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## The Genealogy-Complex History Beyond the Avant-Garde Myth of Originality<sup>1</sup>

As there are many possible historical contexts within which to frame modernism, there are also various histories of modernism. From the 1980s through the turn of the millennium, scholars tended to rub modernist texts and artworks up against their most immediate contexts—understood in institutional, ideological, social, or cultural terms. More recently, new approaches have called this procedure into question: digital humanities appear to bookend all of modernist history by questioning the traditional modes of presenting textual and artistic sources;<sup>2</sup> cognitive readings substitute the human brain for context;<sup>3</sup> while ecological and other approaches regard the history of modernist art and literature as a blip on the screen of planetary history, or “deep time”, radically expanding the reach of a term like context.<sup>4</sup> These recent approaches have led to what could be called an “excess” of context that has thoroughly complicated our historical understanding of modernism and its classic avant-gardes (futurism, expressionism, Dadaism, surrealism, among others). Yet this excess has also created a situation in which the wood is often no longer seen for the trees, because it has tended to draw attention away from a basic concern that unites all historical analyses: the issue of writing history or historiography, of the narrative design and discursive presentation of *res gestae*. Different conceptualizations of the term “context” may well yield a variety of historical outlooks, but at least as

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<sup>2</sup> See, among others, collaborative digital humanities initiatives such as the Modernist Journals Project (<http://library.brown.edu/cds/mjp/>), Editing Modernism in Canada (<http://editingmodernism.ca/>), and the Blue Mountain Project (<http://library.princeton.edu/projects/bluemountain/>).

<sup>3</sup> Consider Peter Stockwell’s analysis of avant-garde poetry or Jesse Matz’s reading of modernist prose: Peter Stockwell, *Cognitive Poetics*, London: Routledge, 2002, 112-17; Jesse Matz, “The Art of Time, Theory to Practice,” *Narrative*, 19:3 (October 2011), 273-94.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

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essential to attain that variety is the aesthetic manner in which those outlooks are fleshed out. Adding to the urgency of a reflection on the aesthetic dimension of historiography is the fact that recent approaches frequently present themselves with an air of positivism. This is obvious in tendencies claiming to adapt insights from Darwinism and the supposedly exact science of evolutionary biology for the analysis of modernist art and literature.<sup>5</sup> Yet the spirit of positivism is at times equally manifest in research exploits informed by digital humanities. The vast amount of modernist sources to have been disclosed of late with so-called tag clouds and other instruments of statistical use, for example, may well create the impression of a possible return to objective, empirical research, but the problems of inscribing such sources in historiography have arguably not disappeared with such projects.<sup>6</sup> History, today still, needs to be written, or at least, represented, for as we shall see the history of modernism could also be conceived of in visual rather than verbal terms.

Hayden White realized all of this well and was perhaps also one of the first to suggest that the views on history and historiography to circulate within modernism and the avant-gardes holds hitherto neglected potential. Two years before Roland Barthes published his now canonical essay “L’effet de réel,” White reproached fellow historians for their literary backwardness, challenging them to stop representing the past as if they were nineteenth-century realist novelists and to start looking toward twentieth-century modernism and the classic avant-gardes for new modes of representation:

When historians try to relate their “findings” about the “facts” in what they call an “artistic” manner, they uniformly eschew the techniques of literary representation which Joyce, Yeats, and Ibsen have contributed to modern culture. There have been no significant attempts at surrealist, expressionistic, or existentialist

<sup>5</sup> “New Darwinist” Steven Pinker even goes as far as to look askance at modernism’s project for social change through aesthetics, arguing that “high priority” is to be given instead to “economics, evolutionary biology and probability and statistics,” thereby altogether denying the complex historical links between evolutionary theory and modernism. See: Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, New York: Penguin, 2002, 235-36.

<sup>6</sup> For a more elaborate critique of data presentation that is also of interest to the concerns raised in this article, see Johanna Drucker, “Humanities Approaches to Graphical Display,” *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly*, 5:1 (2011), <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/1/000091/000091.html> (Accessed 28/04/2014).

historiography in this century (except by novelists and poets themselves) for all the vaunted “artistry” of the historians of modern times.<sup>7</sup>

Half a century later White’s suggestion remains a powerful one, and I shall return to it in more detail in conclusion. At this point it suffices to state that I find myself in partial agreement with White. The at times local and small-scale views on history and historiography, especially those to circulate within the classic avant-gardes, are indeed worth scrutinizing to explore alternative ways of producing the history of modernism as well as to arrive at a better understanding of modernism as such. Among other things, a closer look at how the classic avant-gardes devised their own history helps us to cast a new light on their allegedly ahistorical stance and claims to originality, criticized perhaps most vehemently and richly by Rosalind Krauss in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (1981).

### The Myth of Originality

It is a truism to argue that the modernist avant-gardes in a variety of ways claimed to create a new art from a *tabula rasa* and presented themselves as well as their work as absolutely original and thus ahistorical. F. T. Marinetti’s “Fondation et Manifeste du futurisme” (1909) needs but be recalled. Relegating the whole of history to the past and averring to start afresh from scratch, Marinetti’s words paved the way for many isms to come. Originality here meant “more than just [...] revolt against tradition”, Rosalind Krauss observed, because the avant-gardes to follow in the wake of futurism conceived originality in terms of “a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth.”<sup>8</sup> Krauss expressed profound skepticism towards this vanguard discourse of rupture and inspired by (post) structuralist theory put forth two basic arguments against it.

First, she refuted the avant-gardes’ parables of absolute self-creation by exposing how many artists stating to produce absolutely authentic works in actuality engaged in improvisational play within a very rigid sign system, almost to the point of copying one another. By reading plastic works in which schematized grid patterns time and again emerge, for example, Krauss illustrated how most

<sup>7</sup> Hayden White, “The Burden of History,” *History and Theory*, 5:2 (1966), 111-34, here 127.

<sup>8</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986, 157. Subsequent references to Krauss’ book occur in parenthesis in the main body of the text.

avant-gardists mistakenly confused the idea of starting afresh with *self*-creation. Thus, Kasimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian as well as Pablo Picasso and Kurt Schwitters all stressed the autonomy of their abstracting self-creation, whereas in practice they were repeating each other *in difference*. Indeed, Krauss further asserted that the materiality of the system, “grid” or Saussurean *langue* of linguistic and pictorial signs, subject as it is to an endless process of signification, of necessity always forestalls pinning down the meaning or tenor of such seemingly exchangeable works. Both this proliferation of meanings and the acts of systemic repetition, according to Krauss, were covered up by the avant-gardes’ discourse of originality. Like a myth, this discourse was employed to obscure a deeper-lying structure or “grid” of repetition in discourse and practice. As such, Krauss noted, the avant-garde “myth of originality” also played in the hands of the art market and its institutions. For this myth went well beyond the “restricted circle of professional art-making”: “this discourse *serves much wider interests*—and is thus fueled by more diverse institutions [...]. The theme of originality [...] is the shared discursive practice of the museum, the historian, and the maker of art” (162, my emphasis). Thus Krauss also exposed the historical-institutional context in which the myth of originality functioned. Perhaps more than the avant-gardes themselves, art historians and the art market stand to gain from dubbing the originality myth: for the traditional historian it opens up the possibility of presenting the avant-gardes as a succession of ever new isms; for the market it creates the possibility of financial surplus.

Remarkably, however, Krauss went to some length not to call her own critique of the avant-garde *historical*, mounting a second argument against historical readings of the avant-gardes. Krauss called her own method *etiology* and put it in stark opposition to the methods of traditional history:

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History, as we normally use it, implies the connection of events through time, a sense of inevitable change as we move from one event to the next, and the cumulative effect of change which itself is qualitative, so that we tend to view history as *developmental*. Etiology is not developmental. It is rather an investigation into the conditions for one specific change—the acquisition of disease—to take place. In that sense etiology is more like looking into the background of a chemical experiment, asking when and how a given group of elements came together to effect a new compound or to precipitate something out of a liquid. [...W]e are specifically enjoined from thinking in terms of “development,” and instead we speak of repetition. (22)

In the introduction to her book she highlighted the liberating force of this operation: “we have discovered that one of the most modernist things about it [the grid] is its capacity to serve as a paradigm or model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical” (*ibid.*).

By labelling her own approach antihistorical, Krauss at once proved consequential and contradictory. She was consequential in that her analysis stuck within the parameters of her (post)structuralist frame of reference. Just like Barthes in “La Mort de l’auteur” (1968) questioned the hermeneutical tradition that reduced the meaning of a text to the original creator, the author’s intention, Krauss cunningly exposed how the allegedly self-created works of the avant-garde were the product not of “individual” agency but of larger discursive structures. And like Michel Foucault in *L’archéologie du savoir* (1969) could only describe, yet never fully explain, certain changes coming about in history, Krauss’ etiology claimed to evoke the discursive structure of “originality” without further exposing what agency, intentions or motivations kept that structure or “grid” in place.

Yet Krauss’ antihistorical stance was also contradictory. For in practice she proved not as consistent as Barthes in “Histoire et littérature: à propos de Racine” (1960), for example, when he averred that literature (and, by extension, all art) simply resisted history as such, given language’s irrepressible process of semiosis, but also that an institutional or functionalist history of art and literature were nonetheless always possible: “l’histoire littéraire n’est possible que si elle se fait sociologique, si elle s’intéresse aux activités et aux institutions, non aux individus.”<sup>9</sup> Krauss as well contextualized and historicized in this sense, unearthing the power relations that kept the “myth of originality” in place. For was the avant-garde artist’s discourse of originality not also developed to serve the much wider interests of the art market and its institutions? Setting out to criticize the alleged ahistorical nature and Romantic presumptions of the modernist avant-garde, then, perhaps she, too, in the end proved too much of a modernist when she upped the ante and asserted to be entirely *antihistorical*. Naturally, much could be argued for her critique of traditional art history, which by presenting the avant-gardes in a succession of ever new isms failed to come to grips with recurrent structural patterns within the avant-gardes as a whole. Yet

<sup>9</sup> Roland Barthes, “Histoire et littérature: à propos de Racine,” *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 15:3 (1960), 524-37, here 530.

as her own practice illustrated, to be against this convention in historiography is not the same as being antihistorical. Quite the opposite: Krauss' analysis of the "grid" *did* cast a new light on the historical phenomenon of the avant-gardes.

Krauss' approach, rather than being antihistorical, presented an alternative way of writing history, one that was perhaps more in tune with the avant-gardes and as such also willing to consider strategies of *visual* historical representation such as the grid or roster: inventive pre-digital strategies for the "visualization" of historical "data" analogous to the readymade visualizations that contemporary computer users have at their disposal, such as the cascading list, the network diagram, the spreadsheet, and the word-cloud.<sup>10</sup> However, in this operation Krauss failed to take note of the fact that the avant-gardes, too, presented themselves as anything but ahistorical, because they as well experimented with the design of alternative, at times antidevelopmental, historiographical modes of representation. This is not to deny that they frequently foregrounded their originality or the absoluteness of their new departures. Rather, Krauss' reading of the avant-garde's "myth of originality" is itself in part a myth. For her reading in turn covered up how the modernist avant-gardes were perhaps the first in modern art and writing to actually *historicize*, however paradoxically, their own novelty and originality.

### The Genealogy-Complex

The critique of the avant-garde "myth of originality" is as old as the classic avant-gardes themselves. The many negative reactions to the publication of Marinetti's "Fondation et Manifeste du futurisme" in *Le Figaro* need but be recalled to illustrate that from the classic avant-gardes' very inception skepticism towards their assertion to create *ex nihilo* was a commonplace. Two decades before Marinetti's manifesto appeared in *Le Figaro*, Jean Moréas in the same daily published his manifesto, "Le Symbolisme" (1886). Moréas, in less inflated terms than Marinetti, pointed out that symbolism was a new phenomenon, but he added that there was "une exacte filiation de la nouvelle école"<sup>11</sup>—the absolute novelty of symbolism, then, came with a pedigree. However counterintui-

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<sup>10</sup> For more on such strategies of visualisation, consult Johanna Drucker's *Graphesis: Visual Forms of Knowledge Production*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Moréas, "Un Manifeste littéraire. Le Symbolisme," *Le Figaro*. Supplément littéraire (18 September 1886), 150-51; here 150.

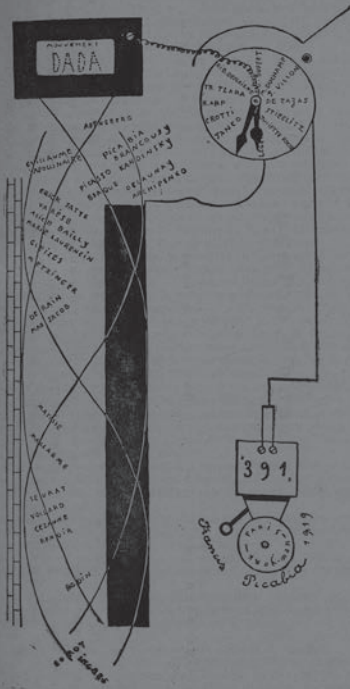
tive it may be to claim that original creations *ex nihilo* have a genealogy, Moréas' strategy of historicizing the new was also to become one of the basic tenets of the early twentieth-century avant-gardes. Drawing on much older models of genealogy, often represented by way of a tree-diagram, the avant-gardes, both the movements and its individual artists, set out to rewrite art and literary history so as to reconstruct the anamnesis of their own work in the now.

Of note in what could be termed the "genealogy-complex" of the avant-gardes are four aspects. First and foremost this complex thoroughly complicates the received ahistorical nature of the avant-gardes and their assertions of originality as criticized by Krauss. Krauss was correct to isolate that many avant-gardists claimed to produce work on a *tabula rasa*, and thus averred to rupture in time and history, but the avant-gardes as a rule stressed not only the discontinuity they presented but also the continuity in which they figured. Admittedly, many of the genealogical models they came up with to this aim were developmental in the sense Krauss isolated, that is, teleological. The stationary F. T. Marinetti designed for the futurist movement around 1925 is a good illustration of this. Presenting his "futurismo" as the roots and trunk of a genealogical tree, it depicted all subsequent avant-garde movements to have emerged up and until surrealism as offspring or branches of the founding futurist family.<sup>12</sup> Another case in point is the synoptic table representing recent advances in French painting, which Umberto Boccioni devised for his *Pittura scultura futuriste. (Dinamismo plastico)* (1914).<sup>13</sup> As is not uncommon in genealogical research that reconstructs the so-called family tree, Boccioni here put the tree on its head and placed what he saw as the founding fathers of modern French painting on top. These formed a double offspring, one stressing colour and one accentuating form. The futurists, Boccioni's table exemplified, were the synthesis of these previous tendencies, which followed in the familiar succession of late impressionists, fauvists, and divisionists.

This tactic of representing the new ism as the synthesis of all previous ones was to be repeated by all subsequent avant-garde movements. In Hugo Ball's writings, for example, Dada in Zurich, too, was portrayed as the point in which expressionism, futurism and several other isms came to coincide to make a new

<sup>12</sup> F. T. Marinetti, "Futurismo" (n.d., ca. 1925), in the Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, GEN MSS 130.

<sup>13</sup> Umberto Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futuriste. (Dinamismo plastico)*, Milano: Edizioni Futuriste di "Poesia", 1914, 100-1.



**Figure 1:** Francis Picabia, *Mouvement Dada*, ink drawing taken from *Dada*, n°4/5 (Zurich, 15 May 1919 aka “Anthologie Dada,” International Version), 2. With permission of the International Dada Archive, University of Iowa Libraries. Copyright © Estate of Francis Picabia/SABAM.

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advance.<sup>14</sup> And this same operation was repeated by Dada elsewhere, though preceding avant-garde movements were at times also substituted by the names of individual artists and writers. Francis Picabia’s ink-drawing *Mouvement Dada* (1919, see **Figure 1**), for instance, represented Dadaism in Paris and New York. Picabia’s drawing depicted the Dada group as a clock fuelled by a battery of artists from previous generations. The mechanical contraption Picabia thus evoked still in part suggested a causal relation: without the battery, no operating clock. Yet the very mutation of the genealogical model Picabia performed

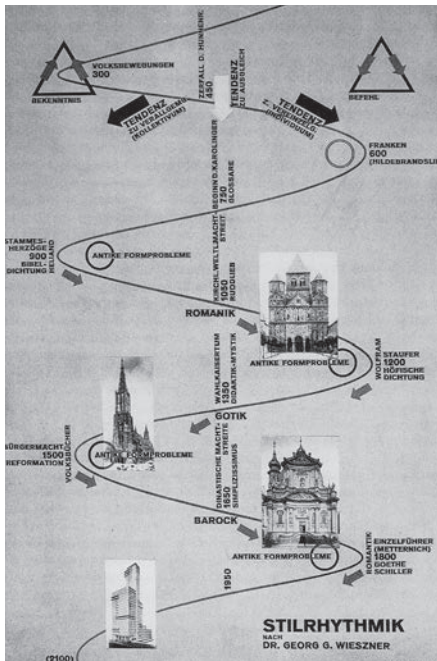
<sup>14</sup> See Hubert van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zurich und Berlin*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999.



here—turning the synoptic, tree-like model of Boccioni into a clock—indicates how the avant-gardes also went against traditional developmental historiography, setting and resetting the time of aesthetic change and production. For in the differential model of Picabia's drawing it is no longer clear as to what or who came first, that is, the names in the battery on the left or those in the clock on the top right. Both existed simultaneously in a structural now, the one requiring the other to gain meaning. Thus, Krauss was right to isolate that many avant-gardists claimed to produce work from scratch, but they also thoroughly reflected on the history of this practice, developing a clearly *presentist* regime of historicity.

This presentism is, secondly, of note in itself, because as I have argued elsewhere it also helps us to do away with the common notion, canonised by Renato Poggioli in his *The Theory of the Avant-Gardes* (1968), that the avant-gardes were all somehow futurist, that is, that they favoured the future over the present in their historical outlooks.<sup>15</sup> If Boccioni, Picabia, and others whom we shall presently consider illustrate anything, it is that they all seized upon history in order to elucidate the(ir) present, the moment and context of creation, the now. Anticipating El Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919-20), *Sintesi futurista della Guerra* (20 September 1914), a poster-manifesto signed by Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo and Piatta, manifests this well. Historical and cultural geography come together here, on the one hand in a horizontal spearhead showing, very much counterintuitively, how the present of futurism came *before* the past on the arrow of time, and, on the other hand, in vertical lists driving a wedge between futurist and non-futurist nations; Germany, Austria and Turkey apparently belonging almost entirely to the past. Cyclical models of history, in which a core of tendencies and impulses rhythmically reoccur, were tried as well from a presentist perspective. László Moholy-Nagy's *Stilrhythmik nach Dr. Georg Wieszner* (1930, **Figure 2**) is a telling example. A collage meant to figure as the decorated title-page in a historical study by Wieszner, it visualizes Wieszner's conviction that the major shifts in architectural history were caused by an ever-recurring succession of movements towards change from below on the one hand (the upward mobility or "Bekanntniss" of the masses, the triangle on the top left), and towards the dictating of change from above ("Befehl") on the other hand (the triangle on the top right). This "voyage en zig-zag," as Astrid

<sup>15</sup> For details on this regime, see Sascha Bru, "Avant-Garde Nows: Presentist Reconfigurations of Public Time," *Modernist Cultures*, 8:2 (2013), 272-87.



**Figure 2:** László Moholy-Nagy, *Stilrhythmik* nach Dr. Georg Wieszner; photomontage as frontispiece in Georg Gustav Wieszner, *Pulsschlag deutscher Stilgeschichte. I. Teil: Von den Anfängen bis ins 16. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart: Dr. Fritz Wedekind & Co., 1930). Copyright © Estate of László Moholy-Nagy/SABAM.

Schmidt-Burkhardt cleverly calls Moholy-Nagy’s collage,<sup>16</sup> not only bracketed the historical cycles to come (see the “(2100)” at the bottom left). It also historicized the situation *anno* 1930, a year in which Moholy-Nagy could look back on almost three decades of experimentalism in the arts and—perhaps against the clear return to the moment of “Befehl” in German cultural history—hopefully despaired the moment of “Bekanntnis” in the far future.

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Historicizing both their originality and the now, thus, the avant-gardes not only proved consistently presentist but, thirdly, also exploited their intertextual or intersemiotic relations to the past. In fact, the avant-gardes made these relations as well as the signifying potential of their linguistic and plastic material productive in ways that often come eerily close to Krauss’ etiological approach. A famous example is the cover of Lissitzky’s and Hans Arp’s edited volume *Die Kunstisten. Les ismes de l’art. The Isms of Art* (1925).<sup>17</sup> Whereas traditionally ge-

<sup>16</sup> Astrid Schmidt-Burkhardt, *Stammbäume der Kunst. Zur Genealogie der Avantgarde*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005, 278.

<sup>17</sup> *Die Kunstisten. Les ismes de l’art. The Isms of Art*, eds. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, Erlenbach-Zürich: Eugen Rentsch, 1925, cover.

**Figure 3:** Cover of 391, n° 8 (Zurich, 1918) with Francis Picabia's ink drawing *Construction moléculaire*. With permission of the International Dada Archive, University of Iowa Libraries. Copyright © Estate of Francis Picabia/SABAM.



neological tree-models in art history construct a developmental pattern from artists' or writers' discursive claims of affiliation or from formal as well as thematic similarities between works, the cover here constructed a pattern that drew on an arrangement of language's materiality. Spanning a period of ten years, this book took stock of the avant-gardes by building a conceptual or linguistic tree around the etymon or stem ISM, which took up the function of the trunk here. The cover fleshes out a genealogy that is as much driven by this formal-linguistic constraint as by actual historical developments. All words or isms on the cover as it were branch out as boughs or limbs of a much larger trunk, the capitals ISM. Around and tied to this vertical etymon ISM, all branches are on a par, all equal, all horizontal.

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Picabia's *Construction moléculaire* (1919, **Figure 3**), too, shows that Krauss' proposed etiological model of historiography was already tried by the avant-gardes. Striking first of all is the grid or roster, so central to Krauss' analysis. (Picabia is notably absent from Krauss' *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*.) Within the constraint of this roster, consisting of 9 times 7 squares, Picabia at once paid homage to immediate predecessors, especially



**Figure 4:** Louis Scutenaire, "Pêle-mêle" [Le Panthéon surréaliste]. Collage with frame. Photographed by Alice Piemme. With the kind authorization of the Archives et Musée de la Littérature of Brussels. This collage was later also reproduced in Documents 34, *Intervention surréaliste*, July 1934, 50.

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through the mention of older, pre-Dada magazines such as Alfred Stieglitz' *Camera Work* (1903-17) and *291* (1915-16) and Guillaume Apollinaire's *Les Soirées de Paris* (1912-1914). Picabia's design at the same time presented a sort of snapshot of the Dada movement, the position and distance between its protagonists' names also hinting at the internal relations within the group. As in *Mouvement Dada*, a machinelike contraption at the centre suggested to operate only when all components in the grid, past and present, are represented in the now, giving way to a temporal anomaly or anachronism.

The grid-like family portrait was of course by no means an invention of Picabia. This technique stemmed from the older, nineteenth-century *pêle-mêle* which

was developed to as it were pictorialize relations of kinship. A *pêle-mêle*, writes Anne Reverseau, is “a frame with cut-outs for photographs. This craft of collecting and presenting several ‘random’ pictures together, focusing on people and portraits, had been widely used for more than a century. [... It was a] popular way of representing families by an amalgamation of various pictures.”<sup>18</sup> It is tempting to regard this *pêle-mêle* model as the basic grid structuring much of surrealist auto-historiography. We find it in Man Ray’s stringently geometrical montage of photographs, *L’Échiquier surréaliste* (1934)—taken up in the *Petite Anthologie poétique du surréalisme*—which presented a group portrait of the surrealist “family” in the early 1930s. Yet we also encounter it, for example, in Louis Scutenaire’s more messy collage, “Pêle-mêle” [Le Panthéon surréaliste] (1934, **Figure 4**), as well as in André Breton’s “H.N.” (1937) reproduced in *De l’humour noir* (1937). The latter two examples expand the family portrait of respectively Belgian and French surrealism in historical terms by way of a genealogical moment. Belgian surrealist Scutenaire included Marx and Freud, Rimbaud and Lautréamont; there are drawings of Lewis Carroll and Alfred Jarry, among others, and besides the Belgians René Magritte, André Souris, Paul Nougé and E.L.T. Mesens we also find Breton and Louis Aragon as representatives of French surrealism. Yet quaint other figures as well stand out in Scutenaire’s *pêle-mêle*. There is the occultist Cornelius Agrippa, there are unconventional literary figures like Lassailly and Forneret, and romanticists like Achim von Armin. Scutenaire appears to have suggested with this collage that this was his family. In an unchronological fashion familiar also from surrealist anthologies, he presented a snapshot of his family *across the ages* but in the now. In similar examples using language instead of images we can see how Scutenaire’s, Picabia’s and Ray’s clear grid patterns could quickly fade into the background, yielding even more rhizomatic historical portrayals, as in Breton’s and Desnos’ “Erutaretil” (1923),<sup>19</sup> or Max Ernst’s “Favorite Poets and Painters from the Past” (1942).<sup>20</sup> Commenting on such practices in a manifesto entitled “La Justice immanente,”<sup>21</sup> Scutenaire went as far as to assert that the *pêle-mêle* had the potential to liberate the whole

<sup>18</sup> Anne Reverseau, “The Surrealist ‘Pêle-Mêle’: Picturing Literary History,” in MDRN, *Modern Times, Literary Change*, Leuven: Peeters, 2013, 81-99, here 88.

<sup>19</sup> André Breton and Robert Desnos, “Erutaretil,” *Littérature*, 11-12 (1923), 24-25.

<sup>20</sup> Published in *View*, 1 (1942), 14-15.

<sup>21</sup> Louis Scutenaire, “La justice immanente,” in *Documents 34*, special issue *Intervention surréaliste*, July 1934, 51.

of mankind: everyone could construct his own *pêle-mêle*, and by consequence, everyone was able to create his own history and pedigree.

This in part Nietzschean way of regarding the past not as dead weight but as a collection of materials for aesthetic play in and for the present, fourthly, differed from the way in which official art history devised genealogies. There was nothing new as such of course in designing genealogies. Traditional art history had been doing so for a long time and is doing so to date. Yet the impulse here is a different one. Unlike the *avant-gardes*, whose many histories pay tribute to pluralism, accentuate possibility and give way to a rhizomatic complex, art history aims to construct the one history in a comprehensive causal narrative or schema. Perhaps the most famous of these is the diagram Alfred H. Barr devised for the 1936 MOMA exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Much ink has spilled over this diagram, so I can limit myself here to highlighting just a few issues. For starters, Barr's *abstract* form was clearly indebted to the models developed by the *avant-gardes* in preceding decades. Yet equally important is that, instead of creating new possibilities in the present, his diagram reduced the present to a choice between two "states," that of non-geometrical abstract art, and that of geometrical art. If Barr's diagram further let Orphism die a quiet death along the way, if it left out dozens of *avant-gardisms* and further failed to articulate cross-fertilizations between many *avant-garde* movements that were included, this was only to make his model cohere. Barr too presented a genealogical structure, and his model was as presentist as those of the *avant-gardes*. While his structure did not dialectically evoke much possibility or potential, it is a memorable instance (among many) that illustrates how the historiography of art and writing indeed has already learnt, and perhaps still can learn, from the presentist experimentation of the *avant-gardes*.

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### **By Way of Conclusion**

I began with Hayden White who in the 1960s advised historians to stop representing the past as if they were nineteenth-century realist novelists and to start looking toward twentieth-century modernism and the classic *avant-gardes* for new modes of representation. Today still, White's suggestion remains a powerful one. Admittedly, his advocacy of *avant-gardism* strikes as somewhat dated, as many developments in metahistorical reflection of recent decades have of course caught up with various tenets of *avant-garde* writing. Nonetheless, the



often intriguing and radical possibilities offered by avant-garde poetics have far from been exhausted. A truly surrealist history of, say, the French Revolution, has not been written, for example. How could it? What indeed would such a history amount to? If historians were to take their cue from surrealist writing and draw, for instance, on the poetic of the image put forth by André Breton in his founding *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924), the results might be uncomfortably unhistorical, even to Krauss. As Breton explained in his *Manifeste* a surrealist image arises from the spontaneous articulation of several dispersed and unrelated everyday phenomena. A notorious example Breton himself gave derived from the Comte de Lautréamont's now canonised fifth song of *Les Chants de Maldoror*: "comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie." A sewing machine, a dissecting table and an umbrella have very little in common, indeed, but when put together—albeit in syntactically correct clause—on a table for surgical dissection a rather different and marvelous image sparks from their encounter. By trial and error a historian too could spin a narrative that connects entirely unrelated phenomena, distant from one another in time and space, or not. Whether that historian would be willing to deliver his *historia rerum gestarum* over entirely to arbitrary play with *res gestae*, as Breton would have it, is less clear, however.<sup>22</sup> Alternatively, historians could turn to surrealist visual art and draw on the technique of *frottage* developed by Max Ernst—also commonly encountered in archeological field research. Ernst would take a sheet of paper, a pencil (or any other writing materials) and arbitrarily start calquing objects' surfaces, later often cutting up the resultant tracing paper to insert snippets of it into larger collage artworks. Very few practices might so forcefully function as the index of the historian's actual bodily engagement with concrete remnants of the past. But which historian has been willing to *subconsciously* offer such an entirely *visual* narrative of past objects, following the example of Ernst himself in *Histoire naturelle* (1926)?<sup>23</sup> Given the examples of *écriture automatique* and *frottage*, it is perhaps not surprising that White never delivered a surrealist or avant-garde history of anything. Yet the genealogy-complex as I have called it here, a distinctly avant-garde form of

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<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, Walter Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*, certain texts of Mass Observation, Humphrey Jennings' *Pandamonium*, and perhaps the documentary historical fiction of Alexander Kluge as well deliver a mode of *surrealistic* historical discourse at least potentially exemplifying what White was imagining.

<sup>23</sup> Max Ernst, *Histoire naturelle*, Paris: Galerie Jeanne Bucher, 1926, portfolio with thirty-four collotypes after frottages made in 1925, introduced by Hans Arp.

historiography, might well prove worth pursuing more actively in history, and art and literary history in particular. If Krauss' grid has helped us to recognize more comprehensive structures across the classic avant-gardes, the genealogy-complex of the avant-gardes in turn presents a model for connecting such grids through time in Foucauldian-genealogical terms. Above all, the examples of avant-garde history I have given here are to remind us, as historians of modernism and its avant-gardes, that history will always be history, facing a number of constant challenges, first among which the choice of the most appropriate narrative or aesthetic form.