1915-1925 had excluded materialism and dialectics, contriving an ersatz opposition between ‘abstract idealism’ and ‘idealising realism.’ Yet the latest work was worse:

Picasso’s latest (surrealist) period presents sociological interest only to the extent that, in its relation to Gothic stained-glass windows and by the methodical consummation of its initial mysticism, it confirms our classification of his work as reactionary and in the Christian-European tradition.28
Though Raphael mentions no images by name, a number of pictures exhibited at Zürich might fit this description: the 1931 *Pitcher and Bowl of Fruit,*29 for instance, or the 1932 *Girl before a Mirror.*30 But of all the paintings shown, surely the most remarkable and blatant grab at the ‘Christian-European tradition’ was the 1930 *Crucifixion.*31

Raphael construes Picasso’s recent output as irrational idealism, anti-modern mysticism – in his words ‘devoid of dialectical sense’ – that mimics the medieval without gaining dialectical purchase on it. Under the aegis of scholasticism, Gothic art and architecture figured the dialectic between absolute spirit and material finitude; but notwithstanding their evasive nostalgia for the pre-modern, Picasso’s ‘symbols’ cannot assimilate this medieval dialectic:

Because of the absolute dualism of their content and the magic effect they produce, these symbols could never figure within the boundaries of Catholicism. The latter is too well protected by the Church and its ideological arm, neo-Thomism, to be very deeply shaken by such romantic revivals.32

The tenor is that Picasso’s medievalism seeks and fails to negate Catholicism, though Raphael’s rhetoric is slippery – it is unclear whether the ‘absolute dualism’ of Picasso’s symbols consists in their (as it were pagan or satanic) opposition to Catholicism, or (less likely, but more interestingly) an internal scission. But Raphael’s judgement – and this is implicit in the term of exclusion, ‘magic’ – bespeaks an apprehension of alterity to dialectical reason.

Raphael’s reference to Thomism is a reminder of an ecclesiastical history that normative accounts of the historical avant-garde ignore. Neo-Thomism was the Church’s chosen armour against the errors of modernity. From Leo XIII’s 1879 Encyclical *Aeterni Patris* onwards, popes aggressively remobilised Thomas Aquinas’s thirteenth-century synthesis of patristic theology with Aristotelian ontology and dialectical logic, promulgating it through schools and seminaries, in order to repel secularism on the ground of rational discourse.33 Aquinas’s system, by which man reasoned through analogy from nature to God, was considered supremely integrated; in 1930 the neo-Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain asserted its having ‘definitively established the order of Christian economy,’ from a ‘summit of knowledge which is architectonic par excellence.’34 This classical-metaphysical theology, in Leiris’s words an ‘instrument of reaction,’ enjoyed considerable currency in France in the 1920s.35 The interwar French *renouveau catholique* – which recruited Jean Cocteau, Max Jacob and Pierre Reverdy – assumed neo-Thomism, embodied by the aforementioned Maritain, as its intellectual standard.36 It is the *systematicity* of the Thomist cosmos that has led Denis Hollier to pose it as the architecture against which Georges Bataille’s writings militate;37 and comparably, Picasso’s *Crucifixion* ruptures any chain of analogy or reasoning from its material surface towards a theological idea. It is in the context of a
reactionary Catholic humanism, whose metaphysics privileged intelligibility, that we might view the *Crucifixion*.

Perhaps the Church as a political institution had little to fear from Picasso’s painting, though the shrillness of interwar Catholic responses to surrealist provocation betrays anxiety.\(^{38}\) For Raphael, it is the *a-dialectical* structure of this painting that fails to engage its theological mirror-image. I would suggest that, rather than to a simply *mystical irrationalism* (a catch-all for reason’s others), it is to factors of structure and operation that we might look in order to explain Raphael’s presentiment that a painting like the *Crucifixion* does not supersede the Thomist idea. On the one hand, the *Crucifixion* performs a parody, and as such maintains a split position *vis-à-vis* its object, rather than mastering and interiorising it. On the other, I would argue that the *Crucifixion* is heterogeneous to the dialectics Raphael invokes because of its *anti*-idealism, and the downward thrust with which it collapses difference.

Yet while Raphael sees neo-Thomism and its Picassian shadow as mutually exclusive, he is categorical about the crypto-Christian essence of the latter:

\[\text{The perversion of Picasso’s historical instinct reached its culminating point in the course of his surrealist period. Up until then he had always been, at least within the boundaries of art, active and revolutionary. Now it is purely reactionary contemplation that comes to the fore. Its ultimate basis is God, whether one is conscious of this or not, and regardless of whether one sees in all religion, as Freud does, an illusion that is nearing its end. As long as atheism is not based upon dialectical materialism, one merely replaces one word with another.}\(^{39}\)

At this point the Nietzsche of the *Genealogy of Morals*, the Bataille of ‘Le bas matérialisme et la gnose,’ and perhaps the Picasso of the *Crucifixion*, emit a guffaw at the idealist or theological basis of faith in the truth of dialectical materialism. Against Raphael, with Bataille, I want to argue that the *Crucifixion* is anti-theological, or, better, *atheological*. But first I’ll address its anti-modernism.

The reactionary *perversion* Raphael imputes to Picasso’s ‘historical instinct’ implies a teleology by which medievalism instates regression to the pre-modern. In fact the return of Catholicism that the *Crucifixion* represents in Picasso’s production might, by its historical situation, verge on such a turn (or overturning), since the early-twentieth-century Catholic revival imagined itself as a return of the medieval. Thus Catholic youth movements in 1920s France routinely used chivalric emblems in their insignia,\(^{40}\) and medievalism, as anti-modern nostalgia for pre-Reformation integrity and Gothic triumph, obtained across the French Catholic spectrum, from far right to Christian democrat. In effect this was the conservative, even proto-fascist, activation in political discourse of what Ernst Bloch called *Ungleichzeitigkeit* – ‘non-
Though it dethrones hierarchy and unmakes the phallic subject, the *Crucifixion* does stage violent anachronism between Picasso’s most avant-garde monsters and methods, and a Catholicism enmeshed with medievalism. Collage-like, it invades the theological scheme with what Raphael called ‘symbols’ – figures irreducible to propositional logic – from Picasso’s late-1920s production. In the terms of Raphael’s critique, these ‘cannot figure within the boundaries of Catholicism’; and yet, in the *Crucifixion*, Picasso stages the intrusion. This is an *atheological non-contemporaneity*.

The temporal contradiction between medieval iconography and avant-garde incursion overarches a multiply anguished internal time of the image. In the passages of paint that might denote sky, Picasso contrasts ante-meridian cerulean blue and lemon yellow, against afternoon Prussian and cadmium, and dawn-dusk scarlet, while the black and white of the central chiasmus is like a lightning-flash at midnight. The Biblical crucifixion brought cosmic disorder (an eclipse, an earthquake), but in Picasso’s *Crucifixion* the time of the Biblical narrative concertinas and flips. Thus Christ is an infant, speared in the side though he is not yet fully crucified, while the thieves lie at bottom left, deposed prior to the God-man. This parodies the medieval habit of presenting different stages of the narrative simultaneously, but the crushing of diurnal time (the suspension of *temporal* distinction), and the flash of contact between pre-modern and modern, also concur with the apocalyptic operation of the picture, which will in due course reveal itself as this essay’s *eschaton*.

Picasso’s *Crucifixion* is on the scale of a devotional image, and, given this scale, the crude outlines, and flat, bright colours, I want to propose a specific type of religious image as the object of parody, or frame for Picasso’s intervention. The type of image to which I refer, though a ‘low’ genre, encapsulates Raphael’s objections to Picasso’s medievalist mode, being at once a locus of Christian faith, contemplation and the medieval. I mean the *image d’Epinal*, in its subcategory of devotional *images de piété* depicting the Crucifixion [figs. 2 and 3]. Typically these prints, intended for domestic consumption, used simple inks in a format that posed either conventional personnel on either side of the crucified Christ, or Jesus alone amid his equipment. The scratchy haloes of the *image de piété* compare with the ragged radiation around the red and yellow figure at the right of Picasso’s *Crucifixion*; likewise, the incongruous green thing at the left of the (de)composition, which Barr identified as a disproportionate vinegar-soaked sponge, might parody the logic of the *arma christi*. The early-twentieth-century historiography of the French popular printmaking tradition conferred upon it autochthonous authenticity, tracing an unbroken line of inheritance from the windows of the Gothic cathedrals to the plain colours and black outlines of *l’imagerie d’Epinal*. In the words of one 1926 history, ‘the imagery crossed several centuries with an immobile soul, close to the native soil,’ from the medieval *imagiers* to their modern counterparts. *L’imagerie populaire* signified a conservative *françité* that stretched back to the Middle Ages.
Rather than pious contemplation, however, the *Crucifixion* forces the viewer to experience a disaster of meaning and the subject. If we’re in the temple, as the etymology of *contemplation* suggests, then the veil is torn. Again, its affect is far from stable, veering between horror and hilarity, an improper mix for a conventional meditative image. I would note the Spanish layer in the picture’s palimpsest, not least in its blaze or riot of colour, whose garish dazzle connotes Southern sun, while the predominant reds and yellows literally flag Spain up. Given the Paschal theme, the crowded polychromy of the Andalusian Semana Santa offers an anthropological overlap. The clearest motif in the painting refers to the bullfight, via the picador-Longinus at left, and an irruption of Spanish popular festive violence in a French frame of contemplation is congruent with the *victimisation* of the image (and indeed the image, *eikon*, is a victim).

Spain functioned as a topos of proximate, primitive otherness in French modernism – one Bataille visited in *L'Histoire de l'oeil*. In his *Documents* articles Bataille exploited his professional formation as a medievalist at the École des Chartes only once, in his 1929 piece about the pre-Thomist Apocalypse de Saint-Sever [fig. 4], and it is noteworthy that he chose an apocalyptic medieval treasure of the Bibliothèque Nationale that he could recode as a disordered product of Christendom’s Spanish margin (he linked its millenarianism to panic at the Moorish threat). In contradistinction to the ‘architectural and majestic mystique’ with which Northern illuminated manuscripts cloaked the ‘theological speculations of contemplative monks,’ the Saint-Sever *Apocalypse* presented disasters with a crudely vernacular ‘provocative bonhomie.’

Figs. 2 and 3: *Images de piété*. France. 18th-19th century. Private collection.
Scholarship has linked the *Apocalypse de Saint Sever* to Picasso’s *Crucifixion* through the reproduction in Bataille’s article of the Saint-Sever Flood, whose drowned victims Ruth Kaufmann compared with the twisted bodies of Picasso’s thieves.\(^{47}\) Kaufmann also referred the *Crucifixion*’s colour scheme to that of the *Apocalypse*, despite the *Documents* images being monochrome.\(^{48}\) It is true that Picasso could have seen a couple of plates from the Saint-Sever manuscript at the blockbuster 1926 *Exposition du Moyen Age* at the Bibliothèque Nationale, though neither of these were illustrated in *Documents*.\(^{49}\) More pertinently one might correlate the *Crucifixion* with the co-presence Bataille saw in the Saint-Sever Flood, between ‘a feeling of decisive horror [...] expressed with the aid of arbitrary deformations,’ and the ‘unexpected jovial feeling’ conveyed by the goat at the bottom of the page and even the eye-gouging raven at top.\(^{50}\)

![Image](image_url)

Fig. 4: Anon., France, ‘Le Deluge’, *Apocalypse de Saint-Sever*, 11\(^{th}\) Century. From *Documents* 2, 1929.
According to Bataille:

Here this inconsistency is the sign of the extreme disorder of free human reactions. In effect this is not a matter of calculated contrast, but of immediate expression of unintelligible – thus all the more significant – metamorphoses which are the result of certain fatal inclinations.51

Freud’s theory of instinctual dualism was urgent in 1929, after the 1927 French translation of the second topography,52 and it inflects Bataille’s text here, in his interception of the significant unintelligibility of ambivalence. The idiotic serenity of Picasso’s Christ, his face untroubled by the terrifying jaws at his breast, effects the same affect Bataille saw in the Apocalypse:

…there human grandeur is found at the point where childishness – ridiculous or charming – coincides with the obscure cruelty of adults.53

The sadomasochistic disintegration of an infantilised masculine subject is the nucleus of the Crucifixion’s catastrophe. Like the apocalyptic manuscript, Picasso’s painting might be said to produce ‘grandeur’ through ‘direct and crude procedures’; but it is above all in the ambivalence between horror and jollity, between the feminine screams and the grinning yellow skull at top right, that the two converge. This affective contradiction approaches the structural operation of the apocalyptic genre.

Bataille’s article on the Saint-Sever Apocalypse implies the possibility of an other medievalism, disruptive of both liberal rationalism and reactionary idealisation of the pre-modern.54 The neo-Thomist catholic revival was a classical, humanist medievalism. On the contrary, like much of Picasso’s production at the time, the Crucifixion is rigorously anti-classical. Rather than obey the syllogistic Aristotelian economy of the image (to eikon – the icon), where the spectator garners pleasure through deducing intelligible content from sensible form, the painting’s motifs violate intellection.55 As against the pleasure principle of spectatorship, one might inscribe this as a mobilisation of the death drive in pictorial mimesis:

But why hesitate to write [wrote Georges Bataille at the end of 1929] that when Picasso paints, the dislocation of forms leads to that of thought, that is to say, that the immediate intellectual movement, which in other cases leads to the idea, aborts.56

The literature on the Crucifixion has hesitated to write this dislocation, but I’m going to argue, with Bataille, for an anti-idealist Picasso. The Crucifixion’s anti-idealism – the violence or excess it
installs in the painted signifier, against ideation, against ideality – can be subordinated neither to the traditional crucifixion iconography, nor to the idealist ‘project of iconography’ per se.\textsuperscript{57}

By ‘iconography’ I mean the mode of art-historical inquiry, codified by Erwin Panofsky, in which ‘specific themes or concepts as transmitted through literary sources’ determine the ‘conventional meaning’ of images.\textsuperscript{58} This methodology is rooted in theology and philosophical idealism, which are themselves close relations of course. Therefore iconography’s logocentrism derives at least in part from its affiliation to scholastic theology.\textsuperscript{59} Art-historical iconography emerged in mid-nineteenth-century France with Adolphe Napoléon Didron’s monumental study of medieval art, \textit{Iconographie Chrétienne} (subtitled \textit{Histoire de Dieu}).\textsuperscript{60} Didron was followed by Emile Mâle, who dominated French medieval studies in the first half of the twentieth century. In his 1898 tome, \textit{L’Art religieux du XII siècle en France}, which went through seven editions by 1931, Mâle described a medieval orthodoxy in which the visible world itself was iconographical, ‘a book of twofold meaning of which the Bible held the key.’\textsuperscript{61} For Mâle, European Gothic art was a systematic regime of the image as ‘first and foremost a sacred writing.’\textsuperscript{62} Ecclesiastical authority dictated this iconography, so that it manifested divine law; the image as \textit{verbum dei}.\textsuperscript{63}

The traditional Crucifixion image, the central image of the Western cultural imaginary, is a \textit{priori} iconographical, an illustration of scripture and exegesis. Enculturation has conflated the binary iconographical structure of the crucifixion sign – a picture signifying a text – into consubstantiality. In Picasso’s \textit{Crucifixion}, this homology shears apart, by dint of its disruption by motifs heterogeneous to the Gospels. Thus Picasso emancipates the icon from the master text; but further, iconicity itself, the image’s internal mimetic condition of similitude to being, undergoes sacrifice. That is to say, the \textit{Crucifixion} inverts the binary hierarchy of the iconographical sign, then confounds the pictorial term. The \textit{restricted economy} of the iconographical image – where pictorial representation tallies with prior discourse (and is later exchangeable by experts into discourse of equivalent meaning) – opens onto \textit{general economy}, at the site of the picture’s unassimilable ‘potlatch of signs.’\textsuperscript{64} Whereas iconography as art-historical method presupposes a transparent motif, sublating sensible materiality in favour of intelligible meaning,\textsuperscript{65} the \textit{Crucifixion}’s crude facture desublimates the iconographical motif, foregrounding the painted signifier, marring intellection with sensible materiality. This is base materialism in figuration.\textsuperscript{66} The gestalt fails, iconicity shudders between overplus and non-meaning, hybridity and anatomical confusion addle identities. In Panofsky’s terms, the \textit{Crucifixion}’s ruinous ‘world of artistic motifs’ is a catastrophe of the ‘pre-iconographical.’ Paradoxically, the \textit{Crucifixion} might be the kind of picture Panofsky barred from pre-iconographical description, where ‘the objects, events and expressions depicted […] may be unrecognisable owing to the […] malice aforethought of the artist.’\textsuperscript{67}

Yet it is possible to track the operations by which Picasso sacrifices intelligibility. For one, the very motif of crucifixion realises a bad gestalt (I’ll come back to this). Elsewhere, there are
several examples of the typical Picassian trick – reminiscent of the surrealist image, or even the ‘poetic technique’ of L’Histoire de l’œil – of crossing indeterminate visual metaphors on the axis of contiguity. For instance, at top left, next to the yellow head that connotes a moon, claw or helmet, is the green shape that scholars have identified iconographically as a sponge, rock or rotten sun, but which might just as well signify an avocado, pomegranate, visceral organ, brain or testicle. In juxtaposition with the head the green object might stand for a helmet-plume, but the possible permutations of the contingency of associations bankrupt discursive economy. Above all, they cannot be contained in theological exegesis.

Sometimes in the Crucifixion the paint pushes towards non-meaning, as in the yellow field and white strip beneath the blue cloak with the yellow upraised arms at right; and the vortex or striated screen jutting from the orange groin of the moon-headed figure at left, to reach up the ladder. Yet in contact with the mutilated and hybrid bodies to which they pertain, these sections are also overdetermined. Throughout, the picture does much violence to anthropomorphism and bodily integrity: for example in the central bad form; or the sutured schizogenesis of the dicer and skeletal mourner at right; or the arm of the left-hand dicer, which we can view as a gaping mouth; or the disorganised, confused bodies of the thieves, their faces inverted, the right-hand thief’s arm a leg – a confusion we also see in the torturer on the ladder.

These moves coincide in the most obscure section of the painting, just to the right of the cross. The bizarre red and yellow figure on the horizon has caused exegetes of the Crucifixion no little trouble. It is a figure, because it has feet. But how are we to read the rest of it? My first impression is of a big yellow grinning skull. We are supposedly in Golgotha, after all. The blind bulges I’m taking for eyes might also connote testicles or buttocks. Could this figure instead be bending over, showing us its arse? The tiny configuration in the middle of the ocular buttocks is inscrutable. Could it be a face, with inverted nose and slit eyes, or a genital formation, surfacing from behind the buttocks? Or might it represent two eyes, a nose and a moustache or mouth of a red face with grotesquely fat, puffed-up jowls, the whole figure hunched and holding its breath, the ‘skull’s smile’ its groin? Or might we read the ensemble as a carnival costume, with eyeholes or face in the centre? The otherness to discourse of this thing has led scholars vaguely to invoke the primitive and the non-European. By contrast, a similarity – a ressemblance informe, to be sure – has been suggested with the risen Christ of the Eisenheim altarpiece, the glorious antithesis – apotheosis – of Grünewald’s suppurating Crucified.

The face of the figure immediately to the right of the cross shows the typical Picassian device of simultaneous profile and frontal representation. Two strands of long blue hair gender the figure as feminine, while the yellow right-angled triangle subjacent to the red outline of the face confers a family resemblance with the numerous heads Picasso painted between December 1929 and March 1930 in which triangles impinge on the facial features. Below this female face is what might be a short yellow dress, in which case we might read the red shape emerging from
the hemline – another bit of paint that resists assimilation – as a shin and foot. But against this are the two yellow feet below and what appears to be a blue hand, proceeding from a yellow shoulder behind the blue skeletal jaws to touch the yellow elbow of the upraised arm at right. The groin of the figure would therefore seem to be disintegrating in contact with the blue jaws. Does a third, red foot inhabit this disintegration? If we must pick a body-part for the red shape on the white ground, articulated, rounded at its top and frayed at its bottom, how about a severed finger? Or a wound, vaguely phallic, vaguely vaginal, to correlate with the painting’s pervasive iconography of castration?

Ruth Kaufmann produced an influential iconographical identification of this figure as ‘a reference to Mithras, the youthful sun god who, in the Mithraic religion, sacrificed a bull and was depicted on reliefs wearing a peaked cap’, reading the triangle in the girl’s face as a Mithraic ‘conical cap’ or ‘triangular hat’ (note the slippage). But Mithras wears a Phrygian cap [fig. 5]; if we must interpret the triangle as a hat, why not a dunce’s cap or, seeing as it is on the face rather than the top of the head, the tall pointed mask of a Spanish Semana Santa Nazarene? Or why should we stop at a hat? What about the theological or Pythagorean discourse on the triangle? I’m carping at an outmoded analysis, but Kaufmann’s interpretation keeps being reiterated, not least by the Musée Picasso. The series of heads in which Picasso uses triangles to interrupt and figure the female face seem to be more about the problematic of pictorial representation than anything else. As I mentioned above, Kaufmann adduced Bataille’s text ‘Soleil pourri’ as ‘the probable source of, or impetus to, Picasso’s use of this Mithraic reference.’ Rather, I would say that ‘Soleil pourri’ describes the operation in the Crucifixion that makes iconographical analysis untenable.

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Fig. 5: ‘Typical Representation of Mithra (Famous Borghesi bas-relief in white marble, now in the Louvre, Paris, but originally taken from the mithraeum of the Capitol.)’ From Franz Cumont, The Mysteries of Mithra, Kegan Paul, London, 1910.
Now Bataille, in ‘Soleil pourri,’ compared looking at a Picasso to beholding the blinding sun, or undergoing sacrifice. At this time Bataille thought sacrifice as a bursting of limited homogeneity – of meaning and the self – into the ‘heterogeneous’ (a movement he later termed the ‘sovereign operation’). Perhaps more than any other painting by Picasso, the Crucifixion dazzles the spectator. We might think it in Bataillean wise, as a sacrificial image. Like Bataille’s writing, the Crucifixion does not tolerate the distinction of form and content. It signifies sacrifice and sacrifices the signifier. Simultaneously the central crucifixion sacrifices Christ, Christ’s form, Christ as form, and, in a phobic space between castration and abjection, Christ as phallic subject.

This ‘Christ’ – another name under erasure – is a bad imitatio Christi. At the apex of the ironically triangular (Trinitarian) composition (or decomposition), outlined in black on a white ground, we see a bald, chinless, beardless – infantile – head on a long neck, set against the transverse beam of a T-shaped cross. In another displacement of the authorising text (in a literal displacement of text), Picasso excludes the superscription declaring Christ to be the King of the Jews, on which all four Gospels agree, and which the iconography normatively represents as the initials I.N.R.I. The face on the cross has no hair, no nimbus, no crown of thorns, no beard, in short no True Likeness as it was perpetuated in the post-medieval tradition. Indeed the dots that denote eyes and mouth are so close as to become almost indistinguishable, insinuating, in combination with the extended neck and smooth, bulbous head, a low pun on the male urethral aperture. True Likeness as phallus. Is this the jouissance of the hanged man? Or a signum victoriae, in the manner of the ithyphallic sub-genre unearthed by Leo Steinberg in Renaissance Christological iconography? The primary context is the contemporaneous subcultural of psychoanalysis:

As well as showing to what extent the psychological life of man is linked to his sexuality, psychoanalysis gives the key to the idea of God, for example, by rendering it as the transposition of the father (or of the phallus) onto an ideal plane.

In these terms Picasso’s Christ, a mock-phallus, acts out a parodic desublimation of the Father.

By dint of the lance-thrust of the picador-Longinus one may deduce the tiny rectangle on Christ’s breast to be the wound. But if we take the coup de lance as not yet having pierced Christ’s side, the dry ‘wound’ resembles a nipple. The nakedness of Christ’s chest seems to be confirmed by the patch of black armpit hair to the wound-nipple’s right, which belies the infantilism of the rest of the body. There is also, it has been suggested, something of the adult female pubis in this patch, with the wound as navel, conferring polymorphous gender on Christ’s body. The potential nakedness, though not the gender trouble, seems contradicted by the pleated hemline above the little feet on the customary footrest; yet the figure’s neck and right shoulder are visible, and there is no sign of a collar. Doubt twitches the veil.
The covering of Christ’s body in the traditional crucifixion iconography supplements the Gospel narrative, in which Christ is stripped of his raiment. We can see the soldiers dicing for the raiment at the bottom of Picasso’s *Crucifixion*. Notwithstanding a few exceptions, the veiling of Christ’s genitals on the cross can be taken as a general rule of decorum. Medieval iconography accounted for this veiling with the Old Testament prefiguration of Shem and Japheth’s filial piety in averting their eyes and covering Noah’s nakedness; a typology related to that in which Ham’s mocking of Noah foreshadowed the Passion. The uncovering of Noah has more recently been connected by Jacques Derrida with the dangerous unveiling of *apokalupsis*, the ‘gesture of denuding or affording sight’ that he also saw tabooed in the Levitical sexual prohibitions, and compared to the revelation of the glans in circumcision. Might the *Crucifixion*’s twitching veil border on *apokalupsis*?

Picasso’s posing of Christ (Logos) as veiled phallus correlates with the Lacanian signifier, whose sublation of the real penis into the ideal master signifier of meaning Lacan theorised as a veiling:

[The phallus] can play its role only when veiled, that is to say, [...] when it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier. The phallus is the signifier of this *Aufhebung* itself [...]. That is why the demon of *Aidôs* (*Scham*, shame) arises at the very moment when, in the ancient mysteries, the phallus is unveiled (cf. the famous painting in the Villa di Pompeii).

![Image of The Unveiling of the Phallus](image)

*Fig. 6: The Unveiling of the Phallus. c. 70-50 B.C. Pompeii, Villa of the Mysteries, Room of the Mysteries, east wall.*
In Picasso’s Christ we see the divine Logos – theologically the primordial signifier ('In the beginning was the Word,') – as the phallus of which the avant-garde culture of psychoanalysis, from which Lacan emerged, understood God to be ‘the transposition [...] onto an ideal plane.’ This desublimated Christ nevertheless retains his veiled, symbolic status, his raising of the penis to the level of the signifier. Picasso visited Pompeii in 1917, and there is something in the seamless line around Christ’s head, running down to the hem of His collar-less garment, that resembles the veiled bulb in the Villa of the Mysteries [fig. 6]. *What we are witnessing is the sacrifice of the signifier.* Now if theology obtained, one might receive this sacrifice as sublation – as an elevation of the Word made flesh, the contradiction between God and Man, through preordained Resurrection, into Majesty. But Picasso’s *Crucifixion* is not the Crucifixion, not least since it undoes Christ’s identity, his gestalt, his presence on the cross.

Rendered in the same black outline on a white ground as the infant and the cross, a scream, much larger than the face above it, occludes the Sacred Heart, its jaws and fangs familiar from Picasso’s repertoire of feminine types. With verticalised (horizontalised) eyes the woman stares the viewer down, as the prong of her lower body drops flatly into knife-like continuity with her cloak. Similarly the white leg, at contorted odds with its blue counterpart, stands in for the foot of the cross. This process of indistinction, here of the woman’s body with the cross and the cloak, is repeated between the veils (or *veil*) and bodies (or *body*) of Christ and the woman. For at the crux of the *Crucifixion* is a blindingly obvious aporia, in the gestalt switch flickering between the arms of the white woman and the arms of Christ. On one level Picasso dramatises the *Crucifixion* as castration. As such the painting negotiates the genealogy concatenated by Frazer, and repeated by Freud, between the ancient Phrygian god Attis – the young lover of the mother goddess, Cybele, who died by castrating himself – and Christ. Freud interpreted the narrative of Attis within the world-historical Oedipal economy of *Totem and Taboo*, the young god’s self-castration an enactment of Oedipal guilt at transgressing the incest prohibition. In the *Crucifixion* the sacrifice of the phallic Christ cooperator with abundant castration metaphors: the falling bird (as phallus) and fallen thieves, their heads mimicking Christ’s; the mutilated and fragmented bodies to either side of the cross; the feminine jaws; the woman-cross’s knife-like lower body. Yet there are also frantic defences against castration: the multiple phalluses (remember Freud’s ‘technical rule’) that constitute the body of the crucifier on the ladder in the act of castrating; the phallic prong of the white woman’s midsection. Christ’s own crucified phallicism might itself represent a kind of *virile* castration.

But in the loss of difference between self and other, the failed gestalt of Christ and the woman, appears abjection, as Julia Kristeva has theorised it: as the primary separation of the infantile subject from the maternal body, and the threat of its reversal. A mother/son dyad proposes itself, with the infantilised Christ little in relation to the large white woman, perched on her ‘hip,’ her body making up the bottom part of the Cross. As if in parody of the traditional...
emblem of Christ as the mother pelican feeding her brood with her own blood, Christ’s wound-teat is offered to the woman’s gape: may we not read this as a phobic fantasy of the devouring mother, of incorporation by the mother’s body? Christ’s head strains away from the white woman’s, like a scissiparous cell, as if he were seeking separation from the body with which he is irretrievably undifferentiated. This undifferentiation ruins the integrity of Christ’s crucifixion: the psychoanalytic diachrony collapses, so that there is no progression, through symbolic castration (which theological Crucifixion, as the passage to Majesty, would play out), no progression to the paternal Law; rather, the pre-Oedipal infant is mired in the body of the mother. The transcendental signifier is pulled down into abjection. This is the representation of abjection as a crisis in paternal law.

The general strategy of undifferentiation instanced by the bad gestalt of the central cross, the jumbling of Dysmas and Gestas, the hybridity of the dicer/insect at right, or the mimicry by which the bodies of the hammerer, the thieves, and the soldier at the drum simulate that of Christ, is consistent with the sacrificial in twentieth-century anthropological theory. In that theory undifferentiation became a master-trope through which to apprehend a universal structural operation of sacrifice. Since, as Bataille noted, sacrifice is etymologically nothing but the production of sacred things, in theory sacrifice accessed the sacred, whose aporetic ambivalence between holy and accursed, awe and horror, came to constitute a central theme of modern anthropological thinking.

At the turn of the twentieth century Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert conceived the ‘sacrificial mechanism’ as transgressing, through the victim, the fundamental Durkheimian opposition between the profane world and the sacred; thus the victim embodied the sacred, the co-presence of binary opposites. Later Jacques Derrida, in his account of the pharmakon of writing, allied the scapegoat, the pharmakos, to the undecidability excluded by communicative reason. René Girard – whose project, notwithstanding its ethnocentrism and monolithic claim to universality, is recognisably deconstructive – theorised sacrifice as the expulsion of mimetic violence (social undifferentiation) in the ambiguous figure of the victim. In the Crucifixion the Girardian mimetic crisis is in process. Through mimetic contagion the two thieves, the dicer and the crucifier all acquire characteristics of Christ: indeed the crucifier’s leg/hand and his hammer replicate the T-crosses themselves. The anthropological theory of sacred ambivalence inflected Kristeva’s formulation of the abject’s ‘vortex of summons and repulsion,’ too.

Notwithstanding the Crucifixion’s communication with what Giorgio Agamben has termed the ‘scientific mythologeme’ of sacred ambiguity, I want to suggest that one might rethink the Crucifixion, and with it Bataillean heterology, as apocalyptic. I’m indebted on this topic to Malcolm Bull’s extraordinary book, Seeing Things Hidden: Apocalypse, Vision and Totality, which analyses apocalyptic as the revelation, return or reincorporation of the undifferentiation – the contradiction or indeterminacy – excluded by ontic and epistemic
bivalence. While Derrida and Girard feature in Bull’s argument, as does Kristeva, Bataille barely gets a mention. Yet in Bull’s terms Bataille is the most apocalyptic of thinkers.

In the unpublished text from 1930, ‘The Use-Value of D.A.F. de Sade,’ Bataille sketched out his ‘heterological theory of knowledge’:

[T]he intellectual process automatically limits itself by producing of its own accord its own waste products, thus liberating in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element. Heterology is restricted to taking up again, consciously and resolutely, this terminal process which up until now has been seen as the abortion and the shame of human thought.

*In that way [heterology] leads to the complete reversal of the philosophical process, which ceases to be the instrument of appropriation, and now serves excretion* [...].

That is to say, heterology reverses the process by which, ‘As soon as the effort at rational comprehension ends in contradiction, the practice of intellectual scatology requires the excretion of unassimilable elements.’ It’s a deconstructive operation, and an apocalyptic one according to Bull’s definition; in fact for Bataille it goes hand in hand with catastrophic Revolution. Likewise the *informe*, in the various descriptions Krauss gives of it, is an operation of binary undifferentiation. Apocalyptic undoes the separations and differences that maintain cosmic order, so that religious apocalypse manifests the transgression of taboo and the undifferentiation of fundamental differences – hence the predominance of monsters in the Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic texts. Picasso’s picture is a shambles of undifferentiation: of figure/ground; self/other; infant/mother; human/non-human; right/left. The differential order is collapsing. Picasso visits apocalyptic on the *Crucifixion*.

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1 This article proceeds from the paper I gave at *Picasso in the late 1920s*, a conference at the University of California, Berkeley, 23-24 March 2007. I would like to thank Professors Tim Clark and Anne Wagner for the invitation to attend this very focused and productive event; many thanks also to my respondents, Amy Lyford and Sebastian Zeidler.


4 For Zeidler’s work see his article in this number of the *Papers of Surrealism*. T.J. Clark turned to Leiris’s article, ‘Toiles récentes de Picasso’ (*Documents* 2, 1930, 57-71), in his lecture, ‘The Ordinary Optimism of Picasso,’ at *Picasso in the late 1920s* (see note 1, above). One should also


See my ‘Introduction: The Use-Value of *Documents,*’ in this number of the *Papers of Surrealism*.


Kaufmann, ‘Picasso’s *Crucifixion* of 1930,’ 554.

*Documents* doesn’t give exact dates of publication, but *Documents* 2, 1930, 50, reports a conference at the Musée Guimet on 26 January, and contains advertisements for the forthcoming numbers of the journals *Europe* and *Variétés*, dated 15 February and 15 March respectively. *Documents* 3, 1930, the ‘Hommage à Picasso,’ contains advertisements for exhibitions, at the Galerie Vignon (1-15 April), the Galerie Georges Bernheim (31 March-12 April), the Galerie de France (3-19 April), and announces the next number, 4, as coming out on 1 May 1930. It is therefore most likely that the *Crucifixion* was painted while the ‘Hommage à Picasso’ was in preparation. Given its brevity, it is probable that Bataille wrote ‘Soleil pourri’ after Picasso painted the *Crucifixion*. It’s fun to imagine Bataille seeing the picture, then writing the text, but I have no data to support such a claim. In any case, Bataille’s anti-idealist construal of Picasso was in place well before February 1930 – see Bataille, ‘Le “Jeu Lugubre”,’ *Documents* 7, 1929, 369-372; 369.

I am speaking generally and not claiming any special genetic privilege for the 1930 *Crucifixion*.


sophisticated of these accounts, Cox refers back to Kaufmann's identification of the 'left-hand Mantis-headed figure as the Magdalen,' when the figure in question is on the right-hand side of the painting ('Marat/Sade/Picasso,' 397). This error is symptomatic of the trouble to which the picture puts both identity and binarism.

17 John 19:32.
19 John 19:34.
20 In the words of the Church Father St John Chrysostom, in the Roman Breviary (Feast of the Precious Blood [1 July], Second Nocturn): 'De latere sanguis et aqua. Nolo tam facile, auditor, transeas tanti secreta mysterii; restat enim mihi mystica atque secretalis oratio. Dixi baptismatis symbolum et mysteriorum, aquam illam et sanguinem demonstrare. Ex his enim sancta fundata est Ecclesia per lavacri regenerationem, et renovationem Spiritus Sancti. Per baptisma, inquam, et mysteria, quae ex latere videntur esse prolata. Ex latere igitur suo Christus aedificavit Ecclesiam, sicut de latere Adam ejus conjux Eva prolata est.'
22 Philippe Sollers, 'Crucifixions,' in Corps crucifiés, 59-61; 60.
31 There is a useful comparative list of works exhibited at the Galeries Georges Petit and the Zurich Kunsthau in Christian Geelhaar, Picasso: Wegbereiter und Förderer seines Aufstiegs 1899-1939, Palladion/ABC Verlag, Zurich, 1993, 266-268.
32 Raphael, ‘Picasso’, 140
34 Maritain, St Thomas Aquinas, 42.
35 An entry in Leiris’s journal from 1926 reads: ‘Sur le thomisme. Métaphysique venue d’Aristote, opposée à la Dialectique de Hegel. C’est la forme la plus sèche, la plus abstraite, la plus dénuée de sens historique de la pensée catholique. Elle représente dans la pensée chrétienne, contre le courant mystique (qui s’accorde avec l’origine orientale du christianisme), le courant intellectualiste gréco-latin [...]. En un mot il représente le catholicisme sous sa forme le plus


38 Maritain himself targeted surrealism as worshipping a false god in poetry, an error that ‘will give a new development to the old heresies of the free spirit’ – that is, the medieval pantheism that stated that since all was divine there was no sin and therefore everything was permitted. For Maritain the psychoanalytic literary subculture was both symptom and cause of a perverse, godless world: ‘The air we breathe is saturated with spiritual filth and we have returned to the great night of the agony of paganism, when man has to cope not only with his own wretched body but with a body scourged by the angels of Satan, when all nature clothes itself with obscene symbols, a nightmare the obsession of which literary Freudism is busily multiplying.’ See Jacques Maritain, Frontiers of Poetry, trans. J.F. Scanlon, Sheed and Ward, London, 1930, 103 and 116. On surrealism and Catholicism see Fiona Bradley, An Oxymoronic Encounter of Surrealism and Catholicism: Ernst, Dalí and Gengenbach, PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, 1995.

39 Raphael, ‘Picasso,’ 140.


45 Georges Bataille, ‘L’Apocalypse de Saint-Sever,’ Documents 2, 1929, 74-84; 75.


49 The images shown from the Saint-Sever Beatus were the Annunciation to the Shepherds (fol. 12 verso 13) and a photograph of the Mappa mundi (fol. 45 bis). See Bibliothèque Nationale, Catalogue des manuscrits-estampes, médailles et objets d’art imprimés exposés du 28 Janvier au 28 Février 1926, Editions de la Gazette des Beaux-Arts, Paris, 1926, 23-24 (nos. 26- 26 bis).


55 Aristotle describes this economy of understanding in Poetics 1448b: ‘[U]nderstanding gives great pleasure not only to philosophers but likewise to others too, though the latter have a smaller share in it. This is why people enjoy looking at images [tas eikonas], because through contemplating them it comes about that they understand and infer [sullogizesthai] what each element means.’ Aristotle, Poetics, ed. and trans. Stephen Halliwell, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2005, 39.


65 Sebastian Zeidler nicely parsed this in his response to my lecture at ‘Picasso in the late 1920s.’ See note 1.

66 On base materialism see my ‘Introduction: The Use-Value of Documents,’ in this journal.


69 Barr, Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art, 67.


72 Cox, 'Marat/Sade/Picasso,' 394.

73 Kaufmann describes it vaguely as a ‘ritual figure’ (‘Picasso’s Crucifixion of 1930,’ 557). Chénieux-Gendron suggestively – though with misleading certitude – refers to Apollinaire’s poem ‘Zone’ when she describes the motif as ‘an enormous fetish figure “from Oceania and Guinea,” the “Lower Christ of Dark Hopes” (a reminder of Apollinaire).’ See Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, ‘Setting a surrealist stage for Picasso: Framing “the genius”,’ in The Surrealist Picasso, 215-224; 221.

74 I owe this insight to an audience-member at ‘Picasso in the late 1920s.’ See note 1.


76 Kaufmann, ‘Picasso’s Crucifixion of 1930,’ 554.

77 When the Paris Musée Picasso devoted an entire exhibition to the theme of crucifixion, it reproduced in translation Kaufmann’s 1969 Burlington Magazine article. See Ruth Kaufmann, ‘La Crucifixion de Picasso, de 1930,’ in Corps crucifiés, 74-83.; Picasso: Sous le soleil de Mithra, which took ‘Soleil pourri’ as its epigraph, also rehearsed the solecism (115).

78 See n. 75

79 Kaufmann, ‘Picasso’s Crucifixion of 1930,’ 554.

80 Bataille identifies the beholder of the ‘rotten sun’ with the sacrificial victim, correlative to the viewer of Picasso’s painting: ‘Mythologiquement, le soleil regardé s’identifie avec un homme qui égorge un taureau (Mithra) [...] ; celui qui regarde avec le taureau égorgé [...] . Dans la peinture actuelle [...] la recherche d’une rupture de l’élévation portée à son comble, et d’un éclat à prétention aveuglante a une part dans l’élaboration, ou dans la décomposition des formes, mais cela n’est sensible, à la rigueur, que dans la peinture de Picasso.’ (Bataille, ‘Soleil pourri,’ 174.) I should signal here two misleading Englishings of ‘Soleil pourri.’ Alan Stoekl (Visions of Excess, 57) renders ‘celui qui regarde avec le taureau égorgé’ as ‘in other words, with the man who looks along with the slain bull,’ rather than, ‘he who beholds, with the slaughtered bull.’ Stoekl creates ambiguity needlessly: Bataille clearly identifies the rotten sun with Mithras and its beholder with Mithras’s sacrificial victim. In Bois and Krauss, Formless: A User’s Guide (81-83), ‘mais cela n’est sensible, à la rigueur, que dans la peinture de Picasso,’ is translated as, ‘though this is, in ever so small a degree, only noticeable in the paintings of Picasso.’ ‘A la rigueur’ is surely better rendered as ‘rigorously speaking’; Stoekl has ‘strictly speaking’ (Visions of Excess, 58). The misrepresentation is exacerbated by Bois’s succeeding comment: ‘The “in ever so small a degree” is important’ (Formless: A User’s Guide, 83).

81 Cf. Derrida, ‘From Restricted to General Economy,’ 267.


83 See Leo Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, 82-93. In the context of this essay it is interesting that Steinberg identifies representations of the deposed Christ touching his genitals with a theological reference to the original wound of the Circumcision. Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ, 104.


85 My thanks to Amy Lyford for this suggestion.

86 For these see Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ, 132.

87 James H. Marrow, Passion Iconography in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and Early Renaissance, Kortrijk, Belgium, 1979, 323, n. 697.

88 Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ, 16.


The only commentator to note this appears to have been Gasman, *Mystery, Magic and Love in Picasso*, 1051.


For Kristeva abjection is apocalyptic: 'The time of abjection is double: a time of oblivion and thunder, of veiled infinity and the moment when revelation bursts forth.' *Powers of Horror*, 9.


Bataille is careful to distinguish heterogeneous revolutionary destruction from the 'Christian apocalypse' – suggesting that his is an atheological apocalypse, 'The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade,' 100.

See my 'Introduction: The Use-Value of Documents,' in this journal.

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Arnaud Dandieu and the Epistemology of Documents

Christian Roy

The significance of the two contributions of Arnaud Dandieu (1897-1933) to the review Documents has only recently been realised – though not, until now, by scholars of the avant-garde. Since both articles dealt with Émile Meyerson, they were among the numerous texts by Dandieu rediscovered in a 2004 dissertation, on the psychological contexts of Meyerson’s philosophy of science, by Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos, who has otherwise been instrumental in the current renewal of interest in a once-towering figure of French epistemology.¹ Coming on the heels of the recruitment, in a major UK-based human geography journal, of Dandieu’s Documents texts as a departure-point for theorising world city topologies,² this marks the reintroduction of Dandieu’s thought into the mainstream of one of the many fields to which he made original contributions, other than to political ideas. In the latter context, in 2001 Thomas Keller was the first seriously to address Dandieu’s links with Georges Bataille and Documents, in his book about the relationship between French and German ‘Third Way’ discourses between the wars, notably in the section on Dandieu’s ‘Personalist anthropology of self-expenditure,’ in the chapter devoted to ‘the Federalist Personalism of Ordre Nouveau.’³ Keller is the first to have included Bataille’s circle in the spectrum of French ‘non-conformist’ movements, such as Ordre Nouveau, that blurred conventional right-left distinctions in the 1930s.⁴

The best known of the other so-called ‘non-conformist’ movements of the interwar period was Emmanuel Mounier’s review Esprit. Founded in 1932, Esprit is still alive and well, at the forefront of intellectual debates in France, though no longer as closely associated as it once was with Personalist philosophy – which it is often credited with introducing as a widely influential form of Christian progressivism. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Personalism, as a politicised form of existential thought that hinged on a distinction between the concrete particular person and the generic individual conceivable in masses, was first developed in this group’s largely – though by no means exclusively – secular ‘Nietzschean’ context, from its inception in early 1931. Only later was it borrowed, adapted and spread in a more unambiguously Christian guise by the mostly Catholic intellectuals of Esprit.⁵ In order to establish its credentials for both the Christian and progressive constituencies that it was the first to bridge successfully in France, the Esprit group defined its own brand of ‘Communitarian Personalism’ by casting doubt on the ‘revolutionary Personalism’ of Ordre Nouveau, occasionally portraying it as right-wing or Fascist, so that Esprit’s ostensible 1934 break with Ordre Nouveau might appear to situate the former squarely on the left. This picture was consolidated by post-war sympathisers of Esprit, who projected the binary parameters of the Cold War back onto the 1930s, ignoring the complexities of ‘non-conformist’
politics, and giving short shrift to those who continued to propose Personalism as a ‘Third Way’ between capitalism and Communism. When, by the 1980s, American historians started digging past these left-Catholic reconstructions of the origins of Personalism, they promptly concurred with Marxist imputations of proto-Fascism to *Ordre Nouveau*, which seemed confirmed by the presence of Personalists in the early stages of Vichy institutions (regardless of their prominence in the Resistance as well, and even of some overlaps), and especially by *Ordre Nouveau*’s early contacts with German nationalist groups (though not with the National Socialist German Workers Party per se): did not its very name, after all, portend Fascist revolution?\(^5\)

However seductive it has appeared for a number of reasons (including ideological convenience), this line of interpretation is vitiated by, among other things, its assumption of reverse causality, since it explains earlier developments in terms of later ones, often by means of superficial connections and spurious analogies. It thereby fails to examine a ‘non-conformist’ movement such as Personalism on its own terms and in its own initial context, overdetermining its meaning to suggest the fatal consequences of entertaining critical discourses outside of liberal or Marxist categories. My own studies of *Ordre Nouveau*, based on previously unexplored published and unpublished sources, have been accepted as authoritative by recent continental scholarship.\(^7\) They are the first to have differentiated the emergence, formulation, positioning and ramifications of Personalism, in relation to an ideological spectrum where surrealism figured alongside various faiths as well as political movements of both right and left. Yet the Anglophone literature on Personalism and *Ordre Nouveau* continues to be dominated by outdated, even sensationalistic invocations of ‘French Fascism.’\(^8\)

Fortunately, a recent Cambridge dissertation on Denis de Rougemont (an *Ordre Nouveau* Personalist whose ties to the Collège de Sociologie are relatively well-known), which may be the best historical account of Personalism available in English, has reviewed the debate on Personalism’s relation to Fascism, concluding that the former falls outside most accepted definitions of the latter in terms of stated objectives and modes of action, despite some common objects of negation; thus, their respective antiliberal, anticonservative, anticapitalist and anticomunist revolutionary claims actually make Personalism and Fascism rivals on the same contested ‘Third Way’ field.\(^9\) As for *Ordre Nouveau*’s networking for allies or counterparts in late Weimar Germany, far from importing to France Germany’s ‘Conservative Revolution’ (a catch-all term for a disparate array of radical neo-nationalist ideologies), it was a conscious attempt to export to a still-fluid German revolutionary context, thought of as in dire need of doctrinal clarity, the new dispensation of French Personalism. In fact Personalism’s *Ordre Nouveau* originators compared it to the advent of Socialism among earlier revolutionary movements, enabling them to critique all twentieth-century revolutions so far as falling short of their doctrine’s exacting standards.
It happens that this graft of French Personalism to German revolutionary politics was only successful to any degree with Harro Schulze-Boysen, a ‘National-Bolshevist’ intellectual who would go on to lead the pro-Soviet ‘Red Orchestra’ Resistance network, for which he was executed in 1942. In 1931, Schulze-Boysen had become a close ally of Ordre Nouveau in his capacity as director of the revived Dadaist publication Gegner, which for a while could even be taken for the French movement’s German antenna, some of whose debates found echoes in Bataille’s circle in La Critique sociale. Arnaud Dandieu was minimally involved in these contacts with Germany, yet his few comments on that scene are unambiguous. In one of his last articles to appear before his premature death on 6 August 1933, he pointedly referred to recent works by German nationalist authors, whom he saw as heirs to Romanticism, in order to dismiss the new Hitler regime as a monstrous still-birth; for like Stalinism and Italian Fascism, it was based on ‘the lyricism of dreams and the metaphysics of becoming or synthesis,’ against which he called on ‘the blood of Nietzsche’ to mix with that of François Rabelais and René Descartes (once rescued from Cartesianism), so as to restore balance to Western civilisation in a new order where institutions would be attuned to the creative acts of concrete persons. This for him was what Nietzsche literally stood for: ‘erect man’ (‘l’homme debout’) as opposed to ‘reclining man’ (‘l’homme couché, celui des heures nocturnes, comme disait [D. H.] Lawrence’). To the latter he ascribed three ‘prestiges,’ all illustrated with examples featuring an implied or overt critique of surrealism.

In reverse order, the third ‘prestige’ of ‘reclining man’ was ‘the poetry of the belly and the underbelly,’ to which psychoanalysis contributed in spite of its undoubted merits; the second ‘prestige’ was Romantic melancholy and more generally ‘irréalisme’ (including surrealism just as the subconscious is tied to the unconscious), exemplified by the dispersal of the self in automatic writing, Marcel Proust’s ‘interruption des sentiments’ and André Gide’s ‘acte gratuit’; the first ‘prestige’ was what Nietzsche called ‘immaculate knowledge,’ the mind as mirror for the subject as spectator, in a passive attitude that could have as a counterpart ‘adherence to any determinism, even a materialist one,’ as in the case of ‘the aesthetes of Le Grand Jeu, a small group that got itself talked about a while back in avant-garde circles and that claimed to reintroduce Oriental thought in the West,’ ‘seeing no problem in declaring themselves Marxists, since historical materialism could be considered by the individual as a way to negate himself.’ This showed how materialism was but a thinly disguised form of idealism, which Dandieu rejected on account of the passive, disembodied subject it implied; due to its conflation of spiritualist quietism with materialist determinism – the worst of the East with the worst of the West as it were – Le Grand Jeu appeared in several of his writings and publications as an adversary to be taken seriously, precisely because its mystical wager was the polar opposite of his own stance: a defence of a West defined by the violence of a creative conflict with the real.
Except for its Eurocentrism (on an East-West axis at least), this intellectual project overlapped with that other dissident orientation relative to surrealism: namely, Documents, though perhaps not so much Bataille’s ‘base materialism’ as Carl Einstein’s brand of anti-idealism. Sebastian Zeidler’s presentation of Einstein’s thought, on 24 June 2006 at the conference accompanying the Hayward Gallery ‘Undercover Surrealism’ exhibition, suggested parallels with Dandieu. For Dandieu also developed Nietzsche’s defence of the real, by way of a phenomenology of time and space as critical of Bergsonian flux as of idealist stasis, articulating as a third position that of an active subject who surrenders to neither tendency in its adherence to the instant. Dandieu too pursued a point of dynamic, optimal tension between opposite tendencies in the protoplasmic composite of subjectivity. Not unlike Einstein, Dandieu sought a support for this third position in Africa, which for him represented grounded rhythm (e.g. jazz) and concrete space (the fetish), over against, on the one hand, the endless melody and boundless fluidity of a mystical ‘Orient’ (including Russia and Germany), and on the other hand, the rigid meter and mechanical methodology of the scientistic ‘American Cancer’ of Western culture. (It has been my experience that some contemporary African intellectuals readily find a kindred spirit in Dandieu in questioning neo-colonial thought patterns, precisely on the basis of his phenomenology of space.\(^{14}\)) Zeidler could refer to what he disclosed of Einstein’s thought as ‘the tip of an iceberg,’ and I find it tempting to use the same phrase about Dandieu, though his writings still to a large extent await edition and publication, to say nothing of translation.\(^{15}\)

Even though they were brought back to the attention of Esprit’s readers by his faithful collaborator Robert Aron in October 1973,\(^{16}\) the ideas of Arnaud Dandieu are only still remembered today as the main source (along with the Mutualist Socialism of Proudhon to which he was himself indebted) of the Federalist Personalism of the Ordre Nouveau movement. Ordre Nouveau lives on (however discreetly by now) in a wing of the European federalist movement revolving around the Centre international de formation européenne, based in Nice, where I was able to copy doubles of his original papers, deposited at the Bibliothèque Nationale after the death of Dandieu’s sister Mireille in 1962; in 1987 I was the first ever to consult them there.\(^{17}\) Yet there was little doubt among Dandieu’s contemporaries that his early death at thirty-five robbed them of one the most promising thinkers of the early 1930s – ‘the Bergson of our generation,’ it was even claimed.\(^{18}\) Dandieu’s ideas were perpetuated in the review L’Ordre Nouveau, which he had launched in 1933, until its last issue in 1938, and to their last breath by some of the group’s more prominent thinkers, be it the Russian-born philosopher-cum-professional-revolutionary Alexandre Marc (1904-2000), the Swiss writer Denis de Rougemont (1905-1986), or Dandieu’s early associates Robert Aron (1898-1975), the journalist and editor with whom he co-wrote three books and a number of articles, and Claude Chevalley (1909-1984), one of the great mathematicians of the twentieth century, who helped develop set theory in the Bourbaki Group he co-founded in 1934, while he was fairly close to Bataille.\(^{19}\)
If Dandieu’s legacy was soon to be confined within the largely Judaeo-Christian humanism of an increasingly marginal Federalist wing of French Personalism (which nonetheless played a crucial role in launching the movement for European integration just after the war), the side of his thought that is less easily subsumed under this heading could still find some resonance a few years after his demise. Thus, in his 1938 dissertation for Brown University on Marcel Proust and His French Critics, the American literary scholar Douglas W. Alden discerned in Arnaud Dandieu’s 1930 book (finished in August 1929), Marcel Proust: sa révélation psychologique, ‘the culmination of the modernist-surrealist interpretation,’ drawing on anthropology (Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), the phenomenology of religious experience (William James), child psychology (Jean Piaget), and epistemology (Émile Meyerson). There thus exists a substantial study of Proust from the standpoint of Documents’ sensibility (comparing him to James Frazer and invoking G. H. Luquet’s work on children’s drawings) that had a serious impact at the time (including on Samuel Beckett in his first book devoted to this author), but seems to have fallen below the radar of both Proustian and surrealist studies. The book was published in French by Humphrey Milford, the Oxford University publisher, on the recommendation of Dandieu’s friend, the retired diplomat and English literary scholar Abel Chevalley, through whom Dandieu not only met Chevalley’s son Claude, but also befriended Émile Meyerson in 1928. Having read Eugène Minkowski’s 1927 book on schizophrenia, Dandieu asked Meyerson to arrange a meeting with Minkowski, and the two became close; the influence could well have been mutual, since Minkowski, in his later work on the phenomenology of time and of sensations, draws, like Dandieu, from Meyerson. Dandieu read Meyerson and Minkowski into each other as it were; he rarely mentioned the philosopher of science without bringing up the psychiatrist, and vice versa. This is already clear in Dandieu’s contribution to the ‘Espace’ entry in the ‘Dictionary’ section of the first issue of Documents’ second year, 1930.

A year later, Dandieu edited the Anthologie des philosophes français contemporains, contributing many introductory essays to the selections from thinkers he divided up between ‘conformists’ (i.e. Thomists, idealists, behaviourists, sociologists, Marxists, Freudians) and ‘heterodox.’ Dandieu singled out Meyerson, Minkowski and Lévy-Bruhl among the latter, in addition to writing the entries devoted to them, among others. However, he left the last entry, devoted to René Daumal, to the latter’s friend and Le Grand Jeu associate Roger Gilbert-Lecomte. As I have already suggested, Le Grand Jeu’s mystical version of surrealism, aiming at absolute depersonalisation, in an Orientalising Spinozist pantheistic fusion enforced by the secular arm of Stalin, was often alluded to by Dandieu (even in his deathbed delirium) as the most dangerous spiritual temptation facing France and the West. It was obviously the antithesis of Personalism, though Dandieu felt it was contrary to his own orientation prior to his encounter with the latter doctrine on its emergence from the Ordre Nouveau group at the beginning of 1931.
Likewise, Dandieu’s contributions to *Documents* allow us to see the main outlines of his philosophy of science densely inscribed even before he joined the Personalist cause.

Some time before the foundation of *Ordre Nouveau*, the economic basis for its social criticism and institutional planning was also first presented to the public in another dissident surrealist review: *Bifur*, edited by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes (who significantly framed his homage to Giorgio di Chirico in *Documents* as a realist creed). Since 1927, Arnaud Dandieu and his school friend Robert Aron, who was close to Roger Vitrac and Antonin Artaud as the manager of the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry, had been hammering out in weekly brainstorming sessions the new critical theory and revolutionary doctrine they felt the modern world desperately needed. Having heard of it, in August 1929, a friend of Aron, Pierre Lévy, who was launching the review *Bifur* as its director, asked the tandem to contribute a political article, and they obliged with the first application of their new approach to a topical issue: the Young Plan for the repayment of war debts, which they discussed as ‘a phenomenon of social neurosis’ in terms of Minkowski’s theory of schizophrenia. Many other articles on the perils of modern nationalism and international finance would soon follow in Romain Rolland’s review *Europe*, in a steady collaboration ending with ‘La philosophie de M. Meyerson et l’avenir du rationalisme’ on 15 August 1932, in parallel with three co-authored books: *Décadence de la Nation française* (1931), *Le Cancer américain* (1932) and *La Révolution nécessaire* (1933). Dandieu’s last book drew the full socio-political implications of Marcel Mauss’s *Essai sur le don* (1924), concurrent with Georges Bataille’s own reading of Mauss, indeed with Bataille’s anonymous collaboration. The latter’s article ‘La notion de dépense’ appeared in *La Critique Sociale* shortly before Dandieu completed *La Révolution Nécessaire*, on the eve of his untimely death from a benign hernia operation gone horribly wrong.

It was no doubt Bataille who invited Dandieu to contribute to *Documents* alongside him on one of the topics they would have discussed in long conversations almost daily at the Bibliothèque Nationale, where both men were employed. They even jointly curated a small tercentennial Spinoza exhibition that ran from December 1932 to January 1933. There are detailed witness reports of Dandieu’s career as a librarian there from 1924 onwards, and of his interactions with other staff, including historian Jean Baruzi (1881-1953), a specialist of Saint John of the Cross (whose work would be used by Bataille in *L’Expérience intérieure*), and Henry Corbin (1903-1978), the future specialist of Shiite mysticism, who was then fascinated with Heidegger, even translating for *Bifur* his ‘Was ist Metaphysik’ (also a reference-point of *L’Expérience intérieure*). As for Dandieu’s interaction with Bataille, the cross-fertilization of ideas across a similar range of themes and disciplines raises the question of influence as surely as it makes it almost impossible to answer with much certainty, in the absence of surviving correspondence (since daily workplace encounters unfortunately precluded the kind of written exchanges that would have left traces).
Though it might seem convenient to assume that Bataille, who has made it into the canon, merely found an epigone in Dandieu, who has not, many facts fly in the face of such a hasty conclusion. It would be premature to try to set them out here, before Dandieu’s writings and biography have been carefully examined and analysed; yet I have no doubt that the comparative study of Dandieu and Bataille would open new historical insights and theoretical avenues, and turn out to be at least as fruitful as recent comparisons of the latter with Simone Weil across a greater intellectual and moral gulf. For the purposes of this article, I must largely limit myself to discussing Dandieu’s texts for *Documents* and their place in this review’s project as well as in the context of his own thought, only mentioning in passing some points of contact with Bataille’s.

The parallel is however suggested by the way Bataille and Dandieu shared the responsibility for a crucial entry in the review’s ‘Critical Dictionary’ in early 1930. In the first part of ‘Espace,’ taking up one third of the space and entitled ‘Questions de convenances’ (‘Matters of propriety’), Bataille seems content to stick out his tongue at philosophy as a father-figure, juxtaposing jarring images against the general idea of abstract space [fig. 1]. This functions as a
comic warm-up for Dandieu’s tightly packed theoretical deconstruction of the latter idea, in the second section, entitled ‘Fondements de la dualité de l’espace,’ which provides a concise statement of many constant themes of Dandieu’s thought, as well perhaps as of the implicit epistemology of Documents, since it is after all the review’s ‘dictionary definition’ of a theme often treated in its pages, by Einstein in particular.

Dandieu’s text begins with a declaration of love for space, consonant with the group of unpublished texts posthumously gathered by Aron under the title _L’espace ami de l’homme_, which draws out the historical, political and economic implications of Dandieu’s phenomenology of space. It is presented from the outset as a two-pronged assault against both geometric space and Bergsonian _durée_, since the latter ‘subordinates space to time.’ Meyerson is said to provide the antidote to this subtler peril by laying bare Bergson’s utilitarian assumptions, subordinating _Homo sapiens_ to _Homo faber_. This line of argument is of a piece with Dandieu’s anti-utilitarian critique of every form of pragmatism, and especially with his radical application to political economy of Mauss’s anthropology of the gift. It is the utilitarian principle, in the form of the need to manipulate given objects for the subject’s self-interested ends, that explains the passage in Bergson from a primal experience of space as a concrete, discrete solid to a secondary conceptualisation of it as continuous and abstract extension:

The first implies adherence to a concrete and limited thing, the reality of the diverse, of the discontinuous, of transitive action by contact or by shock; the second, which is none other than Cartesian extension, assumes on the contrary the rationality of the real, the logical and icy monism of the scientists.

Dandieu criticises modern physicists’ need to ‘superimpose the real and the rational’ by reducing the former to the generic object postulated by the latter’s ideal schemes (even when ‘quantum theory, which reintroduces the discontinuous and the irrational in science, appears at first to confirm Meyerson’s postulate of the irreducibility of the real), in his other contribution to Documents (5, 1930). It is a review of Meyerson’s article ‘Le Physicien et le Primitif’ in the May-June 1930 issue of Lévy-Bruhl’s _Revue philosophique_, to which Dandieu himself would contribute in December an article on ‘Le Conflit du réel et du rationnel dans la psychologie du temps et de l’espace.’ In all his texts pertaining to the assumptions of science, Dandieu makes critical use of the distinction introduced in Meyerson’s first book _Identité et réalité_ (1908), which went through four editions by 1932, the year before they both died. The principle of identity here represents the urge to explain by reducing disparate facts to the sameness of the sign of equality that can be introduced between a cause and the effects which are assumed to be already contained therein. It corresponds to the reversibility and homogeneity of time and space, as opposed to the irreversible newness and heterogeneous rawness of endlessly diverse facts that always at first
defy explanation and challenge it to rein them into a causal scheme. But the irrational substratum of the real is never exhausted by any such attempt at mastery, and keeps sticking out, thus spurring on the endless process of science as the steady conquest of an ever-elusive territory that can never be equated with its map.\textsuperscript{40}

Yet this is the fantasy pursued by reason when it falls into the trap of the cognitive disorder Dandieu uncovers in every corner of the modern malaise, under the heading of psychophysical or rationalist ‘parallelism.’ As defined at the beginning of the Proust book Dandieu finished in 1929, ‘parallelism is the rationalist theory according to which the series of material facts and that of psychic facts correspond term by term, merely translate into one another, these two orders of facts thus being considered to be parallel.’\textsuperscript{41} Robert Aron gives the following gloss on this quotation in his unpublished introduction to a projected anthology of Arnaud Dandieu’s works:

This is to say that the laws of the world are the same as those of the spirit, that the latter conceives of nothing other than what is rational: man’s moral and spiritual life thus becomes one with the practical life that ends up absorbing everything. This is the veritable diktat of a rational technique that imposes itself on the reality of the spirit and on its relationships with the world. There result from it several very grave symptoms that Arnaud Dandieu analyses or describes in the course of [L’Esprit révolutionnaire, an unpublished text from about 1929]: reduction of most people to their economic role, transformation of patriotism into a nationalism that is defined by its borders, general loss of contact with reality, a schizophrenia that leads to every perversion.

It is against all this that the revolutionary spirit must react. According to Dandieu, it is then inspired by three main doctrines: Marxism, which is valid in economic matters, anarchism, which opposes the State’s predominance, and finally Nietzscheanism, which, through its cult of violence, allows the individual to regain contact with the real.\textsuperscript{42}

In L’Esprit révolutionnaire, the ‘refutation of parallelism’ rests on the demonstration that ‘the relationship between subject and object, spirit and matter, need and commodity, pre-exists these terms,’ and draws from:

1/ sociology (Lévy-Bruhl)
2/ epistemology (Meyerson)
3/ psychology and psychopathology (Bergson, psychoanalysts, Russell, Whitehead, etc…)
There results from this a new notion of the concrete which, when it becomes conscious, may alter and clarify the true goals of the Revolution.\(^{43}\)

These goals are suggested in the first sentence of this manifesto, which states that ‘individual – and subsidiarily social – life has as its goal and wellspring pleasure accompanied by creation that follows upon it,’ as asserted in a first principle ascribed to Minkowski: ‘From the psychological standpoint, pleasure is the feeling of contact with the real,’ contrary to the parallelistic Freudian opposition of the pleasure principle and the reality principle. Contact with the real in Minkowski’s sense already appears as the fulcrum of Arnaud Dandieu’s pleasure-driven social and cultural criticism in this 1929 text, in a way that is immediately echoed in his January 1930 *Documents* article on space, where it takes centre-stage halfway through a line of argumentation that first relied on Meyerson. For ‘the fundamental distinction’ of the rational and the real is ‘strongly demonstrated not only by epistemology, but by the psychiatrist’s clinical observations,’ namely by Dr. Minkowski’s identification of a ‘concrete space, prior to any intellectual data and whose notion survives the ruin of intelligence’ in the demented, as opposed to the schizophrenic:

The second, who on the contrary has by no means lost the notion of Cartesian space, who on the contrary is afflicted with morbid geometrism, has lost the affective notion of the here-and-now, of this concrete and specific present where, as Ward very aptly says, the here seems to dominate and condition the now.\(^{44}\)

This is the primacy of lived space over notional time that Dandieu aims to restore to creative centrality in Western culture, through an emphasis on the existential sense of the embodied here-and-now that finds many echoes among his contemporaries, beyond the *Ordre Nouveau* group of which it is a key tenet; closest to Dandieu’s circles, one need only mention the Barthian Protestant review *Hic et nunc*, where *Ordre Nouveau*’s Denis de Rougemont, *Esprit*’s Roger Breuil and the Bibliothèque Nationale’s Henry Corbin would strive to reinterpret the Christian faith as an incarnational event in the existential sense of Kierkegaard’s ‘instant.’\(^{45}\) For the Dandieu of *Documents*, ‘the instantaneous, the simultaneous’ can only be represented as the ‘shock’ of two solids, like Hume’s marbles.\(^{46}\) A simile that would have been even more at home amidst the shock imagery favoured in *Documents* is used to depict the literal ‘shock of the new’ in Dandieu and Aron’s 1928 *Discours contre la méthode*:

Between this active novelty [nouveauté agissante], surprising and as inexplicable as the boxer’s punch, and the seasonal novelties that the calendar accounts for, there is the same difference as between brutal Revolution and lazy evolution, which leaves it to time
to solve the problem. Novelty negates time, or rather, acting upon it and putting all clocks forward, it conversely denies it any ability to act upon itself. Born of unexpected contacts, operating by successive leaps, it partakes of the unpredictability and the irrationality of life.

For the real joins life [...].

[...] If we want to account for it, we have to evoke the affective totality of those privileged moments when the real appears to us and distracts us from our rational faculties.\(^{47}\)

In an unpublished manuscript entitled ‘Renversement du bergsonisme (cf. Whitehead, Forster),’ part of a set on duration and space, Dandieu marshals Pierre Janet’s realisation of ‘the heterogeneity of the world and of man’ against the insistence of Bergson and Freud that memory retains everything. On the contrary, ‘man retains only the affective peaks of events ascertained by making contact [prises de contact].’ Dandieu emphasizes, over against both the seamless continuity of abstract space and the smooth flow of Bergsonian durée, what he calls the ‘temporal discontinuous: psychological analysis. Quantum theory. Search for psychological peaks of memory. Revenge of quality and the concrete.\(^{48}\) These quantum leaps of full – if not unmediated – presence can take the form of Proust’s madeleine as it catches the narrator unawares when he allows his mind to wander, but also that of the shock value soon to be cultivated in Documents, or the satisfaction of overcoming obstacles glorified later on at Ordre Nouveau: ‘We find triggering them elements of surprise, or even of horror and amazement, and at their culmination elements of pleasure or of conquest,’ as Dandieu says in the Discours contre la méthode.\(^{49}\) But whereas at Ordre Nouveau Dandieu would define the spirit (equated with permanent revolution in all spheres) in the terms with which he concludes his first Documents article – ‘the pure violence that escapes time, on which it therefore asserts its primacy’ – in January 1930 he still spoke of this concrete space revealed in the moment as introducing ‘the positive notion of an irrational and antispirtual real.’ Within a few months, the term ‘spiritual’ would lose for Dandieu the negative connotation he gave it here (perhaps to fit with Documents’ materialism), and would regain centrality, once divorced from an idealist understanding that all the ‘non-conformists of 1930,’ not least the Christians among them, agreed in repudiating in the name of embodied spirit. There was thus some existential common ground between them and people like Bataille, who opposed, in his article ‘Le bas matérialisme et la gnose’ in the same issue of Documents, a sovereign experience of base materialism to the sanitized objectivity of rationalist materialism, derided as a hypocritical avatar of idealism.

The discursive shift observable as Dandieu moves from the orbit of dissident surrealism to the germ cell of Personalism may affect slight circumstantial details of his rhetoric, but not the substance of what he has to say, thus attesting to an unexpected element of continuity between these apparently rival ideological horizons. The dramatic apex of this intellectual cross-wiring may
be located in Dandieu’s deathbed conversion to a Catholic faith his Proudhonian family heritage had long made him wary of (a religious trajectory opposite to that of the lapsed seminarian Bataille). It was even philosophically motivated when he stated in Aron’s presence that Lipiansky (Alexandre Marc’s original Russian name) ‘reconciles the act and Catholicism.’ In their shared Ordre Nouveau language, the act was understood as the pure violence of an instantaneous change of plane that reorders reality in a flash of eternity, bringing it to a new level of creativity. Marc was so affected by the reports of his friend Dandieu’s last words that he soon thereafter formally joined through baptism the Catholic Church, towards which he had been leaning for several years; he would play a decisive role in spreading in some key French Catholic circles a Personalist philosophy partly shaped by Dandieu, that helped pave the way for the profound transformations in the self-understanding of Christian life that came to a head with the Vatican II Council.

Not the least of these changes was a new appreciation of embodiment, turning away from an implicitly Platonising ascetic deprecation of the flesh. If this keen sense of incarnation was present on its own in Christian founders of Ordre Nouveau like Marc, Rougemont, and Daniel-Rops, it could only be confirmed in them by the decisive, even mystical importance Dandieu granted to ‘the revelation of touch’ (the theme of some unpublished manuscripts) as the privileged sense of contact with the real through an instantaneous, irrational act – as opposed to disembodied, timeless contemplation. An allusion to the crucial function of tactility in Dandieu’s thinking is found in his remark in Documents that, if mathematical time had historically appeared later than the Cartesian space with which it was practically interchangeable, it was only because touch seemed to maintain ‘a fragile, perhaps illusory bridge […] between the moi-ici-maintenant and abstract extension.’

This deficient sense of contact between the self-here-and-now and the surrounding space had far-reaching consequences for Dandieu and Aron who, in their Discours contre la méthode, had maintained that ‘the false individualism of industrialist democracies relies on this false conception of the personality’ as ‘a conventional unit without direct contact with the real,’ be it extended to the nation-state or reduced to the consumer or the stockholder – all taken to task in turn between 1929 and 1931 in their joint articles for Bifur and Europe, culminating in the 1932 book Le Cancer américain. Hence the need to blast open the ‘Socratic self, this final membrane that hides from us primal (protoplasmic) reality,’ since ‘the affective notion of the other alone has the synthetic value that allows it to unite opposites (the other as same, the other as other).’ According to what may be termed Dandieu’s heterology, announcing in some ways both Bataille and Emmanuel Levinas, the ‘original value of the Other, of the plane of the second person […] is, before anything else,’ beyond any ‘idealist mysticism,’ a ‘contact, an adherence to life and to the present’:
The personality is not closed. It is a locus of perpetual exchange between the world and us. The individual in whom the real and thought meet is neither perfect, nor fixed. He owes his dignity and his tragic greatness [son tragique] to his position as a frontier post, as a perpetual locus of osmosis between two different universes. To suppress this antinomy so as to obtain unity means to suppress any anxiety, any real progress.\textsuperscript{56}

It therefore goes without saying that ‘to throw the body outside of spatiality as does G.\[abriel\] Marcel is the morbid fantasy of a spirit medium,’ as Arnaud Dandieu observes in his ‘Contribution à un éloge du solide’ in \textit{L’espace ami de l’homme}.\textsuperscript{57}

In order to be overcome, conflict requires space in general and more particularly the solid, and more particularly a certain affinity of the human body considered as participating in existence and other bodies considered as exterior. Be it from the transcendental standpoint or from the scientific standpoint, it is in the spatial atmosphere that is effected the indispensable conciliation between the other as other and the other as same \textit{[l’autre en tant qu’autre et l’autre en tant que semblable]}. Outside of this atmosphere, anxiety prevails over creation and inhibits it instead of facilitating it. If faith can no longer impose real presence, there must soon appear another real presence….

The flag replaces the host, the uniform, the eagle or the statue replaces the altar; for man can no more do without fetishes than without language.\textsuperscript{58}

Hence the linkage of ‘Philosophie de l’angoisse et politique du désespoir,’ made by Arnaud Dandieu as early as October 1932, between the lapsed Catholic author of \textit{Being and Time} and the Nazi movement on the march, in a prescient article for the \textit{Revue d’Allemagne}.\textsuperscript{59}

Dandieu may have heard of the philosopher’s newfound political leanings before anybody else thanks to Henry Corbin,\textsuperscript{60} who had been deeply moved by the second German trip he had made especially to visit Heidegger, as recorded upon his return in Alexandre Marc’s 1931 diary, mentioning their April 27 meeting at the Bibliothèque Nationale.\textsuperscript{61}

But as far as science’s creative role in overcoming conflict with the real is concerned, in the January 1930 issue of \textit{Documents} Dandieu states that:

…by referring to Dr. Minkowski’s observations and by comparing them with Meyersonian theories among others, we realize that this purely irrational space is none other than individual contact with nature, to which science itself – however much it would wish otherwise, one might add – cannot refuse itself without committing suicide. At once syntonic and causal, this concrete space provides the basis for both purely affective pleasure and properly scientific hypotheses.\textsuperscript{62}
This could be seen as Arnaud Dandieu’s rejoinder to the ‘division between the spontaneous and causality’ that Carl Einstein had set up in the second issue of Documents, casting the rationalist’s causality as devoid ‘of any value from a psychological standpoint’ while, ‘given that the ego vanishes during ecstasy, we observe a syntonic attitude’ coming into play in hallucinatory processes. Combining features of atmospheric ‘sameness’ and resilient ‘otherness,’ Dandieu’s definition of concrete space can also ground epistemologically Documents’ constant juxtaposition of surrealist playfulness and solid scholarship, pop culture and antiquarianism, primitivist provocation and intellectual rigour. A favourite gesture of Documents writers is precisely that of demonstrating, on the basis of recent scientific findings, the continuity between the most typically modern, allegedly rational institutions and forms of behaviour on the one hand, and the most ‘primitive’ features of pre-modern ancient or exotic cultures on the other hand. Bataille and Dandieu’s diptych on ‘Space’ is thus immediately followed in the Documents dictionary by Michel Leiris’s entry on ‘Hygiene,’ where he turns on its head the prophylactic explanation of ancient taboos such as those found in Jewish law, claiming instead that ‘our modern hygiene is but a kind of more or less rationalised taboo,’ making the well-groomed modern man ‘worthy of figuring, club or spear in hand, alongside primitive men.’

Dandieu takes this procedure to its logical limit in his other contribution to Documents, in a mise-en-abyme that equates with shamanistic sorcery the very scientific methods that allow such comparisons with pre-scientific worldviews to be made in the first place. This entitles him to borrow a famous example taken from Lévy-Bruhl, and discussed by Meyerson in his forthcoming book Le Cheminement de la pensée, unfavourably to compare the Copenhagen interpretation of quantum physics, which tends to put into question the actual existence of a reality exterior to consciousness, with a Bororo’s claim to be an arara parrot; the Fulani herdsman may deny all evidence to the contrary, but he will not deny the existence of parrots, unlike the modern physicist who reduces the outside world to a view of the mind. Émile Meyerson and Louis de Broglie leaned on each other over the course of their respective careers to insist on the objectively real ground of quantum observations, against the increasingly prevalent position issuing from Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, by now popularly believed to converge with Eastern thought in making all of reality dependent on consciousness, and even one with it. Dandieu’s commitment to the tactile solidity of discontinuous diversity as the fulcrum of the human spirit’s quantum leaps (in contrast to the dizzying abyss that lures it to sovereign ruin as fluid excreta in Bataille’s base-materialist religiosity) makes him rise to the defence of more classic atomic models, and of vacuum itself, against this renewed idealist peril of an ether-like unified field.

It is to Meyerson’s discussion of Prince de Broglie’s recent work on wave mechanics that Dandieu devotes the second half of his Documents review of the epistemologist’s article ‘Le Physicien et le primitif,’ of which he clearly has inside knowledge. He starts out by announcing
that it is an excerpt of *Le Cheminement de la pensée*, adding that ‘without abandoning epistemology, the author of *L’Explication dans les sciences* claims to apply the method that is his own to common sense as much as to scientific reason.’ In fact, both Dandieu and Minkowski were going to expand, in their own work, on Meyerson’s sketched attempt to transpose to the cultural sciences his findings on the natural sciences. It was no coincidence if parts of the reviewed text had already appeared in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, ‘about the interesting session devoted to the theories of M. Lévy-Bruhl.’ (Dandieu would also publish a review of the latter’s *Le Surnaturel et la Nature dans la mentalité primitive* in *Europe’s* 15 October 1931 issue.) For Meyerson went so far as to ‘unite the prelogical and the logical, the magician and the scientist,’ having established that ‘our intellect’s most serious effort is cast in the same mould.’ Shorn of the dignity that his goals confer on the scientist in the eyes of society, his behaviour ‘takes on the aspect of a sorcerer’s dance – a far more essential dignity.’ Here is again the typical *Documents* gesture: the primitive provides the standard that explains the modern, and which it has to live up to. Dandieu would take this procedure with him to several venues other than *Documents*, for instance writing on the same topic with Claude Chevalley an ‘Esquisse d’une phénoménologie du savant,’ for the December 1932 issue of the Marseilles-based *Cahiers du Sud*, part of a series of joint essays, beginning with ‘Logique hilbertienne et psychologie’ in the same year’s January issue of Lévy-Bruhl’s *Revue philosophique*, continuing with ‘Rigueur et méthode axiomatique’ (immediately following an article by Eugène Minkowski) in Alexandre Koyré’s *Recherches philosophiques* of 1933, and coming to an abrupt end with the publication of ‘Réflexions sur la mesure considérée comme acte’ around the time of Dandieu’s death, in the July-August issue of the *Revue philosophique*.

It is likewise as a continuator of *Documents’* spirit that Dandieu would endeavour to show, culminating in the ‘Bible’ he posthumously bequeathed (with Bataille’s discreet help) to his *Ordre Nouveau* movement as *La Révolution nécessaire*, that ‘the study of the potlatch turns out to be extremely fertile in lessons concerning the genuine nature and the essential source of so-called economic phenomena.’ One of these lessons is that the social time of gift and counter-gift precedes the disembodied atemporality of quantifiable material exchange, that credit precedes both barter and cash. ‘But we should not think that this modern term covers new operations without historical precedent: far from raising as they believe above the laws of morals and history,’ people like Herbert Hoover who would make credit out of nothing ‘suddenly return, through the abstract figures of the balance-sheets of their pyramidal trusts, to the region of ritual gift, of the assertion of power characterizing the primitive magician’s naiveté.’

Credit is the most developed modern form of suggestive magic. Far from returning to the exchange of concrete objects, of identical values, we now only exchange fictitious
papers, odourless and weightless, signs at the most: we are in the realm of pure abstraction where the prestige of the sign abolishes real values.\textsuperscript{72}

Jean Baudrillard’s reiteration of this point in relation to today’s electronic environment, in his political economy of the sign in symbolic exchange, goes to show how Arnaud Dandieu’s barely re-emerging lost continent of cross-disciplinary critical reflection might complement Bataille’s visions of excess, in helping us interpret the postmodern world whose outline they anticipated, by apprehending the pre-modern modes that endure in mutant forms in advanced industrial societies. The far-from accidental pairing of their voices in defining ‘Space’ for \textit{Documents} thus appears as a tantalizing hint of the radical questioning to which research on Dandieu, and on the Personalist connection to surrealism, may put the epistemological assumptions of modern science and social life.

\textsuperscript{1} Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos, \textit{La Philosophie de l’intellect d’Émile Meyerson. De l’épistémologie à la psychologie}, doctoral thesis in philosophy for Université de Paris X-Nanterre, 2004; this active young scholar (one of the local organizers of the 6\textsuperscript{th} International History of Philosophy of Science Congress at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris from 14 to 18 June 2006) has since then organised or contributed to conferences in Amiens and Jerusalem on Meyerson’s place in the history of philosophy of science in France, aside from giving several papers along these lines.


\textsuperscript{4} See Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, \textit{Les Non-conformistes des années trente. Une tentative de renouvellement de la pensée politique française}, Paris: Seuil, 1969, revised edition 2001. In this seminal political science thesis focussing on the Jeune Droite, \textit{Esprit} and \textit{Ordre Nouveau}, the latter was presented as the most original and coherent representative of this loose constellation
of groups of young intellectuals. It was already introduced in these terms to the British public at the time in the 'French Chronicle' of Montgomery Belgo (future translator of Ordre Nouveau. Personalist Denis de Rougemont's L'Amour et l'Occident), The Criterion, no. 46, October 1932, 80-90, noting how 'most definitely anti-Maurras' were Ordre Nouveau's aims of 'a territorial, racial, and cultural regionalism,' that made it 'somewhat akin to the New Europe Group over which Arthur Kitson presides in England.' Rooted in Guild Socialism, the latter group soon became Ordre Nouveau's closest foreign ally once Dandieu was held up as a luminary in the pages of its publications such as New Britain by their Serbian 'guru' Dimitrije Mitrović, former editor of Wassily Kandinsky's Blaue Reiter Almanach, who now championed in them such avant-garde art as that of sculptors Ivan Meštrović and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska or Italian Futurist aeropittura. See Andrew Rigby, Dimitrije Mitrović: A Biography, York: William Sessions, 2006.


9 'In sum, personalists competed with fascists in the arena of antiparliamentarism. They irreducibly opposed fascism on the question of the nationalism, on the state, and on the idea of central power.' Emmanuelle Hériard Dubreuil, The Personalism of Denis de Rougemont: Spirituality and Politics in 1930s Europe. History dissertation for the University of Cambridge, 2005, 213.


11 Schulze-Boysen praised leftist dissident Communist Karl Korsch’s new edition of Das Kapital in Gegner no. 4-5 in March 1932, at the same time as a Gegner article from the previous month was reviewed in La Critique sociale no. 5, 235, as ‘Karl Korsch, Contribution à l’histoire de l'idéologie marxiste en Russie,’ while Korsch was hailed as ‘one of the rare German Marxists today who have survived the bankruptcy of official ideologies’ (202) in the editorial introduction to Georges
Bataille & Raymond Queneau, ‘La critique des fondements de la dialectique hégélienne,’ 209-214, followed by the translation of a Korsch text from Gegner: ‘Thèses sur Hegel et la révolution,’ 214; Korsch’s letter in reply to the Bataille-Queneau article in the next issue, no. 6, September 1932, 183: ‘Sur Hegel — sur Le Capital,’ continued a diatribe against Nicolai Hartmann’s reinterpretation of Hegel’s dialectics that he had begun in response to the philosopher in the pages of Gegner. Dandieu himself would take off from Bataille and Queneau on Hartmann’s rediscovery of the master-slave dialectic in one of his last texts, ‘La philosophie sociale marxiste,’ in Demain?, July-August 1933, reissued as ‘Théorie marxiste de la révolution’ in L’Ordre Nouveau, no. 41, 1 June 1937, 24-31 (in the same issue as a controversial text by Roger Caillois, witness to the enduring Ordre Nouveau-Bataille connection: ‘L’agressivité comme valeur,’ 56-58).

12 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Le sang de Nietzsche,’ La Revue mondiale, 15 July 1933, 30-32.

13 Dandieu, ‘Le sang de Nietzsche.’


15 Plans are being developed jointly by Gavin Parkinson and myself to start closing this gap in the research on the environs of surrealism; as a first fruit of this new collaboration, Dandieu is already discussed in this context in Parkinson’s forthcoming book, Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008. The English reader may also refer directly to Robert Aron & Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Back to Flesh and Blood. A Political Programme,’ The Criterion, no. 47, January 1933, 185-199.


17 The Centre international de formation européenne’s set of Dandieu papers, not all of them typed doubles of the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s manuscripts, have been transferred to the archives of the European University Institute in Florence after the death of Ordre Nouveau’s founder Alexandre Marc in 2000, as part of the latter’s papers.

18 Echoing similar appreciations from many corners, it was the writer and Church historian Henri Daniel-Rops (1901-1965) who, two decades later, interviewed as part of a series of articles that is the earliest item in the literature to focus on ‘non-conformists of the 1930s’ as an intellectual generation (Gilbert Ganne, ‘Qu’as-tu fait de ta jeunesse ? L’Ordre Nouveau,’ Arts, no. 562, 4-10 April 1956, 7), could still say of his Ordre Nouveau comrade: ‘Dandieu était un garçon de génie. S’il avait vécu, il aurait été le Bergs de notre génération.’ Cited in Jean-Louis Loubet del Bayle, Les Non-conformistes des années trente, 91.

19 Claude Chevalley’s friend and junior Ordre Nouveau comrade Pierre Prévost would become even closer to Bataille, from 1937 to their founding of the review Critique after the war, even introducing him to Maurice Blanchot in 1940; see his memoir of this ten-year friendship for a first-hand account of the contacts and interaction between Personalist and Collège de sociologie circles: Rencontre Georges Bataille, Paris, Jean-Michel Place, 1987. As for Chevalley, in his post-war introduction to set theory for the Bourbaki collective of mathematicians, he explicitly refers to Blanchot when comparing mathematics to literature, and implicitly to Bataille about ‘expérience intérieure’ and sacrifice. See the significantly titled study by Maurice Mashaal, Bourbaki: A Secret Society of Mathematicians (trans. Anna Pierrehumbert), Providence, RI: American Mathematical Society, 2006.


22 Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1931; French translation and presentation by Édith Fournier, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1990. I owe this information to Frédéric Fruteau de Laclos (e-mail of June 7, 2006), who detected clear signs of this influence of Dandieu (such as the notion of sacred act) that the editor had overlooked, not knowing about his work on Proust.

23 Yet according to Pierre Prévost, the passages on Proust in Bataille’s *L’Expérience intérieure* (1943) clearly owe much to Dandieu’s book, as he maintained in his diptych study of his successive ‘spiritual masters’: *De Georges Bataille à René Guénon ou l’expérience souveraine*, Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1992, 70.

24 With an academic background in French literature and law, Arnaud Dandieu assisted Abel Chevalley at the Association France-Grande-Bretagne (still in existence, launched in 1916 and officially under the patronage of the President of the French Republic from 1920 to 1974) from their first meeting at the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1925 to their respective deaths in 1933. Having devoted some of his first published articles to H. G. Wells, Harold Laski and E. M. Forster, he also left unfinished a monograph on the English Romantic poets on the pattern of his Proust study.


26 Compare, on the page before Dandieu’s second contribution to his magazine, Georges Bataille’s review in *Documents*, yr. 2, no. 5, 1930, 310-311 of the article ‘Conformismes freudiens’ by Emmanuel Berl (originator of this derogatory catchphrase for the bourgeois kind of thinking ‘non-conformists of the 1930s’ felt united against) in *Formes*, no. 5, April 1930.


29 A reprint of *La Révolution nécessaire* was published in Paris in 1993 by Jean-Michel Place (who also reissued *Documents* and many other publications relating to surrealism and its environs), with an introduction by Nicolas Tenzer. At this writing, pending the permission of Aron’s son, a reissue of *Le Cancer américain* with a substantial introduction by Olivier Dard is set to open a new collection of ‘Classics of Political Thought’ of the Swiss publisher L’Âge d’Homme. An Italian translation should be released shortly thereafter.

30 In the concluding paragraph of his memoir, Pierre Prévost explains as follows the long gap separating Bataille’s 1933 article on ‘the notion of expenditure’ from his mature treatment of *La Part maudite* thirteen years later: ‘The death in 1933 of his friend and colleague Arnaud Dandieu, who had just signed *La Révolution nécessaire* with Robert Aron, had already brought a stop to Georges Bataille’s research of an economic nature, and then a change of orientation that one realizes when one compares the study on the notion of expenditure with that of *The Accursed Share*. Bataille had indirectly collaborated to Dandieu’s work through numerous suggestions and pieces of information.’ *Rencontre Georges Bataille*, 157.

31 See the interview with Dandieu’s Bibliothèque Nationale colleague Jean Lavaud of 19 February 1965, appended to Robert Aron, typed manuscript of an introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, 182-183, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence.

32 Martin Heidegger, ‘Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique?’, with an introduction by Alexandre Koyré (5-8), in *Bifur*, no. 8, June 10, 1931. Corbin had his translation read by Bataille, who had asked him to write an article for *Documents* on Rudolf Otto upon his return from his first trip to Germany in the summer of 1930. Corbin had then visited Otto (like Baruzi before him) and met Rabindranath Tagore, aside from first reading Heidegger and Karl Barth. There is no trace of Corbin’s projected contribution to *Documents*, but it is through his translation of Heidegger in *Bifur*...
(which had first been turned down by the *Nouvelle Revue Française*) that Denis de Rougemont came to join him in promoting Barth's dialectical theology in France and that Jean-Paul Sartre discovered Heidegger's existential philosophy. See Maria Soster, *Le développement de la pensée d'Henry Corbin pendant les années Trente*, D.E.A. thesis in history of philosophy for Université de Paris I-Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2002, 22, available on the website of the Association des Amis de Henry et Stella Corbin at http://www.amiscorbin.com/textes/francais/SOSTERMaria.pdf.

Aside from Heidegger in Corbin's *Bifur* translation, several other works Bataille borrowed from the Bibliothèque Nationale during the war as documentation for *L'Expérience intérieure* are by authors of vital importance to Dandieu, and already figure in the bibliography of *La Révolution nécessaire* in 1933, like psychologist of anguish, ecstasy and belief Pierre Janet, Kierkegaard and Hegel scholar Jean Wahl, and especially the excommunicated modernist Catholic historian of religion Alfred Loisy for his 1920 *Essai historique sur le sacrifice*. The full list from the last volume of Bataille's complete works is provided in Prévost's *De Georges Bataille à René Guénon ou l'expérience souveraine*, 15-16.


Translated as 'Fundamentals of the Duality of Space' (‘foundations’ might have been more accurate) in *Encyclopædia Acephalica, 77-79*. The translations of citations of Dandieu are however my own in what follows.

See Christian Roy, ‘”L'espace ami de l'homme”: l'Afrique vue par Arnaud Dandieu?.’ Being only familiar with the Dandieu texts from *Documents* translated in the *Encyclopedia Acephalica*, R. G. Smith (‘World City Topologies’) understandably overlooks the subtleties of his phenomenology of space, issuing in the dialectic of the concrete and the abstract, the particular and the universal, the sedentary and the nomadic, that underlies *Ordre Nouveau*’s radical world federalism of local units. Thus for him, 'Dandieu rightly points to degrees of abstraction, but his distinction between the abstract and the concrete is problematic because the dualism manufactures distinct and separate geographical scales. Here the global and local are distinguished so that the former is abstract, remote, and unaccountable, while on the other hand, the later is concrete, familiar, and accountable.’ And yet Smith still sees how ‘surrealists such as Dandieu’ (sic) anticipate ‘Foucault who most famously introduced space to time oriented social theory because poststructuralism has become such a significant intellectual movement. In answering several "Questions on Geography" Foucault ((*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books,) 1980: 70) asked: "Did it start with Bergson or before? Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary, was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic". Indeed, Foucault is widely credited with foregrounding space over time and is often cited as an origin to the "spatial turn" (Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, ] 1991) that has become one of the chief interests of the social sciences and humanities in recent decades.’ But as we shall see, Arnaud Dandieu consciously took this ‘spatial turn’ half a century before Michel Foucault, and it would be tempting to add that, when he sketched the ‘prodromes d’une philosophie “structurelle”’ in terms of his anti-utilitarian critique of Bergsonian temporalism by contrasting 'Conciliation évolutionniste et conflit structurel' in a fragment of this title (to be found in folder 34 of the Bibliothèque nationale de France’s Dandieu papers as well as among the Marc papers in Florence), Dandieu may also have been pointing toward both structuralism and poststructuralism.

This Maussian strand of Dandieu's thought is explored at length in two articles by Christian Roy: 'Transpositions of Mauss' Theory of the Gift in the Personalist Social Critique of Arnaud Dandieu (1897-1933),' in Antoon Vandevelde, ed., *Gifts and Interests*, no. 9 in the 'Morality and the Meaning of Life' series edited by Albert W. Musschenga & Paul J. M. van Tongeren, Leuven:

38 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Fondements de la dualité de l’espace,’ Documents, yr. 2, no. 1, 1930, 41.


40 In the fragment ‘Lorsque M. Meyerson…’ published amidst posthumous writings pertaining to Documents, Bataille begs to differ with the epistemologist’s definition of the irrationality of the diverse as improbable, which does not allow it to be irreducible enough to his taste. Admitting he has not thereby given credit to ‘the profound significance of Mr. Meyerson’s work,’ with which Dandieu would surely have acquainted him, Bataille however adds that ‘we must be in opposition to his personal resolution’ when it comes to philosophy’s dependence on science, as well as to issues of stochastics – that is to the theme of chance so crucial to Bataille, which allows the editors to link this note to others found with the manuscript of ‘L’oeil pinéal,’ where ‘the Meyerson analysis’ is joined by ‘heterological analysis’ as a knowledge condition of mythological thought. Georges Bataille, Oeuvres complètes II: Écrits posthumes 1922-1940, Paris: Gallimard, 1970, 137-139, 414, 429.


42 Robert Aron, typed manuscript of an introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, 182-183, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence.

43 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, L’Esprit révolutionnaire, text included within Robert Aron’s typed manuscript of an introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, 182-183, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence.

44 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Fondements de la dualité de l’espace,’ 41-42.

45 Rougemont’s early intellectual career and involvement with Hic et nunc, Ordre Nouveau and Esprit are the focus of Emmanuelle Hériard Dubreuil’s thesis on The Personalism of Denis de Rougemont: Spirituality and Politics in 1930s Europe, mentioned above.

46 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Fondements de la dualité de l’espace,’ 42.

47 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, text of first part (‘L’Évidence’) included within Robert Aron, typed manuscript of an introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, 180, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence.

48 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Renversement du bergsonisme,’ among the file of ‘Manuscrits inédits, dépouillés par Claude Chevalley’ relating to their philosophy of science, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence.

49 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, text of first part (‘L’Évidence’) included within Robert Aron, typed manuscript of an introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, 180, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence, 181.

50 Robert Aron’s transcript of Dandieu’s last words, preceding his introduction to an unpublished planned edition of Arnaud Dandieu’s works, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence. It would be misleading to retroactively characterize Arnaud Dandieu on this account as ‘deeply Catholic,’ as Dominique Lecoq does in the biography provided in Appendix III of the Encyclopaedia Acephalica, 161. The delirious expressions of Dandieu’s
newfound faith remained idiosyncratic, in line with the personal interpretation of the figure of Christ through the prism of the economy of sublimated pleasure in religion that he had been developing as an agnostic in his unpublished writings for many years, comparable in some ways to William Blake’s appropriation of Christian myth, to which he devoted much attention, not only in his work on the English Romantics, but also in his pre-Ordre Nouveau doctrinal efforts. See Christian Roy, ‘Révolution et Révélation: Arnaud Dandieu entre Nietzsche et Jésus,’ L’Europe en formation, nos. 315-316, Winter 1999-Spring 2000, 199-230.

51 See for instance Arnaud Dandieu, L'espace ami de l'homme, I- Contribution à un éloge du solide, 2: La révélation du toucher, manuscript compiled and typed by Robert Aron, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence, and 33-Manuscrits inédits divers, 5: La révélation du toucher, among the Dandieu papers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

52 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Fonduements de la dualité de l'espace,’ 42.

53 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, full typed and annotated manuscript among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence, 52.

54 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, 22.

55 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, 40.

56 Arnaud Dandieu & Robert Aron, Discours contre la Méthode, 22. The last two sentences of this citation are handwritten interlinear additions to the typed manuscript.

57 Arnaud Dandieu, L’espace ami de l’homme, I- Contribution à un éloge du solide, 2bis: Corps, plaisir, espace, 26, manuscript compiled and typed by Robert Aron, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence; original manuscript in folder 4-Corps, plaisir, espace, among the Dandieu papers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

58 Arnaud Dandieu, L’espace ami de l’homme, I- Contribution à un éloge du solide, 5: Présence réelle, 24, manuscript compiled and typed by Robert Aron, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence; original manuscript in folder 2-L’espace ami de l’homme, among the Dandieu papers at the Bibliothèque nationale de France.


60 About traces of Corbin’s input in Dandieu’s article, see Maria Soster, Le développement de la pensée d'Henry Corbin pendant les années Trente, 21.

61 It is also at their workplace that Dandieu would introduce Marc to Bataille on 21 October 1931 to discuss their respective notions of the gift and of expenditure – used to demolish Freud’s ‘immanentist’ dream theory in Bataille’s case. Marc could agree to that much with Bataille, who, ‘being “of surrealist extraction,” so that unfortunately his reactions are specifically warped, nonetheless seems very interesting,’ he noted. A week earlier, Marc had mentioned again the early project for an Ordre Nouveau weekly that he had apparently first submitted on 18 May to Carlo Rim, editor of Vu and Jazz, illustrated magazines whose pioneering visual style - and even intellectual scope in the latter’s case - can be likened to that of their contemporary Documents, according to Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley’s ‘Introduction’ to Dawn Ades & Simon Baker, eds, Undercover Surrealism. Georges Bataille and Documents. London: Hayward Gallery & Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006, 13. See Christian Roy, Alexandre Marc et la Jeune Europe 1904-1934: L’Ordre Nouveau aux origines du personnalisme, 197, 207-208.

62 Arnaud Dandieu, ‘Fonduements de la dualité de l’espace,’ 42.

Michel Leiris, 'Hygiène,' *Documents*, yr. 2, no. 1, 1930, 42.


See Arnaud Dandieu, *L’espace ami de l’homme*, I- Contribution à un éloge du solide, 1: L’homme inventeur du vide, manuscript compiled and typed by Robert Aron, among the Alexandre Marc papers at the European University Institute, Florence; original manuscript in folder 2-L’espace ami de l’homme, among the Dandieu papers at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.


Arnaud Dandieu, *La Révolution nécessaire*, 97.

Arnaud Dandieu, *La Révolution nécessaire*, 98.

Arnaud Dandieu, *La Révolution nécessaire*, 105-106.

Robert Aron & Arnaud Dandieu, ‘De Wall Street à La Haye (Essai sur le crédit),’ *Europe*, vol. 22, no. 88, 15 April 1930, 587.

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**Documents in the 1970s: Bataille, Barthes and 'Le gros orteil'**

Patrick ffrench

In sharp contrast to his current profile, the presence of Georges Bataille in the intellectual context of France and beyond was, up to his death in 1962, a relatively withdrawn, even hidden presence. Aside from his role as founder and director of the review *Critique* it is via the pathologising and indeed hysterical attacks on him by André Breton, in the *Deuxième manifeste du surréalisme*, in 1929, and by Jean-Paul Sartre, in ‘Un nouveau mystique?’, in 1943, that his name, for all but a few, would have been remarked, at least in the broader field of French culture and its translations overseas.¹ This is symptomatic, of course: that the two most powerful and influential intellectual figures of the French 20th century felt it necessary to mark their rejection of Bataille signals his importance, not only as a foreign body to be expelled ‘hors de toute forme’² as he would say, but also as an object of desire. It was in the 1960s that this situation alters; Marguerite Duras was behind a brief *hommage* to the author of *Madame Edwarda* in the review *La Cigüe* in 1958, now more or less inaccessible, but the most consequent impulse for the re-inscription of Bataille from the 1960s onwards came with the obituary issue of *Critique* (1963), the review he founded in 1946, where key figures of the decade - Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Philippe Sollers - wrote alongside associates and friends of Bataille from earlier generations - Michel Leiris, Raymond Queneau, André Masson, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski.³ The theoretical force of Bataille’s thought was further pursued and perpetuated in a key article of 1967 by Jacques Derrida, included in *L’Ecriture et la différence*.⁴ The review *Tel Quel*, which from the mid 1960s to the mid 1970s was a major reference point for the avant-garde and for the emergence of what is now called ‘French theory’, had played the major role in the re-activation of Bataille, whose living presence had been evoked around its inception in 1960.⁵ *Tel Quel* published lectures by Bataille from late in his life (‘Conférences sur le non-savoir’), and, in 1968, would publish ‘La “vielle taupe” et le préfixe “sur” dans les mots “sur-homme” et “surréalisme”,’ alongside critical texts by Denis Hollier, the prime mover behind the recovery of Bataille’s textual legacy.⁶ A climactic moment came in the early 1970s, with the publication of the first volume of Bataille’s *Œuvres complètes* by Gallimard, prefaced by Foucault and including Bataille’s contributions to *Documents*, as well as *Histoire de l’œil*, by Lord Auch. In 1972 *Tel Quel* organised a colloquium titled ‘Artaud/Bataille: vers une révolution culturelle,’ at which Bataille with Artaud provided the armoury with which *Tel Quel* – now overtly Maoist – launched anew its ‘machine de guerre contre les idées reçues,’ to paraphrase Leiris on *Documents*.⁷

But where is *Documents* in this redrawing of the map? It is perhaps worth pointing out that, somewhat like Bataille’s other interventions, *Documents* disappears once its moment has passed, true to the function of an avant-garde. The afterlife of *Documents* can of course be traced
in the itineraries of its many contributors; in Bataille’s case its persistence is there in the extended critical engagement with Breton and surrealism, to which, it must be stressed, Bataille and *Documents* were rigourously hostile, at least until after the war, when Bataille’s critique of surrealism was reoriented towards a ‘morale de révolte,’ the principal adversary this time being Sartre. In the critical context, however, *Documents* disappears until Leiris’ article in the 1963 issue of *Critique* sketches its character (as ‘impossible’), and points to Bataille’s contributions. The bibliography to the special issue (the first critical moment, I would wager, when Bataille appears as the author of an ‘œuvre’ featuring the *Documents* texts as well as the pseudonymous works *Histoire de l’œil, Madame Edwarda* and so on) lists all of Bataille’s contributions to the review. Leiris would also contribute to a special issue of the review *L’Arc* on Bataille in 1968, this time specifically on *Histoire de l’œil*, but linking its thematics to those mobilised in Bataille’s *Documents* texts.

However, until the early 1970s *Documents* was not significantly present among the elements of Bataille’s legacy that were reinscribed or revisited, partly perhaps simply as a result of problems of accessibility. There is no mention of *Documents*, or of any pre-war text save ‘La notion de dépense’ and “La vielle taupe” in Derrida’s crucial article ‘Un hégélianisme sans réserve,’ for example. Until the more recent and exclusive focus and emphasis on this period of Bataille’s output in the review *October* and on the part of its participants, and separately on the part of Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Documents* has not been a major element of the active legacy of Bataille… with a significant exception.

This is the perhaps surprising presence of *Documents* period Bataille in the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes himself comments on the incongruity he senses in relation to Bataille:

In the end I am barely affected by Bataille: what have I got to do with laughter, devotion, poetry, violence? What have I got to say about the ‘sacred’, or the ‘impossible’?

[Bataille en somme me touche peu: qu’ai-je à faire avec le rire, la dévotion, la poésie, la violence? Qu’ai-je à dire du ‘sacré’, de l’ ‘impossible’?]

While Barthes says here that what makes Bataille’s texts ‘stick’ for him is the association of the thematics he lists above with fear, it is significant that the elements of Bataille’s work which Barthes does consider come from the period of *Documents* and before. He is less interested in questions of experience, sacrifice, and expenditure than in what he reads as the structural operations of displacement and subversion at work in *Histoire de l’œil* and in the *Documents* texts. It should be noted however that the choice of Balzac’s ‘Sarrasine’ as the object of scrutiny in Barthes’ idiosyncratic model of ‘textual reading’ – *S/Z* – is at least in part inspired by its inclusion in the preface to *Le Bleu du ciel*, as one of those books you feel must have been written ‘in
Bataille functions to fracture, to displace, the structuralist paradigm. This operation is already at work in Barthes’ article ‘La métaphore de l’œil,’ his seminal contribution to the 1963 issue of *Critique*. I have considered this critical encounter elsewhere and it is not the immediate concern here. Documents surfaces in Barthes’ contribution to the 1972 *Tel Quel* colloquium, in a paper titled ‘Les Sorties du texte’ where he considers Bataille’s ‘Le gros orteil,’ published in *Documents* 6, in some detail. It is this text that I want to discuss here, for the following reasons: firstly, it is a decisive step in the trajectory of Barthes’ thought and writing; as a consequence it performs what I see as an epistemologically crucial step in the displacement of the paradigmatic model of structure which to a large extent had dominated literary-critical work in the 1960s. This displacement is also a key if discrete reference point in the recent work on the informe, and in the elaborations from and around Bataille taken forward by Rosalind Krauss in *The Optical Unconscious*, for example, and in the book which accompanied the 1996 exhibition on the informe curated by Krauss. Thirdly, a key element of the displacement effected by Barthes is the introduction of the Nietzschean notion of value, which supplements, exceeds and problematises the semiological concern with meaning, which had been at the forefront of Barthes’ concerns up to that point. Related to the notion of value, dragged along with it, is the question of singularity, of the body; value is value for me, as an affective body, above and beyond the subject as producer and recipient of the sign, upholstered in this structural matrix into symbolic belonging. Finally, and in summary, I focus on this text as it is to my knowledge the first major critical engagement with *Documents* after its demise in 1930, prior to the later critical studies by Hollier, Krauss, Didi-Hubermann and others.

Significantly, Barthes’ reference to the text of ‘Le gros orteil,’ if I might be allowed some further indulgence of philology, is not to the recently published first volume of the *Œuvres complètes*, but to the edition of Bataille’s *Documents* contributions by Mercure de France in 1968, edited by Bernard Nœl, the French poet whose work in many ways most overtly extends the legacy of texts like *Histoire de l’œil*. Nœl, significantly not allied to *Tel Quel*, appears extrinsic to the main literary and theoretical contexts and groupings of the time, and this publication comes at a time when he had explicitly distanced himself from literary creation. *Documents* does feature in *Tel Quel*’s re-affirmation of Bataille; in 1968 *Tel Quel* published “La vieille taupe” as I noted above, re-activating the polemic with surrealism partly for strategic reasons, appending a critical analysis by Hollier situating the text in the context of the polemical interchange sparked by Bataille’s ‘Le langage des fleurs’ and ‘Le jeu lugubre.’ ‘Le bas matérialisme et la gnose’ and the dictionary entry ‘Matérialisme’ were also cited by Sollers in the elaboration of a materialism which would become the philosophical line of the review. Nœl’s re-edition, however, appears outside this context, appears extrinsically, just as Barthes text ‘Les Sorties du texte’ seems to me to stick out from the other all highly individual and exceptional contributions to the *Tel Quel* conference, by Julia Kristeva, Sollers, Hollier, Marcelin Pleynet, Jean-Louis Baudry, Jean-Louis Houdebine.
and François Wahl. Barthes' text is an exception among exceptions, if such an idea can be entertained, or, at least, it can be seen to resonate on a different wavelength.

* * *

I have suggested that Barthes' text resists any easy contextualization within the polemical and strategic re-activation of Bataille's critical opposition to surrealism on the part of Tel Quel, and within the context of its version of dialectical materialism. Bataille functions differently for Barthes, in relation to a different problematic. This is borne out by his reference to the same Documents text in a slightly earlier article of 1970 which appeared in a dossier on Eisenstein in Cahiers du cinéma. The article, titled 'Le troisième sens' is concerned with several stills or photograms from Eisenstein films, and elaborates a notion of 'le sens obtus,' which has decisively Bataillean resonances. The obtuse meaning or ‘third meaning’ of the photogram is excessive, ‘en trop,’ supplementary. It is deployed outside the fields of culture and of knowledge: ‘the obtuse meaning seems to open out outside culture, knowledge, information; analytically, it has a somewhat derisory quality’ ['le sens obtus semble s’employer hors de la culture, du savoir, de l’information; analytiquement, il a quelque chose de dérisoire']. But the obtuse meaning is not a negation, it does not negate the cultural meanings that the same sign carries: it is ‘a non-negating derision of expression’ ['une dérision non-négatrice de l’expression']. It is a useless expenditure: ‘it belongs to the species of word-games, jokes, useless expenditures’ ['il est de la race des jeux de mots, des bouffonneries, des dépenses inutiles']. And it is also an evaluation: ‘the obtuse meaning carries a certain emotive force… it is an emotion-value, an evaluation’ ['le sens obtus porte un certain émotion… c’est une emotion-valeur, une évaluation']. Its eroticism, finally, can ‘include’ the ugly but also ‘the very opposite of opposition’ ['le dehors même de la contrariété']:

This is to say: the limit, inversion, discontent, and perhaps sadism: the very things of which Georges Bataille spoke, particularly in the text from Documents which for me situates one of the possible regions of the obtuse meaning: The Queen’s Big Toe (I don’t remember the exact title).

[C'est-à-dire la limite, l'inversion, le malaise, et peut-être le sadisme: cela même dont a pu parler Georges Bataille, singulièrement dans ce texte de Documents qui situe pour moi l'une des régions possibles du sens obtus: Le gros orteil de la reine (je ne me rappelle pas le titre exact).]

Barthes' uncharacteristic mistitling of the text points to a focus on the end of Bataille’s text and the story of the count of Villamediana who took his obsession with the queen so far as to touch her
feet. For Bataille this indicates ‘base seduction’ and a ‘burlesque value’ and points to the strategy of his own text:

The meaning of this article lies in the insistence on directly and explicitly bringing to light *that which seduces*, without taking account of poetic cookery, which in the end is only a detour.

[Le sens de cet article repose dans une insistance à mettre en cause directement et explicitement *ce qui séduit*, sans tenir compte de la cuisine poétique, qui n’est en définitive qu’un détournement…]25

This is to say that the obtuse sense has nothing to do with aesthetics (‘ne fait pas acception d’esthétique,’ writes Barthes).26 For the opposition beauty/ugliness Bataille substitutes the opposition high/low, or more exactly, displaces and disables aesthetic or ‘poetic’ values by adding the supplement of the base or low to the contradiction beautiful/ugly. Aesthetics is not negated, it is simply beside the point.

The paper on Bataille, two years later in 1972, would allow Barthes to focus more closely on Bataille’s text and moreover to develop the obtuse meaning within the more explicitly theoretical framework of Nietzsche’s theory of values. Barthes insists on the proximity between Bataille and Nietzsche but also, implicitly, on the displacement Bataille operates in relation to Nietzsche. In this instance it is not the Nietzsche of the eternal return who is at stake, but the Nietzsche of the *Genealogy of Morals*; the nodal point of Barthes’ analysis is the question of value. In *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*, Barthes categorises the last ‘phase’ of his thought with reference to the ‘intertext’ of Nietzsche and the ‘genre’ of morality.27 He also cites without commentary a section from ‘Les sorties du texte’ on the question of value and knowledge.28 This suggests that Bataille’s text plays the role, here, of a kind of hinge, introducing a Nietzschean orientation into his semiology.

A possible intertext is Gilles Deleuze’s 1962 text *Nietzsche et la philosophie*, which I would wager is a major critical source behind Barthes’ reading of Nietzsche, and which can serve to highlight the salient elements of Barthes’ approach.29 In the first sentence of *Nietzsche et la philosophie* Deleuze highlights the question of value in Nietzsche’s work: ‘Nietzsche’s most general project is the introduction of the concepts of sense and value into philosophy.’30 While a straightforward semiology receives the fact in so far as it signifies (as Barthes writes in ‘Myth Today’ in 1957), for Nietzsche, Deleuze asserts, phenomena have meaning and are appraised on the basis of values, which presuppose evaluations.31 Evaluations, moreover, are differential, premised on different ‘styles of life’ or ‘modes of existence.’32 In a proposition which resonates strikingly with Barthes’ text, Deleuze writes:
There are things that can only be said, felt or conceived, values which can only be adhered to, on condition of ‘base’ evaluation, ‘base’ living and thinking. This is the crucial point; high and low, noble and base are not values but represent the differential element from which the value of values themselves derives.

Any phenomenon is a sign or a symptom, moreover, of a force, of a forceful appropriation of a thing by a force or by forces. Deleuze writes: ‘the whole of philosophy is a symptomatology, and a semiology.’ The sign is not a straightforward relation between signifier and signified; it is the symptom of the appropriation of a thing by a force. Seen in this light, Bataille’s text on the big toe is a symptomatology of the foot; it asks: what forces have appropriated the foot, and on the basis of what kind of evaluations, what moralities and modes of existence?

In Barthes’ itinerary this Nietzschean inflexion has the result that phenomena are of interest not only in so far as they signify, but in so far as they signify for me. It is on the basis of the introduction of the evaluative moment in signification, and thus the introduction of questions of appropriation and power that the rest of Barthes’ work will focus on questions such as pleasure, the body, love, living with others and the neutral. What is at stake here is a shift from semiology to what we might call a post-semiology, a shift of which Barthes’ reading of Bataille is a motivating force.

A significant element of the challenge posed by Bataille as Barthes reads it thus relates to the notion of value and the history of values. Nietzsche and Bataille, Barthes argues, diagnose the decadence of the present in terms of a flattening of values (‘aplatissement des valeurs’). The bourgeois denies the evaluations which support bourgeois culture and passes them off as self-evident truth, denies them as evaluations. The quasi-Nietzschean impetus of Barthes’ Mythologies is retrospectively illuminated – mythological analysis diagnoses the evaluation at work in the tropistic tourniquet of the second-order sign that is the myth. At this level semiology, at least in its application to meta-languages, is Nietzschean in its unmasking of the will to power inherent in such forms of denegation. Bourgeois decadence is ‘un système du mesquin’ (‘a mean system’), a petty, niggardly evaluation. Both Nietzsche and Bataille trace an ‘apocalyptic history of values,’ and relate the present to another time, another temporality, in which primary evaluations were explicitly articulated as such. Barthes thus detects two temporal levels in Bataille’s text: ethnological time and historical time, the latter quintessentially that of Christianity. Two systems of evaluation pertain to each of these temporalities: in the first, the low is deprecated and the high exalted; in the second the low is censored. The depreciation of the low is itself an evaluation, as the low instantiates a seduction. In historical, Christian time, the seduction of the low is censored, the evaluation repressed and belied by the laugh. In the first case transgression is ‘savage’: ‘value lies in the savage transgression of the interdiction,’ in the second,
the condemnatory evaluation of the foot is flattened and repressed.\textsuperscript{39} Bataille’s \textit{Documents} text becomes, in this light, a critical confrontation of the two value-systems, or rather, a confrontation of the ‘savage’ and mythical system of open evaluations with the repression and weakening of evaluation as such. Bataille’s ‘honesty’ about the seduction of the foot, of the base (this is how I read the term ‘sauvage’ in Barthes’ rhetoric), is part of a critique of the decline of values; it is a chapter in a genealogy of morals.

With the shift from ethnological to historical time, we move from a strong condemnation, from transgression and seduction, to a weak condemnation, with which is associated the sublime, the aesthetic, \textit{la pudeur}. The effect of the introduction of value, or evaluation, is to disturb the hierarchy of the concept and the elevation of man. It also destabilises the autonomy of knowledge, since, as Nietzsche writes: ‘Behind all logic and its apparent autonomy there stand evaluations.’\textsuperscript{40} Barthes reads in Bataille’s text two regimes of knowledge, two codes; the first is ‘endoxal,’ ‘official,’ so to speak. It is that, Barthes suggests, of Salomon Reinach, the esteemed archaeologist and historian of religion whose book \textit{Cultes, mythes et religions} Bataille footnotes in ‘Le gros orteil.’ It is also that of the ‘Messieurs du Comité de Rédaction de \textit{Documents},’ in Barthes’ words.\textsuperscript{41} Barthes thus posits \textit{Documents} as representing orthodox or doxic knowledge, ‘citational, referential and reverential knowledge’ [‘savoir citationnel, référentiel, révérentiel’] and Bataille’s place within it as parodic and subversive.\textsuperscript{42} This assessment on Barthes’ part may not be on the basis of a full reading of the journals themselves and of the heterogeneity and complexity of the contributions, for example, of Carl Einstein, not to mention Leiris, Robert Desnos and others. The point, however, is that this doxic knowledge is accompanied by a second ‘code’ of knowledge, specific to Bataille, which is ‘a burlesque and heteroclite knowledge,’ tending towards a culture of ‘curiosities,’ characterised by the ‘strange’ and the ‘detail.’\textsuperscript{43} This amateurish discourse troubles the ‘arrogance’ of science (a reference repeated in later works by Barthes\textsuperscript{44}) through the pluralisation of knowledge, against knowledge as a monolithic and totalising system. Bataille’s approach to knowledge is not oppositional but textual, in so far as different elements or fragments of knowledge lie alongside one another without any one taking precedence. Knowledge becomes a series of ‘curious facts,’ a burlesque; subversion operates here not through hysterical or neurotic negation but through \textit{bricolage}. While it may appear that Barthes is making Bataille out to be a postmodernist \textit{avant la lettre}, Barthes points to this strategy with regard to knowledge as ‘already an operation of writing,’ an operation in other words of what, around the same time, he will call the \textit{text}.\textsuperscript{45}

While the question of the text and of writing will return later, it is also worth emphasising at this point the effect of Bataille’s writing in \textit{Documents} on Barthes’ text, on his writing strategy; the ‘Dictionnaire Critique’ of \textit{Documents} provided Barthes with an intertext and a matrix for the critical style and the form he would adopt in his writing from the early 1970s onwards. This was the first instance of the alphabetically ordered fragments or ‘entries’ which characterised \textit{Le
Plaisir du texte, Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, Fragments d’un discours amoureux and the ‘course’ Comment vivre ensemble. This formal strategy, as Barthes notes, undoes (déjoue) cohesion and avoids any rhetoric of ‘development,’ imposing a ‘zero degree of order.’ It assures a pluralisation of knowledge and an indifference to hierarchy which counter the drive to appropriation (le ‘vouloir saisir’). In undoing the logic of development it also tends to undo the conceptual security of the concepts of beginning and end. In parallel to this serialisation of the textual body, Barthes highlights the way that Bataille’s writing undoes the hierarchy and cohesion of the organic body; in Le Plaisir du texte he had wondered if for certain fetishists the sentence (‘la phrase’) might not be a body. The third section of Barthes’ essay ‘Commencement’ (‘Beginning’) provides a link between the question of the body of the text and the text of the body:

Bataille asks the question about beginning in an area where it had never been asked before: where does the human body begin?

[Bataille pose la question du commencement là où on ne l’avait jamais posé : par où commence le corps humain?] What is at stake here, in this question about where the body begins, which Barthes takes from Bataille’s dictionary entry ‘Mouth’? Barthes’ analysis suggests that what Bataille does is to bring to light the evaluations on which conceptions of the body are premised. An evaluation which starts with the head necessarily presupposes a deprecatory condemnation of the foot as low, and therefore as a site of seduction, of potential transgression. The semiotics of the body presuppose an evaluation; the body does not signify ‘in itself.’ Moreover, the question of the ‘beginning’ of the body implies a structuring of flows; psychoanalysis poses such an order of flows in the paradigm of mouth and anus and the narrative of stages, and, one might add, polarises the body around the phallus through the concept of fetishism. Bataille insists that the body starts nowhere; its flows are multiple and in all directions, erupting spontaneously and being intermittently audible. The semiotics of the body, the sense of the body depends thus on a ‘vestorisation,’ an ordering of flows according to a paradigm or an ‘interpretative fiction.’ Bataille’s fiction of the body – it ‘starts’ with the toe - relies on the paradigm of foot and hand or toe/finger, but this is posed as a fiction. It is posed alongside the psychoanalytic semiotics of fetishism, not against it. It is another evaluation, another fiction which displaces that of orthodox or scientific knowledge, and outplays it not according to the paradigm of true/false, but as one of a series of fictions, as non-true, allowing a ‘rest,’ as Barthes suggests via Nietzsche, from the conflict for truth.

Bataille himself proposed alternative semiotics of the body, alternative fictions of the body, notably in Histoire de l’œil but also elsewhere in Documents, in the article ‘Mouth,’ for example, and also in L’anus solaire and in the pineal eye texts. It may be a mistake to see these
exclusively as a celebration of the abject for its own sake. What Barthes’ reading suggests is that Bataille’s texts operate strategically, as structural re-calibrations of the semiotic codings of the body. Such structural displacements are also evident in the operations Bataille brings to bear on the language of flowers, on architecture, on the classical figure of the horse, and so on. The operation consists in displacing the evaluation on which knowledge is premised, making it appear as one of a series of fictions; alternative evaluative paradigms are proposed, different mappings of the body.

In the chapter ‘Part Objects’ of Formless: a User’s Guide Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois interestingly propose a parallel between Barthes’ account of the chains of signifiers in Histoire de l’œil and Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of Melanie Klein in Anti-Oedipus. Here body parts are liberated from ‘persons’ and from intersubjective relations and become ‘impersonal but permutational’ elements of desiring machines. They detect this operation at work in Documents, not only in the textual subversion of the classical, psychoanalytic or scientific body, but also in the ‘rotation’ of the body in the photographs which appeared in Documents. Pierre Fédida, in a book which takes Barthes’ question ‘where does the human body begin’ as its title, also writes that the effect of Bataille’s textual operation is ‘a change in the vision of the body – the body being always literally overturned by the “tasks” of words’ (‘un changement dans la vision du corps – le corps étant toujours littéralement bouleversé par les “besognes” des mots’) And while Krauss and Bois highlight the horizontal flipping of the body in the photographic practice of Man Ray, for example, they also foreground the proposition in Bataille’s writing of a different verticality. This operation is at work in the ‘Big Toe’ text; schematically, the argument goes as follows: the big toe is the most human part of the body because it is most differentiated from the corresponding part of the monkey. No longer tree-gripping, the big toe enables man to stand upright. Despite the fact that the big toe plays a vital role in the shift to upright posture of which humanity is so proud, the foot is seen as something vile, like spittle. This betrays a fundamental evaluation (‘an indelible conception’) of the body – the higher parts are noble, the lower parts are vile, hidden by modesty (‘la pudeur’) and obscured by aesthetics (‘la cuisine poétique’). But they cannot completely obscure the basic vertical tendencies of the human body: aspiration towards elevation countered by an ineradicable anchoring in the mud. Bataille’s text is thus structured around a repeated vertical opposition between movement upwards and movement downwards, of which we can list some minimal elements:

Up:
Erection / light headed / elevation / sky / celestial space / pure space / ideal / the purest energy / an elevated aspiration / ideal light and beauty
This suggests a recurrent ‘cosmic’ vertical matrix in Bataille’s work, a ‘to and fro’ between elevation and collapse, which may be figured in the image of a headless body with pineal eye erected upwards and monstrous big toe stuck in the mud. The exorbitant eye and the big toe meet in absolute tension in the characteristically explosive juxtaposition which closes Bataille’s text: ‘opening the eyes wide in front of a big toe’ [‘écarquillant les yeux devant un gros orteil’] This is presumably what the readers of Bataille’s text were doing at the very moment of reading, with Boiffard’s photographs in front of them.

Although, as suggested above, Bataille’s critical re-evaluation as read by Barthes re-asserts the paradigm of high and low against the bourgeois ‘aplatissement des valeurs,’ and although Bataille’s contributions to Documents bear the usual interpretation as a ‘low blow,’ the serial logic hinted at here is a further destabilisation. Barthes notes that in Bataille’s text the apparatus of meaning is not destroyed, it is ‘ex-centred,’ made to limp. This is how it seems to work: Nietzsche postulates what Barthes calls ‘an unmoveable paradigm’ [‘un paradigme intraitable’]: noble/vile. In the first part of the Genealogy of Morals Nietzsche asserts that the received conception of morality derives from an original evaluation on the part of the powerful between themselves – the good – and the ‘inferior’ ‘lower depths of humanity,’ an evaluation which was essentially an affirmation of the style of life of the powerful. Nietzsche then traces the movement by which, according to him, the weak and inferior came to dominate human culture. The positive affirmation of life is usurped, the story goes, by the logic of ressentiment. In other texts Nietzsche predicts the overturning of this nihilism into joyous affirmation, the acceleration of destruction and the triumph of the positive.

With Bataille, Barthes suggests, the paradigm is structured differently, and it follows that the account of history and of the future is different. Barthes suggests that the paradigm is ternary; there are three poles: noble/ignoble/base. He then proceeds to an accounting of expressions in these three registers, taken from ‘The Big Toe’ and from ‘The Notion of Expenditure.’ Noble pertains to the social stratae of rulers and kings, those who sacrifice, those who expend prodigiously. Ignoble pertains to shame, hypocrisy, the bourgeois, the grocer, poetry. Base, the
third term, includes all that is materially related to the body and to ‘base matter’: spittle, mud, blood, viscera, the corpse, the organs. On the one hand a social paradigm, on the other, matter. The two ‘positive’ terms of noble and base or ideal and material come to squeeze out as negative the mediocre term, which is not the contradiction of the noble nor the condemnation of the base, but the repressive and hypocritical flattening of both. In other words, what Bataille is about here is a positive evaluation of the basely material, which has the effect of illuminating the ‘real’ paradigm of high and low, eliminating the false value of the mediocre, repressive and ashamed, which in fact is not so much a value as a repression of evaluation as such. The affirmation of the base appears as an antidote to nihilism, whereby things appear not as shamefully repressed but ‘as they are,’ according to a quasi-cosmological tension between the seductions of sky and of mud.

What Bataille appears to do to Nietzsche here then is to displace the paradigm of noble and vile – which functions in terms of power and will to power, by that of high and low, which does not, which functions instead in terms of a cosmology. Nietzsche’s will to power, that of the Overman, for example, is reviewed by Bataille as an ‘Icarian’ tendency toward solar elevation. The paradigm of noble and vile is subverted by its displacement towards a materialist and gnostic diagnosis of solar elevation and entropic collapse.

Bataille’s interpretative fictions, moreover, are not straightforwardly logical. Barthes notes in passing that Bataille uses a ‘falsely naïve’ transition, ‘en outre’ (besides) in moving from a discussion of high heels to the sexual anxiety regarding the foot. Indeed in the Documents texts at large and in Bataille’s writing as a whole the indications of logical relation are extremely weak. Those terms such as therefore, however, because, and so on, which would order elements according to a logic of predication, contradiction and cause and effect are ‘falsely naïve’ in that they appear to promise logical consequence but in fact offer none. We can see this elsewhere in ‘The Big Toe,’ in which Bataille ‘borrows’ the language of logic and argument: ‘in the sense that’, ‘this pertains to the fact that…’ ‘is one of the explanations of the tendency’, ‘on the other hand’, etc. [‘en ce sens que,’ ‘Ceci tient au fait que…’; ‘est une des explications de la Tendance,’ ‘Par contre’]. But the appearance of a logic of consequence and opposition seems to hide a logic of association and seriality, more like that proposed by Bataille in ‘L’anus solaire’: ‘It is clear that the world is purely parodic, which is to say that each thing one looks at is the parody of another, or even the same thing in deceptive form’ [‘Il est claire que le monde est purement parodique, c'est à dire que chaque chose qu'on regarde est la parodie d'une autre, ou encore la même chose sous une forme décevante’]. X is to Y as A is to B collapses into x1, x2, x3, x4 etc. This form of materialism, Barthes indicates, sometimes borrows the ready-made associative chains of idiom and etymology, and works according to the ‘tasks’ of words rather than of concepts. We can see this at work again in Histoire de l’œil and elsewhere in Documents, and the operation is given a theoretical ‘programme’ in the celebrated entry ‘Informe,’ where, as Barthes notes, Bataille proposes that ‘A dictionary would begin from the moment where it would give not the meanings of...
words but their tasks’ ['Un dictionnaire commencerait à partir du moment où il ne donnerait plus le sens mais les besognes des mots']. Barthes reads ‘besogne’ as ‘the work of the word’ ['le travail du mot'] and the jouissance of the word ['la jouissance du mot']; ‘the way the word “rummages” in the inter-text, in connotation’ ['comme le mot “farfouille” dans l’inter-texte, dans la connotation']. He thus displaces Bataille’s strategy in Documents towards a textual materialism, in which, as he puts it, ‘the body is engendered on the very surface of language’ ['le corps s’engendre à même la langue'].

Ultimately, then, or at least in its last serial fragment, Barthes’ reading of ‘The Big Toe’ deflects the quasi-cosmological angle of the values of high and low and insists on the textual nature of the operation Bataille undertakes here. The strategy is allied to writing (‘écriture’ rather than ‘écritance’), and to textual work (‘travail textuel’), where textual does not imply a formalism but an operation carried out on language insofar as it is a vehicle of values instilled in the associations of words, in what words do, their tasks. Fédida suggests something similar when he writes that the affirmation of the base, of the Nietzschean ‘l’envers des choses,’ relates not to a hermeneutics - that is to a search for a truer version of things - but to what he calls ‘a sort of physiological philology.’ Bataille’s strategy would thus be ‘to make the thing fantastic and allow writing to make the vocable of the word exceed the name of the thing’ ['d’émerveiller la chose et laisser l’écriture excéder le nom de la chose par son vocable'].

The vocable – the word exists in English – would not be the meaning of the word but its formal effect beyond signification, the value of the word. For Barthes, as for Fédida, Bataille’s text would thus subvert the security and arrogance of knowledge through the irruption of value in the very tissue of the text, and through the production of fictions of knowledge by the values of words, or word-values. Barthes ends his article with the hypothesis of a ‘linguistics of value,’ where the focus would not be on the exchange-value of meaning but on the combative or erotic use-value of words. But this linguistics of value is at work, in practice, in the Text, in writing: textual practice would be a science or a genealogy of values in action. In an essay which in many ways extends and elaborates the propositions of Barthes’ 1972 essay, Pierre Fédida suggests that the mot-valeur, which in Bataille’s text is written as besogne or as aspect, removes the repression to which the word is subject in being limited to meaning. The erotic use-value of the word exceeds its meaning and gives access, Fédida proposes, to a jouissance of language structurally prior to the repression necessary for symbolic meaning:

Through the resonance of the word and of silence the vocable is a value which undermines ‘knowledge words’ behind their back: it retains, even in writing, the aspect of things, which has somehow escaped repression.
De par sa résonance de parole et de silence le vocable est une valeur travaillant à leur insu les « mots-savoir »: il réserve jusque dans l'écriture l'aspect des choses, en quelque sorte soustrait au refoulement.\(^7\)

And further:

To say that writing, if it is driven by the movement of the vocable, opens words out to the value of non-repression, is to bring the corporeal into the physical action of language, a corporeality which challenges its own representations, even those of fetishism.

[Prétendre que l’écriture, si elle est entraînée par le mouvement du vocable, ouvre l’accès des mots à la valeur du non-refoulement, c’est faire venir dans l’action physique du langage, le corporel qui défie jusqu’au fétichisme de ses propres représentations].\(^7\)

The apparent opposition between readings of Bataille that emphasise the affirmation of the base or construe it as abject, low or base in the moral sense, and readings of Bataille that emphasise the structural operation at work in his texts may be resolved here, by seeing the operation as one which is carried out in and on language rather than in terms of axiological values. Readings of Bataille which celebrate a ‘return’ to a ‘primitive’ state would thus miss the point that the operation Bataille undertakes is one which dissects and redistributes the body of culture insofar as it is carried by and in language.

Barthes’ final words – continuing the fantasy of a linguistics of value – propose that such an analysis would pick out in a text those words which were ‘sufficiently outlined, sufficiently brilliant, to make themselves loved, like fetishes’ [‘suffisamment découpes, suffisamment brillants, triomphants, pour se faire aimer, à la façon de fétiches’].\(^7\) The return of fetishism here recalls Bataille’s infamous challenge in ‘The modern spirit…’ – to find an art lover who loves a painting as much as a fetishist loves a shoe. Given the deflection of any unilateral reference to the psychoanalytic theory of fetishism by Bataille, or by Barthes, what is suggested here is an erotics of language which stands outside any definition in terms of perversion, which fashions an affective body with deviated word-values. Bataille in Documents is the symptomatologist of this body.

2 In the polemical text ‘La Valeur d’usage de D.A.F. de Sade’ Bataille says he envisages readers who are unlike those he already knows but are rather ‘men (and especially masses) who are comparatively decomposed, having become amorphous and even violently expelled outside any form’ [‘des hommes (et surtout des masses) comparatifs décomposés, devenus amorphes et même expulsés avec violence hors de toute forme’]. Cf. *Œuvres Complètes II*, Paris 1970, 55.


6 *Tel Quel* 34, Summer 1968; Denis Hollier, ‘Le savoir formel.’


9 Cf. Michel Leiris, ‘De Bataille l'impossible.’


17 *Tel Quel* 34 (Summer 1968): Denis Hollier, ‘Le savoir formel,’ Philippe Sollers, ‘La grande méthode.’


33 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 2.
34 Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 3.
35 Cf. Barthes, in ‘Le Gros orteil’: ‘value, according to Nietzsche, extends the question: what is it for me?’ [*la valeur, selon le mot de Nietzsche, prolonge la question: qu’est-ce que c’est pour moi?*] (Barthes’ italics), ‘Les Sorties du texte,’ 59.
47 It is interesting to note that Barthes refers to the dictionary Bataille provides ‘at the end of *Documents,*’ referring one supposes to Nöel’s 1968 book edition of Bataille’s contributions rather
than to the journal itself. *Documents* was republished in a facsimile edition in two volumes by Jean Michel Place in 1991.


50 ‘The role of value is not to destroy, or even to dialectise, nor even to subjectify, it is perhaps, simply, to rest… “it is enough to know that truth has a great power. But it must be able to struggle, and it must be opposed, and one must from time to time be able to take a rest from the struggle in non-truth”’[‘Le rôle de la valeur n’est pas un rôle de destruction, ni même de dialectisation, ni même encore de subjectivisation, c’est peut-être, tout simplement, un rôle de repos… « il me suffit de savoir que la vérité possède une grande puissance. Mais il faut qu’elle puisse lutter, et qu’elle ait une opposition, et que l’on puisse de temps en temps se reposer d’elle dans le non-vrai. »] (Nietzsche). Barthes, ‘Les Sorties du texte,’ 54.


54 ‘There [in the pineal eye texts], in opposition to the idea of the civilizing change of axis that lifted man off the horizontal plane of his animal condition to set him erect on his two feet and thereby to initiate the long process of education and sublimation, Bataille interposes the image of another form of verticality, this one obscene.’ *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 156-7.

55 Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 204.

56 Bataille, *Œuvres complètes I*, 204.

57 ‘…the apparatus of meaning is not destroyed […] but it is ex-centred, made to limp’ ['l'appareil du sens n’est pas détruit […] mais il est excentré, rendu boiteux'], Barthes, ‘Les Sorties du texte,’ 58. In view of Barthes’ insistence, via Bataille, on the ‘tasks’ (*besognes*) of words one can see how the *vocable* is functioning here, both at the level of metonymic contiguity (orteil-sorties) and metaphoric association (the exorbitant big toe causes the apparatus of knowledge to limp). Barthes himself notes that the etymology of *scandaleux*, ‘scandalous’, links it to *boiter*, to limp.


60 Cf. ‘La “vielle taupe” et le préfixe « sur » dans les mots « surhomme » et « surréaliste »’ in Bataille, *Œuvres complètes II*, Gallimard, Paris, 93-109 ; ‘Nietzsche was condemned by circumstances to conceive of his rupture with conformist ideology as an icarian adventure’ [‘Nietzsche était condamné par les circonstances à concenvoir sa rupture avec l'idéologie conformiste ainsi qu’une aventure icarienne’], 99.


65 Barthes, ‘Les Sorties du texte,’ 56. This expression would bear interesting comparison with the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, especially in *Corpus*, Métailié, Paris, 2000, the phrase à même being
particularly recurrent throughout Nancy’s work and in his consideration of the relation between writing and the body.

68 Fédida, *Par où commence…*, 12.

Julia Kristeva makes this point in the discussion following Barthes’ reading of his paper at the 1972 colloquium, distinguishing Nietzsche’s ‘teaching’ from Bataille’s *practice*.

70 Fédida, *Par où commence…*, 13.
71 Fédida, *Par où commence…*, 14.

Jean-Luc Moulène’s Dialectical Documents

Sophie Berrebi

Consider this image by the French artist Jean-Luc Moulène: *Untitled. Saint Sebastian/Donostia (11 January 2000)* [fig 1]. It shows a white plastic tub containing partially wrapped meat that is being dragged with a butcher’s hook by a figure in white trousers, on the sidewalk of an almost empty street. The image might easily be described as documentary, taking into account its focused clarity and apparent absence of aesthetic effects. Further, the strict framing of the picture isolates anything that is not essential to the subject - the tub of meat being dragged on the sidewalk - and the neutral caption gives a sense of time and space. These traits have been the traditional measures for what constitutes a documentary image rather than an aesthetic one. Jean-Luc Moulène’s own name for images such as this one is, however, different. *Untitled. Saint Sebastian / Donostia (11 January 2000)*, is part of an ongoing series of images entitled *Documents* that he began producing in the late 1990s. While the term ‘documentary,’ which changed from being only an adjective to becoming a substantive, refers to a genre (mainly film and photography) that uses documents, a
'document' is more broadly an object such as a text or an image, either found or constructed, that is used for purposes of identification, education, evidence, or archival record.

In the recent trend for documentary in the art context, the meaning of the two terms document and documentary is often conflated. As a consequence, documents are invested with the same characteristics of truthfulness, transparency, necessity and realism that have informed the documentary tradition. In exhibitions such as *Documenta 11* (Kassel, 2003), *Cruel and Tender* (London and Cologne, 2003), and *The Need to Document* (Basel and Lüneburg, 2005), a certain logic of the document as an index of the real, as a truthful and transparent object, prevails.

It is not certain, however, that Moulène’s photograph subscribes to such an idea of the document. A closer look shows other things at work in the image. The framing allows for little contextualisation, silencing the figures in the foreground by cutting off their heads and creating a strange ‘disjunction’ – to borrow the title of another series of photographs by Moulène - whereby the missing heads are reclaimed in the form of the severed animal heads in the white tub. If the image tells us something, it is less about something out there in the real world than about something at work in the image. But, if it is, as the artist contends, a document, one may ask: of what kind?

To answer this question and explore a conception of the document that diverges from the one commonly adopted in the language of documentary, the notion of a *dialectical document* might be of use. What I am calling a dialectical document – after Walter Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image – would be a work of art that adopts the form of the document and the strategies of the documentary, but that in so doing, would simultaneously – and self-consciously - question their codes and conventions. A dialectical document then, is an equivocal object that endorses the intrinsic paradox of the document: it is both an object of interest in itself, and at the same time only there to attest to the existence of something else. This paradox, it can be argued, further opens up a range of productive oppositions that the dialectical document employs: neutrality and engagement, transparency and opacity, art and non-art.

What I call the dialectical document is not an entirely new phenomenon, of course. The images of Jacques-André Boiffard and Eli Lotar included in the pages of the journal *Documents* and then, today, on the walls of an exhibition, might be defined as such. Or, one may think of works such as Robert Smithson’s essay *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (published in *Artforum* in December 1967), which explored the suburban wasteland of Passaic, describing abandoned construction materials and industrial waste as monuments of a past industrial era. Together with its photographic illustrations, Smithson’s text plays out a subtle indeterminacy between factual observation and fantasy-like interpretation, challenging the alleged objective nature of the documentary format and of the document as a faithful recording of fact. The essay, both a work of art and a document, played out the discrepancy between text and image, and their basic inability to convey experience in a truthful way. These strong precedents suggest that this phenomenon is not
new, and show the need to identify what may be called the dialectical document in contemporary art, in a context marked by an increased presence of documentary practices in art exhibitions, practices that are usually accompanied by a very straightforward, realist discourse.

The rhetoric of documentary
An exhibition such as Cruel and Tender exemplifies this belief in the document as an index of the real. In the catalogue essay, its co-curator Emma Dexter described the way in which the show aimed at presenting an undisturbed narrative stretching from Walker Evans and August Sander to the present, including artists such as Rineke Dijkstra and Philip Lorca di Corcia, claiming that this tradition had continued in parallel with ‘critical practices and theories.’ The rhetoric of the exhibition emphasised the anti-aesthetic quality of the work presented, underscoring the ‘straightforwardness’ of the images and the realist use of the medium – it avoided thereby addressing issues that would complicate the picture, such as the ambivalent formula coined by Walker Evans in speaking of a ‘documentary style.’ Instead of this, and looking back to the 1930s, Dexter argued that the ‘child-like simplicity or truth to the medium was not readily associated with the dynamics of a European avant-garde.’ Furthermore, she also stressed the modesty of these photographs that do ‘not draw attention to themselves, ‘allowing the medium to concentrate on depicting the subject.’ This unobtrusiveness contrasted with what she called the ‘isms’ of modern art that range from surrealism to conceptualism. In the former, ‘the photograph is stretched and twisted and […] the technical invention of the photographer is to be marvelled at,’ while conceptual art was dismissed for its ‘solipsistic position.’ In this simplistic analysis, Dexter emphasised the antagonism between the work of art and the document, the former seen as critical and self-reflexive, the latter as realistic, and following an independent, parallel tradition.

Dexter’s straightforward appraisal of documentary photography reflects the dominant literature on the subject. The studies of Jean-Francois Chevrier and Olivier Lugon, among others, privilege the German and American traditions of ‘straight’ documentary photography to the detriment of alternative currents and in particular surrealism, rarely examined in relation to documentary, aside from Ian Walker’s City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in Interwar Paris. While Walker often shies away from defining the particularities of the surrealist document and its relation to documentary, for authors such as Lugon, it is a relationship that simply never developed. In his key study of documentary photography, Le Style Documentaire, Lugon foregrounds the interest of the surrealists and of Salvador Dalí in the document and recalls their discovery, via Man Ray, of the work of Eugène Atget. Yet he argues that a real surrealist documentary tradition did not come into being, mainly as the artists concerned never followed up these early interests, and pointing too to the domination of literature over the visual arts in surrealism.

Document and work of art
At stake in the idea of the dialectical document is the ambivalence of status between document and work of art. The distinction between the two is the subject of a short text by Walter Benjamin, ‘Thirteen Theses against Snobs,’ which appeared in 1928 in the volume of ‘aphorisms, jokes and dreams’ published under the title One Way Street. Benjamin’s text stages an opposition between the two elaborated through thirteen theses prefaced by a short statement that sets the scene:

Snob in the private office for art criticism. On the left a child’s drawing, on the right a fetish.
Snob: ‘Doesn’t this make Picasso seem such a waste of time?’

Following this entrée en matière, two columns divide the page, each one claiming the respective qualities of the work of art and of the document and bringing them into comparison with one another. A sample of these gives a sense of their tone:

**Thesis 3:** The art-work is a masterpiece/the document serves to instruct.
**Thesis 9:** In the art-work the formal law is central/in the document forms are merely dispersed.
**Thesis 10:** The artwork is synthetic: an energy-centre/the fertility of the document demands: analysis.

Pointing out the naïveté of the snob who is touched by the spontaneity and directness of the child’s drawing, Benjamin seems at first to aim at putting concepts into place. Hence he stresses the ‘one dimensionality’ of the document; its poverty when compared to the work of art, which he instead praises for its quality of synthesis. While, as he states in thesis 6, the work of art brings content and form into one to produce meaning, the document’s strength comes only through a ‘wholly dominant’ subject matter. In this perspective, the work of art is granted qualities of synthesis, of uniqueness, remoteness and durability, that the document’s plainness – a point echoed by Dexter’s remark on the ‘childlike simplicity of documentary photography’ - clearly cannot match.

Walter Benjamin’s condemnation of the document should not be taken, however, entirely at face value. The solemnity of his tone is enough to suggest that there is a great deal of irony behind these words, and one needs only to look at other statements and think of the art that Benjamin was interested in at the time to give the text another reading; one that may be suggested for instance, by thesis 11: ‘The virility of works of art lies in assault,/the document’s innocence gives it cover.’ Could it be then that the document’s innocence is but a strategy that the snob mistakes as child-like simplicity? Around the time that he wrote and published One Way Street, Benjamin displayed a strong interest in avant-garde art, in photography, dada and surrealism, and these avant-gardes, as Benjamin often repeats, produced documents. The original cover of One Way Street testifies to this interest, featuring...
a montage of visual and written documents by photographer Sasha Stone, who was also a friend of Benjamin’s. In his article, ‘Surrealism, or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,’ published a year later, in 1929, Benjamin in fact described the productions of the surrealists as, among other things, documents rather than works of art. In 1931, in an essay on the ‘crisis of the novel,’ he likened the practice of the novelist Alfred Döblin in Berlin-Alexanderplatz to montage and compared it to dadaism: “Authentic montage is based on the document. In its fanatical struggle with the work of art, Dadaism used montage to turn daily life into its ally. It was the first to proclaim, somewhat uncertainly, the autocracy of the authentic.” Thus the document, while it cannot measure up to the great classical works of art in a conventional sense, may nonetheless, notably in a practice of montage, display a greater power of subversion.

Beyond Benjamin’s direct references to surrealism and dadaism, it is worth noting that his text appeared at a time in which the issue of the document and of documentary was, often in the context of modernisation and the development of new technologies, a recurrent theme. This was of course, the same period that saw the publication of André Breton’s Nadja (1928) and of Georges Bataille’s Documents. Benjamin’s ‘Thirteen Theses against Snobs’ also preceded by a couple of years his major essay on photography, ‘A Small History of Photography.’ This essay, incidentally, was the occasion for Benjamin to discuss a number of recent photographic publications and to praise photographers such as Karl Blossfeldt – whose images appeared in the pages of Documents.

These examples suggest that the ‘Thirteen Theses’ sought, more than anything, to reflect upon the equivocal nature of the document. The acknowledged simplicity of the document appears, then, to be the result of a deliberate strategy, a cover to make a work of art that challenges the classical definition given in the text. This does not seem so far removed from what Denis Hollier calls, in the preface to the facsimile re-edition of Documents, Bataille’s deliberate ‘anti-aesthetic’ position, signalled, among other things, by the choice of ‘documents’ as the title of the journal. The ambivalent document shares with Benjamin’s notion of the dialectical image an instability that is moreover a temporal instability. In the dialectical image, ‘all temporalities meet’ (‘tous les temps se rencontrent’), notes Georges Didi-Huberman. This temporal instability is, further, what allows the image to escape from being, in Didi-Huberman’s reading, either a simple ‘document of history’ or a ‘work of art idealized as a monument of the absolute.’

Benjamin’s reflections on the document, notably in the ‘Thirteen Theses,’ and the qualities the document shares with the dialectical image, suggest that the antagonism between work of art and document posited by Dexter, while following a broad historical tradition, only gives a partial view of a richer history in which document and work of art can be two interrelated aspects of the same object.

**Moulène’s dialectical documents**

To account for this history of what we can call the dialectical document, it may be worth examining the works of artists who have integrated this concept of the equivocal document in
later twentieth-century art practice, in opposition to the historians who have neglected it. An early model of this dialectical document in the context of conceptual art is no doubt the project *Evidence* developed by artists Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan in the late 1970s, and which took the form of an exhibition and a book. This book was re-issued in 2003, and the photographs were the subject of the exhibition *Evidence Revisited* at the Photographer’s Gallery in London in 2005.¹³ They were shown again in the 2006 Berlin Biennial entitled *Of Mice and Men*. The two artists collected documentary photographs from archives of over one hundred American government agencies and educational institutions, and assembled a sequence of 59 pictures, which they presented in an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern art in 1977. Stripped of captions or any kind of description or indication of origin, these images, made according to the pure conventions of photographic documentary, and made specifically as objective records of activities and situations, test results, crime scenes and so forth, became absurd, and gained a life of their own by virtue of their selection and arrangement.

*Evidence* presented documentary photography in its most elementary form and showed how the conventions of clarity, frontality and black and white could fail to convey any information whatsoever once the captions had been removed and the context had changed. The effect was accentuated by the contrast between such highly demonstrative images, originally staged and framed solely with the purpose of pinpointing a certain reality, and the total obtuseness that resulted from their reconfiguration in the exhibition and book project. But further, *Evidence* demonstrated the shakiness of the document as a stable record. As the photographer and theorist Joan Fontcuberta recently put it:

*Evidence* pulverized the very notion that photography was the proof of something, the support of some evidence. Because we should have asked ourselves: Evidence of what? Perhaps evidence only of its own ambiguity. What remains, then, of the document?³⁴

What remains then, is that the ambivalence of the document is exposed. These works adopt the forms and conventions of documents - here as found objects - and disrupt their codes and conventions. Dialectical documents are unstable objects that do not completely relinquish their status as documents even when becoming an art project. This instability and reliance upon presentation and contextualisation means that photography can never just be ‘itself’ as Dexter claims at the end of her essay in the *Cruel and Tender* catalogue, when she writes that ‘photography has finally become itself.’¹⁵ Instead, photography exists in relation to specific conditions of production, circulation and interpretation.

Jean-Luc Moulène’s photographic practice has since the early 1990s shown a particular awareness of this characteristic of photography. Emerging from the realm of performance and body art, rather than photography, Moulène was notably close to the French artist Michel Journiac who relied on photography for what he called ‘constats d’actions’ -
literally, photographic certificates, or reports of actions - objects which sit indeterminably between art object and documents.\textsuperscript{16} In Moulène’s work, the reflection on the dialectical quality of the document moves from exploring its instability within a body of work and artistic production, to examining the condition of a work’s reception. A case in point would be one of his best-known projects, the \textit{Objets de Grève}, a series of photographs and of manufactured objects produced by workers on strike and collected by the artist [fig. 2]. The \textit{Objets de Grève} (strike objects) ‘presented by Jean-Luc Moulène,’ to cite the full title of the work, trace episodes of workers’ movements and form part of a social history. Moulène has collected and photographed them, making something akin to identity photographs of each individual piece. The images, presented in exhibition and museum spaces, closely frame the objects, enlarging them. The unframed pictures have an object-like quality, but at the same time, printed on glossy paper, they surreptitiously evoke advertising posters. The result is an ongoing project that is both a document of social history and an art project, with the stress on either aspect depending upon the context of reception. The ambivalence of the project as at once conceptual, documentary and celebratory is echoed further by the ambivalence within the images: as both iconic and documentary.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig2.jpg}
\caption{Jean-Luc Moulène, \textit{Objets de Grève}, Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.}
\end{figure}

In one of his most recent projects, \textit{Le Louvre}, Moulène can be seen methodically deconstructing the codes of photographic documentation made for the purpose of archive and conservation. For this project, which was presented in the Louvre museum in November 2005, Moulène photographed a series of 24 small sculptures from the museum’s collection,
mostly of religious or sacred figures of all beliefs. Removing them from the vitrines in which they were usually displayed, and transporting them into the artist’s studio, he made what can best be called portraits of these small sculptures, using only natural light, and framing them so that they made eye contact with the viewer.

Fig. 3: Jean-Luc Moulène, *Crise d’hystérie ou de tétanos*. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.

The images of this deceptively simple project are reminiscent of the displacements that *Documents* created with its methods of framing, arranging and ordering images in an issue. In Moulène’s images, the photographic process, instead of being an unquestioned realist medium, is addressed as a coded representational system. This becomes clear if we juxtapose the images made by the artist with the photographs that the museum keeps in its archives and which are available on the online database of its collections. Moulène’s images underscore the tradition at work in these apparently objective documentary images. The figurine from Smyrna entitled *Crise d’hystérie ou de tétanos* is a case in point. Moulène’s
image of it is taken in natural light and the photographer is, as it were, face to face with the sculpture [fig. 3]. By contrast, in the photograph that is kept in the collections of the Louvre - and available online in the Atlas database - shows the figurine photographed from below and with a strong lighting scheme that emphasises the smile and the distortion of the figure. As such, the Louvre image becomes as convincing a representation of a hysteria figure as those staged by Jean-Martin Charcot in his time. That these 'objective,' documentary images in the Louvre archives also adopt a conventional framing that the photographer thought best in relation to the subject matter is evidenced further in the photograph of a terracotta model of Bernini’s sculpture Truth [fig. 4]. The image in the Louvre database stresses by anticipation the monumentality of the sculpture for which this is a model. By contrast, Moulène, aiming at the figure’s gaze, reveals the way in which the pleats of her gown obscure rather than illuminate the truth she is supposed to represent.

Fig. 4: Jean-Luc Moulène, Bernini’s Truth. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.
It might be possible to see this project as a follow up and extension to what is at work in Documents. While Georges Bataille assigned his dictionary the job of defining ‘the tasks rather than the meaning of words,’ Moulène’s images suggest that his dialectical documents are about the task of photography, rather than about its meaning. This task might be defined as re-orienting vision, making the viewer aware of visual conventions and usually unquestioned modes of presentation. At this point, it is time to return to the first image discussed, Untitled. Saint Sebastian/Donostia (11 January 2000). If it is a document, then, it is clear that this document presents not objective fact, but a document destined to join the artist’s own archive, part of what he calls an ‘impersonal diary,’ consisting of raw material that is destined to be collected in order to later re-emerge, in a publication or an exhibition (such as the one on show in London in summer 2006 at Thomas Dane). In this most recent case, works from different series - various kinds of documents - come together in a montage that takes place in the exhibition space.

Fig. 5: Jean-Luc Moulène, Les Ongles, Paris, novembre 1999. Courtesy Jean-Luc Moulène and Galerie Chantal Crousel, Paris.
Although Moulène possesses an extended knowledge of the history of surrealist and related photography – he cites notably the journal *Le Grand Jeu* and what he sees as the performative photographic self-portraits of its protagonists - his work does not directly cite or re-enact historical existing images. He claims instead an interest in the mechanisms at work in the compositions. Yet an image such as *Les Ongles, Paris, novembre 1999* [fig. 5], provides a good starting point to investigate the relation between his work and the images in *Documents*. It may help, for instance to understand the artist's rather mysterious phrase explaining that he ‘organises unconscious projections’ (‘j’organise les projections inconscientes’) in his images. Indeed, while there is no direct association between *Les Ongles* and Boiffard’s *Gros Orteil*, or between Moulène’s photograph of packed meat and Eli Lotar’s images of La Villette, the eeriness of these images nevertheless similarly relates to issues of anthropomorphism - big toe as face, toe nail as thorax - and make you sense at once the bloodiness of the meat and its inclusion in a rationalised circuit of production and distribution. Moulène’s images, produced in a context that is unambiguously an artistic one, discreetly bring out the dialectical document aspect of the images of *Documents*. In so doing, they suggest the possibility of a tradition of documentary photography that would include the images from *Documents* and those of Moulène, those of Le Grand Jeu and the photographic reports of body art. These dialectical documents have been sidelined in the histories of documentary art constructed around the father figures of Walker Evans and August Sander and their legacy. Moulène’s images show how practice can raise historiographic issues and help critically revise historical traditions.

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2 Dexter, ‘Photography Itself,’ 16.
3 Dexter, ‘Photography Itself,’ 16.


7 Dexter, ‘Photography Itself,’ 16.

8 Walter Benjamin, ‘Surrealism or the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’ (1929), *One Way Street and Other Writings*, Verso, London and New York, 1979, 225-239.


12 Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps*, 91.

13 The original exhibition *Evidence* was presented at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977.


16 Interview with the artist, 24 March 2006, Paris.


18 Interview with the artist, 24 March 2006, Paris.

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Pygmalion and the Sphinx

Robert Desnos
Translated, annotated and introduced by Simon Baker

Base-Metal Materialism (Translator’s Introduction)

Robert Desnos’s short essay ‘Pygmalion and the Sphinx’ appeared in the first issue of Documents’ second year, 1930. By this point, the magazine had already succumbed to the upended logic of its own ‘critical dictionary,’ so that Georges Bataille’s materialist meditations on ‘The Language of Flowers’ and ‘The Big Toe’ had been published alongside serious scholarly articles on Norwegian archaeology and French prehistoric rock art. In this context it is tempting to read Desnos’s poetic critique of late-nineteenth-century monuments as just another flea in the ear of the magazine’s scholarly credentials.

‘Pygmalion and the Sphinx,’ however, deals with material that had been the subject of almost perpetual scrutiny by men of letters since before the Great War: the incredible proliferation of statues in Paris, or ‘statuemania’ as the phenomenon was known at the time. Desnos, for his part, avoids the predictable bourgeois lament over the style and placing of these ‘poisonous mushrooms of the Parisian fauna,’ as one critic described statues that seemed to ‘pop up’ overnight. Instead, doubtless inspired by Bataille’s seductive theory of ‘base materialism,’ he produces a brilliant account of the material shortcomings of statuary as a representational form. In an age when, as René Bazin remarked, bronze ‘flowed like ink,’ filling the Parisian streets with half-remembered celebrities and unheeded rhetorical gestures, Desnos’s response (which blends his distinct journalistic and poetic skills) concentrates on the earth-bound nature of the city’s bronze inhabitants. It is this approach that links ‘Pygmalion and the Sphinx’ to essays like Bataille’s ‘Language of Flowers’ – concerned, as it is, with the weight of statues, their lumpen subservience to gravity, and the ludicrous (if charming) gambits by which sculptors attempted to bypass this condition: balloons of bronze, dust-clouds of stone, veins of marble, universally supported by the specious sophistry of the pedestal. Like Documents itself, Desnos’s text bears out surrealist concerns (expressed both on statuary and monumental forms at various times by Louis Aragon, André Breton and Paul Eluard) yet cleaves resolutely to Bataille’s distinct philosophical posture.

While Desnos’s text is remarkable in its own right, the five Jacques-André Boiffard photographs – which add to rather than simply illustrate Desnos’s ideas – have involuntary, marvellous qualities of their own. Strangest to the modern eye are the photographs of two bronze monuments that have long since ceased to occupy the sites specified in the captions: Bartholdi’s monument to the 1870 defence of Paris (at the place des Ternes) and Farcy’s statue of Chappe, inventor of the aerial telegraph (at
the junction of Boulevards Raspail and Saint-Germain). Both were victims of the German occupation of Paris during the Second World War, when many of the most expendable (usually politically divisive or aesthetically questionable) statues were melted down to satisfy the need for reusable metals. In common with the statue of Etienne Dolet immortalised in Breton’s *Nadja*, these are monuments whose posterity was guaranteed by the back-handed compliment of association with a Boiffard commission.

The translation that follows is intended to offer the contemporary reader a deeper engagement with Desnos’s essay by explaining some of the more obscure and impenetrable references, and by offering supplementary images to the photographs that originally accompanied the article. These textual and visual references are intended to confirm ‘Pygmalion and the Sphinx’ as ranking among the most sophisticated surrealist critiques of medium specificity: to sculpture perhaps, what Aragon’s ‘Challenge to Painting’ is to collage. In practical terms, because Desnos used notes in his article, these appear as footnotes while editorial annotations and supplementary illustrations appear as endnotes; annotations to Desnos’s footnotes appear at the end of the endnotes.

Sincere thanks are due to Jacques Fraenkel and Editions Gallimard for granting permission to publish Desnos’s text. Thanks also to Caroline Hancock and Charlie Miller for assistance with the translation, and Mark Rawlinson for shooting the Pigeons.

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**Pygmalion and the Sphinx**

M. de la Palisse himself would agree with me, at least I hope so, if I say that sculpture, which is so idealistic in its aims, is controlled by the terrestrial laws of matter, and above all by the law of gravity. Whether it’s a matter of the pyramid, or better the cone that expresses its triumph (doesn’t the light of a star, which is considered terrestrially as a point, form a cone as it falls to earth!), or the spindle that escapes it, gravity makes its mark on all material creations, by which I mean those situated in space.

This presence of the earth is manifest with greatest power in the branch of sculpture known as statuary. To the weight of bronze, marble or granite is added the weight of the corpse that a statue purportedly perpetuates, or the burden of the rotten brains of allegory.

Nothing, in fact, is more contrary to the idea of divinity than this kind of sham. The best example, I recall, was the use Eisenstein made of a crude crucifix in the ‘Battleship Potemkin.” But nothing is more loaded with mystery, underhand power and activity than this. Because it is in the earth considered as a whole (earth, water, air) that geniuses must be sought. And statues are somewhat like clothes abandoned in a forest: the first vagabond to come along puts them on, the first genius to come along embodies them… if he’s not too ‘tight.” This mysterious humanisation of fakes illustrates, better than any other means, the fate of statues.
Who can explain to me why the Jules Simon of the Madeleine, the Musset of the Porte-Maillot and the Louis XIV of the Place des Victoires are moving? Why the Napoleon of the Vendôme Column is endowed with a peculiar life? Why the Etienne Dolet of the Place Maub’ is a con, while the chevalier de la Barre at Montmartre is endowed with the powers usually given to dangerous symbols.

Then there is the question of the pedestal. These walls enclosed at their summit, this shut shack, plays a greater role that you think in the style (the way of life) of statues. The François Coppée of the boulevard Montparnasse is a famous chap, contrary to the dust which bears his name. He is not, or not quite, of the pedestal, he is light-footed, he is alive. And as such then, it is easy to understand that the only statues destined to perpetuate the life of a man are those taking refuge in the Musée Grévin. But what can be said about shop-window mannequins? These anonymous statues don’t always look at us kindly. There is enchantment beneath their sweating brows and porcelain eyes.

If I was a councillor, a town planner (don’t laugh, eventually everyone dreams that they’re mad) I wouldn’t put these dangerous rascals in everyone’s reach.

There is a tangible difference between the statues of stone or metal and the effigies of coloured wax, equal to that which separates silent films from films with sound and these from films with sound, colour and relief. For you can ignore the very relative immortality conferred on bronze and marble.
Monument to Léon Serpollet, 1858-1907, (Place Saint-Ferdinand). – Photo J.-A. Boiffard.
And equally, if I admitted that concern for the perpetuation of someone’s memory is praiseworthy, I would not go about it that way.

No dedication, no name, no pedestal.

Leaning on the parapet of the Ile Saint-Louis, you would encounter a bronze gentleman who could be Baudelaire; Fortune, on her wheel, could roll down the road to the carrefour Haussman; Courbet, with motionless footfall, would turn his back on the column, and come back up the rue de la Paix without moving, smiling at the pretty women…

In this context, the tomb of M. and Mme. Pigeon in Montparnasse cemetery is a success. These venerable old folk of bronze and cast-iron enjoy an exceptional prolongation of reality in their metal sheets… but they don’t smell as bad as they did in real life.

It must be acknowledged however, that it is necessary to make a distinction between the allegory and the portrait. Erecting a likeness of a being who was alive onto a pedestal is equivalent to raising him to the rank of god, and these days this kind of enterprise is less legitimate than ever. While the allegory of bronze situates itself on the plane of metaphor, as image, as poetic fiction.

The Carpeaux fountain in the Luxembourg is a poem, ‘Paris during the war’ at the Carrousel the height of stupidity, Mickiewicz at the place de l’Alma an unfunny joke.

Why must it be that advertising, which furnishes the modern world with so many strange creatures, has not yet entered the domain of statuary? Advertising, whose hoardings give such grandeur to landscapes and whose presence accentuates the majesty of mountains, moors and the sea.

I would love a porphyry Cadum baby getting out of a marble bath, the waiters of the café Saint-Raphael appearing suddenly at a bend in the road, the little girl from Meunier chocolate in granite and bone, leaning against the walls.

Don’t these fetishes of today deserve at last to have their shadows in the sun more than some poet, general or scholar?

Certainly Pygmalion is dead, if he ever existed. But the example of this Narcissus of art is not about to tempt us. What we love is life with its cortège of strange manifestations, miracles, profound gazes, abuses, hot embraces! It’s not beauty that we love, she leaves us as cold as she is. What we love is the shudder of a left breast at heart’s height, the heat of a body, the beating of eyelids, the richness of a voice.

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2 I regret equally that there have never been statues raised to certain everyday instruments, like the casserole, the bottle, the wheel, the wheelbarrow etc…that speak convincingly of the amazing object which would consist of the marble effigy of a train, gas light, ball bearings, or the Vaucluse fountain!

Figural sculpture has in fact, everything to gain from enterprises quite so perfectly idiotic, in the proper sense of the term.

And when we raise a statue to X-rays, we will force the sculptor to discover a correct and unexpected mode of expression.
As regards statues, they should be only supplements in the exegesis of life, which unfolds perpetually in rhythmic paragraphs in the imaginations of men. They would be thankful to be able to carve on their own plinths two names surrounded by a heart and pierced by an arrow. And once again charm, spell, enchantment lay their sturdy sculptor’s hands, hands with enormous thumbs, on the effigies, and remind us of the danger of figuring nature and the appearance of things.

Pygmalion was probably just a clumsy magician who, wanting to bring himself love, fell in love with his own copy.

We would not want statues to be anything other than supplements...

Statue by E. Christophe, 1876 (Tuileries Gardens). - Photo J.-A. Boiffard.
But are marble, porphyry, granite and bronze insensible? Don’t they enjoy any life?
Bronze is sonorous. The veins of marble are real veins…
We would not want statues to be anything other... That phrase redounds on the author of these lines.
The nature of matter is once again called into question, and faced with such a question we can only fall silent… O radium, vibrant and inhuman matter!
Who knows if a hurricane will not one day sweep away the dust-cloud of the car-crash at the place Saint-Ferdinand, if the bronze balloon of the porte des Ternes won’t take formidable flight, at daybreak, in an upset sky? Listen. The ropes sing, the metal pigeons coo, the cheers leave the throats of bronze with a sound like a tocsin, the fountains of the Concorde, lit this evening like a fairyland, are troubled by the sirens’ tails beating impatiently…
From the point of view of the absolute, platinum is heavier than hydrogen.

And the author of this article stops at this precise point. Because everything must be started afresh, must be contradicted, redone to start again, contradict, redo anew. The great cycle ends and recommences. Perhaps it never existed?
But in spite of everything, the eyes exist, they shine, they rule, they overcome – the living eyes of our best loved.

Robert DESNOS

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3 I draw attention to, as one of the most baroque and admirable enterprises, the two statues that attempt to depict something which is less than figurable: the dust when the wind sweeps it, a balloon when it tries to rise in spite of constraints.
**Translator’s Endnotes**

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iii R. Bazin as quoted in Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris*, 255.


v The ‘M. de la Palisse’ to whom Desnos refers here is the man who gave his name to the French phrase ‘un lapalissade,’ a modern conflation of ‘une verité de la Palice,’ which explains the apparent misspelling. Meaning literally, ‘something so obvious as to be unworthy of mention’ the phrase was reputedly coined when a recently deceased M. de la Palice, ‘fifteen minutes before he died he was still alive’: see Claude Augé (ed.), *Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré*, Paris 1935, entry on Jacques de Chabannes, seigneur de la Palice, 1483. Desnos’s introduction of this black humour at the meeting point between life and death is appositely directed at statues whose ‘lifelike’ qualities are also their most patently ridiculous feature. I am grateful to Marie-Claire Dumas for suggesting the relevance of M. de la Palice in this context.

vi The scene in Sergei Eisenstein’s 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin* to which Desnos refers occurs during a mutiny that breaks out on the ship, where the sailors are resisted by, among others, the clerics on board. At one point a priest wields his heavy metal crucifix menacingly, pounding it club-like into his hand. During the melee the crucifix flies from his grip becoming embedded in the deck of the ship, like an axe in a chopping block. Eisenstein thus reveals the religious ‘symbol’ for what he believes it to be: a weapon of violence used to intimidate and oppress the people.

vii The phrase here ‘s’il n’est pas gênée aux entournures’ means literally ‘if the armpits of his jacket aren’t too tight,’ a French reference to miserliness, the closest English version of which would be the concept of being ‘tight’ with money.

viii There was a long tradition of the idea of moving statues in the city of Paris, not helped by the fact that some monuments were indeed moved around from one location to another. In fact, the ‘Jules Simon of the Madeleine’ that Desnos mentions here was moved from one corner of the site to another, several years after its inauguration (see Hargrove, *The Statues of Paris*, 187-8). The high point of imaginative responses to the phenomenon was Marcel Sauvage’s 1932 novel *La Fin de Paris ou le Révolte des Statues*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932. Sauvage, at one time a fellow-traveller of the Paris Dada group, and editor of the journal *Action*, drew on current ideas about statuemania, and specific surrealist ideas raised in different contexts by both Aragon and Desnos, to imagine a rebellion of the statues in the city which come to life and hold the inhabitants of the capital to ransom. The novel also contains ‘photos’ by someone named Constantinescu (possibly a pseudonym). Fig. 1, below, shows (the statue of) ‘Marshal Ney coming down the Champs-Elysées’ using a very subtle montage technique to uproot Ney from his proper place: the *photo-monteur* cleverly adding a shadow to the figure to securely ground him in the new location. Fig. 2, ‘The first attack column coming from the Louvre’ shows Ney leading a crowd of statues including writers as diverse as Voltaire and Paul Déroulède over a bridge across the Seine.
Fig. 1: Constantinesco, ‘Marshal Ney coming down the Champs-Élysées,’ M. Sauvage, La Fin de Paris, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.

Fig. 2: Constantinesco, ‘The first attack column coming from the Louvre,’ M. Sauvage, La Fin de Paris, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.
In this case of course, Desnos is uncannily accurate, the Napoléon on the Vendôme column having enjoyed a very peculiar life, or rather series of incarnations, of which Desnos’s was only the most recent. The first, by Chaudet was erected in 1810 on top of the emperor’s tribute to the glory of the Grande Armée and depicted Napoléon in Roman garb complete with tunic and laurel wreath. This statue was then removed under the restoration in 1814 and replaced by a monarchical fleur-de-lys. In 1833 the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Phillipe arranged for a more contemporary Bonaparte, dressed in a frock-coat to occupy the top of the column but then in 1863 Napoleon III replaced this with a copy of the first version of his uncle in Roman dress: it was this figure that the communards brought crashing down under Courbet’s supervision in 1871; the present-day toga-wearing Napoléon replaced the former version at Courbet’s expense in 1873. See R.D.E. Burton, Blood in the City: Violence and Revelation in Paris, 1789-1945, Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 2001, 72-89; and Michel Poisson, The Monuments of Paris, I.B.Tauris: New York and London, 1999, 37.

The reference to Etienne Dolet (a sixteenth-century publisher burned at the stake by the Church) may reflect André Breton’s discussion of the monument as ‘inducing unbearable discomfort’ in Nadja. The singling out of Armand Bloch’s statue of the chevalier de la Barre is also interesting. The young nobleman, tortured and also burned at the stake in 1766 for refusing to salute a religious procession, was a cause célèbre for Voltaire whose words were used on the plinth of the statue. It was however the original location of the monument, immediately outside the Basilica of Sacré Coeur [fig. 3] which as Desnos rightly points out, gave it a dangerous symbolic power. It was erected in 1905 by an anticlerical ‘league of free-thinkers’ as a deliberate affront to the authorities that had succeeded in provocatively building the basilica allegedly ‘in expiation’ for the so-called ‘crimes’ of the Commune on the very site where many fervently anti-religious Communards were supposed to have died. In 1926, the monument, which succeeded in offending visitors to the basilica, was moved to a less prominent location in what is now the place Nadar. The original bronze figure was destroyed during the Second World War and later replaced by a cheery and presumably less offensive version on the original plinth. For a full account of the politics of this site see David Harvey, Paris, Capital of Modernity, Routledge: New York and London, 2003, 311-340.

François Coppée’s statue, long-since replaced by a smaller monument with a bas-relief portrait, originally showed the poet in a relaxed ‘strolling’ pose, complete with nonchalantly held cigarette.

The Musée Grévin is the Parisian waxwork museum equivalent to Madame Tussaud’s in London, displaying wax replicas of famous and infamous celebrities and historical figures.

The link here between shop-window mannequins and the historic wax-works in the Musée Grévin is interesting in relation to the critique of forms of realism elsewhere in Desnos’ essay.

In the Paris of the French Third Republic, the Municipal Council was the body with authority over the placement of statues in the city. It was therefore blamed by ‘statuephobes’ with having failed to stop the onset of statuemania. In fact, however, the municipal council had little control over prestigious sites controlled by the state (the President, Senate etc.) and even in areas where they were nominally in charge, they were theoretically responsible for ‘finding sites’ as opposed to deciding whether the statues were a) necessary, or b) aesthetically adequate. See Agulhon, ‘La statuomanie et l’histoire,’ and Pessard, *Statuomanie Parisienne*.

Gustave Courbet’s association with the demolition of the Vendôme Column during the commune is well known, primarily as a result of his being forced to pay punitively for the reconstruction of the monument after the fall of the commune and establishment of Thiers’ ‘conservative’ Third Republic. Less well known, however, and more tantalizing in the context of Desnos’ materialist critique of statuary, are Courbet’s ideas about the column that he was alleged to have hated so much. According to Frank Jellinek, ‘Courbet enthusiastically demanded its déboulonnement, a word of his own invention, which appears to mean that he wanted to deflate it like a balloon, as he believed it was hollow.’ F. Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, Victor Gollancz: London, 1937, 283.

Fig. 4 shows the quite incredible funeral monument of the ‘Famille Charles Pigeon’ in Montparnasse cemetery. The tomb itself is constructed in the form of a life-size bedstead complete with gothic gravestone headboards in which the Pigeons have been laid to rest. The top of the monument consists of life-sized bronze sculptures of the couple in bed; Mrs. Pigeon laid out fully clothed under the sheets, staring heavenwards, and Mr. Pigeon sitting up in bed, pausing to contemplate the contents of the book he has been reading.
The references here are to a series of monuments that, in contrast to the idea of portrait-based statuary, epitomise attempts to transform poetic concepts or ideals into sculptural form. The Carpeaux fountain mentioned in the Luxembourg Gardens is the Observatoire fountain which includes the well-known sculpture The Four Corners of the World, depicting allegorical female representatives of Europe, Asia, America and Africa holding up a hollow globe. But it is not this kind of ‘poetry’ that seems to annoy Desnos as much as monuments that attempt to blend allegory and portraiture. It is harder to say what Desnos means by ‘Paris pendant la Guerre’ at the Carrousel, although the parentheses suggest that it is a nickname. In the light of the context of the idea of allegory, and the description of it as the ‘height of stupidity’ it could be Paul Aubé’s giant (and lofty) Monument to Léon Gambetta which occupied much of the Carrousel at the time. It featured the hero of the siege of Paris with allegories of Strength and Truth either side at the base of a ziggurat crowned by a ‘triumph of democracy’ riding a winged lion and enjoyed renewed popularity during the First World War as a site for nationalist wreath-laying. The ‘Mickiewicz at the place de l’Alma’ is the monument to the Polish poet and patriot Adam Mickiewicz whose ‘totem-Polish’ monument (designed by Antoine Bourdelle and inaugurated in 1929) depicts its hero as the ‘pilgrim of liberty’ at the top of a column that also features an avenging angel (symbolizing Poland) which bisects it two thirds of the way up. For illustrations see Hargrove, The Statues of Paris, 106-109 and 280-285.

Fig. 5 shows the construction along the Boulevard Haussman in 1926, and gives a good sense of the towering presence of the Cadum baby to which Desnos refers. See A. Warnod, Visages de Paris, Firmin-Didot: Paris, 1930, 322.

Radium was discovered by Marie and Pierre Curie in France in 1898, and then isolated by Marie Curie in 1911. Later the source of luminescent paint for glow-in-the-dark numbers on watch faces,
radium is brilliant white in its natural state but blackens on exposure to air: a process of oxidization linking it to bronze statues that often turn green.

xx Marcel Sauvage’s novel *La Fin de Paris* (discussed in note 8 above) took Desnos’s suggestion a step further, illustrating it with a photomontage [fig. 6]. Sauvage begins his novel with a detailed account of the balloon floating away, as he puts it, ‘coming free of its moorings and gently rising, loping from side to side above the crowds, the traffic and the houses. Two tons of stone, like a child’s balloon in the Paris sky.’ Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, 12. It is interesting to note here that Sauvage (who had, like Desnos, clearly seen the monument first hand), specifically describes the balloon as stone rather than bronze.

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xxi The introduction of the first Hollywood ‘talkies’ in 1929 was a landmark in the cinematic experience that greatly affected Desnos and other contributors to *Documents* including both Bataille and Michel Leiris. Stills from *The Broadway Melody* and *The Hollywood Review of 1929* (which also contained hand-coloured sections including a spectacular musical finale) were reproduced in *Documents* (in black and white) and Leiris contributed an entry on ‘talkies’ to the critical dictionary. Although the analogy at work here (between bronze sculptures and waxworks) is very effective, quite what Desnos meant by films ‘with relief’ is hard to imagine.

xxii In this note on the suitable subject-matter for future street sculptures (undoubtedly drawing on Duchamp’s readymades and surrealist objects) Desnos pre-echoes the work of Claes Oldenburg. Best known for his giant gallery-based soft sculptures of the 1960s such as *Floorburger* (1962), *Soft Pay Telephone* (1963) and *Soft Switches* (1964), Oldenburg later produced monumental outdoor civic sculptures of everyday objects of the sort described by Desnos, including *Clothespin* (1976),

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Fig. 6: Constantinesco, ‘The stone balloon goes…,’ M. Sauvage, *La Fin de Paris*, Denoël et Steele: Paris, 1932.
Binoculars (1991), Corridor Pin, Blue (1999) and Trowel (2001). It is remarkable that as with his references to the imaginary monument to the Cadum baby in its marble bath, Desnos alludes here to the conjunction or disjunction of symbolism and material (marble trains, gas lights and fountains). The idea of a statue to x-rays (invisible to the naked eye) takes this meditation to the same impossible degree as the subsequent evocation of radium as an ideally ‘vibrant’ sculptural component.

Desnos’s admiration for the ‘less than figurable’ aspect of Bartholdi’s Monument to the National Defence at the porte des Ternes is perhaps more obviously explained by Boiffard’s photograph than his reference to ‘dust when the wind sweeps it.’ Here Desnos is referring to what he calls the ‘car crash’ (the Monument to Leon Serpollet) at the Place Saint-Ferdinand. Serpollet, a pioneer of the motor industry in France, invented the steam-tricycle and his monument, a substantial affair in the centre of a modest circular place, attempts to depict its subject on an early precursor of the motor-car from which clouds of steam billow in all directions (a material contradiction emphasized by the flocks of pigeons that perch on it). The idea of the car-crash derives from a figure facing Serpollet from the front of the vehicle who looks very much as if he has been struck by it.

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