Sea of Dreams: André Breton and the Great Barrier Reef

Ann Elias

‘The Treasure Bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ is an underwater photograph in Mad Love (1937). André Breton’s caption tells us the source was the New York Times but not who the photographer was. The research informing this article reveals the coral reef is not Great Barrier in the Pacific but the Bahamas in the Caribbean. The photographer is J.E. Williamson. I establish the provenance of this photograph and argue for its centrality to surrealist aesthetics. I discuss the image’s many possible symbolisms but also argue that Breton’s desire was to construct Great Barrier Reef as the uncanny Pacific of his imagination.

In this article I trace the provenance and context of a black and white photograph of a coral reef taken underwater and published by André Breton in L’Amour fou (Mad Love, 1937). Its caption reads: ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier.”’ Approaching the photograph as an art historian with a particular interest in exchanges between the disciplines of biology and art and specifically in relation to the Great Barrier Reef, I wanted to uncover the circumstances surrounding Breton’s possession of such an early, and therefore rare, underwater photograph of the Reef. What was the source of the image and how did Breton obtain it? In 1937 very few Australians had seen under the surface of the sea at Great Barrier and the fluid ocean was of much less significance to Australian identity and history than the territory above sea level.¹

Inquiry led me to discover a discrepancy between the photograph and its caption: the geography of the photograph is not Great Barrier. Instead the location is the Bahamas – according to the New York Times, where it was first published in 1929 in an article on the image’s maker, the photographer John Ernest Williamson (1881-1966). This finding in turn led me to consider the significance of the image to André Breton and to surrealism more broadly, particularly to the cornerstones of surrealist aesthetics including dreams and the unconscious, the uncanny and convulsive beauty.

Here I discuss the implications of Breton’s appropriation and recontextualisation of the image from American journalism to surrealism. It was an example of ‘photography in the service of surrealism,’ as distinct from ‘surrealist photography,’ according to the distinction drawn by Dawn Ades to account for the vast number of readymade photographs appropriated from popular culture by surrealists for surrealist ends.² In the 1920s and 1930s a new culture of photographically illustrated newspapers and magazines allowed for unprecedented, international circulation of documentary images. Through the new telegraph system a modern class of itinerant image, akin to floating signifiers, could be plucked from one context and placed in another. When collaged together and juxtaposed they increased dramatically the possibilities of creating new realities for the world. And Breton himself knew he was benefiting from this vibrant, virtual image culture when he wrote how the new ‘wireless telegraphy, wireless telephony, wireless imagination’ enabled him to become ‘a seeker of gold … in the air.’³
In addressing the relevance of ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ to Breton’s private life I want to discuss certain connections between water and the figure central to Mad Love, Breton’s wife Jacqueline Lamba. I want to argue that the vision of a submerged landscape relates to Lamba through evocation of sensual pleasure but also to the unconscious and, by association, memories and dreams. However, the photograph’s relevance to surrealist aesthetics more broadly radiates from the vision it offers of nature’s surreality, and from its ambiguous status as a photograph – an index of reality – that also resembles a dream. This object, then, demonstrates a point made by Ian Walker in relation to photography in the service of surrealism; that it can simultaneously render the world ‘as an hallucination that is also a fact that is also an hallucination.’ Given this rupture between reality and fiction, and in light of the fact that this photograph, taken by Williamson from inside an early submarine, has an historical connection with Jules Verne’s Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea (1870), I want to raise the possibility that it was the photograph’s science-fiction aesthetic that attracted Breton.

Finally, as signposted at the beginning of this Introduction, my discovery of Breton’s misappropriation of a photograph of the Bahamas to stand in for the Great Barrier Reef leads me to discuss his fantasy of Australia. As I will show, by changing the geographical location of the coral reef and by not disclosing the photograph’s authorship Breton was able to project onto the image his idealized vision of the Pacific as a place filled with imaginary nature and a place different from Europe both physically and psychologically. In the context of Mad Love this underwater photograph no longer denotes the reality of place; instead the image and caption are two signs that collude in a form of mutual mimicry. The signifier ‘Great Barrier Reef’ serves to connote the ‘edge of the world.’

Fig. 1: Front of Wide World Photos photographic print acquired by André Breton 1929-1936 (Photo: Association Atelier André Breton).
Sometime between 1929 and 1937 André Breton obtained an underwater photograph belonging to Wide World Photos in Paris, the photo-agency then owned by the New York Times (Figs. 1 and 2). In 1937 he published it in the pages of Mad Love naming it ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier.”’ It is possible the image was originally sent to Breton from New York as a ‘wire photo’ using the new telegraph technology available in 1935. A fellow surrealist might have passed it on as happened throughout the history of the movement when artists chanced upon surprising, often uncanny press photographs. Meret Oppenheim, for example, sent Breton a newspaper picture of a bicycle seat seething with bees, a defamiliarising union of two objects that creates a disquieting strangeness. But while it is possible that the underwater photograph in question originally reached Breton through a friend and as a ‘wire photo,’ at some point he also obtained a photographic print from the Paris office of the New York Times.

Fig. 2: Back of Wide World Photos photographic print acquired by André Breton 1929-1936. With title: ‘Pl.3.- Le pont de trésors de la « grande barrière » australienne.’ (Photo: Association Atelier André Breton).

Together with Man Ray’s photograph of a sunflower captioned ‘This kind of helianthus,’ the underwater scene of coral caverns in Mad Love remained in Breton’s collection of books, manuscripts, photographs and art at 42 Rue Fontaine in Paris until his death in 1966, after which it was preserved and then digitized by the Association Atelier André Breton before the collection was dispersed through auction in 2003. Such longevity of possession was not unusual for a man who
amassed thousands of objects including shells, crystals and corals in a private museum that served as raw material for surrealist practice and theory and embodied an ‘expression of its owner’s psyche.’

Utterly surprising is the news agency photograph’s spectacular clarity compared to the pale, murky, reproduction it became in Mad Love. Every dark grotto, every mysterious variation in tone and pattern of light, and every eerie shape of coral reef flora and fauna, is visible. The photograph evokes a sense of peering into the depths of being, of experiencing ‘the oceanic feeling’ of subjectivity unbounded and unconstrained, and of being witness to the mind as it dreams.

‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ was one of twenty photographs reproduced in Mad Love. Their inclusion raised the price of the book so considerably that of the 1800 copies printed by Gallimard Editions only 544 sold over a period of three years. But they were integral to the book’s concept. While many commentators have addressed the photographic conditions of Mad Love, they differ as to the images’ function. For Dana MacFarlane, Breton draws ‘out the textual element by creating captions for the photographs that call into question any assumption of photographic objectivity.’ The ‘Great Barrier’ picture is a case in point. Yet in Anna Balakian’s view the photographs were a concession to curious readers ‘who need the static reality of the place or object’ referred to in the text. Kim Grant has similarly claimed that when Mad Love was published, Breton ‘used photographs not as interventions in the real but as documents and a sort of sentimental evidence.’ But Mary Ann Caws has better captured the poetic value of the images. In Caws’s Introduction to her translation of Mad Love, she explains how the book was first put together as an assemblage of writing, photographs and letters all interleaved and stuck on the pages, constituting ‘not just a book, not just the record of an extraordinary love – that between André Breton and the artist with whom he shared his life – but an object inserted madly and really, now in our world.’ Mad Love is a passionate assemblage of text and image and a fitting tribute to Breton’s love affair with his wife Jacqueline Lamba, the mother of Aube for whom the concluding letter of Mad Love was written.

Relevant to this discussion, and to the symbolism of the underwater photograph under scrutiny, is the fact that Breton met Lamba in 1934 when she was a nude dancer in an underwater tank in a Montmartre music hall. In those early years he had taken his friends to watch her dance, according to Lewis Kachur (who wonders whether Salvador Dalí was amongst the visitors since two years after publication of Mad Love Dalí built the Dream of Venus, an installation at the 1939 New York World’s Fair in which topless women swam in a deep water tank inviting the audience to dream of love and erotic desire). In mythology the sea was the birthplace of Venus, the goddess of love, and because of this the sea and erotic love have long been associated. For M.E. Warlick this is most obvious in Dalí’s installation where ‘spiky protuberances of coral’ rise from an ‘underwater grotto, or uterine environment.’ In Breton’s photograph in Mad Love coral also rises as phallic shapes towards the surface of the sea from vulval grottos in the body of the ocean. Kirsten Powell, however, finds something ‘puritanical’ in his choice of coral for sexual suggestion. She comments that the erotic is ‘veiled’ since the delirious love and ‘orgasmic aesthetic experience’ embodied in Breton’s concept of convulsive beauty, a concept integral to Mad Love, is difficult to reconcile with ‘coral beds of the Great Barrier Reef.’ Nevertheless, coral as well as crystal inspired in Breton the psychical state he termed
‘convulsive beauty.’ In the first chapter of Mad Love he addressed a comparison of coral and crystal before developing the poetics of convulsive beauty: ‘Life,’ he wrote, ‘in its constant formation and destruction, seems to me never better framed for the human eye than between the hedges of blue titmouses of aragonite and ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’.

Comparing the underwater photograph of the ‘Great Barrier’ with a photograph by Brassai titled The house where I live, my life, what I write, Breton compared the rigidity of crystal to the image of calcified coral whose destiny is to dissolve into the liquid sea. Later in the book he used the phrase a ‘petrifying fountain’ and while not specifically related to the ‘Barrier Reef’ image it captures perfectly the look of coral formations in the photograph. Both image and phrase evoke the contradictory effect of a gush of water turning to stone, a vision that is uncanny in that it produces intellectual uncertainty. In turn the image of a petrifying fountain creates a visual equivalent of Breton’s aesthetic category of ‘fixed-explosive,’ one of three aesthetic groups identified in Mad Love that illustrate the concept of convulsive beauty. Along with ‘veiled-erotic’ and ‘magic-circumstantial’ the category of ‘fixed-explosive’ evokes a clash of opposites and a disturbance of the senses that – for Breton at least – aroused erotic bodily sensations, the sign of convulsive beauty.

With only very few images in public circulation in the 1930s of coral reefs photographed underwater Breton was fortunate indeed to find one that conveyed such a powerful image of motion arrested and one that embodied a visual clash between something fixed and something explosive. But he heightened the photograph’s mystique even further, and accentuated the image’s strangeness, by giving it a title that located this vision in the Pacific Ocean at the outer limits of the world that few Europeans had seen through photographs taken beneath the sea.

In the first decades of the twentieth century the Pacific, and the sea in general, was still surrounded by mystery. Ocean-space was not a space of society as it later became; instead it stood for the unknown. Scholarship on André Breton recognises the sea as one enigma that remained important throughout his life. A ‘haunting presence’ is the way Anna Balakian described the sea’s place in shaping Breton’s temperament and in motivating his future as an artist. References to the sea are abundant in Breton’s work as they are throughout surrealism prompting Allan Sekula to name surrealism as ‘the last aesthetic movement to claim the sea with any seriousness.’ Four examples of the sea’s representation in surrealism drawn from a huge store of possibilities are Max Ernst (Forêt, 1927), Rene Magritte (Collective Invention, 1934), Pablo Picasso (Figures on the Seashore, 1931), and Buñuel and Dalí (Un Chien Andalou, 1928). At the start of ‘Surrealism and Painting,’ published in 1928, where Breton brought to mind ‘the Marvels of the sea a hundred feet deep,’ he wrote that only the ‘wild eye’ freed from habit can be fully receptive to the magical sensations of the outer limits of the world. As well as reflecting key elements of surrealism including the creative power of spontaneous vision, Breton’s reference to the marvels of the deep captured the spirit of the times. In 1928 the invisible realm beneath the surface of the sea was a frontier that few had witnessed, studied or photographed yet one many yearned to experience and possess. Consequently to contemplate the ocean floor and its primordial mysteries – the site of evolution for life on earth – was to identify with a wilderness alien to civilization and order. Those early photographers of the deep, including French
filmmaker Jean Painlevé, exaggerated the sea’s surprising potential and unknown secrets and revealed the imaginative possibilities of a new type of fiction based in science.

A contemporary of Painlevé, the American photographer John Ernest Williamson was a celebrated inventor, explorer and underwater cinematographer. Williamson published widely about his underwater achievements including in *Scientific American* in 1914 where he wrote about the triumph of photographing the bottom of the ocean. In 1932 Williamson filmed one of the earliest known underwater documentaries, entitled *With Williamson Beneath the Sea* (1932). The film’s publicity promised audiences an awesome spectacle of ‘a lost world fathoms below recovered in savage splendour.’ At a time before the populace at large developed a visual vocabulary for looking at the world beneath the sea Williamson’s films and photographs ushered in that new paradigm of vision. Submarine film offered audiences the thrill of observing something for the first time with a wild, untrained eye. André Breton, too, was excited about the new frontier.

The underwater photograph Breton chose for *Mad Love* was published in his book as an anonymous press image; but it was Williamson who took the photograph, on location in the Bahamas. In 1916, with his brother George, Williamson became a sensation for filming a silent, underwater adaptation of Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). Released by Universal Pictures, it was the first Hollywood movie shot underwater. Williamson was not a surrealist but he was a science fiction filmmaker with an eye for images that could take the viewer beyond the boundaries of normative experience. His films, photographs and dioramas produced a combination of estrangement and logic, and as such enacted the genre conventions of science fiction. The subjects he sought in the natural world – sharks, fish and coral formations – were not in themselves unusual but Williamson coded them as dangerous and exotic, presenting ‘man-eating sharks’ and coral ‘jungles.’ The production of *Twenty Thousand Leagues* was made possible by Williamson’s invention of the ‘photosphere,’ an air-filled enclosure placed on the ocean floor and big enough to house Williamson. It had a spherical window to photograph through and a strong headlight to enhance Williamson’s vision.

The photograph that Breton captioned “The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”” was taken in 1929 when Williamson led an expedition with Chicago’s Field Museum to collect Bahamian coral for dioramas and fish for taxidermy. It was taken beneath the water at Nassau just before the same ancient coral formation in the photograph was extracted from the ocean floor and shipped to Chicago. Even today visitors to the Field Museum can view the impressive coral structure in the ‘Bahama Islands diorama.’ Williamson photographed and wrote about the process of ‘lifting the huge coral trees.’ The natural history museums in Chicago and New York, inspired by the growing impact of Charles Darwin’s 1842 treatise ‘The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs’ (where he proposed the theory that coral reefs are formed by the earth’s subsidence), acquired large quantities of coral specimens from the Bahamas for their displays of marine life.

In 1929 The New York Times published Williamson’s photographs of the underwater expedition to the Bahamas, including the eerie image that eight years later appeared in *Mad Love*. Reflecting the frontier status of the ocean in 1929, a realm almost as foreign as outer space and therefore considered ripe for conquest, the caption read: ‘The coral world beneath the waves that the
Williamsons invaded. The fact is that between 1929 and 1937 the same underwater photograph by J. E. Williamson appeared in *The New York Times* (1929), Williamson’s autobiography *Twenty Years Under the Sea* (1936), and Breton’s *Mad Love* (1937). Over that time it had three different captions, two of which placed it in two different geographical locations – the Bahamas and Australia. We know from the stamp on the verso side that the print in Breton’s possession originated from the New York Times photo-agency, but not whether Breton was familiar with the New York Times article – let alone whether he had seen Williamson’s films or read his autobiography (a book so popular it was translated into several languages including French).

But what about J.E. Williamson: was he aware that his pioneering photograph taken under the sea at Nassau had found its way to France and into a key work of the European avant-garde? A copyright notice in the front pages of Williamson’s 1936 autobiography states that ‘no part of this book may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher.’ Without doubt copyright did not count for much in the early twentieth century since illustrated journals and books frequently used photographs without naming the photographers. However, what makes the case of *Mad Love* different is the surprising presence of J. E. Williamson’s name, typed on the back of the photo-agency print that Breton acquired (Fig. 2). Was it André Breton’s intention or mistake to misname the photograph’s geographical location and omit the name of its author? His annotations on the print provide more insight.

Both front and back of the photo-agency print are marked with Breton’s handwriting. On the front, below a line drawn horizontally across the image, there is a note, at times illegible, providing instructions on how to crop the photograph (Fig. 1). In the final reproduction the lower section is missing. Cropped out for publication in the book was the bottom of the image showing a strangely curving white ocean floor, a give-away sign of the round viewing chamber of Williamson’s photosphere through which he photographed the underwater scene. In other words the distracting sign of the process of making the photograph, a barrier to unmediated visual experience, was cropped for reproduction in *Mad Love* in order to focus completely on the coral formations and illusion of direct access to the unchartered ocean.

On the back of the print, beside an official agency stamp is an agency title naming the photographer, J.E. Williamson (Fig. 2). It reads: ‘Expedition oceanographique J.E.Williamson dans les profondeurs de la mer flore et faune aquatiques. coraux géants, poissons, plantes marines scaphandriers. etc…’ [‘JE Williamson oceanography expedition in deep sea aquatic flora and fauna. giant corals, fish, marine plants divers etc…’]. These words, however, have been deliberately crossed out as if irrelevant, superfluous, and not required. Written directly above the crossed-out agency title, in Breton’s handwriting, are the words ‘L’amour Fou’ and on the opposite side of the print’s back is more of Breton’s writing: ‘Pl.3.- Le pont de trésors de la « grande barrière » australienne.’ This sentence was the basis for the final title in the first French edition of *L’Amour fou*: ‘3. Le Pont de Trésors de la «Grande Barrière» Australienne (p. 15) (*Photo N.-Y.-T.*).’

The pages of *Mad Love* were not the first place the words ‘the Australian “Great Barrier”’ appeared in Breton’s captions. They accompanied a series of photographs of coral in the essay entitled ‘Beauty Will Be Convulsive’ (‘La beauté sera convulsive’), which was published in 1934 in...
Minotaure and later incorporated into Mad Love. In Minotaure the words appeared below a page of Brassai’s photographs of coral and crystal specimens: ‘Entre Les Haies de Mésanges Bleues de L’Aragonite et la «Grande Barrière» Australienne.’ Already part of Breton’s repertoire of captions, the phrase came readymade to the pages of Mad Love where it appears in-text as well as below the photograph.

The underwater location in Breton’s book is not the Great Barrier Reef. The question is why he named it so, and secondly whether it matters that the caption and the geography don’t match. Now, Mad Love is part theory, part autobiography, and part fiction, and as such we might expect it to open onto what Robert McNab has described as the geography of imagination. Since the title ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ is also a line from the text of Mad Love, it feels right to think of it as a poetic supplement to the image. The words exacerbate what Paul Hammond refers to – when explaining Breton’s approach to writing about Miró’s Constellations – as enigma, ambiguity, frisson. Miró’s own approach to titling his work is helpful: ‘I invent a world from a supposedly dead thing,’ he remarked. ‘And when I give it a title, it becomes even more alive. I find my titles in the process of working, as one thing leads to another on my canvas. When I have found the title I live in the atmosphere.’

One thing is plain: Breton’s caption adds to the atmosphere of the image but without creating a disjunction between word and image or critiquing the habits of language, as in Magritte’s 1928-1929 painting, The Treachery of Images. These are not incongruous elements and disparate realities brought together to create a more poetic reality, but rather elements of imagined resemblance. Yet ‘The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”’ does draw our attention to the unreliable space between image and text, between seeing and reality, and between thought and representation; to slippages in communication that Breton himself articulated in ‘Surrealism and Painting’ in 1928 when he wrote that ‘words, images, touch are all cruel. I am not writing what I thought I was thinking.’

One way to consider the title is to think of it as an example of a caption becoming a directive for reading, as discussed by Walter Benjamin. In ‘A Small History of Photography’ (1931) Benjamin asked, rhetorically, about photography in modernity: ‘will not the caption become the most important component of the shot?’ The caption, he predicted, would supersede the image and become a directive for politicized thought and propaganda. Breton’s caption directs our thinking to Australia, at the far reaches of the planet, a place Breton never visited. In the context of the autobiographical nature of Mad Love the title even insinuates that Breton was a great traveller, which he was not – unlike Paul Eluard, who in 1924 journeyed to Australia and New Zealand, travelling past the Great Barrier Reef en route to New Guinea. Breton, in the view of Robert McNab, was an armchair traveller – yet one ‘longing for new horizons.’ And perhaps because he was an armchair traveller, he was less concerned with geographical reality and more with the excitement of a photograph that suited his fantasy of the remote Great Barrier Reef. Breton’s title exoticises the narrator, implying that he is a man in touch with the antipodes of the world. The title also politicizes the image in Benjamin’s sense, decentring Europe, privileging the Pacific, the southern hemisphere and the Tropic of Capricorn.
What a different life experience was promised by the wilderness of Great Barrier Reef compared with Paris, a city that Denis de Rougemont referred to as the ‘geometric locus of the modern adventure.’ If the experience of Paris was ‘geometric’ the encounter with Great Barrier Reef seemed likely to offer an extravaganza of the organic and an encounter with a natural wilderness of the type identified by Gavin Parkinson as ‘antithetical to the habits, customs, restrictions, and laws that characterized modern Western society.’ Coincidentally, when Williamson’s photograph was published in the New York Times in 1929, the surrealists published ‘The Surrealist Map of the World,’ where ‘France had all but disappeared and the Pacific Ocean was at the centre of the world.’ As Barbara Creed notes, the surrealists were fascinated by the idea of the Pacific which represented a faraway exotic location, a refuge, a place to seek the marvellous, to make new beginnings, to encounter other cultures.

As the passage quoted above from Mad Love indicates, coral reefs, for Breton, were places to witness the formation and destruction of life. Scientists as well as artists found metaphysical resonance in the physical nature of corals, especially the way young coral organisms build their lives on the bodies of the dead. For example, while working in 1905 at the Cocos-Keeling Atoll where Charles Darwin studied corals in the nineteenth century, the British scientist Frederic Wood Jones was struck by the way coral animals inhabit both ‘their dwelling place and their mausoleum.’

Again, artists and scientists have both been intrigued by the ambiguity of coral formations. As one scientist remarked of the Great Barrier Reef, the paradox of corals is that they are mistakenly classified as stone, but branch and bud like plants, and while properly classified animal are immobile, whereas animals ‘run, walk, fly, swim or crawl.’ Coral excites the imagination due to its uncanny blurring of the vegetable and mineral and this is expressed in Mad Love where Breton marvelled how ‘the inanimate is so close to the animate that the imagination is free to play infinitely with these apparently mineral forms.’

Rosalind Krauss has argued that Breton’s attraction to the mimicry of coral and its disorienting likeness to flowers, plants and rocks stemmed from surrealism’s fascination with reality as representation and ‘the natural production of signs, of one thing in nature contorting itself into a representation of another’ also seen in Brassaï’s photographs of plants that resemble insects. When in Mad Love Breton wrote about the uncanny likeness of animate coral to inanimate mineral he referred to this illusion as ‘nature’s fantasies’ and compared the effect of this phenomenon to that provoked by the poems of Lautréamont. Both left Breton transfixed by the object’s convulsive beauty ‘like the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across my temples to produce a real shiver.’ And not only in surrealism, but in science fiction, were writers drawn to the coral uncanny.

There is little doubt that when J.E. Williamson photographed the underwater scene destined to become part of Mad Love he framed it through the eyes of Jules Verne whose images of life underwater he knew intimately. Breton’s relation to Verne is less clear. Nonetheless Mad Love recalls Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. When Breton refers to two kinds of coral by their scientific names, as ‘those absolute bouquets formed in the depths by the alcyonaria, the madrepores,’ he echoes Jules Verne’s narrator, Dr. Pierre Aronnax, who, in describing Captain Nemo’s coral collection, used the same unusual technical terms. When, one year before Mad Love
went on sale, J.E. Williamson published the coral photograph in his autobiography *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, he titled it as if a film still for a Jules Verne production: "Where the huge, loathsome octopus might lie in wait"; A Lovely Setting for Horrible Tragedy. The underwater setting reminded Williamson of the lair of the gargantuan squid in Verne’s story. Williamson (in the spirit of Verne) imagined this coral reef as the home of a monstrous freak of nature, as a site of the Darwinian grotesque.

Pamela Kort has argued that it was *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* that inspired Max Ernst’s forests and that *Forêt* (1927) was a response to Verne’s passage about the resemblance of coral to petrified forests; it explains, writes Kort, why viewers of Ernst’s works feel as if they are ‘standing on the ocean’s floor.’ The surrealist fascination with underwater imagery was also influenced by the German naturalist Ernst Haeckel, and his colleague Wilhelm Bölsche. Bölsche’s *Love-Life in Nature* (*Das Liebesleben in der Natur*, 1898) stimulated in German and Viennese modernism an interest in the ocean ‘as a primordial erogenous zone.’ A passage from Bölsche resonates with the erotic context of Breton’s appropriation of this photograph of a uterine, sensual ocean where there is ‘infinite life, trees rising from the coral depths, covered … with the greedy orange-yellow mouths of polyps, darting silvery fish, and … the medusa, the most enchanted of all children of the sea. … Myriads of quivering souls. … All is one vast chain of life, one vast chain of love.’

How disappointed Breton must have felt when he opened the first copy of the first edition of *Mad Love* and found that magnificent, detailed, vibrant underwater photograph become a dim and imprecise copy. Yet possession of the photograph gave him an image of life underwater every bit as strange and theatrical as Jean Painlevé’s photographs of sea creatures published by Georges Bataille in *Documents* in 1929. In the late 1920s surrealists celebrated Painlevé’s photographs for probing the ‘optical unconscious’ of underwater space. It is interesting to speculate whether Painlevé and J.E. Williamson, working in two different countries but both practicing at the intersection of science and art, knew each other’s work. I would make the observation that while the long, picturesque view in *Mad Love’s* underwater image stands in contrast to the defamiliarising close-ups of Painlevé’s crustacean ‘monsters’ in *Documents*, the similarity lies in the suggestion of alien life materialising from the deep. Both photographers amplify the mystery of nature underwater while also expressing, in the manner of science fiction, anxiety about the sea, that new geographical frontier opened up by modern science.

André Breton admired the mimicry of coral, and consciously or unconsciously, by titling the photograph ‘Great Barrier’ he created another type of mimicry; that of title and image imitating each another. Because the general resemblance of image and caption are so close and because it is difficult to tell one reef from another, the error has long gone undetected. Most of us would struggle to place the geography of the Bahamas simply by looking at the image in Breton’s book. However, today’s marine scientists have no difficulty identifying the peculiar nature of Caribbean reefs and the distinctive Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) in the lower right of the photograph.

Whether Breton came to be in possession of J.E.Williamson’s extraordinary underwater photograph by chance or design, it is a vision maximally opposed to urban, machine culture. It is certainly true that in 1937 the underwater photograph reproduced in *Mad Love* indexed technological
innovations. But the gaze of nature returned by 'The treasure bridge of the Australian “Great Barrier”'
effects a return of the repressed. To the thousands of readers of Mad Love who, across time and
space, have put image and caption together to form a mental picture of the ocean floor at the Great
Barrier Reef – one that, while mistaken, rates amongst the earliest global impressions of the Reef
obtained through mass reproduced photography – it has presented a vision of nature unruly and
other; yet an otherness also enthralling, belonging to a jewel in the sea at the edge of the world that
magically bridged, as coral reefs do, past and present, life and death, animate and inanimate, and the
thresholds of sea, land and sky.

1 The dominance of the land and repression of the sea in Australian history and mythology is
discussed by Ross Gibson, 26 Views of a Starburst World: William Dawes at Sydney Cove 1788-
1791, University of Western Australia Publishing, Perth, 2012, 228.

2 Dawn Ades, ‘Photography and the surrealist text’ in Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingston, L’Amour fou:
photography and surrealism, The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C, and Abbeville Press, New
York, 1985, 187.

3 André Breton, Richard Sieburth and Jennifer Gordon (translators), from Point du Jour, Editions

4 Ian Walker, City gorged with dreams: surrealism and documentary photography in interwar Paris,

5 Ibid., 23.

6 The European portrayal of the Pacific as picturesque and other is discussed in Simon Ryan, The
87.

7 M.E. Warlick, ‘Magic, alchemy and surrealist objects,’ in Elmar Schenkel and Stefan Welz (eds),
Magical Objects: Things and Beyond, (Leipzig explorations in literature and Culture 12), Gaida +

8 The history of the Paris office of the New York Times discussed in John G. Morris, ‘Henri Cartier-
Bresson: Artist, Photographer and Friend.’ News Photographer, September 2004, 2, consulted 23

9 Steven Edwards, Short History of Photography, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 32.

10 Oppenheim’s gift to Breton noted in Fionna Barber ‘From “Familiar: Alice Maher” 1995,’ in Fintan

11 Thankyou to Constance Krebs for providing a digital print of ‘The treasure bridge of Great Barrier
Reef’ which is catalogued under ‘photographs’ at the website for the Association Atelier André Breton,

12 The collection is discussed in Dagmar Motychka Weston, ‘Communicating vessels: André Breton
and his atelier, home and personal museum in Paris,’ Architectural Theory Review Vol. 11, No. 2,
2006, 106.


Warlick, ‘Magic, alchemy and surrealist objects,’ 18.


André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), 19.


This definition of science fiction by Darko Suvin from *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) is quoted in Carl Freedman, *Critical Theory and Science Fiction*, University Press of New England, Hanover, 2000, 16.

Williamson writes about 'the first film drama beneath the sea' in J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 132-146.

The Field Museum-Williamson Expedition is described by Williamson in J. E. Williamson, *Twenty Years Under the Sea*, Hale, Cushman & Flint, Boston and New York, 1936, 251-255.


André Breton, ‘La beauté sera convulsive,’ *Minotaure*, Issue 5, May 1934, 11.


Ibid., 24.


William J. Dakin, Great Barrier Reef and some mention of other if other Australian coral reefs, The Australian National Publicity Association, Melbourne, 1951, 15.

André Breton, *Mad Love* (1937), 11.


Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill note that while Breton did not mention Verne in the 1924 Manifesto and did not name him as a precursor to surrealism, the science fiction writer occupied a significant place in surrealism’s background including ‘oblique reference to Verne’ by Breton. See Terry Hale and Andrew Hugill ‘The science is fiction: Jules Verne, Raymond Roussel and surrealism,’ in *Jules Verne: narratives of modernity*, ed. Edmund J. Smyth, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2000, 132. See also Pamela Kort, ‘Arnold Böcklin, Max Ernst, and the debate around origins and survivals in Germany and France,’ in *Darwin: Art and the Search for Origins*, eds. Pamela Kort and Max Hollein, (eds), Wienand, Cologne, 2009, 48.

André Breton, *Mad Love*, 11.


Pamela Kort, ‘Arnold Böcklin, Max Ernst, and the debate around origins and survivals in Germany and France,’ 46.


When shown the photograph in *Mad Love* Anthony Gill, Curator of Natural History at the Macleay Museum, University of Sydney, identified ‘a West Atlantic reef,’ and ‘the Nassau Grouper (Epinephelus striatus) in the lower right part of the photo [which is] a large and distinctive species.’
Anthony Gill email to Jude Phelp, MacLeay Museum, University of Sydney, 21 March 2012, <jude.philp@sydney.edu.au>.

Dr Ann Elias gained an MA and PhD from the University of Auckland and is Associate Professor of Theoretical Enquiry at Sydney College of the Arts, the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on Australian art and visual culture and her publications place Australian material in the context of British and American histories. She has two specializations: camouflage, including the crossing of disciplines between art and science, and flowers, especially flowers as objects of camouflage. Her research is included in major international journals and her book *Camouflage Australia: art, nature, science and war* was published by Sydney University Press in 2011.
Artaud’s Heliogabalus

C.F.B. Miller

What is interesting in the events of our time is not the events themselves, but this state of moral ferment into which they make our spirits fall; this extreme tension. It is the state of conscious chaos into which they ceaselessly plunge us.
Antonin Artaud

We could write a history of limits –
Michel Foucault

My topic is Antonin Artaud’s strange book, Héliogabale ou l’anarchiste couronné (Heliogabalus, or the Anarchist Crowned). Unclassifiable, eccentric, written at the limit, this ‘mystico-historical’ narrative (or schizohistory, or anarchaeology) of the infamous third-century Roman emperor appeared in Paris on 28 April 1934, amid the political tumult of that year. On 6 February, the extreme right had rioted in the Place de la Concorde, causing the collapse of the government and prompting the formation of the antifascist Popular Front. To the East and South, Fascist sovereigns were in power. The subtitle of Heliogabalus announces the paradox of sovereignty, of the sovereign who is both ‘outside and inside the juridical order’. Germany and Italy were states of exception and, adjacent to them, the French polis experienced a crisis of representation. Normative distinctions broke down. The far left seemed to mimic the far right. Committed antifascists valorised authoritarianism. Antidemocratic extremists sought to go ‘beyond right and left’. Intellectuals entertained paranoid identifications with foreign powers.

It was an historical conjuncture germane to apocalyptic speech. In May 1933 Artaud felt that he was writing on the verge of ‘cataclysms to come [qui s’annoncent]’. Anaïs Nin recorded his behaviour during the period he was researching Heliogabalus:

Artaud sat in the Coupole pouring out poetry, talking of magic, “I am Heliogabalus, the mad Roman emperor,” because he becomes everything he writes about. In the taxi he pushed his hair back from a ravaged face. The beauty of the summer day did not touch him. He stood up in the taxi and, stretching out his arms, he pointed to the crowded streets: “The revolution will come soon. All this will be destroyed. The world must be destroyed. It is corrupt, and full of ugliness. It is full of mummies, I tell you. Roman decadence. Death. I wanted a theatre that would be like a shock treatment, galvanise, shock people into feeling.”

In a few years Artaud himself would undergo electroshock, writing spells and dedicating books to Hitler from his asylum, even as, to the East, the Führer acted out the death drive.
But I will not pander to biographism. It is a text I wish to situate, not an authorial subject. And how, in any case, could you restrict Artaud to the latter designation? Artaud, who performed the rupture between madness and the work itself. Artaud, who set out to destroy conventional authorship and exceed representation. Artaud, who rendered the subject en procès: in process – unfixed – and on trial.

Again and again Artaud flashes through the text of poststructuralism as a vector of radical transgression. In what follows I will offer a partial genealogy of this antiauthoritarian mobilisation. And yet a metonymy dogs the reception. Shadowing the figure of liberation is an anxiety: that Artaud’s production may be contaminated by fascism. If I confront this ambiguity, it is not to purge it from my argument. To the contrary, in outlining the patterns of affirmation and denunciation which since the 1960s have characterised writing about Artaud, I mean to map a threshold for my reading of Heliogabalus – which is a reading of a threshold.

The 1961 publication of Michel Foucault’s Folie et Dérision. Histoire de la folie à l’age classique (‘Madness and Unreason: History of Madness in the Classical Age’) was a turning-point in Artaud’s reception. The meaning of the book has altered with its chequered publication history, which saw the main text and preface substantially abridged in the 1964 paperback, and the original preface completely suppressed in the 1972 second edition. Hence Ian Hacking’s remark that the 1961 and 1972 editions (the latter simply entitled History of Madness in the Classical Age) are ‘two distinct books’: ‘One of these books is governed by an idea of déraison, in which there lurks a dream of madness in the wild, as something prediscursive, inaccessible, pure. The other book is what the first became, stripped of romantic illusion.’ Hacking is not the only commentator to criticise the early Foucault for being ‘Romantic’ – though Dionysian might be more accurate. Nonetheless, it is this Foucault, intimately invested in avant-garde writing, that I want to adduce here: the Foucaul of Folie et Dérision and the 1963 homage to Georges Bataille, ‘A Preface to Transgression’.

In a 1961 interview with Le Monde, Foucault cited Artaud’s writing as an example of the sort of ‘lyrical protest’ that might ‘restore to the experience of madness the profundity and power of revelation that was extinguished by confinement’ during the classical age (circa 1650 to 1800). Foucault begins and ends the book by invoking Artaud alongside other ‘mad’ exemplars, but while there is a ritual aspect to this tactic, it is no mere name-dropping. A concrete intertexture is at play between Artaud’s writings and Foucault’s philosophy of history. In the astonishing opening chapter entitled ‘Stultifera Navis’ (‘The Ship of Fools’), Artaud stands for the ‘tragic, cosmic experience’ of madness, as against the ‘critical consciousness’ which in modernity has determined, mastered and internalised madness as unreason. Despite the historical triumph of reason, the tragic experience of madness haunts Western culture like a repressed memory:
It is that tragic consciousness that is visible in the last words of Nietzsche and the last visions of Van Gogh. It is that same element that Freud began to perceive at the furthest point of his journey, the great wound that he tried to symbolise in the mythological struggle between the libido and the death instinct. And it is that same consciousness that finds expression in the work of Antonin Artaud.20

Under the sign of tragedy, Foucault conjoins Artaud with the Nietzsche of the Wahnbriefe (the ‘Madness Letters’ in which he identified himself as Dionysus and the Crucified),21 and the Freud of the second topography, the ‘cosmological’, originary limit of Freudian theory.22

There is an echo in the reference to Van Gogh, of Artaud’s 1947 anti-psychiatric broadside, ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society’, which construed Wheatfield with Crows (1890) as opening ‘the secret door to a possible beyond, to a possible permanent reality’:

The sky in the painting is very low, bruised.
violet, like the lower edges of lightning.
The strange shadowy fringe of the void rising after the flash.
Van Gogh loosed his crows like the black microbes of his suicide’s spleen a few centimetres from the top and as if from the bottom of the canvas, […]
Worthy accompaniment to the death of the man who during his life set so many drunken suns whirling over so many unruly haystacks and who, desperate, with a bullet in his belly, had no choice but to flood a landscape with blood and wine, to drench the earth with a final emulsion, both dark and joyous, with a taste of bitter wine and spoiled vinegar.23

Across the border between life and death, a lightning-flash. In Bataillean vein – and Van Gogh was important for Georges Bataille too – this solar cataclysm of a suicide, this manifestation of something like the death drive, has the tenor of a sacrificial affirmation, ‘dark and joyous’, with the taste of Crucifixion in the sour wine.24 As we shall see, a significant factor in Artaud’s reception has been his encounter with Bataille in the text of theory.25 But my point in citing Artaud’s description of Van Gogh is that it inscribes a limit-experience. The latter term, derived from Maurice Blanchot’s reading of Bataille, was crucial for Foucault. Limit-experience calls the subject radically into question.26 In it, Foucault later explained, ‘experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation. The idea of a limit-experience that wrenches the subject from itself is what was important to me in my reading of Nietzsche, Bataille, and Blanchot.27 I would add Artaud to the list.28
In *Folie et Déraison*, Artaudian tragic experience, which is limit-experience, is noncontemporaneous with and contestatory of modernity:

This madness, which knots and divides time, which curves the world in the loop of night, this madness so foreign to the experience contemporaneous with it, does it not utter to those who can hear them, like Nietzsche and Artaud, the scarcely audible words of classical unreason, where all was nothingness and night, but now amplified into screams and fury? Giving them for the first time expression, a *droit de cité* ['right of abode'], and a grasp on Western culture, a point from which all contestation becomes possible, as well as the contestation of all things? By restoring them to their primitive savagery?  

The evolutionist language here would seem to locate tragic madness in the premodern, and indeed Foucault says that Artaud 'never ceased to claim that Western culture lost its tragic focus at the moment it finally forgot what he termed the great solar madness of the world, the violent ceremonies which enacted the life and death of “the great Fire Satan”'. The rationalisation of madness is a disenchantment, a desacralisation – major themes in Artaud’s writing, as elsewhere in dissident surrealism. We will see that a sacral, pagan, tragic heliopoetics is at stake in *Heliogabalus*, as it was at certain moments for Bataille. Foucault enunciates his own historiography ‘beneath the sun of the great Nietzschean quest’.

Among the founding divisions Foucault associates with the renunciation of tragedy is the heliotropic opposition between East and West:

In the universality of the Western ratio, there is this division which is the Orient: the Orient, thought of as the origin, dreamt of as the vertiginous point from which nostalgia and promises of return are born, the Orient offered to the colonising reason of the Occident, but indefinitely inaccessible, for it always remains the limit: the night of the beginning, in which the Occident was formed, but in which it traced a dividing line, the Orient is for the Occident everything that it is not, while remaining the place in which its primitive truth must be sought. What is required is a history of this great divide, all along this Occidental becoming, following it in its continuity and its exchanges, while also allowing it to appear in its tragic hieratism.

Edward Said (who certainly read this passage) pointed out that the ‘demarcation between Orient and West’ was ‘already secure by the time of the *Iliad*’; and that in *The Bacchae* Dionysus is ‘explicitly connected with his Asian origins and with the strangely threatening excesses of Oriental mysteries’. A more recent historian of Orientalism has argued that the modern champion of Dionysus, Nietzsche, chose Zarathustra as his hero ‘chiefly to slap the face of his Greek counterpart, Socrates.’ And any reader of Artaud’s interwar writings will
attest to the crucial importance in them of the opposition between the Orient and the Occident. As we shall see, this traditional paradigm acquired a particular political valence in France between the wars. In Artaud’s Heliogabalus, an anti-Western Orientalism – appearing in all its ‘tragic hieratism’ – coincides with solar mythology. The name Heliogabalus itself was a Hellenistic (aptly heliocentric) corruption of Elagabalus, the Syrian sun-god of whom the adolescent emperor was high priest and eponym.

Foucault speaks to the origin of the division between reason and its other. Yet on examination the historicity of this division is radically ambiguous. It is unclear when the division emerges – whether it is the seventeenth century, the sixteenth century, the middle ages, or antiquity. Foucault’s language of tragedy suggests nostalgia for the pre-Socratic. But the 1961 preface complicates the question of diachrony with a synchronic problem of the limit:

To interrogate a culture about its limit-experiences is to question it at the confines of history about a tear that is something like the very birth of its history. There, in a tension that is constantly on the verge of resolution, we find the temporal continuity of a dialectical analysis confronted with the revelation, at the doors of time, of a tragic structure.35

To write the history of madness is to question the limit of history as a rational construct. The tragic oscillates on a threshold. The limit is a ‘lightning-flash’, ‘heterogeneous with the time of history, but ungraspable outside it.’ It touches on dialectic, yet, unsublatable, exceeds it.

In Folie et Déraison, limit-experience is a Left-Nietzschean ‘way out between Hegelianism and the philosophical identity of the subject.’ It exceeds dialectical thought. In ‘A Preface to Transgression’, where the lightning-flash returns, alongside the trope of oscillation, Foucault calls in vatic wise for a ‘nondialectical language of the limit’, a philosophy of ‘nonpositive affirmation’ in the manner of what Blanchot called contestation, with which to speak the experience of sexuality, the emergence of which he ties to the death of God. He proclaims ‘the impossibility of attributing the millenary language of dialectics to the major experience that sexuality forms for us.’ We will see that Artaud’s Heliogabalus stages this ‘impossibility’, adopts a stance along the rift where ‘the interrogation of the limit replaces the search for totality and the act of transgression replaces the movement of contradictions’. Though it wishes for metaphysical resolution, Heliogabalus affirms a sovereignty that problematises the surrealist attempt to cross the discourse of sexuality with dialectical philosophy.

* 

In the 1930s Artaud yea-said transgression in the same breath as freedom, insurrection, ‘anarchy’. It was a shibboleth of what he called the Theatre of Cruelty. In The
Theatre and its Double (1938), Artaud vaunts John Ford’s Annabella, who commits incest in ‘Tis Pity She’s a Whore, as ‘an example of absolute freedom in revolt’. Like Foucault’s, Artaud’s transgression was against foundations: ‘And when we tell ourselves that we have reached the paroxysm of horror, blood, and flouted laws, of poetry which consecrates revolt, we are obliged to advance still further into an endless vertigo.’ About the incestuous gender-bending family-background ascribed by history to Heliogabalus, Artaud assured the reader: ‘I am not judging what resulted as History may judge it; this anarchy, this debauchery, please me. They please me from the point of view of History and from the point of view of Heliogabalus’. Heliogabalus functioned as a negative exemplum in the historiography of Rome. He brought the idol of the sun-god Elagabal from Emesa (Homs) to Rome and installed it in place of Jupiter. He personally enacted every vice and profanation, from deflowering a Vestal Virgin, to transvestism and passive pederasty. Oriental, effeminate, criminal, prodigal, the adolescent emperor (he was fourteen when he came to the throne in 218CE) was everything romanitas was not. What marked Artaud out from the données of historiography was that he said a big Yes to these crimes. His Heliogabalus was a sacred lord of misrule.

Among the essays assembled in Jacques Derrida’s L’écriture et la différence (1967) were two important discussions of Artaud that affiliated the Theatre of Cruelty to deconstruction. For Derrida, Artaudian transgression opened the space of the ‘festival of cruelty’, by rupturing such given ‘ethico-metaphysical prohibitions’ as the opposition between stage and audience (the Theatre of Cruelty is a node in the genealogy of avant-garde participation). He was, however, scathing about countercultural grabs at this abysm-fest:

As regards the festival, as invoked by Artaud, and the menace of that which is “without foundation”, the “happening” can only make us smile: it is to the theatre of cruelty what the carnival of Nice might be to the mysteries of Eleusis. This is particularly so due to the fact that the happening substitutes political agitation for the total revolution prescribed by Artaud. The festival must be a political act. And the act of political revolution is theatrical.

This theatre is ‘the art of difference and of expenditure without economy, without reserve, without return, without history. Pure presence as pure difference.’ The performative contradiction signals différance or pharmakon, here expressed in the Bataillean vocabulary of general economy or the sovereign operation. That is to say, the Theatre of Cruelty is an impossible theatre. Earlier, Derrida had described Artaudian Cruelty as the ‘nonrepresentable origin of representation’, the ‘archi-manifestation of force’. This is what Artaud called ‘another archetypal and dangerous reality, a reality of which the Principles, like dolphins, once they have shown their heads, hurry to dive back into the obscurity of the deep.’
Derrida insists that Artaud’s is a ‘revolutionary affirmation’. Why? First, it is anti-Western: Artaud ‘intends the effective, active, and nontheoretical destruction of Western civilisation and its religions’. This is fair. For Artaud, Western theatre has fallen away from the ‘Danger’ of Cruelty, subordinated itself to the text; a ‘Latin’, Occidental state of enervation, against which he calls for ‘the discovery of an active language, active and anarchic, a language in which the customary limits of feelings and words are transcended.’ He poses the Balinese dancing he witnessed at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition as gestural force, contrary and prior to the Western logos. As such this force ‘condemns us, and along with us the state of things in which we live and which is to be destroyed, destroyed with diligence and malice on every level and at every point where it prevents the free exercise of thought.’

Artaud avers: ‘our present social state is iniquitous and should be destroyed. If this is a fact for the theatre to be preoccupied with, it is even more a matter for machine guns.’ Alarm-bells ring here for those who would impose literalism (and liberalism) on Artaudian Cruelty. But he goes on to specify his purpose as the ‘higher and more secret one’ that is ‘the spirit of deep anarchy which is the root of all poetry.’ Artaud’s aim is avant-garde insofar as he wishes to rupture aesthetic autonomy. But aestheticism is a symptom of the Occidental malaise because of its autonomy from ‘mystic attitudes.’ It is a case not of broaching the seal between art and politics, but of opening art to limit-experience. The limit-experience of Cruelty (or the Dionysian, or différence, or the Real – non-synonymous substitutes all), is cognate with the transgression of West by East.

At the same time as generating a transgressive ‘idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits’, the Theatre of Cruelty aspired to the ‘total’ experience of the ‘mass spectacle’. It was contemporaneous with projects such as Walter Gropius’s Total Theatre, and Mussolini’s attempts to develop a ‘theatre of masses’ (which in October 1934 was the subject of the star-studded Volta congress, attended by Gropius, Pirandello, Yeats, Copeau, Maeterlinck, to name but a few). There was a fine line between total and totalitarian theatre between the wars, and a general permeability between “fascist,” “socialist,” and even sometimes “liberal” modes of envisaging a theatrical revolution. Again, Artaud’s calls for anarchy coincide with authoritarian language. Derrida is justified in describing the Theatre of Cruelty as a ‘protest against the letter’, which sought ‘emancipation from the text’, its hieratic yet ‘nontheological space’ releasing the mise-en-scène from the word and the ‘author-god.’ But Artaud simultaneously invokes the ‘absolute preponderance of the director whose creative power eliminates words.’

Derrida acknowledges the contradictions in Artaud’s extremism. ‘How,’ he asks of the Theatre of Cruelty, ‘are this liberation and this raising of the repressed possible? And not despite, but with the aid of a totalitarian codification and rhetoric of forces?’ Artaud’s politics are in fact radically in doubt. ‘All of The Theatre and its Double’, writes Derrida, ‘could be read – this cannot be done here – as a political manifesto, and moreover a highly ambiguous one.’ This ambiguity proceeds from Artaud’s calling for an impossible theatre of transgression.
‘without the destruction of the political structures of our society.’ Derrida cites the counterblast Artaud aimed at the surrealists (‘these bog-paper revolutionaries’) in 1927 after he left the group. There, Artaud rejected the surrealist coding of theatre as ‘counter-revolutionary’, as if ‘revolution were taboo and we were forbidden to tamper with it forever’:

Well, I do not accept taboos.

I personally feel there are several ways of looking at the Revolution and among them Communism seems to me much the worst, the most restricting. A lazy man’s revolution. I say it out loud, I don’t care whether power passes out of the hands of the middle-classes into those of the workers. This is not the Revolution for me, just transferring power. A revolution which has put the need for greater production as a matter of prime concern, because it insists on stressing mechanisation as the means of easing working conditions, seems to me a eunuch’s revolution. […] We are driven to despair by mechanisation at all levels of contemplation. […] For the moment, let us simply say the most urgently needed revolution is a sort of retro-action in time. We ought to return to the state of mind, or simply even the practices, of the Middle Ages, but genuinely, by a form of essential metamorphosis.

‘Well, I do not accept taboos.’ A declaration of transgression. And yet this is also an anticommunist manifesto, calling for medieval reversion.

Antimodern medievalism; resistance to a dialectical conception of history: pre-echoes of Folie et Déraison. The conventional assumption is that noncontemporaneity is reactionary, and, to be sure, the conservative and fascist right dragooned the premodern in interwar Europe. But as Ernst Bloch recognised, noncontemporaneity was irreducible to fascism. One might even envisage an antifascist noncontemporaneity. This is what dissident surrealism aspired to in the 1930s, culminating in the (notoriously ambiguous) activities of Acéphale and the Collège de Sociologie. The rejection of industrial production that we see here in Artaud, was common to the Collège and the antiparliamentary ‘nonconformist’ movement whose contributions to fascist ideology Zeev Sternhell itemised in Neither Right nor Left. Like the extremists in the ‘neither right nor left’ movement (and like Artaud), the sociologists of the Collège rejected the Marxist privileging of economics, instead ‘asserting the primacy of the symbolic (or of myth, in Georges Sorel’s sense). Both groups had a vision of reanimating a disenchanted world. But the ‘most disturbing similarities’ lay in the strategy these groups adopted towards German and Italian fascism, which was one of ‘a mimetic subversion that appropriates the enemy’s slogans and twists them to its own ends’ – a structure of paranoid identification that resulted in Acéphale’s so-called surfascisme. (If Artaud is not interested in changing society, we must ask in what sense might his aesthetic be political? Recall Benjamin: ‘The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an expression while preserving property. The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of
aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.\(^7\) And yet, when the sovereign appears in *Heliogabalus*, he is self-transgressing.

After 1968, identity politics and ‘revolution in poetic language’ became urgent questions for the group based around the radical journal *Tel Quel*. Artaud was a key term in this discussion. *Tel Quel* had published Derrida’s essays about Artaud, and in 1972 the editor, Philippe Sollers, organised the colloquium at Cérisy-la-Salle entitled ‘Towards a Cultural Revolution: Artaud, Bataille’. The remit was the historical ‘period of crisis’ that had seen ‘fascism, Stalinism, two World Wars, the displacement of history from Europe towards Asia, two or even three revolutions, or more precisely the practical experience that the revolution cannot be stopped.’\(^7\) Thus Sollers elided 1917 and 1949 with 1968, his geopolitics inflected by a ‘Maoist’ Asiaticism. The student revolt had been marked by a sense of the 1930s happening again, with anti-colonial struggles and De Gaulle as a fascist.\(^7\) In this revolutionary moment, Sollers declared, ‘the whole of our epoch is animated by [travaillé par] Artaud, by Bataille.’ After the May events, ‘theory itself can no longer be done’ without Artaud and Bataille.\(^7\) Those names ‘or rather gestures’ have begun to ‘cut the subjugated knot of the subject.’\(^7\) This focus on the subject was crucial. Julia Kristeva’s contribution to the conference was entitled ‘Le Sujet en procès’ – ‘The Subject in Process/ on Trial’. Like Foucault, Kristeva apprehended Artaud’s writing as desubjectivation, as a prelinguistic ‘negativity which dissolves subjective unity’.\(^7\)

Among the contributors to the Artaud section of the Cérisy-la-Salle conference was Xavière Gauthier, author of the groundbreaking psychoanalytic-feminist critique of surrealism, *Surréalisme et sexualité* (1971).\(^7\) Her lecture, ‘Héliogabale travestissement’ (travestissement expresses both ‘travesty’ as parody, and the etymological sense of cross-dressing), recounted Freudian thematics of castration and maternity, and proffered some entertaining analogies.\(^7\) Heliogabalus made a dancer leader of the praetorian guard – ‘Transposition: Nureyev commanding the C.R.S. [French riot police] squads.’\(^7\) Heliogabalus’s modern equivalent is the ‘blouson noir’ – the Hell’s Angel, the rock ‘n’ roller: ‘Direct descendants of Heliogabalus, a whole current of pop music: Mick Jagger and his whorish ways of wiggling, Alice Cooper, his black stockings and his boa between the thighs, Jimmy [sic] Hendrix and the obscene relentlessness with which he wanks or mounts his guitar.’\(^7\) The parallel with countercultural individualism is suggestive as well as amusing. But simultaneously, Gauthier is disturbed by the perverse authoritarianism of the *anarchiste couronné*: ‘All these decrees [such as appointing senators according to the size of their cocks] made by a man who governs a nation, are those of a tyrant and a thug. “He pursues systematically the perversion and destruction of all value and all order.” Sometimes close to tipping over into fascism, these are fringe, marginal acts, the acts of pirates.’\(^8\) Heliogabalus as fascist pervert – a trope with a
lineage in left-wing thought. Irruption of the signifier *fascism* into a political discourse scripted as antifascist struggle.

* 

Post-68, Artaud and Bataille offered the theoretical neo-avant-garde a Nietzschean ‘antifascism’ distinct from the humanism of the PCF. And yet Nietzsche, Bataille: the ideological sirens wail. Nietzsche because of his posthumous imbrication with fascism; Bataille because of his ‘fascinated’ deconstruction of it.\(^8\) Targets of committed critics from Lukács to Habermas; more recently of liberal Nazi-hunters such as Richard Wolin.\(^9\) And now Artaud is on the hit-list. His first advocates in the theatre were already nervous. In 1968, Peter Brook felt bound to ask: ‘is Artaud in his passion dragging us back to a nether world, away from striving, away from the light […]; is there even a fascist smell in the cult of unreason? Is it a cult of the invisible, anti-intelligent? Is it a denial of the mind?’\(^8\) In the same year, Peter Schechner wrote of his ‘hidden fear’ that Artaudian theatre might be ‘perilously close to ecstatic fascism.’\(^8\) And indeed one might well detect a fascist whiff in Artaud’s extremist, antimodern advocacy of Danger, Cruelty, ecstatic experience and solar myth.\(^8\)

Later, in the polemics around postmodernism, we find Artaud accused of a ‘totalitarian bent’ that ‘results from his negation of the subject and his antihumanism that have made Artaud a saint in the postmodernist calendar.’\(^8\) A sentiment – that poststructuralism prepares the way for fascism – recently rehearsed as the conclusion of Kimberley Jannarone’s provocative attempt exposé of Artaud’s ‘fascist underpinnings’, *Artaud and his Doubles*.\(^8\) Habermas was surely correct to say that between the wars ‘there was no theory of contemporaneity not affected to its core by the penetrating force of fascism.’\(^8\) Artaud himself wrote in May 1933 that in ‘the harrowing and catastrophic period in which we live, we feel the urgent need for a theatre which events do not surpass [ne dépassent!], whose resonance is deep within us, dominating the instability of the times.’\(^8\) Artaud’s writings of the 1930s are not separable from the fascist moment. And yet their specific historical conditions must be worthy of consideration, lest *fascist* be a ritual banishing-word, a mere token of miasma or unrepresentability.

Rather than investigating Artaud’s local contexts, Jannarone takes a long view, grounding her argument in Isaiah Berlin’s liberal-rationalist account of fascism’s roots in the counter-Enlightenment. (There is ad-hominem irony in this enlistment. Berlin’s collusion with military-industrial anticommunism during the Vietnam war was on a different ethical plane from Artaud’s tarrying with phantasms.)\(^8\) A concatenation of binaries ensues from the opposition between ‘man’s [sic] powers of reason’ and ‘irrationalism’.\(^9\) Jannarone’s argument rests on the assertion that Artaud’s irrationalism was more ‘consonant with the discourse of the reactionary Right between the wars than with the liberal Left.’\(^8\) What this schema
suppresses (along with the radical right) is the positionality – one well-represented in 1930s Paris – which is both anti-fascist and anti-liberal.

For Jannarone, Artaud and fascism fall into the same counter-Enlightenment bracket:

A furious rather than contemplative attitude, a rancour towards Western civilisation rather than a liberal curiosity towards ‘other’ cultures, and a fundamental basis in violence rather than a search for beauty or peace underlay this interwar irrationalist resurgence.  

Given these bourgeois terms of disapproval, it is unsurprising that surrealism – which exhibited all these negative characteristics, these characteristics of negativity – barely features in Artaud and his Doubles. When surrealism does appear, Jannarone misrepresents it as seeking to remove ‘hindrances to self-expression and cultural exploration so that a greater number of people would be happy and so that the individual might come into his or her unique voice. This liberal attitude, as we will see, is the opposite of Artaud’.  

Only a passing acquaintance with historical surrealism is necessary to recognise this liberal-humanist image as a gross distortion. It is true that Artaud renounced surrealism’s Marxian politics when he left the group. And yet there was continuity between surrealism’s anticolonial revolutionary-defeatism and Artaud’s anti-Western Orientalism.

Jannarone’s argument proceeds by way of resemblance, seeking out transnational ‘correspondences’, ‘affinities’, ‘consonances’ and ‘commonalities’ between The Theatre and its Double and ‘the maelstrom of ideas that fuelled the early stages of fascism’. The latter metaphor indicates the unstable idealism of this style of ‘intellectual history’, on which Jannarone attempts to impose order by recourse to theorists of ‘generic’ or ‘ideal-type’ (sic) fascism. The usefulness of this essentialist school is questionable (as is its rhetoric on occasion). It is striking that while Jannarone cites Lukács’s notorious post-war Stalinist tract, The Destruction of Reason (which denounced not only Nietzsche but Freud as fascist), she eschews contemporaneous theories of fascism, such as those of Wilhelm Reich or, most pertinently, Georges Bataille. Bataille’s essay, ‘The Psychological Structure of Fascism’, published in the non-aligned leftist journal La Critique sociale in 1933-1934, sought to interpret fascist sovereignty in relation to the anthropology of the sacred and a politics of affect. Scholars such as Michèle Richman and Gavin Grindon have convincingly located Bataille in his intellectual milieu, allowing us to discount unbalanced accusations of essential fascism. While important reservations have been raised about its historicity (notably by Giorgio Agamben), Bataille’s attempt to think fascist sovereignty in relation to the heterogeneous – that which is ‘incommensurate’ with everyday life – is relevant to the present discussion. According to Bataille, as opposed to the ignoble heterogeneous of the slave (which Bataille privileges), the fascist heterogeneous, while drawing on irrational affect, is that of the master. Its authoritarianism is constituted ‘by an act excluding all filth’, and by a sadism...
purified of eroticism or perversion. One might apply this understanding of fascism, as grounded in a primary repression or abjection, to the French far right between the wars. Equally, in thinking about *Heliogabalus*, it will become clear that there Artaud affirmed what fascism excluded, in particular at the level of sexuality and gender.

There is in fact surprisingly little agreement among historians about what constitutes fascism, or to what extent authoritarian nationalism in interwar France might be classed as such. In any case, the labour of nomination might be misplaced. Refining the category of fascism may be less productive than tracking the local operations of extreme nationalist discourse. As Sandrine Sanos has recently emphasised, far-right intellectuals in 1930s France perceived the contemporary crisis above all as one of the subject: as a crisis in ‘man’. Far from an antihumanism, this was a militant, hygienic humanism, where the (Western, masculine, heterosexual) subject was at stake. Abjection was the privileged mode by which this discourse prosecuted its anti-Semitic, xenophobic, homophobic politics of exclusion. It is in this French context that we must read Artaud. Just prior to the *Heliogabalus* project, Artaud found himself under attack from the far right. His 1932 manifesto, ‘The Theatre of Cruelty’, had met with derision in the pages of *L’action française*, whose critics espoused the classical aesthetics associated with the authoritarian nationalism of Charles Maurras. It is noteworthy that the peculiar affirmation of the plague in *The Theatre and its Double* transvalues the language of the bacillus with which Maurrassians condemned their ethnic, political and aesthetic adversaries.

We should also note that Artaud’s plague is from Beirut, a ‘virus from the Orient’. This is a strategy of affirmation, affirmation of the excluded.

‘The future of Western civilisation, indeed the future of mankind, is today in jeopardy.’ So began Henri Massis’s 1927 bestseller about the ‘crisis of Western civilisation and the threat of Asiaticism’, *Défense de l’Occident (Defence of the West)*, a text which defined the political discourse of East and West in interwar France. Massis was a rightwing journalist, editor of the chauvinist *Revue universelle*, where he worked with Charles Maurras. *Defence of the West* – so titled to contradistinguish it from Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* – postulated a Manichaean division in the geopolitics of culture or ideas, between an East beginning at the Rhine, and a West identified with a classical humanism of which the Roman Church was the culmination:

The radical and essential opposition between the East and West lies in the different idea that each has of man and his relation to the universe. In the West, man has desired to be; he has not consented to lose himself in things, or to regard the human person as a simple dependency of nature, which, for the Asiatic, plays itself out in the illusion of living forms, and entangles all life in an immense ambiguity.

For Massis, everything in Western identity proceeded from the ‘grand unitary principle’ of ‘Judaean-Christian monotheism, “garbed in the heritage of Graeco-Latin culture”’, which
asserted ‘the unity, the personality and the finality of being:’ this resistance’, he wrote, ‘of form to the formless, of unity to chaos, is what might be called the “creative limits” of the West. A classical aesthetic, and the model subject homologous with it – rational, bounded, sealed off against otherness, indeterminacy and the flows of desire – underpinned this logic.

For Massis and others like him the threat of the East was revolutionary and irrationalist. Massis rehearsed a move well-practiced on the French authoritarian right, of mapping this threat onto the ancient dualism between civilisation and barbarism. He wrote that

A return of the barbarians, that is to say, a further triumph of the least conscious and least civilised parts of humanity over the most conscious and most civilised, no longer seems impossible to us. The Bolshevist revolution has familiarised us with this thought, which yesterday was still monstrous, and which, today, forces itself on our minds. The Orient precisely threatened the integrity of the humanist masculine subject:

Personality, unity, stability, authority, continuity – these are the root ideas of the West. We are asked to break these to pieces for the sake of a doubtful Asiaticism in which all the forces of the human personality dissolve and return to nothingness. We are asked to destroy the lineaments of man, which he has spent long years and methodical and persevering efforts in acquiring.

Massis saw the Asiatic forces of dissolution, revolution, mysticism and unreason as invading the cultural and intellectual domain, which was where they had to be repelled. ‘Let the forces of the mind,’ Massis wrote, ‘organise the defence’ of the ‘Roman idea.’

Massis railed against the turncoats who, ‘on the pretence of opening us up to the ideas of the East, are betraying civilisation. [...] These are the real fosterers of the crisis in Western thought, or, to put it bluntly, in thought itself.’ In the mid-1920s there was no more extreme example of such cultural defeatism than what has been called the ‘reverse-Orientalist [...] revolutionary masochism’ of the surrealist group. The revolt of Abd-el Karim in Morocco had crystallised the crisis for Massis, demonstrating the threat of the ‘awakening of the nations of Asia and Africa, united by Bolshevism against Western civilisation.’ For the surrealists this had been the occasion to announce that ‘it is now the turn of the Moguls to camp on our squares.’ As Denis Hollier has argued, the surrealists simply inverted the East/West hierarchical opposition, conflating the North African rebellion with Asia in that broad, imaginary category of alterity, ‘the Orient’. The operation of this dualism is evident in the layout that Antonin Artaud used in the one issue he edited of La Révolution surréaliste, in 1925, where the negative ‘Address to the Pope’ sat opposite the positive ‘Address to the Dalai Lama’. (This antinomy owes something to Artaud’s reading of René Guénon, the
Orientalist mystic whose 1924 book *Orient et Occident* had posited an essential, hierarchical opposition between the spiritually rich East and its bankrupt Western other.)

After his expulsion from the surrealists group and the failure of his Théâtre Alfred Jarry, Artaud’s cathexis of the East/West opposition resurfaced in the early 1930s. His identification with an Oriental position can be glimpsed in his 1931 plan for a ‘poetic account’ of the Battle of Salamis (480 BCE), at which the Greek navy had famously vanquished the Persians. By focusing on the psychology of the Persian king Xerxes, nourished as it was by the ‘Spirit of the Orient’, Artaud intended to show how the defeat demonstrated the ‘superiority’ of that spirit ‘on the plane of the absolute’. It is in this context, of an identity politics of East and West, that I want to look at *Heliogabalus, or the Anarchist Crowned*.

Heliogabalus starts out as Elagabalus, boy-priest-king and personification of the Sun, in the Syrian city of Emesa at the beginning of the third century AD. This Syria conforms hyperbolically to the Orient abjected by Massis, in that it is barbarian, mystical and indeed abject. At the outset, Artaud acknowledges the ideological or civilisational stakes:

> From the geographical point of view there had always been this barbarian fringe around what is usually called the Roman Empire, and within this Roman Empire must be placed Greece, which invented, historically, the notion of barbarism. And from this point of view we are, we people of the Occident, the worthy sons of this stupid mother, since for us the civilised are ourselves and all else – this shows up our universal ignorance – is identified with barbarism.

In fact, claims Artaud, the Orient was the origin of anything in the Greco-Roman world that participated in the great mystical Tradition (with a capital T). Although Heliogabalus’s temple of the Sun no longer stands, according to Artaud its present-day site, Homs, ‘stinks like Emesa stank, since love, meat and shit are all to be found in the open. And pastry shops are near latrines, ceremonial slaughterers beside ordinary butchers. The whole of it shouts out, spills forth, makes love, squirts poison and sperm, just as we ourselves might hawk and spit.’ Artaud’s Orient is a scene of the sexual and sacrificial miscegenation of substances, a commingling of ‘urine, sweat, sperm, spittle, excrement, human blood’ and the ‘plasma of certain animals’. In ancient Emesa, the worshippers of Elagabalus’s sun-cult become a cloacal horde, rankly autochthonous and indistinct from nature, as ‘all around the temple, in multitudes issuing from huge black sewer-mouths, stream forth the servants of the rites, as if born of the earth’s own sweat.’

The religion of ancient Syria is fundamentally sexual and anti-Christian: ‘At the moment of its death – just when the religion of Ichtheus, the perfidious Fish, made signs of the cross over the guilty parts of the body – the religion of Elagabalus exalted the dangerous activity of the dark member, the organ of reproduction.’ When Heliogabalus raises an army and journeys to Rome – in a ‘strange sexual procession, a dazzling explosion of festivities’, with a
‘ten ton Phallus’ drawn ‘at the speed of a galloping zebra’ by ‘three hundred bulls, enraged and harassed by packs of howling but chained hyenas’ – he becomes a ‘St Louis of the Sex Crusade, who’d carry a male member to serve as cross, spear or sword’. This is an anti-crusade, a trajectory both topographically and morally opposed to the medieval Catholic march on the Holy Land. The East comes to – comes on to, comes all over – the West.

Heliogabalus enters Rome ‘on the dawn of the Ides of March’ – and he ‘enters it backwards’, preceded by the giant Phallus. This, ‘from the viewpoint of Roman custom means that Heliogabalus is entering Rome as a ruler, but backwards, and that at the outset he’s had himself buggered by the whole Roman empire.’ It is, says, Artaud, a ‘profession of pederastic faith’ consistent with ‘a systematic and joyous demoralisation of the Latin mind and consciousness’. Heliogabalus jettisons the Roman toga, assumes the Phoenician purple, and gives ‘that example of anarchy which, for a Roman emperor consists of adopting the costume of another country and for a man in wearing women’s clothing, adorning oneself with jewels, pearls, feathers, coral and talismans’. ‘Sporting on his pubis a sort of iron spider whose legs tear at his skin and draw blood with each extravagant movement of his thighs dusted with saffron – his member dipped in gold’, the body-modified Heliogabalus, like a ‘hooligan and an irreverent libertarian’, taunts the Senate, asking if the senators too ‘got themselves buggered in their youth’; Artaud imagines the ‘venerable greybeards’, ‘pale with shame, bowing their outraged heads, swallowing their humiliation.’ He deflowers the Vestal Virgin with ‘blasphemous and sacrilegious intent’, ‘polluting’ the ‘climate of the Palladium’.

The arrival of the Eastern sex-cult leader in the capital of the Western Empire is an egregious category mistake: ‘he puts an elephant in the place of a donkey, replaces a dog with a horse, puts a lion where a tabby cat would have done’. Heliogabalus is a lord of misrule, calling ‘weakness strength and theatre, reality’, ‘overturning the received order’, choosing ministers by the enormity of their pricks and appointing prefects with the job of ‘systematically perverting’ the young. Artaud cautions us not to ascribe to madness or the youth of this teenaged emperor that which is ‘the systematic disparagement of an order’, the expression of ‘a desire for orchestrated demoralisation.’ The ritual buggery, the heterotopic transvestism, the shaming of the elders, the pollution of the Palladium, constitute, he reiterates, a systematic ‘perversion and destruction of all value and all order’, a programme of ‘monstrous moral disorganisation’.

Artaud’s vocabulary of ‘moral disorganisation’ and the ‘demoralisation of the Latin mind’ could have been lifted from the Revue universelle. Just as Artaud affirms the abjected geopolitical other of the ‘Orient’, he affirms Heliogabalus’s transgression of normative gender and sexuality. In the interwar period, the French far right increasingly defined national identity in relation to heterosexist masculinity and reproductive virility. This heteronormative discourse was continuous with longstanding anxieties in the Third Republic around masculinity and birth-rate – anxieties heightened by the 1914-1918 war. When André Gide defended pederasty in Corydon (1925), in an attempt to render French the so-called ‘German
vice' he strove to code it as virile, classical, and compatible with familial reproduction.127 To the contrary, Artaud ridicules the 'hearth and home mob', emphasising Heliogabalus's effeminate and Eastern characteristics, and the gender trouble of his parentage (his virile mother, his effeminate father).128 Again, *Heliogabalus* participates in the extraordinary pullulation of castration imagery that characterised the interwar avant-garde. There is a nonreproductive negativity at stake here.

To be sure, a concern with virility and *natalité* was common across the political spectrum in the Third Republic. Again, there is no doubt that the conservative and extreme right used the discourse of sexual deviance to repudiate perceived political, aesthetic or ethnocultural deviance.129 In the words of one right-wing newspaper, responding to a homosexual scandal in 1933, 'the inversion of the genital sense very often calls forth the inversion of the national sense'.130 But recent research has made clear that homophobic language was not limited to the political right in interwar France. It was also a fixture of the antifascist left.131 Indeed it was an aspect of antifascism which developed after the war into a full-blown trope of critical theory.132 In this context, Artaud's 1934 celebration of Heliogabalus's 'religious pederasty' truly transgresses the limits of political discourse, since the repudiation of homosexuality was common across the political spectrum. For confirmation of this fact we need look no further than the homophobia of André Breton.

Now, the discourse of sexuality in interwar France assumed an essential relation between sexual dimorphism and homosexuality, deploying the language of the 'third sex' and the hermaphrodite to describe homosexuals, and *Heliogabalus* participates in this language. If the Orient/Occident dualism determines the ethnocultural valence of *Heliogabalus*, then its mystical dimension is governed by a cosmic antagonism of masculine and feminine 'principles'. Heliogabalus's own sexuality emerges as an attempt to combine phallic sun-worship with femininity:

> Heliogabalus the pederast king who wanted to be a woman, was a priest of the Masculine. He achieved in himself the identity of opposites, but did not achieve it without harm, and his devout pederasty had no origin other than an obstinate and abstract conflict between Masculine and Feminine.133

Heliogabalus becomes performative contradiction, a 'life-size statue, taken to the utmost extreme of religious mania, aberration and lucid lunacy, the image of all the human contradictions and of the contradiction within principle'. This vision of a dualistically gendered and sexualised universe bears the inscription, the horizon of expectations, of the occult revival of its day (and indeed Heliogabalus's transgressive sexuality finds parallels in the magick of Aleister Crowley).134 Heliogabalus incarnates the supposed contradiction between god and man, man and woman, and yet 'far more' than the divine 'Hermaphrodite' appears in this 'devious', dual image of 'the end of contradictions': and that is, writes Artaud, 'the idea of
ANARCHY’. Anarchy, ‘at the point to which Heliogabalus pushes it, is poetry realised.’ This magus is the embodiment of a certain point where opposites conjoin, reminiscent of André Breton’s telos. This embodiment of poetry, of a surrealist operation – is queer.

The coding of Heliogabalus’s homosexuality as sublation harks back to late-nineteenth-century Decadence, in the shape of Jean Lombard’s extraordinary novel, L’Agonie, which depicted Heliogabalus’s ‘sexual revolution’ as a mystical apocalypse. Louis Estève’s 1933 pamphlet, ‘Elagabalus, a Lenin of Androgyny’, shows that at least one interwar pundit of sexuality was reading L’Agonie in the 1930s, and connecting Heliogabalus’s pederasty with revolutionary politics. For Artaud, the metaphysics of androgyny – which is to say, of binary sex – works to contain the negativity or limit-experience at stake in Heliogabalus’s transgressions. Derrida describes this kind of move as the ‘duplicity of Artaud’s text, simultaneously more and less than a stratagem’. Heliogabalus is on the threshold of the transition from dialectic to transgression. The metaphysics of sexuality – which in the nineteenth century became precisely a mysticism of sexuality – persists, even as its limits are transgressed.

Artaud’s narrative arc – which ends with the murder of Heliogabalus in the palace latrines and the expulsion from Rome of his corpse through a sewer – transgresses the oppositions West/East, civilisation/barbarism, straight/queer. The Action Française critics repudiated Artaud’s dramaturgy on the grounds of its anticlassical, Romantic excesses – which, interestingly, they related to the ‘violence and excess’ visible in Nazi Germany.

There was an Orientalist strand in German nationalism, which expressed itself in Aryanism, the swastika and so on. But the Nazi aesthetic was neoclassical. There is surely a certain mimicry of fascism in Artaud’s Heliogabalus. Heliogabalus is a sovereign in the era of the Führer, Il Duce and Rexism (Belgian fascism). But in his ‘perversion’, Heliogabalus transgresses the virility and compulsory heterosexuality of fascism. Again, though it may be possible to identify a ‘Nazi sublime’ in, say, Himmler’s wartime rhetoric, which ‘involved a fascination with excess or unheard-of transgression’, crucially, that ‘sublimity’ was invested in the phobic expulsion of contaminating presences – the opposite movement from that which we see in Artaud’s affirmation of abjection. Although Heliogabalus was ultimately expelled from the Roman order as human waste, Artaud honours his memory. Heliogabalus himself, with his total insubordination to the Roman regime, would seem to personify a Bataillean sovereignty, sovereignty as excessive expenditure or dépense: with him there is ‘everywhere prodigality, excess, abundance, immoderation’; his is a ‘spirit undisciplined and fanatical, a real king, a rebel, a crazed individualist.’ Sovereignty is of course a contested term, bound up with the history of fascism. Artaud’s Heliogabalus is inseparable from that history. And yet it remains unassimilable to fascist ideology.


Hollier, Absent without Leave, 76-93.


Artaud was hospitalised in 1937 on his return from his disastrous trip to Ireland to return what he believed was St Patrick’s cane. On which see David Rattray, How I Became One of the Invisible (New York: Semiotex(e), 1992), 143-172. Artaud claimed to have met Hitler on a visit to Berlin in 1932, and in 1939 addressed the following spell to him: ‘Dear Sir, In 1932 in the Ider Café in Berlin, on one of the evenings when I made your acquaintance and shortly before you took power, I showed you a series of roadblocks on a map that was not just a map of geography, roadblocks against me, an act of force aimed in a certain number of directions you indicated to me. Today Hitler I lift the roadblocks I set down! The Parisians need gas. Yours, A.A.—P.S. Be it understood, dear sir, that this is hardly an invitation; it is above all a warning.’ Quoted in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaux: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, trans. Brian Massumi (London: The Athlone Press, 1988), 163-164.

Michel Foucault, ‘Madness, the Absence of the Oeuvre’, in Foucault, History of Madness, 541-549.


Ian Hacking, ‘Foreword’, in Foucault, History of Madness, ix-xii, xi-xii.

Jürgen Habermas also describes Foucault as ‘Romantic in The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 240.

18 James Miller claims that the very tactic of the litany proceeds from Artaud’s 1947 essay, ‘Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society’, arguing that *Folie et Déraison* is crisscrossed with ‘countless allusions and references’ to Artaud. Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault*, 414, n. 95.


26 ‘The limit-experience is the response that man encounters when he has decided to put himself radically into question.’ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 203.


31 Foucault, *History of Madness*, xxx


39 Foucault, ‘A Preface to Transgression’, 44.


45 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 244.

46 Derrida, ‘*Writing and Difference*, 245.

47 Derrida, ‘*Writing and Difference*, 247.


49 ‘There is no theatre in the world today which fulfils Artaud’s desire.’ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 247-248.

50 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 234, 238.


52 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 189.

53 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 237


60 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 187.

61 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 187.


63 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 242.

64 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 328, n.37.


68 Hollier, Absent without Leave, 78-79.

69 Hollier, Absent without Leave, 79.


72 Margaret Atack, May 68 in Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112.


75 Kristeva, ‘Le sujet en procès’, 50.


80 Gauthier, ‘Héliogabale travestissement’, 192.

81 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 216.


88 Habermas, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, 216.

89 Artaud, The Theatre and its Double, 84. Translation modified.


91 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 50.

92 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 65.

93 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 67.

94 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 15.

95 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 67.


97 Jannarone, Artaud and his Doubles, 27.


100 Agamben rejects the notion of the ambiguity of the sacred as a ‘scientific mythologeme’. Agamben, Homo Sacer, 80.


102 The literature on this topic is vast. For a recent review, see Brian Jenkins, ed., France in the Era of Fascism: Essays on the French Authoritarian Right (London: Berghahn, 2005).


107 Massis, *Defence of the West*, 3.


110 Massis, *Defence of the West*, 52.


112 Massis, *Defence of the West*, 12-13

113 Massis, *Defence of the West*, 132.


115 Massis, *Defence of the West*, 3.


118 Artaud, *Heliogabalus*, 16.


120 Artaud, *Heliogabalus*, 43.


123 Artaud, *Heliogabalus*, 122-123.


133 Artaud, Heliogabalus, 72.

134 For a comparison of Crowley with Bataille see Keith Urban, Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

135 Artaud, Heliogabalus, 133.


137 Louis Estève, Elagabal ou un Lénine de l’androgynat (Orléans, 1933).

138 Derrida, Writing and Difference, 194.

139 Sreen, ‘Resisting the Plague’, 94.

140 Cf. Marchand, ‘German Orientalism and the Decline of the West’.


142 Artaud, Heliogabalus, 133.

143 Agamben, Homo Sacer.
Who has been tampering with these pianos?: The surrealist writings of Montagu O’Reilly (Wayne Andrews).

Andrew Hugill

This article makes a case for Wayne Andrews as a neglected and original voice in American surrealism. The article begins by examining his periodical *La revue de l’élite* (1930-33) (later *La revue intime* and *Demain*) as evidence of his early interest in European avant-gardism. Next, it offers close readings of the short stories he wrote under the *nom de plume* “Montagu O’Reilly.” Within overtly surrealist narratives, these stories conceal a series of encounters between a sickly European high culture, characterised by consumptive girls, imperilled aristocrats, failing pianos and a vigorous American materialism, represented by thrusting bankers, ostentatious socialites, gleaming technologies. They provide a novel twist on some of the familiar tropes of surrealism, but also reveal something of how its revolutionary vision was subtly undermined during its transatlantic passage. In particular, the article discusses Andrews/O’Reilly’s fascination with the outmoded and the uncanny and how they are modified through their staged encounters with American wealth. It concludes with a discussion of Andrews’ later works, including his unfinished history of surrealism, *The Surrealist Parade* (1988).

Wayne Andrews seems an unlikely conduit for surrealism to America – a conservative, academic, religious, careerist figure – yet his periodical *La revue de l’élite*, and fiction written under the *nom de plume* Montagu O’Reilly played an important though marginalised role in introducing surrealism to America. Andrews presented to Americans a version of surrealism that differed from others circulating at the time, such as the interpretations of the movement put forward by Eugene Jolas’ *transition* magazine (1927-38) or Charles Henri Ford’s slightly later publication, *View* (1940-48). As such, his responses to the movement invite us to rethink conventional understandings of how surrealism was received by Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. As is well known, the most the celebrated inheritors of the surrealist legacy were not writers such as O’Reilly but rather Abstract Expressionist painters, whose success during the 1940s and 50s eclipsed the waning surrealist avant-garde. Andrews/O’Reilly was not particularly optimistic about a future for surrealism in America, its marginalisation was partly foreseen in the stories themselves, in which the hard realities of commerce and enterprise repeatedly trounce surrealist imaginings. Andrews switched fairly quickly from being a champion of surrealism to become a cultural commentator and globetrotting photographer, though his interest in the movement did not disappear completely.

Andrews, who was born in Kenilworth, Illinois in 1913 and died while travelling in 1987, is probably best known today as the author of a series of exemplary books on American architecture. These were published during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and are still used as standard texts in some universities. The books comprise hundreds of photographs, mostly taken by Andrews himself during his travels around Europe and the United States, accompanied by his idiosyncratic accounts of the evolution of various architectural styles. Andrews was no Wallace Stevens, who never visited Europe, preferring to live in ‘a Paris that has never existed and that is composed of the things that other people, primarily Parisians themselves, have said about Paris.’ For Andrews, Europe was a concrete reality whose architecture was testament to its cultural richness. His pleasure was to document photographically this evidence and to involve himself with its most enlightened inheritors (as he saw...
them): the French surrealists. He first went to Paris in 1934, initially meeting André Breton, who then introduced him to Alberto Giacometti, Paul Éluard, Salvador Dalí and other surrealists. Andrews recorded that Dalí, in particular, ‘[paid] the most flattering attention to the pianos and the heads of hair that figured in the fiction I was writing under the pseudonym of Montagu O'Reilly.’ In the postwar years, he visited Paris many more times in his role as a globetrotting cultural historian and photographer and it was during one of these trips that he died.

Andrews emphasised continuity between surrealism and European cultural precursors, rather than seeing surrealism as predicated upon the latter’s renunciation, a common interpretation of avant-gardism that views it exclusively in terms of novelty or rupture. His history of surrealism, entitled The Surrealist Parade, which was ‘nine-tenths completed’ at his death tellingly makes little mention of the movement in America, preferring to concentrate on its European existence.

Andrews first became involved with surrealism in 1930, at the age of 17, when he founded La revue de l’élite, a journal he co-edited with his fellow student James Douglas Peck at Lawrenceville, a New Jersey prep school. It contained a mixture of literary and critical writings by Andrews and Peck, along with contributions from their better-known collaborators, including: Marcel Arland, Georges Braque, Jean Cassou, Paul Claudel, Jean Cocteau, Henri du Régner, Roger Martin du Gard, André Gide, Arthur Honegger, Valery Larbaud, Jean Lurçat, André Maurois, Jean Paulhan, Ezra Pound, Romain Rolland, Georges Rouault, Bertrand Russell, Paul Valéry, and William Carlos Williams.

Andrews and Peck’s generally enthusiastic and unfailingly courteous correspondence with many of the leading French avant-garde writers was crucial to the journal’s success. Romain Rolland wisely persuaded them to rename it Demain, although only after it had first passed through another name, La revue intime. Raymond Roussel even sent them money, which arrived just as the final edition was going to press in 1933 (the year of Roussel’s death).

There were some similarities between Andrews and Charles Henri Ford who, at the age of 20, had begun his periodical Blues (1929-30) in the previous year. Blues shared some of the contributors to La revue de l’élite and also originated in a provincial American town (Columbus, Mississippi, in this case). The pair became acquainted and years later, when Ford was editor of View he introduced Andrews to Joseph Cornell, who had become an admirer of the Montagu O'Reilly stories. Like Ford, Andrews travelled to Paris during the 1930s to explore the avant-garde and fashionable society.

However, there were also some important differences between the two men. Andrews lacked Ford’s social, financial and artistic ambitions, and was never to express the level of admiration for Cocteau that complicated his (Ford’s) relationship with Breton. Nor was he willing to quit high school and devote his life to the avant-garde: his future academic career was too important to him. Whilst Ford would later be seen as a populariser of avant-gardism, making it available, palatable even, to Americans, this was in marked contrast to the overt elitism of Andrews and Peck’s title.

La revue de l’élite seems to have aligned itself more with Eugene Jolas’s transition: indeed the first complete Montagu O'Reilly story, ‘The Evocative Treason of 449 Golden Doorknobs,’ was published in transition 23 in 1935. Andrews would have sympathised with the celebrated twelfth proclamation in the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto, published in transition June 1929, which
declared ‘the plain reader be damned.’ The fact that La revue de l'élite was ‘a mimeographed chronicle of French civilization written in the French language’ seemed deliberately calculated to exclude (especially American) ‘plain readers.’ This divided the opinions of some of the editors’ better-known correspondents. Ezra Pound was supportive: ‘I dare say you are right to print in French. Will confine circulation to those who can understand the contents.’ This was no doubt exactly what Andrews and Peck wished to hear (although they might have been somewhat less sympathetic to Pound’s later opinion, expressed in a letter of July 21, 1934: ‘nothing much against the Surrealists, save that a lot of ‘em are French, and therefore bone ignorant, like the English’). Somerset Maugham, on the other hand, was damning:

I wish I knew why you wrote to me in French, which you write very well, rather than in English which you probably write better. Are you by any chance under the impression that the French language is richer than the English, or that the literature of France of today has a merit greater than that of England and the United States? If so, I venture to point out that you are quite wrong.

This Francophile tendency was to become a defining characteristic of O'Reilly's style. In what appears to be the only extant piece of critical writing about his stories, Céline Mansanti positions Andrews (she omits to mention his pseudonym), along with Paul Bowles and certain other American writers interested in surrealism, as a fantasist who wrote what Nathanael West called ‘Frenchified Symbolist stuff.’ She compares this with William Carlos Williams’ A Novelette, published in transition 19-20 (June 1930), an example of ‘Superrealism’ which she calls ‘a concrete, dynamic American form of Surrealism, relying on the physiological body to express its specificity, unlike the more abstract and psychological conceptions at work in French Surrealism.’ This evaluation certainly holds good for the small amount of Andrews’ writing that appeared in transition, but does not do justice to the complete O'Reilly stories which, as we shall see, played out something of the contrast between that same American ‘concrete dynamism’ and the ‘Frenchified Symbolism,’ admittedly within a generally fantastical narrative.

Andrews’ views on the political aspects of surrealism at this time are difficult to discern. A natural conservative, he nevertheless seems to have found communism fascinating from a safe distance, if we are to judge from the account given in The Surrealist Parade. La revue de l'élite implicitly echoed transition's guarded yet thorough rejection of communism by studiously avoiding the subject. When the ‘Revolution of the Word’ was rejected by Breton in his preface to the catalogue for Dali’s 1929 exhibition at Galerie Goemans, Paris, Andrews seems to have avoided taking sides. He thus maintained a somewhat ambiguous relationship with Breton, whose blessing he enjoyed but whose political direction he could not follow. Writing retrospectively in The Surrealist Parade, Andrews placed Breton centre-stage, but also described him as a ‘perpetual adolescent’ who rather wilfully drifted from Freud to Trotsky to Fourier.

Andrews’ literary ‘revolution’ involved a brush with censorship which he recounted with glee in the foreword to The Surrealist Parade:

on January 27, 1932, Demain reprinted Guillaume Apollinaire’s proto-Surrealist poem “Zone,” in which Christ wins the world’s record for altitude. This was too much for a sad example of a Roman Catholic on the faculty, who complained to our headmaster (incidentally a direct
descendant of Cotton Mather). *Demain* was suppressed for a few weeks - which vastly increased our readership once it reappeared. News of the censorship enchanted Georges Braque, who wrote us that this proved that Apollinaire was still very much alive.\(^{14}\)

His youthful radicalism thus assuaged, he was never again to risk controversy. Indeed, he eventually became a pillar of the Episcopal Church, a family man of impeccable character, and a distinguished academic. He graduated from Harvard in 1936 and then worked as a banker and subsequently as curator of manuscripts for the New York Historical Society. He gained his PhD in Art History from Columbia University in 1956 and became the Archives of American Art Professor at Wayne State University in Detroit in 1964, a position that had been created especially for him.

Andrews’ own contributions to his review included discussions of subjects as diverse as Georgia O’Keeffe, Manuel de Falla, the photographic collection of Alvin Langdon Coburn and modern architecture at the Museum of Modern Art, as well as some short pieces of creative writing. In the latter, the first signs of the surrealist style of Montagu O’Reilly begin to appear. A short piece entitled ‘... Si le balcon tombait’ (a quotation from Raymond Roussel’s *La Doublure* [1897]) features a narrator with a mad love for Eliane, whose ‘blue eyes reflected the orange of I don’t know which Grecian painting by Picasso.’\(^{15}\) He terrifies her by reading from Lautréamont, then pursues her through a window, while making sinister references to Louis Aragon and Gérard de Nerval. She ends up mysteriously frozen in the glass, stone dead, in his arms.

The first complete Montagu O’Reilly story, ‘The Evocative Treason of 499 Golden Doorknobs, Dedicated to the perilous memory of Don Luis de Gongora’ was published in 1935 in *transition*. In the foreword to *The Surrealist Parade*, Andrews recounts how this fiction was endorsed by Breton.\(^{16}\) The tale includes descriptions of billowing hair without heads and walls that palpitate like melting soap, images that were to recur in later stories. James Laughlin described it as ‘painfully clumsy,’ and mocked Jolas’s rather over-enthusiastic trumpeting of it in issue 23 of *transition* as an example of ‘paramyth.’\(^{17}\) It was never included in any subsequent Montagu O’Reilly collection, which was perhaps a reflection of the fact that Laughlin secured all O’Reilly’s future output for his own press, *New Directions*.

The next O’Reilly story, ‘The Romantic Museum,’ was published in the first New Directions Anthology in 1936, alongside works by Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Jean Cocteau, e. e. cummings, Henry Miller and others. The story is set in the estate of the reclusive Paul Duval near Maisons-Laffitte, fourteen years after his graduation from the Lycée Condorcet. ‘Pianos of Sympathy’ was also published in 1936, the first single-authored book from New Directions. This story takes place initially in the Palazzo Ducale Museum, once the sixteenth century residence of Isabella d’Este, Marchioness of Mantua, on August 21, 1935. The narrator, an American traveller, is subsequently driven to Florence by Count Giacomo delle Fontane, a wealthy banker. After that publication, a steady stream of O’Reilly stories appeared, which were eventually issued in 1948 as a collection by New Directions, under the title *Who Has Been Tampering with these Pianos?* This was reprinted in London in 1988 by Atlas Press.

The name Montagu O’Reilly was taken from a box of old visiting cards in a London bookshop, whose proprietor ‘identified O’Reilly as an admiral in the King’s Navy.’\(^{18}\) Despite the vivid contrast
between the rather daring O’Reilly and the ultra-respectable Andrews, Laughlin argued for their indissolubility:

I resist the temptation to claim that Professor Andrews and Montagu O’Reilly were two different persons, they were not. I knew them both very well. They were one of the same.’

Montagu O’Reilly was not Andrews’ only alter ego. The stories repeatedly feature an aptronymic character named James (or Paulus) Wander who travels widely across Europe and America. Wandering, whether in dreams, prose, or reality, was extremely important to Andrews. It is also tempting to see the substitution ‘Paulus’ as a reference to an episode from the childhood of Hermann Hesse, described in loving detail in Andrews’ *Siegfried’s Curse* (1972), when he ran away from school and the attentions of his teacher, one Professor Paulus. However, the O’Reilly stories were probably written too early in his career for Andrews to have been aware of this coincidence at the time.

James Wander is described as the owner of a ‘Moline emporium’ who had ‘amassed his first fortune at Cannes.’ In ‘Once the Soft Silken Damage Done,’ which takes place during a masked ball in the home of wealthy society hosts Mr. and Mrs. Honorius Anger in New York, we learn that he also owns a transatlantic steam yacht named ‘The Wanderer’ and a private car called ‘Aquila Molinae.’ The latter could be a meaningful play on the names of Molina Aterno, a *comune* and town in the province of L’Aquila in the Abruzzo region of central Italy, and Moline, one of the ‘Quad’ cities on the banks of the Mississippi, 165 miles west of Chicago, and then (as now) part of the engine of the American industrial machine. Moline was well known to Andrews: after attending Harvard he had worked at the Northern Trust Company in Chicago for a year. Laughlin consequently surmised that Wander was ‘surely a holdover from [Andrews’] days in banking at “Pourtales & Cie” in Paris (“Pourtales & Cie” was a Wanderism).’ He went on to recall that:

I never met Wander, but now and again cryptic postcards from him would reach me from abroad as Wayne travelled or there would be news of his operations in letters. The most puzzling of these reports came in a letter of March 1968:

‘You will be saddened … to learn of the death of James Wander on July 14, 1921, in his suite at the Hotel Plaza, Buenos Aires. At the time of his death he had decided to eschew all American steels (for which we must forgive him) and to rearrange his portfolio to emphasize his faith in André Citroën S.A. and the Michelin works. He had already booked passage for Bordeaux on the new *Duc de Choiseul*.’

André Citroën (1878-1935) was a French industrialist who founded the S. A. André Citroën automobile company in 1919, which by 1921 was the fourth largest car manufacturer in the world. Wander’s rejection of American steels in favour of European car manufacture suggests a certain Europhile longing which ultimately goes unfulfilled.

The originality of the O’Reilly stories turns on the surreal encounters between brokers, bankers and wealthy American industrialists and a Proustian (or rather, given Andrews’ interests, Whartonian) world of the fading French-speaking élite. They respond to surrealism’s antipathy to the ruling classes yet do not endorse their embrace of communism. Communism is a constant but subtle presence, most dramatically articulated by the sudden appearance of Lenin, working in disguise as a butler, in ‘The Depraved Piano of the Nevski Prospect.’ He stands up for an oppressed and
consumptive young female pianist by magnetizing the steel keys of the piano with his teeth. However, this liberating, yet threatening, gesture may well owe more to Dalí’s 1931 painting Partial Hallucination: six apparitions of Lenin on a Grand Piano than to any incipient communist sympathies. It is certainly eroticised, as Mlle. S. has her lap ‘confused’ by the teeth-like keys that slip from the ‘depraved’ piano (‘Had Neva moisture? Some wondered …’). This appearance of Lenin reflects Andrews’ evolving attitude to the political aspects of surrealism. By this time, his youthful fascination with the movement had matured into the distanced curiosity of a cultural historian. Andrews was certainly no communist, but neither was he unsympathetic to their anger and frustration at the bourgeoisie. Rather than make political identifications in an explicit or transparent way, the politics of the O’Reilly stories inhere in their exploitation of the outmoded.

In his celebrated 1929 essay ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,’ Walter Benjamin included grand pianos in his list of those outmoded items whose revolutionary energies were, he argued, first perceived by Breton. Twentieth century means of reproducing music, such as the phonograph, had quickly consigned pianos to that category. They consequently exerted a certain fascination on the surrealist mind, both as evidence of a superseded culture and as fetish objects. The imposing casing, the shiny surfaces, the black and white teeth of the keys, the mechanical interior and the tremendous heaviness could combine to create a vaguely sinister eroticism. Several surrealist works play with the eroticism of the piano and its, usually, female performer. For instance, Salvador Dalí’s sculpture Surrealist Piano (1954), in which a naked female dancer in bronze stretches atop a piano whose three legs are in fact those of a girl wearing high heels and bloomers, seems to embody this spirit of imaginative, libidinal revolt against the prudery of the Victorian drawing room.

Following Benjamin, Hal Foster argues that one way of viewing the revolutionary potential of outmoded forms is their ability to ‘relativize … bourgeois culture.’ The challenge to capitalism represented by O’Reilly’s grand pianos can be located within this reading of the surrealist outmoded which sees it, following Benjamin, as identifying “the situation of the middle class at the moment it shows the first signs of decline,” when its cherished forms begin to crumble as “wish symbols.” Far from appearing as ‘wish symbols,’ the pianos in O’Reilly’s stories are subjected to ‘tamperings,’ to alterations which go far beyond the ‘temperings’ of piano tuners. In ‘Pianos of Sympathy,’ we have water-filled Pleyels. In ‘The Prairie Avenue Piano Recital,’ which is set in the gothic pile of the wealthy businessman Ogden Dearborn, on Prairie Avenue, near Lake Michigan, we find English Broadwoods filled with snow. ‘Slippers, the Imperial Police and Paris’ is a kind of detective story in which a German piano manufacturer and a French minister pursue a mysterious quest around the private dwellings of various Princesses and Countesses in Paris, with a dénouement that hinges on a ‘golden mane’ cushioning the keyboard of a Gaveau. The title alone of ‘The Depraved Piano of the Nevski Prospect,’ which takes place in 1921 during a hotel luncheon hosted by Count Raimund von Waldtraum, onetime secretary to the German ambassador in St. Petersburg, with guests including an hotelier (Floor dei Vasani), the narrator, and various Russian diplomats is enough to convey the point, but the story features an Erard piano filled with dough, while Steinways churn champagne. O’Reilly is detailed in his descriptions of all these tamperings, specifying the manufacturer of each grand piano.
Indeed, there are several diverting discussions of the relative merits of different makes of grand piano that focus on their construction and commercial advantages rather than their tonal characteristics. So O'Reilly's grand pianos are ridiculed, commodified and instrumentalised. Their appeal as an aspirational feature of bourgeois life is ironised and undermined.

Liszt and Chopin both appear, either through their music or in person. The fountains of the Palazzo of Isabella d'Este (who was known as 'La Prima Donna' of the Renaissance), which provide the setting for 'Pianos of Sympathy,' evoke 'Les Jeux d'Eaux à la Villa d'Este' (The Fountains of the Villa d'Este), from Liszt's *Années de Périenage* (although the work itself is never directly mentioned). Liszt makes an appearance in person in 'Slippers, the Imperial Police and Paris,' initially disguised as a 'silent and hooded figure in Magyar boots.' Chopin's *Barcarolle* is performed by two Italian dwarfs, who lick the strings of the Broadwood before executing 'tortuous cadenzas' and 'degenerate notes' in 'The Prairie Avenue Piano Recital.' In 'The Depraved Piano of the Nevski Prospect' a tubercular young girl is unable to summon up the physical strength necessary to play Chopin's *Etude* No. VII on the Erard filled with dough. Liszt and Chopin were the archetypal Romantic pianist-composers, and the piano manufacturing industry depended to a great extent on the popularity of their music. Just like the pianos themselves, these composers are invoked as evidence of outmoded bourgeois high culture whose superiority and longevity can no longer be taken for granted.

The recurring appearance of frail and consumptive girls throughout the stories reinforces the impression of a fatally sick high culture. As they reappear within the twentieth century context of the stories they become manifestly uncanny, often transformed into mannequins or, in the case of the late Miss Elenor Hammersley, recreated entirely from human hair. Paulus Wander falls temporarily and sickeningly in love with her in 'Once The Soft Silken Damage Done.' The moment he realises that she is a ventriloquist's dummy and automaton provokes that 'sudden fear in the forest of symbols' that Breton described in *L'Amour fou.* The ill-prepared Wander turns away from the horror in a state of delirium and stumbles 'through shabby avenues until dawn' before, significantly, cabling for his car, the 'Aquila Moliniae.' The solution is evidently to get away in his modern machine, back to the rational world of business.

Ideas of liberty and love predominate in the O'Reilly stories. He seems to have responded to what Foster identified as a connection between the surrealist uncanny and the Freudian death-drive. The stories figure this connection in the form of sadomasochistic deconstructions of the female form, which are accomplished through recurring fetishistic motifs of hair and keyholes. In common with many of the European surrealists, O'Reilly displays a certain misogyny. Women are frequently objectified and dehumanised, reduced to a collection of body parts. The extent to which this reveals a more deep-rooted misogyny in Andrews himself is debatable. These dislocated body parts are rather typical, even cliché, surrealist tropes, but their frequent occurrence in O'Reilly's fiction indicate one way in which the problematic gender politics of European surrealism gained currency in America.

Hair, in particular, features in every one of the stories as the supreme example of a fetish object. This is rooted in Freud's understanding of the fetish as a substitute for the maternal phallus, often 'some part of the body (such as the foot or hair) which is in general very inappropriate for sexual purposes.' In 'Pianos of Sympathy' changes in piano temperature alternately deaden and revivify the
hair of Giulia Davanzati, in an echo of the musical phenomenon of sympathetic vibration. In ‘The Prairie Avenue Piano Recital,’ a keyhole is hidden in the side of an F sharp key, which when opened reveals another key, which in turn opens a drawer containing a young girl’s dehydrated *chevelure* which soaks up the snow filling the piano. In ‘The Romantic Museum,’ Eliane de Hautecoeur (possibly the same “Eliane” that appeared in …*Si le balcon tombait*) connects her hair via a control cord to a mechanical brooch she wears. Travelling as a passenger in a motor car at a speed of 89 kilometres per hour, she is able to adjust the cascade of her hair at a precise rate of 88.3 kilometres per hour.

Eliane’s mechanical hair provides a particularly arresting moment of convulsive beauty that seems to encapsulate O’Reilly’s surrealism in a single image. It takes place at a dinner at the Maisons-Laffitte home of Paul Duval, which he significantly describes as a ‘veritable romantic museum,’ a phrase that causes some ‘misgivings’ in the minds of his guests. After a promising start as a student, Duval has withdrawn completely from society ‘to devote himself to a thorough study of scientific problems.’ On their way to the dinner with his friend, Duval, who is ‘well versed in Italian history,’ Eliane's husband pleads with his wife to behave well. Eliane memorably replies ‘I believe hair can confuse history,’ and proceeds to demonstrate this as she sits in a stationary car, its engine racing, in Duval's garage:

Sublime in the spurious sun of the garage lanterns, the tresses of Eliane de Hautecoeur had descended, liquid in speed. And as the onlookers gazed with pleasure at the conquering imitation of light, it was acknowledged by all that hair had indeed vanquished history.

The word ‘sublime’ is not used lightly in this passage. The history that has been ‘vanquished’ is at once personal and political. The onlookers are provided with an alternative to reality, achieved at a certain speed, which is nevertheless arrested. At the same time, Paul Duval’s abandonment of a political reality, in favour of the sequestered pursuit of (surrealist) science, finds fulfilment in the scene. This ecstatic and mecanomorphic moment of surrealist precision seems also to validate the ‘fantastic’ approach to writing of O’Reilly himself, even if it is only by transforming women into machines that such transcendence may be achieved.

Mannequins they may have become, but these uncanny females nevertheless resist Bataille’s ideas of an ‘inorganic’ sex appeal. O’Reilly apparently shared Breton’s disapproval, expressed in the *Second Manifesto*, of Bataille’s fascination with ‘that which is vilest, most discouraging, and most corrupted’ in the world. These are tales of a sublimated fetishism. Thus, Wander is entranced by Elenor Hammersley’s hair, which is so sensitive that it seems to weep in the heat and can only be comforted by an ice bath, which causes her ‘two alabaster treasures’ to ‘palpitate with relief.’ Despite the warnings of the dandy Ward McAllister and his companion, the Duc de Morny, who reveal that Elenor is in fact operated by her demented widower husband Count Capolavoro (the name means ‘masterpiece’), Wander cannot resist her allure.

Similarly, in ‘The Influence of Harps and Laundry on Railway Commitments,’ which is set in the orphelinage Eugène-Napoleon in the Rue de Martignac (next door to the Bavarian Embassy) in the early years of the Second Empire, a dozen young girls perform an aria of Offenbach on partially de-stringed harps that are laid flat (effectively, eviscerated pianos) and have soiled napkins covering their remaining strings. The foundlings, whose ‘foaming hair [falls] gaily over their shoulders’ play
shyly to the Empress Eugénie, the banker Giovanni delle Fontane and the mine owner ‘Marchese Ragnatelo, born Treptu in Bucharest, [who] had once clerked for Carlos Anger in New York.’ The latter ‘admires for a moment the confusion of the girls’ supple busts.’\textsuperscript{40} The young girls wear ‘abused’ warm white slippers, donated by the Empress. All the Freudian symbols come together in this story, which seems to parody psychoanalysis and even gently mocks surrealism itself.

O’Reilly nevertheless generally followed the surrealists’ attitudes towards Freud, favouring the irrationality of the dream to its analysis. Freud’s disapproval of Breton’s fascination with un-interpreted dreams and their ‘artistic’ consequences is described by Andrews in The Surrealist Parade. He recounts the letter from Freud to Breton dated 26 December 1932, which stated: ‘I really am not in a position to understand what surrealism is and what it means. Perhaps I am not intended to understand it, since I am far away from art.’\textsuperscript{41} O’Reilly’s stories also encode differences from therapeutic psychoanalysis. The Romantic Museum, for example, recounts a story of 87 young girls (the same number, minus one, as there are keys on a grand piano) who, having been hypnotised by a whirling triangle on a black circle dangling from the wrist of a mysterious gentleman, wander the streets of Asnières with hands that are bewitched into ‘making the most unseasonal advances, the most gratifying caresses that that city had yet seen’ to passing strangers.\textsuperscript{42} This example of fetishism parts company with Freudianism, not least in its use of hypnosis to achieve a sexual outcome. Having explored hypnosis in his early work, particularly with Josef Breuer, Freud rejected it as a technique in favour of free association, and ultimately his celebrated sessions of analysis on the couch. O’Reilly, on the other hand, places it at the centre of the most overtly sexual episode in the stories.

‘Slippers, the Imperial Police, and Paris’ contains another example of O’Reilly’s reinterpretation of the Freudian death-drive:

Although the yards of chevelure which lay on the flooring of the young woman’s bedroom had been long shorn, the manes were still murmuring when the two old men entered. Doubtless the swollen Venetian slipper which pierced the mound of hair had agitated some sensitive strands.

However, the warm bread which inflated the girl’s shoe had not been permitted to mar in any way the admirable shellac of the footwear: meticulous baking had allowed no dough whatsoever to overflow the tight lacings.\textsuperscript{43}

The found slipper reiterates Breton’s ‘lost object,’ the slipper of ‘folkslore’ (in other words, Cinderella).\textsuperscript{44} In Breton’s example, the slipper spoon is ‘not only a fetish that combines a perception of castrative “lack” with an image of phallic “unity”; it is also a “Cinderella ashtray” that conflates a figure of desire (Cinderella) with an image of extinction “ashes.”’\textsuperscript{45} In O’Reilly’s story, the slipper filled with warm dough is a more maternal and life-affirming substance, which is nonetheless constrained and sadomasochistically eroticised by the tight bondage of the lacings. The male ‘entry’ into this trembling female interior eventually leads the two phallic policemen all the way to the central mystery.

This story is constructed from a chain of reasoning that articulates a bizarre industrial imperative while offering a surreal solution. Napoléon III had told one of the policemen, named Piétrì, that the trade position of the Empire ‘depended entirely upon the recovery of two thousand chevelures stolen that night from a warehouse in Passy.’\textsuperscript{46} This was because European piano manufacturers had been using a cheap but poor quality substitute for ivory (the price of which had risen prohibitively high)
in their keyboards. Count Rainer von Waldtraum (the surname translates as ‘forest dream’) knows the commercial secret that the only way to cushion these new keys successfully is to use chevelures, a solution first proposed by Franz Liszt himself. However, the chevelures had been stolen from an Anonymous Society who had purchased the necessary stock. Waldtraum notices a key that resembles one sent to the businessman Ogden Dearlove in Chicago for his piano. The key opens the bedroom (veiled behind ‘voluptuous red curtains’) of the guilty Princesse Mahaut de Chaulnes, and the chevelures are found, along with the slipper. This narrative structure interweaves the tropes of O'Reilly’s fetishism with commercial and industrial themes. American big business is introduced at a crucial moment, relocating the solution away from Europe. Yet without the insights provided by the European ‘forest dream,’ the final penetrative action could not be achieved.

Most of the stories are constructed around similar encounters between the surreal dream and hard commerce. The performance of the foundlings in ‘The Influence of Harps and Laundry on Railway Commitments,’ for example, leads directly to a confession from the banker Fontane to Waldtraum that he has made an investment in twenty thousand shares in Lombardo-Venetian Rails. It is the evocation of Italy through soiled laundry and harps, a discovery of both sexuality and the unconscious that has persuaded him to make that decision.

Likewise, in ‘The Prairie Avenue Piano Recital,’ Ogden Dearborn and Paulus Wander meet to discuss business. Wander’s association with European culture leaves him compromised in the eyes of the ‘realtor and dry goods dealer’ Dearborn, who observes that his tie-pin is ‘hopelessly passé de mode,’ and remembers rumours of an abandoned love and a bastard son ‘living in the remote world of the aristocracy of the Neva… .’ The tale goes on to describe the surreal chain of events that lead to the dehydrated chevelure of a very young girl being used to soak up the snow that has filled the Broadwood so that the dwarfs may give their performance. The successful conclusion of this operation leads to some hard bargaining around some tapestries in which Dearborn, deeply affected by the recent experience, comes off worse:

‘And now,’ [Ogden Dearborn] began, ‘those New Jersey Aubussons. While manufactured in Trenton, they will nevertheless have a wide sales appeal.’
‘So wide,’ agreed Paulus Wander, ‘that I take Illinois.’ Wander goes on to claim several more large tracts of land, while Dearborn is disturbed by a more intimate memory. Gazing at the chevelure he sobs: “Mary, Mary!” Thus the tables are turned. Dearborn’s attachment to the Freudian symbol of the hair, with its personal associations and memories, has made him susceptible to precisely that weakness that he first decried in Wander. Meanwhile, the latter has gained in commercial strength. The objects of trade are the very antithesis of surrealist objects: stylised seventeenth and eighteenth century tapestries depicting conventional figures against a background of verdure, foliage and vignettes of plants and animals. These are bourgeois decorations which, to complete the commodification (and vulgarisation) in this case are reproductions, manufactured in Trenton, New Jersey. Wander knows that Americans will consume these objects in large quantities but the price of the trade is that aspect of oneself that is susceptible of surrealist fantasy. It is as though French surrealism itself is incompatible with the banalities and realism of American materialism.
Throughout the stories there is evidence of the influence of visual as well as literary surrealism on O’Reilly/Andrews. The descriptions of nineteenth century interiors recall the collage novels of Max Ernst, with their collisions of catalogue pictures and illustrations from melodramatic novels. As Foster comments, ‘Ernst relates the historically outmoded to the psychically repressed at the very level of representation, specifically of representations residual in surrealist childhoods - that is to say, in the era of the Freudian “discovery” of sexuality and the unconscious.’ In O’Reilly’s version, this encounter is intruded upon by the adult parade of American bankers, traders and businessmen. Andrews lived in a very different time and place to the European surrealists, one in which there were no ready equivalents to Ernst’s Victorian interiors. Andrews felt this discrepancy keenly and the translocation of Ernst’s imagery suffered something of the same marginalisation as Ernst himself in America. In O’Reilly’s stories, European surrealism has not grown up and the encounter with the adult world of American materialism is consequently traumatic. Andrews’ own position as a writer reflects this tension and he consequently seceded into literary silence.

Salvador Dalí is also a strong presence in the O’Reilly stories. Dalí was of course much more influential in the United States than other European surrealists and Breton’s mocking anagram of his name, ‘Avida Dollars,’ neatly summed up the reason for this. Dalí’s embrace of capitalist enterprise presented opportunities for surrealism in America yet also, from Breton’s perspective, spelled its corruption. Breton’s dismay at Dalí’s involvement in theatre, dance and, more broadly, spectacle is subtly echoed in the O’Reilly stories. Andrews hedges his bets here, probably rather fascinated with the figure of Dalí while at the same time wary of his self-promotion and narcissism.

Thus the description of the ‘Eye-Lash Quadrille,’ for example, in ‘Once the Soft Silken Damage Done,’ seems to be modelled on the Bal Onirique, which took place in New York in 1935. This was instigated by Dalí and organised by Caresse Crosby and Julien Levy’s wife, Joella. Gala commented ‘it was an experiment to see how far New Yorkers would respond to a chance to express their own dreams.’ High society indulged itself with gusto in the process setting down a blueprint for many such events in the future. Novel costumes were the order of the day, including ‘a woman giving birth to a doll from the top of her head’ and ‘women in shimmering white gowns with green snakes emerging from their heads.’

O’Reilly’s story, which takes place during a masked ball organised by the House of Anger, features similarly outlandish garments. For example, Mrs Honorius Anger is ‘costumed as a Burgundian Princess of the XV Century [with] numerous doves nesting about her waist.’ The Eye-Lash Quadrille is accompanied by the band of the conductor and choreographer Wunder (wondering and wandering meet in this story). Wander, trying unsuccessfully to please Miss Hammersely by offering to fetch a plate of terrapin, settles for joining her in watching the ballroom floor where Mrs Carlos Anger and her set were completing the Eye-lash routine. None other than the outstanding conductor Wunder had invented the fantastic dance steps which those women, mounted on stilts, danced. In the center, the hat of a very young girl represented the pupil of the human eye, while each spouse stepping round her was clad in an enormous lash.
The eye itself is, of course, a recurring motif in surrealism, much exploited by Dalí and here, once again, transported by O'Reilly into the home of wealthy American industrialists. Evidently he could see how surrealism was sufficiently compatible with American high society to be suitable for such occasions. Nevertheless, in his stories, it takes a specifically European presence (Wunder) to guarantee authenticity, something which Andrews presumably concluded from watching Dalí.

The spirit of Dalí also seems to be present at the dinner given by the reclusive Paul Duval in ‘The Romantic Museum.’ The guests are shown into the great Dining Hall, but as the company leaned back in their Louis XV chairs, they noticed that the very touch of their backs on the chairs produced an intense operatic whistle. When the whistle had run its course, all recognized the tune as the famous Haunting Theme from Schubert’s well-known Unfinished Symphony. Bewildered, the ladies and gentlemen arose and stared at the chair backs. To their surprise, they discovered that on the back of each chair was projected a pair of full-size lips.\(^54\)

Duval remarks that the lips are a ‘scientific replica’ of those of Clarice Orsini, the Roman Bride of Lorenzo de’ Medici. Clarice died aged 35 of tuberculosis and was the subject of portraits by Lorenzo and others, as well as being the mother of Pope Leo X. Her lips, to judge by the portraits, were rather thin and consumptive. The initial evocation of voluptuous objects such as Dalí’s Mae West sofa give way to an apparently more repressed image.

There may be an implicit critique of Dalí’s showmanship in this turn. Just as the Louis XV style began the move away from the rococo towards moderation and restraint, so Clarice Orsini’s strict religious beliefs contrasted unhappily with the humanist ideals of Florentine society. Likewise, Paul Duval himself, who was immensely popular as a student and seemed poised to live a high life in polite society, disappeared from view for more than a decade to devote himself to ‘a thorough study of scientific problems.’ This move towards restraint is consistent with Andrews’ own journey into conservatism. The flamboyance of Dalí’s version of surrealism lacked the refinement, discretion and elitism that Andrews admired. While not siding with Breton in denouncing Dalí, Andrews nevertheless managed to convey his unease quite effectively in the O'Reilly stories.

In the public mind, O'Reilly might have most closely been associated with the work of Joseph Cornell, the ‘Enchanted Wanderer’ of Manhattan and another important conduit through which a surrealism of sorts was made available to Americans. Cornell himself used that nickname in an article subtitled ‘Excerpt from a Journey Album for Hedy Lamarr’ in View magazine, in 1941. Myers notes that ‘[a] footnote explains that the title is borrowed from the biography of Carl Maria von Weber who wrote in the horn quartet of the overture to “Der Freischutz” a musical signature, “The Enchanted Wanderer.”’\(^55\) Cornell acknowledged that his Taglioni’s Jewel Casket (1940), ‘although not inspired by, would remind anyone familiar with it of Pianos of Sympathy.’\(^56\) This erotically charged box has a velvet lining and contains three rows of four glass cubes resting on blue glass and various fragments of jewellery including a necklace. It is an homage to the ballerina Marie Taglioni, who reputedly danced on an animal skin in the snow to entertain a Russian highwayman.

The subject-matter of the O'Reilly stories and Cornell's boxes is ostensibly the same: faded fragments from another time, evocations of the Russian ballet or high society balls, mysterious references to journeys undertaken and holidays at continental hotels and collaged objects such as
slippers, ribbons, or birds. They share a love of detailed intricacy and a sense of intense focus that
give their work a certain timeless quality. They have a similar sense of history being vanquished by
the frozen moment at which these elements come together. However, the hallucinatory conjurings of
O'Reilly lead to the rather concrete world of big business, whereas the entranced Cornell remains
gazing upon the marvellous. Cornell's world was essentially small and localised, obsessive in its
detailed observation, whereas O'Reilly's wanderings cover the globe and, despite the intimacy of the
events described, have a sense of a grander scale. Cornell's work is often, though not uniformly read,
as 'a coded personal record,' suggesting another difference between his practice and O'Reilly's
writing.57 O'Reilly's stories are impersonal, betraying relatively little of the subjectivity of the author.
Given the common currency of the assumption that surrealism was primarily concerned with the
psychic life of the author, the use of the pseudonym and the impersonalism of the O'Reilly stories
indicate a possible reason why they passed under the radar in America and have been forgotten as
bearers of surrealist influence.

O'Reilly seems to have found himself rendered increasingly irrelevant by a combination of
Andrews' natural conservatism, by the intangibility of a geographically and historically distant
European culture and by the strength of an American culture that demanded a stronger sense of its
own identity. The fact that literary surrealism was itself already marginal in comparison to its visual
counterpart only compounded Andrews's dissatisfaction with his creations.

The Montagu O'Reilly stories dried up in the late 1930s, roughly coinciding with Jolas' turn
away from surrealism and the publication of the first issue of View in 1940. It is instructive to examine
Andrews' relationship with surrealism once he ceased creative writing. Unlike Jolas, he made no
attempt to carve out a new position for himself in the avant-garde. No longer did he present himself as
Montagu O'Reilly: instead he was to become Wayne Andrews, a cultural chronicler and critic with a
wide-ranging portfolio of interests and the photographic eye of a super-informed tourist. As O'Reilly
had, Andrews tended to portray surrealism along Benjaminian lines, as 'the only intellectual
movement of his contemporary era to dream the future out of the ruins of outmoded nineteenth-
century cultural modernity.'58 Yet unlike O'Reilly, Andrews did this by showing the relative failures of
other movements to do the same, an account that culminates in The Surrealist Parade.

The list of Andrews' cultural monographs covers an impressively wide range of topics: The
Vanderbilt Legend, 1941; Battle for Chicago, 1946; Edith Wharton's Best Short Stories, 1958;
Germaine: A Portrait of Madame de Staël, 1963; Siegfried's Curse: The German Journey from
Nietzsche to Hesse, 1972; Voltaire, 1981; The Surrealist Parade, 1988; and numerous shorter
essays. Andrews' trademark writing style consisted of a series of elegant historical or biographical
miniatures that are woven together in a highly readable way. This readability drew censure from
academic reviewers who frequently found the books too anecdotal to make a useful contribution to
scholarship.59 Andrews' approach was not to discover new facts - he was quite content to draw
entirely on existing sources - but to observe relationships and coincidences between people and
events that add up to a novel 'take' on a familiar story. These are infused with his own infectious
curiosity and eye for detail, so the reader gradually builds an impression not just of the subject but
also of the author who is telling the tale.
One chapter of *Siegfried's Curse* is entitled *The Expressionist Parade*, a title that prefigures Andrews’ final book *The Surrealist Parade*. In a revealing paragraph, he compares Expressionism with surrealism:

It is not exactly profitable to read each and every word of all of these [Expressionist] writers. Unlike the Surrealists in France, they did not intend to leave row after row of volumes to be devoured by the generations to come. Unlike the Surrealists, who codified and expanded the marvellous tradition of Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Hugo, and Chateaubriand – to mention only a few of the men summoned from their graves to applaud the performances of their successors – the expressionists had nothing but contempt for anything that resembled a tradition. To say something absolutely new was the excuse for their existence. Once that was accomplished, or attempted, they were usually exhausted. They could be amazing in the evening and boring the morning after.

This emphasis on the importance of literary tradition strikes at the heart of Andrews’ view of surrealism. Breton and his group famously set themselves against anything that might have resembled a literary career, yet from the First Manifesto onwards, surrealism invoked influential precursors from European literature. Their revival of romanticism and the gothic was clearly of central importance to Andrews, more so than other more recognisable or characteristic features of the movement, such as its investments in psychoanalysis or the marvelous. To him, surrealism’s continuities with radical cultural traditions, rather than a shallow pursuit of novelty, proved the superiority of their revolution over the Expressionists.

Andrews’ interest in surrealism can only be dimly perceived amidst the hundreds of beautiful photographs of buildings in his architectural books. Although the images of buildings bereft of people and photographed in a documentary style might reference, for instance, the photographs from Breton’s *Nadja* (1928) or the city scenes of Brassai, they invite very different interpretations. Anthony Vidler has identified architecture as a home for the surrealist uncanny insofar as it ‘construes a topology of symbolic forms, from the stair to cellar, that, from Freud on, have become topoi of dream analysis.’ Andrews’ celebratory images do little or nothing to further this interpretation of the built environment, concentrating instead on conveying an impression of American construction transcending its European origins. A typical example is his photograph of the Syracuse Savings Bank, New York, designed by James Lyman Silsbee in 1876. Andrews remarks that Silsbee ‘surprised Syracuse ... with a Venetian Gothic savings bank, still standing and still honoured.’

Nevertheless, some of the photographs do seem to betray very subtly the one-time surrealist gaze of the photographer, something that is occasionally reinforced in the accompanying texts. His picture of Horace Walpole’s ‘toy castle’ at Strawberry Hill, London [Figure 2], for example, is accompanied by the following:

[André] Breton was also happy to find that *Otranto* could be considered an example of automatic writing. There is a letter of Walpole’s that proves Breton’s thesis, “I sat down and began to write, without knowing in the least what I intended to say or relate,” the author told a friend. “One evening I wrote from the time I had drunk my tea, about six o’clock, till half an hour after one in the morning, when my hand and fingers were so weary, but I could not hold the pen to finish a sentence, but left Mathilda and Isabella talking in the middle of a paragraph.”
However, Andrews’ historical narrative ultimately concludes not in the triumph of a surrealist ‘intra-uterine’ architecture that sets itself against modernist functionalism but rather in a parade of both domestic and public buildings that amount to a catalogue of European influences and original American architecture that takes in modern and traditional styles with a dispassionate eye for quality.65 His major response to surrealism, therefore, must remain the O’Reilly stories.

The title of the collection – *Who Has Been Tampering with these Pianos?* – perfectly sums up O’Reilly’s surrealism. It seems to be a querulous question, delivered to thin air, suggesting an action whose evidence is plain but whose cause is unknown. ‘Tampering’ is a fine but disabling adjustment. In the stories, history itself seems to have been tampered/tempered; the outmoded (pianos) are replaced by capital (American big business), the surrealists’ revolutionary aspirations thwarted. And yet, O’Reilly wields a playful but sinister kind of tuning peg; he skews the conventional forms of the short story into something that serves a particular interpretation of surrealism that privileges its capacity to unsettle and disturb. The short creative life of Montagu O’Reilly constitutes a minor, idiosyncratic legacy for surrealism in America, one that has been overshadowed by others, but nevertheless increased its visibility and currency outside of France.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin for their help in the preparation of this article. The HRC holds the major collection of Andrews’ manuscripts, working notes, correspondence and publications. Quotations from these are made with permission.

---


5 Eugene Jolas et al, ‘Manifesto for The Revolution of the Word,’ *transition* 16-17, June 1929, 12.


12 La revue de l’élite, La revue intime and Demain are all held by the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

13 Andrews, The Surrealist Parade, x.

14 Ibid., viii.


19 Ibid., 161.

20 Andrews, Siegfried's Curse; the German Journey from Nietzsche to Hesse, Atheneum, New York, 1972, 279-280.

21 Montagu O'Reilly, Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?, Atlas Press London, 1988, 48-49.

22 Ibid., 161.

23 Ibid., 161-162.

24 Ibid., 25.


27 Ibid., 162.

28 This seems to have been based on an actual building. The Mahlon D. Ogden mansion stood on the north side of Walton Street, Chicago, between Dearborn and Clark. It was the only building in the area to survive the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, thanks both to luck and the rapid application of soaked carpets to the exterior. Mahlon Ogden himself was a successful attorney and later a judge.

29 O'Reilly, Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?, 32.

30 Ibid., 18.

31 André Breton, Mad Love, trans. Mary Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1987, 15.

32 O'Reilly, Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?, 53.

33 See Foster, Compulsive Beauty.


35 O'Reilly, Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?, 34.

36 Ibid., 39.


39 O’Reilly, *Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?*, 52.

40 *Ibid.*, 44.


42 O’Reilly, *Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?*, 36.


44 Breton, *Mad Love*, 33.

45 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 45.

46 O’Reilly, *Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?*, 28.


49 Foster, *Compulsive Beauty*, 182.


52 O’Reilly, *Who has been Tampering with these Pianos?*, 50.


61 Anthony Vidler, ‘Fantasy, the Uncanny, and Surrealist Theories of Architecture,’ *Papers of Surrealism* 1, 2003, 3.

Andrew Hugill is Director of Creative Computing at Bath Spa University. His research is transdisciplinary, combining music (both composition and musicology), literature and computer science. He is the author of *Pataphysics: A Useless Guide* (MIT Press, 2012), *The Digital Musician* (Routledge, 2008/2012), and *The Orchestra: A User's Manual* (Philharmonia, 2004). His musical compositions have been performed worldwide, including the choral work *Les Origines humaines* and *Catalogue de Grenouilles*, for massed frogs and ensemble, both inspired by the writings of Jean-Pierre Brisset. He is a panel member of the European Research Council and an Associate Research Fellow of the Université de Paris, Sorbonne.
Gardeners and Outlaws, or Playing Hide and Seek with Edward James and Pavel Tchelitchew.

James Boaden

This essay considers the visibility of queer sexuality within the work of the artist Pavel Tchelitchew and the writer Edward James from the 1930s and 40s. It examines Tchelitchew’s painting *Hide and Seek* (1942) and James’ novel *The Gardener who Saw God* (1937) in order to compare the ways in which they negotiate questions of nature and artificiality in relation to sexuality.

In the ever-expanding literature examining the fraught negotiation of aesthetics and politics within the surrealist group during the 1930s there is frequent mention of the way in which wealthy patrons damaged the group’s left-wing credentials. This attitude is perhaps most neatly encapsulated by the common periodization of the movement’s political ambitions in the decade as being sealed by the 1938 international surrealist exhibition. This exhibition is regarded as marking the near-total conversion of the movement from one concerned with experimentation, research and politics to an exclusive interest in aesthetics and the commodified artwork, associated with the fashionable tastes of the elite. Susan Suleiman memorably characterizes the decade as witnessing surrealism’s move from ‘the street to the salon,’ and discusses the contradictions inherent in a leftist political group exhibiting in a space like the Gallerie de Beaux-arts, known for its connections to high culture. These contradictions did not go unnoticed or unchallenged within the group itself - Louis Aragon, as early as 1929 warned ‘[t]he snobs are here,’ and he was not wrong. Many of the signal achievements within the aesthetic field throughout the decade benefitted from the patronage of an elite class within European society. Suleiman discusses the obvious irony of the Comte and Comtesse de Noailles’ patronage of Dalí and Buñuel’s film *L’Age d’or* (1930) - a film pitched against the very society that was funding it.

Most accounts of this period have focused on debates within the movement itself rather than addressing how surrealism was perceived by the broad audience for the works produced by its members. Surrealism’s influence spread widely in the 1930s as writers and artists outside the movement opportunistically took up its now fashionable strategies in their own work - Jean Cocteau’s film *Le sang d’un poète* (1930) being perhaps the most obvious example. Many of these ‘surrealish’ works are often looked at as derivative and unworthy of critical attention, yet they may allow us to see issues and ideas being developed that the movement itself could not address but which their work nonetheless suggested to others. This essay will examine two figures that appeared on the periphery of the movement during the late 1930s and into the mid-1940s and look at the place of their work within the division Suleiman draws between the street and the salon - and perhaps suggest a third position of the garden. Neither Edward James nor Pavel Tchelitchew would ever be a member of the surreal group and both expressed a relatively limited knowledge of the movement. By examining how the work of these men came to be assimilated into the movement (as it was understood in an Anglo-American context) the polarized discussion of class politics and the surrealist group during these years are further nuanced. The themes of their works and their public personas ask...
uncomfortable questions for surrealism, not only about class but also about the representation of ‘degenerate,’ privileged sexualities from the late nineteenth century, such as those that dominated the fertile symbolist imaginary on which surrealism frequently fed in the 1930s.

Edward James was an extremely wealthy upper-class Englishman, who used his money to become a significant patron of the arts in the 1930s. James moved in fashionable circles, linked predominantly to the European ballet. Around 1933, through his friendship with Marie-Laure de Noailles, James learned of the surrealist movement. One of the first artists he became involved with was Salvador Dalí: from the mid 1930s James arranged to finance Dalí’s career through a contract that gave him exclusive rights to the works made under its auspice. James received several of Dalí’s most celebrated canvases and allowed the painter to develop his style free of financial constraint. However James is also responsible for other projects involving the artist that are considered by many as the beginning of Dalí’s turn towards a clownish showmanship that (for some) marks his decline as a serious artist. The commissioning of the ballet *Bachanale* (1939) would probably not have happened without James’ involvement with that world, while the contemporaneous *Dream of Venus* pavilion at the 1939 World’s Fair in New York was entirely financed by the Englishman. Throughout the 1930s James published a number of books of poetry and a novel, several of which play with themes popular within the surrealist group.

Pavel Tchelitchew was born into a wealthy and privileged Russian family, who lost all their property in the 1917 Revolution. As a White Russian, Tchelitchew lived in exile in Turkey, Berlin, Paris, New York, and throughout Italy, never returning to the land of his birth. Trained as a painter, he achieved his earliest recognition as a stage designer before finding favour for his early canvases within the Paris salon of Gertrude Stein. It is within this circle that he probably first became aware of the surrealist movement, through his close friendship with René Crevel - during the hiatus between Crevel’s abandonment of the group in 1923 and his return in 1929. During the 1920s Tchelitchew exhibited alongside Christian Bérard and Eugene Berman under the label of ‘neo-romanticism.’ Those artists had links to theatre and dance design, and employed a figurative style that could be linked (like surrealism) to a trajectory emerging from romanticism and symbolism. Tchelitchew’s association with surrealist painting was assured in the following decade when, during the early 1940s, his work arrived in the United States, where it was exhibited in galleries known for showing surrealist work (such as the Julien Levy Gallery) and was frequently reproduced in the pages of Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s *View* magazine (1940-48), which clearly marked its debt to the group and frequently published their texts.

Unlike the products of the surrealist group, Edward James’ writing and Pavel Tchelitchew’s paintings are unquestionably bourgeois both in their technique and in their intended audience. James’ early poetry was published in tiny runs, often in luxury editions. The poems frequently borrowed from earlier forms such as the ballad, the sonnet, and the ode, such as those celebrating his travels in Orvieto and Toledo. Although painting was still central to the careers of several artists associated with surrealism, most had gone far to change conventional expectations of the medium. In contrast, Tchelitchew worked with the most traditional materials, techniques and genres. He particularly excelled in the mode of the portrait, in which he often drew on the conventions of society portraiture
from the earliest years of the century. Both openly courted the audiences of whom many within the surrealist movement were wary, yet both were working in modes that were recognizable to that audience as heavily influenced by surrealist aesthetics.

I will examine here the shared scope of Tchelitchew and James’ work during the period by concentrating on two major works: James’ only completed novel *The Gardener who Saw God* (1937) and Tchelitchew’s painting *Hide and Seek* (1940-42). Both were well received at the time of their creation: Tchelitchew’s painting was bought following its initial showing for the Museum of Modern Art, New York, while James’ novel went through three editions. Their subsequent reputation has been rather less spectacular: James’ novel has not been reprinted since the 1930s, while Tchelitchew’s canvas hung recently in a lift lobby, before being returned to the storage it has occupied for the last decade. These two works are closely linked through their subject matter - both deal with themes of untamable nature - but also through the friendship between the two men in the 1930s. This friendship was tested along the lines of sexual decorum during the time of their earliest collaborations in an incident that tells much about the place of sexuality within an elite class during the decade and shapes its representation in later works by both men.

Acting as the painter’s patron and promoter in the bohemian high society of both Paris and London, Edith Sitwell introduced the pair in the early 1930s. Tchelitchew designed sinuous, glittering costumes for the ballet *Errante*, which James had commissioned for the *Ballets of 1933*, swathing James’ wife Tilly Losch in a sheath of shimmering emerald. The *Ballets of 1933* were key public successes for both Tchelitchew and James, and led to further collaborations. 1933 was also a key year in the career of the twenty-year-old writer Charles Henri Ford, who had traveled to Paris in order to publish a scandalous novel he had co-written with Parker Tyler, titled *The Young and Evil*. The book was a difficult, self-consciously ‘modern’ account of the lives of a group of homosexual men living in New York City in the 1920s. The main characters were ‘obvious’ homosexuals (to use the terminology of the time), who rouged their faces and travelled to Harlem for drag balls, flirting with sailors, sharing clothes and lovers. Each of the three central figures in the novel (two are thinly-veiled representations of Tyler and Ford themselves) is a vagabond of one sort or another - living hand-to-mouth in the cold-water apartments of Greenwich Village, and making their own luck on the city’s sidewalks. Arriving in Paris, Ford had already made contact with a number of American writers living and working there whom he had published in his little magazine *Blues* (1929-30) - opening doors into the salons frequented by Tchelitchew. Ford quickly displaced Tchelitchew’s previous lover Allen Tanner and the two became inseparable.

The attitude of Edward James and his circle towards Ford in 1933 was one of a singular animosity that centred on the book he had travelled to Europe to publish. During the 1930s Tchelitchew was a highly visible and high profile homosexual, yet this did not significantly jeopardize his place within a socially prestigious bohemian enclave. By looking at where Ford crossed the line we might be able to establish some boundaries of acceptability within the loose codes of decorum at work in this time. Popular biographies of Ford, Sitwell, James and Tchelitchew tell various versions of an anecdote surrounding the fate of a copy of *The Young and Evil* in the hands of James and Sitwell. James - speaking to George Melly in the late 1970s - is, as ever, the most garrulous in the telling:
Charles Henry brought out a ridiculous book called *The Young and Evil*, co-written with a man whose name I forget, and it irritated me because it was so silly and because I was still so disapproving of homosexuals, particularly feminine ones. James remembered Sitwell acquiring a number of copies in Paris, before being forced by Osbert Sitwell to leave them behind for fear of arrest on the boat back to London (an account contradicted by Sitwell’s correspondence with Tanner). James also suggests that Sitwell came to his country house, West Dean, near Chichester in West Sussex, to read the copy Ford had given to him. He recounts:

I found the book in the grate; in my irritation I had torn it into many more than five pieces; in particular the last few pages were in shreds. ‘The last pages were particularly obscene,’ I said, ‘I will put them together for you.’ … Edith read the bit about one young man biting off the other’s penis. She didn’t understand a word of it.

The passage in question names no bodily part - only that there is a bite followed by a scream. In other versions of James’ story the book is set aflame fanned by Edith Sitwell’s skirts. Sitwell had not only read the novel but perfectly understood its references to the homosexual demi-monde of Greenwich Village and Harlem it describes. In August 1933, more than a year before the incident James describes, she wrote to Allen Tanner:

I know that creature must be most dangerous. In the first place, judging from that foul and unspeakable book, he must know the most appalling underworld. That book … is like a dead fish stinking in hell! You send him to England if he’s tiresome, Allen dear, with that book, and I’ll see to it that he gets from three to six months board and lodging free, from the moment he lands!

While Sitwell turned a blind eye to the homosexual relationship of Tanner and Tchelitchew, and similar queer couplings within her social circle, which at the time included Lord Berners, Cecil Beaton and her brother Osbert, she could not ignore the flaunting of sexual taboo in Ford’s fiction. In this epistle she clearly sees Ford as a danger to the reputation she has carefully built for Tchelitchew in the wilder country houses of England.

In the summer of 1934 James invited Tchelitchew to stay at his country house West Dean. Tchelitchew brought Ford with him, making the stay a highly uncomfortable one. James asked Ford to leave the house, writing,

I do not think that you yourself have fully realized the important role the nature of your book, *The Young and Evil* played in my intimating that I wished you to leave West Dean. Fortunately or unfortunately I had not read the book before that week. I had indeed gathered from Tchelitchew that it was an erotic book in the manner in which D.H. Lawrence might have written erotically; but I had not realized that it would be unwholesome and depraved. I am sure that it is Tchelitchew’s ignorance of English which has caused him not fully to have appreciated the unwholesome nature of your and Mr Tyler’s erotic expression.

The visit ended when Cecil Beaton took Tchelitchew and Ford with him to Spain. James surely objected to a man who had flagrantly written about the criminal underworld in which many lesbians and gay men socialized in the 1920s and 30s. As George Chauncey has examined, the city of New York...
York (where for the most part *The Young and Evil* is set) was, during the interwar years, a space where sexual identity was constantly being renegotiated within a network of clubs, bars, and balls at which both gay men and lesbians danced and socialized. Of course a parallel world existed in cities across Europe too, in London, Paris, Rome, and beyond. These spaces were not entirely secret either - yet when represented, in for example the photographs of Brassai, they were associated with a sense of elegant slumming, offering a temporary immersion into the abject rather than being presented from within, from a sympathetic autobiographical point of view. Through *The Young and Evil*, Ford became quickly identified with what Leo Bersani and Johnathan Dollimore have called the homosexual outlaw.

Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photograph of the poet emerging zipping his flies from the screen of the pissoir, a leering tongue from an advertisement stretching out towards his crotch, is a clear allusion to cruising and the homosexual as street hustler. This image was perhaps posed as publicity for the novel; it inserts Ford’s public persona as a man of the street even as he was developing his career firmly within the salons of Gertrude Stein and her circle.

In 1934 Edward James was emerging from a very public divorce in which his wife, Tilly Losch, accused him of infidelity with other men. All of James’ biographers are in agreement that he was to some degree bisexual, however throughout his life he was to deny this very vocally on a number of occasions. James’ attitude is hardly surprising given that, during his divorce, proof of Losch’s claims against him would have resulted in imprisonment due to the criminal status of homosexuality in the period. Nonetheless, in the 1930s he moved publically in a circle that included several prominent homosexual men. These friendships must surely have been somewhat tested by the newspaper reports of the divorce (which, it should be said, never mentioned Losch’s accusations, and presented a profoundly sexist picture of her as adulterous gold digger), yet his friendships with Lord Berners, Cecil Beaton and Pavel Tchelitchew seem to have remained constant throughout this period. This is doubtless because the colourful lives of those men were conducted largely outside of the street culture which Ford explores in his novel and instead in the drawing rooms and salons of the crumbling stately homes of England. Social historian Matt Cook has observed:

> Beyond the universities, wealthier men had access to homes in London and the country which facilitated a private social circuit, largely insulated from the law … Their bohemian and artistic occupations in addition allow[ed] for a degree of openness that was unimaginable in most middle and upper-middle class professions.

Perhaps the most intriguing document of such a world can be found in the novel penned and privately published - in a miniscule run - by James’ eccentric pal Lord Berners. Berners’ book saw the figures of his small social coterie of the 1930s - Cecil Beaton, Peter Watson, Oliver Messel, and Robert Heber Percy - depicted in shallow drag as school girls at a boarding school. Berners wrote under the nom de clef Adela Quebec, a parody of the girls’ school novelist Angela Brasil. In the summer following the publication and subsequent scandal of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) the novel could only be entitled *The Girls of Radcliff Hall*. Sheltered from the real world these girls can go on a journey to find themselves through their pashes on other girls - building their own moral codes and attitudes under the bedsheets at the midnight feast.
It is difficult to imagine James appearing in the pages of Berners’ racy parody, yet his own home would quickly become notorious for its eccentricity - not least for its association with guests such as Ford and Tchelitchew. Although Ford and Tchelitchew’s trip to West Dean in 1934 might have been uncomfortable for the American poet, it was a productive visit for the Russian painter. Both Parker Tyler and Lincoln Kirstein in their monographs on the artist suggest that the time spent there was one of a feeling of return for both artist and patron. Both writers read Tchelitchew’s stay at West Dean as a return to a precious, privileged childhood that he had lost as an adolescent when his ancestral home was taken from his family by the revolution in Russia.34 Tyler in particular suggests that the trees of the arboretum and elsewhere on the estate reminded Tchelitchew of the dark woods of Kolpin Bor behind his ancestral home of Dubrovka. The moment of Tchelitchew’s visit was also a time of return for James, to his own ancestral seat which he had barely lived in since his full inheritance of the estate in 1932. The burden of taking on such a vast estate and the maintenance of buildings, land, and staff would emerge as frequent themes in James’ poetry and prose of the next few years before, like Tchelitchew, he would leave Europe for good for the Americas in 1939.35

The closest synergy between the work of James and Tchelitchew can be found in the 1937 novel The Gardener Who Saw God and the painting Hide and Seek. Tchelitchew provided a pen and ink drawing for the cover for the first edition of The Gardener, which shows a youth with rolled up sleeves gazing upwards into an amorphous cloud. James commented later, ‘The drawing by Tchelitchew is beautiful, but not at all like the character of the gardener whom it portrays. He was an educated head gardener. This is a peasant; a very Slav peasant at that.’36 Thankfully their shared interest in the garden would prove more extensive and complex than this initial collaboration. Tchelitchew’s best-known painting, Cache-Cache or Hide and Seek was painted between 1940 and 1942 in North America. It was based on a series of ink drawings and a preparatory painting that the artist began at West Dean in 1934 and seems to have continued on a return visit the following year, when he was commissioned to prepare stained glass designs for the estate church.37 The sketches were made in the grounds of the house and show a large pollarded tree taking the unmistakable form of a hand. In some of the sketches children play amongst the hand-tree’s boughs. Some of these sketches, including a large preparatory work in oil, would later enter James’ collection.

The finished work was exhibited eight years later; it had been on the easel for two years. The canvas involves not only a complex set of double images but occasionally triple and even quadruple images-within-images, in a seemingly endless mise-en-abyme. The tree is a hand reaching up and a foot pressing down. Tchelitchew drew attention to the face of a Viking warrior, with the nose formed by the central figure who hugs the tree-trunk, her arms forming a brow. Between the branches, and at the edges of the trunk, translucent child heads are constructed, in the style of Archimboldo, from flowers, flames, and the bodies of other children. Tchelitchew was concerned that as much attention was given to the ‘empty’ parts of the composition as to the ‘solid’ areas.38 The effect is rather like that of the Rubin Vase diagram, where a white vase can be seen on a black background or two profiles facing one another; the mind cannot perceive both images at once and flickers between the two. This shifting of visual attention gives the effect of movement and growth within the composition. Such perceptual disorientation is further complicated by use of multiple vanishing points in the work’s
perspective. Tchelitchew had previously experimented with three-point perspective in sketches and paintings showing a number of figures (such as Bathers, [1936], or the portraits of Lincoln Kirstein [1937] and George Platt-Lynes [1937-8]), here there are multiple vantages within a unified composition. Like the confusion of figure and ground the numerous perspectives have the effect of an uneasy lurching motion within the pictorial field.

Each of the heads within the branches represent the passing of the seasons - time marked at the far left in the head of spring where a dandelion clock sits inside the cheek, moving to the barren branches of winter, the full corn fields of spring, into the burning leaves of autumn. The vast scale of the painting makes it difficult to take in all at once, while the detail beckons the viewer to see the work from close to. These factors conspire to make the viewing of the work an act with its own gradual and motile part-by-part temporality. Within each of the heads there are further figures, again children: fighting, playing, sleeping.

It is within the tree trunk itself that the representation of reproduction and sexuality becomes central: at its roots labial folds are emerging from underfoot and a baby is born from amongst its cavities - yet above ground, probing the skirts of the central female figure is an engorged penis. Fantasies of parthogenic reproduction and the alchemical image of the androgene are conjured by this peculiar organic mass. It is tempting to imagine that Tchelitchew's interest in the trees of West Dean led him to investigate the sexuality of the variety of trees on the estate's arboretum, which form a wildly polymorphous range of self procreating species. Most trees are dual sexed as allegorised in Hide and Seek, their pollen moving on the wind to develop the seeds that drop from the branches - just as embryonic children droop from the bower of the arbour in the painting. Nature in Hide and Seek is radically queered in this image; as the vision of the viewer is questioned by the constantly unravelling scenes depicted in the branches, so too is the sense of bounded set asunder by these sexual ambiguities. This concentration on botanical metaphor - a nature which in itself is ' perverse' and which asks us to question what we take as natural within the human - has firm roots in the yellow literature of the fin-de-siecle.

A similar harking back to discourses of decadent botanics is also taken up in the novel James wrote as Tchelitchew was at work on Hide and Seek.

The Gardener Who Saw God tells the tale of a young man called Joseph Smith, who is employed by the owner of a large country house to be its head gardener. The book is split in its narrative between telling the tale of the young gardener's first attempt to claim a prize at the Chelsea Flower Show and the story of his upbringing. Interspersed are a number of vignettes depicting the leisure time of the high society which frames the everyday working lives of Joseph and his brothers. The novel culminates with a spectacular vision of 'God' that Joseph sees in the gardens of the house. The novel passes through a number of distinct styles. The chapters of the book devoted to describing Joseph's long years looking after his invalid mother; the way in which his brothers trick him out of his inheritance; and the tragic love affairs of his youth (culminating in the death of his fiancé) are told in a broadly realist style. In those sections James emphasizes the everyday settings and vocabulary of the protagonists, careful to pay attention to the aspects that mark out Joseph as a member of the working classes. Here James was no doubt influenced by the turn to the left within British literary culture during the 1930s. The majority of the novel is however painted in fantastical strokes: Joseph's trip to
Wigmore Hall to hear Beethoven’s Eroica symphony is written as a synesthesic reverie, a visionary tone also reserved for the apparition of God at the climax of the narrative. Elsewhere James seems to be referencing the dandyish literature of the 1890s and their revival in the works of Ronald Firbank.

Firbank’s novels of the 1920s had considerable significance for many of those within James’ broad social circle. Early in the second chapter of The Gardener James introduces a character who is entirely superfluous to the narrative of the book as a whole; a woman named Lady Marionette, for whom Joseph’s brother Philip works. She is described in some detail:

Lady Marionette’s hair was still yellow, except sometimes at the roots. She wore it neatly waved close to the head like a marquise and her ears were never without two baroque pearls whose creamy whiteness looked sometimes a trifle sickly against the yellow hair at her temples, and on the tiny cups and coruscations of whose surfaces both the rouge at her cheekbones and the gilded light off her curls set their representative reflections sliding in and out of little irregularities in the nacre.

While Marionette is given none of the kind of detailed characterization afforded to most of the other secondary characters, the reader is constantly afforded vivid descriptions of her appearance. The narrative in those parts of the novel in which Marionette appears is driven - for the most part - by extensive passages of reported speech. Both exterior description - with an emphasis on the artificial aspects of costume and hairstyling - and whole paragraphs of prattling dialogue are the hallmarks of Firbank’s mature fiction. At the time James was writing, Cyril Connolly - an important figure in the circle of Cecil Beaton - was preparing his own assessment of Firbank, published in the collection Enemies of Promise in 1938. Connolly begins by outlining the space of Firbank’s career as that of a dandy novelist. He makes very clear the political stakes in such a pose: ‘Dandyism is capitalist, for the Dandy surrounds himself with beautiful things and decorative people and remains deaf to the call of social justice.’ Such a position is of course very far from that of the surrealist group in Paris - yet James’ strangely bifurcated novel shows the way in which, for an Anglophone audience, surrealism could begin to look rather dandy.

Connolly’s short text makes very clear that in his view Firbank’s dandy role is quite directly linked to his sexuality: ‘For the “queen” or homosexual capon, being usually a parasite on society, a person with an inherited income and no occupation, can criticize society only in jest.” In 1964 Susan Sontag, following many of the points made in Connolly’s ‘Anatomy of Dandyism,’ named the novels of Ronald Firbank as perhaps the apotheosis of literary camp. Esther Newton, in an important early assessment of ‘camp,’ suggests: ‘Camp usually depends on the perception or creation of incongruous juxtapositions. Either way the homosexual “creates” the camp by pointing out the incongruity or creating it.” It is easy to see how this description could be easily migrated to address one of surrealism’s most potent totem images; Lautréamont’s juxtaposition of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table from Les Chants de Maldoror. Whilst that image in its original context is a symbol of queer desire, it is very difficult to read it as in any way campy (the horror of much of the rest of Lautréamont’s novel puts pay to that), however James easily transforms the image into camp. The opening of chapter four of the Gardener Who Saw God takes place in the gardens of Joseph’s previous employer, a friend of Sir Tatton who James describes as ‘a surrealist milord,’ who was ‘Maecenas and protector of all the surrealists in England (of whom there were only three).’
long dialogue takes place between a fading ‘bright young thing,’ Diana Haddon, and the surrealist poet, Darius de la Tourmoite, in front of Joseph in the early hours of the morning. James writes: ‘He seemed to play a Ronald Firbank character to her Noel Coward.’ The two are sat on granite seats shaped as an ‘unrolled but unopened umbrella’ and a sewing machine, which were placed on a terrace ‘made of concrete lightly covered with turf’ to suggest an operating table. By this shift from literary metaphor to garden folly the power of ‘incongruous juxtaposition’ loses any power of shock, becoming politically neutralized and a feature of the ruling establishment.

Surrealism’s introduction to the British public (as opposed to the small British literary world) is generally understood as taking place in 1936 as the newly formed British surrealist group organized the First International Surrealist Exhibition in London. The exhibition garnered a remarkable amount of press attention and also resulted in a volume of texts that set about explaining the movement to a curious public. As with Julian Levy’s almost contemporaneous book published in the United States, Herbert Read’s edited volume Surrealism did much to transmit surrealist artworks and texts to an Anglophone audience, however at a significant remove from the way in which the movement was understood on the continent. Read’s text, and others in the volume, made a case for Britain as the movement’s natural home, citing the writings of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear as vernacular precursors. Surrealism becomes in this text a version of English eccentricity - itself a newly privileged category in the wake of Edith Sitwell’s book The English Eccentrics (1933) (with a cover design by Tchelitchew), which no doubt influenced James’ prose.

Although Sitwell does not concentrate exclusively on eccentricity within the English upper-classes, it is this class strata with which the term is generally associated. No doubt Sitwell’s readers saw the book as, to at least some degree, reflecting its author - who at one point had been photographed by Beaton as a medieval effigy, and whose figure was often encrusted with such wildly oversized jewels as to bedazzle those who looked upon her. Such a view of the aristocracy, as an essentially senile institution to be looked to as a figure of fun, was of course at odds with the traditional view that they were to provide a model in manners and morals for society as a whole. This traditional attitude - a complete fiction but one still clung to by many at the time (one need only look to the palpable shock caused by the abdication in 1936) - was taken to extremes by the social Darwinism which was taking a sinister turn within certain sections of high society (the highest profile example being the activities of Oswald Mosley). Surrealism, then, linked to eccentricity may have been seen at the time as a form of degeneracy, a category in the history of English literature that was firmly associated (not least through the continued popularity of Nordau’s Degeneration (1892, trans. to English 1895)) with the figure of Oscar Wilde and in turn ‘perverse’ sexualities.

This is an association which is made fairly overtly - although cautiously - in James’ novel. Sat on their granite garden seats Darius de la Tourmoite attempts to explain surrealism to Diana Haddon - his characterization would no doubt have appalled André Breton:

We Surrealists are the caviare (sic) in this age of decadence - and by decadence I do not mean degeneration. For a decadence is the rich period which comes after the prime, and corresponds with the archaic age before the noon … A decadent age can contain all the digested fruit and fantasy of the earlier ages married to the knowledge of the prime, … We the Surrealists, en fin de compte, can give this present decadence its new lease of life. Like
the sturgeons we swim at the mouths of the rivers between the fresh sweet waters of art and the cold salt tide of science, the vast material ocean. And like those fish we swim against the current ... we swim up against the general tide of opinion.

Although guarding against accusations of degeneration in this speech it is difficult not to bring the word together with the favoured term ‘decadence’. The poet de la Tourmoite is depicted as a French Jew, something that James’ descriptive passages pick out in the vocabulary of the casual anti-Semitism of the day. At the time of the book’s publication a ‘Jewish’ aesthetic was being allied in Europe with the degeneracy of artistic practice.

Hanging over the parts of the narrative set at Wooton Vanbrugh is the legacy of the old lord of the manor Sir Arthur Tatton. Although Sir John, the new head of the house, appears only briefly in the narrative, Sir Arthur is a constant presence. Sir Arthur is clearly signalled as a degenerate figure of the late nineteenth century, to be associated with the dandyish world of Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley and perhaps, later, Firbank. Although James presents a heterosexual love affair for Sir Arthur in chapter nine, it is clear that this affair is one that is easily turned aside in favour of the pursuit of fine art treasures. The flowers grown in the hot houses of Wooton Vanbrugh are rare orchids - which could only be cross-fertilised artificially. I would like to suggest that the various references to decadence made throughout the novel in reference to Sir Arthur, such as the growing of prize orchids, and the mysterious air that surrounds him, are meant to signify an at least questionable sexuality for the lord, however James is careful to distance him from the effeminacy of his peers:

Sir Tatton was perhaps the only contributor to the Yellow Book who had been a big game sportsman and habitually rode to hounds. I imagine that old Tatton Grantly would have been more happy in the company of a Benvenuto Cellini or a Ben Johnson than he found himself in the scarcely less brilliant company of Mr Beardsley, Mr Wilde, Monsieur de Maupassant and their votaries.

This can be read as an attempt to dissociate what were considered ‘perverse’ sexualities in the period from effeminacy - a clear aim of many individuals in the United Kingdom in those years, as Matt Houlbrook has investigated.

However Tatton is clearly portrayed as queer in a broad sense. His trip to Toledo in search of forgotten artistic treasures, in particular the paintings of El Greco, is described in some detail. Tatton goes to the Episcopal stores to search for works to bring back to England; he discovers little of merit, but returns with a painted wooden statue. Inside the statue, we learn later, are the musings of the sixteenth-century botanical scientist Lorca de la Vega who was seeking to create a ‘plant which was half vegetable and the other half animal - positively a sentient animal with roots and leaves.’ The idea of building another human through the avoidance of heterosexual procreation is of course a queer fantasy - one that quickly becomes entangled in the mind of the gardener with the musings on surrealism made by the poet Darius de la Tourmoite. In the description of Tatton’s attempts to follow Vega’s plans, James draws attention to impossible processes of artificial fertilization, (he was familiar with the real propagation of orchids), ‘mimosa pudica crossed with the sperm of the mandrake and the sporn seed of the sea anemones.’ This is an attempt to create an altogether natural monster - on a par with that created by Tchelitchew in *Hide and Seek*. 
This hybrid man-plant is very close to the vision of ‘God’ that forms the climax of the novel. Joseph sees the empyrean above Wooton Vanbrugh; wheels of circling flowers and animals permeate the whole night sky:

The primal beast alone filled the entire empyrean, one figure, one essential animal ... winged, four legged, horned, hoofed, hirsute and huge prototype, scaly, mammoth, Gryphon-like and reptilious, one-pattern brute ... It was an hermaphrodite animal weighing over the entire cosmos - it was both male and female in the superb and terrible moment of procreation.62

Here a perverted nature is fully naturalized into the image of the maker. As in Hide and Seek nature is bi-gendered and bisexual as a single complete figure copulates with itself. The narrative of The Gardener is explicitly gothic, set as it is in a large, abandoned house with hidden secrets. Judith Halberstam has written at length about the place of the monster in late nineteenth-century gothic fiction.63 She suggests that the monster is able to stand for a multiplicity of society’s fears, patched together from abject parts. It is clear that while Tchelitchew and James both draw on the idea of the monster as a gathering point for different subjectivities, neither sees the resultant beast as necessarily frightening. These grotesque, massive spiritual beings are there to be celebrated, worshipped even, marking the sublime point at which the most beautiful and the most abominable collide.

Edward James, like Tchelitchew, often played with the idea of the multiplicity of identity within the works he was involved in. Dawn Ades has suggested that there is a very clear identification in The Gardener between the writer and both of the main characters - Arthur Tatton the inheritor of Wooton Vanbrugh and the gardener Joseph Smith.64 Such a bifurcation of identity is key to several of the works James supported in the 1930s - it is central to the storyline he fed to Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weil for the ballet Anna Anna or The Seven Deadly Sins (1933) and is of course crucial to the double images of René Magritte’s La Reproduction interdite (1937) and Salvador Dalí’s Metamorphosis of Narcissus (1937) and Swans Reflecting Elephants (1937) in James’ collection. In Tchelitchew’s major painting of 1939, Phenomena, James appears as a monster, a two-headed figure lounging by a small lake in which a naked Charles Henri Ford lies bathing. In these double images there is no hidden image but rather two images, two identities clearly present at the same time.

Although the surrealist transgressions in the street might have been uncomfortable for James, it is important to recognize that his work does not merely represent a retreat to the salon; indeed the distinction between the street and the salon may not hold so well outside of France in the 1930s. The garden for both Tchelitchew and James was a space in which discourses around the natural and the artificial could come to a head, an encounter in which sexuality is of central importance. Elsewhere in the surrealist milieu, Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore’s photographs that experimented with masquerade, or Man Ray’s photographs of the drag performer Barbette explored the artificial aspects of gender performance and tested conventional sexuality, yet these two producers were showing ways in which nature might already confound that which is taken for natural.65

See the bibliography compiled in note 1 of Elena Filipovic, ‘Surrealism in 1938: The Exhibition at War,’ in Surrealism, Politics and Culture, eds. Raymond Spiteri and Donald Lacoss, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2003, 179.

Suleiman, ‘Between the Street and the Salon,’ 43.


Suleiman, ‘Between the Street and the Salon,’ 46.


There are many debates surrounding the significance Dali’s work. Recent scholarship has emphasized the way in which his popularism might be read subversively, as opposed to André Breton’s denunciation of the artist as ‘Avida Dollars.’ See for example, Jaap Guildermond (ed.), It’s all Dalí: Film, Fashion, Photography, Design, Advertising, Painting, Museum Boijmans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 2005, and Robert Lubar, ‘Salvador Dalí in America: The Rise and Fall of an Arch-Surrealist,’ in Surrealism USA, ed. Isabelle Dervaux, National Academy Museum, New York, 2005, 20-29.

See Lowe, Edward James, 111-121.


Lincoln Kirstein, ‘The Position of Pavel Tchelitchew,’ View Vol. 2 No. 2 (May 1942), unpaginated, discusses the place of Tchelitchew’s work between surrealism and neo-romanticism.

The special issue of View dedicated to Tchelitchew was cannily shared with the surrealist Yves Tanguy - firmly aligning the Russian painter with the movement. Dickran Tashjian, A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995 discusses the way in which View's editor Charles Henri Ford attempted to position Tchelitchew amongst the surrealists, 172-3.

Edward James, La Belle a bois dormant and Other Poems, Duckworth, London, 1933. These sites were significant destinations for the interested art tourist. The early Renaissance paintings at Orvieto and the El Greco’s at Toledo were not spectacles of the Grand Tour but newly fashionable sites and as such mark out the writer’s elite education.

Many painters associated with surrealism at this time worked within varieties of abstraction - Joan Miró, Yves Tanguy, and Roberto Matta each provided perspectives far from the tradition of the easel painting, often making use of novel techniques. Salvador Dali may have employed the techniques of the old masters (going so far as to write his own technical manual) yet he was able to justify this through his appeal to the paranoic critical method. Max Ernst - whose work is perhaps closest to Tchelitchew’s during the early 1940s - was continually developing new automatist techniques within...
his figurative practice; decalcomania, frottage, dripped paint - each can be seen in the manifesto-like painting *Surrealism and Painting* (1942).


20 James, *Swans Reflecting Elephants*, 171.


23 Quoted in Glendinning, *Edith Sitwell*, 180-181. She had read the novel by this time as she wrote to Ford from Renishaw that month thanking him for sending it and suggesting less lascivious subject matter. This letter dated 23rd August 1933 is amongst Ford’s papers at the Harry Ransom Centre, Austin, Texas. I am grateful to Joanna Pawlik for drawing my attention to it.


30 *The Daily Mirror* followed the trial particularly closely, running the initial story on the front page on Monday 30 October, 1933. Losch’s defense was covered on Thursday 28 June, 1934, 9, where her accusations are described merely as ‘cruelty’.


34 Kirstein, *Tchelitchew*, 62; Tyler, *Divine Comedy*, 159-161.


37 The contract for these designs is mentioned in a letter from Tchelitchew to Edith Sitwell contained in the Edith Sitwell papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, dated 6 June 1935.

38 See letter from Tchelitchew to Edith Sitwell dated 27 August 1941, the Edith Sitwell papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.


42 Connolly, ‘Anatomy of a Dandy,’ 45.

43 The performance of dandyism was of course crucial to surrealism in Paris, as has been much discussed in the literature on the movement, yet the actual socio-economic occupation of the dandy role as conceived by Connolly was anathema to the revolutionary ambitions of the movement. The surrealist performance of the dandy is conducted in the wake of Charles Baudelaire’s discussion of the figure in ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ which suggests that such figures will die away in France but continue to thrive in England, Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ (1863) in *The Painter of Modern Life and other Essays*, Phaidon, London, 1964, 1-41, esp. 26-31. The pose of the dandy was used particularly productively in the work of Claude Cahun and Marcel Duchamp, see Amelia Jones, ‘Clothes Make the Man’: The Male Artist as a Performative Function,’ *Oxford Art Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1995), 18-32; Natalya Lusty, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2007, 102-9; Moira Roth, ‘Marcel Duchamp in America: A Self Readymade,’ *Arts* Vol. 51, No. 9 (May 1977), 92-96.

44 Connolly, ‘Anatomy of a Dandy,’ 46.


49 Ibid., 126.

50 Ibid., 121.


52 Herbert Read (ed.), *Surrealism*, Faber and Faber, London, 1936.


56 Ibid., 124.

57 Ibid., 16.


60 James, *The Gardener*, 257.

61 Ibid., 260.

62 Ibid., 354-5.


64 Dawn Ades, 'Edward James and Surrealism,' 85.


James Boaden is a lecturer in the department of History of Art at the University of York. His research focuses on American art from the mid-twentieth century, particularly the crossover between experimental film culture and the art world during that period. In 2008-2009 James was the research associate on the project AHRC funded project 'Queer Surrealism' within the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies at the University of Manchester, and subsequently an external advisor on the project organising and contributing to a number of events.
‘My work has nothing to do with surrealism’: Paul Bowles, View and the Surreal Short Story

Sam V. H. Reese

The American author and composer Paul Bowles had a close relationship with many of the leading figures within the surrealist movement, both in Paris and in exile in New York, and was an important contributor to Charles Henri Ford’s magazine View (1940-47). Surrealist models of composition, and of cultural appropriation of the non-western, informed the composition of his later fiction, most prominently the seminal 1950 anthology of short stories The Delicate Prey (1950). Bowles’ work suggests some of the ways in which surrealism was adapted by American writers and reapplied to an American context. The reaction against The Delicate Prey, moreover, reveals some of the hostilities towards surrealism on behalf of literary and cultural critics. Although Clement Greenberg’s dismissal of surrealism is well known, there has been little consideration of how the broader intellectual climate of postwar America influenced the movement’s reception; the critiques levelled at Bowles’ work gesture towards some of the underlying cultural biases against surrealism.

Polyglot composer, photographer and author, Paul Bowles made an indelible mark on the artistic world of mid-twentieth century America. The combination of his peculiar style - strikingly precise, vividly violent - and the magazines with which he initially found literary success, saw him still classified ‘as late as the 70s’ as one of a select group of ‘American Surrealists.’ But while the popular association of Bowles’ prose with surrealism may have endured, Bowles himself went on to renounce any intellectual relationship, proclaiming that his fiction had ‘nothing to do with Surrealism.’ This article will explore Bowles’ encounter with surrealism, paying particular attention to his major artistic output, his short fiction. Tracing his early career in American surrealist publications, it will examine Bowles’ interpretation of Bretonian surrealism, exploring both the aesthetic and psychological influences that the movement had on his prose. By analysing the reception of his definitive collection, The Delicate Prey (1950), by American critics, it will also suggest some of the difficulties associated with the position of surrealism in America in the middle of the twentieth century. Bowles was generally seen as presenting a vision that was removed from the contingencies of real life, and violent in a way that served no social purpose; by considering his prose within the framework of surrealism, we can recuperate these disjunctive elements as part of an aesthetic that followed Breton in challenging what they both understood as the deformed rationality of the western mind.

It is not as if surrealism were an alien imposition on Bowles’ artistic career. From a young age, Bowles had consciously composed works within a specifically surrealist mode of production and his earliest literary efforts were oriented along specifically surrealist lines. In the spring of 1928, before Bowles was 18, his poem ‘Spire Song’ was published in Eugene Jolas’ Parisian magazine transition. He had tailored this ‘long Surrealist effort’ deliberately towards the aesthetic priorities of the magazine and his success inspired two trips to Paris, where he would meet Gertrude Stein and later be propelled towards Tangiers, his future home in exile. While the next decade was dedicated to Bowles’ musical career as a composer, mentored by Aaron Copland, when he returned to literature in the 1940s, his work appeared in the even more explicitly surrealist publication, Charles Henri Ford’s
New York-based magazine View (1940-47). With an article entitled ‘The Jazz Ear,’ Bowles made his entry into ‘one of the most important avant-garde magazines of the 40s.’ He would later recall how ‘ideologically View’s policy adhered fairly strictly to the tenets of The Surrealist Manifesto, a stance that suited his perspective, and he quickly found a place as one of two ‘master linguists who would become View’s chief translators.’ Bowles also maintained important personal connections with two of the foremost surrealist artists - Max Ernst and Salvador Dali. A long-time admirer of Ernst, Bowles composed the score for a film on Ernst’s collage-novel, Une Semaine de Bonte, which Ernst reused for his segment of Hans Richter’s 1948 film Dreams that Money Can Buy; in return, Ernst produced the cover artwork for a recording of Bowles’ music issued by Peggy Guggenheim’s ‘Art of this Century’ imprint. Bowles also collaborated with Dali on the ballet Colloque Sentimentale, based on poems of Paul Verlaine, and advised him on his illustrations for a 1934 edition of Lautréamont’s Les Chants de Maldoror. Bowles had thus planted himself at the heart of wartime surrealism, amongst both exile and local disciples, and his finely honed ear for the nuances of surrealism’s fundamental aesthetics allowed him to flourish.

Even after he stopped working on material for an explicitly surrealist forum, moreover, Bowles’ method of composition continued to rely upon the method of automatic writing, which had ‘liberated his style,’ and continued to govern his artistic output. Bowles characterised his life as one that was largely ‘unthought,’ suggesting that he had naturally ‘never been a thinking person,’ and that his life went by ‘without [his] conscious knowledge.’ The moment, during his teens, of discovering Breton’s theories on automatic writing proved a pivotal one, for automatism allowed him to communicate through writing in a way that accounted for his own experience of the world: he could ‘write without being conscious of what [he] was doing,’ just as he lived in an ‘unthought’ way. He relished the freedom to be able to ‘make [his prose] grammatically correct and even to have a certain style without the slightest idea of what [he] was writing,’ to the point where he did not even feel personal responsibility for what he had written. He protested that ‘I don’t feel that I wrote these books. I feel as though they had been written by my arm, by my brain, my organism, but that they’re not necessarily mine.’ Given that a surrealist methodology underpinned his artistic praxis, it is not surprising that this is the one area in which Bowles’ critics have been prepared to concede a continued influence. Gena Dagel Caponi discusses this most fully, noting that Bowles ‘practiced unconscious writing daily.’ Like discussions elsewhere, however, Caponi’s interest in the topic is limited: surrealism is worth considering as a ‘technique’ for literary production and no further. However, Bowles’ evocation of his experience of the world, much like his childhood writing, reveals the extent to which the aesthetics of surrealism resonated with him personally. It was not merely a movement that he became affiliated with, or a source of stylistic techniques, but a perspective on the world that accounted for his own disjunctive, disassociative experience of life, that followed the same unconscious, surreal logic proposed by Breton’s writing.

Bowles’ decision to change career, from composer to author, was instigated in part by the publication in View in 1943 of some of his childhood writings: a diary-narrative written from the age of nine, beginning at the end of 1919, the entries of which were framed as a surrealist text by the editors.
of View.\textsuperscript{14} Described by Ford in the volume’s contents page as ‘the chef d’œuvre of the primitive style,’ Bowles’ work was recuperated, a-historically, as a proto-surrealist ‘document.’\textsuperscript{15} Bluey’s four and a half months of daily entries concern the unfolding relationships of the heroine, Bluey, with the men Dolok Parasol and Henry Altman, and her transition to America (to the mythical city of ‘Wen Kroy,’ New York’s inverted image), and negotiation of its social customs and mores. In the editors’ eyes, its suitability for publication in the pages of View was unquestionable. Ford wrote that it was ‘far more persuasive than the writing of many adults.’\textsuperscript{16} From its focus on cataloguing seemingly trivial details, its emphasis on the monstrous and disturbing, to its use of the staccato form of diary entries to enhance the discordant juxtaposition of Bluey’s experiences with each another, it could readily be produced as evidence of the kind of unconscious connection-making that surrealism strove towards.

In many ways Bluey foreshadows Bowles’ later achievements in short fiction, offering a prototype for the unconscious-driven narratives, which juxtaposed the alien against the civilised, that became his greatest literary legacy. Its publication in View, however, positioned it as a kind of proto-surrealist work instead that invited comparisons to the First Manifesto, in which Bretons’ mock encyclopaedia entry declared surrealism to be ‘based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.’\textsuperscript{17} In this formulation, surrealism sought to cultivate ‘a new awareness’ of the world around the artist that would reveal a higher level of reality.\textsuperscript{18} This process was, as is well known, anchored in the generative powers of the unconscious. Bluey references the unconscious, in part through the characters’ peculiar habit of fainting every few days, initially with due cause - ‘Bluey was worse. Doctor says she has Pneumonia. She faints’; ‘Bluey has a blowout. Dolok dies. Bluey faints; but increasingly, for no reason at all - ‘Bluey gets a maid. Lina Minner. Bluey faints.’\textsuperscript{19} Moreover, the text develops a disturbing theme of madness and violence, also echoing the surrealists’ pursuit of extreme psychic states. From the incipient conflict between Bluey and Henry - ‘Bluey has a fight with Henry. Bluey yells’ and ‘Bluey hits Henry. Henry hits Bluey and gives her a black eye’ - the text shifts its focus to the unfortunate Dolok Parasol’s parents, who quickly succumb to sickness and insanity.\textsuperscript{20} After ‘Dolok Parasol’s mother dies of grief for loss of Dolok,’ and his sister ‘weeps and weeps,’ for two days straight before contracting influenza, Mr Parasol ‘gets influenza,’ ‘goes crazy,’ and ‘almost dies.’\textsuperscript{21} Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Bowles’ text is the way his characters seem to crave their madness. Localised again in the Parasol family, Dorok’s sister Bessie, already sick with influenza, ‘has Chrisis;’ her father, the following day, ‘wishes he would have chrisis.’\textsuperscript{22} Recalling the portmanteau words of the surrealists’ spiritual ancestor, Lewis Carroll, or their famous games of ‘Exquisite Corpses,’ Bowles blends ‘crisis’ with both ‘chrysalis,’ suggesting a kind of rebirth - following her chrisis, Bessie gets ‘better’ - and Christ, suggesting a messianic sacrifice. Mr Parasol gets his wish for ‘chrisis,’ and subsequently dies.\textsuperscript{23} Bowles’ naïve wordplay, reframed within the context of an issue of View organised around the theme of Narcissus, thus suggests the dual possibility of a madness that heals and destroys, just as surrealism promised both a death to rational thinking and a ‘rebirth.’
The claustrophobic sense of madness and dislocation in the text is emphasised by Bowles’ use of juxtaposition. The cornerstone of surrealist thought, the use of juxtaposition to form ‘previously neglected associations’ is the central process for generating meaning in surrealist writing. Focused around clipped and selective diary entries, the structure of *Bluey* is comprised of a series of seemingly unrelated events that are brought together in a disturbing union: ‘Dolok gets worse. Bluey gets a Pierce Arrow Automobile’; ‘Greatest storm in world’s history. Bluey knocks Henry down.’ Through their inclusion together in that day’s entry, the events take on a powerfully suggestive, although never explicit, relationship. The text’s obsession with inane measurements, reflected in Bluey’s compulsion to re-weigh herself, recording even the fractional increase from 95lbs to 95½lbs, or the cataloguing of temperature and snowfall, becomes part of this broader strategy that makes connections between the mundane and the mysterious. We feel compelled to infer a relationship between the storm and Bluey’s violence towards her lover, just as we build a connection when we read, on February 21: ‘It starts snowing again. 34 degrees. Bluey wants a child.’ *Bluey*, compressed, violent and disjunctive, thwarts expectations of a rational, sequential narrative, offering a surreal network of connections and a radically disoriented perspective. Insofar as it differed drastically from the conventions of western cultural production, it could be readily reappropriated as an example of ‘primitive’ writing by the editors of *View* and thus co-opted into a wider narrative that set the ‘primitive’ or ‘outsider’ in opposition to the ‘civilised.’

Even if the editorial gaze of *View* did occasionally venture further afield, ‘the Surrealists were never far out of the line of vision,’ a statement that rings particularly true when it comes to Bowles’ contributions. Dickran Tashjian has shown how, through increasingly high production values, the publication featured a wide range of visual material and a broad spread of interviews and criticism and ‘came to rival the French Surrealists’ *Minotaure* of the previous decade. By 1945, Bowles had established himself firmly enough amongst the magazine’s coterie to edit an issue, the suggestively titled ‘Tropical Americana,’ in which he had the opportunity to enunciate his own surreal ‘Point of View.’ Aside from book reviews, letters and the regular columns on jazz and art, the entire magazine was composed of Latin American ‘documents’ assembled by Bowles, ranging from extracts from Mayan prophecies, to ethnographic notes on an Amazonian tribe, to photographs Bowles himself had taken on his own extended trips to Mexico. This cultural appropriation also signalled a change in direction for Bowles’ own fictional output; all but two of the stories in *The Delicate Prey* (and all four of his novels) deploy the non-western in opposition to ‘civilization,’ in the process reifying and objectifying the non-western subject. In his editorial for *View*, Bowles draws on a *Time* magazine article on the Chavante Amazonian Indians, sketching out for the reader how the surrealist viewpoint mirrors the ‘natural’ outlook of the Indians and describing Chavantes as a ‘tragic, ludicrous, violent spectacle’ of a region that ‘here … welcomes, there … resists the spread of so-called civilisation.’ To an extent, Bowles even acknowledges that his editorial approach deliberately deploys the material in an objectifying and primitivising manner; he explains that his ‘aim is to present a poetically apt version of life as it is lived by the peoples of tropical America.’ This version of life, moreover, is one that Bowles explicitly sets out to equate with an avant-garde position. Suggesting that ‘the avant-garde is
not alone in its incomplete war against many features of modern civilization,’ Bowles argues that ‘the ponderous apathy and the potential antipathy of the vestigial primitive consciousness’ join it in the struggle against ‘civilization.’ The avant-garde thereby denies the autonomy and self-determination of the peoples whose texts and so called attributes he appropriates.31

Co-opting this ‘primitive’ material for such partisan aims is a problematic strategy on Bowles’ part, particularly when some of the material he uses to illustrate this ‘vestigial consciousness’ originated from contemporary newspaper reports and an extract written by a prominent Mexican politician.32 Removed from their original context and reframed within the contest between civilisation and ‘the primitive’ that Bowles’ editorial establishes, these pieces are made to speak in ways they were never intended. Bowles’ use of these documents reflects, moreover, a broader tendency amongst the surrealists, towards a reification of the non-western. There is now a considerable body of scholarship on the relationship between surrealism and non-western cultures, most prominently James Clifford’s seminal Predicament of Cultures and it is telling that Bowles classified the disparate array of translations, photographs and forgeries that he collected for View as ‘documents,’ for it is precisely in these terms that Clifford frames his argument about the ethnographic appropriations of surrealist artists and writers.33 Bowles’ own work fits into Clifford’s understanding of the term ‘Surrealism in an obviously expanded sense,’ which ‘circumscribe[s] an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions - that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious.’34 Within such a programme, the ‘primitive’ is deployed as evidence of an alternative to established patterns of western behaviour.

Certainly, Bowles’ representation of the Chavantes - and Latin America more generally - as exemplars of avant-garde behaviour, was motivated by his own feelings of hostility towards Western ‘civilization,’ which are manifested in the kind of documents he selected to publish in View. From a young age, he had felt a ‘compulsion’ to escape, in whatever way, from America, an impulse he attributed directly to the kind of society that existed there: ‘I had a fairly good idea of what life would be like for me in the States, and I didn’t want it.’35 One interviewer broached the issue with him by suggesting that ‘American technology has already contributed so much to making what you [Bowles] regard as an inevitably undesirable future,’ which Bowles affirmed; he certainly saw little positive in contemporary American society and considered it ‘a great shame, what has happened there,’ with the advance of ‘civilisation’ encroaching so far that he did not ‘think it will ever be put right.’36 Surrealism had such a profound impact on him, not only because it accounted for his ‘automatic’ experience of living, but because it provided a model, in which the ‘exotic’ subject could be deployed in opposition to western culture. Indeed, in his autobiography, Without Stopping, Bowles explicitly identifies the creation of these ‘documents’ for View as the starting point of his career in fiction: ‘[l]ittle by little the desire came to me to invent my own myths, adopting the point of view of the primitive mind,’ stating that, in order to ‘simulat[e]’ this state, he used ‘the old Surrealist method of abandoning conscious control and writing whatever words came from the pen.’37 So, Bowles constructed the stories of The Delicate Prey with motivations that drew explicitly on surrealism’s appropriation of the non-western,
and set out to create fiction as a personal reinterpretation of the ‘primitive’ material he had deployed in *View*.

Bowles, nonetheless, also distanced himself from surrealism later in life, despite his close involvement with the movement throughout the early stages of his career. His work had been published almost solely through surrealist publications, and both exploited techniques germane to surrealist production and shared the movement’s characteristic emphases on madness and psychic dislocation. However, Bowles’ career after his association with *View* is better known and more celebrated. His short stories, which Gore Vidal labelled ‘masterpieces,’ ‘amongst the best ever written by an American’ made the greatest impact but Bowles decreed they ‘had nothing to do with Surrealism.’ His rejection of any association with surrealism resembles other Americans’ appraisals of their involvement with the movement, not least the editors of *View*, Parker Tyler and Ford, who were never part of the surrealist movement in any official capacity and if they laid claim to any involvement with it, it was usually to critique or to revise its precepts and politics. They actively distanced themselves from the movement’s Marxist position and promoted a broader, and sometimes more commercial, interpretation of avant-gardism than the surrealists’ comparatively more doctrinaire approach. In its initial conception, *View* was to be, like Ford’s *Blues* (1929-30) before it, a magazine devoted to a broadly ‘poetic’ perspective - Ford ‘wanted to call the magazine “The Poetry Paper,” and set it up like a tabloid’ - yet it soon diversified and included a wide variety of visual and verbal material, not all of it resembling surrealism. Similarly, many of their more prominent American contributors such as Henry Miller, who contributed stories and articles to several issues of *View*, made similar claims to Bowles. Miller maintained that he ‘was writing surrealistically in America before [he] ever heard the word.’ Miller’s phrasing here is telling: while associating his style aesthetically with the surrealists, Miller also highlights a trend towards producing writing that resembled surrealism in America during the early twentieth century but that developed independently from it.

In the case of Bowles, the development of a style that overlapped with surrealism is clearly tied to his work as a translator. For the *Tropical Americana* issue of *View*, not only did Bowles provide translations from the Mayan holy texts the *Popol Vuh* (or, as his translation renders it, *Popol Buj*) and *Chilam Balam*, but he also translated the Spanish author Ramon J. Sender’s short story ‘The Buzzard.’ Bowles’ reading of contemporary Latin American fiction was broad, and the following year, in January 1946, *View* published Bowles’ translation of Jorge Luis Borges’ ‘The Circular Ruins,’ the first Borges story to be published in English translation. I would suggest that Bowles’ deployment of the ‘primitive’ in *The Delicate Prey* is complicated by the relationship between Bowles’ translations and his own fiction and that this relationship can be better understood through a comparison with Bowles’ work with music.

After receiving a Rockefeller foundation grant in 1959, Bowles ‘set out for some of Morocco’s more distant and secluded locations’ with two assistants, and over the year made four trips and traversed over 25,000 miles, as he attempted to chronicle as many forms of indigenous music as possible. As Foltz notes, however, the project ultimately came ‘to rather an abrupt end by decree of the Moroccan government which deemed indigenous folk music “degenerate” and forbade Bowles
from continuing the project. The hours of music that Bowles collected, often in desperate or dangerous conditions, have remained almost completely unreleased from Library of Congress archives, save for one single disk. Bowles himself was honest about the magnitude of the task he had undertaken, explaining:

My stint, in attempting to record the music of Morocco, was to capture in the space of the six months which the Rockefeller Foundation allotted me for the project, examples of every major musical genre to be found within the boundaries of the country ... By [December 1959] I already had more than two hundred and fifty selections ... as diversified a body of music as one could find in any land west of India.

He considered his task to be one of helping preserve something of a culture he deeply respected from the encroachment of western civilization, but not, as he notes from ‘the by-products of our civilization’ so much as from ‘the irrational longing on the part of members of their own educated minorities to cease being themselves and become westerners.’ For Bowles, then, the issue with western, or more specifically American culture, was the extent to which its monolithic totality could absorb other cultures; his role, in recording, translating and publishing such works was to help slow, or prevent the transformation of the world into an America wrought miniature. His attraction towards surrealism was predicated on a particular desire to challenge American culture.

This stands in contrast with Bowles attitude towards the use of ‘primitive’ material within his own musical compositions. One of the most conspicuous aspects of Bowles’ work as a composer was the extent to which he incorporated ‘folk’ motifs from Spain, North Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. Rather than attempting to create works within these distinct musical idioms, however, Bowles consciously appropriated aspects of their sound and incorporated them into a larger musical montage. Indeed, he argued that he ‘never used Latin folk tunes,’ but rather ‘invented melodies in the manner of Latin folk music.’ These referenced folk music, not as whole pieces, but rather through fragments, which were, in Bowles’ eyes, ‘of course ... deprived of meaning’ in and of themselves; as musical quotations, ‘they never had meaning in the first place.’ For the casual listener, or the one not attuned to the nuances of Bowles’ system of reference, his music could seem ‘witty’ in its appropriation of other musical sounds. But as his friend, music critic Peggy Glanville-Hicks explains, his use of aural references creates ‘a re-arrangement - a surrealism where fragments are stirred into a new relationship, but where each fragment is still glaringly what it was, recalling former juxtapositions.’ So Bowles’ own works were never meant to pass for ‘primitive’ works themselves, but incorporated fragments from them in what Bowles considered to be a deliberately abstracted way. In shaping his stories to resemble ‘primitive’ folk tales, Bowles was engaged in the same process as he was within his music; he was introducing an alternative perspective into his work, without claiming to actually represent that perspective.

Part of what distinguishes Bowles’ stories in The Delicate Prey, then, from his issue of View, or from earlier works like Bluey, is their structure; Bowles deliberately organized these stories around reiterative patterns and a circular structure. On the one hand, Bowles consistently professed to practicing automatic writing and considered the ‘sensation of dreaming’ one of the most important qualities in literature; he treasured his wife, Jane Bowles’, novel Two Serious Ladies (1943) because
of its circular pattern, ‘like the unfolding of a dream.’

But at the same time, he also insisted that his stories were carefully structured and that the meaning of his work was in fact a product of that structure, arguing that ‘there’s nothing in writing except words, patterns of words.’

Recalling Miller’s comments in his Open Letter, Bowles also conceded: ‘I don’t think one could follow the surrealist method absolutely, with no conscious control in the choice of material, and be likely to arrive at an organic form.’ Instead, Bowles focussed on structuring his texts to emphasise patterning, during their transcription from longhand to typescript. In this sense, Bowles might be said to construct an aesthetically form of surrealism, one impelled not so much by dream states per se, but rather a deliberate use of language to mimic somnambulistic patterning.

Within The Delicate Prey this aesthetic emerges from the circular nature of each story; Bowles’ emphasis on patterning in his fiction translates into a kind of story in which everything feels interconnected and inevitable. This reflects his increased interest in producing ‘folk tales,’ and contrasts sharply with Bowles’ earlier work, such as Bluey. ‘The Echo,’ for example, sees student Aileen travel to visit her mother in Columbia. Her feelings become increasingly stifled and oppressed, focused around her mother’s lesbian lover, whom she regards ‘with unmasked hatred.’

The conflict mounts as the story progresses, to the point where even ‘when the tension should have been over, somehow it was not.’ Even when Aileen bursts into the ‘violence’ that the pounding of a nearby waterfall has persistently suggested and attacks her mother’s lover ‘with vicious suddenness,’ the story does not seem resolved.

Instead, it closes with Aileen, heading back towards the airstrip, turning back ‘towards the house,’ and seeing the figures of her mother and her lover ‘standing side by side,’ unaffected by the ‘terrible storm’ of her presence.

Closing with the ‘story’ in no more conclusive a place than it began, the comparison of Aileen’s visit to a storm suggests that her visit has made only a temporary impression, that even her ferocious violence has engendered no change, either in her or her victim. But this lack of development, which contemporary critics had thought of as stagnation, is actually an essential part of how Bowles creates the patterned effect of his prose. ‘The Echo’ begins on a plane, about to descend into Columbia. At the forefront of the narration is a sense of unsettling violence, with ‘the vibration of the plane’ that shook ‘rapidly,’ and the sun shining ‘violently upon the wide silver wings,’ which Bowles contrasts with the soporific air that surrounds Aileen; ‘sleepy,’ she seems almost in a dream, and reads a letter from her mother ‘as if to decipher a meaning that did not lie in the sequence of the words.’ As the story closes, Bowles draws the narration back to these same elements. The violence is refigured in Aileen’s outburst, which has the effect on the outside world of ‘a terrible storm,’ while Aileen herself, in contrast, is ‘still in the midst of her deep dream.’

The journey of the cart is even described as a ‘descent,’ against the yawning backdrop of ‘the gorge looming behind.’ Bowles has embedded the elements of the story’s conclusion in its beginning, and crafted it so that it loops back on itself, forming a circular whole that concludes where it began. The structure forces the reader to impose connections on the narrative, creating something that resembles but diverges from a surrealist perspective. A frequent interpretation of surrealist narratives is that they resist closure; in part, this is a necessary corollary to the process of automatic writing, where the author writes without a conscious awareness of the
narrative trajectory. In Bowles’ case, however, his stories are patterned in order to emphasise the inevitability of the action that occurs. In order to create the sense that the action of the stories was governed by invisible connections, Bowles has to himself relinquish the model of total unconscious production that automatic writing demanded.

What imbues these connections with a greater sense of authority, moreover, is the crisp, neutral prose that Bowles uses to describe them. There is elegance and clarity to the way that Bowles narrates his stories. James Lasdun has noted the ‘calm logic with which they unfold.’ Bowles describes the action with an authority that suggests not a lack of perspective but one that has a greater understanding of what is occurring than an participatory viewpoint could possess. This authority, as Lasdun explains, is often expressed through the way the stories begin: opening ‘with the impersonal simplicity of folk tales.’ When ‘The Delicate Prey’ opens with the statement that ‘There were three Filala who sold leather in Tabelbala,’ the authority of the narrator - removed, and drawing our attention to the scene as if pointing out an interesting episode in a history book, or beginning a fairy tale - gives the story that follows a sense of impersonality and inevitability. The characters, relayed to us in such detached terms, take on a general, almost archetypal quality, just as the Professor in ‘A Distant Episode,’ with his ‘dark glasses’ and ‘two small overnight bags full of maps, sun lotions and medicines’ needs no further description than the contents of his luggage. In much the same way that Dali’s paintings take on a particularly haunting quality when one notices the skill of his draughtsmanship - the elegance of their execution gives their strange elements a surreal coherence - the cool, detached clarity of Bowles’ prose lends the events an even clearer sense of coherence and inevitability. Although working across different media, both Bowles and Dali relied on artistic praxes that foregrounded technique and moved beyond a totally dissociative system of creation. Dali’s fall from the brotherhood of surrealism was based in part upon the extent to which his process of painting failed to adhere to the tenets of surrealism’s Manifestoes and it could be argued that Bowles, like Dali, was more interested in a technocratic version of Surrealism, one that foregrounded through aesthetic means a simulacrum of the dream experience.

The reception of The Delicate Prey, however, occluded any connection between the anthology and surrealism. In fact, critics seemed unwilling to accommodate Bowles’ vision to any degree and the aspects of his prose that they did address reveal the rift between Bowles’ influences and the intellectual currents in America in the post-war period. Perhaps more importantly, the responses to Bowles’ work reveal some of the reasons that surrealism received such a hostile reception in America. While Clement Greenberg’s dismissal of surrealism is well acknowledged, there has been little consideration of how the broader intellectual climate of postwar America influenced the movement’s reception; the critiques levelled at Bowles’ work gesture towards some of the underlying cultural biases against surrealism. Bowles’ first novel, The Sheltering Sky, which had been published a year earlier in 1949, was repeatedly criticised for its lack of well-developed characters; Denham Sutcliffe enunciated this most clearly when he suggested that ‘Bowles’s people never particularize; they continue to be uninteresting abstractions, devices for the expression of unrelieved despair.’ This criticism was even more prominent in the reception of The Delicate Prey, about which the
overwhelming feeling was that the stories were ‘less story and characterization than scenes and places described with great originality.’ As Charles Jackson explained, there was nobody with whom the reader could relate in the anthology, a situation that Leslie Fiedler put down to Bowles’ ‘total inability to make intellectual notions as real as feelings, to specify men thinking as convincingly as he can specify men undergoing castration.’ While critics wanted to ‘take part in’ the stories themselves, and become invested in their characters, they found themselves cut off from them, unable to relate to these ‘undeveloped’ figures. Thomas Barbour characterised the reaction, declaring that *The Delicate Prey* was ‘lacking any … penetration of character.’

The initial critical response to Bowles’ work, then, was predisposed to evaluate the novel on the basis of its characterisation. The critics’ emphasis suggests the importance they placed both on the development of individuals within a text and the latter’s larger ability to ‘convince’ the reader - to provide something for them to ‘relate to.’ Jackson and Fiedler were both sensitive to the quality of Bowles’ descriptive prose, and alive to the hypnotic effect that his stories could produce through their ‘astonishing ease and rhythmical beauty.’ But given that their critical priority was on ‘development,’ the ‘picturesque’ quality of his prose was of interest insofar as it impeded the action of his stories; his stories stagnated, as his attentiveness to detail made them little more than ‘a series of brilliantly graphic, even poetic descriptions.’

Without a greater degree of plot development and action, Bowles’ characters lacked the space to grow and develop. But Bowles’ use of compressed structure and reiterative patterning drew emphasis away from action, creating a sense of claustrophobia - the inertia of the stories rendered them ‘actionless, which is to say characterless.’ Descriptive prose was not inherently a negative aspect of Bowles’ writing, but its use, in conjunction with structural patterning, to replicate a dreamlike cohesion, ran directly against a desire for development and complex characterisation.

The stories failed, moreover, to offer a framework within which their reader could position themselves and so ‘relate to’ the characters. The ‘primitive’ settings, which Bowles deployed in a deliberately confrontational way, were understood as an attempt ‘to deny the world of our everyday.’ Rather than suggesting there could be something provocative about this, however, critics argued that the stories’ disjunction from the quotidian, American world of his readers reduced them to ‘a bit of exotic reporting,’ inconsequential and irrelevant. This sense is registered most keenly in the suggestion that Bowles ought to return to his ‘native scene,’ from which he could provide ‘personal, intimate, and, shall we say, down-to-earth stories or glimpses of the small town in which he was brought up; in order for Bowles to express something worthwhile, according to these critics, he needed to locate his voice within an American context, and reproduce something that spoke directly of his own experiences.

While critics were unable to avoid acknowledging elements that Bowles used to recreate a surreal aesthetic, they repeatedly misread them. Rather than considering Bowles as in some way working within a surrealist legacy, their critiques reveal their desire to recuperate him within a character-driven, specifically American framework. This pattern of misreading is particularly evident in the way critics, from Cyril Connolly to William Carolos Williams, attempted to situate Bowles’ North...
African novel, The Sheltering Sky, within a popular American context. While critics consistently took issue with aspects of Bowles’ characterisation, they were drawn to a quality of ‘adventure’ in the journey of the protagonists, Kit and Port Moresby, which took them into the emptiness of the Sahara - it seemed to offer a contemporary parallel to the American frontiersman heading into the west, a ‘chronicle of startling adventure.’ It offered a tale that conformed to popular expectations of an adventure story, to the extent that it could be recuperated within this popular generic framework, and thus easily consumed. Tennessee Williams was alone amongst his initial readers in suggesting that such readings might be missing the point, when he slyly observed that ‘a good many people will read this book and be enthralled by it without once suspecting it contains a mirror … of moral nihilism.’ In fact, the reconstruction of the novel as a frontier ‘adventure’ was part of a broader strategy to find ‘substance’ in Bowles’ texts, which obscured the vacancy and ‘nihilism’ at their centre.

To understand the position from which Bowles’ American readers approached the text, it is important to understand the priorities associated with ‘liberalism’ in postwar America. In his 1955 text The Liberal Tradition in America, Louis Hartz offered a narrative of American history that is characteristic of the position held more widely by the loosely associated group of New York Intellectuals in the postwar period, in that it places the concept of ‘liberalism’ at the centre of American culture and history. Basing his argument on what he described as ‘the storybook truth about American history,’ where the country was founded by men escaping oppression of Europe, to find freedom in a ‘New World,’ Harz considered the most salient feature of American society to be that ‘the American community is a liberal community.’ Rather than ‘liberalism’ sitting at one end of an ideological spectrum, in opposition to a conservative alternative, Hartz argued that there had ‘never been a “liberal movement” or a real “liberal party” in America,’ and that, instead, the belief in the primacy of individual freedom constituted the foundation for national identity: American society ‘only had the American Way of Life.’ His characterisation of this trans-partisan ideology, where “Americanism” brings McCarthy together with Wilson,” suggests the particular importance that liberalism had taken on with the onset of the Cold War. It had become the defining feature around which Americans could define themselves against the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, whether one aligned themselves with red-baiting McCarthyism or Wilsonian politics.

American critics of this era, particularly the New York intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and Richard Chase, aligned themselves deliberately along ‘liberal’ lines and saw the role of criticism in the postwar period as particularly concerned with promoting fiction that emphasised personal responsibility and bore a close relationship to the ‘lived experience’ of the American people. This emerging strain of ‘modern’ literary criticism was designed, in Trilling’s words, ‘to construct people whose quality of intelligence, derived from literary study or refined by it, would ultimately affect the condition of society in certain good ways.’ Underpinning their desire for a new paradigm of fiction and criticism was a belief that, in the wake of the inexplicable violence that characterised the Second World War, contemporary society was uniquely in need of such a change. The ethical dimensions of their programme were impelled by the sense that at ‘perhaps at no other time has the enterprise of moral realism been so much needed.’ Their perspective, however, just like the broader currents of
'liberalism,' was further inflected by the shadow of the Cold War and the demonisation of the Soviet Union as coercive and totalitarian. Geraldine Murphy has demonstrated how ‘formerly radical intellectuals like Trilling … felt it incumbent on them to deplore the “totalitarianism” of the Soviet Union and embrace the “freedom” of the west.85 The concern of Bowles’ critics at his stories’ relationship to reality - especially the stipulation that it be grounded in ‘his native scene’ - is reflective of this broader concerns to shape a literature that could oppose a Soviet culture characterised as restrictive and oppressive with a democratic, American aesthetic.

Just as New York intellectuals like Trilling made a dramatic shift from a formerly sympathetic position towards Marxism, to a nationalistic, anti-Communist stance, the surrealists themselves had undergone a political about-turn in the face of Stalinist reforms in Russia. But in spite of the split between the pro-Communist surrealists, like Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, and the orthodox surrealists, led by Breton, who maintained an anti-Stalinist Marxist position, the critical response to surrealism from the prominent literary critics of the time was unable to overlook its association with the far left. Serge Guilbaut has shown how the ‘slow process of de-Marxization and later depoliticization of certain groups of left-wing anti-Stalinist intellectuals in New York from 1939 on, coupled with the rapid rise of nationalist sentiment during the war,’ ultimately led to the emergence and success of American abstract expressionism and the decline of surrealism in New York.86 Bowles had himself been a member of the Communist party before the war, which had contributed both to his permanent emigration to Morocco and to his inability to return to America later in life. Although few of his short stories show any concern with politics, the protagonist of his 1955 novel The Spider’s House, John Stenham, is a ‘reformed’ ex-Communist. While criticism of the text avoided ‘outing’ its author’s former political affiliations, the reception of Stenham reflects the general bias against any work tainted by association with Communism. One review for the New York Times described Stenham as ‘pre-occupied by an indefinable anxiety,’87 while another dismissed him as a buffoon who ‘blunders’ through the text, suffering ‘like many ex-revolutionaries’ from indigestion.88 Perhaps more importantly, both reviews dismissed the text’s relevance to an American audience: Bowles’ characters were ‘silhouettes of despair,’89 and overall, he ‘failed to give his story coherence and a point.’90 The Spider’s House was completely dismissed, as a text that could neither oppose communism nor offer a method of making American citizens better.

The priorities of American critics, particularly the New York intellectuals, extended beyond a concern with the details of what literary texts communicated, to the kind of generic structures they were organised around. For a text to communicate something that could contribute towards the social renovation that Trilling emphasised, it needed to enunciate in its form the same qualities of freedom that its characters and actions expressed. This meant, in general terms, a novelistic mode of expression. Trilling described the novel as ‘a perpetual quest for reality’ whose material offered an ‘indication of the direction of man’s soul.’91 However, Murphy has shown how, in particular, it was the conventions of the romance that offered such intellectuals a model to orient their arguments around. Elucidating the ways in which ‘American romance remained open-ended, resisting formal resolution,’ she has shown the extent to which the conventions of the romance - openness, integrity, a play
between the real and the imagined - embodied the ideal of freedom that liberal critics used to define their literature against Soviet totalitarianism: the romance ‘promoted freedom, just as American democracy did.’ Writers like Saul Bellow, or Ralph Ellison, were valorised for novels that offered sprawling, picaresque tales, whose freedom allowed their characters to develop in a supposedly autonomous manner. Action and characterisation were contingent upon a structure that could emphasise this sense of freedom.

In this light, the approach critics took to Bowles’ fiction can be understood as symptomatic of wider intellectual currents in America. The conflict between Bowles’ priorities, shaped by his reading of surrealism, and those of the New York intellectuals, can be seen most clearly in Richard Chase’s 1952 review for The Kenyon Review, ‘A novel is a novel,’ in which he compared Bowles’ second novel, Let it Come Down, and Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man, both of which were published earlier that year. Chase’s evaluation of Invisible Man rests on Ellison’s ability to express a nuanced version of reality, which is sensitive to ‘the ultimate contradictions of life,’ yet can still offer an image of freedom through its ‘transcendent’ vision. His analysis emphasises the traditional aspects of Ellison’s approach, locating it within the specifically ‘romantic,’ American framework of ‘the classic novelistic theme: the search of the innocent hero for knowledge of reality, self, and society.’ This sits in contrast to the ‘pallid and futile’ attempts of Bowles, whose only ‘occasional real triumphs’ come in the form of ‘scenery painting.’ Just as in the critiques of his short fiction, it is Bowles’ ‘failure of characterization and of dramatic action’ that Chase underlines, assessing him on the criteria on which the romance genre, like Ellison’s text, is predicated. The priorities of liberal criticism direct his reading of the text and Chase concludes by arguing that Bowles fails because of what he considers to be the inherent nihilism of his work - ‘it doesn’t matter what anyone does, since every act is equally valueless and equally without meaningful consequence’ - which divests the characters of the responsibility required of a democratic society. Moreover, he reads Bowles’ patterning as a parallel to the coercive oppression of the Soviet Union, suggesting that since ‘the hero cannot go anywhere,’ there ‘can be no dramatic action.’ The reaction against specific aspects of Bowles writing - his characterisation and structure - points to a larger issue: that Bowles’ writing was antagonistic towards the democratic, liberal trajectory of American society. Bowles had developed his model of short fiction out of his involvement with surrealism, explicitly in order to oppose the spread of American culture on a global scale. If they were opposed to Bowles, then the expectations of critics like Chase and Trilling were certainly antithetical towards surrealism, not simply on a technical level but based on their dedication to cultural production that enunciated a democratic model of individual freedom.

For Bowles, surrealism had offered a framework that accounted for his own experience of the world - it was a perspective that mirrored his own disconnected, dreamlike engagement with his surroundings. More importantly, it offered a model for engaging fictionally with the world in a way that challenged or contested the hegemonic discourse of rational, western civilisation. His interactions with the surrealists, both in Paris and in New York with View, gave him the opportunity to engage critically and reflectively with the movement, as poet, translator, and editor. Breton’s inner circle of surrealists-proper, however, remained a select and almost exclusively European group and Bowles’ fellow
translator for View, Édouard Roditi, stressed that they ‘never sought admission.’ Bowles remained outside the strictures of Breton’s coterie and his fiction represents an attempt to reconstruct an aestheticized surreal state, rather than necessarily following the demands of surrealist processes. He seemed such an ill-fit in America because the tradition he was drawing on conflicted so markedly with the direction of post-war American literary criticism. Surrealism had developed out of opposition to the values of capitalism and the west and Bowles’ reproduction of surrealism’s oppositional stance in his fiction oriented it along starkly nihilistic lines. Criticism in America, on the other hand, whose perspective was underpinned by liberal ideals, drew directly on the qualities of moral realism that had antagonised surrealism and promoted a freedom that was deliberately opposed to the Soviet Union. Attempts to recuperate Bowles within an American context - for example, the frontier narrative, or the romance - would necessarily fail, because Bowles’ ‘nihilistic’ emptiness frustrates any possibility for the kind of freedom associated with these generic structures.

Yet Bowles continues to be misread, within a framework that emphasises the same qualities of freedom and individual development that had been prioritised in postwar American thought. Rather than approaching his work as something influenced by surrealism, critics continue to accommodate him within a tradition predicated upon freedom. The most popular understanding of Bowles is as the prototype Beat, who, in the words of Norman Mailer, ‘opened the world of the hip … let in the murder, the drugs, the incest, the death of the Square.’ While he seems to fit into this tradition - particularly given his early association with William S. Burroughs and his role as guru-cum-icon for Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso while living in Tangiers - his fundamental concern for conveying a nihilistic alternative to the progressive model of American ‘freedom’ in literature placed him in opposition to the cultural and literary ideals that their work usually promoted. This insistence on reading Bowles within a countercultural framework and emphasising individual independence belies the extent to which the narrative of American liberalism continues to govern American culture. But this also indicates another important reason that Bowles has been continuously misread: surrealism has been understood too narrowly by American critics. The qualities that give Bowles’ stories a surreal perspective were not of interest to the dominant critics in postwar American society, apart from the extent to which they stood in the way of recuperating them within a narrative of freedom.

2 Paul Bowles, in Gena Dagel Caponi, Conversations with Paul Bowles, University Press of Mississippi, Mississippi, 1993, 137.
5 Bowles, The Delicate Prey and Other Stories, xi.

7 Neiman, ‘Introduction,’ xii.

8 Ibid., xiii.


10 Ibid., 76.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 79.

13 Gena Dagel Caponi, Paul Bowles, 89. See also Wayne Pounds, Paul Bowles: the Inner Geography, P. Lang, New York, 1985, and Allan Hibbard, Paul Bowles: a Study of the Short Fiction, Twayne, New York, 1993, who both similarly acknowledge Bowles’ surrealist praxis, while otherwise disassociating him from the context of surrealism.


16 Ibid.

17 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, tans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1969, 26.

18 Ibid., 160


20 Ibid, 91.

21 Ibid, 93.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Breton, Manifestoes, 26.


26 Ibid, 92.


28 Ibid.


30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.

32 The two newspaper clippings, which Bowles' simply entitles ‘two documents,’ recount violent murders in Mexico city, while ‘Chewing Gum Land,’ by the politician Raymond Beteta, is dislocated from its original, political context, and presented as a set of ethnographic field notes; View Vol. 5, No. 2, 1945, 8-10; 6, 14.


34 Ibid., 118.

35 Bowles, Bailey interview, 68.

36 Ibid., 70, 69.


40 Tashjian, Boatload, 117.


44 Foltz, 88.


48 Ibid.


50 Bowles, ‘Art of Fiction,’ 83.


53 Bowles, *Delicate Prey*, 151.

54 Ibid., 152.

55 Ibid., 153.

56 Ibid., 154.

57 Ibid., 155.

58 Ibid., 156.

59 Ibid., 135.

60 Ibid.


62 Ibid.

63 Bowles, *Delicate Prey*, 277.

64 Ibid., 291.

65 Ibid., 290.

66 Denham Sutcliffe, 'Novels of the Nebulous Self,' *Kenyon Review* Vol. 12, No. 4 (1950), 734.


69 Jackson, 'Seamier Side,' BR4.


71 Fiedler, 'Style,' 170.

72 Jackson, 'Seamier Side,' BR4.

73 Ibid.

74 Fiedler, 'Style,' 170

75 Barbour, 'Little Magazines,' 280.

76 Jackson, 'Seamier Side,' BR4.


78 Williams, 'Allegory,' 38.


Ibid., 9.

Ibid., 13.


Ibid., 221.


Ibid.


Murphy, ‘Romancing the Centre,’ 738.


Ibid., 679.

Ibid.

Ibid., 682.

Ibid., 683.

Ibid.

Édouard Roditi, in Neiman’s introduction to *View*, xii.


Samuel Reese is a PhD candidate at the University of Sydney. Focusing on the American short story writer, composer and photographer, Paul Bowles, his project explores the relationship between mid-twentieth century politics, surrealism, ideas of violence, and the short story as a genre. He draws on ideas of freedom and morality in literature, the relationship between Bowles’ musical aesthetic and his unique style of short story, and the role that surrealism played in defining his artistic expression.
Carrington’s Kitchen

Katharine Conley

This essay argues that the objects in Leonora Carrington’s kitchen, as represented in her writing and painting, are comparable to the objects in Breton’s study, as he writes about them and has them photographed. Her most emblematic object - the cauldron - epitomizes the way she mixes the ingredients of her art, creating new substances through a literal process of embodiment. In comparison, Breton predominantly matches the ingredients of his art, through his strategy of juxtaposition, following the combinatorial principle of the surrealist image, the spark that stimulates automatism’s flow. Both sets of objects reflect the spaces that house them as the intellectual hub for each artist; the differences between them establish what distinguishes Breton from Carrington as surrealists, in particular their different approaches to non-Western objects.

Everyone who has written about visiting Leonora Carrington in Mexico describes her kitchen. Edward James in 1948 called it a ‘combined kitchen, nursery, bedroom, kennel and junk store’ in a state of disorder that was ‘apocalyptic.’¹ For Carrington, everything begins in the kitchen,’ Germaine Rouvre explained in the 1970s.² Silvia Chérem, in the catalogue to the recent exhibition of Carrington’s work in Dallas, describes the kitchen as ‘a dining room, sitting room, and place to receive visitors,’ centered on ‘an old round table covered with plastic, surrounded by four chairs that resent the passing of time.’³ In the catalogue to another recent exhibition, Surreal Friends (2010), Stefan van Raay describes having ‘had the great privilege of sitting around her kitchen table in Mexico City many times.’⁴ Homero Aridjis tells a similar tale of being led into the kitchen by Carrington: ‘Once seated, she offered tea, tequila, or whiskey and took advantage of our visit to smoke a cigarette. On the cupboards and the refrigerator were post cards with reproductions of works of art featuring cats as well as the royal family of England and Princess Diana.’⁵

Carrington discovered surrealism in 1936 when she was studying art in London. She admired a painting by Max Ernst, subsequently met the artist and then moved with him to France, where they lived until he was arrested as a foreign national at the outbreak of World War Two and she fled to Spain. Her memorable self-portrait, The Inn of the Dawn Horse (1937-38), and her first collection of short stories, La Maison de la peur (1938), were finished in France. She developed her own distinctive surrealist voice and vision there, adding to the plurality of voices that make up the movement. In New York during the war she rekindled her friendship with the surrealists, including André Breton, author of the founding ‘Manifesto of Surrealism.’ After the war, she settled in Mexico City while Breton returned to Paris. In this article I argue that the settings in which Carrington and Breton worked contextualized their individualized visions of surrealism and actively informed their thought. Through an understanding of the way each of them envisioned and spatialized their working environments, it becomes clear how Carrington’s embodied version of surrealism builds on Breton’s more abstract theories.
Carrington’s kitchen was her living, talking, and thinking space. It was her intellectual hub, her equivalent of Breton’s study in Paris, as Jonathan Eburne has persuasively argued. Carrington’s accumulation of various ‘systems of knowledge production’ that are visible in her paintings, wherein she actively mixes Celtic, English, Tibetan, Mayan, and indigenous Mexican traditions, constitutes an ‘archival effect,’ according to Eburne, comparable to Breton’s accumulation of practices, which similarly stand as evidence that surrealism ‘lived under an archival drive.’ Such a drive mirrors the dynamism of the archive itself as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have described it: an oscillating figure caught between the pleasure principle - the desire to capture and understand events as they occur - and the death drive - the inevitable creep and acceptance of mortality. The oscillation in question simultaneously follows the regular path of chronological time and inevitably seeks to disrupt and suspend it. Both Breton and Carrington’s thought and work reflect this tension, typical of surrealism. Through Carrington’s writings and paintings I will look at how her version of embodied surrealism builds on Breton’s vision in a way that is linked tangibly to her surroundings.

Carrington, like Breton, was intentional about the objects with which she surrounded herself and was interested in those she understood as having magical, animate qualities, even a ‘quasi-animal life,’ as Antonin Artaud once described objects seen close up and magnified by a camera. This ‘animal life’ of objects to which Artaud refers comes through clearly in Carrington’s paintings and writings. Furthermore, Carrington adopted an alternative ‘animal life’ for herself, repeatedly, identifying the horse as her totem animal. Breton also adopted a totem animal for himself—the fish or dolphin—because, as he explains in Nadja, he was born under the astrological sign of Pisces, but he never took this connection to an alternative animal identity for himself as seriously as Carrington did until he moved to New York during World War Two. When both Breton and Carrington left Europe and briefly lived in New York, before he returned to Paris and she continued on to New York City, he was exposed to objects made in the American West and actively collected Pacific Northwestern transformation masks that portrayed humans as human beings and animals. Like Carrington, he expanded his idea of what it meant to be human once he arrived in the Americas.

It was in New York that Breton wrote his ‘Prolegomena to a Third Surrealist Manifesto or Not,’ in which he speculated about the place of human beings in the universe in relation to animals larger and smaller that we are, the whale and the mayfly. This speculation built on the earliest surrealist assumptions about the unconscious, based on Freud, and their conviction that human consciousness must be more mobile than the Cartesian view of the mind with which Breton grew up in early twentieth-century France. The experiments with automatic trances the surrealists undertook in Breton’s study and adjoining sitting room in late 1922 underpinned his theory in the ‘Manifesto’ of the receptive surrealist as sharing properties with objects. He claimed that attuned surrealists were equivalent to ‘receptacles of so many echoes, modest recording instruments’—and consequently his theory of the object had a psychological function. His ‘Crisis of the Object’ from 1933 and the first chapter of Mad Love from 1934 established a connection between the psyche and the objects to which it is attracted. This view of objects
as having a catalyzing effect, capable of helping an individual understand him or herself, complemented Carrington's view of objects as having lives of their own. Just as Breton’s thought was developed in his study, the matrix for Carrington’s creative labour originated in her kitchen.

Carrington’s actual kitchen in Mexico City ‘changed minutely over the years,’ according to Susan Aberth, ‘the surface of the table was consistently cluttered with an array of necessities.’¹³ I was fortunate enough to spend two evenings in that kitchen with Carrington and her husband Chiki Weisz in 2001. Cherem’s description captures my own memory of it:

Oils, sauces, plates, glasses, medications, boxes of tea, and cat food are readily visible on shelves from which also hang rows of blemished pans and rusty scoops. As decoration, there are a few postcards and magazine cutouts that Leonora has treasured, with the photos of the English royalty, including of course Lady Di and Queen Elizabeth II, and Irish writers, also an Egyptian cat, some pre-Columbian and prehistoric archaeological pieces, as well as an invitation for an international conference in her honor that took place in the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City.¹⁴

It was an ordinary domestic space containing little of value. [Fig. 1]

Fig. 1: Carrington’s kitchen in Mexico City, Colonia Roma. Photograph by Ann Walsh, 2009.

It was the place where Carrington served tea, whiskey, and tequila - (‘It won’t hurt you, you know,’ she said to me when I hesitated over the choice) - and also a place of fierce intellectual challenge and debate, spiced with humor. Carrington interrogated her visitors and told them stories, sometimes playing jokes on
them.\textsuperscript{15} It was not a place where a visitor could feel completely at ease. Aberth explains how moving to Mexico in the 1940s prompted Carrington to develop her sense of ‘kitchens as magically charged spaces used to concoct potions, weave spells, prepare herbs and conduct alchemical “cooking” experiments.’\textsuperscript{16} The conversation and cooking that ‘charged’ the space were generative of Carrington’s art and were both distinctly female in nature, if not always conventionally feminine. Her choice of the kitchen as a domestic space traditionally dominated by women was deliberate, even as she challenged sexist assumptions about the limits of what women could do.

Critics have long noted the crossover between cooking and art making for Carrington. She once said, ‘Painting is like making strawberry jam - really carefully and well.’\textsuperscript{17} James notably commented in 1975, ‘[t]he paintings of Leonora Carrington are not merely painted, they are brewed.’\textsuperscript{18} In footage from the early 1990s shown in Dominique and Julien Ferrandou’s recent film, Carrington explains her method in terms of cooking, as she prepares tempera paint by breaking an egg in order to mix her colors:

\begin{quote}
The real work is done when you’re alone in your studio and that’s it. First it becomes a sense of something and then it becomes something that you can see and then it becomes something that you can do. It’s like cooking. But cooking isn’t that easy, either, as you probably know.”\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

In Breton’s introduction to her short story, ‘The Debutante,’ in his Anthology of Black Humor (1950), (in which he also praises her ‘admirable canvases’ as ‘laden with the modern “marvelous”’), he describes eating meals prepared by Carrington in New York from a sixteenth-century English cookbook, claiming he was ‘the only one to try certain dishes,’ including a hare stuffed with oysters.\textsuperscript{20} Carrington created several paintings that involve dining - indoors and outdoors - including The Meal of Lord Candlestick (1938), Pastoral (1950), Three Women Beyond the Table (1951), The Hunt Breakfast (1956), and Lepidopteros (1969). Cooking and dining serve as a powerful metaphors for creativity in her writing, too, despite the fact that one of her short stories contains the suggestion that she was raised to believe that food was a vulgar topic: the narrator’s guide in ‘Uncle Sam Carrington,’ who happens to be a horse, warns her to ‘Never mention anything as vulgar as food’ when they pay a visit to the proper Misses Cunningham-Jones.\textsuperscript{21}

The kitchen itself is featured in her short story from 1939 ‘The Sisters’ as a medieval space laden with food, including ‘cakes and enormous tarts’ that were cooked and put to the flame and taken from the oven. Pomegranates and melons stuffed with larks’ as well as ‘whole oxen … turning slowly on spits’ and ‘pheasants, peacocks, and turkeys [who] awaited their turn to be cooked.’\textsuperscript{22} Sonia Assa groups the cooking in this story with two other stories from 1937-40 as a way of linking the food prepared in Carrington’s fictionalized kitchens with the ‘oral activity’ of speech. Conflating cooking and the kitchen, Assa confirms my premise here that ‘[n]o matter what the plot and the cast of characters might be, there is always the question of some “sacré cuisine.”’\textsuperscript{23} The kitchen is also the focus of at least three paintings, The House Opposite (c. 1945), Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen (1975) and Aardvark.
Groomed by Widows (1997). The busiest of these, The House Opposite, shows cooking as a featured activity.²⁴ [Fig. 2]

Fig. 2: Leonora Carrington, The House Opposite (ca. 1945) © 2013 Leonora Carrington / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

On the lower far right of The House Opposite, three female figures—two light, one dark skinned—stand around a gigantic, partially glass cauldron through which a bubbling green-gold brew is visible. It is suspended on a metal chain over a modest fire, while domesticated birds, awaiting ‘their turn to be cooked’ (to cite ‘The Sisters’ again), stand at the feet of the woman stirring the pot, her back to the viewer, showing off her star-strewn cape that looks like it shines with real starlight over her right shoulder. The dark skinned, bare breasted woman on the left sports a crest-like hairdo and extends a forefinger into the bubbling cauldron while the third woman facing the viewer handles herbs for the soup they are preparing for a hybrid figure seated at the painting’s center, a woman with the shadow of a horse and a blond version of the crest-like hairdo of the dark skinned cook. Beside the central figure at the dining room table that dominates the lower floor of the house, sits a chair that appears to have a tiny human head. As a young girl rushes into the dining room from the kitchen bearing a roasted bird on the right, the hybrid central figure looks up from her bowl towards another hybrid female figure entering from the left. This creature with a tree in place of a head carries what appears to be a human face in a package wrapped as a gift, whereas upstairs grows a tree with a human face below which hangs a spectral wooden rocking horse reminiscent of the wooden rocking horse in The Inn of the Dawn Horse from seven years earlier. At the central figure’s feet, almost under the table, sits a calm trio of minuscule female beings who look from their posture as though they are chatting.

Aberth, Marina Warner and Whitney Chadwick all describe the scene in The House Opposite as domestic yet magical; it is ‘infused with the sacerdotal,’ writes Aberth, in particular ‘the meal,’ which is
'designed to instigate transit and transformation.' In this painting, as in her short stories, Carrington normalizes the fantastic with her inclusion of hybrid beings - talking horses, birds, trees and humans with animal or vegetable aspects - who interact with disarmingly realistic heroines. Breton wrote in the 'Manifesto' that surreality was the future resolution of dream and reality, 'which are seemingly so contradictory.' Carrington takes this idea of fusion as essential to surrealist thought even more literally and repeatedly portrays in her writing and painting the fused and hybrid beings who exist not in the future but in her present everyday world. Carrington suggests that every character and every space has more than one aspect and that transformations are as necessary and mundane as breathing. For her, objects do not just have a psychological function, as Breton argued in 1933, they can be animate and animals can be seen as part of humankind’s tangible identity.

Key to her portrayal of a ‘domicile filled with images of creation and resurrection’ that is ‘devoted to a world of women,’ as Chadwick argues about this painting, is the representation of intense magical activity. Like an exquisite corpse drawing from the 1920s and 1930s, that makes sense because we can imagine a real body as we look at the fantastical one drawn by different hands, Carrington’s House Opposite makes sense as a house because we are familiar with the ordinary houses upon which this one is based; this is a house opposite familiar norms. With her transpositions, Carrington reveals houses and their kitchens as laboratories in which women work on fantastic transformations that she makes appear ordinary.

The limits of the inside and outside of the body are put into question by Carrington in this painting, through the changeable hybridity of these female beings, in what Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, calls a characteristic ‘problematic of identity’ for Carrington. It is clear from this work that Carrington admires humans who come close to the creaturely, a position she confirms in an essay from 1975, in which she identifies herself as a ‘Female Human Animal’ as a reminder to her readers that humans have always been animals. In Carrington’s world, humans and animals readily transform into each other; they exist at the threshold between two bodies, two identities. On the upper floor of The House Opposite, moving from left to right, hybrid and clearly human female figures walk a cat, fall through the floor boards, wake up or experience lucid dreaming, and sit contemplatively in a wood as though out of doors. Dreaming has its own reality, as Breton argued in the first ‘Manifesto,’ and in Carrington’s paintings those dreams are materialized. This upper floor - over which a night sky glitters on the left and the sun gleams on a cloudy day on the right - combines inside and outside, daytime and nighttime, waking and dreaming, in one extended suspended moment: chronological time dissolves into ‘simultaneous time,’ as Warner confirms in her comparison of this painting to Quattrocento precedents. The archival drive that suspends time is also on view here. Carrington’s surrealist rendering of non-chronological surrealist dreamtime is visible in the suspended identities of the figures in the paintings: not one thing or another, but one thing and another, at the same time.

Grandmother Moorhead’s Aromatic Kitchen (1975) depicts a scene that refers to Carrington’s Irish grandmother. [Fig. 3]
A massive English or Irish stove sits in the background on the left and serves as a reminder of Carrington’s Irish grandmother and a vestige of her childhood memories, while the activity in the painting concentrates on signs of her life in Mexico in the shape of the curved cooking pot - in place of the cauldron from *The House Opposite* - balanced on top of a traditional Mexican griddle or comal at the center. A large white goose dominates this kitchen and actively steps inside ‘a magic circle drawn on the floor [that] contains a Celtic inscription in mirror writing.’ Carrington’s quintessentially hybrid creatures inhabit this space: three crone-like beings of indeterminate sex cluster around the cooking pot and two figures wearing hats and masks at the edges participate in ritualistic activities related to cooking - the one at the back leans over the European stove while the one at the front grinds corn. Two anthropomorphized animals also participate in this ritual - the dominant white goose, ‘designed to invoke the goddess,’ according to Aberth, and a ‘horned goat-like creature holding a broom.’ The kitchen is a site for magic: Chadwick explains how ‘the garlic cloves resting on [the magic circle] are integral to all magic and healing rituals in Mexico,’ revealing the kitchen ‘as a place of strange transformations where strong magic is necessary to neutralize the enormous goose.’ Even the ears of corn have an animal-like appearance, particularly the one at the foot of the comal. Like the domesticated birds at the feet of the...
three women stirring the cauldron in *The House Opposite*, this animal-like ear of corn awaits its eventual transformation into food, its turn to be cooked.

The ingredients in the painting, from the garlic to the vegetables intended for the shallow cooking platter, infuse the viewer inside and outside, as powerfully as any aromatic scent, with the sense that entry into this kitchen could result in as profound a transformation of the self as that experienced by the figures in the painting. This notion of physical transformation as a result of cooking echoes the less tangible but no less powerful psychic journeys with which Breton and his friends experimented in 1922 and 1923 when they practiced hypnotic trances in his study and adjacent sitting room, group activities later played as games in the 1930s and 1940s. Carrington's kitchen adds an overtly sensual dimension to the psychological experiments Breton describes in essays from 1922 such as 'Words without Wrinkles' and 'The Mediums Enter.' Her shift of locale from the study to the kitchen materializes the surrealist idea of identity as mutable, insofar as the audible manifestation of other voices bubbling up in automatic trance states and spilling out during group meetings in the 1920s translate into the visibly multiple identities in Carrington's hybrid bodies starting in the 1930s. Carrington's emphasis on cooking and eating moves the Bretonian idea of psychic transformation leading to insight towards the idea of physical transformation in which new physical identities, not merely voices, could become manifest - of the self as a being another sex, or a human-tree, or an animal like the giant goose in this painting.

Finally, the more recent *Aardvark Groomed by Widows* (1997) shows a cozy scene of women washing what looks like the family pet in a curved, cauldron-like pot; yet this 'cave-like space' that resembles Grandmother Moorhead's kitchen, similarly serves as a setting for what Chadwick calls 'strange encounters and ritual gestures,' in which washing replaces cooking. [Fig. 4]
The scene’s domesticity naturalizes the fantastic in a manner typical of Carrington’s stories in which magical transformations and substitutions - an aardvark for a dog, creaturely widows for an ordinary family - are presented as a matter of course. For example, in ‘The Royal Summons’ a cypress tree speaks to the narrator and tears up its roots to follow her until she complies with the rules of the deadly game she has unwittingly played with the Queen’s ministers. In ‘The Oval Lady’ the most moving scene comes at the end of the story, when the narrator is surrounded by talking birds and toys, including Tartar, an anthropomorphized wooden rocking-horse that the father of the house has threatened to burn. Carrington’s paintings, like her stories, regularly depict humans and creatures interacting with each another intensely. They show a desire for connection. And the settings for these experiences are frequently as domestic as the kitchen where most of her serious conversations were conducted.

Both the settings for intellectual work - Carrington’s kitchen and Breton’s study - may be described as domestic. They were filled with necessary tools for their occupants’ production: books, pens, pencils and art, in Breton’s case, including non-Western sculptures originally intended for ritual use and kitchen implements, postcards and a dining table and chairs in Carrington’s, as well as her own artwork in the adjacent dining room. Whereas Carrington’s kitchen was a stereotypically feminine domain and Breton study, following in the tradition of Freud and Apollinaire’s work spaces, a masculine one, I am arguing here that both were spaces self-consciously dedicated to creative production and to understandings of surrealist processes that operated independent of the artist’s sex.

Breton published photographs from his collection in books like Nadja, including the Easter Island statuette that was the first non-Western object he acquired. Just as Carrington visually portrays the kitchen as a creative place, Breton wrote about his apartment as a setting for surrealist activities, beginning in 1922 with ‘Words without Wrinkles’ and ‘The Mediums Enter,’ the essay in which he first described surrealist group experiments with automatic trances and gave his first definition of the word ‘surrealism’ as ‘a certain psychic automatism that corresponds quite well to the dream state.’ He also wrote about specific objects in his collection, including those from the Pacific islands he identifies as ‘haloed objects by which we are enthralled.’ After his return to Paris in the 1940s, he described objects collected from the Arizona Hopi reservation he visited and the Pacific Northwest Coast, including a Hopi katchina doll and Kwakiutl and Yup’ik masks he later reproduced in L’Art magique. But whereas Breton’s study is filled with heterogeneous objects he arranged and rearranged in a kind of continuous process of material automatic writing, Carrington’s representations of kitchens, particularly the three paintings to which I refer here, contain principally one recurring object - the cooking pot, platter or mystical cauldron together with a heat source - that function literally and as a metaphor for the transformational process of cooking, to which she compares painting, generative of newly fused entities and identities. This powerful symbolic object, so poetically presented in The House Opposite as a gigantic, transparent pot, also appears literally and symbolically in her writings, including her novel The Hearing Trumpet (1974) and her short, resolutely anti-colonialist play, ‘The Invention of Mole’ (1957), in which a terracotta cauldron serves an important function. [Fig. 5]
The play turns on a key ingredient added to the quintessential Mexican sauce, which turns out to be a meddlesome missionary archbishop. In the final scene, Montezuma’s ‘Imperial Cook appears with a great earthen casserole fit for an Archbishop’ and exclaims, while ‘rubbing his hands,’ ‘It will all be over in a couple of hours and you won’t feel a thing, absolutely and relatively nothing,’ while the curtain falls ‘on the increasingly piercing shrieks of the prelate.’ The casserole or cauldron stands as Carrington’s transcendent metaphor, the magical pot in which all of her alchemical stews were brewed, including the secret of immortal life.

Of all her writings, The Hearing Trumpet best illustrates the importance of the literal kitchen cauldron in Carrington’s iconology. In the penultimate scenes, Marian the protagonist descends into a cavern beneath the retirement community where she has been sent by her grandson, Galahad. In that basement cavern she discovers a crone and a cauldron. ‘As I drew near the fire the woman stopped stirring the pot and rose to greet me,’ writes Carrington. ‘When we faced each other I felt my heart give a
convulsive leap and stop. The woman who stood before me was myself. Marian then proceeds to jump into ‘the boiling soup’ and thereby discovers the secret of eternal life. She realizes that the cauldron is the Holy Grail, with which she and her old-lady friends will trump mortality once and for all. The Grail, in Carrington’s universe, is not an object to be found by Galahad in Europe, of great spiritual and monetary value; it is simply self knowledge accessible to curious old women living in the New World, knowledge that liberates a being from the body and transmutes that body into pure transcendence.

Although both Breton and Carrington valued everyday things as potentially revelatory keys to psychic mysteries, in the post-war era of surrealism, Breton’s ever-growing collection increasingly included valuable items, made even more valuable after his death in 1966 because he had owned them. Among these were artworks by his friends and his non-Western masks and sculptures, which constituted a colonial ‘contradiction’ for Breton: many of the things he treasured he had been able to purchase as a result of France’s colonial empire, to which he was strongly ideologically opposed. Carrington also decorated her house with art - her own sculptures, masks and tapestries, works that also had value in the Mexican, American and European art markets and that have presumably gained value since her death in 2011. Her connection to non-Western traditions was maintained less through objects than through her daily excursions with Chiki to the traditional local markets within modern Mexico City, as footage from the Ferrandou film shows. Her ‘collection’ as represented by her art remained consistently modest, like her actual kitchen, fundamentally domestic and her cooking implements inherited in one symbol - the cauldron - made precious mostly by her treatment of it in her art.

Carrington’s cauldron may seem paltry when compared with the riches in Breton’s study, except that as an encapsulating and recurring symbol it encompasses everything within that illustrious atelier, now immortalized at the Pompidou Center in Paris as Breton’s Wall. For while we could argue for understanding Breton’s study as his most successful realization of material automatic writing - each object constituting an ingredient of his thought - Carrington’s metaphorical cauldron, on the other hand, is the container in which all of her intellectual ingredients are mixed and thereby transformed. While Breton was a consummate appreciator and critic of practices that might lead to transformation as exemplified by his essay on Pacific Northwest Coast transformation masks published in Neuf in 1950, Carrington shows the results of transformation through her consistent use of hybrid animal-human, plant-human, even object-human beings. Her first stories, from ‘The House of Fear’ to ‘The Débutante’ and, as we have seen, ‘The Oval Lady’ and ‘The Royal Summons,’ already involved hybrid creatures - speaking animals and trees - who materialized the transformations that fascinated Breton intellectually.

In the 1950 article on transformation masks, Breton explains how the act of wearing a transformation mask involves a charged emotional exchange, an échange passionnel, between the self (both within and without) and the mask, in a reciprocal relation, allowing an individual to become psychically connected to alternate versions of the self as an animal and also to the surrounding world. He describes experiencing vicariously the ‘vertiginous’ feeling the mask sparks during the initiation ceremony in which it is used, linked to its artistry and ‘multiform spirituality’ connected to the
transformation in question: ‘from fish to bird, from bird to man.’ The mask physically allows the transformation to become an action as well as an idea; it is powerful because it allows him to see a physical manifestation of the idea so dear to him of the co-existence of realities, the mask, with the pull of a string, can represent first one reality and then another. Aesthetically, Breton’s cherished principle of the coexistence of realities was from the start mirrored in the definition for the surrealist image he borrowed from Pierre Reverdy, according to which the image relies on the unifying and co-existing ‘juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.’ Breton’s respect for the idea of transformisme may be seen in his arrangement his Kwakiutl transformation mask near two masks of his own face in one iteration of his study so that he could see them together from his desk. [Fig. 6]

Fig. 6: André Breton’s Study, 2003 @ Gilles Ehrmann, coll. part. S. Ehrmann

This particular mask alternates between a human face awake and asleep, shifting the perspective from an outward to an inward-looking vision of the sort he lionized as early as 1928 in ‘Surrealism and Painting.’ Nonetheless, what Breton called transformisme was primarily an idea for him. Even during the experiments with automatism at the outset of the movement, Breton’s role had been more to record the sessions than to participate fully in them. In ‘The Mediums Enter,’ for example, he is the one observing,
while others like René Crevel and Robert Desnos played the leading roles, plunging ‘headlong’ into hypnotic trances. For Carrington, on the other hand, transformisme was analogous to the process of brewing, or mixing (as opposed to his matching), that recurs in her thought and practice, abstract and material processes that dissolve ingredients and fuse them into new elements. Carrington’s metaphorical cauldron, represented literally in The House Opposite, ‘The Invention of Mole’ and again in The Hearing Trumpet, succinctly represents this principle of embodied surrealism that characterizes her version of surrealist thought—as concepts tangibly corporealized.

In this ability to see fusion through transformation and hybridity, Carrington recognizes what anthropologist Edmund Carpenter identified as typical of the perception of visual puns that Pacific Northwest Coast inhabitants found in their masks, whether Kwakiutl masks or Yup’ik masks of the sort Breton owned, with faces that ripple back and forth between human and animal. In reference to the drawing of a rabbit that looks like a duck from a different angle used by Ludwig Wittgenstein to illustrate his Philosophical Investigations, Carpenter argues that Wittgenstein’s ‘thesis is that you can only experience one at a time. But supposing you experienced both of them as a single image. And I think this is what the native people did. They recognized rabbit-duck not as alternatives but as a single form.’ Carpenter believes the surrealists also recognized and appreciated this notion of simultaneity. This fused perception came easily to Carrington, who was unafraid of the association of spells and magic with the occult, an association Breton only accepted openly in the 1950s when he wrote L’Art magique (1957), partly because earlier he was motivated to represent surrealism as different from spiritualism and to make clear that his movement, indebted to psychoanalysis, had nothing to do with superstition or the supernatural, as he fiercely asserts in ‘The Mediums Enter.’

In Carrington’s work, on the other hand, the cauldron as a tangible and metaphorical object demonstrates her openness to fused bodies and images as well as her willingness to learn from occult practices, including local Mexican traditions. Her portrayal in The Hearing Trumpet of the crone’s cauldron as the Grail for human kind - namely the secret of eternal life - constitutes a literalisation not only of her use of cooking as a metaphor for life powered by intense creative activity but also for Breton’s idea of transformism, which posits the self as an intellectual force living in suspended reciprocal exchange with the surrounding universe, a power that for Breton may be conferred on a human being by wearing a mask in a ritual. In Carrington’s version the transformation effected by the cauldron is less transitional than Breton’s admiration for the temporary transformation induced by wearing a mask during a ritual dance. The stakes are higher and more real for her. Breton’s intellectualism stops short of her more complete embrace of transformation, even though his fascination with the concept of transformisme hints at the possibility of a similar acceptance.

What distinguishes Carrington’s symbolic Grail-object from Breton’s many real objects (all of which had a sacred value for him), has to do with immediacy. For Breton, the mask always existed outside of himself. He matches through juxtaposition on his study walls, whereas Carrington mixes in a way that shows how for her, the notion of transformation is more than an idea, it is something that
happens in the self. She takes a Bretonian abstraction and concretizes it in an ordinary everyday fashion and she does so repeatedly with her hybrid, animal-human creatures who live in her paintings in a suspended synchronous time. We see this hybridity in *The House Opposite* with the central figure of the woman with the shadow of a horse or the tree with a human head upstairs in the same painting, and with Tartar, the speaking wooden rocking-horse in ‘The Oval Lady’ and the various horse-guides for the human female narrators in ‘The House of Fear’ and ‘Uncle Sam Carrington,’ as well the half-human, half-horse protagonist stand-in for herself in the novella ‘Little Francis.’ This all-at-once hybridity is epitomized in Carrington’s mythology in the kitchen environment - the domestic space, par excellence, literally at the heart of her house. For while Breton ultimately returned to Europe and hung his new masks in his study as reminders of his travels and the intellectual importance to him of the mask’s ability to trouble or provoke, Carrington remained in Mexico and, as a result, had less desire for mementoes of the ancient culture that surrounded her, co-existent with the sophisticated modern city in which she lived. Distance collapses in Carrington’s version of transformation, in body, and in the timing and spacing connected to mortality, and this collapsed distance occurs in the practices of surrealism she cooked up in her kitchens.

I have sought to show how the comparison between Breton’s study and Carrington’s kitchen demonstrates how both spaces fostered ‘systems of knowledge production’ important to surrealism, as Eburne argues, that were intrinsically linked to, and animated by, their material surroundings. Carrington’s version of surrealism developed further the fundamental receptivity Breton advocated of the surrealist to his or her environment. Both of their sets of objects and the animate qualities they saw in them served the practical function of nourishing each thinker’s worldview, oscillating, like the archive itself, backwards and forwards in time and place. Both of them showed the extent to which surrealism embraced both European and American, ancient and contemporary, mentalities and a profound appreciation of Western and non-Western things as belonging together in what could be understood as a global aesthetic. Both provided the setting for establishing practices of making art as well as ideas, for actively sparking surrealism as work.

In Carrington’s case, her transformation of kitchens in her paintings and stories into hybrid spaces as settings for the hybrid figures she brought to life exemplifies her more materialized philosophical version of surrealism, in an eminently practical environment. Her embodied vision of what Breton identified as *transformisme* extended beyond the ritual of the masked dance. In her world such ritual happened every day in the kitchen, not just in dream or automatic trance but in reality. For Carrington the tools needed for *all* aspects of surrealist work, at its most magical as well as at its most practical, were situated in the furnace of her creative thought, the kitchen out of which all her paintings, drawings, sculptures, tapestries, and stories emerged.59


7 Eburne, ‘Breton’s Wall, Carrington’s Kitchen,’ 33, 30.


14 Cherem, Eternally Married to the Wind,’ 18-19.

15 As an example, Carrington insisted I speak French for Chiki’s sake, then she would switch to English; it was only after I had switched back to French for about the third time that I realized he had been laughing at all her jokes in English; she had been having fun at my expense.


19 Dominique and Julien Ferrandou, Leonora Carrington, ouvre-toi, porte de pierre (Saché: TFV, November 2011). Collection DVD Phares.


22 Leonora Carrington, ‘The Sisters,’ The Seventh Horse and Other Tales, New York, Dutton, 1988, 43.


24 See Aberth’s ‘Alchemical Kitchen’ for more examples of paintings featuring elements of Carrington’s kitchen.

25 Aberth, Leonora Carrington, 69.

26 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism, 14.


30 Leonora Carrington, ‘Female Human Animal,’ in Leonora Carrington: What She Might Be, 11-15. Once when a dog barked at a mask she had made, ‘she replied gratefully, “That was the most honorable comment I ever received,”’ see Grimberg, 89.

31 Breton, Manifestoes, 16.

32 Warner argues that Carrington ‘refashions the narrative sequences of Sassetta or Matteo di Giovanni or Francesco di Giorgio; they unfold a tale in a journey across the image, with simultaneous incidents represented in demarcated antechambers and chambers of a palace or other edifice seen in section, so that time flows in the stasis of a painted moment’ 16.

33 Carrington cooked on such a stove - a massive Victorian black stove - until the 1970s, when she moved it into her dining room, according to Aberth (e-mail, 2 January 2013).


35 Aberth, Leonora Carrington, 122.

37 See André Breton, The Lost Steps, trans. Mark Polizzotti, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1996.


39 Carrington, The House of Fear, 53.


41 Breton, Lost Steps, 90.


43 Breton published a photograph of a Hopi katchina doll in La Révolution surréaliste, No. 9-10, 1927, 34 and again in 1957 in L’Art magique, along with photographs of a Kwakiutl and a Yup’ik mask; L’Art Magique, Paris, Adam Biron, Phébus, 1991, 28, 117, 119. The number of Cahiers d’art in which Breton published ‘Crise de l’objet’ in 1936 also included multiple photographs of objects from the Pacific Islands, the Pacific Northwest Coast, following an article by Paul Eluard, Cahiers d’art Vol. 11, No. 6-7, 1936, 30-33.

44 See Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, ‘Le tour des objets,’ André Breton: La Beauté convulsive, Paris, Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1991, 64-68. Based on a comparative study of photographs of Breton’s study over a ten-year period (1954-1964), she concludes: 'l'atelier, enveloppe fixe, fut propice aux métamorphoses et sortilèges et le lieu d'un regard aussi rapide et actif que celui de l'écriture,' (the studio, like a fixed envelope of space, lent itself to metamorphoses and spells and also of a gaze that was as rapid and active as writing), 66. See also my ‘Surrealism and Outsider Art in Breton’s “Automatic Message,”’ Yale French Studies: Surrealism and its others Vol. 109, (2006), 129-43.

45 I have given here the first dates of publication for these texts. The Hearing Trumpet was originally published by Flammarion in France as Le cornet acoustique in 1974. Routledge published an English version in January 1977 (copyright 1976). ‘The Invention of Mole’ was originally published as ‘La invención del mole’ in La Revista Mexicana de Literatura in 1957. It was published in Carrington’s translation in English in the 1988 collection, The Seventh Horse (see note 22). On this play, see also Melanie Nicholson, Surrealism in Latin America: Searching for Breton’s Ghost, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2013.

46 Leonora Carrington, ‘The Invention of Mole, A Play,’ The Seventh Horse, 175. See Eburne’s ‘Leonora Carrington, Mexico, and the Culture of Death’ for a persuasive argument for Carrington’s intentional opposition of the Mexican cult of the dead to contemporary European philosophical meditations on death in a critique that also challenges European colonialist assumptions about the inferiority of Mexican culture, Journal of Surrealism and the Americas No. 5 (2011), 19-32. A recent article in the Economist recounts the story of a bishop being eaten by Caeté tribesmen in 1556 Brazil, possibly an inspiration for Carrington. ‘Pirate, Colonist, Slave,’ The Economist, 17-30 December, 2011, 52.


48 See Sophie Leclercq, La rançon du colonialisme, les surréalistes face aux mythes de la France coloniale (1949-1962), 2010, 104. Breton’s anticolonialism was evident early in the 1920s when the surrealists wrote a tract in support of the insurgents in the Rif Valley. It was transformed into strong support of decolonization after World War Two (see the conclusion to Eburne’s Surrealism and The Art of


51 Breton, ‘Amérique du Nord,’ 143.

52 Breton, Manifestoes, 20.

53 Breton is known to have arranged and rearranged the objects in his study on a regular basis (see Mono-Fontaine, note 44). In the Gilles Ehrmann photograph (see Figure 6), this mask hangs between the Kwakiutl transformation mask and the two masks of Breton’s face (one of which is now in the Menil Collection in Houston). See Gilles Ehrmann and Julien Gracq, 42 rue Fontaine, l’atelier d’André Breton, Adam Biro, Paris, 2003.

54 André Breton, Surrealism and Painting, trans. Simon Watson Taylor, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2002, 4-5.

55 ‘No one else ever rushed so headlong onto every path of the marvelous,’ Breton wrote about Desnos in the 1950s. ‘Everyone who witnessed Desnos’s daily plunges into what was truly the unknown was swept up into a kind of giddiness; we all hung on what he might say, what he might feverishly scribble on a scrap of paper.’ André Breton, Conversations: New York, The Autobiography of Surrealism, trans. Mark Polizzotti, Marlowe and Company, 1995, 67. In the retrospective photograph Man Ray took of the ‘period of sleeps’ in 1924, the entire group, with Breton at the centre, is focused on Desnos, speaking and gesticulating.

56 Breton’s Yup’ik mask is featured in the Quai Branly’s Chefs d’Oeuvre book as coming from Breton’s collection. Masterpieces from the Quai Branly Museum, 2006, 86-87.

57 Carpenter gives this explanation in a video-taped interview he gave about his design of the Menil Collection’s Witnesses room, on 16 November 2000. This interview is stored in the Menil archives. The drawing was actually made by Joseph Jastrow in 1899.

58 Breton, Lost Steps, 90. I argue that spiritualism consequently became the repressed ghost within surrealism in my book, Surrealist Ghostliness, University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

59 I thank Ilene Fort for inviting me to give an early version of this article as a talk at the College Art Association meeting in Los Angeles in February 2012 and Susan Aberth and Sibel Zandi-Sayek for their generous readings of this text.

Katharine Conley is Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at the College of William and Mary and Professor of French and Francophone Studies. She is the author of books, articles, and exhibition catalogue essays on surrealism, including Surrealist Ghostliness, University of Nebraska Press, 2013.
Mike Kelley and Surrealism: Monkeys, Frogs, Dogs and Mauss

Doug Haynes

This paper reads the 1980s and 1990s soft toy and sock-monkey installations of multimedia artist Mike Kelley in relation to surrealism. Using Hal Foster’s comments on abject art - of which Kelley is often considered an exponent - I consider the extent to which Kelley’s work desublimes and makes available as ‘affect’ some of the structures of feeling, and structuring feelings, of the capitalist life-world. I compare Kelley’s work to its surrealist antecedents and judge the political efficacy of that avant-garde against his postmodern practice. While this essay uses writers like Freud and Marx, alongside Breton, Bataille and Kelley himself, it is Marcel Mauss’s well-known theory of the gift that takes centre stage in reckoning the social and political significance of Kelley and his use of surrealist discourse.

The multimedia artist Mike Kelley first started playing with ways to incorporate sock monkeys, soft toys, and other found, hand-stitched ‘folk’ art into his practice in 1982, when he used the projected slide of a green soft-toy frog as a prominent part of his performance piece *Confusion: A Play in Seven Sets, Each Set More Spectacular and Elaborate than the Last* in Los Angeles. There, as Colin Gardner notes, the frog emblematised the looping logic and wandering narrative of Kelley’s show: ‘[h]is metaphor for this confusion was the circular mouth of the frog, considered as an insatiable eater who consumes everything and makes it look like itself, a shapeless blob of memory, chaos and boredom.’¹ Like Georges Bataille’s spider, or gob of spit, the frog was an inchoate entity, an incontinent consumer and destroyer of system.²

In this respect, perhaps the frog also signals one of the enduring qualities of Kelley’s work: its power to upset hegemonic patterns of order. Cary Levine says of Kelley that ‘[h]is medium of choice was, above all, social meaning itself …. Cornered by his art, viewers must reevaluate some of their most deep-seated assumptions and beliefs.’³ Although the range of cultural and artistic reference is extraordinarily wide throughout his oeuvre, in this essay I want to explore how Kelley developed ideas from European surrealism, both as a practice of psychoanalytically-inspired disjunction, and also as an anarchistic, poetic and subversive politics. As in the case of the frog here, this tendency is, I think, particularly pronounced in Kelley’s deployment of the soft toy as a latter-day surrealist *poupée*.

Goopy Forms

To position Kelley in relation to surrealism, it is worth considering his exposure to the movement, which first occurred, albeit indirectly, during his undergraduate years studying art at the University of Michigan in the mid-1970s. His friend and collaborator at postgraduate school at CalArts, the artist Tony Oursler, recalls the influence on Kelley of self-consciously surrealist-inspired Chicago Imagists - ‘the Hairy Who’ - like Jim Nutt, as well as the prints and sculptures of figures like H. C. Westermann. Bucking the slickness of 1960s New York pop, these Midwestern artists included fantasy elements, biker-magazine cartoonishness, caricature and the grotesque in works often reminiscent of the ‘soft’ paintings of Dalí or Tanguy. By the mid-70s, Oursler tells us,
Mike was emerging from the spell of the Detroit scene: the Hairy Who, Blue Cheer, Iggy Pop, R. Crumb. I watched Mike destroy piles of old drawings in his studio at CalArts, and it was part of his process of reformation and self-mythologizing. ... I can’t help but think that watching him sift through the Jim Nutt-like images from his Ann Arbor days was an early step in this process. Many of the drawings that were saved from the trash that day were painted over in the late 80s and re-presented. Mike was obsessed with keeping certain histories alive while rewriting and creating others.4

Oursler’s comments illuminate his friend’s ‘image-management’; they also direct us towards the latter’s show Missing Time: Works on Paper (1974-1976) of 1994, in which the amended Ann Arbor works reappeared, repainted to emphasise the points he makes in the catalogue for the exhibition. Here, Kelley confesses his fondness for the ‘goopy, slightly disgusting surfaces of abstract expressionism’ and explains how, like Nutt, he combined this kind of high art technique with the ‘low imagery’ of advertising and underground comics, alluding to William Burroughs as a model for such juxtaposition.5 The key point for him is that such work should not be primarily gestural, as Robert Rauschenberg and pop-art had been; Kelley’s attention to the ‘loaded image’ wishes to retain something semantically as well as aesthetically complex (if we can make that distinction) in the combination of images and marks he makes and collects. Indeed, in his important 1989 essay ‘Foul Perfection: Thoughts on Caricature,’ Kelley provides a sophisticated analysis of caricature and the ‘grotesque’ mixing of forms (for critics like Levine and Robert Storr, the dominant trope in his work), suggesting ways in which such genres undermine the drive in especially the modernist artwork towards idealised, monological presentation.6

Likewise, in a 1998 interview with artist Jim Shaw, his old friend and fellow member of Detroit noise-band Destroy All Monsters, Kelley suggests a cultural shift away from post-war conformity as a stimulus for the new art. ‘The reaction against this restrictive period resulted in an explosion of senseless imagery in the 1960s,’ he tells us, ‘obviously influenced by Surrealist art, but without the psychological underpinnings of Surrealism.’ In this ‘senseless imagery’ - by which Kelley mainly means psychedelia - the supposedly ‘unified psychology’ of surrealism was left behind. The fractured voice of William Burroughs was the new naturalism.7 And in a later interview, that same fractured voice is tellingly invested with exegetical properties - a kind of code-breaking that reveals

submeanings that shine through the ordering structure of syntax. Burroughs calls the invisible ordering structure ‘the gray veil.’ And once you start to see through the gray veil of culture, then you can recognize it as a kind of brainwashing and control mechanism.8

Rather than retain the ‘unified’ thought of Freud as a mastering discourse of conscious/unconscious with which to rend the veil, then, Kelley reaches for the more immanent mode of critique he finds in Burroughs’s cut-up writing, turning cultural discourse against itself, exposing what the artist repeatedly refers to as ‘reality as a social construction’.9 Indeed, this is the kind of sceptical (even ‘kynical’) position suggested by Levine’s comment above: Kelley the disillusioned artist and citizen of the post-Watergate, post-Vietnam era, suspicious of all discourses as discourses of power, as Burroughs had been.10 But Burroughs, it should be remembered, was introduced to cut-up by his English friend Brion Gysin, who had exhibited with the surrealists in the mid-1930s.11 Burroughs’s writing after Naked
Lunch (1959) is thus an important conduit between the historical avant-garde and the post-war American scene.\textsuperscript{12}

Robert Storr usefully broadens this out in a discussion of Robert Gober:

Surrealism as a period style is long dead [but] the undead spirit of Surrealism has come back to haunt modernism ... When using the label now, ‘surrealist’ does not mean that the work in question follows a style or adheres to a manifesto-driven programme, but merely that it has found uses - in the best case - new uses for methods of estrangement pioneered in another time.\textsuperscript{13}

As we shall see, such estrangements may include the use of disjunction, fantasy, the unconscious, the mannequin, the toy, or the excavation of childhood; all of which appear in Kelley’s work. On the issue of childhood, Jack Spector has argued that the crucible of French surrealism can be found in the strict Third Republic education and late-Victorian childhood the members of the surrealist group received, providing them with both a rationalist agenda against which to kick, and a Rousseauian background with which to dream of perfectibility.\textsuperscript{14} Artists like Mike Kelley, Jim Shaw and Robert Gober draw, of course, from a very different reservoir. As Storr again suggests,

When Surrealism leaked out of the salon existence it had maintained in America, it had to compete with the indigenous forms of weirdness that popular culture fed and fed off. Tabloids, TV, monster magazines, and cartoons were where most post-1950s artists went to school before they went to art school ...\textsuperscript{15}

The critic refers to the boom in post-1950s American commercial media production and its underground counterparts, often surprisingly close in tone, like Sex to Sexy, Zap Comix, or MAD magazine, clearly referenced in Kelley’s artworks. This is the cultural diet - and a decidedly lapsarian one - that substitutes for those ‘piazzas with the long shadows, or whatever,’ that Jim Shaw imagines gestating in the early memories of the European surrealists.\textsuperscript{16} An American surrealism, that is, cannot look like European surrealism, whatever the strength of its connection to its antecedents; for Kelley’s generation, it will inevitably be far ‘goopier’ in form and, indeed, content.

In part, this is because surrealism as a period style, as Shaw tells Kelley, has degenerated ‘from a revolutionary force into an advertising gimmick.’\textsuperscript{17} Mostly, though, it is because the warp and weft of modern American life yields very different objects from those of interwar France. Shaw’s collection of thrift store paintings, which resembles in spirit Kelley’s own collection of thrift store handmade toys, functions, for example, as a knowingly ersatz version of the surrealist trouvaille: ‘Collecting the thrift store paintings was sort of like sifting through Life magazines from 1942. I was sifting through the American subconscious by going to thrift stores - not just looking at paintings [largely ‘fucked-up portraits,’ he says], but everything ...’\textsuperscript{18} More mundane than the St-Ouen flea market so beloved of André Breton, perhaps Shaw’s sense of the thrift store as the American repressed - objects denied or denuded of monetary value and cultural status - still works rather as Walter Benjamin imagined the early surrealist interest in the ‘outmoded.’ For Benjamin, ‘fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them,’ or ‘the first iron constructions,’ can startle their viewer into the revolutionary perception that temporal experience is inextricably bound to political economy.\textsuperscript{19} So too amateur paintings, or lovingly stitched unwanted toys, that end up adrift in the thrift
store, show us an underside to, or critically refracted perspective on, ‘normal’ social relationships and everyday economies. And it is to Kelley’s toy works that I now turn.

Toy Story 1

Several years after Confusion, and taking a rather different tack, Kelley’s 1987 work, More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid, placed the soft toy motif centre-stage as all-over painting, satirising the masculine, Greenbergian sublimity of abstract expressionism. The wildly colourful Love Hours featured dozens of second-hand, hand-made dolls of multiple types vertically displayed edge-to-edge across wall-mounted afghans, stitched to a canvas. The assemblage is surmounted by two apparent quotation marks made from folksy corn sheaves; installed to the front and left of the piece is a sculpture - a pedestal of phallic wax candles entitled The Wages of Sin (1987). The ‘feminised’ handiwork of the stitched dolls contrasts as much with the contemporary ‘hard’ commodity art of figures like Jeff Koons and Haim Steinbach as it does with the butch ghosts of action painting, a performance Kelley saw as ‘gender bending.’ Action painters were themselves much indebted, of course, to surrealist ideas of the automatic and aleatory. For his part, Kelley's long-standing editor and interlocutor John C. Welchman notes that the soft toy pieces ‘engage in a specific dialogue with the ‘classical,’ enshelved commodity objects of Haim Steinbach, one of the defining gestures in the New York appropriationism that dominated the 1980s art world.’ But appropriation art too, we should note, has its beginnings in the dada readymade and the surrealist trouvaille; even in its most calculating manifestation it gains its frisson from the queer ontology of objects that are ‘out of place’ in a gallery. Kelley’s objects seem thus to perform a kind of eductive critical work on the genres he references, bringing surrealism to light as a common predecessor.

Over the next four years, numerous explorations of the possibilities of the toy works were executed: sculptural forms like the towering toy snake Plush Kundalini and Chakra Set (1987); the 1990 Arena series, which sited soft toys on rugs horizontally, referencing the low-rise work of Carl André and others, and the 1991 Dialogues series, which added boom-boxes to the mix, were produced. ‘Occupying little territories on the ground,’ Welchman again writes, ‘these works wormed out their niche in that “down and dirty” lineage of floored production, stretching back to Jackson Pollock, and recently associated with “base materialism” and the informe.’ The artist also made his Empathy Displacement paintings in 1990 based on the toys, and his ‘hanging sculptures’ in 1991: objects consisting of toys balled into large plush masses, heads buried inwards, away from their viewer, and suspended by pulleys amidst angular, shiny plexiglass sculptures.

Tiring, however, of audience responses, which had started to associate the toy works too readily with notions of child abuse, either metaphorically or as autobiographical confession, Kelley closed this branch of his production with Craft Morphology Flow Chart (1991), a large installation of drawings, photographs and toys on tables, which displayed, measured and categorised sock-monkey types using methods reminiscent of the scientific racism of the Victorian era.
Toy Story 2

Discussing his 1990 Arena #10 installation, which featured a line of handmade dog dolls - ‘autograph hounds’ designed to be written upon - strung out across an afghan, Kelley noted an uncomfortable double-consciousness in his work:

I toyed with the viewer’s inclination to project into the figures, to construct an inner narrative around them, which I would argue makes viewers less aware of their own physical presence. To counter this tendency, and thus make the viewer more self-conscious, I used extremely worn and soiled craft materials … Fear of soiling themselves countered the urge to idealize.26 Of course, ordinarily, nobody wants to soil themselves. Any pleasurable engagement in the narrativisation or idealisation of these otherwise archetypically cute figures is undercut by the signs and smells of the bodies of others, especially anonymous others. Dirt has the power to put one on guard, both in the form of fussy self-attention and as a kind of police action. Mary Douglas famously pointed out that dirt ‘offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment.’27 Dirt forces us to differentiate between good and bad, sacred and profane; hence, we do not empathise with these smelly toy figures.

Fig. 1: Mike Kelley, Arena #10 (Dogs), 1990, Stuffed animals on afghan, 11.5 x 123 x 32 inches. Photo: Douglas M. Parker

But there is another side to the soiled dogs of Arena #10 and the other dolls in Kelley’s series, which draws us in because they are dirty. As the artist himself and a number of his critics have suggested, these toy works closely resemble what child psychologist D. M. Winnicott called
‘transitional objects’: the means by which infants negotiate the world beyond themselves, exploring the space once occupied by the mother. Such objects, typically soft toys, Winnicott tells us, are always allowed to remain soiled, lest a break be caused in the continuity of the infant’s experience and development. David Hopkins reads this reference to suggest that:

Kelley’s work is thus parodic, although ambivalently so, of late-twentieth-century American obsessions with child abuse and ‘correct’ psychological development. His blankets and knitted toys are clearly as much bound up with critiquing contemporary discourses of childhood as they are with childish fantasy itself. In his best work it is hard to separate out Kelley’s investment in his subject matter from his critique of its societal institutionalisation.

Like Levine, Hopkins regards Kelley as primarily a critic of ideological hygiene. His comments do not, however, seem fully to acknowledge the capacity of these Winnicottian objects to generate a kind of intimate repulsiveness, akin to what Aurel Kolnai once called an ‘eroticism of disgust,’ with all the ambivalence and atavism that might imply.

To take Arena #10 as an example, we might note firstly that the scene is one of sex: a line of autographed hounds, marked with such disturbing legends as, ‘Have fun at your new school. Love. Dawn,’ are doing it doggy-style, a snake-like protuberance or serpentine fuckee at one end, a toy seal at the other. A friendly walrus sits atop a tomato to watch. In his exhibition essay on Arenas, Cary Levine spots the voyeurism of #10 which surely replays and confuses the roles of spectator and object, adult and child - and cites Freud’s remark that, rather than imagine the adult to become a pervert, ‘it would be more correct to say that he had remained one.’

Levine’s implication is that the toys have been soiled by the pre-adult sexual impulses of their child-owners. It might be better to suggest that in this and other assemblages in the Arenas, Kelley folds together representations of both adult and child: the ‘transitional object’ in this way takes on a metaphorical function, recalling his attention to the grotesque. The originary polymorphousness of the child - signalled here by the two-headed dog that forms the centrepiece to #10 - becomes a lost utopia that can only be reimagined in a lapsarian vernacular of loss and horror. Smell functions as the discipline of repulsion, signalling the imperative for distance; yet it also erotically and insidiously inveigles the spectator into a more unselving identification. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it,

The multifarious nuances of the sense of smell embody the archetypal longing for the lower forms of existence, for direct unification with circumambient nature, with the earth and mud. Of all the senses, that of smell - which is attracted without objectifying - bears clearest witness to the urge to lose oneself in and become the ‘other.’

Respiring in this heady medium, the little scenes of kidult activity the Arenas display involve not only gangbangs but ‘low’ popular cultural imagery, like alien autopsies; others show conferences, loneliness, quotidian situations. Such scenes are tragicomic: childhood appears not as Rousseauian idyll but as perverse, alien. In the Arenas, only a partially resistant trace, maybe a simulation, of what ‘socially constructed reality’ represses, can appear.
**Enjoy Your Symptom**

Kelley allows us to smile when we experience such vignettes, and occupy such divided perspectives. One is reminded of that Baudelairean irony which finds its highest form in laughing at itself. But perhaps this is what Hal Foster means when he identifies the aimlessness of the abject art moment as it superseded 1980s postmodernism. Foster focuses his comments on artists like Andres Serrano, the later Cindy Sherman, and on Kelley himself. No longer linked to a notion of art as an agent of history or even to a sense of the activity and affirmation of postmodern ‘play,’ the art of abjection, for Foster, instead submits itself to techniques of disaggregation and de-selving. ‘If there is a subject of history for the culture of abjection at all, it is not the Worker, the Woman, or the Person of Color, but the Corpse,’ Foster writes, scathingly. ‘This is a politics of difference pushed beyond indifference, a politics of alterity pushed to nihility. “Everything goes dead,” says the Kelley teddy. “Like us,” responds the bunny.’

Detecting also a note of curious self-satisfaction in this wound-culture, Foster wonders if the goal of the abject artist is nothing more than perverse self-aggrandisement. The success of abject practice, like that of the self-harmer, is achieved simply through the pained registration of the ‘object-gaze of the real’: an accession to whatever unspeakable other threatens or mortifies the subject, against which dark horizon all signification gratefully fails. For Foster, figures like Kelley become the privileged bearers of a pervasive *lingua tra uma* which functions as a quietist, affirmative culture: keep still and carry on. Enjoy your symptom!

In this sense, and importantly for the present essay, Foster thus finds that the art of abjection goes no further than the antecedent he finds for it in surrealism. Bifurcated into the two tendencies represented by André Breton and Georges Bataille, surrealism, for him, offers two, ultimately unsuccessful attempts at the desublimation (and, presumably, transformation) of repressed experience in the symbolic order of life in capitalism: the ‘broken society’ in question, for Foster. Firstly, there is what he calls Breton’s ‘Oedipal naughtiness,’ where the transgression effected by dream, desire, automatism, the marvellous encounter and so on, becomes a rebellious gesture seeking only confirmation in and by the symbolic law. The surrealism of Breton, Desnos, Soupault, Eluard, Aragon et al, failed to achieve what Walter Benjamin once asked of it: ‘To win the energies of intoxication for the revolution.’ Yet on the other hand, Bataille’s base materialism, with its lower-than-low anti-aesthetic, deliberately offers nothing more (or less) than the love of the fetish, the delight of taboo, the deliquescence of the high to the low, the horizontal, the base and the waste.

**The Form of Informe**

It is well-known that Kelley admired Bataille: throughout Kelley’s oeuvre, one can see the influence of *informe*, the formless mode Bataille advocated. One might refer back to the *Poltergeist* photographs (1979), shot by David Askevold, with their images of Kelley streaming with ‘ectoplasm’ (literally, ‘outside something formed’) and texts about teenage angst, to see an early example. And writing in the same 1996 edition of *October* that carried Foster’s critique of abject art, Rosalind Krauss decisively framed Kelley’s reception in terms of Bataillean theory:
The stuffed animals of the works called *Arena* ... in which these dirty, handcrafted toys sit on crocheted blankets like so many soiled underbellies of elite culture - or to use the German word for turd, the *lumpf*-like objects that appear in some of Kelley's drawings - owe their capacity for subversion in Bataille's sense, which is to say the operation of transgression from beneath, to their very indeterminacy. 

While Krauss's comments are persuasive, it is worth noting what Kelley said about his *Free Gesture Frozen Yet Refusing to Submit to Personification* painting series (1998):

> I’ve used these goopy kinds of forms so many times now, however, that I can no longer see them as non-compositional. A while back I used them as some kind of play with the abject - the unformed. Now I just see them as complex forms.

Abject, 'goopy forms,' deployed by Kelley, as we know, since his undergraduate work, refer both to the legacy of action painting and to Bataille's ideas. But, as he suggests, they are complex forms: aesthetic and art-historical forms. The artist, then, appropriates and mobilises such forms not only for their 'immediate' abject effect but also as a discursive move. This seems pivotal to understanding his work, much of which, especially the soft toy installations, engages with the discourses of surrealism, both Bataillean and Bretonian, but in a way rather different from both Foster and Krauss's readings.

Using notions of baseness and a desublimatory art of desire, repression and the unconscious, Kelley revisits the surrealist idiom to probe further the possibilities for subversion and transgression in the symbolic order. These investigations operate, however, more by way of interference than transcendence. Kelley's practice is directed more towards critique than the exposition of a new aesthetic language. As opposed to Levine's reading, where Kelley is the floating sceptic, I would suggest the artist achieves a more clearly politicised stance.

One can see this in his admiration for Magritte and Dalí, for example, which derives from their reanimation of the imagery of bourgeois art:

> Their style was antithetical to that of other surrealist painters like André Masson or Joan Miró, whose paintings ... could be said to operate expressively in an attempt to transcend language and the sign ... What was to the modernists a despicable world of conventional, academic imagery became an open field of taboos and dead signs that could be rearranged at will.

Perhaps Kelley is mistaken to imagine that surrealist attempts to go beyond referential language and signification were so different from his own. Louis Aragon said of early surrealism that, 'We were busy marrying sounds to each other in order to rebuild things, endlessly proceeding to metamorphoses, calling forth strange animals.' Aragon's play with linguistic permutations, creating new connections and ideas, reminds us of Lautréamont's famous encounter between the umbrella and sewing machine. Such games prefigured the semiotic reading of surrealism suggested by Kelley and scholars such as Rosalind Krauss, Jane Livingstone and Dawn Ades. Whether the signs Kelley himself uses are alive or dead will be an issue here. His toy work, to which I will return presently, addresses the possibility of symbolic disruption by dealing with ideas of *economy* that deploy affect in a political way. As gifts, as tokens, as signifiers in the wider *langue* of social relations, toy objects will become more than themselves. They will become the animated register of a repressed real.
School Daze

Of course, Foster is right to say that Kelley plays with representations of trauma. The artist’s architectural scale model project *Education Complex* (1995), for example, recreates all the buildings in which he was educated, but leaves about eighty percent of the labyrinthine and rather beautiful structure blank or generically filled-in to account for the traumas that occurred in those sites and which caused the architect to repress their memories. This might well sound like victim culture, but the work in fact exists in part as satirical comment on the 80s and 90s media sensation that became known as false memory syndrome; in *Educational Complex*, Kelley is as much social diagnostician as pathological subject, commenting drily on the new ubiquity of the psychological trope. Much as Hopkins suggests above with regard to Kelley’s criticism of ‘healthy’ child-rearing, this is a satire or caricature of the popular institutionalisation of a psychoanalytic discourse. Contra Foster’s notion of a *lingua trauma* sustaining Kelley’s practice, the artist mocks the latter’s colonisation of popular culture. But as it coolly tracks the artist’s intra-institutional art career for blots, for ‘trauma,’ exteriorising, concretising and socialising that phenomenon, *Complex* poses the education system as repressive ideological apparatus - a vital component of that ‘social construction of reality’ mentioned above.

Fig. 2: Mike Kelley, *Educational Complex*, 1995, Acrylic, latex, foamcore, fiberglass, wood, 51 x 192 x 96 inches.

On another level, as Anthony Vidler notes, the work quite seriously problematises the very structure and mode of exposition of personal and historical memory, translating them from psychic and narrative models to something quasi-architectural. He draws on Freud’s notion of the screen...
memory, where an affective memory is displaced by another one, to question the degree to which ‘presentism’ displaces our capacity for objective recollection. *Educational Complex*, Vidler writes, is an ‘interrogation of space as a primary vehicle for tracing [memory’s] repression and recovery.’\textsuperscript{48} The *Complex* structure blurs the distinction between architecture, sculpture and text; between intimate and public knowledge; and it questions where memory and experience are lodged.

Arguably, a work like *Educational Complex* shares strong affinities with the surrealist encounter between the subject and quotidian life; in its investigation of the relation between the interior space of memory, self-relation, and the exterior environment, *Complex* resembles a more sober version of Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* (1926), with its ‘modern mythology’ and suggestions of revelatory encounter. Aragon’s flaneurial eye makes an account of Parisian rooms, streets, arcades and parks, always aware that much remains hidden and marvellous both to himself and the denizens of the city interpellates:

\begin{quote}
Men pass their lives in the midst of magic precipices without even opening their eyes ... It is enough to make one shudder to see a bourgeois family taking its morning coffee without ever noticing the unknowable that shows through the tablecloth’s red and white chequered pattern.\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

This scene, relayed with a ‘shudder,’ evokes Vidler’s account of the bourgeois uncanny: a class ‘not quite at home in its own house,’ opened to its own contingency.\textsuperscript{50} For the agonised witness to whom the sensation occurs here, not the uncomprehending family, the cheery rectilinear grid of the tablecloth - the exoskeleton of the bourgeois self-image - shows through to something precipitous, vertiginous. One is reminded of the collages of Max Ernst, like those in *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934), where Victorian interiors, the houses of the fathers, are mysteriously invaded by mythical beasts, waterfalls, snakes.

While it may appear homogeneous - *Complex* is blandly white throughout, like a bone - Kelley’s presentation of a life projected back to itself through an experience of buildings, where screen memories fill in the gaps, is not so different from the comic phantasmagoria of Ernst, or the hallucinatory submarine world of Aragon. Indeed, it might be said that the whole of *Complex* is a white screen onto which a film, part-fact, mostly fiction, is playing, as Kelley’s failing, perhaps repressed memories are supplemented and conditioned by other material. But my film-screen metaphor is a poor one: this work of recovery, displacement and imagination occurs as the movement and contour of space and form, hence its colourlessness. *Complex* obeys the rules of sculpture as well as being a maquette and a kind of text; its seamless modelling extrudes a strange, hybrid, but utterly naturalised object. And what draws it into the realm of the surreal is the solubility it shows us of physical, textual and psychic realities. Ernst’s collages, which are expertly put together, and Aragon’s mythicised prose, also benefit from this sense of completion, ‘an ambivalent ontological reality, renouncing mimesis; constructed as a simulacrum ...,’ as Elza Adamowicz writes of Magritte.\textsuperscript{51}
In an interview with the sculptor John Miller, Kelley explains the initial impetus for making *Love Hours*:

The first piece I did with stuffed animals, for example, wasn’t even about stuffed animals but was about gifts. That was because the primary discussion in the art world at that time had to do with commodification. There were these Utopian ideas being bandied about, ‘Well, we can make an art object that can’t be commodified.’ What’s that? That’s a gift. If I give you this art-thing, it’s going to escape the evils of capitalism.  

Obviously Kelley does not imagine his work to exist outside the circuits of speculation, prestige, and capital exchange associated with the art-world. But neither does he wish to foreground or exploit the commodified aspect of the art object either, making that issue the centre of his work, visually or conceptually. Welchman describes Kelley’s doll works as ‘clenched in a retort to the *noli me tangere* seduction of the mass-produced commodity and the metropolitan vitrine.’ Kelley himself distances his work from the commodity aesthetics of appropriation art and neo-Pop because ‘there is in it some investment in mass culture on the level of desire. I’m of another generation. I have a more critical relationship to mass culture.’ His choice of materials - the exceptionally demoted, ‘invisible’ cottage labour of anonymous people producing hackneyed and ultimately generic gifts for their
children - is thus a turn away from consumer culture and towards popular producer culture. *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid*, the first gift work, is not, then, especially interested in taste, even if it does have an interest in desire. The work uneathrs and brings into the gallery strange, kitsch, familiar little totems from everyday American life; a slightly downbeat, more materialist version of the surrealist *trouvaille*, shorn of the magical connection the latter makes with the artist, but selected by Kelley for cultural-political reasons no less magical, in their way.

It is worth citing at length what Kelley says of these objects:

> They speak the language of the wage earner in which there is a one-to-one relationship between time spent and worth. The equation is not between time and money, it is a more obscure relationship drawn between time and commitment, one that results in a kind of emotional usury. The gift operates within an economy of guilt; an endless feeling of indebtedness attends it because of its mysterious worth. And the highly loaded nature of these objects is intensified by their material nature: by the seeming contradiction that their emotional weight far exceeds the weight of the cheap and lowly materials from which they are constructed.

Everything in *Love Hours* seems to allude to the mysteries of affective economy and how value is derived, exemplified in the heuristic disparity between the emotional significance and material cost of the ‘raw’ materials. The same point could be made of the assemblages in the *Arena* series even more emphatically since the olfactory evidence of dirt in them plainly signals valuelessness to its audience. One might speculate that *Love Hours* dolls represent non-commodified labour, driven directly by ‘commitment.’ But in another essay, Kelley clarifies the gold standard here: cognate with ‘guilt’ (gilt?), ‘What must be given in repayment is “love” itself,’ Kelley writes. ‘Love, however, has no fixed worth, so the rate of exchange can never be set. Thus, the child is put in the position of being a perpetually indentured servant.’ Expressing a supposedly ineffable economy of feeling in classically capitalist terms, *Love Hours* thus presents intergenerational relationships in terms parallel to quasi-slavery, or even developing-world debt. The rhyme with such inherently violent and totalised economies is significant here since it suggests these relations of indebtedness as the fulcrum of all social and cultural formations springing from them. Later we will see how Marcel Mauss imagined a society of gift to order social life totally.

Interestingly, Winnicott includes something as absolute as Kelley in the remarkable description of the transitional object from *Playing and Reality*; for the psychologist, the intermediate area the object defines is: ‘between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism [sic] and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgement of indebtedness [my italics]. Again, the equation made here, if unwittingly, is a primary ‘emotional usury’ that renders love like a relationship of economic exchange, and perhaps vice versa. In the very first stages of representative thought, Winnicott seems to suggest, a balance-book is opened up; already there is interest to pay.

Usury, or interest-bearing capital is, as Karl Marx points out, capital’s ‘most superficial and fetishised form,’ one that always summons dubious familial relationships. It is capital at its most illusory and lifelike: a double of life. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx cites Aristotle in the latter’s
condemnation of usurer’s interest: ‘For the offspring [interest] resembles the parent. But interest is money, so that of all modes of making a living, this is the most contrary to Nature.’ Later, in Capital III, Marx describes the seeming self-reproduction of ‘money’s body’ through the interest relation as being ‘by love possessed’ (a reference to Goethe’s Faust). With usury, that is, money seems actually alive and generative: it’s the contradictory acme of the commodity fetish where the latter’s most abstract form is realized as full, tangible concretion. Metaphorically, it’s the abusive parent who would possess the child absolutely, a familiar topic for Kelley.

All this seems to add up to a clear attempt on Kelley’s part to desublimate, using the realia of the everyday, some of the invisible forces structuring feeling in the life of capitalism. The handmade toy behaves much like the surrealist poupée, but unlike the dolls of, say, Hans Bellmer (or even the mannequins of André Masson), it does not register social violence or social conflict in a physical drama of dismemberment or collaged recomposition, as Foster argues in Compulsive Beauty. Rather, in its very inertness and blob-like impermeability, the doll alludes to the notion of the abstract unit: its role as counter, gift or currency-token articulating wider relationships within which an implicit violence occurs. But because these relationships are between subjects of capitalism, between whom, as Marx famously says, ‘the definite social relation … assumes … the fantastic form of a relation between things,’ the doll, like money, seems alive. Discarded objects from thrift stores, these dolls have only nugatory financial value; they are tokens of love. An odd doubling occurs also, as the ‘coin’ mimes the qualities of its users. In the catalogue he wrote for the exhibition The Uncanny, a major show curated for the Sonsbeek 93 sculpture exhibition in Arnhem, Holland in 1993, Kelley alerts us to a longstanding tradition of such things. Including an ushabti, or small Egyptian statue in the exhibition, he notes its purpose as a double, ‘a shadow of yourself bound to perpetual slavery. All popular sculpture … has this plebeian quality.

Man and Mauss

This kind of double-flow of love and guilt, or the tendency of love and guilt and memories of discipline to accrete within these objects, can be understood more clearly by reference to Mauss’s The Gift (1925). In this influential study, Mauss provides anthropological evidence that societies - from Polynesia, Micronesia and Northwestern America - are primarily organised around gift-giving rituals that possibly precede barter and certainly precede individualised monetary exchange. For pre-industrial society, everything – people, goods, rituals – ‘passes to and fro as if there were a constant exchange of a spiritual matter, including things and men, between clans and individuals, distributed between social ranks, the sexes, and the generations.’ Gifts must be returned and in greater quantity, Mauss tells us, and so they order society by creating ever-renewed relationships of obligation.

Famously, Mauss provides some Maori testimony regarding the hau of the gift, which means the gift’s identity as spirit. A gift received is part of the giver’s ‘soul’ so that even if it is passed on to another party, any remuneration or love that comes back from the latter is part of the hau and must be returned again to the original donor. In other words ‘the thing given is not inactive’ but part of a
complex, multi-layered system of moral and spiritual exchange. While this part of Mauss’s text is hotly contested, perhaps it is enough to note that gift-giving societies configure social relationships on a non-individualised basis, and that the animism of the gift - its hau - binds groups together. David Graeber explains it thus:

In every case, the most valuable objects in gift economies are valued primarily because they embody some human quality, whether this be the creative potential of human action, or fertility, or the like, or particular histories and identities that have already been achieved.

I will return to the matter of the hau shortly. It is worth noting briefly that one of the people influenced by Mauss’s study was Georges Bataille, particularly in his text *Le part maudit (The Accursed Share)* (1949). Here, Bataille crystallised much of his thought on the ‘value’ of waste, expenditure without return, or the sumptuary economy ‘without reserve’ that seemed indicated by the *potlatch* about which Mauss wrote, where gifts took the form of the destruction of goods, valuables and reserves. But where Bataille focuses on the exorbitance of gift-giving and wild expenditure as the laudably destructive opposite of bourgeois parsimony, for Mauss, even the *potlatch* is ‘essentially usurious.’

Despite the utopian content of *The Gift* - the possibility the text holds out for a society organised entirely outside capitalist principles - relationships of obligation and indebtedness are the essence of social ties. Like the love hours that can never be repaid, gifts bind the participants powerfully together. Indeed, the gifts in Kelley’s work grade easily back from non-capitalist gifts to the fetishised objects of capitalist exchange.

It is the animism of the gift that allows us to read Kelley alongside Mauss (the connection via Bataille notwithstanding) most usefully. Like the familiar of the plebeian statue, the doll uncannily incorporates the wider relationships it articulates. The superposition of adult and child behaviour that we saw in the *Arena* work is visible in the doll as gift, for example. And Kelley tells us that the ‘stuffed animal is a pseudo-child, a cutified, sexless being that represents the adult’s perfect model of a child - a neutered pet,’ which also catches some of that animistic quality and makes clear the power relationships in the objects. We know, however, from *Nostalgic Depiction* that this process goes both ways, and that the doll can be a cue for regression too.

Most pertinently, though, Kelley borrows from the utopianism of Mauss the sense that gifts spiritually embody the community; each with a face, each a token of love. He does so not to recover anything of the organic, pre-industrial mode of social life, but to demonstrate what it feels like to live within the regimen of the commodity fetish. The uncanny life of the commodity, naturalised in capitalist society, is denatured in *More Love Hours* really by taking it ‘at its word.’ By showing non-living things as living, by showing us the impossible face of the gift economy, he reminds us that we always take non-living things to be living; we always imagine objects to be subjects. That is the odd magic of the capitalist everyday: it looks and feels like a folk economy. And perhaps that is why the corn sheaves surmount the canvas. The quotation marks they form there suggest that we behave ‘as if’ there were such a thing as a gift.
Coda: Lumpenprole

Bearing these ideas in mind, we might recall Krauss’s comments on the prevalence of the lumpf motif in Kelley’s drawing work, and the lumpf-like qualities of the sock-monkey objects Kelley creates. In those works such as Arena #7, where the toys are hidden underneath the afghan, the work Lumpenprole (1991), in which a very large afghan secretes a number of large bulges, or, in even more lumpen fashion, the ‘hanging sculptures’ (1991) mentioned at the beginning here, which bundle and weigh large globs of faceless plush toys, something covert, or really pathetic is happening. The connotations are of the excremental, the heterological, as Krauss points out: more dissident surrealism. Yet in addition to those meanings, could it be that these shapeless blobs share something with the dolls attached to the Love Hours afghan? Perhaps the works of Arena and the other projects still retain elements of the gift economy. If so, could these accumulations be imagined as hoards? Jacques Derrida, in Spectres of Marx, shows how hoarding, for Marx, was like burying a body; by hiding the material corpus, one is free to idealise and fetishise ‘pure exchange value,’ as the hoarder or miser must do. Reduced to a mere lump, something hidden and repressed, oddly the doll can be experienced at its most animated. It is once again the poupée upon which desire can play.

Craft Morphology Flow Chart, however, catches the other side of this. Part of the point of using stuffed toys is their capacity for ‘projection.’

Fig. 4: Mike Kelley, Craft Morphology Flow Chart, 1991, Mixed media installation, Dimensions variable, Installation view, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, 1991. Photo: Eric Baum
In his essay ‘In the Image of Man,’ Kelley suggests that there is an ineluctable desire to project a ‘Platonic’ human onto crude doubling images, hence *Craft Morphology* attempts to strip back possibilities for such investment:

First, the crafts are arranged categorically, according to construction technique and shape, on simple folding tables. Second, every one of these items, accompanied by a ruler to show its true size, has been photographed. And third, one representative grouping of craft items - the collection of ‘sock monkeys’ - has been rendered in a large black-and-white drawing reminiscent of archaeological illustration. Through this reiteration, I propose that the psychological baggage that usually attends such objects has been discarded. Of course, by attempting to repress them, these emotional qualities become even more pervasive.

Kelley may wish to stress the persistence of sentiment, a fetishised and abstracted idea of the ‘human.’ But perversely, although it is facilitated by that notional figure, I suggest that it is exactly the *thinginess* of these craftworks that evokes the viewer’s empathy, their complex admixture of pathos and bathos. As much as these works allow us to experience as a kind of oscillation our commodified selves, or our subjecthood as thinghood, there is a small redemptive content here. It appears not in the satisfaction, love, work, or beauty of the objects but their simple ability to generate another kind of materiality, the recognition of a kind of base materialism or corporeality upon which the superstructures of capitalist sentiments are erected, an uncanny flashback to the self as thing. Hence the experience of the artwork allows both a mastering, aestheticised view many times underwritten through the regimes of categorization and cognition the work sets up, and also this other apprehension of the self as the object of scrutiny, of the gaze, a sensation Kelley associates elsewhere with a version of the death-drive, or the *desire* to return to thinghood. That surrealist desire to precipitate from the germinal plasma of the unconscious some new beast finds its fullest expression in this rediscovery of thinghood: the kernel of trauma that punctures a rationalised quotidian. Such an apprehension of the persistent physicality not just of the self, but the mind, offers a more general resistance to that subsumption by everyday culture of which Marcuse warns, and correspondingly generates within that field the possibility of critique. As Theodor Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, ‘the mind’s … reminder of its physical aspect … is the only source of whatever hope the mind can have.’

---


8 Interview with Cary Levine in 2010. See Cary Levine, Pay for your Pleasures, 57.

9 For example, ‘Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw,’ and ‘Jim Shaw: Here Comes Everybody,’ ibid., 176.

10 Levine’s argument borrows from Peter Sloterdijk’s 1982 Critique of Cynical Reason and the latter’s recuperation of the kynic to construct the floating ironist.


12 See Oliver Harris, William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 2006, for the genealogy of Burroughs’ manuscripts and techniques.


15 Storr, ‘Disparities and Deformations,’ 118.

16 Mike Kelley and Jim Shaw, ‘Jim Shaw: Here Comes Everybody,’ 167.

17 Ibid., 166.

18 Ibid., 177.


20 Mike Kelley, ‘Foul Perfection: Some Thoughts on Caricature,’ 32.

21 See Martica Sawin, Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1995, for the standard account of this set of transactions. On the topic of the ‘butchness’ of the toy work, with its attention to feminised labour, see Levine, Pay For Your Pleasures, op cit., 59-61, or Levine, Mike Kelley: Arenas, 9-10 for a discussion of how some feminist artists and critics have objected on somewhat essentialist grounds to Kelley’s appropriation of a traditionally feminised craft.


23 See André Breton’s Mad Love for his famous account of finding the unusual mask in the flea market that would complete Giacometti’s Invisible Object sculpture. André Breton, Mad Love, trans. Mary-Ann Caws, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1987 (1937), 32.

See for example, Ralph Rugoff’s comments on the “whiff of pederasty” around the works. Ralph Rugoff, catalogue text, Just Pathetic, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles, 1990, 5.


Ibid., 109. Foster relates this Lacanian idea to Freud’s death drive.


To cite one of Slavoj Žižek’s memorable catchphrases.

Foster, ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,’ 118.

Walter Benjamin, ‘The Last Snapshot,’ 236.

Extracts from Bataille’s (anti-)foundational essay on Sade, ‘The Use-value of D.A.F. de Sade’ are included, for example, as the ‘artist’s choice’ for theory in John Welchman’s collection, Mike Kelley. See Welchman et al, 108-110.

See Mike Kelley and David Askevold, ‘The Poltergeist,’ in Mike Kelley, Minor Histories, 254-5.

Rosalind Krauss, “Informe” without Conclusion, October Vol. 78 (Autumn, 1996), 103. This reading, cited from the edition of October devoted to the informe in which Foster’s work is published too - represents a kind of high water mark in the critical reception of abject art. It follows a series of big shows like Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art (1993) at the Whitney Museum in New York City, indebted curatorially to Julia Kristeva’s 1980 essay on the abject, Powers of Horror.


Mike Kelley, ‘Playing With Dead Things,’ 92.


Mike Kelley, ‘Playing With Dead Things,’ 19.
48 See Anthony Vidler, ‘Mike Kelley’s Educational Complex,’ 96.


54 ‘Isabelle Graw in Conversation with Mike Kelley,’ 24.

55 Mike Kelley, ‘In the Image of Man’ in *Minor Histories*, 52.

56 Mike Kelley, Three Projects: Half a Man, From My Institution to Yours, Pay for Your Pleasure,’ in *Minor Histories*, 15.


63 Marx, *Capital I*, 165.

64 Mike Kelley, ‘Playing With Dead Things,’ 88.


72 See Mike Kelley, *Foul Perfection*, 25. This is also cognate with Foster’s comments from ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic,’ cited above.

Dr Doug Haynes is a lecturer in American Literature at the University of Sussex. His interests are in modern and contemporary American literature and visual art, particularly as they interact with Critical Theory. He has published work on Thomas Pynchon (about whom he is currently writing a monograph), William Burroughs, surrealism and black humour, Nathanael West and ‘unhappy consciousness,’ Louise Bourgeois, Mike Kelley and has work forthcoming on Flannery O’Connor and Theodor Adorno.
Alice in Wonderland, Tate Liverpool, 4 November, 2011 - 29 January, 2012

Alice in Wonderland Through the Visual Arts, Edited by Gavin Delahunty and Christoph Benjamin Schulz, Tate Publishing, Liverpool, 2011, 192 pp., 120 colour illus., ISBN 978-1-85437-991-7

I almost wish I hadn’t gone down that rabbit-hole – and yet – and yet – it’s rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what can have happened to me! When I used to read fairy tales, I fancied that kind of thing never happened, and now here I am in the middle of one! There ought to be a book written about me, that there ought! And when I grow up, I’ll write one.¹

Originally presented in 1864 by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson as ‘A Christmas Gift to a Dear Child in Memory of a Summer Day,’ Alice’s Adventures Underground was a product borne of boredom, of an attempt to keep the attention of the young Alice Liddell and her sisters on a boating trip in Oxford on 4th July 1862. Over 150 years later, Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass continue to hold the reader’s attention, to persist and to entertain. The winter exhibition seeks to explore, retell and invite a world of adventures that, throughout their histories have never once been out of publication, and to have them writ both large and small across the walls and gallery spaces of Tate Liverpool.

Beginning from the moment of departure, a turning back and a looking back, to a super-sized girl projected in light across the gallery’s warehouse façade, it is Alice who draws back the curtain, into, across and around the curated Wonderland inside. Fittingly, it is John Tenniel’s illustration, drawn from and influenced by Dodgson’s original manuscript that beckons. His were the most recognisable, lingering and influential of designs - the hand that gave Alice her dress and pinafore, her black strap-pumps and big flowing hair - producing the Alice we know (or at least, we think we do). So to be greeted inside by Jason Rhoades’ bright neon scrawls (Tate Touche from My Madinah: in pursuit of my ermitage, 2004) is a very curious thing indeed. Already shrunk, the visitor looks up, moves through and across the graphic language (graphic in every sense of the word- ‘Caterpillar’ beside ‘Brazilian’ beside ‘Hole’), whilst Annelies Štrba’s Nyima series (2009) - smudgy dreamworlds, cloud-like colour formations, forest undergrowth and pink-cheeked, shut-eyed solitary girls in frothy dresses - frame the walls. It is clear from the off that, just as in Wonderland, nothing is to be quite as expected. Curators Christoph Benjamin Schulz and Gavin Delahunty set themselves no easy task in seeking to draw together both image and text to bring out the many visions, versions and variations of Alice. Childhood and adulthood collide, and confusion and intrigue take the visitor not down down down, but up up up the stairs to the main exhibition space.

Here, at first, things seem a little more familiar. Deep red walls and velveteen curtains, glass cabinet displays and books upon books, the origins of Alice open up the exhibition. On show for only the second time outside of the British Library, Carroll’s original 1864 ninety-page illustrated manuscript rightly takes the stage in this theatrically-themed space, the set for the setting of the story. Theatre
programmes of early stage adaptations, tea tins, playing cards and printed fabrics busy the space, but
the stories’ pages open out, bringing play into the consumptive everyday. Attention is paid too to the
‘real’- Dodgson’s life exhibited in original plates and prints portraying the Liddell sisters feeding each
other cherries, Xie Kitchin as Tea Merchant (1873), and Alice as a Beggar Maid (1858), marking the
slippage between his Oxford life and the imagination, both set free and fixed by the camera lens.
There are a selection of Pre-Raphaelite works here by friends and associates, William Holman Hunt
and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, that, as contemporaries of Dodgson introduce the relationship between art
and fiction that persists throughout the exhibition. John Everett Millais’ daughter Mary in Waking
(1865) and George Dunlop Leslie’s Alice in Wonderland (1879) prepare the viewer for reading Alice
through the trope of a little girl’s listening-in.

With a large section of the exhibition dedicated to surrealism, there is a focus on the disruption of
conventional interpretations of text and image. Reading representations of dreams as ‘constrained by
neither the laws of nature nor the limitations of human reasoning’ Schulz notes in surrealism the
‘manifest parallels to the situations Alice experiences in her dream-travels in Wonderlands and in the
realms behind the looking-glass.’ Deriving from a fascination with the uncanny and unexpected, the
surrealist allusions to and recruitment of Alice are multi-faceted and manifested on many levels;
ranging from literary reference to fantasy and self-reflection, with Dodgson proffered as ‘artistic
predecessor and soulmate,’ a Surrealist ‘avant la lettre.’ On the same walls where the Magritte
retrospective hung a month earlier, now there’s Ernst, Dali, Kokoschka, Paul Nash, Dorothea Tanning
and Balthus, along with chess, kings, queens, beasts, beauties, mirrors and distortion, many of which
are sourced from the Tate collections. Whilst the focus is predominantly given over to painting and
sculpture, it is the Mouse’s Tale that wriggles out of a space between Carroll and the surreal. The cut
and re-pasted words of the tale curve down the page of the 1864 proof-sheet, diminishing in size, a
metonymical stand-in for the furry creature’s tail in a manner that would be enough to raise a smile in
Mallarmé, Apollinaire and child alike. With Dodgson’s The Hunting of the Snark translated to French
by Louis Aragon in 1929, and its subsequent inclusion in André Breton and Paul Eluard’s Dictionnaire
abrégée du Surréalisme in 1938, the poetic, literary and sensory nonsense of Alice nods to the
group’s strategies for an topsy-turvy exploration of language by moving beyond the fixedness of
assumed, conventional reading.

Anthropomorphic, age-defying, continent-crossing Alice persists in Max Ernst’s decalcomanias Alice
in 1939 (1939) and Alice in 1941 (1941). Painted during a period encompassing his time as a prisoner
of war in the south of France, his fleeing to Spain and subsequent escape to the United States, the
two images are bound up in conflict, displacement, alienation and a drive towards hope and freedom.
The works were hung together for the first time in Ernst’s 1942 exhibition at Valentine Gallery, New
York. The 1939 work is textured with sickly disturbances, featuring a bird-like figure, with talons and
beaked-head lowered, wearing green-feathered trousers that reveal salmon-pink feet and a pale
exposed groin. Two years later and the fur is still there, this time warmed by ochres and muted reds,
the body turned and seated, offering a glimpse of a pale face, chest, hand, with one leg folded over
the other. The bird becomes more of a fowl, a gryphon perhaps, crouching at the foot of the rock on which the female figure sits. This is an Alice after Alice if you will, no longer the dreaming girl-child but an eroticised, developed woman. Returning to the images, they invite, provoke, like Alice, an additional reading - the bird motifs suggest a Loplop more attuned to the smile of a hovering, haunting Cheshire cat or the kid gloves of the White Rabbit. Dorothea Tanning’s, Eine Kleine Nachtmusik (1943) is by no means any less disconcerting - with its corridor, closed doors, one ever-so-slightly ajar revealing an eerie yellow light and engorged sunflower. The two girls’ flowing hair is caught up in an unnatural interior space. By contrast, Pincushion to Serve as a Fetish (1965) can be read as part of a curatorial selection that marks Alice’s appropriation by the sphere of artistic endeavour. ‘... [I]n league with my sewing machine,’ Tanning wrote, ‘I pulled and stitched and stuffed the banal materials of human clothing in a transformation process where the most astonished witness was myself.’

A movement between the stitched and sewn physicality of the black velvet and orange plastic pins, and the two-dimensionality of paint and text, is staged as sculpture that tempts and challenges the reader’s vocabulary of form, just as Carroll’s Alice pulls at the imagination to make forms from what is seen and heard, written and read aloud.

As in Alice, mirrors abound here. Time is stretched and compressed across the exhibition spaces, as the visitor moves in and around the rooms, linked by corridors that are jutting and angular, narrowing and widening, drawing onwards, in and back upon themselves. Joseph Kosuth’s Clock (One and Five), English/Latin version (1965/1997) ticks over through ‘generated’ time, with the photographed object and text description challenging definitions of order and knowledge, whilst Duane Michals’ Alice’s Mirror (1974), a seven-part photographic series, works to compress and contain. A giant pair of spectacles propped up against a miniature chair, a cabinet reflected in a round vanity mirror, a giant hand clutching a mirror that contains a body holding another, gorging on the ‘Eat Me’ titbit temptations of Alice, consume both viewer and photographed space alike. Francesca Woodman’s Yet another leaden sky, Rome (1977-78) through Wonderland, Through the Looking Glass, becomes ‘Alicious’ like Carol Mavor’s catalogue fairytale essay, a portmanteau of reality and imagination played out through the camera lens.

In Salvador Dali’s work Alice also changes. His 1969 twelve-part series of colour illustrations (one for each chapter of the book) are filled with purple mushrooms (Advice from a Caterpillar), huge blue droplets (The Pool of Tears), a bodiless pink arm trapped inside an orange tiled house (The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill), whilst all the while a black inked figure in a bell-skirt skips across the pages, accompanied by her seemingly more solid counterpart shadow. The long-limbed figure with tiny waist and skipping-rope hair steps through the looking glass from page to screen. No longer just Alice, she is the protagonist of Destino, Dali’s film collaboration with Walt Disney, begun in 1946 and completed as a seven minute colour and sound animation in 2003. Re-reading the girl motif within the context of
Alice, Schulz presents Destino as a way of questioning the artist’s ‘complex yet playful artistic strategy that both specifies and opens up references to the literary source.’

For Alice, despite her sweet looks, is a very difficult little girl. She cannot be pinned down for long. She questions, challenges, changes. Courageous and stubborn, she cries both tears of frustration and wonder at her own lack of fixedness in her adventures down the rabbit hole and through the looking glass. As an exhibition subject she is all at once historicised, painted, sculpted, written, filmed, drawn, photographed, worked and re-worked, alluded to, simultaneously anonymous and instantly recognisable.

The problem with Alice is that she is both too big and too small. The white-frocked, dark-haired ‘universal dream-child’ of Dodgson’s photographs becomes engorged and engulfed upon her return back above ground, to be appropriated by artist and reader alike in their own attempt to follow a rabbit’s tail to an unfamiliar elsewhere as determined by the laws and practices of the familiar. She is, to quote Gillian Beer, ‘Time’s manifolds’ - caught up in the pocket-watch of consumed cultural spectatorship and unrestrained by the passage of time that marks the longevity and endurance of the books’ enthused readership. Thus the exhibition, like Alice herself, questions how the memory of a summer’s day might be appropriated and adopted by the experiences, imaginations and renderings of another, the artist. The challenge then, for the curator and visitor alike, is to avoid seeking sense and coherence and to welcome non-sense as a means to finding a path to tread. The spaces are at times too controlled, too prescribed, too chronological and were best experienced when doubling back, returning and moving across and between cinema spaces, installations and peering into cabinets of curious Victorian photographs.

Perhaps Dodgson’s Ocean Chart from The Hunting of the Snark (1874) would best befit Tate Liverpool’s Alice: a space without answers, without charts or plans, but surrounded by language, framed by Carroll’s books. With Alice herself ‘in the middle,’ there is space for the visitor to plot their own course, without any expectation of simple explanation, but secure in their understanding that in the little-big girl’s drawing back the curtain on the building wall, inside is a place where curiosity is welcomed, without any guarantee of an answer or explanation. Where would be the fun in that?

Alison Criddele
University of Manchester

---

1 Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass, (1871) Everyman’s Library, London, 1992, 43-44.


3 Schulz, ‘Down the Rabbit Hole and into the Museum,’ 14.


6 Carol Mavor, ‘Between Eating and Loving, an *Alicious* Annotated Fairy Tale,’ in *Alice in Wonderland Through the Visual Arts*, 81-96.

7 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 55.

8 Schulz, ‘*Down the Rabbit Hole and into the Museum: Alice and the Visual Arts*,’ 17.


11 Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 44.
The Road is Wider than Long: Roland Penrose and British Surrealism.
Southampton City Art Gallery, 9 February – 13 May 2012

Taking its title from Roland Penrose’s well-known booklet *The Road is Wider than Long* - a part ‘image-diary,’ love poem, come highly unorthodox travel book of his and Lee Miller’s tour of Balkans in the summer of 1938 - this exhibition spans Penrose’s career of some 60 years. It illustrates the manifold nature of his work and sheer versatility as an artist, covering as it does drawing, painting, collages and photography from the late 1920s to the mid-1980s. Penrose’s importance to British surrealism cannot be overstressed. Due to his extensive contacts with continental surrealism, including friendships with Man Ray and Max Ernst, he was an effective conduit for surrealist ideas and art into Britain. His activities within the British avant-garde also greatly helped to establish surrealism in this country as with the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London which was instigated by Penrose and the writer Herbert Read. Penrose was also a collector, curator and art historian, writing most notably on Picasso, and was one of the founders of London’s Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in 1947.

The Southampton show features some 50 works by Penrose and his contemporaries such as Paul Nash, Eileen Agar, Conroy Maddox, Itell Colquhoun and Penrose’s first wife, the poet and artist Valentine Boué as well as lesser well-known names like the artist and printer Stanley William Hayter who is represented by a striking post-war WWII abstract. The majority of the works have come from the Penrose Estate and Southampton’s own important holdings of home-grown surrealism, with the rest from the Arts Council Collection, Swindon Art Gallery and a number of private collections. The range of works on display at Southampton and the varied nature of Penrose’s oeuvre makes this exhibition highly worthwhile to visit, but unfortunately there is no catalogue.

*The Road is Wider than Long* is underpinned by the view that British surrealism is still held in low esteem in this country. As Antony Penrose, Roland Penrose’s son and one of the show’s curators recently explained:

It is our own thinking that has to change. We need to get away from the idea that it doesn’t count if it does not come from continental Europe. We have a rich group of artists, men and women, and we are too unimaginative and too diffident to appreciate their value.

There is some truth in this, but the assessment also revels in an underdog status for British surrealism and we have moved on from the days when Lawrence Alloway could dismiss the movement as ‘a branch of landscape gardening. Instead of the sewing machine and the umbrella on the dissecting table, there was a flint and a fossil waiting to be introduced on a golf course.’ The exhibition is a fitting reminder of the extent of Penrose’s art and his contribution to the distinct character of British surrealism, or as Antony Penrose put it, ‘its own particular way of seeing.’

Penrose comes across as a protean figure able to assimilate a variety of styles, media and techniques. For example, his skill in traditional draughtsmanship is in evidence in his preparatory...
drawings for key paintings of the 1930s such as *Good Shooting* (1939) which is in the show along with *Seeing is Believing* (*L’Ile Invisible*) (1937), its severed and inverted female head, an example of Penrose’s innovative ‘retinal inversions’ designed to dislocate the viewer’s gaze. Penrose also mastered radical surrealist devices such as frottage and decalcomania and advanced his own innovations like the kaleidoscopic colour picture postcard collages that exploited the uncanny repetition of motifs decades before Gilbert & George. Picasso, Penrose’s great friend, is often there in the background as in Penrose’s 1926 oil painting *Sugar Factory* with its tentative cubist forms that recall the Spaniard’s early cubist *Horta de Ebro* landscapes. Similarly, the stark oil painting *Breakfast, Portrait of Lee Miller* (c. 1948) with its greys, blacks and whites and silhouette outline of Miller, is reminiscent of Picasso’s bleak monochrome still-lives painted under and just after the German occupation of France. The exhibition also shows that, like Picasso, there was no creative let-up in Penrose’s later years. He continued to experiment as with the mixed media *Hommage á Man Ray* (1975) and fruitfully re-visited previous techniques as in the *Seychelles* series of holiday postcard collages made after a stroke and just before he died in 1984.

Rounding out *The Road is Wider than Long* are two travelling educational displays of over 50 photographs (digital prints) from the Penrose Estate: *Lee Miller at Farley Farm* and *Roland Penrose’s Surrealist Camera*. Curated respectively in 2008 and 2011, both are fine introductions to the work of each artist. Miller moved with Penrose to Farley Farm in East Sussex in 1949 and set about capturing its bohemian domesticity; gardening, cooking and pottering with such distinguished guests as Picasso, André Masson and the poet Paul Eluard. What emerges is a sense of bucolic bliss at Farley. Yet anyone familiar with the American photographer’s life knows that this belies the reality of a deeply-troubled Miller and family tensions. Also included are some of her celebrity portraits, war reportage and well-know surrealist works like *Portrait of Space, near Siwa, Egypt,* (1937). *Roland Penrose’s Surrealist Camera* features works from the late 1920s to the mid-1950s and shows Penrose as a consummate lensman working across a range of photographic genres; portrait, surrealist and documentary and, like Miller, often blurring the boundaries between them as in his eerie 1936 double portrait of Eluard and Belgian Surrealist E.L.T Mesens sporting grotesque tribal masks.

The curators of *The Road is Wider than Long* also wanted to work with ethologist and artist Desmond Morris, who is represented in the Southampton permanent collection, and showcase two of the Gallery’s recent acquisitions; John Armstrong’s *Dead Church* from 1941 (Fig. 1.) and *The Reversal*, (1953) by Oscar Mellor (Fig. 2).
Fig. 1: John Armstrong, *Dead Church*, 1941, tempera on board, 34.3 x 43.8 cm. Southampton City Art Gallery. © Courtesy Estate of John Armstrong/The Bridgeman Art Library. (Photo: Southampton City Art Gallery).

Fig. 2: Oscar Mellor, *The Reversal*, 1953, 73.5 x 55 cm. Southampton City Art Gallery. Courtesy of the artist's estate. (Photo: Southampton City Art Gallery).
Both are the first works by these artists to enter the Gallery's collection. Armstrong was a founder member of 'Unit One,' that short-lived, yet influential British avant-garde formation of the 1930s that advocated both abstraction and surrealism. Armstrong’s image of a devastated church was painted during the Second World War and has an oneric quality. Yet it also relates to his experience as a gunner shelling Byzantine churches in the Balkans in the First World War, as well as a wider fascination with ruins in English culture. Oscar Mellor (1921-2005) is lesser known but is, nonetheless, an interesting figure. Mellor's involvement in British surrealism began in the late 1940s when he became an associate of Conroy Maddox, head of the Birmingham Group of surrealists which included the artists Emmy Bridgwater, John Melville and a young Desmond Morris. During the 1950s, in addition to painting, Mellor worked as a theatre photographer for the Oxford Playhouse and founded the Fantasy Press, publishing works by Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin. Mellor's The Reversal is a typically prurient work featuring a partly-covered female figure in what seems like a ballet pose. The breasts and pubic area are uncovered and perhaps stand in for the hidden face in the manner of Magritte, while also reducing the figure to an object of desire.

Morris, who opened the Southampton exhibition, billing himself as ‘the last living British Surrealist,’ is represented by five works spanning his career to date. (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3: Left to right: Tim Craven, Curator, Southampton City Art Gallery, Desmond Morris and Antony Penrose, The Road is Wider than Long: Roland Penrose and British Surrealism exhibition private view 8 February 2012. (Photo: Southampton City Art Gallery).
The earliest is a 1946 painting *A Girl Selling Flowers* which is a joyous Matisse-like affair bursting with colour and the more recent *The Gathering* (oil on panel, 2004), a large dark, enigmatic triptych inspired by Hieronymous Bosch’s hellish *The Temptation of St Anthony* (c. 1500) in Lisbon (Bosch, of course, was a surrealist favourite). *The Gathering* is peopled with Morris’ trademark biomorphic forms set in an indeterminate space. The triptych’s centre panel has the forms converging on a large biomass suggesting some inviolable evolutionary process or perhaps referencing the torments visited upon the hermit saint. Morris who is in his eighty-fourth year considers it his magnum opus: ‘I decided I wanted to do one big painting before I die.’

Morris brings us to a rather quaint and quasi-surreal coda to *The Road is Wider than Long*; a small display of gouaches and drawings by the ‘artist’ Congo the chimpanzee (1954-64). This is the first exhibition in a public art gallery of Congo’s work since a 1957 show at the ICA and *The Lost Image*, a Royal Festival Hall exhibition held a year later, a poster for which is on display at Southampton. The primate’s productions are an historical curiosity now, yet they are a record of when science and art come together in a particular way under a specific set of circumstances. Morris began experimenting with Congo in 1956 to find biological roots for art and aesthetics. Although ape artists were nothing new, they had been an object of study in pre-revolutionary Russia, Morris with his scientific credentials, charm and ability to work the media (Congo was a regular star of Morris’ popular television programme *Zoo Time*) did much to raise awareness and appreciation of ape art; for the cognoscenti the ultimate in primitivism and automatism. Penrose and Read, instigators of the ICA show, were among the many that brought works by Congo and Penrose even presented one to Picasso. Thierry Lenain in his study of ape art describes it as ‘pseudo-artistic play’ engendered by humans, who supplied the painting equipment and legitimated the results by aligning it with contemporary gestural abstraction. General interest in simian art petered out in the early 1960s. Even so, it is still sought after in some quarters. A 2005 sale at the London auction house Bonhams saw three of Congo’s paintings fetch £12,000 - the sale estimate was several hundred pounds.

Peter Jones  
Southampton Solent University

The author would like to thank Antony Penrose, Tim Craven, Curator and Liza Morgan, Education Officer at Southampton City Art Gallery, Phoebe Tulip and the Taurus Gallery in Oxford.

---

1 See Peter Jones, ‘Notes on British Surrealism at Southampton City Art Gallery,’ *Papers of Surrealism*, No.5, Spring 2007, 1-14.
2 Antony Penrose, e-mail to author 7 February 2012.


4 Penrose, e-mail to author 7 February 2012.


7 Desmond Morris, Southampton City Art Gallery private view, 8 February 2012.

Dalí: All the Poetic Suggestions and All of the Plastic Possibilities. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 27 April - 2 September 2013

Dalí: todas las sugestiones poéticas y todas las posibilidades plásticas by Jean-Hubert Martin, Montse Ager, Jean-Michel Bouhours and Thierry Dufrêne, Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía and TF Editores, Madrid, 2013, 383pp., 193 illus., €49.90

The exhibition Dalí: All the Poetic Suggestions and All of the Plastic Possibilities at the Museo Nacional de Arte Reina Sofía is predominantly a joint initiative between this museum and the Centre Pompidou of Paris, with additional input from The Dalí Museum in Saint Petersburg, Florida and the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí in Figueres. The exhibition constitutes a commendable achievement by the Reina Sofia but it might have worked a little harder to showcase Dalí’s commitment to both the visual and verbal. It focuses on presenting a good range of Dalí’s plastic work but neglects the written per se, including poetry. Despite the fact that the title of the exhibition is taken from the poetic essay ‘Sant Sebastià’ (1927), written works by Dalí appear almost exclusively as secondary material. Dalí, after all, considered himself a better writer than painter.

The first impression as one enters the exhibition is of a lack of context, but one soon discovers that this is just because the janitor has made the first visitors start their Dalinian wanderings from room three. At this point one feels the need to ‘systematize confusion,’ using Dalí’s own words on the occasion of his 1930 conference in the Ateneu Barcelonès on the paranoiac-critical method, ‘a form of “irrational knowledge” based on a “delirium of interpretation.”’ This section of the exhibition is devoted to ‘Honey is sweeter than blood,’ a line from his poem ‘La meva amiga i la platja’ (1927) that signifies Dalí consideration of love as sweeter (think Lorca) than familial relationships or friendships (think Dalí’s father or Buñuel), an idea inspired by Lídia of Cadaquès. There is here a first attempt at pointing to the rich interaction between the visual and the written in Dalí’s production, for the fragment of the poem appears alongside an untitled oil of 1928. This interplay between word and image is further reinforced by the presence of Los esfuerzos estériles / Cenicitas (1927-28), which echoes some of the ideas in ‘Sant Sebastià.’ Room three also presents the famous Yellow Manifesto (1928), although it does not feature as prominently as it might, given its importance in the context of the Catalan avant-garde. In fact, this anti-artistic manifesto remains largely unknown to the general public and not much has been published on its meaning and complex references, apart from Joan M. Minguet Batllori’s monograph. However, one highlight in this room is the exhibition of two issues of the famous L’Amic de les Arts from 31 July 1927 (in which one finds the original version of ‘Sant Sebastià’) and 31 March 1929.

The curators envisaged the exhibition being visited in any sequence, although there is nonetheless a sense of chronological order. To take each room in numerical order, the eleven themes that one encounters are: ‘From the multiplying glass to putrefaction’ and ‘Self-portraits’ (presented as connected themes); ‘Honey is sweeter than blood’; ‘Surrealism’; ‘The Angelus’; ‘The face of war’ and...
Surrealism after 1936 (presented as connected themes); ‘America’; ‘The secret life’; ‘Scenarios,’ and finally, ‘The aesthetic enigma.’ In order to enjoy everything you would likely need two long visits, something that unfortunately the current system of one-day tickets does not allow, unless you pay twice of course.

The exhibition presents a wide range of art works, more than 200 of them: paintings, drawings, poems, manifestos, magazines, films, theatrical material, video art, advertisements and books, as well as information about exhibitions, letters, surrealist posters and photographs. As mentioned above, the essay ‘Sant Sebastià’ is supposed to encapsulate the raison d’être of the exhibition, particularly in the following extract:

I see in the nickeled headlight of an Isotta Fraschini a girl playing polo. I do no more than let my curiosity lead me to her eye, which then occupies the whole field of vision. This single eye, suddenly enlarged to become a sole spectacle, is the whole depth and the whole surface of an ocean on which sail all poetic suggestions, and where all the plastic possibilities are stabilized (trans.)

These words are used to introduce the first theme of the exhibition (‘From the multiplying glass to putrefaction.’) Here the influence of Giorgio de Chirico is aptly emphasized in Dalí’s portraits of his sister. Of course, de Chirico’s presence is felt in later works by Dalí (for instance in Suburbs of Paranoiac-Critical Town; Afternoon on the Outskirts of European History, 1936), but perhaps more importantly this section of the exhibition pinpoints Dalí’s knowledge of European art and places him alongside a number of avant-garde artists who admired the Italian as the master of perspective. Umberto Boccioni’s catalogue Pittura Scultura Futuriste (Dinamismo plastico) (1914) is on display, suggesting its influence on Dalí. Room one shows Dalí’s earliest works, including the not very well-known Port Alguer (1923) and emphasises his early obsession with Cadaqués, which Dawn Ades has described as ‘ancient, melancholy landscapes [that] enter his paintings not just as backdrops, but as presences.’ This section is definitely one of the highlights of the exhibition in terms of its consistency and for presenting lesser-known works of art. The display cabinet in the middle of the room features a number of pamphlets and books on Dalí’s exhibitions at that time, some of them illustrated by himself, and a potentially very interesting letter from Dalí’s father to the family Serraclara (1926), which is, unfortunately, very difficult to read. The display of 14 drawings from the series ‘Putrefactos,’ which includes works from 1924-25, relates a very interesting episode, one that connects Dalí to García Lorca, Moreno Villa and Pepín Bello. Another glass cabinet features a letter from Dalí to Lorca (18-20 January 1927), that can barely be read, and a poem, ‘A orillas de la luz,’ whose authorship remains unclear. The second room presents earlier works by Dalí, from 1921, when he was just 17: Autorretrato and Autorretrato con cuello rafaelesco. The highlights of this section are the original illustrations for the autobiography The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí (1931 and 1939-1941), a copy of the second book of Les meves impressions y [sic] records íntims (1920) and the screening of Jean-Cristophe Averty’s Autoportrait mou de Salvador Dalí (1966). It is after this that one should encounter the theme of ‘Honey is sweeter than blood’ in room three.

Room four shows Bañistas (1928) a work that would have been fruitful to compare with the beautiful
Banyistes des Llaner (1923), not included in the exhibition, to reflect on what happens between one work and the other. Why are they so different yet address the same topic? An interesting work from the point of view of technique is La vaca espectral (1928), but perhaps it would have been useful to refer to the experiments in frottage developed by Max Ernst that influenced this and others by Dalí. Once more the display cabinet in this room includes works without further explanations, in this case Admosferique-animals-tragedie and Cadavre exquis (1932). This section also displays a number of surrealist objects: Busto de mujer retrospectivo (1933-1976), Objeto surrealista de funcionamiento simbólico. El zapato de Gala (1932/1973), Portrait de Joella (1933-34) (collaboration with Man Ray) and the famous Teléfono afrodisiaco (1938) and La Chaqueta Afrodisiaca (1936/1967), which is displayed alongside a video explaining why and how to use it (1964). Interestingly, there is a recording taken from Josep Pla’s Homenots to illuminate our understanding of Le spectre du sex appeal in connection with l’Alt Empordà, but I would argue that Dalí’s writings would have been more appropriate here. Moreover, Suburbs of Paranoiac-Critical Town; Afternoon on the Outskirts of European History (1936) would have been a great addition to the exhibition, especially given that Estudio para suburbios de la ciudad paranoico-crítica. Tarde en las afueras de la historia europea (1935) is on display. Of course, Dalí’s surrealist episode cannot be concluded without a reminder of his collaboration with Luis Buñuel in Un Chien Andalou (1929), hence the related screening. However, I feel the film should have been projected in a more isolated area so as to avoid the interference of the quiet enjoyment of the other surrealist works of the room by the volume of its soundtrack (the delicious Argentinian tango).

Section five, on ‘The Angelus,’ is unfortunately easy to miss. In fact, I wonder how many people must have passed it by mistake and why there is not a sign to make the exhibition route clearer. The origins of the ‘Angelus’ are not clearly explained in this section: the recording discusses Dalí’s ‘Angelus’ as being influenced by Jean-François Millet’s work, which is surely the case, but the pace of the recording does not help to locate Millet’s work in time and it is almost as if you have to already know the story to benefit from its instruction. This room would have worked better by displaying Dalí’s ‘Angelus’ (or some of its many representations) together with Millet’s Angelus and the image of a child’s coffin in Millet’s work, which was confirmed by using X-rays.

Room six, the face of war, brings together an interesting group of works and invites the audience to reflect on the uncanny presence of war in Dalí’s oeuvre. There is some focus on Hitler: a page of Dalí’s manuscript Vive le guerre – Le Surréalisme et Hitler (1933-34), the interesting 1973 gouache Hitler masturbándose as well as the famous The Enigma of Hitler. There have been some discrepancies over the dating of The Enigma of Hitler. It has been attributed to 1938 or 1939 (even 1937), although Ades established it to be from 1938 when preparing the 2004 Centenary Exhibition. This is not something that has been picked up by the curators of this exhibition, but worst than that is the lack of consistency in the accompanying material: the label of the painting states 1939, whilst the recording proposes 1938.

Room seven, ‘Surrealism after 1936,’ introduces some of Dalí’s seminal works. Coming from Tate
Modern, *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus* occupies a prominent position in the room. Unfortunately, the poem of the same title that Dali wrote to accompany the oil is presented as secondary material. Although the poem is displayed close to the painting, the book in which it appears (*Salvador Dalí, Metamorphose de Narcisse, París, Éditions Surréalistes, 1937*) was not open at a different page. Dali’s instructions to viewers to look ‘for some time, from a slight distance and with a certain “distant fixedness”’ at the figure of Narcissus are not visible. It seems that presenting this material to the spectators would have been more interesting given that the poem and painting deal with, according to David Lomas, ‘mirroring or doubling.’

In a similar fashion, the famous *El gran masturbador* (1929) was shown without the accompanying poem (1930), further undermining the importance of the written in Dali’s oeuvre. The other shortcoming of this room, or rather in the information provided, is the scant attention given to the paranoiac-critical method in works such as *Endless Enigma* (1938) or *Impresiones de África* (1938). Although it can be beneficial for the spectator to form his/her own response to the works, some help in identifying the multiple images in such oils would have been welcome. Yet, there are a couple of interesting texts in this room: a draft of a handwritten letter from Breton to Dalí (the first attempt at expelling the Catalan from the surrealist group) (1934), and an article by Dalí that appeared in *Minotaure* on 15 October 1936: ‘Première loi morphologique sur les poils dans les structures molles.’

The section ‘America’ screens an interesting selection of advertisements, for example *Chocolat Lanvin* (1969) and *Alka-Seltzer* (1974) (Bayer aspirins). However, some indication of Dali’s performance in other advertisements such as *Veterano* (a famous Spanish drink) and *Braniff International Airways* (with baseball pitcher Whitey Ford) would have been helpful. The importance of such detail is that Dali’s fascination with baseball helps to understand a number of his works, including the uncanny *Uranium and Atomica Melancholica Idyll* (1945) and *Destino* (1946). There is also a display cabinet showing books authored by Dalí, including *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí* (1942) and *Hidden Faces* (1944), but the emphasis is on the artist as an illustrator and not on the artist as writer, even though a sample written page is presented from both texts. A clearer sense of the volume of Dali’s written output would have enhanced the quality of the exhibition. Even less pleasing than this omission, is that theme eight is displayed in two non-consecutive rooms, so you only see the second part of ‘America’ after room/theme ten. The second exploration of Dali’s encounter with America deals with ‘Etapa mística nuclear,’ from which one of the highlights is an extract from *Amazing Stories* (1956): there is here a reference to the relation between art and science, and praise of the viscous as the secret of life, art and power. I would argue that these ideas encapsulate the principles of the exhibition better than the fragment from ‘Sant Sebastià.’

Room nine, ‘The secret life,’ is interesting in that it shows 30 drawings, of an Edwardian nature, that accompanied *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. In this section prominence is finally given to the written as opposed to the visual. The spectator is invited to contemplate the drawings while listening to the story of the fancy dress costume that Dali was given by his uncles from Barcelona. Room ten will fascinate those who did not know about Dali’s collaboration with Disney and Hitchcock in the mid 1940s. An exquisite part of the exhibition, the dream sequence from Hitchcock’s *Spellbound* (1944),
could have been contextualized a bit more by showing some footage immediately before Gregory Peck starts explaining his oneiric experience. Furthermore, it is not clear when this sequence begins and when it finishes so a longer pause before repeating it on loop would have been helpful.

Last but not least, room eleven touches on questions of science including mathematics, stereoscopy and holography. It is particularly pleasing to see the work *Cola de golondrina y violonchelos (serie de las catástrofes)* (1983), in which two of the graphics used by René Thom appear: the swallow’s tail and the apex in an S shape. The glass cabinet presents some delicacies: the catalogue of the exhibition *The 3rd Dimension: 1st World Exposition of Holograms Conceived by Dali* (New York, Gallery Knoedler & Co, 1972); catalogue of the exhibition *Dalí: hommage à Crack et Watson* (New York, M. Knoedler, 1963); and a handwritten letter from Matila Ghyka to Salvador Dali (1947). Another highlight of this room is a film screening that includes sections on a diverse range of topics including, amongst others, Gaudí, how a sea urchin can paint, a happening for Harkness Ballet, pluvial painting, Dalí as a baker, dai-kinis (Dalí’s own collection of swimming costumes) and a very revealing section on Dalí’s perceptions of Lorca and his poetry.

The clearest achievements of the exhibition are its inclusion of such a wide range of seminal works by Dalí (normally exhibited in places as far apart as New York, London, Saint Petersburg, Paris, Figueres, etc.) along with lesser-known material pertaining to his pre and post-surrealist periods. Yet, a better room distribution, signposting and general organization by the Reina Sofía would have made the experience more illuminating and enjoyable. In fact, one must be warned that the organizing committee has not considered breaks (cafeteria, restaurant) as a possibility (even a need) during the visit to the exhibition, and the show rooms themselves have barely any seats. If you would like to take your time and reflect on the exhibition contents, you better go well fed or else you would need a good dose of fascination for the subject to go without sustenance. In this sense, the exhibition has been curated from the familiar premise of Dalí as a brand, and does not really contribute enough to amend (or at least to challenge) the image of Dalí as a crazy, original genius.12 Personally, I would have liked to hear fewer comments about Dalí’s craziness.13 Surely, we can present him more accurately than this without losing the fascination of his slippery artistic persona? Also, there seems to be more emphasis on the quantity rather than quality of exhibits, insofar as the expert commentaries on each theme seem thin and further information is needed but not usually provided.14 The proliferation of works and accompanying audio creates a sense of kitsch and pastiche (something, however, that Dalí may have liked.)15 While you learn a great deal from this exhibition, it does not have the consistency, finesse and depth of analysis of previous projects such as the Dalí Centenary Exhibition curated by Dawn Ades in 2004 (in Palazzo Grassi, Venice and Philadelphia Museum of Art) or the Tate Modern display on Dalí and cinema curated by Dawn Ades, Montse Aguer, Fèlix Fanès, Matthew Gale and Helen Sainsbury in 2007. Yet, the Reina Sofia Museum has made an enormous effort to showcase seminal as well as more obscure production by Dalí and has made us reflect once more on the monumental contribution of Dalí to modern art. Spectators undoubtedly leave the museum with further knowledge and, most importantly, with a few more questions. The organisers must be commended for this.
The exhibition could first be enjoyed in the Centre Pompidou of Paris from 21 November 2012 to 25 March 2013.


The catalogue clarifies that Dalí considered Boccioni a Futurist genius who expressed himself in terms of speed, automobiles and aviation, 270.


Ades refers to the technique of *frottage* as ‘a kind of “visionary irritation” which consisted in making rubbings from a textured surface and then reading and interpreting images in the rubbings,’ *Dalí*, 119.

As a response to the exhibition, Estrella de Diego proposes to look at Gala as co-author of Dalí: ‘Dalí, el marido de Gala,’ *El País*, Babelia, 8 June 2013, 16. In this way, de Diego reflects on the exhibition in terms of absence.


It seems surprising that no reference is made to *Journal d’un génie* (1964).

Of course, it would be naïve to think that it is possible to ignore this idea of Dalí as a brand. Nevertheless, it is important to consider the limitations of such an approach. A good starting point is the article by Patricia Ortega Dolz, ‘Dalí o la gallina de los huevos de oro,’ *El País*, 20 April 2013, 47-48.

Interestingly, the Director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Manuel Borja-Villel, presents the exhibition in a different light: ‘Invitamos a los públicos … a superar la anécdota, la marca y el eslogan, y a entrar en los profundos debates acerca de la identidad, la ciencia, la historia del arte y la psique humana que su obra disemina a lo largo de las salas,’ 13. However, some of the catalogue texts are indispensable for getting to grips with Dalinian thought, especially Pere
Gimferrer’s. The catalogue also includes some novelties such as a list of Dalí’s performances elaborated by Jean-Hubert Martin with the collaboration of Marie Bertran, 47-59.

14 Fortunately, the exhibition catalogue sorts this problem out by providing detailed readings of a number of Dalí’s works.

15 According to Pere Gimferrer, Dalí becomes fascinated by kitsch on arrival to America, an interest that marks his return to the masters of the past (21).