

**Daniel Horn**

***The Boon of Barbarism.***

**Returns on an Idea in Contemporary Art and Politics.**

**Erschienen 2020 auf ART-Dok**

URN: [urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-71651](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-artdok-71651)

URL: <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/volltexte/2020/7165>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/artdok.00007165>

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*The Boon of Barbarism.*

Returns on an Idea in Contemporary Art and Politics.

Dissertation im Fach Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften.  
Akademie der bildenden Künste Wien

Juni 2013



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## Introduction

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The malleable notion of barbarism has served the various critiques of Western modernity enormously well. It is hardly an overstatement to maintain that over the course of time many a critique's genesis has by and large drawn on the term as a state (political, economic, social, cultural, aesthetic) vis-à-vis which critique and at times subsequent agency in turn constructs its addressee as other. (Historically and to this day as a critique frequently speaking from a location within this other, expressing, not only indignation – or conversely, admiration – but, more importantly, complicity, fatigue, resignation, nihilism and indeed lackadaisical casualness towards any such barbaric state).

The barbaric other of Greek antiquity – historically and territorially of oriental descent – as an alien subject of deformed expressivity<sup>1</sup> borne essentially of the small-town mentality and social structure of the *polis*<sup>2</sup>, apparently found its best deployment in the later Roman Empire as a mercenary contracted by

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<sup>1</sup> Barbarism derives from *barbarismós* (Greek noun) based on *barbarízein*: to speak incomprehensibly/in a foreign tongue (i.e. non-Greek). Note that the notion of barbarity first appears in the Latin *barbaria* denoting rawness, non-culture etc. (Oxford English Dictionary)

<sup>2</sup> “The earliest phase of social formations found in historical as well as in contemporary social structures is this: a relatively small circle firmly closed against neighbouring, strange, or in some way antagonistic circles. [...]. The smaller the circle which forms our milieu, the more anxiously the circle guards the achievements, the conduct of life, and the outlook of the individual, and the more readily a quantitative and qualitative specialization would break up the framework of the whole little circle. The ancient *polis* in this respect seems to have had the character of a small town.” Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life”, 1903. In *The City Cultures Reader*, (eds. Malcolm Miles, Hall, Borden), London, 2004, p. 16.

enemy armies.<sup>3</sup> Other than that - and to make matters worse - the no longer oriental but Teutonic barbarian was mostly irritating to civilized Rome. Blithely ensconced in the woods north of the Alps, the barbaric tribes apparently did not much care for the allure of commodities and the finer things in life. They were an anti-consumerist lobby spoiling the lay of the land's smooth commerce of goods, welcoming merchants only to hawk their "loots" to them while acquiring little in return, seemingly in no need of "foreign" novelties and content with their "bad ponies" <sup>4</sup>. In essence, any business community's most dreaded target group.

In modernity proper, this seemingly headstrong subject of deformed expressive and indeed pecuniary communication emerged as the now literally deformed body of the proletarian, toiling away physically and mentally to the factory's clock-time "rhythm reverberating with every barbaric drum"<sup>5</sup>. Having been sent to his father's Manchester sweatshop in 1842 to acquire a taste for business, Friedrich Engels instead used his stay to gather the raw data of industrial barbarity from local medical records, so as to compile a catalogue of

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<sup>3</sup> "Männer, nicht zum Ackerbau geschickt oder zur Schifffahrt, oder die von Herden ihren Unterhalt suchen, die im Gegenteil nur ein Werk und eine Kunst pflegen; stets zu kämpfen und zu überwinden, was sich ihnen entgegenstellt." Plutarch quoted in Friedrich Engels, *Zur Urgeschichte der Deutschen*, Marx/Engels. *Werke*. Bd. 19, Berlin 1973 [1882], p. 429. In this context it should be noted that based on a historical-economic evaluation which Engels in part derived from Lewis Henry Morgan's 1877 book *Ancient Society*, barbarism was the stage *between* savageness and civilization, thus precisely not the most atavistic societal model. See his *Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums, und des Staats* (Zurich, 1884)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, pp. 434-435. "Kaufleute lassen sie nur ins Land, damit sie jemand haben, der ihnen die Kriegsbeute abkauft, sie selbst kaufen ihnen fast nichts ab; was hätten sie denn auch Fremdes nötig? Sogar ihre schlechten Ponys ziehn sie den schönen und guten gallischen Pferden vor." "[...] Gold und Silber ist den inneren Deutschen gleichgültig, den Fürsten und Gesandten von Römern geschenkte Silbergefäße dienen demselben gemeinen Gebrauch wie irdene." [Nach Tacitus]

<sup>5</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, *Die Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Frankfurt a.M. 1969. [1947]. p.27. (Translation by the author).

deformities unveiling *The Condition of the Working Class in England*<sup>6</sup>. There, the advancement of machined production concurred with the erosion of the “factory-hands”“ literal backbone:

The reports of the [Factories' Inquiry] Commission touching this barbarism surpass everything that is known to me in this line. The Commissioners mention a crowd of cripples who appeared before them, who clearly owed their distortion to the long working-hours. This distortion usually consists of a curving of the spinal column and legs, and is described as follows by Francis Sharp, M.R.C.S. [Membership of the Royal College of Surgeons][...]. Precisely similar is the testimony of Dr. Hey, for eighteen years physician in the hospital in Leeds:

"Diseases of the spine amongst people employed in factories presented themselves very frequently. [...]. The deformities of the limbs appear to be more frequent than the spinal diseases... the bending in of the knees, relaxation of the ligaments of the ankles was very frequent, and the bending of the large bones. The heads of the large bones have especially been increased and twisted to a considerable extent; and these cases I have found to have come from those mills and factories where long hours have been said to be common." <sup>7</sup>

No doubt not least on the basis of Engels' findings, Marx completed the latter's physiological profile of industrialization's barbarian with economic, political and social attributes: “valueless”, “unworthy”, “deformed”, “powerless”, “cretinous” –

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<sup>6</sup> *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, Leipzig, 1845. In Marx/Engels, *Werke* Bd. 2, Berlin 1972

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp. 376-377, English translation at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch08.htm>. Retrieved on May, 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013.



“barbarous”.<sup>8</sup> It was precisely from these “conditions” (Engels) and “according to the[se] economic laws” (Marx) that Marx and Engels advanced their political-economic critique of modern progress and rationalization to the ends of their “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848). Therein the barbaric equally applied once again to the periphery, which in this case meant the entire Non-Western world (e.g. China, India etc.), now simply conceived as one giant global market forced into becoming a trading partner by and with a “modern bourgeois society”; one which in turn also forced “the barbarians’ intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate” to global capital as the paradigm of Western “civilization”. Marx and Engels did, however, give “modern society” credit for at least having “[...] rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life”<sup>9</sup>.

According to Theodor Adorno this was a nineteenth-century rescue operation far from having seen completion with the “modern bourgeois society” – now less understood in its economic than in its cultural and social facilities – having failed to achieve one of its most persuasive purposes: “debarbarization” [“Entbarbarisierung”]. Debarbarization was especially required of the “open [“platt”] countryside”, tarnished as it was for Adorno since

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<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte aus dem Jahre 1844*, Paris 1844. In *Classical Sociological Theory* (Second Edition), eds. Craig Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, Pfaff, Virk, Oxford, Malden/MA, 2007, p. 88. The sequence of these adjectives has been slightly altered from the original.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p.99.

it had produced the “tormentors [“Quälgeister”] of the concentration camp”<sup>10</sup>; those receiving orders, doing the dirty work, “torturers” [Folterknechte] doing what “servants [Knechte]” do, “through which they perpetuate their own servitude [Knechtschaft]”<sup>11</sup>. The “cultural difference between city and country is one of the conditions – though certainly not the sole and most important – of the horror [Grausamkeit]”, claimed Adorno. “Debarbarization of the countryside” was to be “one of the most important goals of education”<sup>12</sup>, albeit with Adorno in the same breath doubting its actual effectiveness.

Adorno’s objective *for* culture was of course trivial compared to his (in)famous objection *to* culture in the light of the camp, mandating that the proven possibility of a “barbaric regime”<sup>13</sup> therefore also meant any artistic form addressing it was preposterous at best and, as has often since been quoted, “barbaric” at worst<sup>14</sup>. This had little to do with any particular discussion of form

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<sup>10</sup> Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II”. *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. 10.2, p. 680, Frankfurt a.M., 1977. Translated as *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, transl. H.W. Pickford, New York 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 690. “Folterknecht” is the term used by Walter Benjamin in a conversation with Adorno.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 680

<sup>13</sup> Adorno, “Die auferstandene Kultur”, *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. 20.2, Frankfurt a.M. 1986, p. 453.

<sup>14</sup> The famous line is contained in a much more expansive complex from which an excerpt reads: “[...] Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely [...]” “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft”, 1951. In *Prisms*. Transl. by Shiery NicholSEN Weber, Samuel Weber. Cambridge/Mass., 1981, p. 34

and medium specificity<sup>15</sup> but was levied by his assessment that: “Barbarism continues as long as the fundamental conditions that favored that relapse [Auschwitz] continue largely unchanged”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, “barbarous” and “barbarism” are liberally applied and sprinkled throughout Adorno’s writing which, intentionally or not, renders these notions significantly bereft of their force as rhetorical provocation, as which they have since been discussed<sup>17</sup>. Not only is Auschwitz barbaric as much as any composing of verses addressing it, but also the preceding “barbarism of the culture industry”<sup>18</sup> – indiscriminately applied to a Weimar Republic of “Berlin tabloid culture” and “*Bomben auf Monte Carlo*”<sup>19</sup> and to that industry’s definitive relocation to Hollywood. An “industry” - by definition naturally tuned in to the “progressing barbarism of economy’s supremacy”<sup>20</sup> - played out in the screen competitions between “Betty Boop” and

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<sup>15</sup> As which this discussion has been “reignited” by Jacques Rancière where the either-or dilemma of sappy *Holocaust* (1978) or sober *Shoah* (1985) – not to mention that Spielberg shower scene – is finally solved by the “meaningless of the secret”; in this case coming courtesy of *Citizen Kane* (1941): “the snow that falls in the miniature glass dome, and a name on a children’s sleigh”. Adorno probably would have shivered at this yuletide theme. *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, transl. Steven Corcoran, Cambridge 2011 [2004], p.126

<sup>16</sup> Adorno, 1977, p.674

<sup>17</sup> For an elaborate discussion of the semantic trajectory employed by Adorno in the context of critique and post-War public discourse in the Federal Republic see especially Sven Kramer: “Wahr sind die Sätze als Impuls...’ Begriffarbeit und sprachliche Darstellung in Adornos Reflexion auf Auschwitz”. *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literatur und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol. 70 No.3, 1996, pp.500-523. Kramer sees this generous usage of barbarism by Adorno as indicative of an intentional “liquefaction of the notion” which “refuses the ascription of evil to the past and emphasizes the Nachleben of barbarism”. p. 513 (Transl. by the author).

<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer, Adorno, 1969, p. 140

<sup>19</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Frankfurt a.M. 1973 [1946], p. 35. *Bomben auf Monte Carlo* (*Monte Carlo Madness*, U.S.-title) is a UFA-studio musical comedy film from 1931.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, “Prismen”. *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 10.1*, Frankfurt a.M., 1997 [1949], p.17

“Donald Duck”<sup>21</sup> was beheld and dismissed on location by Adorno. Only to return to the “complacent cultural barbarism”<sup>22</sup> of a post-War Germany’s “Otto-Normal-Verbraucher” investment/escape into *Die Fischerin vom Bodensee*<sup>23</sup> et al. No wonder that, as far as Adorno was concerned, this meant: “If barbarism itself is inscribed in the principle of civilization, then there is something desperate in the attempt to rise up against it.”<sup>24</sup>

Then again, “to rise up against it”, whether through a confrontational “Manifesto” or a distancing “Critical Theory”, only presents a part of the story, albeit the prominent and arguably persistent part. Differently put, before and after an *against*, barbarism may be historically revisited interjacent *with*: anticipating the resultant desperate-ness to be perhaps only marginally different. Heeding the advice of one of post-War Germany’s notable protectionists concerning art and culture’s across-the-board despair (or ineffectuality) “[...] every historically contextual theory must check the development of its topic at a certain point in time to construe it.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Horkheimer, Adorno, 1969, p. 142

<sup>22</sup> Adorno, 1997[1951], p. 14

<sup>23</sup> A film from 1956 and a prominent example of the Heimatfilm genre popular in post-War Germany around the early 1950s.

<sup>24</sup> Adorno, 1977, p.674, Translation from *Critical Models: Interventions and catchwords*, transl. H.W. Pickford, New York 1998

<sup>25</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a.M. 1974, Nachwort zur zweiten Auflage, p.135

And given the “topic[‘s]” inherent contradictions and malleability, why not “check” its “development” at a point at which to “compare the incomparable”<sup>26</sup>, as Benjamin Buchloh not long ago introduced his discussion departing from a juxtaposition of two formative exhibitions: the “Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung” (1937) organized by the artist and educator Adolf Ziegler at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst in Munich and the “Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme” in Paris realized by Andre Bréton, Marcel Duchamp and Paul Elouard at dealer Georges Wildenstein’s Galerie Beaux-Arts. The exhibitions were formative in that the Munich exhibition once and for all inaugurated and prescribed the artistic ideal of the regime, while the Paris exhibition marked the cessation of the European avant-garde just before the occupation, aware as it was of its imminent expiration at the hands of this new political reality intent to prosecute on the grounds of “degeneration”.

A question arose at the end of Buchloh’s presentation as to whether such a juxtaposition of incomparabilities could have been conceived at that very moment in time. It was answered by the suggestion that the Collège de Sociologie (1937-39), principally founded by George Bataille, Michel Leiris and Roger Caillois, essentially engaged in precisely these improbable comparisons<sup>27</sup>: debating, in “real time”, modern fascism’s awesome radiance stunning a Western

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin Buchloh, “Dialectics of Annihilation”. Lecture, Haus der Kunst, Munich, June 10th 2012.

<sup>27</sup> A question/commentary by Georges Didi-Huberman.

bourgeois modernity perceived as entirely corrupted and spiritually desolate <sup>28</sup>. As much as this conclusion along with the think-tank's neutral sounding name suggests a likeness to the concurrent Institut für Sozialforschung – then led by Max Horkheimer based at Columbia University – their respective trajectories were marked by their increasing irreconcilability, to which German fascism proved to be pivotal <sup>29</sup>. The Collège's investment in myth, in archaisms, in non-Marxist political models, perhaps even in a heterogeneous fascism, met with bewilderment at best: "You are working for fascism"<sup>30</sup>. This was somewhat acknowledged in retrospect on both sides, with Bataille stating in the third person in 1958: "La tendance pro-fasciste prétendue de certains amis de Bataille, de Bataille lui-même à un moin degré." Bataille further pondered that the Collège de Sociologie displayed a: "paradoxical fascist tendency [...] despite the radically contrary intention"<sup>31</sup>. The drifting apart of the Institut für Sozialforschung and the Collège de Sociologie was imminent not least due to their diverging treatment of myths, no doubt including those of a barbaric

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<sup>28</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Reich all offered far-reaching contemporaneous analyses of the pull of nascent National Socialism; as did Walter Benjamin, although less definitively so. The difference of all these theorizations to the debates of the Collège is discussed above.

<sup>29</sup> Both Caillois and Bataille contributed to Horkheimer's *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* though. In fact in a letter by Adorno to Benjamin the former put in a request: "to look for highly qualified French contributors. [...] I mentioned Caillois and Bataille (?)". July, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1937. Adorno/Benjamin, *Briefwechsel 1928-40*, ed. Henri Lonitz, Frankfurt a.M. 1995, p. 257 (Translation by the author). A difficult request as it turned out, with Benjamin replying: "to having to deal on the one hand with the paralyzed orthodox intelligentsia [French Stalinists] and the often unconscious sympathies for fascism of the free ["der freien"; i.e. the members of the Collège] on the other hand." *Ibid.*, p. 264

<sup>30</sup> Apparently a remark by Benjamin to members of the College, according to Pierre Klossowski. Quoted in Giorgio Agamben: *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford/CA, 1998 [1995], p. 113

<sup>31</sup> Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes VII*, Paris 1976, p. 461 (Transl. by the author).

“nature”, reflected in the assertion, again by Adorno, that: “Caillois does not resolve myths into immanence of consciousness, does not flatten them through ‘symbolism’, but on the contrary appeals to their reality.” As “materialism”, according to Adorno, “and unfortunately more than that. Namely the anti-historical and indeed crypto-fascist belief in nature, as such adverse to an analysis of society and eventually leading to a Volksgemeinschaft based on biology and the imagination.”<sup>32</sup> “The indicators of a pathological cruelty [Grausamkeit]” which Benjamin in turn stated the central intellectual-spiritual concerns of at least Caillois to be.<sup>33</sup> To which one may again look to Bataille, who some twenty years later wrote of those years: “Il est certain que le monde bourgeois tel qu’il est est une provocation à la violence et que, dans ce monde, les formes extérieures de la violence sont fascinantes.”<sup>34</sup>

At that moment, contemporary art was no longer at stake for the discussions of the Collège, while these “exterior instances of violence” only became all the more “fascinating” (and during which the aesthetic paradigm of contemporary Fascist art was properly and unmistakably finalized)<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> Adorno/Benjamin, 1995, pp. 276-277

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 1995, p. 357 (In a letter to Horkheimer from 1938).

<sup>34</sup> Bataille, 1977, p. 461

<sup>35</sup> For a recent discussion on the disappearance of the visual arts as a critical domain for the Collège as much as its relationship to fascism as a social viability see Georges Didi-Huberman: “La colère oubliée”, in *Critique* No. 788-789, January/February 2013, pp. 22-29, that essentially presents an expanded follow-up to his preceding remark above.

“Occidental reason”, meanwhile, in all of these cases, was already well on its way to being assigned “its place on the junkyard of history”<sup>36</sup>.

The following study, by contrast, departs from concurrent developments in Germany and France a decade earlier. From “Those Twenties”, as the short text by Adorno is titled, where he states that: “those phenomena of regression, of neutralization, [...] usually ascribed to the beginning pressure exerted by national socialist terror already developed [...] in the liberal continental-European society. [...] The catastrophe that succeeded the 1920s was bred by their own social conflicts, including the sphere one habitually calls culture.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps not least due to this overall sense of “regression” and “neutralization”, barbarism was both implicitly and explicitly adopted as an aesthetic anti-ideal, linked to visions of social models seemingly embracing barbaric aspects by quite “incomparable” “spheres”. Reexamining Bataille’s short-lived yet comprehensively discussed avant-garde journal *Documents* (1929-30)<sup>38</sup>, together with largely forgotten, even then rather marginal and specialized völkisch-fascist art and culture journals from the period alongside archival

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<sup>36</sup> Kramer, 1996, p. 509. He uses this verdict in connection with Adorno’s post-Auschwitz debate while in his context here Kantian “reason” [Vernunft] may be positioned not only against fascism but also vis-à-vis the critique of reason and modernity as leveled by the Collège. One – again – certainly attuned to the myth of enlightenment argued by Adorno and Horkheimer albeit with vastly divergent analyses drawn.

<sup>37</sup> Adorno, 1977 [1962], p.499, 502

<sup>38</sup> The foremost studies being Georges Didi-Huberman’s *La ressemblance d’Informe*, Paris 1995, (*Formlose Ähnlichkeit*, Munich 2010), no English translation available to date, and the 1996 publication and catalogue by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois: *L’Informe: mode d’emploi* (Paris, 1996 / *Formless: A User’s Guide*, New York 1997) preceded by Denis Hollier *La prise de la Concorde*, Paris 1974 which however does not discuss exclusively *Documents*. Furthermore see the comprehensive exhibition catalogue *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, eds. Dawn Ades, Simon Baker, London Hayward Gallery 2006.



material held at the Bundesarchiv in Berlin<sup>39</sup> provided the initial context; at times merely by producing banal correlations caused by overlapping imagery and somewhat unforeseen mutual points of interests and discussions further yielding non-exclusive lines of arguments in making the case for collective cultural models, each of them anti-bourgeois, to a degree. (On this note, the study thereby further seeks to revisit, differentiate and amend art historically established dualistic narratives of avant-garde and fascism<sup>40</sup>).

The first five chapters seek to exhaust these relations over a wide range, tracing and analyzing these parallel evolving discussions along their art historical, aesthetic, cultural and social aspects. This section includes a chapter that extends this dual context to contemporaneous ideas about barbarism by Walter Benjamin – himself being in direct conversation with Bataille not much later (see above). The sixth chapter continues this discussion, focusing on the tangent aspect as provided by Freud’s *system unconscious*: highly influential to the dissident-Surrealist discourse of *Documents* (as much as to various avant-garde positions in general); recognized and reformulated by these “dissident” fascist-spiritualist aspirations to fit their ideological mold, thus performing an act of textbook sublimation for the cause of a pure, spiritually and aesthetically “enlightening” barbarity reconceived as the pinnacle reconciling community and culture.

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<sup>39</sup> Predominantly the collection filed under BArch NS 21 held at the Berlin-Lichterfelde branch.

<sup>40</sup> “Thus if the surrealists embraced the primitive, the fascists abjected it, aggressed against it. For the surrealists the primitive could not be close enough; for the fascists it was always too close.” Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge/Mass. 1996, p. 213.

The seventh chapter reconsiders Bataille's reception by postmodernist art historical and theoretical discourse beginning in the mid 1980s, significantly in the context of the journal *October* and, in connection to it, Rosalind Krauss's and Yve-Alain Bois's influential exhibition project and publication *L'informe: Mode d'emploi*, presented in 1995 at the Centre Pompidou. The aim here is to employ a contextual "exhibition review" to the ends of a discussion about modern and contemporary art's capability to perform the rigorous aesthetic and social agencies requested of it by Bataille and *Documents* – recognized yet somewhat elided by Krauss's and Bois's project for the sake of presenting a quasi-barbaric formalism and classification system which "formlessness" by definition annulled.

The last chapter departs again from a postmodernist art-theoretical discussion through a revisiting of the "anti-aesthetic", as a term afforded renewed acuity by the eponymous publication edited by Hal Foster in 1983. These former discussions, renegotiating and rejecting certain key avant-gardist models and strategies having to do with transgression as a defunct attribute and teleology of visual praxis and critical theory, leads into a final comparative analysis of two recent practices known to deploy content marked as barbaric – indeed as the discussion shows identical content – in quite divergent ways. Both the work of Seth Price and Thomas Hirschhorn have been frequently discussed over the last decade in their art historical and conceptual extrapolation of Andy Warhol's work that presented similar content of everyday media consumption, already liquefied in an image economy of an insatiable recycling, updating and an exchangeability virtually indiscriminate on the level of content. Both artists address the contemporary modes of consumption and exchangeability that have emerged with the digitalization of image production, circulation and reception,

albeit by different formal means that betray a rift revealing the aforementioned discussions of the mid 1980s to be of enduring relevance. (If only by thinking through their irrelevance set by art's shifted structural integration into media culture at large and its rising value as a global capital asset.)

Two recent and incomplete observations in closing:

I

This year's forthcoming Istanbul Biennial under the heading "Mom, am I Barbarian?" sets out to critically and aesthetically draw on the notion of barbarism to address various global and local discontents. From the local biopolitical gentrification of Istanbul's center to the meta frame of the global dynamics of neo-liberal political interest and acquisition over public space and assets by means of minoritarian privatization, in the course of which, as the term already denotes, majoritarian privation is never far.

As a critique of the highest form of civilization and rationality, which has produced a world of barbarity in its negative sense [...] many artists of the Western tradition have advocated historically for what was primordial, primitive and irrational (Romanticism, Primitivism, Fauve, Dada and Surrealism for example). This is also true of today. In the face of excessive production, connectivity and complexity in the world, the simple and direct (and the opposites, the over-complicated and convoluted) are espoused as an expression of the desire to start anew.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Online at <http://bienal.iksv.org/en/press/pressreleases/2013>  
Retrieved May 5<sup>th</sup> 2013

The curatorial statement's resurrection of a Benjaminian artistic "positive barbarity" is further funneled through Rancière's *Hatred for Democracy* and *Dissensus* while updating the latter's *partition of the sensible* – equipped with the advances of an unspoiled Edenic Silicon Valley spirit – with the *Atmospheres of Democracy: making things public*.

Together with transformations in governance and ideology globally, the concept of 'public', and alongside, the role of art and its institutions has shifted drastically. The public programs of the Biennial will focus on this shift, especially on the notion of "making [things] publics", and will pose the question of "one common world" in a contemporary context, as raised by Bruno Latour.

The *prostitution universelle* (Benjamin Buchloh), exerted by Marx's fetish character of the commodity and *exhibited* in 1938 at the International Surrealist Exhibition, has apparently finally run its course to be ransomed in *universal agency* – notably here under a paradigm of barbarism.

Current artistic practices expand from hybrid trials to radical extremes, experimenting with unorthodox (even barbaric) languages, forms and processes sometimes acting as "oxygen bubbles" in reality or as inter-subjective agents acting in the symbolic realm. Many aim to create critical hubs in society. However there are no ready-made formulations. In each case, a new alchemy is needed. The Biennial will be the site for such experimentations.

What is omitted from this oxygen-abuzz script is that these hazy “unorthodox” and “barbaric” “languages” and “forms” have long become the lingua franca not in the “symbolic realm” but proliferating in the 24-hour realm of social media “hubs” “feeds” and “tweets” if you must: #obamasukkkksa\$\$ cuz he a commyniggaLOL. Which is indeed formally derived from said “Western tradition”, hatching as these “languages” do from “the embryos of violet crocodiles” while they implement the gibberish of “Gadji beri bimba”<sup>42</sup>; yesteryear’s “untruthfulness on style”<sup>43</sup> of the Cabaret Voltaire. The language engaged here is itself reminiscent of the very same neo-eco innovative entrepreneurial managerial tune accompanying the drastic purchases on the threatened “commons” under discussion, not least in the Middle East and Turkey itself as the recent *developments*<sup>44</sup> in Istanbul make all too clear. It is a language again in turn partly tapped from the discursive ventures of 1960s Land Art.

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<sup>42</sup> From Richard Hülsenbeck/Tristan Tzara *Dialogue entre un cocher et une alouette*, 1917. Hugo Ball *Gadji beri bimba*, 1916

<sup>43</sup> “What Expressionists and Dadaists meant polemically, the untruthfulness on style as such, today triumphs in the crooner’s song jargon [...]” Horkheimer/Adorno, 1969, p. 138. Translation by the author

<sup>44</sup> “As the violence exercised by the police is getting wilder, the masses are pouring down the streets against the repressive governance of the state. I wholeheartedly support the resistance where hundreds of protesters were seriously injured and condemn the violence exercise by the police. Against the barbarians!” Fulya Erdemci, curator of the Istanbul Biennial. *Artforum International News Digest*, June, 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty* (1970)



Palm Jumeirah Island, Dubai (2006)

## II

At the time of completion of this book two new alpha blue-chip spaces have opened on the outskirts of Paris: Gagosian Gallery's 2000-square meter construction designed by Jean Nouvel in Le Bourget and Thaddeus Ropac's second Paris space in Pantin, no less expansive. Alpha and blue-chip do not merely connote the cachet of the stable of artists shown and their respective value as reflected in prices and auction records; they moreover designate the audience that these spaces are designed to welcome. Barely reachable by public

transport, Gagosian Le Bourget is instead adjacent to the eponymous small airport predominantly used by corporate and private jets. (Both spaces' peripheral geography reiterates criteria that have long become the architectural standards of this caste elsewhere: closed-off islands only reachable by private boat or helicopter). Both galleries inaugurated their white mega cubes with Anselm Kiefer's spectacular-contemplative large-scale earthy paintings and installations, inferring signposts of historical trauma and barbarity; an artist known not least for literally applying precisely the kind of poetry refuted by Adorno due to its irreconcilability with the persistence of conditions diagnosed as barbaric. Here the "boon of barbarism" is not merely in form of an aesthetic or symbolic quality, or in terms of regaining curatorial or discursive actuality, but it is definitely quantifiable – in *real* estate and *hard* currency





## I Distraction no more

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In 1929 the American journalist, World War I veteran, lay-ethnographer and practicing occultist W.B. Seabrook published *The Magic Island*, a diary-style extensive account of contemporary Haiti<sup>45</sup>. A large section of the book was devoted to the island's religious-animistic practice, referred to as "Vaudou". Perhaps unbeknown to Seabrook, the subject was surely of fashionable interest to contemporaneous urbanite circles, and thus commercially viable. In fact, the attraction Vaudou held was fully capitalized upon by retailing it as sensational "Black Magic", which the book was touted as revealing to a curious – and expanding – target group.<sup>46</sup> (Allegedly, the book further introduced the term "zombie" to a Western audience).

Seabrook's fascination with non-Western, pagan and – in view of a by then late-stage colonialism – increasingly extinct customs and artifacts, in conjunction with a personal longing for alternative, arguably more gratifying and authentic models of individual experience within a collective framework were, while certainly idiosyncratically pursued, emblematic for the enlarged spiritual reorientations and searches of post-War Western Europe<sup>47</sup>. If the latter half of

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<sup>45</sup> The book became rather popular among metropolitan circles, evinced by its fairly soon after translation and publication under the titles *L'Île Magique* (Paris, 1929) and *Geheimnisvolles Haiti. Rätsel und Symbolik des Wodu-Kultes* (Berlin, 1931) respectively.

<sup>46</sup> The book's subtitle promised: "The adventures and emotional experiences of an American author who went to Haiti to see for himself the mysteries of Black Magic."

<sup>47</sup> In addition to his exploration of Haitian Vaudou in *The Magic Island*, Seabrook wrote books on Bedouin tribes of Northern Africa as well as on cannibalism among West African tribes, a practice he had participated in himself. These are *Adventures in Arabia* (1927) and *Jungle Ways* (1930) respectively.

the 19<sup>th</sup> century had already seen the emergence of various bohemian and anti-rationalist movements, especially but not exclusively in German-speaking countries, the 1920s saw a fully-fledged revival of these former ideas, now however in a cultural environment of increased access to and circulation of mass media. Within Germany in particular, the rapid phase of modernization since the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century towards a predominantly industrial and bourgeois society during the course of the Wilhelminian Era also meant that these former niche interests were now more widely disseminated. And received by a larger, less class-specific audience as opposed to the properly bohemian initiate and secret societies that had conceived of these alternatives in the first place. Comprising, for example, the “Kosmiker” group around Ludwig Klages and the circle around Stefan George in Munich<sup>48</sup>, both invested in Dionysian ritual and vitalistic Matriarchal myth countering Apollonian rational organization; the retreat to meditative artistic communal life seeking bodily and mental deconstruction in nature at the Monte Verita colony, the archetype of a more or less self-sufficient art-eco tourism; Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophical movement claiming knowledge production from psychic facilities and categories opposing the normative ones prescribed by empirical and materialist natural science; Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy with its alternative pedagogies valuing the investment in the supernatural etc. The interests and propositions of these groups arrived in the mainstream by the 1920s as watered-down – popularized – alternative concepts of living and value systems. The decimation of hitherto unimaginable numbers of lives in the First World War presumably furthered the

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<sup>48</sup> For an insightful and satirical account of both of these circles see Franziska zu Reventlow, *Herrn Dames Aufzeichnungen oder Begebenheiten aus einem merkwürdigen Stadtteil*, Munich 2008 [1913].

susceptibility to the various counter-models on offer to the by then certainly reigning and increasingly conflicted form of coexistence: *society*.

One of the classic studies on the development of industrialization and the subsequently urbanized forms of coexistence – society on its way to becoming permeated by mass media and commodity culture, as it was by the 1920s – had already been carried out in 1887 by Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* [Community and Society]. It is telling in this context that this book really received wider exposure and prominence retroactively: from 1920 to 1926 alone this title saw five reprints, four of which were reissued twice during the same year (1922 and 1926 respectively), indeed becoming something of a best-seller; naturally in Germany but also translated and discussed, for example, in Britain at the time. Tönnies' "objective" retracing of this shift from community to society, which – as he himself as late as 1935 clearly frustratedly stressed, was never conceived as an "ethical or political tract"<sup>49</sup> – resurfaced as a shift more and more openly alleged to be fatal and dissatisfying. The various discontents voiced resorted to the binary definitions Tönnies had devised in order to differentiate community from society. Now his definitions of an abstract such as community were upheld as forsaken and desirable values to be regained.

Tönnies spoke of "relations" and "connections" as the processes structuring each of these two terms, that in turn were characterized by him as follows: the community's inherent relations were experienced as "real and organic life", while society's notion of relation and thus life he determined to be "ideational and mechanical". Furthermore, the "permanence" of the community

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<sup>49</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, "Vorwort zur achten Auflage", Leipzig 1935, p. III

“dissolved” [“sich auflösen”] in society, which by his definition was “temporary” and “ostensive” [“scheinbar”] – community was “a living organism” whereas society was “a mechanical aggregation and an artifact”.<sup>50</sup>

“Alles Wirkliche ist organisch” – “all that is real is organic” – stated Tönnies, by which he did not intend to conjure a spiritual-autochthonous real emanating from a chosen soil, rather this was an assertion he deduced from historically changing economic and social conditions: that of more self-contained communities, where labor and the production of goods took place and departed directly from the lands being worked or built on and exploited. The subsequent transactions, exchange and communication thus equally related to this clearly delineated sphere. Whether one wanted to be or not, as a member of this feudal-to-pre-industrial community, one was locked into a rather hermetic social and economic reality, certainly divided by a clear and barely permeable hierarchy, safe perhaps for travelling merchants and the less appealing prospect of being expelled from the community as an outlaw. (The latter chirpy German notion of “vogelfrei” – “free as a bird” – is rather deceptive here, since the Freiheit/freedom attained by being outlawed essentially not only meant the privation of the limited rights one may have had but furthermore exposure to precariousness and arbitrary homicide at worst.<sup>51</sup>) Tönnies’ notion of “Auflösung” (dissolution/disintegration), by contrast, was defined by him not as negatively connoted per se but merely described a socio-economic process affecting the citizenry’s

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., pp. 3, 5, 6 (Transl. by the author).

<sup>51</sup> On the biopolitical notion of the “ban” producing the non-subject of the “outlaw” (outside the law) in late and post-Medieval society as one stage within a Western evolution of juridical – and terminal – expulsion see also Giorgio Agamben, 1998.

“connection” to one another, a process inseparable from a developing society, most clearly discernable in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century metropolis (Paris, Berlin, Vienna etc.) where capital and commerce hypertrophied into hitherto non-existent dimensions and which therefore also made them the concentrated hubs for new scientific, cultural and political knowledge production (as opposed to 15<sup>th</sup>-century Renaissance aristocratic patronage, say (eg Venice, Florence), or late 18<sup>th</sup>-century “enlightened” courts like Weimar). “Auflösung” would pose a threat, according to Tönnies, once the State – as the non-communal foreign body as which it was perceived, holding a supposed Hobbesian state of *homo hominis lupus* in check – would openly become the subject of hitherto “frequently – and more often hypocritically – concealed hatred and contemptuous sentiment” by the people, “depending on the degree by which they [the people] become detached [abgelöst] and estranged [entfremdet] from it [the State].”<sup>52</sup>

This conclusion was made against the backdrop of a pompous federal-monarchical German Empire increasingly perceived as alienating by an urbanized constituency. Marx’s notions of “*estrangement*” [Entfremdung] and “*alienation*” [Entäußerung] from some forty years earlier meanwhile addressed less a concrete political (German) State (due to the lack of one), but signaled an economic state to which the worker served as the material and asset of the least value: “the most wretched commodity”; his/her “*devaluation* [...] in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things”; this “economic law” being responsible for his/her “*alienation*” in view of actual economic access alongside the bodily and mental “*estrangement*” from the objects he/she

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p. 242

produced.<sup>53</sup> Which, adding insult to injury, Marx claimed to lead to the workers' "self-estrangement" since one's "life" was disowned of the "activity"<sup>54</sup> he/she could have engaged in to the benefit of one's own improvement and creation of any kind, wasted instead by the unsparing production requirements of the factory.<sup>55</sup> Logically, following from these mass individual fates, society was united only in its miserable "estrangement of man from man".<sup>56</sup> If Marx's and Engels's rational economic analyses mandating revolutionary (re)action historically still coincided with the very last sighs of anti-Napoleonic and the more irrational imaginations of German Romanticism, by the time Tönnies amended the 1922 reprint of his study these irrational investments appeared to have returned more empowered than ever; yet simultaneously less clear about their specific intent and application. In his added interjacent "Appendix to social relations", Tönnies pinpointed the longing for a notion of community, as originally defined by him, while raising concern for misguided ambitions drawn from said perceived deprivation:

If the capitalist-social world system after having experienced horrible devastations [WW I], from thereon enacts its disintegrative [auflösenden] forces all the more forcefully; if, in light of these phenomena, the call for 'community'

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<sup>53</sup> Marx, [1844], Oxford 2007, p. 86

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p.90

<sup>55</sup> For a differing narrative – based on archival material – to Marx's image of the proletarian barbarian engaged in no activity other than industrial drudgery see Jacques Rancière: *Proletarian Nights: The Worker's Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, London 2012 [Paris, 1981].

<sup>56</sup> Marx, Oxford 2007, p.91

has grown louder and louder [...] then this call will be all the more trustworthy, the less it unfolds as messianic hope based on the “sprit” [Geist] alone; because the spirit as a distinct being is only real within the belief in ghosts [Gespensterglauben]; [...]<sup>57</sup>

Just as Marx and Engels sought to deflate the efforts of their adversaries who sought to obscure their rationale through conjuring a “spectre of Communism” – instead presenting a *solid* and *infusible* Manifesto – as far as consequences to be drawn from the sentiment of “Auflösung” were concerned, Tönnies recommended “principles” of “collective [genossenschaftliche] self-sufficiency”<sup>58</sup>. A recommendation whose principled temperateness already betrayed its presumable insufficiency, in 1922, to stir or satisfy said society’s enthusiasm and elation for a return to a community of one kind or another<sup>59</sup>.

Instead of countering “Auflösung” with Tönnies’s communitarian pragmatism, it seemed to be more promising and inciting to invest in pre-War spiritual, transcendental “Auflösungen” instead. Towards the kind of states Sigmund Freud in 1929 called “oceanic”, a term he, despite voicing suspicion, adopted in the first page of *Civilization and its Discontents*, derived from his

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<sup>57</sup> Tönnies, 1935 [1922], p. 203 (Transl. by the author)

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> And which despite Tönnies rational-scientific outlook was nevertheless criticized in his day for catering to mythological leanings: “The theory of an organic community, elevating a natural [natürlich] organism to a model of social formation, is no less mythological than nationalism, which can conceive of no higher unity than the fateful form of the nation.” Siegfried Kracauer, *Das Ornament der Masse*, Frankfurt a.M. 1977 [1927] p. 55 (Transl. by the author)

penfriend, writer Romain Rolland: “[...] a sense of eternity, a feeling of something limitless, unbounded [...]”<sup>60</sup>.

If, as Tönnies had posited, “one enters society like one does a strange land [wie die Fremde]”<sup>61</sup>, it would seem that during this period, various other “strange lands” were obversely sought out to at least temporarily provide a break from Tönnies’s – and Marx’s – glumly painted, anonymous yet stifling “*self-estranged*” “*society*”. Freud, in 1929, claimed this society’s “cultural frustration”<sup>62</sup> to be reflective of not only general and blurry “discontent” but furthermore linked to “[...] this strange attitude of hostility to civilization”. In fact Freud, while declaring himself to be “not sufficiently erudite” to historically “trace the causal chain” for such “hostility” did so regardless, retracing two historical excursions, one more geographically and the other more chronologically:

Some such hostility to civilization must have been involved already in the victory of Christianity over paganism. After all, this hostility was very close to the devaluation of earthly life that came about through Christian teaching. The penultimate cause arose when voyages of discovery brought us into contact with primitive peoples and tribes. Owing to inadequate observation and the misinterpretation of their manners and customs, they appeared to the

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<sup>60</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilizations and its Discontents*. Transl. David McLintock, London 2004 [Vienna, 1929], pp. 1-2

<sup>61</sup> Tönnies 1934, p. 3

<sup>62</sup> Freud, 2004, p.44



Europeans to lead a simple, happy life, involving few needs, which was beyond the reach of their culturally superior visitors<sup>63</sup>

The difference now being that these excursions embarked on – according to Freud, simultaneously assuaging and propelling said “hostility” and “frustration” – were increasingly available to an expanding audience. An audience that did not require to embark on exciting – and costly – voyages to the remnants of Paradise and untamed wilderness that the 19<sup>th</sup>-century venturesome artist-dropout (e.g. Gauguin) shared with the aristocratic-affluent globetrotter (the quasi-descendants of Freud’s “superior visitors”, the latter a very fine nomination for the colonizers he essentially was referring to). The marketing of exotic images from around the world, proliferating representations of objects and people from markedly different times and places appeared – seemingly confirming Freud’s hunch – to look not only afield for its material but also back- and inwards; towards the ancient, believed to be lost, spiritual and cultural roots of a less constrained and fragmented origin. Unsurprisingly, both of these spheres – faraway and archaic dominions – offered plenty of visually more or less engaging material. Equally unsurprising, this material was therefore incorporated by a nascent popular media culture catering to this growing public appetite. Basically nothing but an early instance of co-optation and mainstreaming of the intriguing strangeness which both exotic and pagan “authenticity” could lay claim to and be mobilized as, reflected as such for example in the then newly founded popular German magazine *Die Koralle* (1925-44). A “Bilderzeitung” (illustrated magazine), advertising on its cover not only “Kultur und Sport” but furthermore

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p.30

“Natur und Reisen” [nature and travel]; and indeed “Heimat und Ferne” [the homeland and the faraway].<sup>64</sup> (And thus not untypical of Adorno’s disdained “Berlin tabloid culture”, not least since *Die Koralle* was a product of the very Ullstein publishing house he disparaged on numerous occasions for epitomizing Weimar Republic’s aforementioned “cultural barbarism” [“Kulturbarbarei”].)

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<sup>64</sup> *Die Koralle – Bilderzeitung für Kultur und Sport, Natur und Reisen, Heimat und Ferne* (1925-1944). The broad appeal of exotica and ancient arcana as a commercial resource of late colonialism in Weimar Republic Germany likewise left its mark on the film industry that, just like the magazine above, actually continued in Nazi Germany. See for example Jörg Schöning (ed.), *Triviale Tropen. Exotische Reise- und Abenteuerfilme aus Deutschland 1919-1939*, Munich 1997.



“new” aged: a tropical bird’s prominent head feathering is placed next to its human adaptation of a tribal warrior’s headdress. A ceremonial “exotic” costume exaggerating the human anatomy finds its analogous variation in the equally bodily exaggerating outfits worn at a modern-day carnival parade, turning the anonymous wearer into a totemic and mythological figure respectively. Which is to say the images were, despite their compacting presentation, quite *all over the place*. Their contexts were “zerstreut” [scattered], to use an expression both Siegfried Kracauer and, somewhat later, Walter Benjamin frequently drew on around the time of said example, their usage of the term however largely pertaining to mean *distraction*.

“Man schilt die Berliner *zerstreuungssüchtig*” – “One chides Berliners for being addicted to distraction” – Kracauer wrote in a newspaper article titled “The cult of distraction” (1926). Which to him actually presented nothing cultic at all but a perfectly rational conclusion, and who thus thought this scolding “petit-bourgeois”, uttered by society’s more provincial or suburban segments who had not yet fully grasped “distraction” [Zerstreuung]; not merely due to their cultural lag but more importantly since their “days” were not yet “filled” with the “stress” [“Anspannung”] endured by the “working masses”.<sup>65</sup> A “stress” that, for all its pervasive claim on every minute and second, “filled one’s day without fulfilling it”. Distraction therefore directly complied with stress in that both of these modern conditions’ chief “sphere” of actual impression was that of the

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<sup>65</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Kult der Zerstreuung”, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1926. In Kracauer, 1977, p. 313

“surface” [“Oberflächensphäre”]<sup>66</sup>. This superficial sphere, Kracauer claimed, here resorting to Marx and Engels while portending Adorno, logically informed a culture industry formally *in tune* with respective economic principles, famously given shape to by his example of the “Tiller-Girls” whose tightly arranged numbers to Kracauer “resounded *Business, Business*”.<sup>67</sup> Their “[...] legs matched [Engels’s documented barbarous and deformed] factory-hands”<sup>68</sup> which as such set the rule according to which Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s later drastic notion of “Kulturbarbarei” operated<sup>69</sup>.

By having become incorporated into the surface of the magazine page in order to serve as superficial “Zerstreuung”, the aforementioned exotic and obsolescent depictions had themselves become a lucrative part of surface culture. More importantly though, snippets of the critiques, resentments and lamentations over modern society outlined thus far had equally been taken up by

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Most frequently associated with his “The Mass Ornament” essay from 1927, this quote is actually from a later newspaper article titled “Girls und Krise”, published in 1931; at which time the Girls’ rousing productivity had become *depressed*. Kracauer, 1977, p. 342

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p.54

<sup>69</sup> For an entirely different “appreciation” of the Girls see Agamben, who exhumes them as the prototypes for capitalistic self-objectification, freeing oneself from parochial rule of one kind or another, instead investing and refining the self according to one’s projective-identificatory rationale: “The commodification of the human body, while subjecting it to the iron laws of massification and exchange value, seemed at the same time to redeem the body from the stigma of ineffability that had marked it for millennia. Breaking away from the double chains of biological destiny and individual biography, it took its leave of both the inarticulate cry of the tragic body and the dumb silence of the comic body, and thus appeared for the first time perfectly communicable, entirely illuminated. The epochal process of the emancipation of the human body from its theological foundations was thus accomplished in the dances of the “girls”, in the advertising images, and in the gait of fashion models”. Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 48. (Thus, it is only logical that Agamben is *the* champion of the artist Vanessa Beecroft.)

said instantaneous surface culture, in this case pasted in as a digestibly cut caption:

The carnival masks, that because of their grotesque exaggeration are more uncanny than comical, present perhaps the final, almost unrecognizable denouement of those older scary masks – now however the evil demons being fought are the boredom and sorrows of dull everyday life.

The accelerated pacing and fragmentary sensations affecting modern, urban experience seemed to have forfeited their larger appeal and cause for aesthetic celebration as opposed to the former embrace of any such facets of modernity; starting with Baudelaire's *Painter of Modern Life* indulging the “transient, the fleeting and the contingent”<sup>70</sup>; continuing through to avant-gardes such as Futurism and Constructivism, then either indulging in eroticizing the fusion of man and machine into techno-virility or in a translation of machinated production into a transformative collective aesthetic. In the example here, all these advances and excitations had been declared “dull”: modern day's “evils” and “demons”, quasi-religious denouncements.

Kracauer once assigned that majority voice of dissatisfaction the comatose title of “the waiting” [“Die Wartenden”]; waiting, searching and fleetingly engaging with diversions from the realm featured in the clipping above to skirt the “spiritual realm's” general “depletion” [“Entleerung”] – ubiquitous “horror vacui”. While minoritarian factions either met this state of discontent further hounded by a “horror vacui” as adamantly nihilistic “principal skeptics” or, on the contrary,

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<sup>70</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Le peintre de la vie moderne”, (1859). In *Sämtliche Werke. Bd. 5*. Ed. and transl. by Friedhelm Kemp, Vienna, Munich 1989, p. 286. (Transl. by the author)

as fanatically “uninhibited” [“hemmungslos”] “short-circuit people” [“Kurzschluss-Menschen”] the majority hovered somewhere amidst these poles: “as isolated beings [“Vereinzelte”] they traverse the endless diversity of spiritual phenomena [...] their spirit [Geist] drifting on rudderlessly [steuerlos], at home everywhere and nowhere”<sup>71</sup> (This wholesale assessment of spiritual displacements, by Kracauer, ironically – or tellingly – being commensurate with the then solidifying stereotype of the cosmopolitan *rootless* (German) Jew’s busy itinerary; the difference being that his/her displacement was of a foremost physical nature instead). Exotica, folklore and anachronisms meanwhile were commercially produced and disseminated, serving temporary, superficial and inconsequential *Zerstreuungen* – disposable fillers so to speak – maybe not to an all-encompassing “horror vacui”, but to alleviate plain fatigue: “boredom is everywhere”<sup>72</sup>.

Employing the imagery and customs of the pre-modern and the exotic merely for *Zerstreuung* – as opposed to confronting, and further excavating its underlying currents as much as those of Freudian “discontent”, “hostility to civilization” and Kracauer’s stated spiritual “Entleerung” – would not have sufficed for George Bataille at the time he launched the rather short-lived but to

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p. 106, 108, 109, 116. All quotes by Kracauer in this section are from his article “Die Wartenden”, *Frankfurter Zeitung*, March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1922.

<sup>72</sup> Michel Leiris, “Civilisation”, *Documents* 4, 1929. In Alistair Brotchie (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Acephalica*, London 1995, p.96

date repercussive avant-garde journal *Documents* in Paris in 1929<sup>73</sup>. While *Documents* certainly did not present a mere *Bilderzeitung*, it was also too particular in its features and visuals to be retailed as yet another highbrow glossy art magazine hyping exotic objects and modern art for their sheer – *superficial* – novelty. From the perspective of European intellectual history, the small group surrounding Bataille in this publication, after having broken off from Andre Bréton’s predominant Surrealist circle, presents a curious instance with regard to Kracauer’s 1920s social typologies above. While more than a few contributions certainly betray at least the desire towards intense absorption in specific ideas and cultural realms in the vein of Kracauer’s uninhibited if not unhinged “short-circuit people”, at the same time the frequently academic contributions struck a counter-balancing note; maybe not as outright “skeptics” but certainly as representatives of research-based scholarship expressing little tolerance or actual concern for spiritual and irrational extrapolations.

Seabrook’s aforementioned *The Magic Island*, due both to its timely subject matter and due to the motivations behind the writing of it, in a sense presented a converging of both: a detailed, quasi-ethnographic field study and an eccentric leap of the fatigued and discontent Western white man into mysterious and exhilarating “strange lands”. Its eclectic approach, with the book besides dark

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<sup>73</sup> One of the earliest studies pertaining to Bataille’s writing in the context of *Documents* specifically is Denis Hollier’s *La prise de la Concorde* (1974), which however saw its English translation as late as 1992 (*Against Architecture*). A lot of seminal texts by Bataille, from *Documents* and his subsequent journal *Acéphale*, appeared under the title *Visions of Excess*, edited and translated by Allan Stoekl in 1985. The journal *October* can be considered one of the earliest art theoretical/historical contexts to have revived Bataille for contemporary criticism, notably by Rosalind Krauss and Denis Hollier around the same moment. Georges Didi-Huberman published his extensive study of *Documents* in 1995, the same year the *Encyclopaedia Acephalica* was published which, despite its title, is basically an annotated English translation of the “Dictionnaire critique” segment of *Documents*. Ed. Alastair Brotchie, transl. Iain White, London 1995. Krauss’ and Bois’ publication *L’Informe; mode d’emploi* followed shortly after in 1996.



“Vaudou” equally featuring “modern” graphic illustrations of contemporary Haitian performing artists, thus answered to the converging of disciplines that *Documents* aimed for: *Doctrines, Archeology, Fine Arts, Ethnography*; as was stated on its cover. *Doctrines* was dropped from the fourth issue onwards and replaced by the less resolute, at first glance arbitrary *Variétés* – which turned out not to serve airy *Zerstreuung* but on the contrary sought to further pull the myriad of visual sundries down from its elevated state of commodification and sublimation, pointing to a material base subjected to inevitable decay. As Benjamin would pun some years later: “Distraction and destruction as the subjective and objective sides, respectively, of one and the same process”.<sup>74</sup>

Not least against this backdrop, *The Magic Island*, shortly following its French publication, thus became the subject of a review by Surrealist poet, writer and soon to be ethnographer in his own right<sup>75</sup>, Michel Leiris, who from the start contributed extensively to *Documents*, acting as an associate editor alongside Bataille.<sup>76</sup> Titled “L’Île Magique”, the review credits Seabrook’s work with finally

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<sup>74</sup> In the original German “Zerstreuung und Zerstörung”. “Theory of Distraction”, ca. 1935/36. In Jennings, Doherty, Levin eds. . *Walter Benjamins. The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*. Cambridge/Mass. 2008, p.56

<sup>75</sup> Or at least at the time a budding one, with Denis Hollier quoting Leiris’ apparently felt need at the time “to brush up a little on ethnographic and sociological questions”. Hollier, “The Question of Lay Ethnography”, in *Undercover Surrealism*, 2006, p. 59.

<sup>76</sup> *Documents* was conceived by Bataille and fellow numismatic Pierre d’Espezel, a colleague of his at the Coin and Stamp Collection at the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris. It was backed by the art dealer, collector and art historian Georges Wildenstein, who was also the publisher of a leading art magazine, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. For a concise and interpretative account of the magazine’s genesis and its trajectory see Denis Hollier “La valeur d’usage de l’impossible” (foreword to the *Documents* reprint, Paris 1991, an alternate version of which appeared as “The Use-Value of the Impossible”, *October* Vol. 60, 1992, pp. 3-24) as well as the Hayward Gallery exhibition catalogue *Undercover Surrealism*, eds. Simon Baker/Dawn Ades, London 2006.

doing “justice” to the hitherto superficial treatment of occult practices such as “Vaudou”. A treatment he blamed for largely being based on hearsay and fiction, “spiritualist blather” as Leiris called it, dumbed down to entertain the minds of ladies who lunch [...divagation spiritualiste...de bonne femme...]<sup>77</sup>. Aside from being esteemed as “a serious writer” and “conscientious observer”, Seabrook was also hailed as the “first man of the white race initiated in the mysteries of Vaudou” and able therefore to recognize it for what it was: “[...] a religion like all the others, [...] of African origin mixed with Christian [Catholic] beliefs”, the occasional animal sacrifice alone “[...] conferring on it, if one wishes to, a barbaric character”<sup>78</sup>. Which was to say that to “confer” a “barbaric character” upon Non-Western cultures and their aesthetics here and elsewhere was ultimately a matter either born of the kind of fickle “relativism” gaining traction around that time, according to Kracauer<sup>79</sup>, or instead of course good old-fashioned colonialist judgment – if not outright “spiritualist blather”.

Initially attacking what in Leiris’s view amounted to an haute-bourgeois profanation of sacrificial occult practices and attendant fetishes to the stuff of dinner party conversation – complete with matching interior design, which Rosalind Krauss once dubbed “Black Deco”<sup>80</sup> – the article proceeds to admonish

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<sup>77</sup> Michel Leiris, “L’Île Magique”, *Documents* I 3, 1929, p. 334. Translation by the author, resorting partly to a German translation, “Die Magische Insel”, published in *Elan Vital oder das Auge des Eros*, Exh. Cat., ed. Hubertus Gäßner, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 1994, p. 503

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Kracauer, 1977, p.108

<sup>80</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge/Mass. 1985, p. 48

the entire cultural system of “the Occident”. The praised and longed for “Occult” and “Magic”, which apparently still figured unimpeded in Seabrook’s everyday Haiti was, according to Leiris, “eclipsed” in the civilized West, the latter being spiritually “eclipsed” *tout court*, since it was “[...] hardly possible to expect great results in these countries” i.e., France, and by extension Western Europe. (His vague prognostication would be proven right, to say the least, only a few years later). And somewhat differently this eclipse further applied to the United States, which could however lay claim to the emergent ersatz “magic” of Hollywood – a subject frequently figuring within the magazine via the occasional set photograph or film still showing some young platinum blonde striking a pose. (Then a still fairly novel “subject”, clearly catching the eye of the editorial team while being simultaneously – if not outright ridiculed – unhinged by being surrounded with images of hardly gracious animals and facially contorted tribal masks). The natural integration of magic occurrences, which because of their obsolescence within a modern society were posthumously labeled and experienced as literally “supernatural”, had been abandoned; the causes of this dilemma, according to Leiris, were the increasing mechanization of both life and work [“le machinisme”] in conjunction with subscribing to a concept of civilization completely tied to a utilitarian rationale [“liens étroits d’une

civilization purement utilitaire”]<sup>81</sup>. Leiris’ bemoaning of the eradication of magic, without mentioning it, in principal presented, a decade later, an offshoot to Max Weber’s frequently checked enquiry as to whether the sole emphasis on rational protocols in modern knowledge production serving Leiris’ “civilization purement utilitaire” actually “carried a further purpose beyond the purely practical and technological ones”<sup>82</sup> According to Weber, the long “occidental” “process of disenchantment” [“Entzauberungsprozess”] had yielded complete “disenchantment of the world”. (For Weber, essentially personifying Kracauer’s “principal skeptic”, this also meant that precisely because formerly commonly understood non-rational social customs and occurrences had been made redundant they now only resurfaced in “the remote and secluded [hinterweltlich] realm of mystic life”, “[...] producing only fanatic sects but never a true community”).<sup>83</sup> In fact, by being labeled as “eclipsed” Leiris insinuated a ruined if not malign notion of enlightenment that corresponded to the critiques

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<sup>81</sup> In view of Leiris’s notion of “eclipse” to the ends of a critique of Western culture note that Michelangelo Antonioni’s film *L’Eclisse* (1962) may be considered here to resume this critique transposed to the Italian middle-class. One scene has Monica Vitti’s character enter a kind of trance while playing “African” drum music records in her friend’s apartment which is decorated with presumably popular 60’s interior features like a zebra rug and black and white photographs of the savanna (read, department store “Black Deco”). Dark make-up, golden chokers and hoops temporarily turn her into an Italo-fashion version of a Masai woman. More than thirty years later, this juxtaposition of exoticism vis-a-vis the perceived emotional-spiritual emptiness of modernity as a whole appearing throughout *L’Eclisse* (uniform housing, leisure, work – Alain Delon is a mid-level stock broker –, lacking community, casual relationships) as a formal device of cultural critique, is used almost identically to that of Leiris’s

<sup>82</sup> Max Weber, “Wissenschaft als Beruf” [Science as Profession], 1919. Online at <http://www.zeno.org/Soziologie/M/Weber,+Max/Schriften+zur+Wissenschaftslehre/Wissenschaft+als+Beruf>. Retrieved on June, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.

“Hat denn aber nun dieser in der okzidentalen Kultur durch Jahrtausende fortgesetzte Entzauberungsprozeß und überhaupt: dieser ‘Fortschritt’, dem die Wissenschaft als Glied und Triebkraft mit angehört, irgendeinen über dies rein Praktische und Technische hinausgehenden Sinn?”

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

of humanist reason and progress already leveled by Marx's and Engels's historical materialism and the resultant threat of a Western capitalist principle spiraling out of control, ultimately becoming self-destructive and devouring itself. Which for them thus meant that: "society [would] suddenly find[s] itself put back in [a] state[s] of momentary barbarism". "Too much civilization, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce" was their projection<sup>84</sup>. Whose critiques and warnings presaging Leiris' felt "eclipse" of civilization subsequently also led to debates on a Western culture in conflict if not crisis as the positions discussed above show. Which also goes to show that *Documents* not only betrayed "the strange look of a German journal published in French"<sup>85</sup> but, more importantly, circulated ideas and critiques that whether consciously or not reverberated with evaluations of society already undertaken at the turn of the century and informing the cultural commentary of a Kracauer and others in Germany around the early 1920s, if not before. And if the grand term of civilization was decidedly negatively connoted within *Documents*, accommodating as chronologically and historically disparate events as the Christianization of pagan Western and Northern Europe and the societal consequences of industrial capitalist production and global "primitive accumulation" (Marx), Leiris at least unmistakably exhibited that "strange attitude" Freud had concomitantly *diagnosed* as that "hostility to civilization".

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<sup>84</sup> Marx, Engels, 2004 [1848], p.100

<sup>85</sup> Hollier, 2006, p. 59. He further states that because of, most notably, Carl Einstein's input to the overall content, along with individuals of German academia, *Documents* imported an "art historical reflection on primitivism that was considerably more developed in his [Einstein's] native country than in France".

In his one-page book review-*cum*-lamentation of the spiritual shortcomings of modern living, Leiris further reflected the tendencies outlined above – of a cultural, even populist trend reaching, simultaneously, geographically outwards, historically and anthropologically backwards and fantastically inwards – towards distant, archaic and autochthonous cultures and values deemed more authentic, immediate and thus more fulfilling; “ausfüllend” (Kracauer). To be “short-circuited” with the charge of untamed nature thus required following Seabrook’s daring path. He “had acknowledged the intense desire to break through one’s barriers” and accordingly acted upon it, “risking to melt with animals, plants and stones” in a reverse process of anthropomorphization that repositioned the human animal if not lower than, then at least on equal footing with, other organic and inorganic life. An act necessary to fuse with an “outside” that was here yearningly claimed to “be more real and alive than oneself”.<sup>86</sup>

“Real” and “Alive” – fundamental sensations Western culture at that point had apparently largely forsaken to initiate, its participants stuck – “waiting” – in denial or in “lazy tranquility”<sup>87</sup>. Hence Leiris called his fellow urbanites, (likely very much self-reflexively), out on their two-facedness vis-à-vis the genuinely “orgiastic character” as imparted by “Vaudou”, a ritual which: “[...] shouldn’t really need to scare the average European if one thinks of all the sensual rites celebrated more or less hypocritically every night by people in the large capitals,

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<sup>86</sup> Leiris, 1929, p. 334

<sup>87</sup> Michel Leiris, “Civilisation”, *Documents I*, Vol. 4, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 96

that don't raise any mystical delirium"<sup>88</sup>. Instead, as Leiris put it in another article entitled "Civilisation" from the same issue, to overcome this desolate state of modern isolated coexistence perpetually drowning in "distraction" one was instead: "[...] to get closer to our primitive ancestry", to be put "stripped naked, in a more immediate and newer world."<sup>89</sup> This very language again actually resounded with Georg Simmel's perceived "Crisis of Culture" from 1916, as much as Leiris seemed to confirm him. Simmel posited that precisely these perceived spiritual shortcomings of modern society found an outlet in "supra-confessional [überkonfessionell] mysticism":

Because it is within it [this supra-confessional mysticism] that the religious soul wants to act out its life in complete immediacy [ganz unmittelbar ausleben], devoid of any mediation [Vermittlung] by some dogma formed one way or another, to essentially stand naked and alone before its God, if not already conceiving of the idea of any God as rigidity [Starrheit] and constraint [Hemmung] in itself, and the soul thus only considering its own, metaphysical life, not molded into one respective belief system or another, as truly religious.<sup>90</sup>

Leiris' indictment of civilization though conveyed not only Simmel's recognized desire for a *real-ity* that only counted for such if permitting *immediacy* and *non-mediation* but a more direct politico-historical sentiment. One that had: "[...] little respect remaining for anything that does not annihilate the succession of

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<sup>88</sup> Leiris, 1929, p. 334

<sup>89</sup> Michel Leiris, "Civilisation", in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 94

<sup>90</sup> Georg Simmel, *Gesamtausgabe Bd. 16*, ed. Otthein Rammstedt. Frankfurt a.M. 1999, p.44. (Translation by the author)

centuries in one stroke [...]”. Civilization, around the late 1920s, was for Leiris and his cohorts at *Documents*, little more than what he described as “a thin greenish layer – [...] – that forms on the surface of calm water and occasionally solidifies into a crust, until broken up by some eddy.”<sup>91</sup> In other words, civilization was wearing “thin”, stuck in a state of stagnation and prone to complete ossification (i.e., to turning into that dead “crust”). Exactly what the “eddies” breaking up this bankrupt notion of civilization would be or entail remained rather vague, described by Leiris as the “coarseness of our dangerous instincts [...] our horrifying *savageness*“, for which culture, here equitable with civilization<sup>92</sup>, merely served as a “delightfully colored cloak that veils” the “premonitory sign[s] of catastrophe”<sup>93</sup>. What exactly these “signs of catastrophe” were premonitions of (economic crises? nascent Fascism? looming war?) was left unaddressed. “Savageness” and “coarseness” served less as the inculpatory descriptions of modernity’s miseries than as barbaric obstreperous qualities challenging stagnation; qualities to strive for in devising a concept of culture that certainly had as little to do with civilization as with culture as *Zerstreuung* – whether high- or lowbrow.

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<sup>91</sup> Leiris, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 93

<sup>92</sup> Whose historically and nationally differing origins and trajectory are elaborated in detail by Norbert Elias (*Der Prozess der Zivilisation*, Zürich, 1939), retracing German *Kultur* and French *Civilité* as two historically entwined yet socially distinct processes leading to separate notions of culture, their respective cultural creations/works of art and their socio-political implications for a French *bourgeoisie* vis-a-vis a German *Bildungsbürgertum*. Which may in fact further underline the particular theoretical and esthetic concern of *Documents* as an intellectual-artistic group, i.e. the demand for culture to be powerfully transformative and genuine in relaying the inner states shaped by outside realities, which pertains to Elias’ notion of German *Kultur* at least since the 18th century. To which culture as a mere component to civilite obviously would not live up to.

<sup>93</sup> Leiris, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.93



Returning to the here quasi-desirable destructive “eddies”, it appeared that these veered off from the coordinated organization of a proletarian revolution to redistribute the means of production as proposed by Marx and Engels. Neither an embrace of the machine and technology as modern day creatures of libidinous violence and destruction as envisioned by Marinetti and his cohorts, what with Leiris’s disparagement of machined production and technological advances that seemed to only further estrangement. (Bataille spoke of the “contemptible ‘beauty’ of the factory”, here betraying a certain Romantic streak tinged with paranoia, the smoke emitting chimney *in reality* presenting “the oracle of all that is most violent in our present-day world”; “revolting tentacles” as well as “giant scarecrows”.<sup>94</sup>). If modern life and civilization as a whole was barbaric, this clearly here had less to do with either economic conditions or a critique of culture predominantly derived from a transposition of Marxist economic analysis to the culture industry. Instead of all these deductions and analyses, Leiris raved about “the thick blood of mammoths killed by our grandfathers [that] often rushes to our heads again in billows of dark malice”. Except that this kind of primal gore merely existed “above our passive spectators’ heads” – mediated, a performance one paid to see and derive temporary and safe thrills from, “sit[ting] comfortably back in our chairs.”<sup>95</sup> “Cavemen” were still “cavemen” in Leiris’ “Civilization”, “the only difference [...] [that] today we hire dozens of scapegoats whose task is to perform for us everything we are too cowardly to perform for ourselves”. Which included the act

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<sup>94</sup> Bataille, “Factory Chimney”, 1929 (*Documents I*). Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 51

<sup>95</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 95

of murder, since aforementioned mediated visceral violence and spectacular excess was:

[...] the precise reason that murderers are so popular: a beautiful crime is no doubt terrible, but at the same time it is unconsciously satisfying to everyone, and the murderer becomes a kind of sorcerer who has ritually performed the most horrific of sacrifices.<sup>96</sup>

In other words *Documents*, as a meeting point of contemporary artistic and scientific interests at least by way of the contributions of Leiris and Bataille, recognized early on not only culture industry's low bar of inhibition in offering – mediating – even highly atrocious and revulsive content, but furthermore a perpetual exchangeability seemingly regardless of content due to the industry's shrewd grasp of consumers' increasing desires and obsessions for “transgressive” content, always eager to tap the latest market: “the imminent triumph of Occidental entropy”.<sup>97</sup>

Within the same text, Leiris turned to a feature of contemporary culture worthy of attention closer to home: “Lew Leslie's Black Birds”, a Broadway troupe

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p.96. This notion of crime as the riveting content for consumption as a capitalist surrogate for communal sacrificial acts is portrayed in *Documents* by the reproduced covers of the pulp fiction series *Fantomas* featuring illustrations of severed heads and hands, and furthermore the kind of forerunner to contemporary cop shows, the “true crime” magazine *L'Oeil de la Police*. Also see Ades, Baker eds., 2006, pp. 102/103

<sup>97</sup> Denis Hollier, in Ades/Baker ed., 2006, p. 63 He further mentions the more general tendency at the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s for literature to increasingly strive for graphic depictions of extremes and violence, “[...] as if dissimilarities had to be heightened so intensely because they were on the verge of disappearing”.

performing the Moulin Rouge in Paris<sup>98</sup>. Given Leiris's dismissiveness of (haute-) bourgeois indiscriminate purchase on all things exotic and primitive, his raving account of this show as an act of unspoiled "simple and beautiful expression" is contradictory, exemplifying the journal's ambition to salvage what they considered cultural and aesthetic potencies from being sucked up and traded as commercial exoticisms, equivalent with any other commodity. Thus Leiris afforded the "Black Birds" the kind of raw immediacy the Western social apparently had long ago traded in, never mind that the "Black Birds" were not some tribe performing their rites as primitive spectacle. They were an embodiment of an increasingly professional segment of the entertainment industry: proto-Afro-American popular culture catering to the particularly French vogue of "art nègre", epitomized by its star, the dancer and actress Josephine Baker. It didn't matter – for Leiris "[...] this modernism is [was] simply coincidental"<sup>99</sup>.

Tellingly, Leiris divested the "Black Birds" of belonging to the realm of "Art", in keeping with *Documents'* overall dismissal of a concept of high art clinging to cultural and aesthetic superiority. If one insisted on art, the "Black Birds" were to "take us to a point on the other side of art", with their art being the "bastard son of the illegitimate love of magic and free play [...]". The "Black Birds"

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<sup>98</sup> Called *Lew Leslie's Black Birds*, this dance revue ran at the Moulin Rouge from June-September 1929. Brotchie (ed.) London, 1995, p.166.

<sup>99</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.95. Simon Baker makes the different and somewhat contradictory argument that Leiris valued the show since it "[...] reveals the failure of the concept of art to cross continents and remain intact", by, in his view, essentially spoiling the already highly compromised, exploited Parisian institution of "art nègre". Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p.67. Leiris' writing about the performance nevertheless divulges Western objectification and projection that cohere to those "art nègre" thrived on.

did seem to be better able – although not completely – to provide satisfaction that no imperative “Art” at this point in time could come close to:

What is beautiful about such art [the Black Birds show] is not its exotic aspect nor even its highly modern content (this modernism is simply coincidental), but the fact that it doesn’t really constitute an Art at all. Actually it seems quite absurd to inflict upon these lucid and spontaneous productions a frightful capitalized word that one should only write with a pen filled with spiders’ webs.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, for Leiris, the exhilarating numbers of the “Black Birds” nevertheless “fail to overcome our spinelessness” or “to create a hysteria of such intensity that it would immediately induce the audience to commit sordid acts or indulge in extravagant debauches”<sup>101</sup> (which, to recall the *Magic Island* text, would presumably hardly transgress those “[...] mere sensual rites celebrated more or less hypocritically every night [...]). Once again, they were nothing but “hired

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

scapegoats”<sup>102</sup>. “Expressive” acts like the “Black Birds” did, however, according to Leiris, work to finally open up a path to the aforementioned, much sought after, “mystical delirium”, the “mystical we are no longer open enough to” and which the legacy of Western art at least after Medieval times had closed off<sup>103</sup>. Which is to say, they presented the direct anti-thesis to Kracauer’s Tiller-Girls, the leggy PR-reps of the “distraction factory” [Zerstreuungsfabrik]. (While not explicitly mentioned anywhere in *Documents*, the reiterate inclusion of reproductions picturing chorus-lines – “Hollywood Revues” – is telling in this context). By contrast, the “delirium” induced by the “Black Birds” was reached by unleashing or resuscitating believed to be dead primal forces in the audience, as:

[...] this music and these dances do not linger on the surface, [but] they plunge deep organic roots into us, roots whose thousand ramifications penetrate us; a painful surgery that nevertheless quickens our blood.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Or, as Bataille saw it, who devoted an eponymous entry of his “Critical Dictionary” to the “Black Birds” in the same issue, they actually took on an avant-garde rebellious role, vociferously expressing discontent with spiritual decay: “[...] the blacks who (in America or elsewhere) are civilised along with us, and who, today, dance and cry out, are marshy emanations of the decomposition who are set aflame above this immense cemetery [modern society/civilization]: so, in a vaguely lunar Negro night, we are witnessing an intoxicating dementia [...]”. *Documents* 4, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.36. This of course, as an aside, was a wholly different reading and crediting of Afro-American popular music (e.g. Jazz) than Adorno’s later (in)famous take on the matter. *Documents* early on exported its discussion directly to that *other* culture; precisely by not treating it as such, as interviews with Duke Ellington illustrate. (*Documents* 6, 1930). Which doesn’t mean that this didn’t open up another avenue of (positive) fetishization by idolization. (And in view of Ellington, the ignored suspicion that his *black music* were “[...] ‘fantasies’ confected to appeal to white tastes”. Ades/Baker, 2006, p. 67.) For a further side-by-side reading informing this here barely scraped complex also see Diedrich Diederichsen. “Zeichnangemessenheit: Adorno gegen Jazz und Pop”, in Schafhausen/Müller/Hirsch ed., *Adorno – Die Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen*, New York/Berlin, 2003, especially pp. 36-40.

<sup>103</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.95

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

The opposite to the desired but abandoned object of the “root” is, once more – Kracauer, Simmel and even Tönnies echo – “surface”. “Surface” is complicit with the shortcomings of culture: it is an allegory thereof. “Surface” is further negatively differentiated from roots as exhausted phenomena (“linger[ing]”), something falsely comforting. The resurging roots, on the other hand, are described as “painful surgery”, that “penetrate[s]”, “that quickens our blood”, further baring quasi-masochistic libidinal undertones.<sup>105</sup>

“Roots”, that literally down-to-earth symbol raising abstract concepts of identity such as a hereditary belonging, authenticity and connectedness was taken up in the same year by a socially and intellectually undoubtedly different grouping in the North-western German town of Detmold. Calling itself the “Verein der Freunde Germanischer Vorgeschichte” (“The Society of the Fellows of Germanic Prehistory”), this group, like Bataille’s circle, founded a publication in which to voice their cultural interests and their aesthetic and ideological critique. The publication was to lay out *their* discontent and hostility to modern society, not to mention to one of its hallmarks: cheap *Zerstreuung*. This publication, by the name of *Germanien*, was founded by the local lay archeologist and anthropologist Wilhelm Teudt, the author of the (within Germany) fairly successful book *Germanische Heiligtümer (Germanic Sanctums)* in 1929, its title as well as its cover art not unlike Seabrook’s *Magic Island* of the same year. Both titles – *Magic Island* and *Germanische Heiligtümer* – were evocative of adventure, of hidden and unexplored territory. Both cover arts likewise displayed a scene of mystery in the center of the potential reader’s gaze – a gaze in search for Leiris’ “mystical” (with which he credited the “Black Birds” captivating stage presence).

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

In the cover art of *Magic Island* the mystical promise was invited by a greenly lit rock islet, alien and otherworldly, not unlike the famous painting “Die Toteninsel” (1880) by the Romantic Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin. Or, for that matter, the more than a century later kitschy movie poster for the film adaptation of H.G. Wells’ sci-fi dystopian classic “The Island of Dr. Moreau” (1896), a 1996 version, with the related poster plausibly a rehashing of “The Magic Island”, picking up on the extra-terrestrial green “aura” of the island already applied in Seabrook’s cover art. Teudt’s book, on the other hand, featured a purple colored, graphic rather than photographic, image of an arc opening onto a vista of a column, the legendary Irminsul, an allegedly sacred but never actually discovered monument of Nordic pagan mythology, lit here by a full moon vaguely invoking a trope of German Romanticism. While lacking the archival evidence to back up the following argument, it appears rather obvious that the decision to typeset the book in Gothic font<sup>106</sup> – surely already obsolete at the time – as well as for most part occluding any photographic material in favor of hand-drawn illustrations depicting those “sanctums” in the year 1929, derived from a clear intention to push towards anti-modern aesthetics, rejecting the contemporary techniques of mechanical reproduction – i.e., an aesthetic that was consciously, proudly regressive. Regressive structurally, furthermore, in the sense that these sanctums, of which there mostly remained only a few stone foundations, necessitated this hand-drawn simulation for sheer lack of alternatives of satisfying depiction, since the photographic evidence of the mostly “formless” rubble sharply contrasted with the elevated imaginations of the sanctums.

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<sup>106</sup> Note that both *Germanien* and *Das Bild* were set in Gothic type, the preferred typeface of choice it would seem for völkisch-fascist publications of the late 1920s: a “retro-look” so to speak, one in this case heavily politically colored.

With regard to the significant social and aesthetic concept of the “root” as taken up by *Germanien*, one need look no further than the foreword of the journal’s first issue, which contained the following words:

“Eine Nation, die nicht den lebendigen Zusammenhang mit ihrem Ursprung bewahrt, ist dem Verdorren nahe, so sicher wie ein Baum, den man von seinen Wurzeln getrennt hat. [...] Dieser Zusammenhang ist uns zerissen.“<sup>107</sup>

*“A nation that does not preserve a lively connection with its origin is close to withering, as certain as a tree severed from its roots. [...] This connection of ours has been torn.”*

The similarity of metaphors and, more importantly, the critique these served both here and in *Documents* – e.g. via Leiris’ texts – is striking, if only for the otherwise stark contrast between these two groups: a metropolitan avant-garde journal and an initially provincial, völkisch-fascist journal<sup>108</sup>. The connection to the ancestral as imagined here - called “organic” in Leiris, (as it already was in Tönnies), associated with “origin” in *Germanien* – was that of a source of endangered invigoration sought to be revived by a culturally, socially and of course ultimately politically radical turn. Abandoning the “roots” led to death of

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<sup>107</sup> “Zum Geleit”, *Germanien* Heft 1, 1929, first page. Only the author’s last name – Plaß – is given. (Transl. by the author)

<sup>108</sup> *Germanien. Blätter für Freunde germanischer Vorgeschichte* was from 1934 onwards incorporated into the publishing output of the SS-Ahnenerbe Forschungsgemeinschaft, whose chief publication it became until it folded in 1944. Once incorporated, now under the title *Germanien. Monatshefte für Germanenkunde zur Erkenntnis deutschen Wesens*, it was edited by Hermann Wirth and later Walther Wüst, a rector of the University of Munich, under the auspices of Heinrich Himmler, who was the director and founder of the Ahnenerbe think-tank. This further meant that the editorial headquarters were now based in Berlin, with Detmold relegated to a kind of field-office outpost. The definitive study on the Ahnenerbe, including some if not much information on *Germanien* as such, remains Michael H. Kater *Das ‘Ahnenerbe’ der SS 1935–1945. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturpolitik des Dritten Reiches*. Munich, 1998.



the “organic” (“withering”), of the “tree”, the latter a symbol for the German “nation”, with the image of and allusion to the tree occupying a prominent place in German art history and national identity (while Leiris actually referred to the “Black Birds” as “creatures [...] touching as trees”<sup>109</sup>). Culture, in both of the examples above, figured as a realm originally thought to emanate from nature, in particular from the (under)ground, i.e., from said network of roots as an autochthonous force. Likewise, in both passages a culture before a split between the spiritual and the concrete was called forth, to manifest as the kind of unmediated ecstatic charge to which Simmel had circumscribed the desire of the modern subject for immediate quasi-religious experience detached from specific denominations and institutions.

A side-by-side reading of *Documents* with not only *Germanien* but also another völkisch and more properly Fascist publication, the 1934-founded art journal *Das Bild*<sup>110</sup>, frequently reveals similar, at times identical, topics and objects of discussion. There are articles on the study of pre-history in each of these three publications, especially as they relate to a wider discussion on necessary academic interdisciplinarity, or rather the bemoaned lack thereof. There are texts and corresponding imagery on pagan archeological sites and related artefacts, local histories and customs, on carnevalistic and more primitive rites of alien mimicry and camouflage, on formerly ceremonial now largely

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<sup>109</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 95

<sup>110</sup> *Das Bild. Monatsschrift für das Deutsche Kunstschaffen in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* was first published in 1934 and ran until 1944. It was edited by Hans Adolf Bühler, the rector of and a professor at the Art Academy Karlsruhe, which was also the journal’s publisher.

decorative functions and variations of the mask, on the often crude and populist – uncensored – tropes of early Medieval Western-European art at the transitional phase between paganism and Christianization etc.

To not only provide a concrete example of this topical correlation but to further give an example of even attuned arguments accompanying the promotion of this material one can draw on a discussion in *Das Bild* and *Documents* concerning the Oseberg excavation of 1905 in Norway. The Oseberg ship, as it is commonly referred to, was a wooden Viking vessel constituting a sacred tomb for Viking nobility, dated around 800AD (it can still be seen at the Viking Ship Museum in Bygdoy, Norway). Oseberg was thus exemplary of a technically sophisticated pagan art already showing imports of proto-Christian elements such as the cross, which here appeared together with the pagan “supra-confessional” Indo-Germanic symbol of the swastika. It contained intricately carved wooden elements depicting animal-like mythological figures of Nordic culture, such as the “animal heads” or “lion heads”, as they were labeled in *Documents*, heads that in fact bore more resemblance to a dragon or serpent and that merged figuration with abstract ornamentation, with the latter entirely covering the fantastic creatures. Because of this, the Oseberg find presented one of the more successful and persuasive cases of a non-representational, “anti-humanist” art, achieved by prioritizing abstraction and non-human subjects over mimetic, identifiable representation. This particular archeological treasure lent itself, as few other remnants did, to an art-historical revision of the argument that by and large considered the aesthetic achievements of not just the Vikings but of pagan pre-Christian artefacts in general as low and abject; of barbaric

origin and quality, the barbaric for the most part unambiguously used in the deprecatory sense. It was “unique from the standpoint of the history of art”<sup>111</sup> by countering hitherto art historical classifications of barbarism, not least due to the ship’s well-preserved condition that certified it as hard evidence – exceptionally rare for these kind of artefacts, given that many of them were made from perishable wood rather than stone and many had been destroyed by various invading powers. The ethnologist F. Adama van Scheltema, discussing this find in the third issue of *Documents* in 1929, considered it nothing less than “illustrative of an extremely civilized and monumental art”. Importantly though, this “civilized” quality bore traits incongruous with those of accepted ideas about aesthetic sophistication usually rendered in legible representation. Instead, van Scheltema praised the artefact for evincing “free imagination”, regarding it as a proof of the Vikings’ “aesthetic and psychological originality”, thus positing a novel art historical argument that attributed to these objects qualities they would not conventionally have been granted, neither in terms of the “aesthetic” nor of the “psychological”. Rather, barbaric “creativity” was historically usually deemed either inept or irrelevant, since their main “creative” act was thought to come in the form of material destruction (i.e. vandalism, the word deriving from the Vandals, another pagan tribe) while the nomadic nature of the tribe, whose economic model was sustained by moving cattle herds and hunting rather than by advanced agriculture and permanent settling, likewise made a lasting cultural or architectural legacy of their own unlikely. I.e., barbaric aesthetics were no match for the higher “creations” of civilized powers. Worse though, even when

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<sup>111</sup> F. Adama van Scheltema. “La trouvaille d’Oseberg”. *Documents* 3, 1929 (‘English Supplement’, unpaginated.)

creativity was attempted by the barbarians, it merely brought forth derivatives of their colonizers' aesthetic paradigms, such as the Gaulish coins examined by Bataille in *Documents'* first issue, making them not just politically and socially but also artistically inferior – the common feature inherent to colonial rule in general. This upgrading of the barbaric was expounded by van Scheltema as follows:

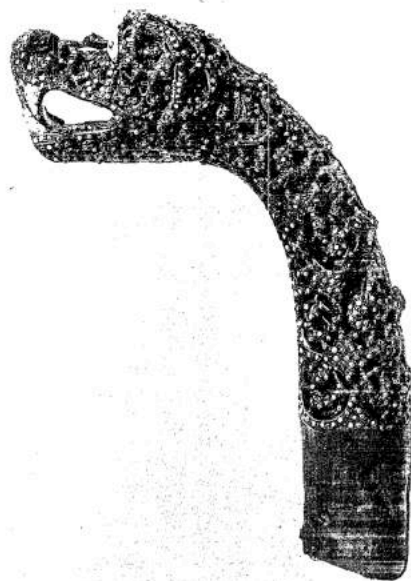
History depicts them [the Vikings] for us as barbarians capable only of destroying the treasures of civilization created by others. The art of the ship of Oseberg suddenly brings to light the refinement of these later pagans, and shows their souls in all their complex and problematical nature.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



7. Tête de lion



7. TÊTE DE LION  
MUSÉE DE BYGDD

Corresponding illustrations of an artefact from the Oseberg tomb as featured in articles in *Das Bild* (H.A. Bühler: “Frühgermansiche Kunst”, Issue 01, 1934, p. 311) and *Documents* (F. Adama Van Scheltema: “La Trouvaille d’Oseberg”, Issue 03, 1929, p. 127).

Van Scheltema essentially argued for this art as being powerfully affective by embodying the spiritual expressions of its creators, the artefacts in a sense manifesting as opposed to representing their makers’ “soul”. He suggested an unimpeded creative process yielding objects that were not deferments or transpositions of inner drives to aesthetic creation, but concretized these as unmediated, an attribute frequently found in both avant-garde and fascist-völkisch expositions on the challenges and demands of a trailblazing aesthetic. Van Scheltema’s argument was book-ended by the thematically corresponding article in *Das Bild* written by Hans-Adolf Bühler himself, its founder and editor-in-chief, discussing the very same objects in the first issue (albeit in 1934,

somewhat belated compared to the definitely “avant-garde” *Documents*, which had taken up the topic five years earlier). However, by being featured under the title “Frühgermanische Kunst”<sup>113</sup> (“Early Germanic Art”), the Oseberg objects were unduly credited as proof of the artistic sophistication of a hitherto deemed poor Teutonic artistic heritage, which in this case was not even properly “Germanic” but rather of Viking cultural provenance, i.e. located in present day Scandinavia. (These factual distortions in dating and locating works to serve the ideological cause of nationalistic valorization were not an exception but pretty much the rule in *Das Bild*. They frequently informed otherwise “scholarly” texts, alongside rather out of context diatribes against (bourgeois) taste and elitism, which *Das Bild* never failed to associate with the artistic and intellectual legacy of the preceding Weimar Republic.) What resonated in Bühler’s take on Oseberg with the argument put forward by van Scheltema was conceiving the works “as the expression of longing of the Northern soul”, which in Bühler’s view was another proof of the objects’ “intertwining with the divine world”<sup>114</sup>, thus conceiving of nature as directly impacting on artistic expression through a kind of telepathic process, unperturbed by external – worldly – mediating forces or reflexivity, indeed suggesting animistic qualities not unlike those characterizing faraway tribal art and customs.

The mutual investment in this barbaric or rather an alternative “civilized” art of inverted value distinctions, which now finally gained visibility due to van Scheltema’s “art of discovery”, were two strands of thought central to the

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<sup>113</sup> Hans Adolf Bühler, “Frühgermanische Kunst”, *Das Bild*, 1934, p. 311

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

Austrian art historian and academic Josef Strzygowski. As late as 1940 he reminisced about the Oseberg find as being:

[...] an art that is treated by the academic art history as inferior [minderwertig] as it hardly shows the human figure, meaning it doesn't represent figuratively, but merely expresses spiritual contents through its Sinnbilder.<sup>115</sup>

Spiritual "Sinnbilder" [literally, sense/soul image] and an "academic art history" appallingly ignorant of these "Sinnbilder" were two essential tenets of Strzygowski's overall theoretical agenda, underlying his career-long call for a revision and indeed replacement of said "art history" by the more hands-on method of "Vergleichende Kunstforschung" – "comparative art research" – that entailed the "art of discovery" that van Scheltema lauded in his Oseberg article. Strzygowski's proposition of this comparative art research was put forward by him – a profoundly fascist writer and theorist – in the very first issue of *Documents*.

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<sup>115</sup> Josef Strzygowski, *Das indogermanische Ahnenerbe des deutschen Volkes und die Kunstgeschichte der Zukunft*, Vienna 1940, p. 113. (This publication, while published only in 1940 comprises various texts that stem from previous essays in journals or preceding publications, many of which go back to the 1920s. This is true of most of his works from the early 1940s (Strzygowski died in 1941))





## II Documents and “Comparative Art Research”

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### II.1 Josef Strzygowski, or the academic as barbarian <sup>116</sup>

Before discussing Strzygowski’s actual text in *Documents*, I want to expound his profuse yet increasingly repetitious and irrational work in more depth. This serves to elucidate the underlying premise for unlikely parallels – in this case collaboration even – between actors as seemingly disparate as those introduced in the previous chapter (illustrated by the fact that not only did Strzygowski contribute to *Documents* as well as later to *Germanien*, he was furthermore listed as part of *Documents*’ editorial board).

A discussion of this, however brief, contact between an early völkisch-fascist art theory and the avant-garde, in this case represented by *Documents*, therefore necessitates an overview of the key terms making up Strzygowski’s approach to art history and that field’s function for a wider socio-cultural analysis towards political ends that entailed the valorization of the barbaric: an aesthetic valorization to begin with, in both of these groups, through which to diminish the very notion of Western or civilized “aesthetics” and the theoretical underpinnings historically upholding these. Strzygowski’s central scholarly

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<sup>116</sup> Christopher S. Wood has written that: “Strzygowski was unable to take in the great drama of barbarism versus civilization, because he insisted on playing the role of barbarian himself.” (He further paints a picture of Strzygowski that seems to have sprung directly from Adorno’s aforementioned barbaric countryside: “He was a clumsy provincial, jarred by class hatred and poisoned by bloody ethno-geographic fantasies; he was the raw material national socialism was made of”). “Strzygowski und Riegl in den Vereinigten Staaten”, in *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 53, 2004, p. 229. I’m not sure as to whether this last point is actually defensible: Strzygowski’s undeniable early on academic career and peer recognition (at least abroad) preceding the regime, added by his intellectual eccentricity, don’t adhere in any aspect to a typology of the bureaucratic, inarticulate and bland public servant suddenly endowed with enormous authority as suggested by Hannah Arendt. (Which is not to say that hers is the definite one).

concerns turned obsessions are already discernible in the trajectory of the titles of his books: from the comparatively clear-cut 1923 title *Die Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften (Vorgeführt am Beispiele der Forschung über bildende Kunst)* (*The Crisis of the Humanities, (As exemplified by the Research on the Fine Arts)*) to the paranoia-tinged title of his posthumously published magnum opus from 1943: *Europas Machtkunst im Rahmen des Erdkreises. Eine grundlegende Auseinandersetzung über Wesen und Entwicklung des zehntausendjährigen Wahnes. (Europe's Power Art<sup>117</sup> within the World's Orbit. A fundamental debate on the nature and development of ten thousand years of delusion)*<sup>118</sup>. While *Die Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften* presents Strzygowki's first major work<sup>119</sup> tying his archeological case studies to a propagandistic teleology that would gain the upper hand in his writing to come, a contemporaneous anthology titled *Die Kunstwissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*<sup>120</sup> (1923) contextualizes Strzygowski's art historical scheme vis-à-vis the field's leading voices in German speaking academia of the time. This collection presented manifesto-like

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<sup>117</sup> I am resorting to Suzanne F. Marchand's English translation of "Machtkunst", if for the sole reason that hers is the single instance I could find in which this term is taken up in a corresponding Anglo-Saxon context. To better convey the meaning of "Machtkunst" one could also translate it by the less reader-friendly "art of/serving political power" to account for the circular nature of Strzygowski's term. Machtkunst is essentially the art enforced by those in power throughout history while simultaneously being an art that consciously strives for an elevated representation of those in power: it is subservient *and* oppressive at the same time in this schema.

<sup>118</sup> The title further rambles on: *Gewaltmacht von Gottes Gnaden statt völkischer Ordnung, Kirche statt Glaube, Bildung statt Begabung; vom Nordstandpunkt planmässig in die volksdeutsche Bewegung eingestellt..* Vienna, 1943.

<sup>119</sup> Which according to Wood he wrote in the United States while on a lecture tour following an invitation by the Lowell Institute in Boston. This explains why he dedicated the book to "his professional observers in Princeton and Harvard". Wood, 2004, p. 218

<sup>120</sup> *Die Kunstwissenschaft der Gegenwart in Selbstdarstellungen*, ed. Joahannes Jahn, Leipzig 1924.

contributions from members of the influential Vienna School of Art History such as Carl Neuman, Hans Tietze and Julius von Schlosser. As evinced by his inclusion in that anthology, Strzygowski certainly belonged to, yet sharply diverged from and critiqued this “School”. Fashioning himself as a kind of institutional renegade – a “ ‘Grub Street’ academic”<sup>121</sup> – on the very margins of this institution, including its retrospective historiography<sup>122</sup>, he was nevertheless the co-chair of the University of Vienna’s then prestigious art historical faculty. Representative of this rift, the faculty was split into two departments headed respectively by Strzygowski and von Schlosser, the latter an establishment figure and art historian who particularly emphasized a traditional philological methodology in aesthetically evaluating the history of Western art. The aristocratic and, literally, textbook scholar thus acted as a perfect in-house nemesis to Strzygwoksi, who hailed from a provincial lower middle-class background, and his – apparently numerous – core audience, which cultural historian Suzanne L. Marchand defines

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<sup>121</sup> Suzanne F. Marchand: “The Rhetoric of Artifacts and the Decline of Classical Humanism: The Case of Josef Strzygowski”.In, *History & Theory* Vol.3 No. 4, 1994 p. 110. Marchand points out that this expression stems from Robert Darnton, p.107 f2. Her text further provides seldom found biographical information on Strzygowski.

<sup>122</sup> Strzygowski appears as a mere footnote in Christopher S. Wood’s definitive English language anthology *The Vienna School Reader. Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (Cambridge/Mass. 1999). On the other hand Wood has elsewhere specifically discussed Strzygowski’s legacy, arguing his retroactive import for interdisciplinary postmodern scholarship distancing itself from a Western-centric outlook. He considers his work as an indispensable example of foresight that “enabled notions of ‘hybridity’ and ‘marginality’ to become cogitable”.p 226.

as “partly, but not solely [comprised of] radical, pan-German students and sycophants.”<sup>123</sup>.

Speaking of nemeses: the subtitle to Strzygowski’s aforementioned *Europas Machtkunst* publication clearly divulged the prime targets of Strzygowski’s diatribe, thinly veiled by “objective” science, against his own discipline: the triumvirate of “Kirche, Hof und Bildung” – “Church, Court and Academia” – the latter in the sense of humanist, enlightened “Bildung” (higher education)<sup>124</sup>. In his self-presentation-*cum*-contribution to the *Kunstwissenschaft der Gegenwart* (Contemporary Art Theory) anthology, Strzygowski designated these three man-made institutions as the “Kräfte des Willens” (forces of the will) in opposition to ancient, not man-made “beharrende Kräfte” (enduring forces) that manifested themselves in a counter triad opposite “Church, State and Academia”: “Blut; Boden; Lage” (blood, soil and territory)<sup>125</sup>. Blood, soil and territory here constituted unchanging, i.e. timeless, thus ahistorical and furthermore quasi-metaphysical forces, which in Strzygowski’s schema were however historically subject to suppression by the institutions of the powers of will named above (especially, of course, in view of the turbulent history of the

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<sup>123</sup> Marchand, 1994, p.121, f51. based on first-hand information according to Marchand. It should be noted that while Strzygowski’s pugnacious to erratic manner in presenting his theory partly satisfies the frequently inferred type of the völkisch-fascist “outré thinker”-*cum*-“frustrated private scholar” (George L. Mosse) representing the “provincial intelligentsia” (Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke), what significantly sets him apart again from preceding zealots such as Julius Langbehn, Paul de Lagarde not to mention a Lanz von Liebenfels, is his undeniably solid career (if frowned upon by many) in the establishment, both in Europe and abroad. (Apparently he was even recommended for the Nobel Peace Prize by a Swedish art historian at some point. See Wood, 2004, p. 219).

<sup>124</sup> See f2 in this chapter

<sup>125</sup> Jahn (ed.), 1924, pp. 15-18.

various attempts at a clearly delineated and politically unified German nation state subjected to various foreign power interests, be that in form of Roman or Napoleonic occupation).

In the *Krisis der Geisteswissenschaften*, these oppositional factions were identified as more concrete processes to be evaluated for the sake of what Strzygowski called a progressive “comparative art research”<sup>126</sup>. This choice of terms alone implied a rebuttal to a largely textual source-based art history as advocated and taught by von Schlosser, that in Strzygowski’s view did not so much objectively compare artifacts as place them into hierarchies (with the cultures and objects favoured by him essentially at the bottom or omitted). These processes were what Strzygowski alternately termed the three “instances” (“Instanzen”)/“forces” (“Kräfte”)/“factors” (“Faktoren”) of “place [Ort]”, “time”, and “society”, constituting a triangular field of conflict to which any artistic production was exposed, alternately aligned with or claimed by either of these three “forces” (It seems imperative that the notion of “society” was throughout his argument employed as a (negative) “force”, while “community” appeared unspoken as the aspired formation arising from “enduring forces” which structurally speaking complied with Tönnies’ criteria of “permanence”).

*Place, time and society* in turn corresponded to aforementioned *insistence, movement and will* respectively. *Territory* meanwhile not only concerned geographical location, but a specific blood and soil, (thus in line with 19<sup>th</sup>-

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<sup>126</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.200 (The term is introduced here by heading a following chapter entitled “The Schema of Comparative Art Research”)

century pan-Germanic ideas that saw an extensive comeback at the time<sup>127</sup>). In Strzygowski's history of art, *territory* was the deciding factor ("formbildende Kräfte ersten Ranges"<sup>128</sup>) in bringing forth the ultimate artistic "form": the less *time* and, even more so, the less *society* intervened, the more genuine and powerful this form's "expression" ("Ausdruck") would be. The true form thus also contradicted society's, or rather, its ruling hegemony's ideals and agendas regarding the demands for and subsequent creation of works of art, which in this diagram were by definition subject to historical changes and events – "temporary", to consult Tönnies one more time. In Strzygowski's theory of art(ifacts), genuine excitation ("Erregung"), but furthermore a quasi-political drive was conserved in the soil of a specific place from where it devolved to its native inhabitants as a kind of autochthonous charge in immediate ("unmittelbar") fashion: "Place [Ort] becomes the being causing excitation [erregende]."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> For detailed historical discussions on the evolution of the pan-German idea since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the various groupings of the völkisch movement in German and Austrian territories see George L. Mosse *The Crisis of German Ideology*, New York 1964, and Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism*, London 2004 [1985]. While Goodrick-Clarke's study does not really take art historical or theoretical aspects into consideration, Mosse's profuse work on fascist art largely focuses on the clearly defined agenda as instated from at least 1937 onwards.

<sup>128</sup> Strzygowksi, 1922, p.202

<sup>129</sup> "Der Ort wird zum erregenden Wesen, die Natur selbst in ihrem Weiterwirken im Menschen zum Gegenstand der Untersuchung." Strzygowski, 1922, p.201. Bataille had actually commented on this ideological impregnation of a chosen soil, offering a psycho-analytically derived explanation: "[...] Condensation of *superiority*, evidently related to a latent inferiority complex: such a complex has equally strong roots in both Italy and Germany; this is why, even if fascism develops subsequently in regions having attained complete sovereignty and the awareness of sovereignty, it is inconceivable that it could ever have been the autochthonous and specific product of such countries." "The psychological structure of fascism" originally published in the journal *La Critique sociale* (Published in two parts in number 10, November 1933 and 11, March 1934) In *Visions of Excess*, ed. Allan Stoekl, Minneapolis 1985, p.160 f14.

While *time* (implying historical shift) was acknowledged as a factor in artistic development, Strzygowksi demoted it to “mittelbare Kraft” – “mediate force” -, clearly inferior to the “unmittelbare Kraft” – “immediate force” – he reserved for terrestrial constants (thus conceptually presenting the complete opposite to the im-pressive yet fugacious immediacies of Baudelarian modernist perception).<sup>130</sup> Regarding *time* and thus by extension dating and chronology being critical to art historical valuation Strzygowski stated : “Values of time [Zeitwerte] are only of contextual [beziehungsweise] significance. The master time [Hauptzeit] we have to employ is not the historical one but the eternally longer pre-historic one”<sup>131</sup>. Disruptions to this force of territory came in the guise of *society* and its *will*, presumably in this case meaning society’s fluctuating tastes, obsessions and vogues, Strzygowski essentially negating an everyday modernity shaped by and contingent upon flux and (self)reflexivity. On the contrary, for him: “society [...] inserted itself between territory and time, affecting [artistic] development yet also raping [vergewaltigt] it”<sup>132</sup>. *Time*, and more significantly, *society* thus bore forth the ingredients responsible for Strzygowski’s concept of art history as obliging a kind of primal sin encroaching upon culture, to which he gave the name “Machtkunst” (“power art”)

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<sup>130</sup> The ideological separation between “mittelbar” and “unmittelbar” is somewhat difficult to translate since “unmittelbar” here - as the phenomenologically superior state - equally implies an unmediated experience and act of artistic creation as much as an immediate one in the sense of a sensorial and not intellectual process.

<sup>131</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.250. And furthermore: “Die Zeit als Ganzes, ohne Anfang und Ende ist in Entwicklungsfragen deshalb notwendig, weil sie dadurch von vornerein in dem Wesenszuge erscheint, der nie vergessen werden darf, nämlich eins zu sein mit der endlosen Bewegung an sich, ihr Hauptträger“. I.e. time “freed“ from any historical, social, economic, cultural purchase, instead figuring as uncontainable, uncorrupted cosmic time.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 201

Following from his rebuttal of the criteria of a (con-)textual art historical evaluation of material culture, Strzygowksi concluded:

Art History had made a more applied research an easy task for itself by simply departing from the supposition of the divine in the beautiful, the good and the true, deducing from it a notion of the fine arts that unfortunately had little to do with the foundation of its development. It [art history] prescribed to humanity a moralist aim according to which it judged, based on the art it was familiar with.<sup>133</sup>

This summed up the *Crisis of the Humanities*, a “crisis” that Bataille and other contributors would address – and savor to a degree – in *Documents*. Strzygowski’s early critical writing and his rather idiosyncratic scholarship, as introduced above, may further explain his initial interest in a publication such as *Documents*, which he called “an independent organ [...] indispensable for the free expression of those who belong to no school”<sup>134</sup> (a barely veiled sneer towards his despised “Vienna School”). His dissenting attitude was similarly in dialogue though with the political agenda behind *Germanien* which considered itself to be “living protest”<sup>135</sup>.

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<sup>133</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.138

<sup>134</sup> *Documents* 1, 1929, (unpaginated ‘English Supplement’)

<sup>135</sup> “Vom Kampf um die deutsche Seele”, *Germanien* Heft 4 1934, p.68 (unauthored text).  
“Germanien protestiert, aber es protestiert nicht mit dem einen Dogma gegen das andere – es ist selbst lebendiger Protest, und darum ewig jenen verhaßt, die ein totes Gerüst für vollkommener halten als einen gewachsenen Baum.”



## II.2 Barbaric remnants in *Documents*: Between cultural history's "positive extravagance" and the lost object underlying "Comparative Art Research"

Aside from the plausible motivation outlined above, there exists barely any supplemental information on Strzygowski's involvement with *Documents* and virtually none (to my knowledge) indicating how this unlikely affiliation came about in the first place, neither in Bataille's nor Strzygowski's other writing of the time.<sup>136</sup>

Precisely his academic idiosyncrasy though would have made him a prospective contributor, complementing what Leiris would later call "[...] the impossible mix of *Documents* [...]" its "diversity of disciplines – and of indisciplines".<sup>137</sup> Representatives from the academic and institutional establishment, (e.g. the Musée de l'Homme's director Paul Rivet and frequently of German academia) found themselves in the company of Carl Einstein, the main contributor besides Bataille and a staunchly communist intellectual active on the institutional fringes at best, despite his magnum opus *Die Kunst des 20.*

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<sup>136</sup> Furthermore Strzygowski is not mentioned once in Georges Didi-Huberman's *La ressemblance informe*. He is solely mentioned as part of a list of names in Bernd Mattheus meticulous account of Bataille's biography: *Georges Bataille: Eine Thanatographie*, Munich, 1986, p.132. In the 2006 Hayward Gallery's exhibition catalogue surveying *Documents* Strzygowski is briefly described: "In Josef Strzygowski *Documents* gave platform to an art-historical race-theorist with extreme anti-Roman-centric archaeological beliefs about late antiquity and the middle ages, which he saw as determined by Eastern ethno-cultural factors.". Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p.48

<sup>137</sup> Quotes in Julia Kelly, "Discipline and Indiscipline: the ethnographies of *Documents*", in *Papers of Surrealism*, 7, 2007, p.2. Online at <http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal7/index.htm>. Retrieved on November, 12th, 2011..

*Jahrhundert* (1926); as well as the aforementioned Seabrook, a sorcerer and sometime creator of S/M-leather masks covered in *Documents*.<sup>138</sup>

Strzygowski's acknowledged expertise in early Oriental and Eastern art, his unorthodox research methods, which had included various archeological excursions off the beaten path in Iran and Armenia and his audacious proclamations, must have further appealed to both Wildenstein and Bataille for these respective reasons. Strzygowski in fact contributed only one article to *Documents* though. Thus the question regarding his level of involvement in the journal's editorial decisions remains essentially unanswered. With regard to these editorial decisions, Georges Didi-Huberman, early on in his expansive trajectory on the development of themes within *Documents*, maintains that the overall content of the issues needs to be looked at as an inter-related, larger project that systematically pursued a definitive rather than arbitrary agenda<sup>139</sup>. The, at first sight, random, occasionally grotesque and repellent visual elements and thematically loosely related texts were not merely encouraged – or forced – to bleed into one another. Rather, it was precisely this, at first impression, thematic discrepancy characterizing the progression of articles that advanced a complete reconsideration or outright dismissal and derision of accepted methodologies of hierarchic classification, be they in the field of science or art,

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<sup>138</sup> Didi-Huberman, points out that other prominent members of the Vienna School were intended to be approached as contributors to future issues, namely Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl. p.369 (f2)  
Strzygowkis is curiously still featured in the list of 'collaborators' as late as in *Documents'* second volume, here issues 5, 6, and 7 (1930).

<sup>139</sup> In his reading, a *dialectic* of the *Informe* (1995) as opposed to a *negation* through it as argued by Krauss/Bois (1996, and in Krauss 1985), seemingly different conceptions of the term serving clearly different critical projects. (See chapter seven)

canonical or contemporary. If Strzygowski indeed “[...] had no respect for the category “artwork”, only conceiving artifacts [...]”<sup>140</sup> this would have been an attitude and a resultant manner to engage in any art historical or cultural discussion particularly relevant to Bataille’s impetus in founding *Documents* in the first place. Didi-Huberman points out that while the selection and presentation of image and text featured in the journal could certainly be perceived as extravagant, their ultimate contextualization was anything but “eclectic”<sup>141</sup>. *Documents* here thus also significantly diverged from *Der Querschnitt*, a German lifestyle magazine founded by another major art dealer, Alfred Flechtheim, in 1921 which enjoyed popularity amongst certain “liberal” German and European high(er) society circles. *Der Querschnitt’s* visual themes and layout decisions were at times rather similar to *Documents’*; it visibly indulged in anthropomorphic juxtapositions that occasionally produced visual puns, by mixing news items and entertainment industry imagery with avant-garde and primitive art, all kinds of curio, without however really placing the

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<sup>140</sup> Wood, 2004, p. 226

<sup>141</sup> Speaking specifically about the plethora of images showing masks and heads frequently featured in *Documents* Didi-Huberman writes: “When one sees how persistently this relation continuously appears, it becomes logical that the heterogeneity of the photographed objects in the magazine – its somewhat peculiar ‘corpus’ – essentially wasn’t at all of an eclectic nature. It would have been eclectic to gather objects considered to be infinitely diverse and in no relation to each other. But it is on the contrary the always perceptive and precise problematization of the images’ relations to each other that ensures a cohesive discourse running through the entire journal.” Didi-Huberman, 2010 [1995], pp. 113-114. He considers *Documents’* “discourse” to essentially bear “structuralist thinking” avant la lettre (also see p.114 f2).

resulting dialogue within a wider historical and theoretical discussion (It, by and large, did not exceed *Haute Zerstreung*)<sup>142</sup>.

*Documents'* presentation suggested connoisseurship, sophistication and professional authority of some kind (doubtless helped by the cachet of some of its contributors), which was, of course, intentional: so as to provide a formal counterpoint to the play, or rather the assault it committed on unquestioned value relations informing visual culture and the discourses that established them. The connections between conventionally conflicting banks of imagery and themes unsurprisingly produced the occasional clash by setting up the low against the high, the profane against the sacred. In this way, *Documents* was akin to preceding Dada publications, with their proclivity for imagery culled from an indiscriminating range of sources: from tabloid, news and commercial material to pulp and oddities, from high art both classical and modern, to exotica and folklore. Both *Documents* and comparable, predominantly German art journals before it, followed an editorial logic which by way of this clashing layout and the attendant content sought to de-sublimate and provoke in what has since been canonized as hallmarks of avant-garde anti-aesthetic procedures. The main difference between these formats, I would argue, may be due to *Documents'* (be)late(ed) appearance with regard to these critical strategies.

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<sup>142</sup> The art historians Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley who also discuss *Der Querschnitt* further mention *Documents'* parallels with the Belgian magazine *Variétés* as well as with the Parisian *Jazz*; the first they consider to have more or less surveyed similar novel aesthetics in architecture, art, the performing arts/music, design etc. without however delving into the kind of philosophical or political analyses found in *Documents*. The second they point out published controversial graphic content such as the Chinese execution by "thousand pieces", interestingly an image Bataille would time and again return to (he was in possession of a print of it preceding the publication). Nevertheless it appears *Jazz* covered this kind of content as 'shocking news of the world' without extrapolating a further discussion from it in the fashion of Bataille. See the "Introduction", in Baker/Ades, 2006, especially pp.13-14.

If according to Ernst Bloch, who first and foremost spoke to and from a German context, “*Zerstreuung* had already been over by 1929”, superseded by “*Berauschung* [intoxication]” (in his view the next stage besetting the “bourgeoisie of decay [Zerfalls-Bürgertum]”) this may be an assessment that is revealing for the concerns of *Documents* at that moment in Western European thought and modern art<sup>143</sup>. If the journal’s appearance indeed coincided with the final stages of *Zerstreuung* – the latter condition Bataille formally appropriated in order to make it impossible, spoiling easy consumption by interjecting material that in its corporeal extreme spectacularly upstaged its contrived derivatives of commercial culture featured adjacently – *Berauschung* registers of course much more ambiguously<sup>144</sup>. If an avant-garde critique of *Zerstreuung* had been devised in works as late as Hannah Höch’s series of collages “Aus einem ethnographischen Museum” (1926), that blended cut-outs from fashion advertising with those of primitive “art objects” to yield hybrid mannequins *presenting* both the very latest and the most peripheral, underlining their literal conflation and equivalence following the rule of commodity culture, the way in which contemporary art was discussed in *Documents* could not have been more different. This is already evinced by the fact that works in this (“German”) manner, made really only a few years preceding *Documents*, were conspicuously absent from the discussion as far as its section “Beaux-Arts” was concerned.

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<sup>143</sup> Ernst Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985 [Zurich 1935] (In his foreword to the expanded edition, p.18)

<sup>144</sup> As much as it does both aesthetically and politically if one were to substitute Bloch’s *Berauschung* with Bataille’s actual terminology of “frénésie”: what the “frenzy of forms” would enact aesthetically via the depictions on the Gaulish coins discussed in 1929 would resurface in the “Popular Front in the Street” (1936), as “a contagious emotion [...] [that] turns a hesitating man into a frenzied being”. Bataille, 1985, p.162

Which very likely was a decision attributable to Einstein more so than to Bataille, and which further relates back to the (anti-aesthetic) *Berauschung* favored instead<sup>145</sup>; certainly not denoting an alarming condition for either of them, at least in 1929.<sup>146</sup> In fact *Berauschung* may be considered the very quality a select contemporary art was anticipated to deliver<sup>147</sup>. (It should be stressed that while the same thing could safely be stated of Bréton's properly Surrealist project "intoxication" here bifurcated into, roughly speaking, high and low intoxication. Where Bataille throughout *Documents* linked *intoxicating* ecstasy and transgression to that "wholly other"<sup>148</sup> state afforded by complete admission of the (political as much as physical) body to various deformations, debasements and destructions for Bréton this is what certified Bataille as the "excremental

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<sup>145</sup> Einstein, throughout his *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, never affords German Expressionism or later Berlin Dada the same impact and quality as his unsurpassable ingenious protégés Braque and Picasso. It is both telling and indicative of Einstein's very specific expectation of modern art when he wrote: "The art of the Germans is unable to conceive of collective signs". Carl Einstein, *Werke. Berliner Ausgabe Bd. 5*. Eds. Uwe Fleckner, Hermann Haarmann, Berlin 1996, p.844

<sup>146</sup>. Not least in view of the timing of Bloch's statement (and of course Benjamin's famous remark about fascism' "*aestheticizing of politics*" two years later) any mutual investment in this notion Einstein and Bataille may have shared would subsequently become inconceivable. Whence Einstein played no part – and presumably would not have even considered as much – in the later Collège, where *Berauschung*, now detached from any (anti-)aesthetic project, seems more than admissible to have been a vital concern.

<sup>147</sup> Leiris would actually take up the term in his later *L'âge d'homme* (1939) here not linking it to aesthetics but to the quasi-religious context that had clearly gained priority following the Collège: "I had the distinct sense – not at all literary, but truly spontaneous – that I had offered a sacrifice, with all that this word implies of the mystical and intoxicating." Quoted in Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 106

<sup>148</sup> A term he would use several times, e.g. in "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade", [...] das ganz Anderes [sic]" Bataille keeping the original if grammatically slightly incorrect German expression he derived from Rudolf Otto's book *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen.*, Breslau 1917. In Bataille, 1985, p. 94

philosopher” as which he had called him <sup>149</sup>. Breton, instead, sought aesthetically intoxicating states from the quasi dis-incorporated states of dreams, reverie, automatic writing etc.)

In this light Bataille’s contribution to *Documents*’ first issue, titled “The Academic Horse” and located just after Strzygowski’s article “Research on the ‘Plastic Arts’ and ‘Art History’” (both 1929) presents not only an instance of the conceptual interrelations between singular articles Didi-Huberman discusses in his book. Given that this was Bataille’s opening statement so to speak, it further underlines not only the aspired cultural and categorial de-hierarchization (commensurate with Strzygowski) but betrays Bataille’s intent in the choice of artifacts and their respective aesthetic idiosyncrasies. They (to him) served as the evidence and vessels – *documents* – attesting to a primal state such as *Berauschung* having historically informed the creation and (collective) use-value of the object.

Whether the particular sequencing of these two texts was a conscious decision by Bataille is subject to speculation, but appears likely given his overall dominant hand in the editorial process. The side-by-side reading of the two texts illustrates the central aspects of a nexus of image/form, cultural history and the (academic) treatment thereof, thus providing a kind of case study of proto-fascist art theory intersecting with a key avant-garde position such as Bataille’s.

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<sup>149</sup> Andre Bréton, “Second Surrealist Manifesto”, 1929, where he further disparaged Bataille for his “vulgar materialism”. Also quoted in Bataille, 1985, p. xi

Strzygowski's text, his first and last for *Documents*<sup>150</sup>, may be considered his intellectual Paris debut, through which he regurgitated his tirade against the conventions of academic art history, and, by extension, offered an outline of his signature art historical trajectory-in-reverse in which the South/West of Europe (i.e. Rome, and later Christianized Western Europe under Charles the Great) supposedly owed its cultural, artistic and architectural debt to ancient and vanished or concurrent yet suppressed *Kulturkreise* located in the East/North axis (roughly speaking, spreading from Northern India via Iran to Northern and Central Europe). This argument is concretized in the slightly dry middle part of the text that juxtaposes three loosely corresponding architectural plans of a French Romanesque church (800), a presumably early German church in Eastern German Brandenburg (medieval 12<sup>th</sup> century) and the remnants of an early Byzantine church in Armenia (624). The juxtapositioning suggests that rather than the German medieval church's principal architecture being derived from its French predecessor, the latter in turn actually derived from the Armenian (here further designated "Indo-Germanic") church: Strzygowski posits, therefore, that this less developed, ignored and vanished culture is the origin of lauded Romanesque architecture. These architectural iterations are presented in the text as a progression in which the modest remnants of the Armenian church are evidently trumped by the pompous yet spiritually hollow Merovingian church, the latter presented as a kind of larcenous architecture, as such typical of

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<sup>150</sup> According to Bernd Mattheus, the last issue of *Documents* (Number 8, appearing belatedly in 1931) was at one point to feature an article titled "Oeuvres Indo-hellénistiques" which drew on Strzygowski's excavation in Afghanistan with André Malraux. Mattheus, 1984, pp.191-192



Strzygowksi's aforementioned notion of a cunning, exploitative "power art"<sup>151</sup>. This side-by-side tracing of formal progressions, from which was deduced an anthropological and indeed politico-historical argument, resonated with what Bataille would describe as "successions" and, more poignantly, by the initial "alternations of plastic forms" that reappear at the end of his ostensibly numismatic study as "alterations of plastic forms"<sup>152</sup> – mere *Variétés* undergoing discomposing transformations, caused here by a discreet "petit objet *n*". Bataille employed this comparative analysis of *altered* forms in a somewhat opposite fashion by discussing the increasingly abstracted and disfigured horse and idol depictions on Gaulish coins from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., which, as he wrote, initially sought to "mint" the sophisticated Greek coins displaying faultless "academic" renderings of the horse<sup>153</sup>. This unencumbered process of minting by the Gauls, purportedly oblivious to the Greek prototype, produced a "frenzy of forms" according to Bataille: "nightmares with geometrical traces". (This latter

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<sup>151</sup> Cf Strzygowski later in *Germanien*: "Finally it becomes fathomable why the old kind of art history emphasizes formal concerns and sticks to the humanist aesthetic: Power heightens the means of expression, i.e. the form; it at no given time had created spiritual values. Which is what ultimately counts for the core of all art." "Volkskunst, nicht Machtkunst [als] Grundlage von Forschung und Museum der Bildenden Kunst." *Germanien* Heft 4, 1937, p.99 (Transl. by the author)

<sup>152</sup> In Ades/Baker, 2006, pp.237, 239. Alteration is a central notion in Bataille's terminology. Applied in the formal analysis of artefacts and artworks, and as both Krauss and Didi-Huberman explain, it usually implies not mere variation or modification on a given theme. More significantly it suggests decay/deterioration of some kind, in view of the various French meanings of *altération*, including that of a physiological symptom of degeneration. "Alteration is *regressive*, *aggressive* and *transgressive*" Didi-Huberman, 2010, p.265. Krauss adopts Bataille's almost-homonymy in her discussion of Giacometti's *Suspended Ball* sculpture to denote sexual ambivalence (1930): "Although the alter(n)ation of *Suspended Ball* is constant, it is nonetheless regulated in a way that is entirely structured [sic] by the possibilities of metaphorical expansion of its two elements – wedge and sphere – and the oscillations of their sexual values." Krauss, 1986, p. 62

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

description evocative of the contemporaneous bourgeois scorn leveled against the work of the avant-garde, say Picasso, which he insinuated in closing<sup>154</sup>). It is this movement, or “succession” of forms, at the base of both Strzygowski’s and Bataille’s respective arguments that provides insight into the larger discussion surrounding their mutually contested notion of *progress*, a key feature of modernity and, by extension, Western civilization, which as an ideal harked back to humanism (which was unsurprisingly a period and mindset equally renounced both within *Documents* and by Strzygowski’s self-proclaimed anti-humanist standpoint).<sup>155</sup>

In Strzygowski’s case, progress, not least in the sense of continuity, asserting linear refinement and sophistication (in art and architecture), suddenly attained a problematic note and was therefore to be critiqued. The painstakingly excavated or re-envisioned barbaric remnants served as the roughly hewn vehicles for transporting this critique. Throughout Western art history’s and generally academia’s neglect regarding the achievements of non-Western or non-Greco-Roman cultures, what was equally neglected was that any notion of progress had most likely been carried out “over the backs of others”, entailing

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<sup>154</sup> “There is no reason to forget [...] that this recent negation [e.g. Picasso] has provoked the most violent rage, as if the very bases of existence had been brought into question”. Ibid., p.239. Cf. Bataille, “Architecture”, “[...] a path – traced by the painters – opens up toward bestial monstrosity, as if there were no other way of escaping the architectural straitjacket.” *Documents* I 2, 1929. In Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 36

<sup>155</sup> In Rosalind Krauss’ discussion of Bataille’s base materialism as the philosophical-aesthetic foundation to *Documents* she speaks of a “hard primitivism” employed by Bataille, one which “embed[s] art in a network that, in its philosophical dimension, is violently anti-idealist and antihumanist”. 1985, p.64. Simon Baker speaks of “*Documents*’ anti-humanist editorial strategy”. Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 121

For the general role of the “primitive”, or in fact Krauss’ idea of a “hard primitivism” as opposed to the “barbaric” arguably offering a more useful category to discuss the overlay of aesthetic and ideological concerns of *Documents* and fascist art theory, see Chapter 7.

domination, exploitation and force, thereby denting the humanist-ideal concept of linear progress, and by extension history as an idealizing construct<sup>156</sup>.

Similarly, with regard to this essential paradigm shift concerning the classic dichotomy of civilization/barbarity, high/low, center/periphery and lastly *value* with regard to both to content and form, the political and the aesthetic, Bataille, in his “Academic Horse” essay and similarly to Strzygowski’s revision, posited that rather than the Gauls’ attempts at artistic creation being “the usual barbarian imitations resulting from [the] clumsiness [...]”, the aforementioned coins yielded a starkly divergent, nevertheless genuine aesthetic that “revealed not so much a technical fault as a positive extravagance.”<sup>157</sup> This “positive extravagance”, understood here primarily as that of an aesthetic kind, Bataille sought to link to an irrational, or anti-enlightened, indeed barbarous impulse<sup>158</sup> stemming from their unsophisticated creators, an impulse or mindset certainly conferred upon those “barbarians” by their respective “spokesmen” (and less

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<sup>156</sup> With regard to the latter point, Strzygowski’s quasi-postcolonial critique *avant la lettre* invokes one of Walter Benjamin’s most often drawn on quotes: “There is no *document* of culture that is not at the same time a *document* of barbarism.” (My emphasis). In “Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian”, 1937, in Jennings/Doherty/Levin, *Walter Benjamin. The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility and other Writings on Media*, Cambridge/Mass., 2008, p.124

<sup>157</sup> Ades/Baker, 2006, pp.237-239.

<sup>158</sup> This association of barbarism with artistic and societal impulse is one actually also employed by Walter Benjamin in his artwork essay: A “Dadaism brimming [gestrotzt] with barbarisms” is precisely what generates “its impulse” according to Benjamin, signaling a fundamental aesthetic rift between the work of the avant-garde and mass media culture in the context of socio-technological change of Weimar Republic Germany. See XIV first paragraph (Third version!) Transl. by the author

frequently “spokeswomen”)<sup>159</sup>. The difference in both Bataille’s and Strzygowski’s narrative of the barbaric subject however was that this paradigm shift did not aim to somehow legitimize the non-enlightened subject and his/her creations through a taming assimilation, through a form of cultural “tolerance”, i.e., a pluralistic notion of accommodating *diversity* (to the same degree of an economy gladly accommodating and supplying *Variétés*). Rather, both Strzygowksi and Bataille endorsed and propagated this (alleged) brutish, positively *ignoble* ignorance towards the culturally superior; the free alter(n)ation of a humanist or ideal set of values and aesthetics became a celebrated act of aggression or at least resilience, further serving as proof of not merely a “positive extravagance”, since Bataille went on to credit the Gauls hereby with supplying a “veritable antithesis to civilization”<sup>160</sup>. Both his and Strzygowski’s reevaluation of cultural history thus credited the as yet ill-defined barbaric aesthetic with posing a deliberate challenge to the logic of so-called ideal form and the philosophical foundations from which it derived. They equally

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<sup>159</sup> Who, in Gayatri Spivak’s case, would retort with the inquiry: “Can The Subaltern [actually] Speak?”, in Nelson/Grossberg (eds.) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana/Chicago, 1988, pp. 271-316.

Which is to further say that this up-valuation of the *other* (barbarian, savage etc.,) did certainly not occur first with Bataille. The genesis of said noble savagery (Rousseau) or at least a reassessment of the classic dichotomy between colonizer (civilized) and colonized (barbarous) leads back to Tacitus’ eminent travelogue *Germania* (89 A.D.), which would experience a full-blown if “revised” comeback in fascist propaganda, (see especially Allan A. Lund “Germanenideologie im Nationalsozialismus. Zur Rezeption der ‘Germania’ des Tacitus im ‘Dritten Reich’”, Heidelberg, 1995). What did however mark a sea change in that discussion is the attention and genuine research devoted to those ‘savages’ actual material and spiritual culture, elevating it to a model anti-aesthetic that would soon – and disputably – come to be equated with various tropes of avant-garde art (and in Benjamin’s case even with those of modernist architecture of the Bauhaus, i.e. historically one of architecture’s most “rational” canons) (See his essay “Erfahrung und Armut”, (1933), *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. II.2 (ed. R. Tiedemann.), Frankfurt a.M. 1989, p. 213 ff.

<sup>160</sup> Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 237

conceived of this barbaric “other’s” (anti-)aesthetic<sup>161</sup> as more powerful because more free from not only from an abstract ideality’s but moreover a society’s concrete constraints, and hence more authentic, again by way of an unconsidered immediacy, a key attribute lamented to have been lost at the onset of modernity , already invoked by avant-garde manifestos preceding both *Documents* and völkisch-fascist art theory by over two decades.<sup>162</sup> This so-called “positive extravagance” thus resulted from a barbaric (here meaning ignorant of aesthetic and cultural norms) agency vis-à-vis socio-cultural and aesthetic dictates).

Everything that can make disciplined people aware of values and official organization (architecture, statue law, secular science and the literature of lettered peoples) remained outside the consciousness of the Gauls who calculated nothing, conceiving of no progress and giving free rein to immediate suggestions and violent sentiment.<sup>163</sup>

Bataille had little trouble in the same text – enacting Freud’s charted Ur-scenes of *discontent* – to essentially lump together both chronologically and geographically diverse cultures into one imaginary, defiant constituency populating the pages of *Documents*, one presenting an alternative model of community devoid of a

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<sup>161</sup> I use this notion here not in the sense Hal Foster would employ it: as an artistic strategy contesting latter avant-garde heroisms of transgression, shock and the like increasingly perceived as inconsequential in view of postmodern commodification and spectacle culture; long having succeeded Debord’s of 1967, fully *integrated* and *diffused* within a booming 1980s New York art market.

<sup>162</sup> For example, “Unmittelbarkeit” served as the “terms of admission” to various (German) avant-gardes such as the Dresden group Die Brücke (Schmidt-Rotluff, Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde etc.) whose manifesto states: “Jeder gehört zu uns der unmittelbar und unverfälscht das wiedergibt was ihn zum Schaffen drängt.” (1906). For a discerning analysis of the essentially political legacy of these groups in view of an embryonic Weimar Republic see Georg Simmel “Der Konflikt der Kultur” (1918), as well as his already mentioned “Die Krisis der Kultur” (1916).

<sup>163</sup> Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 237

civilized – impotent – society’s malaises: “Gaulish civilization was comparable to the current peoples of central Africa [...]”<sup>164</sup>

This identification of a “new” or rather until then occluded constituency spanning distant locales and times informed Strzygowski’s approach to overcoming the “Crisis of the Humanities”, which basically entailed a disbanding with humanism, its values and its methods of knowledge production. It is from this position that an art historian like Strzygowski would demand that the traces of ethnography and pre-history upend aesthetic judgment. This critical-ideological overlap with *Documents’* premise to probe aesthetics by means of “ethnography”, “archeology” and, last but certainly not least, “doctrine” had preceded his one-time contribution, Strzygowski asserting in 1922 that:

Humanism’s inherent limited focus on European society, that is, on people who made their histories accessible by means of the written word is untenable. Individual subject areas have thus long begun to draw on ethnography for their actual research material. But just as in the time question, the social question does not only involve the distant, in the appropriate case the primitive people, but also the local, the immediately lying in front of us.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> In this context it is also noteworthy to point to the similar qualitative attributes of both the Gauls and those “Black Birds” again: their performance is of an “incongruous extravagance”, very much equalling the Gaul’s “positive extravagance”. (Bataille, “Black Birds”, in Brotchie (ed.) 1995, p.36).

<sup>165</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p. 17 (Trans. by the author)

The “individual subject area” of choice for Strzygowski (as much as it essentially was for *Documents*) was of course no other than the neologism of “comparative art research”:

The science which first conceives the entirety of the world’s orbit, mankind in its entire process of existence and in all its social strata, and which further explores the inner values and their consistency will shine a light for the other humanities. That science could [...] in fact be the research about the fine arts.<sup>166</sup>

Thus this was very much in dialogue with Bataille’s idea put forward in the “Academic Horse” essay where the “immediately local” – i.e. the homegrown – that Strzygowski spoke about was represented by Gaulish (read indigenous proto-French) culture. This as opposed to, say, a Teutonic legacy, the one celebrated over at *Germanien*, especially in the form of a kind of “barbaric sublime” conjured by Wilhelm Teudt’s travelogues-cum-treatises covering those “Germanic Sanctums” that lay at his doorstep in Lower Saxony, including the (in)famous Externsteine<sup>167</sup>.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., pp. 30-31

<sup>167</sup> The Externsteine are a group of prominent solitary rock formations outside the small town of Horn, close to Detmold. Declared a principal national monument by the Ahnenerbe under Himmler since they were believed to be a pagan sacred site originally storing that legendary Irminsul, the Externsteine were outfitted with stairs and walkways interconnecting the rocks. They served as a prime location for various SS celebrations and rallies while becoming a popular destination for a kind of völkisch tourism spurring on economic development for this rather remote area of Germany. Parts of Kenneth Anger’s 1967 film “Lucifer Rising” were filmed at the Externsteine featuring a fairy-like Marianne Faithfull wandering the rocks (according to anecdote while high on heroin) wearing a “medieval” cape set to a dark electronic score by Bobby Beausoleil, an erstwhile member of Charles Manson’s “family”. The Externsteine to this day serve as the setting for tribal rave parties coinciding with solstice as well as an occasional social gathering point for Germany’s Neo-Nazi scene, i.e., they continue to appeal to various audiences, providing the setting for respective projections.

With regard to that “comparative art research” addressing said aesthetic discourse, Strzygowski firmly disavowed the latter as the pivotal normative category of art historical scholarship of the time. Consequently, as bold – and ludicrous – as it must have already sounded when first published in *Documents*, this for him meant that, “[...] art research [...] belongs in the domain of purely objective research and must not be confounded with aesthetic research”<sup>168</sup>. This critique was shared by institutional figures such as Paul Rivet, a prominent ethnologist and the founder of the famous Musée de l’Homme which housed the former Trocadero’s ethnological collections. (The Trocadero served as an important place for the Parisian avant-garde seeking inspiration from the mostly African and Oceanic objects and artworks taken from the colonies on display there. Rivet’s vision for the newly Musée de l’Homme, as the name already suggests, was at pains to revise the preceding institutional othering complete with a Zoo-like exhibition format, proposing that for all the objects’ formal extravagance these were still artefacts/objects created by “men” (human beings)).

As such Rivet responded to the debate on art historical methodology with a critique of the former museum premise of singling out artifacts worthy of representing a civilization. Rivet explicitly tied this critique to an argument implicating class and economic conditions as factors unjustly determining the writing of cultural history past and present which, as will be seen shortly, resonated with Strzygowski’s direct implication of class in the context of “power art”.

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<sup>168</sup> *Documents I* 1, 1929 “English Supplement” (unpaginated)



Rivet: [...] the essential point is to know all the aspects, or at least the normal aspects of a civilization, and not its exceptional aspects, as revealed by the privileged classes. For the ethnologist the poor man's dwelling is as fruitful a study as the rich man's castle, if it is not more so <sup>169</sup>.

Thus, compared to Bataille, who certainly devoted more attention to (anti-) civilization's "positive extravagances" (a kind of base "exceptional") than its "normal aspects", Rivet's position presented a more moderate attitude. His stance did however correspond to the critiqued to be narrow and exclusive conception of the study of art and by extension culture(s) which, according to Strzygowski led "the consequence of a partition between a pre-history and a historical time"<sup>170</sup> (which as shown in the preceding chapter II.1 was a "partition" in Strzygowski's art research that was faulty in itself since time, and thus history, were secondary to the evolution of art which developed along that fantastic "Hauptzeit", in this schema rendering history more or less irrelevant for art's evolution.)<sup>171</sup>

Rivet took up Strzygowski's notion of "partition", calling it "absolutely artificial" in his text. By this he was referring more specifically to the separations between the then young science ethnography, the emergence of pre-historical studies at the fin-de-siècle and, lastly, traditional archeology, being the oldest father discipline so to speak, and thus the most contested one. In line with

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<sup>169</sup> Paul Rivet: "A Study of Material Civilization; Ethnography; Archaeology; Prehistory". *Documents I* 3, 1929. (English Supplement, unpaginated)

<sup>170</sup> Strzygowski, 1929 (*Documents I* 1) English Supplement

<sup>171</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.5

Strzygowski's call for that "comparative art research" Rivet demanded that: "ethnography should no longer be anything but comparative", endorsing academic interdisciplinarity long before it became an institutional mantra and eventually a rule.

The mere classification and cataloguing of a select group of esteemed artefacts was commonly considered within *Documents* to no longer be adequate to produce useful knowledge in the humanities (especially for contemporary artistic concerns seeking to fulfill a mandate as an avant-garde). "It would be a mistake not to do more and better" writes Rivet. "Ethnography has been handicapped by errors of method", he continues, echoing Strzygowski's characteristically confrontational diction.<sup>172</sup> Meanwhile, the first issue of the publication *Germanien* in the same year of 1929 saw a similar call for interdisciplinarity:

It is a further demand that one branch of science shall not be constructed as a self-contained idea, but that it sufficiently considers its neighboring sciences to form a logical general knowledge of mankind.<sup>173</sup>

This – while roughly obliging Rivet's revised Musée de l'Homme – somewhat hazy "logical general knowledge of mankind" as Wilhelm Teudt grandiosely

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<sup>172</sup> For yet another "verbal form" of this "aggressive anti-Western stance of the visual avant-garde" as Rosalind Krauss puts it, see her reference to Georges-Henri Riviere's essay "Archaeologism" in "Cahiers d'art" no. 7 (1926), Krauss, 1985, p.49f16. (Riviere was an assistant director at the Trocadero, the preceding institution of the Musée de l'Homme and closely associated with *Documents*.)

<sup>173</sup> "Eine weitere Forderung ist, daß eine Wissenschaft nicht als ein für sich allein bestehendes Gedankengebilde aufgebaut sein darf, sondern sich mit ausreichender Berücksichtigung der Nachbarwissenschaften in ein logisches System des Gesamtwissens der Menschen einfügt." Wilhelm Teudt, "Germanische Vorgeschichte und Wissenschaft", *Germanien* Heft 1, 1929, p. 5

named it would basically be provided by Strzygowski's "comparative art research", declared by him in *Documents* to be an "intellectual science which does not solely depend upon written sources", promoting the visual and the unrefined remnants over the textual and sophisticated.

Needless to say it was not quite the case that this "comparative art research" presented such a groundbreaking, advanced method towards the study of art that it could just skip textual source material for the purpose of chronology and provenance classification. Rather, that obliviousness to textual source material was borne of an ideological agenda, which sought to not only recognize "barbaric" culture but furthermore to establish it as the new ideal. The aggressive depreciation of the textual and thus conventional art historical methodology also arose simply out of a factual necessity since, as already noted, a lot of these barbaric remnants and cultures were hardly existing or preserved anymore, let alone recorded in any kind of historical chronicle (the few exceptions coming courtesy of Roman chroniclers such as Tacitus "Germania", i.e. from the perspective of the oppressors – of "power art"). "Art research" therefore invited at times heavily speculative accounts and methods in securing this underappreciated material, the qualitatively poor leftovers of low cultures suffused with mythical and folkloric information, unearthed as they often were by self-proclaimed experts who were in fact frequently decidedly lay-ethnographers, characterized by individuals like Teudt. That formally and historically rather heterogeneous barbaric legacy, the lost object to be recovered by (fascist) "art research", was to be solidly united through some ancient, unchanging and higher nexus of blood, race and territory that was not be perturbed by textual sources suggesting otherwise. Strzygowski neatly provided

the conceptual framework to this novel barbaric aesthetic, not failing to couch it in a populist language of class struggle:

History sticks to written sources. For the art researcher there exist relics of an underclass that doesn't resort to writing and certainly not the word to express what is at stake for them, but to the image.<sup>174</sup>

Promoting the visual over the textual as an act of more genuine expression and denouncing fact-based contextualization in general, hesitations about the legitimacy of that barbaric up-valuation were sought to be pre-empted. Rather than posing complications to the kind of sublimation of the barbaric as advanced by Strzygowski and völkisch-fascist art theory of the time, the unorthodox, at times dicey methodology of "art research" was acknowledged, albeit by conveniently turning it into an actual faculty, evinced by Strzygowksi who in *Documents* claimed that "Plastic art research has discovered methods superior to those employed by 'Art History' which permits of rendering actual even that which has not been *conserved*"<sup>175</sup>. Which is to say that this quite fantastic idea of "rendering actual" implicitly admitted to a resurrecting, supernatural component lying at the heart of "art research".

While these ideas were presented within *Documents*, it should be noted that there likely existed reservations, to put it mildly, about the projective nature of Strzygowski's "art research", if not by Bataille then certainly by the equally

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<sup>174</sup> "Geschichte hält sich an die geschriebenen Quellen: Für den Kunstforscher gibt es Zeugnisse aus seiner Unterschicht, sie sich nicht in der Schrift und überhaupt nicht in erster Reihe des Wortes bedient, um auszudrücken, worauf es ihr ankommt, sondern des Bildes". Strzygowski, *Nordischer Schicksalshain*, Heidelberg 1937, p. vi (Transl. by the author).

<sup>175</sup> Strzygowski, 1929, unpaginated "English Supplement"

nongeneric art historian Carl Einstein. It was Einstein who in his essay “Negerplastik” [Negro Sculpture] as early as 1915 voiced doubts about a notion such as art research, or in fact art itself “shining a light” (Strzygowski) for academic disciplines:

To view art as a means to anthropological and ethnographic insights seems to me dubious, since artistic representations hardly reveal anything about the facts upon which this kind of scholarly knowledge is based<sup>176</sup>.

More directly in the face of Strzygowski’s thundering proclamations are Einstein’s critiques of what I have called a sublimation of the barbaric, contained in his 1920 text “Afrikanische Plastik” [African Sculpture] and thus more or less contemporaneous with Strzygowski’s “Crisis of the Humanities” (1922)

By way of phony [hochstaplerisch] emotion and newly stenciled [schabloniert] ideologies that have a desperate similarity to illusions, nothing is to be gained<sup>177</sup>.

No doubt Einstein was here directly disputing the concurrent vogue for an escapist – and indiscriminate – primitivism within artistic circles from Paris to Berlin, the art market and the criticism substantiating it, rather than the simultaneous passion for Germanic or Nordic remnants on the side of the

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<sup>176</sup> Einstein, “Negerplastik”, Leipzig 1915. “Negro Sculpture”, translated by Charles Haxthausen and Sebastian Zeidler in *October* 107, 2004, p. 125

<sup>177</sup> “Afrikanische Plastik”, Berlin 1920. “Mit hochstapelndem Gefühl und neu schablonierten Ideologien, die eine verzweifelte Ähnlichkeit mit Einbildungen besitzen, ist nichts gewonnen.”, p. 6 (Transl. by the author).

völkisch movement<sup>178</sup>. His critique however of a conception of a prehistoric or primitive culture as somehow timeless and ahistorical and thus unspoiled and immune to external influences seems especially valid in the context of “art research”.

When looking at African art we miss the support of a clear history, or fixed time. [...] Much of what is told about Africa resembles a beautiful, fathomless story. Time and space remain dubiously fixed in the uncertain slumber of the mythological.”<sup>179</sup>

Yet what was early on recognized by Einstein to pose a problem in terms of appropriately introducing and studying artifacts outside the Western canon for the purpose of an academic, art historical and aesthetic expansion and de-hierarchization, was on the other hand elevated by Strzygowski to a model attribute of primal, unspoiled cultural heritage to be unleashed and tapped by the community (i.e., the “Volksgemeinschaft”). A similar hopeful expectation from these last contingents of unspoiled genuine “culture” is discernible in Michel Leiris’ elaboration on Haitian culture as discussed in the first chapter. However, the fiction of such an unspoiled primitivist purity was certainly also exposed in *Documents*, most eloquently perhaps in Marcel Griaule’s text “Gunshot” in which he humorously pinpointed – with regard to Ethiopia then

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<sup>178</sup> That Einstein was very well aware of the latter though and even put it into a relation with the concurrent popularity of the primitive and the exotic discussed here is evident in his writing on German expressionists such as Emil Nolde, whose work in his *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* he described as “barbaric magic”.

<sup>179</sup> Einstein, 1922. p. 5. Transl. by the author. “Bei dem Betrachten afrikanischer Kunst missen wir den Anhalt eindeutiger Geschichte, fixierte Zeit [...] Vieles über Afrika mitgeteilte ähnelt einer schönen, bodenlosen Erzählung. Zeit und Raum verharren fragwürdig im ungewissen Schlummer des Mythologischen.” Translation quoted (slightly altered in keeping with the original German text) from David Quigley, *Carl Einstein: A Defense of the Real*, Vienna 2007, p.78

under Italian rule – the infiltration of the natives’ art and architecture by colonial residues; basically the junk of industrialized mass production (“railway fish-plates”, “Chianti bottles”) left behind creatively incorporated into “indigenous” local craft<sup>180</sup>.

What Einstein in “Afrikanische Plastik” rightfully probed as being *passive* “fragwürdig[es] verharren” [dubious fixity] concerning the status of time and place of this *other* artistic production, Strzygowski concomitantly moved to the top of his art theoretical tripartite schema in the form of now *active*, empowering “beharrende[n] Kräfte”, [insistant forces], tellingly unaffected by *time*. Strzygowski thus turned that “mythological slumber” Einstein objected to into the chief asset of a resistance to the dominant cultural idea of linear progress. In fact, later on in his now fully phantasmagorical oeuvre, the notion of ahistoricity and the overall mythic nature of cultural heritage as the foundation of a radically renewed socio-cultural – or rather national-socialist – consciousness was explicitly embraced:

In reality this ahistoricity is one of the most important features of the Nordic spirit; not actual history, but what is turned thereof into myth and fairy tale through the Sinnbild, proliferated orally from generation to generation – that is the spiritual heritage of the North [as a cultural-ethnic zone], as such artistically valuable above all.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Marcel Griaule, “Gunshot” *Documents* II 1, 1930, In Brotchie (ed.) 1995, p. 98

<sup>181</sup> Strzygowski, 1943, p. 175 (Transl. by the author)





### III Double Visions

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The reappraisal of barbaric (anti-)culture, its particular social features and customs, culled from a broad range of historical sources and epochs deviating from – transgressing – Western values, did not solely take place in the realm of aesthetics. In both *Documents* and in the thematically corresponding essays of völkisch-fascist literature, one comes across treatises on ritualistic acts, at times viscerally gruesome from a “Western” moral standpoint, along with, especially in *Documents*, images that formed a kind of collection of objects evincing “barbaric” treatments and modes of production. Bataille’s earliest example, one which divulges his pretty much life-long investment into macabre cultural and indeed political phenomena, can be found in a text he published a year ahead of *Documents*, entitled “L’Amérique disparue” (1928). Here, Bataille indulged in a graphic description of violent acts of sacrifice set within the otherwise rather sophisticated culture of the Aztecs, their capital re-envisioned by him as a place of dazzling wealth and beauty, turning the rigid notion of “civilization” upside-

down by way of this jarring contrast<sup>182</sup>. This was Bataille's first foray and theoretical investment into extinct and anti-modern socio-cultural rituals (in this case, the purported Aztec priests' custom of tearing out a living person's heart), the explicit atrocities/sacrifices occluded from western socio-political life <sup>183</sup>. Except that, at a second look, they were not so occluded: especially not within *Documents*, whose selection of images at times unearth rather mundane instances of the modern social and its modes of production and consumption that did in fact contain traces of, if not barbarous atrocity, certainly a mass production of death. Or, differently again, *Documents* disclosed "barbaric" aspects reemerging here and there as the raw material assimilated by a bourgeois-capitalist circuit of demand and supply, the various disasters and acts of violence sold as shocking news items to the public (such as the sensationalist photo book *X Marks The Spot*, documenting the gang wars amongst Chicago's mafia,

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<sup>182</sup> "Mexico [City] was not only the most streaming of the human slaughterhouses, it was also a rich city, a veritable Venice of canals and bridges, of decorated temples and beautiful flower gardens over all.[...] Doubtless, a bloodier eccentricity was never conceived by human madness." (Translation by Krauss, 1985, p.55). Georges Bataille, "L'Amérique Disparue", in Jean Babelon (ed.) *L'Art précolumbien*, Paris 1930 (A later catalogue to accompany the 1928 exhibition "Exposition de l'art de l'amérique" at the Pavillon de Marsan, Paris. Bataille did not provide references to historical documents or scientific studies in support of the picture he painted of Aztec culture. Bernd Mattheus criticizes this text as a "populist-scientific" one, a "hack job", that fails to discuss important elements of Aztec human sacrifice such as the role of hallucinogenic drugs, the "sacral character of the sacrificed" etc. all of which leads the reader to misunderstand the sacrifice as a "stunning yet senseless spectacle". Mattheus, 1986, p.130. Interestingly enough though, Bataille makes an argument with regard to the Aztecs' art that reverberates with the critiques of a high art emphasizing mimetic representation as critiqued by Strzygowski et al. The Aztecs' depictions of their deities are described by Bataille as: "less a clumsy attempt to represent nature but a symbolism to express an idea". Again, not only do the Aztecs' preference for idiosyncratic expressiveness over clear-cut representation echo the Gauls willfully diverging animal depictions, but it furthermore aligns with the qualities ascribed to the fascist-völkisch Sinnbild.

<sup>183</sup> In this context it is worth mentioning Foucault's spectacularly gruesome opening passage of *Surveiller et punir* (1975), detailing an execution by drawn-and-quartering in 18<sup>th</sup> century France as the last instance of public execution serving collective spectacle/experience (of power). Jean Baudrillard would, not much later, make a similar historical argument in *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (1976) there discussing the social function of public execution, a *performance* of sovereign power integral to – not isolated from – medieval society.

discussed in an eponymous article by Bataille). Significantly, these items tended to stem from a civilization's, or rather from the citizenry's, underbelly, which is to say from the criminal subset that Bataille conceived of as agents of a not yet rationalized, law-abiding constituency. These defectors from civility and from the law Bataille basically presented as the genuine heirs to the equally noncompliant barbarians as represented by the Gauls in Bataille's "Academic Horse" essay. This equation, or identification, of the historically barbaric, principally understood by Bataille as an anti-sovereign aesthetic unruliness or deviation, with the actual lawlessness of modern-day interest groups such as the clan or the gang, was made explicit in this text, with Bataille stating that: "[...] a perfect casting and intelligibility [of the classical style characterizing Greek coins], implying the impossibility of introducing absurd elements, were as little to their [the Gauls'] taste as police regulations are to the criminal classes."<sup>184</sup> (A narrative somewhat short on the fact that for all its hardnosed brutality the gang was nevertheless a community founded upon shrewd economic interests, i.e. following a capitalist *rationale* of profiting from precarious demand-and-supply, any deviancy thus concentrated first and foremost in the illegal goods trafficked.) This connection did serve a larger argument, in which he deduced this polarization of *civilized* vs. *barbaric* from a clashing of aesthetics, (and vice versa), which he had already formulated in the beginning of this text:

Thus since an academic or classical style is opposed to everything baroque, fantastic and barbarous, these two radically different categories sometimes

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<sup>184</sup> Bataille, 1929. In Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 238

correspond to contradictory social states. Styles could thus be considered the expression or symptom of an essential state of things.<sup>185</sup>

Whence it would appear all the more logical for Bataille to likewise deduce the “dément” renderings of Aztec deities from their indeed “contradictory social state”; a state/State terrifying the Spanish conquerors under Cortez beholding the Aztec’s “eccentricity of human madness”, as Roger Hervé phrased in his text for *Documents* entitled “Sacrifices Humaines du Centre-Amérique”<sup>186</sup>. Bataille’s agenda to cover just these “contradictory social states” in the pages of *Documents* found its equivalent in a reconsideration turned redemption of barbaric customs in *Germanien*. Here, one can find articles such as “Das Roßopfer bei den Indern und Germanen” (“The horse sacrifice of the Indians and the Teutons”) as well as “Die ‘Menschenopfer’ nach der Varusschlacht” (“Human Sacrifices’ after the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest”). These two texts in fact thematically correspond to three entries to *Documents’* “Critical Dictionary” section, entitled “Kali”, “Man” and “Slaughterhouse”, all by Bataille, as well as with Roger Hervé’s previously mentioned article.

In “Das Roßopfer bei den Indern und Germanen” its author, Hans im Uhl, proposes a direct cultural affiliation between ancient Teutonic and ancient Indian culture (the “Vedas”), exemplified by their apparently mutual practice of

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 237. It should be noted that what here has been translated as “fantastic” in the original French text is called “dément” by Bataille; which is more opportune towards the linkage of aforementioned processes of material alteration yielding allegedly barbaric properties. And which furthermore allows for Bataillean wordplays: monnayer (to mint) becomes démenté and thus de-monnayé (demented, *de-minted* and *de-moneyed*), ruining the monetary flow.

<sup>186</sup> In *Documents* II 4, 1930

sacrificing and consuming the noble animal of the horse. The author lays out the following scene:

The [horse] sacrifice was carried out in holy places. The flesh, after having been presented to the deity for consumption, was dined on at the sacrificial meal, with the [horses'] skulls hefted onto trees. The horse sacrifice was probably only performed on special occasions.<sup>187</sup>

Im Uhl goes on to posit that “despite the destruction of our own culture”, (presumably here meaning the Teutonic tribes’ Christianization at the hands of the Roman colonizers) a study of the ancient Vedas’ scriptures provided the evidence for the sacrificial role of the horse to be directly related to Teutonic customs. (This since, according to the proto-Fascist geo-ethnic model, the “Aryan race” linked ancient Indian and Persian cultures with the Nordic-type inhabitants of Central and Northern Europe.<sup>188</sup>) Leaving aside this doubtlessly problematic premise, what is significant here, is the way in which the article’s “closing arguments” introduce an ethical dimension to this barbaric consumption of an animal as valued as the horse (I.e., considering the horse’s esteemed representation in the Western aesthetic tradition, being “the most perfect and academic of forms” and hence “the most accomplished expressions of the *idea*”, as Bataille maintained “The Academic Horse”.) There surely existed a “contradiction of social states” or, indeed, of symbolic application between

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<sup>187</sup> Hans im Uhl, “Das Roßopfer bei den Indern und Germanen”, *Germanien*, Heft 5/6, 1930, p. 86

<sup>188</sup> For a detailed account primarily responsible for this theory and spawning many thereafter see Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55) (*An Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*).

embossing coins – monetary value – with horses and adorning trees with their craniums. The abstract realm of a barbaric sacred (Aztec, Teutonic etc.) came up against an ideal concept of beauty applied to abstractions like prestige, power etc. as promised by money.

To return to the reconsideration of the barbaric on the level of culture, im Uhl asserted:

From these accounts we can conclude that the horse sacrifice also had the same symbolic meaning [Sinn] as the Indian one. Hence the Teutonic horse sacrifice was as little a raw, barbaric blood feast as the Indian one, but a holy, symbolic act.

This kind of proto-postcolonial critique towards a colonialist, moral judgment and consequently discrimination of the colonized subjects' customs – perceived as contrary to the colonizer's ethics and culture and thus bizarre – was something that very much reverberated within *Documents*. To this end, Bataille, curiously enough, likewise turned to Indian culture as an example of a non-Western culture subjected to a colonizer's agenda of seeking to paint foreign customs as a "raw, barbaric blood feast" (im Uhl). Bataille did so by quoting from a sensationalist and racist Indian travelogue by the American journalist Katherine Mayo, entitled *Mother India* (1927). Bataille, crediting Mayo with "the avowed intention of disgusting her readers with an ignoble barbarity",<sup>189</sup> quotes generously from this work, surely in order to bolster his hypothesis of a transformation of cultic acts into sensational material within a nascent modern

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<sup>189</sup> "Kali", *Documents* II 6, 1930, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 54

consumer culture, i.e. into bloody spectacle – an ersatz experience of sacrifice turned fictive gore<sup>190</sup>, the remaining format to engage otherwise abolished customs of that nature in secularized society.

The blood flows over the flagstones, the drums and gongs before the goddess ring out in a frenzy. ‘Kali, Kali, Kali’, cry the priests and suppliants in a chorus [...]. A woman rushes forward and, on all fours, laps up the blood with her tongue...Half a dozen hairless and mangy dogs, horribly disfigured by nameless diseases, plunge their avid muzzles into the spreading tide of blood.<sup>191</sup>

Note that, while this material would have appealed to Bataille in the first place due to its graphic and revolting narrative, it would seem that it further served his purposes in providing “base terminology” to draw on – “...frenzy, disfigured, diseases...” – for his own writing, such as the “frenzy of forms” Bataille ascribed to the creations of the barbarous Gauls.

This example of a spectacularization of barbaric customs to the ends of value creation – a trajectory found frequently within *Documents* as a whole – is followed just two entries later by the article “Man”, shifting the focus to mass production thus further emphasizing the economic dimension of Bataille’s analysis. This entry is accompanied by a photograph of a made up woman

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<sup>190</sup> And from gore to the most “extreme” variant thereof: snuff, i.e. the niche genre evolving in the 1970s with B-movies such as the Italian *Mondo Cane* films where the on-screen slayings of both animals and of humans are accused of being authentic and not staged. See here especially the legal controversies surrounding the film *Zombie Holocaust* (Italy 1980, directed by Frank Martin a.k.a. Marino Girolami). (On a historical trajectory of snuff in the moving image see David Slater, David Kerekes, *Killing for Culture: An illustrated History of Death Film from Mondo to Snuff*, London 1994).

<sup>191</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 55

sporting a fur coat, seated in front of a row of hanging skinned foxes at a 1928 Berlin fur exhibition. The German word “Zurichterei”<sup>192</sup> is displayed on top of this in equal parts mundane and unsightly composition. This kind of casual snapshot of modern-day barbarity supplements Bataille’s text, in which he shares with the reader his recent reading of a book entitled *The Blood-Guiltiness of Christendom. (May We Slay for Food?)* (1922) by Sir William Earnshaw Cooper. (Cooper was apparently a member of the “The Order of the Golden Age”, a “group of militant nationalist vegetarians” and thus not entirely remote from an idiosyncratic grouping such as the “Freunde Germanischer Vorgeschichte”, presenting yet another peculiar intersection of “alternative”, “progressive” agendas such as vegetarianism with politically reactionary aspirations.)

In the entry “Man”, just as in “Kali”, blood again flows and gushes copiously; this time, however, not in a faraway demonic Calcutta temple but closer to home, in the “Christian’s bloody slaughterhouses”, the concrete manifestation for Bataille of the apparently “well known fact that not one of the

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<sup>192</sup> This expression alone - “Zurichterei” - would have certainly appealed to Bataille, assuming his familiarity with the multiple meaning it carries in the German. Used as it is here it describes a manufacturing process (of skinning), i.e. a production technique. Zurichterei however possesses a verb form of “zurichten”, denoting an act of disfigurement, mutilation, marring etc. “Jemanden zurichten” denotes abuse or violence committed to a subject which is actually present in the image spread that contains the photo of the fur exhibition, by way of a bizarre image of the “murderer Crépin” in court, his face bandaged to conceal defacement, the entry it pertains to entitled “Malheur” i.e. very much pointing to Crépin being “zugerichtet” (and furthermore “vor Gericht” [before the judge]) making his “Hinrichtung” [execution] plausible). The products of this secular sacrifice of “Zurichterei” come in from of a photograph showing a cinema actress clad in fur: “Betty Compson dans le film parlant [talkie] ‘Weary River’”, i.e. the fur figures as a modern relic ironically furnishing these “women so de-natured” – modernity’s “saints” (Bataille). See his “Places of Pilgrimage: Hollywood” [Lieux de pèlerinage: Hollywood]. *Documents* I 5, 1929. (Also see Chapter 4).



millions of animals man massacres every year is necessary for his nourishment”<sup>193</sup>.

Bataille’s transposition of the “barbaric blood feast” from the exotic and barbaric other – i.e. the Indians (and by extension the Teutons) – onto civilized, modern urbanity and mass production comes full circle in the entry “Slaughterhouse”, this entry in a way introduced by “Man”’s coda provided by Cooper:

A calculation based on very modest figures shows the quantity of blood shed each year in the slaughterhouses of Chicago is more than sufficient to float five transatlantic liners.<sup>194</sup>

Traversing this ocean of blood, the “transatlantic liner”, carrying bloodshed as a by-product of voracious consumption, arrives at the relatively new slaughterhouses erected at Paris’ periphery, in the area known as La Villette, the actual subject in question of “Slaughterhouse”. The “liner” of “Man” – on its passage both across the Atlantic and the Critical Dictionary – arrives in the old world as a “plague-ridden ship”<sup>195</sup>. Presumably seeking to amplify the barbarous nuances of a term like “slaughterhouse”, the article features photographs of La Villette taken by Eli Lotar, depicting – similar to the image of the Berlin fur exhibition – a bland but, again, also unsightly setting: in this case interior shots of

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<sup>193</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 57

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>195</sup> Bataille “Slaughterhouse” (“Abattoir”), *Documents* I 6, 1929. In Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.73

a slaughterhouse, its floors covered in blood, as well as an image of a row of neatly lined up severed cows' feet. In her discussion of "Slaughterhouse", Dawn Ades points out that these images starkly contrasted with only slightly earlier features on La Villette in one of the major art publications at the time, the *Cahiers d'Art*. Here, La Vilette's outwardly modern, gleaming and sterile facade made of silvery steel was captured by an aestheticizing architectural photography that portrayed it as an epitome of modern, sanitized manufacturing<sup>196</sup>. This ennobling representation of the slaughterhouse through photography reflected, to a degree, the idea of slaughterhouse as a modern day "temple", as Bataille put it, a sublimating association he immediately turned upside down by concluding that this therefore also rendered the slaughterhouse-*cum*-pagan-temple as "one of those places in which blood flows."<sup>197</sup> The slaughterhouse as portrayed here is

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<sup>196</sup> Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p. 14

<sup>197</sup> That Bataille did not embrace an aestheticizing of the industrial is evident in his entry "Factory Chimney": "Today when the truly wretched aesthete, at a loss for objects of admiration, has invented the contemptible 'beauty' of the factory, the dire filth of those enormous tentacles appear all the more revolting". In Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 51

the manifestation of sacrifice turned into “curse”,<sup>198</sup> according to Bataille. The industrialized mass shedding of blood – in the form of meat and aforementioned fur production – and the sites of its execution are to be moved at all cost to the city’s geographic and social periphery, out of sight because of its “unseemliness”. Communal experience of sacrifice is ousted from a population that was at pains – or condemned – “to vegetate as far as possible from it”<sup>199</sup>.

If sacrifice and its modern day variants in the above examples were limited to horses, foxes and livestock it was only a matter of time – or pages – until human sacrifice proper would be addressed, both within *Documents* and in contemporaneous fascist ponderings on the matter. In the *Germanien* article “Die ‘Menschenopfer’ nach der Varusschlacht”, Joseph Plaßmann, a high-ranking academic within the Ahnenerbe think-tank and one of the most frequent contributors to the journal, gives a speculative account of alleged human sacrifices during the time of the Roman Empire’s conquest of Northern Europe. These sacrifices, according to Plaßmann, involved the execution of higher-

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<sup>198</sup> An analogy which would actually align with the notion of the sacred as theorized by Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige* (1917), a work frequently drawn on by Bataille later; the word derived as it is from the Latin *sacer*: holy and damned/cursed, sacred and soiled/untouchable, etc. In this connection, see Agamben’s critique of Bataille’s idea of the sacred who had right up until the *Tears of Eros* allied torture with ecstasy (as transgression), a misguided thought according to Agamben for Bataille fails to recognize the biopolitical paradigm of this act: in which the subject – by Law – is drawn-and-quartered for no sacrificial or civic value at all – including heterogeneous value as *accursed share* – but in fact presents an instance of bare life executed – sans ecstasy. (Put differently, one could argue that the heterogeneous is still a (central) constant in Agamben but it is devoid of any philosophical, spiritual, psychological etc faculty and describes a juridical procedure demarcating sovereignty and bare life from the “law”, which is the one crucial status sovereignty and bare life have in common.) See Agamben, 1998, pp. 112-115. “If Bataille’s merit is to have brought to light the hidden link between bare life and sovereignty, albeit unknowingly, in his thought life still remains entirely bewitched in the ambiguous circle of the sacred. [...] In modernity, the principle of the sacredness of life is thus completely emancipated from sacrificial ideology, and in our culture the meaning of the term ‘sacred’ continues the semantic history of *homo sacer* and not that of sacrifice.”

<sup>199</sup> Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 73

ranking officers of the Roman army by Teutonic tribes of which the historical “Battle of the Teutoburg Forest” (fought in the north-Western German region known as the Teutoburger Wald) provided a record, again by Tacitus’ frequently referenced “Germania”. Plaßmann quotes Tacitus’ actual passage dealing with human sacrifice, making the case that historical chronicles like these are subject to inaccuracy and interpretation, due not least to translations that may ideologically tweak the meaning of topics such as the sacrificial act itself:

After the victory the Teutons slaughtered the first-ranking tribunes and centurions in order to subsequently attach their skulls onto tree trunks with nails. [...] In neighboring wood clearings stood the altars of the barbarians, on top of which they had slaughtered the tribunes and centurions<sup>200</sup>.

That Plaßmann seems to have taken issue with the very notion of “slaughter” as employed by Tacitus (or as it had been translated) is reflected by him putting the title’s “Menschenopfer” (“human sacrifices”) into quotation marks. “Opfer” in German carries a two-fold meaning: the ambivalence of a sacrificial human body on the one hand, and the body as a subject to violent, if not criminal acts on the other. “Opfer” denotes both victim and sacrifice, and it is no doubt the latter and not the former that Plaßmann seeks to locate in this ancestral rite of barbarity chronicled by Tacitus. The odious nature of the Teutons’ act is to be purified by an argument that asks the reader to reconsider the differing notion of (sacrificial) death in barbaric culture:

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<sup>200</sup> Joseph Plaßmann, “ Die ‘Menschenopfer’ nach der Varusschlacht”, *Germanien* Heft 1, 1933, pp.110/111 (Transl. by the author).

We have to consider that this was a highly cultic occasion in this case, because 'barbaric blood thirst' or 'brutish vengeance', which is how it used to be interpreted, are notions too worn out to serve as scientific arguments.<sup>201</sup>

Without offering much in terms of "scientific arguments" either, Plaßmann did not seem satisfied with merely recasting alleged barbaric "slaughtering" as a holy, if archaic, sacrifice. Plaßmann actually proceeds to posit a connection between the sacrificial, i.e., religious realm and the juridical realm, a connection which "leads us to a logical interpretation of this process as a legal act conditioned by the cultic." And Plaßmann does indeed make the case for the aforementioned reformulation of execution into sacrifice, thus turning the victim into a sacred subject, maintaining that:

[...] every form of execution originally represents a cultic act, thus, in the proper sense, a sacrifice [...]<sup>202</sup>

Plaßmann's thinking, given the early (1933) Nazi-fascist context in which his ideas are presented, eerily presages the semantically fraught, in fact "biopolitical" notion of the holocaust (originating from the Latin "holocaustum", a "burnt offering") itself, i.e., its inherently troubled meaning, denoting sacrifice on

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p. 111

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

the one hand and, historically speaking, plain extermination on the other <sup>203</sup>. (Platzmann's assertions on the other hand, if without him delving deeper into a historical and philosophic argument, are certainly in discussion with the revised notion of the sacred that would become Bataille's focal point after *Documents*, by way of his publication and secret society *Acéphale* and of course the *Collège de Sociologie*). Platzmann concludes by making the case for ethical relativism, writing:

We can in any case recognize that the 'human sacrifices' of the Teutons have to be viewed entirely differently than is commonly done. The margin between "barbarity" and "higher culture" is as little to be sought for here as the one between those people who carry out the death sentence and those who disclaim it. Only a humanitarian [sic] rationalism has invented such separations.<sup>204</sup>

It was exactly that "humanitarian [humanistic] rationalism" that Bataille and colleagues like Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris in the context of the *Collège* would assess and ultimately seek to refute as the paradigm responsible for the ultimate obliteration of the sacred within the modern social. Stephan Moebius, a

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<sup>203</sup> While he may not be the first one to point out this ambivalence, Agamben summarizes it as follows: "The wish to lend a sacrificial aura to the extermination of the Jews by means of the term Holocaust was [...] an irresponsible historical blindness. The truth – which is difficult for the victims to face, but which we must have the courage not to cover with sacrificial veils – is that the Jews were exterminated not in a mad and giant holocaust but exactly as Hitler had announced, 'as lice', which is to say, as bare life. The dimension in which the extermination took place is neither religion nor law, but biopolitics" Agamben, 1998, p.114.

<sup>204</sup> Platzmann, 1933, p. 113 (Transl. by the author.). Platzmann speaks of a "humanitärer Rationalismus" by which I think he means to say "humanistic rationalism" not a "humanitarian" one (?).

historian of sociology who has compiled a kind of interpretative anthology of the Collège's three years of activity (1937-39) proposes as much, writing:

The *Collège de Sociologie* departs from the assumption that collective phenomena like death rituals, or festivals and collective narratives such as myths are given secondary status by traditional sociological analyses, compared to the rational and contractual [Hobbes'? Rousseau's?] conceptions of society<sup>205</sup>.

Which, to come back to Plaßmann, also meant that while this perceived loss or deprecation of ritualistic and sacrificial social acts – including out-and-out archaisms like human sacrifices – was bemoaned by Bataille et al, it was not only earlier similarly taken up by völkisch-fascist ideology but, theoretically, in 1933, more properly “re-deemed”. Indeed, the spiritual *value* of the dead as not yet excluded from society was of great interest to this branch of fascism, turning the kind of lay historiography on barbarian social and cultural models laid out in the

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<sup>205</sup> Stephan Moebius, *Die Zauberlehrlinge. Sozialgeschichte des Collège de Sociologie*, Konstanz 2006, p. 135 (Transl. by the author). Moebius in his take on the Collège's principal re-envisioning of the social summarizes this the following way: “The aim of the Collège was to build communities that were defined by an aspect of free choice, and to differ from “blood-and-soil communities” as well as from traditional communities while bringing order and unifying elements into a disintegrating society”. The crucial point to differentiate the Collège and by extension Bataille's notion of a sacred community from blood and soil ideas is well taken, while to speak of ‘order’ as a key principle for a newly sacred social seems rather debatable a notion in this context, given Bataille's predilection for precisely dis-order and chaos as expressed in the “state(s)” he supported: formlessness, a (phenomenological) “frenzy of forms” (1929) that eventually would give way to a (socio-political) “frenzied being” (1935/36) engaged in acts of perpetual revolt. It may be more apt an analysis in view of Roger Caillois' contributions at the time, which betray parallels to the writing and ideas of an Ernst Jünger.

preceding chapters into crucial research objectives with political ends<sup>206</sup> by Himmler's "Ahnenerbe Forschungsgesellschaft", exemplified by briefings such as the following:

Der Reichsführer-SS möchte eine ganz kurze Zusammenstellung – etwa in Form einer Disposition - von all den Bräuchen haben die noch in der Volkstumspflege lebendig sind und die den Gedanken, daß die Toten noch mit teilhaben am Leben der Sippe, bis in unsere heutige Zeit versinnbildlichen.<sup>207</sup>

To return to *Documents*, the historical and ethical question concerning the "margin between 'barbarity' and 'higher culture'", between "slaughter" and "sacrifice", between an executed corpse and a sacrificial body was debated not by turning to the colonial scenario of choice in *Germanien* (Romans vs. Barbarians). Rather, the topic was approached via the slightly more recent and more properly recorded colonial narrative of the Spanish conquest of Central America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, provided by the accounts of one of Cortez' soldiers, Bernal Diaz del

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<sup>206</sup> In this context, it appears all the more logical on the level of symbolic signification that the caps worn by the SS were adorned with a skull. In a lecture the literary theorist Hans Mayer gave at the College he points out that this detail was in turn appropriated from a German secret society from 1813 called the "blacks" that formed in the circle of Ernst Moritz Arndt, a key figure preparing for a Francophobe 19<sup>th</sup> century German nationalist movement. In Denis Hollier (ed), *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, transl. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis, 1988, p. 272. Which, even if coincidental, is somewhat stunning, in light of the fact that Walter Benjamin was supposed to lecture on the subject of "fashion" instead, presumably in the manner he would later discuss it in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940); a lecture which for reasons unknown was cancelled/rescheduled (and never presented) and replaced by Mayer's "The Rituals of Political Associations in Germany of the Romantic Period." (April, 18<sup>th</sup>, 1939).

<sup>207</sup> "The Reichsführer-SS requests a concise exposé of all the customs that are still being observed in preserved folklore culture and which contain Sinnbilder that to this day relay the idea of the dead as continuing to partake in the life of the community". Bundesarchiv (BArch) NS21/227. Document dated April 8<sup>th</sup>, 1942. The request continues to state that: "Der Reichsführer-SS interessiert sich vor allen Dingen, wo das Allerseelenfest mit seinen Lichtern überall noch gefeiert wird."



Castillo, who essentially took Tacitus' role of the witness in this context<sup>208</sup>. Hervé in this text returns to the site of a spectacular – and paradoxical – barbarity that had fascinated Bataille in his aforementioned text “L'Amérique Disparue”: that of ancient Mexico's Aztec culture, where barbarity was allegedly performed by an apparently otherwise highly sophisticated society. Hervé conjures up the bloody rituals of the Aztecs for the reader by quoting passages from del Castillo's detailed testimony. Of importance here, again, is the kind of revision of moral and ethical standards in the context of colonialism on the one hand and the ghastly sacrifices of the Aztecs on the other that, according to Hervé, is reflected in the Spaniards' “disgust” before the Aztecs' “stinking mass graves”, to their sentiments' gradual giving way to an “obsession” and, ultimately, to an “enchantment” [emerveillement] with this “strange novelty [...] sacrifice”. (Hervé speaks of the Conquistadors' “double vision of wonders and horrors”)<sup>209</sup>.

Once again, the ambivalent notion of the barbaric is here re-negotiated, as much as it is in Plaßmann's text, as first and foremost a historically conditioned category of ethics. Moreover, barbarity here figures as a lynchpin ensnaring colonizer and colonized<sup>210</sup>, the abhorrent yet fascinating and socially mandated and *valued* killings by the Aztecs and the *legal* yet brutal exploitation and decimation of the indigenous Indians at the hands of the Conquistadors in the name of the crown (i.e., of the law and hence, in this case, of God). “L'idée de la

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<sup>208</sup> Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, (written around 1568, posthumously published in 1632.)

<sup>209</sup> Hervé, 1930, p. 206 (Transl. by the author).

<sup>210</sup> Which is precisely also the reason that the barbaric is engaged for an artistic avant-garde with political ambitions in Brazil just around the same time: the movement around Oswald de Andrade, whose “Manifesto Antropófago” (1928) calls for the consumption of the colonizers.

‘barbarie’ toute gratuite”, Hervé thus deliberates, with 17th century Mexico a conundrum, imagined as “une civilisation à une sorte d’âge d’or” but also labeled “satanique” and ultimately “inexplicable”<sup>211</sup>. Hervé’s text closes with an illustration from the Mesoamerican collection of the Codex Vaticanus picturing a “tzompantli” (a skull rack/palisade), a kind of architecture of skulls that would appear to be related to the Teutonic skull-trees discussed by Plaßmann. The “tzompantli” becomes less exotically morbid though when juxtaposed with the photograph of the ossuary of the Santa Maria della Concezione church in Rome, found in Bataille’s last article in *Documents*. Here, the ornate skull architecture (of death) registers as positively “baroque, fantastic [demented] or barbarous”<sup>212</sup>, especially when viewed alongside its New World counterpart/predecessor.

### **III.2 Modernity – “Double-vision of wonders and horrors”**

Hervé’s notion of a “double-vision of wonders and horrors” may actually serve as a useful metonymy of the various skulls, heads and masks featured in *Documents*. Double vision and dualisms already formally constitute the various “Janus-masks” featured in Eckhart von Sydow’s article on Cameroon masks (“Masques-Janus du Cross-River (Cameroun)”) <sup>213</sup>. While von Sydow’s article and its images

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<sup>211</sup> Herve, 1930, p. 209

<sup>212</sup> Bataille, 1929. In Ades/Baker (eds.), 2006, p.237

<sup>213</sup> *Documents* II 6, 1930

limit themselves to this culturally specific category of masks, the various possible “treatments” or *alterations* of the human skull/face, subjecting it to seemingly myriad possibilities of contortions, mutilations and exaggerations is explicitly foregrounded in another article of the same issue. Ralph von Königswald’s “Têtes et Crânes”<sup>214</sup> (Heads and Skulls) assembles a variety of these possible alterations to the human skull that are furthermore partly superimposed into a rough collage. It would seem that the purpose of this collaging was to reinforce the cultural and historical dualisms discussed above: an Oceanic facemask with conches for eyes is placed together with a skull whose remaining rudimentary facial features are re-accentuated – made-up – with paint, making for a grotesque, indeed clownish appearance. At the bottom of this collage are, yet again, rows upon rows of skulls that stem neither from Aztec nor Teutonic “tzompantlis” but depict the Roman-Catholic ossuary of Hallstatt, Austria. The article goes on to feature not only human remains but a photograph portraying a “Central European obese woman”, more outrageously altered skulls, and a cropped section of a painting by Cranach the Elder showing a severed head (“Judith with the Head of Holophernes” 1530). If the “primitives” inventive mutations of the head may still register as a sinister celebration of the wealth of facial (human) expression (including unspeakable transmogrification), its civilized counterparts veer more to the side of a denigration of the head as a particularly human attribute, leading all the way to – demanding – decapitation, as performed in the Cranach painting. As with almost all of the disfigurations or attacks on the body within *Documents*, the selection of images suggest Bataille’s aims to be ultimately political: if the unpleasant close-ups of big toes, and the

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<sup>214</sup> *Documents* II 6, 1930

horror of a sliced eye in “Un chien andalou” (1929)<sup>215</sup> already hint at this, the act of beheading is symbolic not only for the denigration of the intellect and the idea but the decapitation of authority (hence the “Acéphale”, the headless idol of the coming sacred community envisioned by Bataille). This political notion of the deformed and debilitated head as a desirable act/state was actually confirmed by Bataille when, in the journal *Acéphale*, he wrote:

To be free means not to be a function. [...] The head, conscious authority or God represents one of the servile functions that gives itself as, and takes itself to be, an end; consequently it must be the object of the most inveterate aversion<sup>216</sup>

The juxtaposition of the mundanity of an obese woman’s unappealing face mass with the “primitives” transmutations of the human head such as the shrunken heads of the Jivaro-Indians present are, according to von Königswald, “[...] equally terrifying and droll distortions” (i.e. an instance of a “double-vision of wonders and horrors”). All of these variants indeed register as “object of aversion”, and in particular affecting a feature significantly typifying the human species: the face, or more precisely, the face’s ability to form various expressions, an aspect that sets it apart it from the animal’s incapacity for facial expressions.

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<sup>215</sup> Which in this case could essentially serve as a quite literal allegory of a de-enlightenment, that, given the Surrealist context, may be linked to an erotic act rather than to the castration anxiety the scene has been interpreted as; a misogynistic one I suppose, from a feminist perspective, since the (liberating?) act of de-enlightenment occurs at the hand of a male protagonist (who historically speaking is of course also the protagonist of Enlightenment). See also Rosalind Krauss, “Antivision”, *October* Vol. 36, 1986, pp. 147-155 for a further/different idea of “de-enlightenment”, here called “antivision”. Also see chapter 7.

<sup>216</sup> Bataille, “Propositions”, *Acéphale* 2, 1937 (Bataille, 1985, p.99)

One social instance in which this celebration of facial expressiveness – including those expressions registering “extreme” states – was allowed to resurface in modernity was in the institutionally sanctioned space-time of the carnival<sup>217</sup>. If representations of “alterations”, signifying various kinds of horrors/ecstasies/*jouissances* of the human face, are banned from public representations and prohibited by social protocols, the carnival allows, briefly, these deviations and exaggerations to not only resurface but, furthermore, to be paraded. The vacuous quality of this temporary masquerading, complete with temporary “transgressions” of everyday social norms, is illustrated by the photographs of Jacques Boiffard that feature contemporary subjects wearing contemporary and somewhat ridiculously bland carnival masks.

These photographs in turn introduce an article by Georges Limbour that interweaves the perceived malaises of contemporary Western society with the more concrete ones of colonialism and the Greek tragic theatre of Aeschylus (“Aeschyle et les civiles”). The latter famously incorporates masks portraying various exaggerated, stylized expressions such as grief, elation, awe, horror etc. for dramatic effect, a kind of special effect of antiquity. Limbour concludes that what is left for a Western society that has banished sacrificial rites that visibly

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<sup>217</sup> Which has been elaborately explored by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* (1941). It should be noted that Giorgio Agamben designates the carnival as a commonly recognized, mundane form of a “state of exception” (referring to Carl Schmitt’s notion of the “Ausnahmestand”). The carnival, while being a temporary “suspension of juridical and social hierarchies”, is only an “anomic festival” though – in fact a “parody of anomie”. *Ausnahmestand (Homo sacer II.1)*, trans. Ulrich Müller-Schöll, Frankfurt a.M. 2004, p.88 (Transl. by the author).

impart the breadth of human expression through the experience of various ecstasies (i.e. alterity), is the gas mask, *the* contemporary modern mask <sup>218</sup>:

No question, this [the gas mask] is the authentic modern mask. Among the peoples of ancient times religion and worship of the dead and the feasts of Dionysus made the mask a sacred ritual adornment; and we too have our religion, our games, and as a result our masks. Except that our age's standardisation [sic] forces us to all wear the same one.<sup>219</sup>

Rosalind Krauss, in her discussion of Limbour's text, notes that the gas mask at that moment in time represents both a "[...] horrific image of brutality and industrialized war" as well as a "[...] fascination for what modern imagination has dreamed to replace the head of man", arguing that both of these takes "had become widespread among the 1920s avant-garde" (thus basically yet again presenting a "double-vision of horrors and wonders").<sup>220</sup> To illustrate her argument, a trio of photographs taken from the previously mentioned magazine *Variétés* and captioned "Les protections des hommes" (The protections of men)

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<sup>218</sup> Likewise, if the gas mask may be the emblem of WWI, then the gas chamber seems to be the one of WWII and by extension for civilization for Bataille; as a "a sign of man" just "like the pyramids, the acropolis, etc. [...] the human image is inseparable, henceforth, from a gas chamber." Quoted in Stuart Kendell, Introduction to Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity*, ed. and trans. Stuart Kendell, New York, 2005, p.23.

<sup>219</sup> "I imagine a meeting in Hell between Aeschylus's troupe, a dozen shades with different, terrifying wooden faces, and a handful of ghosts of my own time, their faces hidden behind absolutely identical, utterly dehumanized gas masks." "What are these porcine faces, every one of them the same?" Aeschylus asks. These are not snouts, dear father of Tragedy, these are gas masks."

"Aeschylus, Carnival and the Civilized". English translation online at [http://www.latriennale.org/sites/default/files/journal-pdf/le-journal-de-la-triennale--4--you\\_do\\_not\\_stand\\_in\\_one\\_place\\_to\\_watch\\_a\\_masquerade--melaniebouteloup\\_ABM2.pdf](http://www.latriennale.org/sites/default/files/journal-pdf/le-journal-de-la-triennale--4--you_do_not_stand_in_one_place_to_watch_a_masquerade--melaniebouteloup_ABM2.pdf) Retrieved October 5th, 2012.

<sup>220</sup> Krauss, 1985, p.68.. Didi-Huberman frames Limbour's trajectory – from Aeschylus' theatrical masks to gas masks – somewhat differently, calling it a "moving summary of myth and modernity, a certain way to *crush myth by way of modernity*" his reading betraying an import of Adorno's and Horkheimer's conception of myth and enlightenment. 2010, p.127 (Transl. by the author).

(1930) show not only a wearer of said gas-mask but furthermore some new-fangled optical device covering the upper half of a man's face as well as what appears to be a diving helmet entirely obscuring a standing figure's face. Laying out this pivot of a (post-human) aesthetic and an (anti-human) technology in general terms – “industrialized war”, “modern imagination” – she skips, perhaps due to their obviousness or literalness, Berlin Dada's arguably most famous heads pertaining to each of these terms: Raoul Hausman's “Mechanischer Kopf” (1919), tellingly also called “Der Geist unserer Zeit” (The Spirit of Our Time), a wooden dummy head onto which knob and antenna like parts as well as bits of measuring tape are affixed and Otto Dix' series of etchings titled “Der Krieg” (War) (1924)<sup>221</sup> depicting quasi-mummified soldiers, anonymized by said gas masks, indeed resembling “a handful of ghosts”<sup>222</sup>. Krauss suggests that Limbour's symbolism of the gasmask as the “contemporary mask” aims to intimate not “higher stages in the evolution of the species [man]” but “much lower ones”, such as an “insect”<sup>223</sup>. Thus her association of the gas-mask with a quasi-alien, insectoid subject differs from Limbour's relation of the gas mask to the “dirtiest” of mammals and therefore the morally “lowest” of the human traits: the swine, with Aeschylus calling the gas masked soldiers “porcine faces” and

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<sup>221</sup> Another contemporary work of Berlin Dada featuring the gas mask would be George Grosz' caricaturist drawing of a crucified Jesus wearing a gas mask from 1925 (1927?). The work's title is “Maul halten und weiter dienen” [Shut up and serve], presenting a more direct political commentary on the complicity of church (religion) and secular power (the military, warfare), which seems peculiar given that WWI, for all its atrocity, is not usually considered a war of religion.

<sup>222</sup> Or, alternatively, “an embarrassing allegory” according to Carl Einstein.

<sup>223</sup> Krauss, 1985, p. 58

“snouts”. Both of these readings – the contemporary mask signifying dehumanization and depravity - correspond to a short and somewhat cryptic text by Bataille entitled “Le Masque”<sup>224</sup>. Here, Bataille maintains that the man-made mask, by both resembling and obscuring the truly human faculty of the face (“the sole open window”), by literally closing this last window, initiates further isolation and alienation. Bataille writes: “When that which is human becomes masked there remains nothing but animality and death”.<sup>225</sup>

The man-made and human-resembling mask “is chaos become flesh”, because the mask proves and confronts the face encountering this human/-nonhuman face with its ultimate “extermination and decay”, something that would normally be the task of external nature (disintegration). The mask is already manifested death, signified by the petrified expressions of the mask of that last moment from life to death (i.e. the frozen facial contortions of pain, pleasure, surprise etc.). For Didi-Huberman, the parading of various instances of these (anti)human representations – “chaos become flesh” – underline Bataille’s attempt to foreground “decomposition” (thus also spoiling the idea of a life after death in a higher realm). Instead of celebrating human semblance and thus, by extension, “God’s anthropomorphism”<sup>226</sup>, the various takes on the face invoke the non-human, verging on an obstreperous formlessness. Not unlike Benjamin’s notion of barbarity that initially registers as decay, in his case specifically as a

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<sup>224</sup> In Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes* II, dated from presumably 1934, and in German in Mattheus, 1986, p.404ff. Didi-Huberman also refers to this text in 2010, pp.110/111. While discussing both Bataille’s and Limbour’s texts he does not put them into a dialogue as presented here.

<sup>225</sup> Quoted in Didi-Huberman, 2010, p. 110 (Trans. by the author).

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.



cultural and psychological one, only to be flipped by him into a positivity of renewal<sup>227</sup>, Bataille's transitively decomposing mask and the ensuing "chaos become flesh" are not negatively connoted per se.

Yet the *mask* still has the power to appear as the dark incarnation of chaos at the threshold to this bright and pacifying world of boredom.<sup>228</sup>

It is thus not only an empowering of the mask but furthermore of chaos, in the course of which, despite chaos suggesting uselessness, it reemerges as agency (as "expenditure"): a political power contra sovereign power, as Denis Hollier in his discussion of the text suggests. Hollier surmises that this text may have been written in the context of a 1938 lecture held by Bataille at the College de Sociologie entitled "The Structure of Democracies" (which is somewhat ambiguous since "Le Masque" is elsewhere presumed to date from 1934<sup>229</sup>). Despite signifying decay, Hollier suggests that, on the contrary, Bataille's conception of the mask, and the carnival in general, serves as his model for democracy as an event of political renewal, as a kind of initiation of a heterogeneous ("bi- or polycephalic"<sup>230</sup>) body politic:

*The use of the mask is an initial version of two-headedness. Through this the blind beliefs [?] of the democratic world (not to be confused with the utilitarian*

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<sup>227</sup> In his essay "Erfahrung und Armut", 1933. See Chapter 5

<sup>228</sup> Quoted in Didi-Huberman, 2010, p.110

<sup>229</sup> As an article for the journal *Minotaure*, where it was rejected for publication. See Didi-Huberman, 2010, p.111

<sup>230</sup> Bataille, quoted in Hollier, 1988, p. 191

*rationalism of the bourgeoisie!) and its antimonarchical Dionysianism are linked in part to the world of the carnival.*<sup>231</sup>

Simply put, the mask offers escape from the rule, from hierarchy, etc. Wearing it would seem to promise an instance of breaking with Limbour's critiqued "standardisation". Instead, it functions as a device enabling a temporary suspense of fixed identity and social position and thus of *standards*, that translates into liberated *chaotic* subjects, prolonging, extending the carnivalistic chaos into the political realm – prolonging and extending a "state of exception" that holds a revolutionary promise<sup>232</sup>.

Strzygowski, on the other hand, veered more towards Limbour's direction in his allegorical usage of the mask, denoting a social protocol that was not only ubiquitous and bureaucratized – *standardized* – but that suggested repression. Hence the mask essentially was a key attribute of the "Machtmensch" (power man<sup>233</sup>).

The mask, supposed to have evoked natural beings in the equatorial region, becomes a mask of society, the latter hiding its true nature underneath it. If the

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<sup>231</sup> In italics in the original. Hollier, 1988, p.191

<sup>232</sup> Thus, to repeat, in direct opposition to Agamben's notion of the carnival as merely a "parody of anomie". See f 36 in this chapter. Chaos as a heterogeneous state serves as means to an end in fascism, the end being definite homogeneity (as determined by Bataille in "The psychological structure of fascism" 1933/34). A fascist revolt expects and enables a powerful head (of state), a Führer, to emerge, a dynamism diametrically opposed to Bataille's vision of an acephalic (headless) community equally derived from heterogeneity, with the goal to perpetuate heterogeneity.

<sup>233</sup> Despite the fascist ring of this term, Strzygowski conceived it as an unmistakably flawed subject. See chapter 4

mask had previously been an exception, it has now become the rule, worn at all times.<sup>234</sup>

Strzygowski's assessment of this repressively *masked* society further corresponded with Limbour's assertion of the modern mask's main function "to drive away certain invisible enemies" (i.e. again suggesting its purpose to conceal/repress/suppress).

What power has done to the folkloric [volkstümlich] mask originally warding off evil spirits! It has put on the mask in the everyday of the court, the church and the academy; society cannot miss it [the mask] without feeling insecure.<sup>235</sup>

External spirits have become internalized – "invisible enemies" –, directed against the self that therefore needs to be masked (suppressed), the mask conceived as an addictive veneer of everyday social relations. Responsible for this standardization and suppression, for this reversal of the mask towards masking internal discontent and decay was, as always, "power" (Macht), more precisely Strzygowski's habitual culprits of "church, court and academia". Unsurprisingly though, for the völkisch-fascist rumination on the political implications of the mask and by extension the carnival, the focus was less on the primitives' masks per se (Strzygowski's "equatorial mask" would be geographically correct though in view of the predominantly West African, Mesoamerican and New Guinean masks in *Documents*); neither was it on ancient

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<sup>234</sup> Strzygowski, 1943, p.243. Transl. by the author. In this light Emil Nolde's paintings' frequent depictions of Oceanic masks as well as the carnival become all the more plausible as objects of desire, a nostalgic admission of the inability to escape internalized evil (discontent) as the consequence of the eradication of the spirits from a Western modern social. Thus Einstein's peculiar labeling of the work as "barbaric magic" becomes more comprehensible, if one reads Nolde's work as a painterly conjuring of a pre-modern state/State out of remnants.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid. p. 275

Greek theatre, nor on Bataille's interest in the Mardi Gras. As the notion "folkloric [volkstümlich] mask" already suggests, the cultural realm and its respective rituals subject to reconsideration and revalorization were the pagan traditions and myths partly surviving in rural Southern Germany, Switzerland and Austria. Dismissive of the function of the carnival as touristic sideshow or urban, tamed working-/middle class *Zerstreuung*, the carnival as it is featured in völkisch publications and various research trips ordered by Himmler's Ahnenerbe on the contrary sought to reveal its political potencies – and in fact its vivid, if not grotesque heterogeneity<sup>236</sup>. What is rather striking in the illustrated texts on these vernacular traditions, ones that feature outlandish characters and processions, is that heterogeneity was deemed culturally and politically valuable, which is inconsistent with the later regime's strict suppression of any aspects of chaos<sup>237</sup> not to mention identificatory ambiguity. (The various characters indeed show aspects of not only a bizarre "formlessness" but, furthermore, in some cases approve of and enact a blurring of gender that is thus appreciated as

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<sup>236</sup> It is in this context that a work such as Cameron Jamie's "Kranky Klaus" (2005) video could be discussed. Jamie captured the events leading up to and the actual procession of the "Krampus" in rural Austria, a pagan creature whose outfit includes a disfigured mask with horns and a fur suit. The anonymized, inebriated Krampusse roam the village as a group during St Nicholas Day, consisting of presumably male villagers, and explicit violence in form of beatings and vandalizing is permitted, expected and certainly carried out. Jamie edited and combined the footage with music by the drone metal/noise band The Melvins, resulting in a music video-cum-ethnographic study suggesting a correlation between the (subcultural) forms of discord invested in/identified with by a largely adolescent male (sub)urban faction and the Austrian youths out of bounds acting out (sanctioned) aggression, unsettling the "parodistic" trait of Agamben's "anomie"; at least for this time-frame.

<sup>237</sup> Unless of course one considers an event such as the pogrom/Reichskristallnacht as "chaos" of a political nature, ecstatic destruction, which would be valid, yet doesn't account for the fact that this temporary chaos/ecstasy again serves as a means to an end that interdicts chaos/anarchy.

belonging to an “authentic” völkisch cultural history<sup>238</sup>). Instead of the carnival serving as “[...] an occasion conceived as lighthearted horseplay, as a joke, as tomfoolery, and a lust for life [...]”<sup>239</sup> the carnival is predominantly reviewed as an act of political uprising against clerical authority, mostly in the context of the peasant uprisings in 16<sup>th</sup> century Southern Germany and Austria<sup>240</sup>. Because of this, folkloric myths pertaining to the carnival – involving acts of “slain body parts hung on house entrances”, including “half a corpse of a child”<sup>241</sup> etc. – are renegotiated less as acts that are barbarous and grotesque and more as acts that are culturally meaningful in reconnecting with a composite heritage that comprises post-Medieval class-struggle (the 1500s) as much as a Early Medieval pagan resistance to Christianization. In this historical and political contextualization, these acts register less as eccentric massacres and, rather, are “put into perspective” as presenting cultic acts that are integral to the community’s narrative and values resisting power’s standardizing and rationalizing dictates.

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<sup>238</sup> Fr. Mötzingler “Sommer- und Winter-Spiel”: “[...] the egg-manikin, a lad in woman’s clothes [...]”. *Germanien* 1939, p.226 (Transl. by the author).

<sup>239</sup> Hermann Busse “Volksfastnacht im Oberrheinischen”, *Das Bild* 1938, p. 50

<sup>240</sup> “Auch das deutsche Volk hat seine revolutionäre Tradition. Es gab eine Zeit, wo Deutschland Charaktere hervorbrachte, die sich den besten Leuten der Revolutionen anderer Länder an die Seite stellen können, wo das deutsche Volk eine Ausdauer und Energie entwickelte, die bei einer zentralisierteren Nation die großartigsten Resultate erzeugt hätte, wo deutsche Bauern und Plebejer mit Ideen und Plänen schwanger gingen, vor denen ihre Nachkommen oft genug zurückschauern” Friedrich Engels, *Der Deutsche Bauernkrieg*, in Marx/Engels, *Werke* Bd. 7, Berlin, 1960 [1850], p. 329.

<sup>241</sup> Hugo Neugebauer “Wild’gfahr und Wildmänner in Tirol”, *Germanien* 1938, p.480. “Ein ganz besonders charakteristischer Zug dieser Sage ist der von zerrissenen und stückweise an die Haustüren gehängten Leiber von Menschen [...]”, “an die Tür eines Dritten eine halbe Kindesleiche [...]”.



Kopie aus dem Bundesarchiv



Kopie aus dem Bundesarchiv

BArch NS21/442. Images of an undesignated and unlabeled set of photographs held by the Ahnenerbe.



### IV.1 Machtkunst – “Power Art”

Initially, as discussed in the preceding chapter, through tracking cultural history’s formal deviations, its curious instances of altering appropriations such as the Gauls’ “barbarous” coins, Bataille celebrated these apparently “immediate” expressions within *Documents* as civilization’s “anti-thesis”. Likewise, for Strzygowski these alterations and deviations presented material challenges to the representations sanctioned by the historically traditional bodies of authority, his “powers of the will”: Church, State, Academia, surely very much with contemporaneous powers in mind, advocating a revolutionary call to arms that had permeated any blend of fascist art theory from the get-go, along with an aggressive anti-clerical agenda (both of which intensified over the course of national-socialism’s political ascendancy, only to eventually adopt and submit to the Führer-cult as an alternative authority and proxy religion, basically peddling shrewd, political “Willenskraft” as organic, apolitical “Beharrende Kraft” .)

Strzygowski’s anti-authoritarian train of thought was shared by Bataille, who in the “Critical Dictionary”, under the entry “Architecture”, wrote:

[...] It is in the form of cathedrals and palaces that Church and State speak to and impose silence upon the crowds. Indeed, monuments obviously inspire good social behavior and often even genuine fear.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Bataille: “Architecture”, *Documents* I 2, 1929. In Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p.35.



This name-calling of enemies (*Feindbilder*) seemed to neatly overlap both positions. Even the relational nature of these institutions' affective faculties were quite similarly conceived, with Strzygowski's anti-authoritarian stance and Bataille's attack on architecture as a central feature of a *dispositif* of authority and order holding sway over everyday experience. Relational, in the sense that the manifestations of power for Bataille (and for Strzygowski) acted paternalistically towards their citizens, whom they inculcated as much as controlled, if not outright oppressed. Power art essentially perpetuated a parent/child dialectic, one in which the dominated and subservient recipient or dutiful member of the Church and the State (and lesser so of Academia) sought to please authority, even (falsely) identifying with it as a model to aspire to, while remaining equally in awe of it, in the sense of Bataille's "genuine fear" (if not necessarily a "fear" of *punishment* in form of death, then certainly of *discipline*, including marginalization – or simply obliviousness). Strzygowski called this double-sided, quasi-schizoid subject "Machtmensch"; "power man/man of power". This subject was intentionally conceived by Strzygowski as being ambivalent, a subject fallaciously assuming to be *in* power but in actual fact subject *to* power: ultimately servile to power regardless of the hierarchical position held within any system thereof, i.e., whether executing a certain amount of power or having to carry out someone else's superior mandate. It was one and the same in this conception: that of the "poor European who either arrogantly raises himself above all [hubris?], or who has to let himself be exploited in his

suffering as servant, believer or academically educated”<sup>243</sup>. In other words, the classical humanist goals – obtaining an education/knowledge with the view to participating in the political system as an enlightened citizen, etc. – were, in fact, the (self-)imposed manacles of civilization, since these institutions were considered corrupt or at least bankrupt in terms of fostering far-reaching societal change – which also meant that any investment in them equaled political agency squandered<sup>244</sup>. Corresponding to this “power man” came “power art”, which exerted the education/control over the former. For all of “power art”’s alleged evil the concept itself, throughout Strzygowki’s writing, remains rather fuzzy, presumably intentionally so, since that allowed it to be ascribed to any artistic development or tradition that did not fit his demand for a kind of völkisch avant-garde movement. Entire artistic periods and their respective works or architectures (especially Roman Antiquity and the Renaissance) were regarded solely as spectacular yet hollow embellishments and representations of those in power – “titillating means of power [die sinneskitzelnden Mittel der Macht]”<sup>245</sup> – whether clerical or secular in nature – “cathedrals” or “palaces” (Bataille). This naturally set up a dichotomy between a pompous and manipulative high art and a humble yet heroic because genuine folk art<sup>246</sup>, which

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<sup>243</sup> “Vorläufig sei nur gesagt, daß ich unter [...] Machtmensch den armen Europäer der sich entweder tätig selbst überhebt oder als Untertan, Gläubiger oder Gebildeter sich leidend ausnutzen lassen muss verstehe”. Strzygowski, 1943, p. 9

<sup>244</sup> This being one of the chief arguments posited by any preliminary anti-democratic, extra-parliamentary agenda, including fascism, which from this perspective is indeed anti-bourgeois.

<sup>245</sup> Strzygowski, *Spuren indogermanischen Glaubens in der Kunst*, Heidelberg, 1936, p. 98.

<sup>246</sup> With Strzygowski going as far as endowing the pensive-sensitive barbarian artist with somewhat effeminate aesthetic faculties: “[...] die bescheidene Blumensprache der indogermansichen Seele [...]” Ibid.

even informed a kind of ideological rift regarding the material used to create art, i.e. power art's preference for (enduring) stone vs. the (perishable) wood used by various lower cultures. It was precisely the work and responsibility of his "art research" to finally grant these "unpreserved" monuments of an alternative history their legitimate status (which was also the point on which Strzygowski's initial research questioning the cultural hierarchy and its underlying ideology was valid and, indeed, pioneering). The error of art history was that:

The claims of power art, adopted from the ancient Orient and Rome, were stipulated as laws for the fine arts in general, thereby forsaking the primal nature of art to be expression in favor of being intentionally stupefying effect attuned to power <sup>247</sup>

"Power art" thus enslaved its audience (its subjects), who were literally stupefied (i.e. immobilized) by the representations power prescribed and which the people in turn internalized, further feeding into upholding the status quo. A social schism between empowered and disenfranchised, sophisticated and crude, high and low, for Strzygowski, essentially came down to the schism between the false usage of art to the end of manipulative "effect" as opposed to the genuine "expression" of a free subject, one previously stamped barbaric now warranting authority, leading the way. Art was thus deemed the battleground (of the representation) of classes and cultures from which to force through a barbaric aesthetic. Similarly, with regard to art and architecture's roles in meekly

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<sup>247</sup> "Man hat die Forderungen der vom alten Orient und Rom übernommenen Machtkunst für Gesetze der Bildenden Kunst überhaupt ausgegeben und damit das eigentliche Urwesen der Kunst, Ausdruck zu sein, gegen die absicht einer im Sinner der Macht verblüffenden Wirkung zurückgestellt". Strzygowski, 1937, p.vi

reproducing and reinforcing societal power structures, Bataille bemoaned that “[...] the compositions of certain painters express the will to constrain the spirit within an official idea.”<sup>248</sup>

As a concrete example of representations that ran counter to if not outright undermined the “classical” or “academic” representations of power art, Bataille turned to the idiosyncratic carved gems he discovered at the Bibliothèque nationale’s coin collection, where he worked as an archivist. These gems were of Manichean provenance, i.e. of the Mesopotamian location and historical period Strzygowski frequently drew upon to source artifacts challenging those of Greco-Roman heritage. In his text “Base Materialism and Gnosticism” in *Documents*, Bataille endowed these gnostic (anti)representations with liberating capacities for the humanist inculcated master/slave “Machtmensch”:

The interest of this juxtaposition [idealism and base matter] is augmented by the fact that the specific reactions of Gnosticism led to the representation of forms radically contrary to the ancient academic style, to the representation of forms in which it is possible to see the image of this base matter that alone, by its incongruity and by an overwhelming lack of respect, permits the intellect to escape from the constraints of idealism.<sup>249</sup>

Instead of a Western tradition of depicting deity and beauty through immaculately divine renderings of an ultimately unattainable ideality the

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<sup>248</sup> Bataille, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, pp. 35-36.

<sup>249</sup> *Documents* II 1, 1930. In Bataille, 1985, (ed. transl. Stoekl), p. 51

Gnostics' fantastic "archontes" presented essentially a kind of negative anthropomorphism out of bounds, producing anti-deities, creatures with odd animal heads and extremities (e.g. "Figure 8. God with the legs of a man, the body of a serpent, and the head of a cock")<sup>250</sup>. Bataille lauded the Gnostics' gems for visualizing "materialism's most virulent manifestations", and considered their period as a time "[...] when metaphysics could still be associated with the most monstrous *dualistic* and therefore strangely abased cosmogonies".<sup>251</sup>

This unusual (arguably "abased") legacy of certain religious or spiritual "metaphysical" expressions, which in Western thought and aesthetics remained intentionally unsolicited (i.e., suppressed; buried deep in archives), due to the fact of its "monstrous" or at least non-intelligible and abject (and thus importantly non-identificatory) character, more or less provided the bulk of the material to which the scholarship and ideological investment was devoted in *Germanien*, *Das Bild* and Strzygowski's own writing. This was also the case with the hefty tome *Der Aufgang der Menschheit* (The Rise of Mankind) 1928, penned by Hermann Wirth, a völkisch "para-academic" (Marchand) specializing in Nordic philology who was instated as the director of Heinrich Himmler's "Ahnenerbe Forschungsgesellschaft" as well as being *Germanien's* initial editor-in-chief. The book was widely discussed in the journal's first issues (where it was, unsurprisingly, deemed a masterwork, whereas in most academic circles of the time it was considered a product of fantasy based on phony science). This almost one thousand paged study is a wide-ranging if factually unsound

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p.46

genealogy of various pre-historic and tribal cultures' signs and symbol systems, corresponding to their respective natural religions. Wirth analyzed this both geographically and periodically highly diverse material in order to prove a kind of Ur-Sinnbild language of a fictitious, ancient Aryan civilization of sunken Atlantis; the respective material often dated much further back than its actual origin. All these various cultures, whose visual systems he united into a heterogeneous pool of runic and hieroglyphic depictions, he rather condescendingly labeled "'Konservenbüchsen-Völker"<sup>252</sup>, "can-peoples". (He called them this because they had literally "conserved" the ancient visual legacies of mankind due to their apparent non-exposure to modernity and civilization). While the content of the *Rise of Mankind* is too hermetic and absurd for the purpose of this discussion, the formal overlap of Wirth's idiosyncratic collection of artifacts reproduced in the book with the kind featured in Bataille's Gnosis text is noteworthy<sup>253</sup>. Particularly some of the Native American Hopi's visual renderings of deities, again featuring counter-anthropomorphic idiosyncrasies such as bird-like heads, a snake for an arm etc. came close enough to Bataille's "strangely abased cosmogonies" of the "archontes"; in the context of Wirth, and by extension völkisch-fascist art theory, these would here constitute distant variations – conserved residues – of the aforementioned pagan "Sinnbilder" – the

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<sup>252</sup> Herman Wirth, *Aufgang der Menschheit*, Jena 1928, p. 20. (Transl. by the author).

<sup>253</sup> Interestingly enough, the Hopi Indians' artifacts in Wirth's book are just the ones discussed and seen first-hand by Aby Warburg during his research trip across the American South-West, which later provided the content to his study *Das Schlangenritual* – albeit already in 1897. The tapping of folk as well as exotic culture by various European avant-gardes can of course be already discerned during the 1910s, in for example the Blaue Reiter's embrace of Bavarian folk craft (woodcuts etc.) as well as Emil Nolde's interest in Oceanic masks and the like.

principal model aesthetic from which an anti-modern yet progressive völkisch-fascist supra-aesthetic was supposed to derive from.

#### **IV.2 “Sinnbild”, or the *base* of völkisch-fascist art theory**

Wirth’s broadly accumulative approach presented above already indicates the rather eclectic, in fact uncertain nature of this “new” groundbreaking category of the fascist “Sinnbild”. It essentially consisted of at times rather abstracted, rudimentary, formally rather poor runic symbols, hieroglyphic and mythological-figurative elements and artefacts that were liberally drawn from a range of periods and places: pre-history proper, i.e. the cave art uncovered at the beginning of the century at Altamira but also from sites such as the aforementioned Externsteine, which contained traces of rock inscriptions that völkisch-fascist research claimed were the sacred symbols of pagan Germanic tribes (but which were more likely of early Roman origin). The majority of material covered in *Germanien* and *Das Bild*, however, was of Northern or Middle European origin, from the proto-Christian period and the Early Middle Ages; this fact alone therefore responsible for the overlap with the kind of artifacts discussed in *Documents* (as exemplified by the already discussed Oseberg find, but further illustrated by, for example, the striking formal correspondences between artifacts from Luristan (Northern Iran), discussed in *Documents*, and

those found in Denmark, discussed in *Das Bild*)<sup>254</sup>. For this hence quite heterogenous realm of Sinnbilder, the definitions and quasi-philosophical underpinnings identifying them as such, was what was really at stake for völkisch-fascist art research, since the study and investment into this oblique material was believed to transmit a spiritual charge for a people arguably alienated by both modernity in general and the historical patronizing yielded by power art specifically. This wanting, or indeed barbaric, aesthetic of the Sinnbild, was in line with foregoing “effect” (power art) for the benefit of “expression” as Strzygowksi had laid it out, even though the sought after high efficacy of expression had to derive largely from projective interpretation: an interpretation that, ultimately, did not entail an analytical formal interpretation so much as a certain precursory attitude or “mentality” which, once attained, would quasi-automatically facilitate the appreciation and, more importantly, the alleged mobilizing energy imparted by the Sinnbild.

Essentially belonging to the interpretation of a Sinnbild is a mentality, one that is similar to the one that conceived of the Sinnbild in the first place.<sup>255</sup>

A “mentality” which, therefore, had to be regained and resuscitated from some deeper pre-modern level; that was ancient but also new, since it promised to

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<sup>254</sup> See here William Anderson, “Die Entstehung der Nordischen Kunst” in *Das Bild*, 1935 pp.133-138, “[...] Diese feinen Formen [Objekte des “Faardal” Funds in Dänemark] erinnern an die skythisch-sybirische Tierornamentik und besonders an die Bronzefunde aus Luristan [an area in present day Iran]”, p.134. Cf, Georges Bataille, “Les Trouvailles Du Louristan”, *Documents* II 6, 1930, pp. 372-373. “[...] le style de ces objets les apparente [...] à l’ensemble des bronzes “scythes” ou “siberiens” d’autre part.” Thus both authors presumably here drew on similar source material.

<sup>255</sup> Dr. R.F. Viergutz, “Zur Erkenntnis des deutschen Wesens: Gedanken zur Sinnbildforschung”, *Germanien*, Heft 5, 1937, p.130



provide the solution to the mental dilemma of modern experience. This remedial, indeed anti-humanist yet nevertheless enlightening function of the Sinnbild aesthetic vis-à-vis a critique of modernity is an argument frequently found in both of the publications under discussion. As Herman Wirth put it in *Germanien*:

[...] the excavation and study of the ancient past reveal spiritual legacies whose recognition and understanding was [is] destined to provide clarity to inextricable problematic of the presence.<sup>256</sup>

Consequently, this meant that engaging with the Sinnbilder was not, according to Wirth, considered to entertain mere academic problems: because it involved these both clarifying and spiritual assets it was of “public interest”<sup>257</sup>. Which is to say that a formal, aesthetic or even purely art historical engagement with this outsider aesthetics would not do: what was called for was a wider reaching social and political deployment. Again, this was also argued by redirecting the analysis of these Sinnbilder from a materialist and formal perspective to an aforementioned political, philosophical and (as will be taken up in the next chapter) psychological discussion and contextualization. Herein the very notion of materialism, as a dogma to disprove, was employed and repudiated in its double meaning. The poor, uncertain nature and historical recording of the Sinnbild artifacts made an evidence-based, materialistic “just the facts” evaluation problematic, a material weakness that was however fashioned into an

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<sup>256</sup> Wirth, “Deutsche Vorgeschichte und deutsche Geistesgeschichte”, *Germanien*, Heft 1, 1929, p. 34

<sup>257</sup> Ibid.

apparently intentional methodology that downgraded material and formal criteria to the shallow concerns of materialist science – as well as to belonging to the realm of modern materialism, i.e., to the enslaving mandate of use-value and value creation that also was the domain of power art.<sup>258</sup> As far as the Sinnbild's overall abject aesthetics were concerned, this had to be solved likewise were it to appeal to that "wider public interest" Wirth intended to reach. The following statement actually combined these anti-materialistic and anti-aesthetic sentiments, again in order to pre-empt doubts or attacks leveled against this anything but conventionally visually impressive or heroic fascist aesthetic (i.e. very much in contrast to what would later define a properly fascist art endorsed by the regime):

Of course, he who does not believe in divine-creative powers [meant here those of a pagan religion, not Christianity] and in the possibility to temporarily enter into immediate [unmittelbar] contact with them, must conceive of all Sinnbilder as random [unverbindliche] spawns [Ausgeburten] of fantasy, that can only become meaningful [sinnvoll] when they can be put into a utilitarian relation<sup>259</sup>

Of significance here is the actual admission of the aesthetically fantastic, potentially alien nature of these "divine-creative" entities called "spawns", which

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<sup>258</sup> Cf. Wilhelm Teudt "Germanische Vorgeschichte und Wissenschaft", *Germanien*, Heft 1, 1929: "[...] das materialistische Zeitalter mit seiner ausschließlichen Berücksichtigung des sinnlich Erfassbaren [...]", "[...] ein ebenso öder wie verderblicher Materialismus [...]", pp. 3, 5

<sup>259</sup> Viergutz, *Germanien* 1937, p.131 . This also meant again that the reception of the Sinnbild by the beholder didn't call for the learned or handed-down formal-analytical criteria of power art (personified, say, by the "elitist" critic, the patrician or aristocratic collector/connoisseur, the haughty academic etc.). It was an anti-intellectual reception supplied by a mentality [Geisteshaltung] that however rather than being considered primitive was elevated above intellectual faculties, a spiritual – but under no circumstances spiritualist – faculty surpassing analytical reason.

is in essence what the Gnostic gems were lauded as by Bataille when he called them “abased cosmogonies”, undermining reason, utility, ideality, immaculate form.

And with regard to the socio-political argument for this fascist-völkisch anti-aesthetic, Bataille equally linked a reconsideration if not replacement of ideal aesthetics and academicism (both intrinsic to power art from a fascist point of view) to a political and social necessity of change, these “virulent manifestations” or “spawns” [Ausgeburten] as much a *symptom* thereof as well as providing a possible new aesthetic of the base<sup>260</sup>:

But is difficult today [1930] to remain indifferent even to partly falsified solutions brought, at the beginning of the Christian era, to problems that do not appear noticeably different from our own (which are those of a society whose original principles have become, in a very precise sense, the *dead letter* of a society that must put itself in question and overturn itself in order to rediscover motifs of force and violent agitation.)<sup>261</sup>

Bataille’s “*dead letter*” of course meant the (in his view) stagnant, reactionary state of Western civilization at the very end of the 1920s, i.e. the accrued knowledge regurgitated via an academic canon. This was again in line with Strzygowski’s anti-textual stance towards knowledge production (now achieved by “art research”) and a corresponding aesthetic of choice (a pre-lingual, anti-lingual Sinnbild).

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<sup>260</sup> Which, to repeat, would be recognized by völkisch-fascist art theory, for that too, yet sublimated, to serve the “coming community’s” (Agamben) future aesthetic, arguing that the both historical and aesthetic notion of the barbaric was disproven and misplaced whereas precisely what made them “barbaric” was of course what was embraced by Bataille and within *Documents* in general.

<sup>261</sup> Bataille, 1985, p. 46

### IV.3 Between the symptom and the sublime: “Formlessness” and “Sinnbild”

In so far as fascist art theory of the kind outlined above prioritized expression over effect, interior spiritual assets (“roots”) over exterior representational (“surface”) ones, it compelled a shift from ideal depictions or the life-like towards abstraction, risking non-intelligibility and possibly even deformation along the way, since to once more consult Strzygowski on the matter, the Sinnbild clearly constituted “a thing without representation, or at least devoid of human representation”<sup>262</sup>. Thus this would almost tie in with Bataille’s concise definition of “formlessness”, as an entity basically serving as the core of the “Critical Dictionary”, within which he purported it to “resemble nothing”. I say almost because Bataille went on to book-end this idea with the coda that if the formless resembled anything at all it would be something like “a spider or spit”<sup>263</sup> – *devoid of human representation* to be sure but by way of this wicked promotion of not only arguably formless (i.e. uncontainable) but moreover abominable entities the formless was rendered also incompatible with Strzygowski et al, since the Sinnbild’s sliding towards abjectness and baseness was precisely what was to be averted at all costs. Which is not to say that these negative associations of non-semblance, of a kind of formlessness, were left unconsidered; it was indeed acknowledged that the Sinnbild possibly may be received as:

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<sup>262</sup> Strzygowksy, 1936, p.98. (Transl. by the author).

<sup>263</sup> “L’Informe”, *Documents* 17, 1929. In Bataille, 1985, p. 31

[...] Something indecipherable and therefore something uncanny [unheimlich] to that [rationalist-scientific] mindset.<sup>264</sup>

Importantly however, the function of the Sinnbild would not settle for an alleged obscure “indecipherability”, i.e. as passive entity, unclassifiable maybe, yet ultimately insignificant vis-à-vis enlightened reason and high art. Rather, the aim was for the Sinnbild to assume defiant agency or value precisely via a quintessentially Batailleian modus operandi, which, with regard to formlessness, meant “it is [was] not an adjective having such and such a meaning but a term serving to declass.”<sup>265</sup> The target of such declassing, of destabilization by way of the contestations leveled by formlessness against ideality, so-called objective science/materialism etc. would resonate with the proactive, aggressive function ascribed to the Sinnbild:

The Sinnbild is the eternal contrary versus the attempt to force life into a definitive form, which we commonly call dogma<sup>266</sup>

From this perspective, it seemed genuine for völkisch-fascist cultural theory to make the confident assertion that “*Germanien* is living protest”, which was also in

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<sup>264</sup> “Der Kampf um die deutsche Seele”, *Germanien* 1936 p. 68, unauthored.

<sup>265</sup> Bataille, 1985, p. 31

<sup>266</sup> “Das Sinnbild aber ist das ewige Widerspiel gegen den Versuch, das Leben in eine begriffsbestimmte Form zu zwingen, die wir gemeiniglich Dogma nennen. , “Der Kampf um die deutsche Seele”, *Germanien* 1936 p. 68,

keeping with the aspired to mandate for an unmediated non-bookishness in both politics and aesthetics (that, for all its insurgent noise, in this particular constellation can safely be called reactionary though).

It was, further, a protest, which in the case of a publishing project demanding such a high task of itself meant the presentation of thoughts in tandem with specific visual material that together were to thwart materialist science and normative aesthetics. In this regard formlessness, according to Bataille – and herein much like the conception of the Sinnbild – posed a perpetual affront to “academic men”, since for:

[...] them to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat.<sup>267</sup>

And the Sinnbild accordingly should pose no less such an affront or obstacle to these “academic men” for:

[...] It belongs to the very nature of the Sinnbild that it cannot be grasped and comprehended through the intellectual means of ‘exact sciences’ – all of which are modeled on the ideal [Vorbild] of the ‘exact sciences’, that is the mathematical natural sciences.<sup>268</sup>

While categorically disinclined to allegory and metaphor, not unlike Bataille’s own probing of these, especially by way of the entries to the Critical Dictionary,

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<sup>267</sup> Bataille, 1986, p. 31

<sup>268</sup> Viergutz, *Germanien* 1936, p.130

*Germanien's* persistent renunciation of modernity's rationalizing processes – wielded against it by way of the written word as it was – nevertheless occasionally required resorting to metaphor in order to drive home its point:

Thus not everything can be caught in the nets of terms!<sup>269</sup>

The metaphorical intimation at immaterial reason, i.e., ideality and rationality as tangible and moreover strapping structures represented by everyday things such as said “net” pops up frequently in *Documents* (in the aforementioned “frock coat”, for example). For this as yet still civilized, academic frock coat, literally hemming in matter (the body, its flesh), constricting it, Bataille suspected would soon enough corral entire groups of bodies – *everybody* – in the form of an “architectural straitjacket”; yet another metaphor for the perceived rationalization of everyday life that gave rise to respective, ideologically contradictory, critiques thereof.

#### **IV.4 “Sinnbild” and “Formlessness” vs. Allegory and Ornament**

What placed the Sinnbild in further agreement with Formlessness was their mutual contestation of not only a rationalist doctrine, as both expounded in *Documents* and *Germanien*, but essentially of the three formal devices, the three tropes key to a Western canon of (high) art, be it literature, the fine arts or architecture: metaphor, allegory and ornament. This contestation derived from

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid. “Es lässt sich eben nicht alles in den Netzen der Begriffe auffangen!”

the assumption that all these entities could only ever be, or had become, spiritually emptied out, turned into misguided vehicles of identification, either because of power art's exclusive say regarding the message they were to transport, or, as in the case of ornament, because of its perceived fake, *superficial* and thus ineffective collective binding power. Allegory in particular was assailed for purposely instilling certain rules levied by power in the form of social stratification, i.e. for its objective, pursued by formal means, to assign a set place to each and every thing through a mirroring of these power relations. Thus, for Strzygowksi, allegory simply presented "any power-political [machtpolitische] and humanist deception"<sup>270</sup>. Or, as one author writing in *Germanien* put it:

We cannot believe that our ancestor's religious Sinnbilder are poor imitations [Abklatsch] of external events, allegories, 'embodiments' of terms, or in the best-case scenario are derived from the imagination and 'self-delusion' [Selbsttäuschung].<sup>271</sup>

So a völkisch-fascist aesthetic not only renounced the faculty of mediation, but it further claimed the supported aesthetic to be relaying, indeed manifesting genuine values for a social reality. This was so the aspired (anti-)aesthetic ideal would precisely not come across as a "positive extravagance" – one in for example Viergutz' view confined to the realm of the imaginary, or worse, pathological "self-delusion". Just as Bataille did not simply conceive of the diverging aesthetic he endorsed by, say, the gnostic gems as fantastical but

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<sup>270</sup> Strzygowksi, 1940, p.7

<sup>271</sup> Viergutz, *Germanien* 1937, p. 131



precisely as a “base materialism”, (therefore locating its origin in a messy realm of actual, physical phenomena), the Sinnbild was to be “real”. It was therefore also claimed to be that very “veritable anti-thesis”, one in this case directed towards the three tropes mentioned above, trumping – exposing – these through its spiritual depth and ahistorical, timeless quality. Which again, to take up the passage above, meant for this fascist faction to also accept or even embrace the frequently raw aesthetic quality of the Sinnbild if it guaranteed precluding its utilization and incorporation as “Abklatsch” (i.e., allegory viewed as solely mimetic and in this context thus as inauthentic) or as mere “embodiment of terms” (i.e., the transposition of ideas onto objects of the concrete world, which in this reading were made servile to the idea rather than generating it). Bataille’s anti-thesis to allegory and metaphor can be seen to come courtesy of what he approvingly defined as “raw phenomena”, those instances of a non-ideational base materialism of which the formless was the ultimate expression<sup>272</sup>.

Art, “real” art that is, as strived for by this branch of avant-garde thought as well as the branch of fascist aesthetic theory under discussion here, did not need to resort to either of these deflecting figments or superficial décors concealing unmediated visual potency. In other words, the visual was not to be mere – dead – representation perpetuating the status quo; on the contrary, it was

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<sup>272</sup> The term “raw phenomena” is first employed by Bataille within the Critical Dictionary entry “Materialism”, *Documents* I 3, 1929. Allan Stoekl in his introduction to *Visions of Excess* writes that: “Bataille precisely recognizes that the *fall* of the elevated and the noble threatens the coherent theory of allegory itself. This is not to imply that allegory is simply done away with in Bataille – [...] – but rather, that what Bataille works out is a kind of headless allegory, in which the process of signification and reference associated with allegory continues, but leads to the terminal subversion of the pseudostable references that had made allegory and its hierarchies seem possible”. p. xiv. Note in this connection Stoekl’s notion of the “pseudostable” underlying, guaranteeing a hierarchy (in this context here one of, say, “power art”), which aligns with the contestation of allegory’s and metaphor’s claim to “embody” social reality leveled by the *Germanien* quote.

to disrupt this status quo (“state of things”) as either “violent force” (Bataille) or to no less forcefully invigorate as deeper spiritual meaning<sup>273</sup>.

As far as metaphor was concerned Bataille basically sought to deflate this term *ad absurdum*, which was essentially the Critical Dictionary’s foremost ambition, with Bataille suggesting that “[...] to see a dog running” could be “just as much the *run that is dogging*”.<sup>274</sup>

This mischievous stirring up of object-subject relations and, by extension, of signifier and signified as played out within the “Critical Dictionary” did however serve a quite pointed agenda of de-aestheticizing and social de-regulation drawn from that base materialism: on the one hand, from the “raw phenomena” of the human body – “spittle”, a “big toe” etc. – all of which compromised idealized conceptions of a purified body, and from the “raw phenomena” of the social on the other hand, subverting the administered body politic so to speak – “cults”, criminals, rejects – i.e. the subversive subjects of Bataille’s version of Marx’s “Lumpenproletariat”<sup>275</sup>.

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<sup>273</sup> An example of this fascist-völkisch rebuke to allegory as a key trope of especially Renaissance painting is offered by Strzygowski. Discussing Albrecht Dürer’s etching “Melencolia” (1514), traditionally discussed as exemplary for its use of allegory in its coded arrangement of various symbols surrounding a brooding female figure which together may present an allegory of artistic melancholy/depression. Strzygowski writes: “In the Melancholie [sic] Dürer is wholly rooted in place, blood and soil of his Nordic homeland, humanism has no part in it.” “It is all spirit, the intellect has no right to it.” “Dürer’s soul images represent “original Europe” which had a different ethos than present day’s Europe which is aligned with power, wealth and the history of the two.” Strzygowski, 1937, pp. 88, vi (Transl. by the author)

<sup>274</sup> Bataille, “Metaphor”, *Documents I 3*, in Brotchie (ed.), p. 61

<sup>275</sup> “Spittle” (twice by Griaule and Leiris), “Cults”, “Big Toe” (Bataille) are all entries to the Critical Dictionary, “Misfortune” featuring the bizarre character of ‘the murderer Crepin’. In essence all these serve to pervert Bataille’s principal definition of metaphor: “An abstract word is formed by the sublimation of a concrete word”. Ibid. On the notion of the (a)social lumpen and how this category structurally figures in Bataille’s particular idea of democracy see Chapter 7

In Carl Einstein's view, allegory's "soul" – whose concepts he likewise interrogated via an entry in the Critical Dictionary – "[...] is [was] for the most part a museum of meaningless signs". (I.e. to in turn dissect the allegorical tropes at play here, allegory was dead ("museum") while the verdict of it being "meaningless" indeed corresponds with the negative view of allegory as being only "Abklatsch" [a poor imitation]). From this imagined "museum's" collection, Einstein singled out the "Nightingale"<sup>276</sup>, using this example to tear up allegory altogether. Einstein declared the nightingale to be that "eternal prop, star of the lyrical repertory", albeit one in the "repertory of bourgeois diversions" and "among those ideals devoid of meaning". The nightingale employed as allegory was "cheap utopia that obscures misery", "an ornamental motif", its real purpose to "hide the failure and ugliness of man" while committing "a form of assassination because it disposed of the object, robbing it of its literal meaning"<sup>277</sup>. Einstein's attack on allegory is quoted more extensively here in order to convey how his linguistic incrimination of allegory ("assassination", "robbing"), that had turned it into the "ornamental motif" devoid of veracity or progressive faculty, reverberates not only with the rebuff to allegory as echoed by Bataille and informing the writing in *Germanien*. This strong wording further invokes the no less fierce language used by architect Adolf Loos in his famous incrimination of ornament from some twenty years earlier, his *Ornament and Crime* (Ornament und Verbrechen) (1908). Loos' tirade however concerned the built environment and, shall we say, industrial design proper. It was due to the

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<sup>276</sup> Which is also the title of this entry discussing allegory.

<sup>277</sup> "Nightingale" *Documents I* 2, 1929. All quotes by Einstein in this passage are from Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 66

course of modernity, including a (positive) process of industrialization at that point in time, that Western man, so Loos stated, “had outgrown ornament”. The rationalizing aspects of modernity to Loos served as the reason and the quasi-evolutionary evidence that “we have fought our way through to freedom of ornament”, which thus had descended for him to a reprehensible emblem marking “the criminal and the degenerate”. In other words ornament was banned to the lowest realm in the guise of its in this case lowest form: as tattoo, marking both the “prisoner” and the no less abominable “degenerate aristocrat”<sup>278</sup>.

This demoted, indeed decayed nature of ornament as illustrated by the tattoo in Loos vis-à-vis a denigration of ornament some twenty years later by völkisch Fascism on the other hand, was at one point taken up by the Munich based physicist and scientific philosopher Hugo Dingler. For Dingler, the obsolescence and decay of ornament was the consequence of “the distortion [Verzerrung] of the spiritual relation towards ornament”<sup>279</sup>. Ornament, and especially the process of ornamentation, that is the application of specific signs onto surfaces, be they artefacts, architecture or indeed the body, in the form of the tattoo, was (correctly) assumed by him to present a symbolically determined act in tribal societies. The various motifs circulating within a tribe were not interchangeable and randomly applied but visual expressions of specific value relations of a reality system as yet undivided by dualistic Cartesian thought (*res cogitans/res*

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<sup>278</sup> These two outcast figures in a way perfectly merged in the character of the Marquis de Sade, whose writing was so influential to Bataille. Adolf Loos, *Ornament und Verbrechen*, Vienna 1908. English translation online at [http://www.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary\\_SL/177/pdfs/Loos.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~art/Temporary_SL/177/pdfs/Loos.pdf). Retrieved September, 12th, 2011

<sup>279</sup> Hugo Dingler, “Wege und Grundlagen der Sinnbildforschung”, *Germanien* Heft 3, 1936, pp. 36-40, Heft 4, 1936, pp. 69-76. All quotes by Dingler are from this article. Transl. by the author.

*extensa*). By, again, the questionable practice of transposing ethnological research of the time regarding primitive cultures onto far less conceivable pre-historic society generally, Dingler considered it “improbable that early Man would have arbitrarily covered surface with ornaments that had no inner relation to the respective object they covered”<sup>280</sup>. In other words, ornamentation was precisely *not* decoration, that latter mode again being exactly what turned ornament into “crime” for Loos, but the result of a religious act and corresponding symbol system that was hermetic and set. Therefore, ornament originally could not be aligned with concepts of (commercial) utilization or aestheticization since ornamentation belonged to that strictly magic and later religious function of art that Einstein had already accorded to the primitive artwork in his previously drawn upon “Negerplastik” (1915). In this text he maintained, that “the art of the Negro [i.e. primitive art] is determined above all by religion”. Therefore it “possesses an unequivocal definition” whose “formal reasons” derived exclusively from its religious function too, which was not open to the “formal or emotional interpretation the European artwork was subjected to”. Rather, the primitive artwork *was* “[...] god, who preserves his hermetic mythical reality, into which he draws the worshipper, transforming him, too, into a mythic being and dissolving [aufheben] his human existence”<sup>281</sup>, which basically corresponded with the assessment of the prehistoric work of art in *Das*

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Einstein, 1915, translation by Sebastian Zeidler/Charles Haxthausen in *October* 107, 2004, pp. 130-131. Note that Einstein speaks of the primitive artwork’s “[...] exhaustive, total, and unfragmented space that must be given and guaranteed. Here the isolation of the space does not amount to abstraction but is rather unmediated sensation.”, p. 129. This, it seems, would be the ideal case scenario of Sinnbild creation and reception.

*Bild*, according to which “the pre-historic art object attained its highest expressive value as a cultic device [Kultgerät]”<sup>282</sup>. (This overriding endeavor on the side of völkisch-fascist art theory to steer art back towards regaining its lost cultic function preceding both (Christian) religious “use-value” and exchange-value through commodification, was of course in the former’s case spurred on by political considerations, since if successful, it would generate a dynamic between the collective group and its cultural heritage to produce a worldview based on the questionable values ascribed to the Sinnbild. Not dissimilar at all to aspirations of Bataille and Caillois at the time of the Collège, albeit without a nationalist component in the latter case<sup>283</sup>)

In this connection it further seems more than plausible that Einstein’s notion of “interpretation” [Deutung] as being absent from the reception (or rather experience, since reception presupposes reflexivity) of the primitive artwork certainly would have appealed to völkisch-fascist art theory in that the Sinnbild equally was conceived as being *beyond interpretation*. The very act of interpretation was framed by fascist art theory to be an intellectual investment

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<sup>282</sup> Dr. W. Schleiermacher, “Das vorgeschichtliche Kunstwerk”, in *Das Bild*, 1934, p. 6

<sup>283</sup> Caillois certainly openly indulged the idea that a chosen, (physically, spiritually) strong (male) minority could and should claim leadership, (precisely due to the inferiority of the masses, both physically but more importantly intellectually), complete with all kinds of barbaric debauchery on the side, serving, well, not the greater good but history’s greatest; See his “Brotherhoods, Orders, Secret Societies, Churches” as well as “The Winter Wind”, in Hollier (ed.), 1988, Hollier: “Caillois obviously aspires, by banding together the intellectual ivory towers in this manner, to build a wall of fortifications [...] a feudal system whose center would no longer be the pope or the emperor, but the sages of the College of Sociology. An ideal strangely similar to an active reality on the other side of the Rhine.[...] fascist adventurers [...]”, p. 372. The again, this has nothing fascistic about it all necessarily (in the Nazi/historical sense), but on the contrary makes Caillois *the* prescient “sociologist” dispensing utterly contemporary teleology pursued by City Boys vying for global plutocratic 1%-rule. (See Cronenberg’s *Cosmopolis* (2012) for a (one of many) pop-cultural adaptation.)

unnecessary to – interfering with – its spiritually binding faculty as well as its force as symbolic immediateness [Unmittelbarkeit], thought of as:

[...] An implicitness [Selbstverständlichkeit] beyond all reflection, because the conferring of meaning [Sinnggebung] merges into the Sinnbild, not into philosophical deduction, not into parchment and papery dogma. And thus its life as Sinnbild is eternal.<sup>284</sup>

Interpretation, then, defined as being borne of cognitive reception and subsequent analysis always necessitated a multi-step process, “a psychological process” as Dingler called it, during which the beholder of the sign or symbol contained in the artifact had to match the “schema” (conveyed for example by a heavily abstracted Sinnbild (such as a rune)) with a corresponding “active image” [Vorstellungsbild, lebendiges Bild]. In other words, in order to *unlearn* interpretation, here thought of as an inferior form of perception, one had to first learn or practice it until it would no longer present an intellectual task but a quasi-sensory, natural reaction. Repeating the process of this associative cognition between “schema” and “life/active image” would allow the beholder to gradually arrive at a “fusion [Verschmelzung] of schema and the imagined”, a fusion and a process, again herein in accordance with Einstein’s theory of primitive art, that was always already a given for the primitive beholder; not so much a beholder really since he/she was dissolved “aufgehoben” into the artifact,

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<sup>284</sup> “Vom Kampf um die deutsche Seele” [On the struggle over the German soul], unauthored text in *Germanien*, 1934, p. 68. Note that the notion of “papery dogma” is not dissimilar to Bataille’s notion of “society’s dead letter” in his “Base Materialism and Gnosticism”. Also see chapter 2 f22.

presumably facilitated by a ritualistic scenario of trance, invocation, no doubt induced through intoxication – *Berauschung* – by drugs etc.<sup>285</sup>

That, which we have here presented as separate moments of a psychological process, is for the primitive a whole and genuine experience of oneness [Einheitserlebnis] without psychological and critical splitting.<sup>286</sup>

The sacred function of ornament that up until then thus did not allow for a superficiality chiefly providing visual stimulation was according to Dingler severely corrupted by two historical developments that occurred more or less side-by-side. The first was the increasing interest and vogue for exotic and primitive cultures, reflected in the rise of ethnographic collections and museums displaying the colonies' artefacts now turned fantastic trophies. The appropriation by both the arts and, shortly following, commerce and their incorporation of the formal novelties introduced by these symbols and motifs, this "Verwertung" [exploitation], a "senseless collecting and imitating" of – and the "purely playful relation" towards – ornament is what led to this "distortion",

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<sup>285</sup> Perhaps not surprisingly, the swastika was chosen as the leading Sinnbild; it managed to achieve this "fusion" most effectively, curiously, or ironically, because or in spite of its wholly anti-figurative nature being pure "schema" to employ Dingler, whose "active / life image" would basically fulfill what Benjamin had called fascism's "*aesthetization of politics*". (1936) "The swastika contains everything while not articulating anything". Otto Wacker, "Geisteshaltung und Stil", *Das Bild*, 1934, p.12

<sup>286</sup> Dingler, *Germanien*, 1936, p. 38 And furthermore this return to a pre-split, holistic state of experience frequently appears in *Germanien* usually ascribed as a characteristic to not any primitive but the superior primitive of the Teuton. "It never occurred to the Teuton to record and assess philosophically what to him was a natural, spiritual expression of everyday life. He had never known a principal separation between interior and exterior life." Ibid. p68. (Cf. Bataille on the Gauls from Chapter I: "Everything that can make disciplined people aware of values and official organization (architecture, statue law, secular science and the literature of lettered peoples) remained outside the consciousness of the Gauls who calculated nothing, conceiving of no progress and giving free rein to immediate suggestions and violent sentiment.")



(this line of argument basically aligning with Krauss' notions of "Black Deco" and "Soft Primitivism" already mentioned.<sup>287</sup>) Dingler, therefore, similar to Loos, cast this "Verwertung" as a, if not outright crime, certainly nothing less than profanity. To recall, over at *Documents* Michel Leiris seemed to have been in basic agreement with this verdict, asserting that it was an "infinitely deadlier insult" of Westerners to "transform a mask or a statue – originally made for complicated and precise ritual purposes – into a vulgar art object"<sup>288</sup>.

The second process Dingler diagnosed to be responsible for said "distortion" were the structural changes inherent to modernity itself, specifically by way of the rise of mass media which naturally entailed the ease of an indiscriminating reproducibility and dissemination of previously unique of works of art and meaning-laden symbols of any kind, including those never intended for boundless multiplication and circulation. This "thousand fold reproduction by mass industry" as Dingler wrote in 1936, together with this meaningless, "arbitrary" [willkürlich] "exploitation of signs" [Zeichenverwertung] led first to a loss of their magical faculties and from there onwards to a gradual decline of what he called their " 'symbolic aura' ", imagined as the leftover spell of these sacred or at least specific symbolic relations of select objects and motifs for a collective group. While particular artefacts and their respective ornamentation over the course of history saw their magic and religious function gradually diminished, they nevertheless continued

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<sup>287</sup> While precisely this "soft primitivism" was equally what was ridiculed by Einstein to be a desperate search for formal innovation by the contemporary artist: "Hilflos negert der Unoriginelle". "Afrikansiche Plastik", 1920, p. 5.

<sup>288</sup> 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p. 94

to affect the collective social by way of “tradition”, which guaranteed the continued relevance of ornamentation and ornamented object by way of this “symbolic aura”, acting as a kind of socially uniting aesthetic nucleus (also called “Gefühlsaura” by him, “affect aura”).

As Dingler stated: “Tradition could only be sacred [geheiligt] if it stemmed from a truly meaningful effect of ornament”. In tradition, the former magic and religious function of ornament and cultic object managed to live on, by retaining a residual, irreproducible “aura”. For this aura of a symbolic system to continue to exert its powers in the future it would equally need to “have collective meaning”, since an “arbitrary choosing of signs would only have meaning for an individual”. By which Dingler presumably meant the forsaking of collective aura for the fancies and idiosyncrasies of the rationalist modern ego – perhaps no better personified than by that culture-vulture, the avant-garde artist.

If Dingler’s line of argument, not least his particular terminology sounds strangely familiar, it is because it resounds with an incomparably more eminent text that saw its publication that very same year, Walter Benjamin’s interminably quoted and drawn upon “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” (1936).



## **V Transforming Decay: Benjamin's Barbarism**

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The trajectory sketched by Benjamin in this text was – perhaps unsurprisingly – much more expansive in scope, than Dingler's somewhat narrow, ultimately reactionary grasp of the cultural consequences following his own critique of what one may, for titular parity's sake, call: "The spiritual symbol in the age of its thousand fold reproducibility". Leaving aside their differing consequences drawn for a collective – *popular* – culture to come (Benjamin seeing film as a promising art form that, in the right hands, could potentially advance a new society positively parting with the historical burden of "tradition"; Dingler endorsing a "new" Sinnbild aesthetic as a binding force to resume "tradition" serving a national-socialist collective) their coinciding discussion of the concept of "aura" and their shared diagnosis of its "decay" [Verfall] begs a closer examination. What exactly was it that Benjamin considered auratic in work of art and how did this quality vanish through image technology and mass culture? Why and how should or could it be reinstated in forms of cultural production other than the conventional fine arts proper (importantly here including the avant-garde) as a way out of this decay or crisis, thereby conceiving of crisis not as a dead-end but as a stepping-stone for socio-cultural renewal?

Benjamin defined the traditional work of art, its sphere of influence, as being "the original of the here and now", which were the spatio-temporal criteria confirming its "authenticity".

The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating

to it.<sup>289</sup>

“Authentic” “duration [...] testimony [and] [...] history” were essentially the processes through which tradition manifested itself for any given society, or at least for those that engaged in this proliferation, be it through written chronicles or orally through in-situ storytelling or, say, through the sustained performance of certain rites and the like (the latter especially prized by regressive positions such as Dingle’s and by Bataille’s enthusiasm for rediscovering ritual for society.)

Aura and tradition, interdependent as they were in the original work of art, were therefore equally affected by “technological reproducibility” which, according to Benjamin, drastically impaired that quality of the “original of the here and now”, by rendering these very criteria commonplace:

One might focus these aspects of the artwork in the concept of aura and go on to say: what withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter’s aura. This process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond beyond the realm of art. *It might be stated as general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object form the sphere of tradition.*<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> Jennings/Doherty/Levin (eds.), 2008, pp.21-22. In order to cohere to the argument made here – that of concomitant debates about originary aura and its decay – all quotes are from the second version of the artwork essay which served the slightly edited French translation by Klossowski published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1936. The German version can be found in *Gesammelte Schriften VII.1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann/Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a.M., 1989, pp. 350-384.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., p. 22

Furthermore, the following “shattering of tradition” by, roughly speaking, modernity, led to the “liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage”<sup>291</sup>. Importantly though, this “shattering”, here again specifically that of the artwork’s socially auratic function, did not suddenly occur overnight with the onset of photography and mass print media (Adorno’s “Illustrierten-Kultur”), but actually went much further back in the context of the Western social vis-à-vis its art. Not unlike the critiques leveled against Western art history or rather its canon as already discussed in the previous chapters, Benjamin sketched a historical arc of the artwork passing through three ontological stages, of which its final stage evokes the negative notion of superior yet hollow and increasingly non-relatable “power art”, devoid of meaningful social function other than that of perpetuating aesthetic and political dominance.

As we know, the earliest artworks originated in the service rituals – first magical, then religious. [...] In other words: *the unique value of the “authentic” work of art has its basis in ritual* [...the location of its original use value; third version].<sup>292</sup>

Benjamin went on to state that:

[...] This ritualistic basis, however mediated it may be, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty. The secular worship of beauty, which developed during the Renaissance and prevailed for three centuries, clearly displayed that ritualistic basis in its

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid. Cf Dingler, who further introduced the notion of the sacred character of aura as imparted by the specific symbol/image: “Tradition could only be sacred if it had originally emerged from a meaningful affect of the ornament”.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, p.24

subsequent decline and in the first severe crisis which befell it.<sup>293</sup>

So, according to Benjamin too, art since the Renaissance had lost its social relevance as transmitted by an auratic sphere through which the community spiritually and meaningfully engaged with the work of art, by actually relating to the values or expressions it offered. The artwork - or better, its values as exerted through a social protocol - had become “profane”, its foremost concern being to oblige and in turn decree a dictate of ideational beauty which it imposed onto the audience, which could either identify with it in a stratified, hierarchical manner, striving to resemble its ideal creations while fully accepting the status-quo, or be barred from participation from the very outset due to one’s class (not to mention one’s race etc.). Participating in this “cult of beauty” thus entailed submissiveness on the part of the beholder-cum-devotee-cum-servant, and here it seems apposite to point out that Benjamin did not employ the notion of “cult” in the original German text but that of “service”<sup>294</sup> – “Schönheitsdienst”. This “service to beauty” – as opposed to a “cult/worship of” it – thus underscores the almost bureaucratic act of serving as opposed to the more properly cultic act of ritualistic immersion<sup>295</sup>. “Schönheitsdienst”, the chief aesthetic realm of the

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid. p.24 Cf Dingler, who basically also located this ontological shift affecting the reception of the symbol: “Only at a later stage when the symbolic character becomes distorted or forgotten, is it that the symbolic figuration transitions into the ornamental, which is even then still tied to tradition and still carries with it a symbolic sensorial/spiritual aura [Gefühlsaura].” As shown before, this is the last stage of the “symbolic aura” (Dingler) before its final demise by way of “mass industry [and] thousand-fold reproduction”.

<sup>294</sup> In the 2008 English translation used here both “cult” and “worship” are used, the latter being more accurate yet still missing the wholly secular-servile dimension of “Dienst”.

<sup>295</sup> Schönheitsdienst does of course continue to contain a religious dimension, i.e. a variant of the “(church) service”, translated here as “worship” – “Gottesdienst”.

Western social since the Renaissance, meant serving a prescribed ideal, first as part of the choreographed protocol of the court, then as part of an ambitious bourgeoisie that engaged art to advance its social mobility and acceptability (by that simultaneously despised yet aspiringly emulated aristocracy) that would yield the principal faculty of “good”/bourgeois taste (taste unsurprisingly therefore as much dismissed by fascist art theory as by the avant-garde.<sup>296</sup>)

It was due to that historical trajectory of art – a gradual waning of its affective-identificatory binding power – that Benjamin foresaw the cinema becoming the new model of meaningful, affective aesthetic production – as much as experience and indeed participation. The cinema as a virgin inter-relational aesthetic realm of investment could potentially recoup the magic and religious aspects that art had long ago forfeited. Benjamin’s attitude towards art’s efficacy regarding its capabilities to reclaim this kind of immersive investment was at the time of the essay’s writing a pessimistic one: he speaks of 19<sup>th</sup> century “l’art pour l’art”’s “theology”, “a ‘pure’ art which rejects not only any social function of art but any definition in terms of representational content”, for Benjamin proof of

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<sup>296</sup> And explicitly by Bataille according to Didi-Huberman who writes:

“The childlike frights and tantrums evoked by Bataille are always concerned with decomposing *taste* [Geschmack], that contrived reconciliation with the world of ‘concrete forms’ “ 2010, p.249. (Transl. by the author).

One example of the devaluation of taste in fascist art theory can be found in a text entitled “Geisteshaltung und Stil” [Spiritual Conviction and Style] by a Dr. Otto Wacker. Discussing the human urge to create art to convey/contain an individuals or moreover a people’s principles and desires Wacker writes: “The measure they [those disconnected from their cultural heritage or “whose soul is confused”] employ towards orientation has become an utterly fleeting and flat one: taste. Taste is the gauge for those who cannot conceive a world of their own. Taste will never create anything of destiny [schicksalsvoll] only once in a while it will be lucky to pick the right thing, just like the blind hen. Taste confuses the symbol with allegory.” Wacker actually also offers a perfect description of the swastika as the epitome of all Sinnbilder: “The swastika contains everything while not articulating anything [i.e. as opposed to *wordy* allegory]. It is a symbol of the inner world of today’s German, a symbol of his aim, expression of his will, sign of his worth”. *Das Bild* 1934 p.12 . This succinct definition of the Sinnbild here would seem to rest on attributes akin to those of the high Modernist work of art: its immanence, its autonomous potency attained precisely by omitting representation i.e. articulation, which importantly is of course derived not from völkisch “metaphysics” but from a transcendental formalism.



this theology having turned into a “negative theology”<sup>297</sup>. Benjamin did not identify a particular style or movement of this “‘pure’ art”, yet one may presume it would be the works of, say, De Stijl; certain Bauhaus art perhaps in the vein of Josef Albers; Suprematism as advanced by Kazimir Malevich who of course celebrated a “world as Non-Objectivity” and thus would have gladly underwritten that rejection of “representational content” that Benjamin held responsible for modern art’s continual removal from the masses, whether intentional or unconscious. More to the point, Malevich’s celebration of his notion of a “Freed Nothing” [Das befreite Nichts] – the key aesthetic denomination of a Suprematist work like his “Black Square” (1915) – in fact represents just that “negative theology” Benjamin faulted “pure art” for, not least confirmed by Malevich’s religious tone as he made his case for Suprematism in *The World as Non-Objectivity* (1926)<sup>298</sup>.

Another example of the avant-garde’s contribution to – or mirroring of – “decay”, less in terms of purity but certainly in terms of an object-subject destabilization, came in the guise of the work of Picasso. The latter, so Benjamin claimed, elicited an “extremely backward [most reactionary/third version]

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<sup>297</sup> Benjamin, in Jennings et al. (eds.), 2008, p. 24

<sup>298</sup> Kazimir Malevich, *Die Gegenstandslose Welt*, Cologne, 1962 [Munich, 1926]. Malevich’s exhaustive manifesto is actually strikingly revealing (of the intellectual-artistic currents of the 1920s) in that it explicitly contains various key strands under discussion here: A critique of Western materialism and reason; a critique of art as a historically ideological and representational vehicle of secular and clerical power interests; a critique of art’s pandering to idealism. The consequences thereof, of which he lists many, as regards Benjamin’s “negative theology”, are of course just the ones commended by Malevich: “The new, abstract art is received as a threat because it demonstrates the decay [Verfall!] of the subject and the object. So is Suprematism as it displays the non-objectivity [Gegenstandslosigkeit].” All of these “threats” are for Malevich the “liberation [from subjective/indoctrinated experience] by way of the Freed Nothing”, p. 46

attitude”<sup>299</sup> by the “masses”, i.e. their aesthetically derived reception and (non)investment, whereas the on-screen contortions and buffoonery of a Charlie Chaplin made for a “highly progressive reaction”. Chaplin, not Picasso, generated that non-plus-ultra “immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure – pleasure in seeing and experiencing”<sup>300</sup> which importantly came courtesy not of the artistic *experimentation* with color, light, space, movement – modern(ist) vision – of the avant-garde, but of the life-like to larger-than-life spectacle of *lights, camera, action*.

Benjamin herein painted a conflictual scenario of a kind of antipodal synchronicity: Modern art, by way of advancing abstraction, by the relentless dissolution and fragmentation of both subject and object, and thus of identification both spatially and temporally, had advanced in tandem with media technology’s continual, ever more refined capabilities of a realistic, *complete* representation, one by which the crowd/collective increasingly beheld itself and – more significantly – saw itself affirmed of its (meaningful, exciting) existence and vitality. (Again, this scenario would correspond with Bataille’s assertion regarding the popular rejection of modern art, enraging the “masses”, “as if the very bases of [their] existence had been brought into question”). This phenomenon of being beheld ranged from a banal sense of inclusion by being photographically captured, *featured* even perhaps on a newsreel, to the potential promise of temporary rise to fame as a celebrity or of political agency as a street

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<sup>299</sup> Cf Bataille in the “Academic Horse” (1929) where this “backward attitude” (i.e., rejection, non-intelligibility) is contained in the statement: “There is no reason to forget [...] that this recent negation [modern art] has provoked the most violent rage, as if the very bases of existence had been brought into question”.

<sup>300</sup> Benjamin in Jennings et al (eds.), 2008, p. 36

protester turned photogenic rebel... Which is to say “to *matter*”, both in the sense of an action and as a being, at a moment when the avant-garde in turn continued its splintering of matter. This antipodal synchronicity, was summed up by Benjamin by the following dynamic:

The more reduced the social impact of an art form, the more widely [sharper/ third version] criticism and enjoyment of it diverge in the public.<sup>301</sup>

“The *shattering* of tradition”, already aggressively exercised by the avant-garde since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, for Benjamin found its synaesthetic highpoint in the notion of shock, or in Benjamin’s Francophonic preference, of “chock”. (Which, in view of shock’s nature as a emotional-visceral impact, corresponded to Bataille’s predilection for an equally visceral vocabulary of “frenzy”, “agitation”, “violence” and so forth, all of which were, to his mind, decidedly desirable states). Importantly, “shock” in Bataille is explicitly tied to the “heterogeneous”, which in turn, for him, was Nazi fascism’s affective kernel<sup>302</sup>. The prospects for tradition

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> “*Heterogeneous* reality is that of a force or shock. It presents itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to another in a more or less abstract fashion, almost as if the change were taking place not in the world of objects but only in the judgments of the subject”. 1985, p.143. It thus appears that Bataille in essence here précised the phantasmagoric investment accorded to the Sinnbild, the inferior and/or “uncanny” artifacts sublimated by völkisch fascism (In relation to Benjamin’s notion of shock as first informing the aesthetic-moral features of an avant-garde registering as decay – as “barbarisms” – the *heterogeneous* equally corresponds thereto. The *heterogeneous* not only deviates from – negates – normative aesthetics but more importantly, at least in the 1930s, it offends social values/norms, denies mass identification, cannot be integrated into a utilitarian (homogenous) reality. As far as mass culture is concerned, the realm Benjamin identified to productively accommodate shock – the *heterogeneous* – to “put it to work” so to speak, i.e. generating value *and* mass investment, Bataille early on perceived that the *heterogeneous* becomes successfully homogenized by mass culture. Again, this argument can be directly delineated from Bataille’s definition of “social *homogeneity*”, “the sciences and technologies”, the way these two entities “establish relations of identity between the different elements of an elaborated and measurable world”. 1985, p.160 f3.

and cultural heritage, however glum, was actually “the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity”<sup>303</sup>, which also meant that the “shattering” was and could be proactively artistically reflected, exploited really by “chock” as a method. Shock here, structurally speaking, equaled barbarization, in that for Benjamin, shock was essential to Dada’s nothing but a last, unintelligible (hence barbaric) roar; that of an avant-garde demonstrating its inaptitude – by flaunting it *as* negation – towards the aesthetic and social features of a mass media suffused environment – and an arguably invested mass, willingly soaking it up. Dadaist and other avant-garde aspirations to capture and relay the sensations of modern experience were “wanting attempts” [mangelhafte Versuche] according to Benjamin<sup>304</sup>. Dada, in Benjamin’s narrative fully aware of this inaptitude, treated its art historical heritage as well as its talents sado-masochistically, through literal material destruction and degradation, through combative yet at the same time non-communicative performance of its outright societal impotence. In Benjamin’s reading, Dada’s employment of shock, its desire to shock/to be (a)socially shocking, was stuck in being “wrapped” as a “*moral shock effect*” only film first “*freed [...] [it] from this wrapping*”<sup>305</sup>, by drowning this moral affect with the persuasive sensory cinematic experience, turning it into a spectacle, so that even when disturbing as shock it would cause excitation in the audience (and thus be made available to consumption). Benjamin’s assessment of Dada, in 1936, as basically (re)presenting the avant-garde’s shortcomings vis-

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<sup>303</sup> Benjamin, in Jennings et al (eds.), 2008, p.22

<sup>304</sup> Third version, f29.

<sup>305</sup> Benjamin, in Jennings et al (eds.), 2008, p.39

à-vis nascent popular culture by embodying defect is understandable given that there was no longer much Dada to speak of at that point, its gradual dissolution having begun some years earlier. For Benjamin, this was presumably further proof of his thesis, a thesis that importantly, and famously, took note of German fascism's early realization of the unifying and mesmerizing faculties of the moving image, which it therefore effectively employed through the filmic, dynamic, representation of the Volk's wholeness; all the while simultaneously disposing of artistic movements like Dada. While Benjamin's particular reading of Dada – as an example of an avant-garde movement intentionally or desperately cut off from culture's overall development due to technological change – may in itself be subject to debate<sup>306</sup>, the way in which he employs barbarization begs closer examination here, in that it connects to Bataille's conjecture regarding the barbaric in *Documents* (from which however completely different consequences were drawn as regards their respectively aspired aesthetics).

The history of every art form has critical periods in which the particular form strains after effects which can easily achieved only with a changed technical standard – that is to say, in a new art form. The excesses [extravagances/third

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<sup>306</sup> Starting with the very fact that various artists associated with Dada and Surrealism did certainly engage with film, and in the case of Buñuel's infamous scene of the slit cow's eye in "Un Chien Andalou" (1929, with Salvador Dali), certainly deployed shock via the possibilities offered by this medium, i.e. the illusion of a woman's eye being slit "for real", achieved through montage. Other examples would be Man Ray's experimental films and Marcel Duchamp's use of filmic projection in his "Anemic Cinema" (1926), the medium here used to explore perception and abstraction coupled with quasi-narrative fragments by way of handwritten puns. Given the emphasis Duchamp's work puts on irony and word play for him to call his artistic deployment of film "anemic" could just as much aim at framing the spectacle of "the pictures" as anemic – as a kind of proto-structuralist film work that puts the onus on satire rather than on medium specificity.

version] and crudities of art which thus result, particularly in periods of so-called decadence, actually emerge from the core of its richest historical energies. In recent years, Dadaism has amused itself with such barbarisms [such barbarisms were abundant [gestrotzt] in Dadaism/third version].<sup>307</sup>

Barbarisms in art for Benjamin at this point in history, as the key characteristics of any avant-garde operating in response to socio-political tension, reveal themselves as “excesses [extravagances] and crudities”, thus in dialogue with the excessive “positive extravagance” Bataille had credited the Gauls’ artistic output with; the latter, to recall, deliberately “everywhere taking a first schematic interpretation to its most absurd consequences”, through “violent and horrible images” of “aggressive ugliness”. All of which are aesthetic considerations that correspond to those Benjamin identified in the work of Dada: the intentional “degradation of their material”, the “obscene expressions” consisting of “linguistic refuse” as well as the incorporation of urban detritus such as “buttons and train tickets”. Finally, there is the foreboding ending of Bataille’s “Academic Horse” essay, wherein he surmises that “alterations of plastic forms often represent the principal symptom of great reversals” – of a “necessity for change”<sup>308</sup>. It is this interrelation of the barbarization of form as symptomatic of a strained environment that is congruous with Benjamin’s linking together of the formal deviances carried out by the avant-garde, these very forms’ breakdown

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<sup>307</sup> Benjamin, in Jennings et al (eds.), 2008, p.38

<sup>308</sup> Baker/Ades, 2006, p.239

registering as symptoms of wider social and political shifts. “Barbarism”<sup>309</sup>, around the mid 1930s, was thus framed by Benjamin as a compulsory feature of artistic production, borne of necessity, a kind of autoimmune function signaling its “decay”. The 1936 artwork essay was not the first introduction of this notion of the barbaric but it was here that Benjamin used it to convey the avant-garde’s demise – “rich energies” give or take –, which ultimately only heralded the superiority of that “new art form” (the cinema, and by extension mass culture).

This had not always been the case. Roughly three years earlier the barbaric – in the context of cultural production – could still register as a “positive barbarity”. As the welcome flipside of decay where the avant-garde – not the cinema representing mass culture – still loomed large as the prime catalyst of radical social and aesthetic renewal to overcome what Benjamin called a “poverty of experience”, which pertained to the title of his 1932 text: “Experience and Poverty”.

## **V.2 Defying cultural fatigue: “Positive Barbarity”**

In “Experience and Poverty” [Erfahrung und Armut, 1933, possibly written in Ibiza] the main topic of discussion, or rather of concern, was not so much the traditional artwork’s exposure to mediatization by image industry. Rather than

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<sup>309</sup> While the term barbarism, understood as a linguistic and grammatical instance, is usually misapplied in the context in which it is discussed here (not so in the English) – which is that of the barbaric/barbarity as a societal, political feature – its meaning as a mutilation of language and images is apt in the context of Dada as employed by Benjamin. The various word-image collages (Höch, Hausmann) just as much as the non-intelligible poetry and performance by say Tzara, Hugo Ball, Emmy Jennings etc. indeed perform linguistic, enunciative and material barbarization.

these media-specific developments, Benjamin here, as was posited by many before him (Simmel etc.), conceived of the crisis of artistic production as one consequence of the aftermath of World War I. Thus technology figured in “Experience and Poverty” before anything else, in the form of the material destruction and atrocities caused by the historically first time fully deployed technological warfare as experienced by veterans. He writes: “An entirely new poverty has come over the people by this tremendous unfolding of technology.”<sup>310</sup> “Poverty” here does not only denote an economic condition (he does speak of “inflation” though, perhaps in the context of the Berlin stock market crash of 1927, if not the 1929 Wall Street crash prefiguring the Great Depression). “Poverty” is moreover a spiritual state Benjamin diagnosed in contemporary German society, one whose capability and ultimately desire for “experience” had been both overwhelmed and subsequently anesthetized by that unsurpassable total experience of war. The consequence for culture, as a sphere thought of compensating for that loss of experience or at least adequately addressing this situation, had at this point in time devastatingly failed both of these expectations. Interestingly enough, with regard to the proclivities, intellectual trends and obsessions discussed in the previous chapters, Benjamin likewise discerned a keen investment by the public in the more fringe or ‘alternative’ directions, manifested for him by the hodge-podge of ideas and practices ranging from ‘astrology’, ‘gnosis’, ‘spiritualism’ all the way to ‘yoga’ (the latter held in high esteem by a later Bataille as an everyday pastime serving

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<sup>310</sup> “Erfahrung und Armut” (1932/33), in *Texte zur Literaturtheorie der Gegenwart*, ed. Dorothee Kimmich et al., Stuttgart, 1996, pp. 122-128. All quotes by Benjamin in this passage from this text. All trans. by the author.



introspection, and, if lucky, receive small doses of ecstasy)<sup>311</sup>. The draw these spheres exerted over their audiences was precisely due to their presentation of an alternative to traditional Western ideas and institutions of investment, which were tellingly here again aligned by Benjamin with the “Renaissance”. This traditional pinnacle of Western thought and arts and its legacy are presented as historically redundant in view of the political and social reality, in that again this legacy is unable to offer genuine “experience”, which is responsible for the kind of escapisms mentioned above. Furthermore, humanism’s ideals as relayed by its arts were devastatingly proven inconsequential given the actual brutalities of war. All of which Benjamin considered to present “a new barbarity”, only to perform a 180 degree turn on this notion in the following sentence, where it is precisely this kind of zero-point of the current state of affairs that offers or rather compels a radical turnaround, leading him to deem it a “positive barbarity”. Positively barbaric for Benjamin meant a radical break with the accrued cultural heritage of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as much as tradition generally, rendered suspect if not obscene in view of its incongruence with present conditions (i.e. a critique in the vein of Adorno’s in the mid 1940s). This radicalism of a “positive barbarity”, now indeed in the sense of the conventional meaning of the barbaric as a destructive act both in terms of materials and ideas, Benjamin accorded to a rather heterogeneous group including Paul Klee, Adolf Loos, Bertolt Brecht, the Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, the science-fiction writer Paul Scheerbart, whose latter scenarios Benjamin lauded for their rebuff to human semblance and their

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<sup>311</sup> “Sehr viel später, im Jahre 1938, führte ein Freund mich in die Yoga-Übung ein. Bei dieser Gelegenheit entdeckte ich, daß die Gewaltsamkeit des Bildes [das Foto der chinesischen Folter/ Exekution] eine bodenlose Bestürzung bewirkte. Diese Gewalt – [...] – erschütterte mich dermaßen, das ich eine Ekstase erlebte.” *Tränen des Eros*, ed. Gerd Bergfleth, Munich 1991, unpaginated.

characters' "dehumanized names" ["entmenschte Namen"]. All these practices were radical to him in that they conceived of forms devoid of tradition, cultural heritage, and especially in the visual arts and literature, of human semblance (i.e. the source of allegedly corrupt or false identification not unlike the probing of immaculate human semblance by Bataille and the rebuke to it by völkisch-fascist aesthetic doctrine). What all these rather diverse practices unified was their uncompromising vision, which in the case of Klee meant the unrelenting, dehumanized laying bare and stripping down, exposing the "inside [Innere] of things" ("like the motor of a car") which was equally reflected in the glass architecture of the Bauhaus, its mandate for transparency, an aggressive transparency, as opposed to now perceived to be sentimental, stuffy, lofty "interiority" [Innerlichkeit]. "That's what makes it barbaric" wrote Benjamin. "Aura" here, even before becoming central in the artwork essay was gladly disposed of, with Benjamin ruminating on the glass architecture of Corbusier and the Bauhaus, as well as the glass worlds imagined by Scheerbart as making aura impossible, an anachronism: "glass" was a "hard and slick material onto which nothing sticks"<sup>312</sup>. In other words, glass served as an allegory for that "positive barbarity" in that it pre-empted tradition, legacy, past narratives all of which were necessary for something like aura to develop. The same was true for the "steel" employed in modernist architecture as well as the Bauhaus' "spaces" generally, "within which it was difficult to leave behind traces". "Positive

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<sup>312</sup> Which of course is quite ironic given that the narcissistic reflection of the postmodern urban "dandy" – regardless of gender – in the gleaming, highly reflective corporate and commercial surfaces very much "sticks". (Also see Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge/Mass. 1996, p. 142: "[...] and indeed, as with pop, it is difficult to imagine superrealism apart from the tangled lines and lurid surfaces of capitalist spectacle: the narcissistic seduction of shop windows, the luscious sheen of sports cars [...]" )

barbarity” derived its value and efficacy, indeed its positivity as something desirable, from apparently not offering experience, in fact being anti-experience and anti-historical, in the form of a harsh bareness mirroring that impoverished experience of social reality. Its various forms did not lend themselves to serving as receptacles for narratives of the past, its cold, hard and transparent surfaces made emotional projection difficult. Benjamin embraced this bare aesthetic of extreme reduction and economy, as it allowed for a kind of fresh start, cleansed of history, culture, its narratives and thus its traumas. “They [the people] have had with ‘culture’ and the ‘human’, they had enough of it and are tired of it”, he writes. By which he not only pointed directly to the cultural fatigue outlined above but furthermore introduced another alternative to rival this promising “positive barbarity” which, importantly, still came courtesy of the avant-garde whether in the form of art, architecture, theatre or literature (i.e. the avant-garde here was still capable of delivering new ways of shared aesthetic investment by said “positive barbarity”, hence certainly a more optimistic prospect than Benjamin’s view of Dada’s “wanting attempts” and its “negation” as failure as discussed in the artwork essay). This other alternative was nothing else but mass culture catering to a tired, psychologically and physically exhausted audience’s desire for non-, or disincorporated experience; it therefore presented a kind of easy-access alternative to “positive barbarity”, in Benjamin’s view no better illustrated than by the shallow, carefree and most importantly gravity-free animated world of Walt Disney, in which figures and objects easily changed shapes, locales and even elements without experiencing any consequences or harm from these quite substantial multi-dimensional transformations. Hence Benjamin hypothesize that a presumably larger contingent of this emotionally

impoverished audience would be aesthetically tended to by the temporary, comforting lightness of Hollywood, of Disney, the “dream” as Benjamin calls it, providing an escape from “sadness” and “despondence”. (Paradoxically enough, even though the genre of trick film was directly tied to advances made in cinematic technology, for Benjamin it was precisely the Disney characters’ – the cartoons - flaunted ease or obliviousness, indeed superiority, towards machines and technology that made the films persuasive as both relaxing and exciting entertainment.) Whence Micky Mouse is a “being full of wonders that not only surpasses the technological ones but further makes fun of these”, by which he presumably meant to say that mass culture as represented by Disney fully obscured, indeed perverted the underlying larger economic conditions from which it operated<sup>313</sup>.

A few years before, Bataille had actually thought quite similarly of Hollywood within *Documents*, calling it “a contemporary site of pilgrimage” providing distraction and “respite”; not exactly amusement though, since Bataille considered Hollywood a “sanctuary for all those whom life has treated as we

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<sup>313</sup> As far as Mickey Mouse is concerned it is worth pointing out the shared antipathy for this “icon” of mass culture by Carl Einstein: “New collective tendencies. The revolt of the petit bourgeois. National Art”. He adds to the typescript by hand, seemingly as an afterthought: “Film Photo Mickey Mouse”. Einstein, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, (1931) quoted in Charles W. Haxthausen: “Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein”, *October* 107, 2004, p.74

commonly treat a piece of cloth.”<sup>314</sup> (And rather than Disney, Bataille addressed the monumentality of the studio system proper, as the article was accompanied by images entitled “Hollywood revue”, production stills picturing a mise-en-scène reminiscent of Busby Berkeley’s lavish choreography and set design.). If Benjamin had linked this compensatory role of the entertainment industry to the desolate status quo, Bataille framed it less in historical-political terms but as a consequence of “a state of absolute depression”, perhaps here implicating himself, as a writer of fiction and non-fiction, falling prey to the distracting/alluring mechanism of Hollywood’s products which he called “*amusements*” and a “tinsel mirage”. (This idea of falling prey to the spectacle offered by Hollywood, and how this potentially deflates or undercuts avant-garde ambitions of conceiving an equally powerful counter-aesthetic towards it, is evoked by Bataille when he writes that “our few remaining heady dreams are traced by the swift bodies of young American girls [...]”.<sup>315</sup>) Furthermore Bataille set up his text by a sentiment or urge “to seize the power to destroy everything and start to

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<sup>314</sup> Bataille: “Lieux de Pelerinage: Hollywood”, *Documents* I 5, 1929, in Ades/Baker, 2006, pp. 74-77. It should be noted that this was precisely the kind of critique Benjamin would not much later contest himself in the final version of the artwork essay: “[...] Some people have launched spirited attacks against precisely this superficial manner [of cinematic experience/consumption]. Among these, Duhamel has expressed himself in the most radical manner. Duhamel calls the movie ‘a pastime for helots, a diversion [Zerstreuung] for uneducated, wretched, worn-out creatures [i.e. Marx’ wretched ones, now being supplied with – sold – temporarily alleviating products by that same industry etc., in Adorno’s view] who are consumed by their worries a spectacle which requires no concentration and presupposes no intelligence, which kindles no light in the heart and awakens no hope other than the ridiculous one of someday becoming a ‘star’ in Los Angeles.’ Clearly this is the same ancient lament that the masses seek distraction [Zerstreuung] whereas art demands concentration from the spectator.” Paragraph XV, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. 4: 1938-1940*, Cambridge/Mass., 2003, pp. 251-283. Note though that in a short text, “Theory of Distraction”, apparently originally content considered for inclusion in the artwork essay, one finds the following statement: “Distraction [Zerstreuung] and destruction [Zerstörung] as the subjective and objective sides, retrospectively, of one and the same process.” Benjamin, 2008, p.56

<sup>315</sup> See Bataille “Human Face”, *Documents* I 4, 1929, in Brotchie (ed.), 1995, p106

build from scratch [...]” which corresponded with Benjamin’s similarly phrased sentiment of wanting “to start from scratch. To start anew, to wipe the slate clean” and to therefore trigger a “positive barbarity”. Benjamin’s call for an aesthetic that is barbaric because bare, stripped down etc. seemingly also corresponds here with Bataille’s base materialism in its emphasis on the “raw phenomena”. Bataille however, at least in this text, betrays a kind of powerlessness vis-à-vis the social force as imparted by Hollywood, precisely because it functions as that contemporary sacred, replacing the religious-mythical site of pilgrimage with the dazzling yet ultimately cheap star(let) as an object of investment, replacing the Goddess and the sacrifices made to her. Herein Hollywood would actually seem to align with Nazi fascism’s provision of the institutions and aesthetics for a sacred, collective investment, as elaborated in Bataille’s “The psychological structure of fascism” from 1934. As such, one could also read Bataille’s conflation of the mythical and sacred with the staged, produced, proliferated and consumed processes of mass culture as basically predicting Benjamin’s artwork essay (within which, to repeat, film (not Hollywood) held socially transformative potential). As far as the “dream” character of mass culture was concerned Bataille, like Benjamin, in a way negates the creative force or import of the imaginary and the dream, both central faculties of Andre Bréton’s concurrent blend of Surrealism with its emphasis on reverie as generating expanded artistic output. On the contrary, as will be discussed in the next chapter, dreams had already been subject to the rational analysis by Freud, as an entity made up of repression and sublimation. This psychoanalytical function of the dream as a compensatory outlet is mirrored in the workings of Hollywood, whose “[...] sole dream [it] is to entertain the rest of

the world” (so states Bataille, literally amalgamating dream with entertainment industry) and not in avant-garde vision, that being one of a base formlessness or of a positive barbarity. The kind of cultural fatigue with which Benjamin’s text opens in his case gives way to a critique of nascent contemporary culture as exemplified by Disney, which in Bataille’s case verges on outright contempt for it (or, as Bernd Mattheus calls it, Bataille’s “cultural pessimism”<sup>316</sup>). The spiritual emptiness [“Entleerung”, Kracauer] observed by both Benjamin and Bataille is furthermore once again shared by reactionary positions of the völkisch-fascist spectrum of the time. The allegory alone in Benjamin’s “Experience and Poverty” of the outmoded, neglected figure of the “storytelling grandfather”, personifying tradition and customs making possible social cohesion that have become ineffective or are severely diminished by modernity, can be found all over the place in proto-fascist writing of the time. The resulting spiritual emptiness, and the erosion of a social bond, as I have already discussed in the first chapter, therefore also informs Herman Wirth’s already mentioned *The Rise of Mankind*. In the introduction Wirth writes:

The occident is caught by a frightening drabness and emptiness by way of its complete mechanization and materialism. <sup>317</sup>

Written in 1928, this gloomy, pessimistic verdict of the state of things reverberated with its contemporaries, not least with the attitudes voiced within *Documents* to recall Michel Leiris’ bemoaning of the “modern occidentals” in

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<sup>316</sup> Mattheus, 1984, p. 148. The term may not be correctly pertaining to Bataille’s critique of Hollywood.

<sup>317</sup> Wirth, 1928, p. 4

“The Magic Island” (1929), their devotion to, or alarming dependency on a “mechanical [i.e. Fordist]” labor process and a strict adherence to a “purely utilitarian notion of civilization.” Yet despite or because of this perceived “drabness” and “emptiness” the quest for a new, trailblazing aesthetic was not the exclusive claim of the avant-garde. It can be detected in fascist art theory of the time, which equally called for a radical break from both a bourgeois-cultural legacy, understood in this case that of a humanist or Western tradition, as well as from the material promises and sensory spectacle offered by mass culture. Aspirations to, or at least consideration for, radical abstraction and the embrace of raw aesthetics that would deny beauty can even be found in these writings: which, however, ultimately led to an expectably problematic ideological rift within fascist aesthetic itself.





## VI Volatile Anti-Aesthetics Left and Right

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### VI.1 A fascist unconscious

Nazi art, conceived as both an aesthetic and crucially a political project, culminating in and effectively illustrated by the “Great German Art Exhibition” held at Munich’s Haus der Kunst in 1937, is habitually associated with a rigid and reactionary homogeneity. The works, as Benjamin Buchloh has pointed out<sup>318</sup>, exhibited resuscitations of already exhausted representations of gender: strong and domineering male protagonists and wholesome, fertile and subservient female auxiliaries set in various imaginary “German” bucolic landscapes. The latter were cobbled together from tropes of German Romanticism watered down in the style of the Sunday painter, thus denying the glum darkness of the genre, in which notions of longing, solitude and disorientation were more or less urgently foregrounded by placing lone figures or small gatherings of individuals in settings of awesome natural beauty in the proper Burkeian sense (i.e. a notion of beauty linked to terror revealing beauty’s sublime faculty). Fascist painting, by contrast, betrays a formal naiveté in the rendering of landscapes and of bodies, which in most of the works bear physiques that, although completely opposite, are nevertheless as eccentric in their synthetic tautness than the frequently unhinged, jarring outlines and features that are signature to German Expressionism. The paintings’ palettes are orientated towards subdued pastels, for the most part eschewing the ocular vividness and the illusion of depth offered

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<sup>318</sup> Buchloh, “Designs and dialectics of annihilation”. Lecture, Haus der Kunst Munich, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Online at [http://www.hausderkunst.de/index.php?id=751&tx\\_ttnews\[tt\\_news\]=2483&cHash=b49a89f52e983fa7fcd87bae3c0a0468](http://www.hausderkunst.de/index.php?id=751&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=2483&cHash=b49a89f52e983fa7fcd87bae3c0a0468)

by fully exploiting the properties of color as a medium. The aspiring and ruling “(petit-)bourgeois aesthetic virtue of mimetic figuration” (Buchloh) shaping the representation of both subject and object is key. Quasi-classless subjects (i.e., subjects “freed” of any attributes/deficits indicating their social standing or economic conditions) are set within quasi-timeless and unresolved sceneries of an anachronistic “golden age”: half “Greco-Roman”, half “Teutonic” (Buchloh) (needless to say with both of these qualities being of a phantasmagoric nature). Even the slightest traces of urbanity and technology are absent, as are ornamentation, geometric patterns and abstraction of any kind; the work thus images the regime’s myth of a near fascist future seemingly unaffected by – indeed blithely unconscious of – modernity (hence of fragmentation of any kind). The Volk gains its power and agency – its *raison d’être* – exclusively from suspect premises of race and geography (i.e., from blood and soil)<sup>319</sup>. It is for these reasons that Buchloh terms the entirety of fascist art as presented in this exhibition a “pornography of promises”. Furthermore, the kind of work making up the bulk of the “Great German Art Exhibition” perfectly exemplifies Strzygowski’s deplored notion of allegory: a deception, fabricated and disseminated by political power, and in this case, an allegory barely qualifying as such since the representations offered here basically collapsed into composite

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<sup>319</sup> Mark Antliff argues this pictorial exclusion of modernity in fascist art not as German avant-gardist refuge but as a kind of proactive landscape to reflect the political ambitions. Nazi art used the countryside “[...] as the focus for the palingetic myth of renewal and sustenance, not for a retreat from twentieth century”. *Avantgarde Fascism*, Durham/NC 2007, p.26. He does not offer the corresponding historical scenario seeking said “retreat”, but most likely he is thinking of groups such as the Blaue Reiter and the Brücke, who each drew on an unpolluted countryside and folk art tropes in their works, rendered importantly through an expressionist style that unfastened mimetic figuration and employing an “expressive”, luminous palette which routinely contradicted the palette of the natural world (i.e. the fantastically hued animals of Marc or the unnatural skin tones of urban subjects in, say, Kirchner’s paintings and so forth.)

yet psychologically one-dimensional archetypes<sup>320</sup>. It was Machtkunst at its best – or worst, considering the exhibition’s efficacy at the level of spectacle and pull, a level at which the “Great German Art Exhibition” was positively bested by the concurrently held “Degenerate Art Exhibition” next door <sup>321</sup>.

The official fascist aesthetics, as briefly outlined above, did not however singularly inform the genesis of a fascist aesthetic project forming in the early 1930s. Rather, it should be considered a gradually and dictatorially instated aesthetic, most obviously and devastatingly against and “at the cost” of the avant-garde, but furthermore departing from the aesthetic and ideological paths pursued by the völkisch-fascist aesthetic project presented in the previous chapters.

In view of the psychological “flatness” or one-dimensionality of the work (as a result of a deferral of history, class and social realities by representing fictitious yet repressed scenarios suspended in a kind of psychological vacuum) it seems necessary to point out that one of the most crucial ideas for the European avant-garde, Freud’s concept of the “unconscious” (1900), was implicitly addressed within *Germanien*. The argument against a Freudian concept

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<sup>320</sup> Note that Carl Jung’s notion of the archetype therefore unsurprisingly lent itself to fascist-völkisch ideological co-optation: “Today it has been proven namely by the studies conducted by C.G. Jung, that the myths bear the expressions of the typical experiences of our race, that they mirror the behaviors typical of our race when dealing with significant turning-points in man’s development”. Viergutz, *Germanien* 1936, p.132

<sup>321</sup> “der besuch der ausstellung haelt nach wie vor ununterbrochen an. taeglich stroemen mindestens ueber 20.000 menschen aus dem in. – und ausland durch die saele und verlassen die ausstellung auf das tiefste beeindruckt von den ungeheuerlichkeiten die dem deutschen volk einst als kunst vorgesetzt wurden. besonders gross ist die besucherzahl der englaender und amerikaner, die zum groessten teil sehr erfreut darueber sind, dass in deutschland endlich einmal mehr der trennungstrich zwischen schund und wahrer kunst gezogen wurde. [...] gesamtbesucherzahl vom 19. juni nnn [sic] juli mit 3.august 384.290. hoechstbesucherzahl, sonntag den 2. august 35.600 . die ausstellungsleitung.” Communique from the exhibition’s curatorial team dated 4.8.1937. BArch R55/20743.1

of the unconscious did not, however, exclusively take the form of an expectable rejection on moralist grounds. Rather, it could be argued that fascist thought, in the manner of the positions taken in that particular völkisch spectrum - exemplified by *Germanien* - was anxious to wrest the unconscious from psychoanalysis (Freud), replacing it with a higher, more pristine “unconscious” that essentially would be innate to the kind of desired affective response to the Sinnbild: an affective process devoid of materialist analysis, of interpretation, of self-reflexivity, but instead figuring as a “natural” sensory experience that would provide a direct link with the ancestral and, by tapping that ancient energy, would yield the energy for a fascist community to come. One such text in *Germanien* thus reads:

The researcher of the Sinnbild [Sinnbildforscher] will be capable of experiencing and re-experiencing Sinnbilder himself [nachzuerleben], and in doing so, given that he can master the material [den Stoff meistern], he can open up new sources of völkisch power [Kraft] to us.<sup>322</sup>

This “mastering of the material” of the already discussed, frequently self-confessed unintelligible, abstract even “uncanny” Sinnbild by the völkisch-fascist faction was naturally no easy task, not least since the actual faculties and skills required of the “researcher” remained rather vaguely identified. Indeed, as Viergutz acknowledged:

We would have to despair in view of ever being able to cogently [deutend] understand the Sinnbilder and signs [Zeichen] of our ancestors if it weren't

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<sup>322</sup> Viergutz, *Germanien* 1937, p. 132

possible for us to experience Sinnbilder ourselves. Which we actually do day and night most discernibly in our dreams, since our inner powerful emotions [Regungen] of the soul find their expression in images that are strangely fleeting in their outlines yet have a distinct character like the soul's emotions.<sup>323</sup>

Hence the (unconscious) act of dreaming gave access to that desperately sought after reconnection with ancestral knowledge in that it generated the experience of eternal Sinnbilder, which thus became partially legible (meaning their ultimately political asset became conceivable). Importantly though, given the aesthetic-political promise of the Sinnbild for a concrete fascist project, the dream did not serve to generate images registering as an expanded imagination, as fantasy, but essentially provided the knowledge – the “material” [Stoff] – to be utilized in the waking state, for a shaping of a fascist reality. Nevertheless, despite being orientated towards a political project, “Sinnbildforschung” can ultimately be said to have grappled with this “subject of such great interest”, as Freud admitted it to be on the first page of the *Interpretation of Dreams*:

It may be asked what view was taken of dreams in pre-historic times by primitive races of men and what effect dreams may have had upon the formation of their conceptions of the world and of the soul.<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., pp.131-132 (transl. by the author)

<sup>324</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams, Standard Edition Vol 4-5*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, London 1953 [1900], pp.1-2

A question which, after the first page, Freud “[...] with much reluctance refrain[ed] from dealing with in this connection”.<sup>325</sup>

Since these primal “conceptions of the world and the soul” were to be recuperated by völkisch-fascism and were, according to Viergutz, locatable and obtainable expressly by the act of dreaming, this “unconscious” state demanded further elucidation. For it was “unconscious” experience turned knowledge, in the form of receiving that dream-material, that in turn would provide the actual “schema” (i.e. the concept) as Hugo Dingler had called it, indispensable in order to properly understand the “active image” (Lebensbild, i.e. a phenomenological and moreover social reality). This process of tapping dreams (the unconscious) in order to unearth and identify the spiritual-political content (unfazed by history, by power art, by prescribed (humanist) aesthetics and ideals, berated by Strzygowskis as “powers of the wills” [Willenskräfte]) thus perfected the already discussed projective nature of “art research” itself; its amazing capacity, to restate Strzygowski, of “rendering actual even that which has not been *conserved*”. (Or, to expand that theory: the cultural legacy had been “*conserved*” in the dream). The dynamic between the abstract realm which the Sinnbilder decoded and this realm’s ancestral and ethnically derived powers thus figure as a kind of völkisch-fascist cathexis permeating the various wanting, residual, pieced together artefacts constituting the barbaric-superior legacy that this fascist art research sought to redress.

Structurally speaking, it was regression that lay at the core of a methodology of the Sinnbild, as the aesthetic fundamental to fascist ideology of

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

the völkisch variety, precisely in the way this methodology was tied to the dream. For it was regression, understood as a process, not as an aesthetic or social judgment, which according to Freud was the chief dynamic underlying the “system *Unconscious*”. Towards the end of the middle part of the *Interpretation of Dreams* Freud states that “for simplicity’s sake” “we can locate the impetus to the construction of dreams in the system UnCs.” It is, claims Freud, “the starting point of dream formation”<sup>326</sup>. The “unconscious” as “starting point” thus functions as the catalyst for the visual sequences of the dream that develop regressively. Regressive, in Freud’s “interpretation” [Deutung], because the dream process/formation instigated by the unconscious is “an excitation [that] moves in backward direction” from the “motor end” – the actual starting point of perception in the waking state – to the “sensory end”<sup>327</sup>.

We call it ‘regression’ when in a dream an idea is turned back into the sensory image from which it was originally derived [...] from thoughts to the pitch of complete sensory vividness.<sup>328</sup>

But not only were the constitutive parts of the unconscious at the sensory end “vivid”; furthermore, “in [that] regression the fabric of dream-thoughts is

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., pp. 541, 542 (*Standard Edition* Vol. 5). “In which of these systems, then are we to locate the impetus to the construction of dreams? For simplicity’s sake in the system *Ucs.*”

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., p. 543



resolved into its raw material”<sup>329</sup>. That very “fabric”, to recall the “material to be mastered” by the Sinnbildforscher, came full circle in the “raw material” which was to be sublimated into a charged Sinnbild by the fascist anti-aesthetic for the purpose of “open[ing] new sources of power”. The act of engaging with the Sinnbild in a supra-aesthetic manner akin to the primitive “being dissolved [aufgehoben] in the artwork” (Einstein, 1915) encapsulated that unmediated “sensory vividness” achieved by regression, which enabled not only the individual modern dreamer but an entire people to “go back to the old ways of looking at things and of feeling about them, to impulses and activities which long dominated us [them]”, thus that which had been “suppressed [would] has become the motive force of dreams” – and not merely the “motive force of dreams” but of an actual political project called fascism<sup>330</sup>. Quite astonishingly, as early as 1933 Bataille had likewise essentially linked his reading of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*, to his own theory of heterogeneity and consequently to his analysis of fascism bearing first and foremost “a psychological structure”.

In heterogeneous reality, the symbols charged with affective value thus have the same importance as the fundamental elements, and the part can have the same value as the whole. It is easy to note that, since the structure of knowledge for a *homogenous* reality is that of science, the knowledge of a *heterogeneous* reality

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<sup>329</sup> Ibid.

<sup>330</sup> James Sully and Yves Delage, quoted in Freud 1953, Vol. 5, p. 591 Which in this constellation would echo Bataille’s call “to rediscover motifs of force”, which he perceived in the Gnostics’ base materialism serving as a model for aesthetic transgression enabling renewal, including on a socio-political level.

as such is to be found in the mystical thinking of primitives and in dreams: it is identical to the structure of the *unconscious*.<sup>331</sup>

Bataille's conception of "charged" "affective" "symbols" that "have the same importance as fundamental elements", i.e. as reality, certainly provides as good as any a description of the entire völkisch-fascist undertaking (which for Freud, being the diehard rationalist he was, actually would be a conception possibly symptomatic of schizophrenia<sup>332</sup>).

Georges Didi-Huberman, on the other hand, takes up Freud's concept of regression not in the context of fascist image theory but with regard to *Documents'* specific deployment of images to – on a visual plane – presage the arguments advanced in the texts, as opposed to simply serving as illustrations. He speaks of a "*dialectic of forms*", a term he adopts from Bataille himself in *Documents*.<sup>333</sup> This dialectic, states Didi-Huberman, is not merely of a "transgressive" nature characteristic of Bataille's thinking as a whole but furthermore implies "*regression*". This notion of regression at work or rather as a

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<sup>331</sup> Bataille, 1985 [1933/34], p. 143. Bataille in footnote 7 in the original text specifies *The Interpretation of Dreams* as the source for his reference to the unconscious (1985, p. 160). This emphasizing of the psychological component as key to Nazi fascism at the very moment of its official outset can further be discerned in Wilhelm Reich (as libidinal transposition in *Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus*, 1933) and Ernst Bloch (as "non-synchronicity" "Ungleichzeitigkeit" (1933), a notion equal part psychological as it is (phantasmagorically) historical, in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit*, 1934).

<sup>332</sup> "We may on the other hand attempt a characterization of the schizophrenic's mode of thought by saying that he treats concrete things as though they were abstract". "The Unconscious", *Standard Edition Vol. 14*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, London 1957, p. 204

<sup>333</sup> "The secret [?] play between image montage and the de-montage of theories within the magazine, which Bataille executes on notions such as form and resemblance, this structural and methodological "materialistic" co-play is the reason we discern something in the expression "dialectics of forms" that comes dangerously close to one of a *dialectics of images*", 2010, p.242 (Trans. by the author).

link between the ideas conveyed in Bataille's writing vis-à-vis the images selected by him to enter into dialogue with these ideas registers, according to Didi-Huberman, as a Freudian process of regression, again structurally. The "discontent" reflected in the destabilizing of, and the attacks on, hitherto normative abstractions (e.g. beauty, progress, order) formulated in the writing lead to the images that register as "symptoms". These symptomatic images thus become the bases of uncertainty or outright collapse with regard to these abstract values, for which Didi-Huberman suitably picks the image of the crumbling "factory chimney" as a prime example of the idea regressing into (leading back to) the image that is symptomatic of the idea (i.e. it structurally and temporally precedes the theoretical idea – the *diagnosis* – by surfacing as the *symptom*, pertaining as these two terms do not only to "invisible" psychological processes but to physiologically visible ones)<sup>334</sup>.

Another way to locate regression in Bataille's thinking at the time of *Documents* is by way of those "raw phenomena" he exhumed – from the body, from culture, from history – and celebrated for their rawness, not least in order to stain aesthetic and philosophical paradigms through, literally, exposure of the raw. Freud's notion of that "fabric of dream thoughts" – basically the ontology of Bréton's surrealism – as the realm preceding full regression into "raw material" provides a context for Bataille's promotion of "raw phenomena". Freud's evocation of the "raw phenomena" of (base) materialism thus supports Bataille's critique of Surrealism: its editing or raisin picking of the unconscious – "the

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<sup>334</sup> All quotes by Didi-Huberman in this passage in *Ibid*, pp. 242-243

pitiable treasure-trove”<sup>335</sup> –, eschewing its more pugnacious features. (Krauss’ notion of a “hard primitivism”, which she accredits to the Bataille of *Documents*, thus corresponds with Freud’s “raw material”, since it is the regressive basis to the sublimated “fabric of dream thoughts” which Bataille would discredit Bréton for<sup>336</sup>).

Didi-Huberman pinpoints Freud’s original German term of “*Rückbildung*” as neatly literalizing the process and the final state of regression (which the French/English term “regression” does not achieve), the actual process of conscious thought regressing into that “sensory image” emerging in the dream; those images whose “outlines were so fleeting yet of such distinct [vivid] character”, to recall Viergutz. Which means that, to further engage the semantic capacity of a “Rückbild(ung)”, when read in the context of a fascist progress achieved through regression by way of Sinnbild aesthetic, the “Rückbild” was flipped into the “Vorbild” (ideal/model). As regression in reverse and yet as a *state/State* perfectly summed up by Freud in his later appendix concerning regression, where he differentiated between topical, temporal and formal regression, the latter described as a scenario “where primitive expressions and representations replace common ones”.

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<sup>335</sup> Bataille, “The ‘Old Mole’ and the Prefix *Sur*”, (ca. 1929/1930). In Bataille, 1985, p. 39

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.: “The same double tendency is found in contemporary surrealism, which maintains, of course, the predominance of higher ethereal values (clearly expressed by the addition of the prefix *sur*, the trap into which Nietzsche had already fallen with *superman*). More precisely, since surrealism is immediately distinguishable by the addition of low values (the unconscious, sexuality, filthy language, etc.) it invests these values with an elevated character by associating them with the most immaterial values.”

All three kinds of regression are in the end one and the same and coincide in most cases, because the temporally more ancient is also the formally more primitive one and in view of the psychological topicality both are closer to the sensory end.<sup>337</sup>

If “*Rückbildung*” produced the “*Vorbild*” (i.e., the *Sinnbild*) – if regression was the ideal – that “system UnCs.” had to be tweaked accordingly so as to no longer serve as the chief repository for the not least visually associative thoughts the ego would have to suppress. It had to be sublimated; put differently, it had to be sublimated in a (fascist) superego, where the (Freudian) unconscious was, in the truly Hegelian sense, “aufgehoben”: negated, conserved - sublated. Thus, to come back to Viergutz, this meant that:

The formation of the symbol in so-called abstract signs, such as the runes, is simultaneously a creative process of a higher nature. Within them experiences of the human soul’s deeper layer find expression unattainable [nicht hinabreicht] by the everyday conscious; experiences of the individual-spiritual [eigenseelische] development but also those of supra-personal [überpersönlich] experience [that are] in a state of sacred immersion [heilige Ergriffenheit].<sup>338</sup>

So the fascist *Sinnbild*, as an expression of the “soul’s deeper layer” (i.e. the unconscious), not only served as a receptacle of personal “eigenseelische” development (leaving it open as to whether that “*Entwicklung*” registered as progress or crisis), but accommodated an abstract religious dimension: “heilig” (sacred). Furthermore, while the unconscious was indeed acknowledged

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<sup>337</sup> Quoted in Didi-Huberman, 2012, p. 243 (Trans. by the author).

<sup>338</sup> Viergutz, *Germanien* 1937, p.132. Also note that the non-plus-ultra “modern” *Sinnbild* capturing and transporting sacred immersion and higher experience across a select collective was – inevitably – the swastika. See Chapter 4/5

for a visual theory, as a kind of buried, indescribable stratum, it was *deep* yet under no circumstances *base*. On the contrary, by exclusively linking the unconscious to “higher nature” and according it a “sacred state”, it was clearly positioned above the ratio. Needless to say, “sacred” was surely not conceived here as it was by Bataille in his “Psychological Structure of fascism” and later in the context of the Collège de Sociologie where he derived the double nature of the sacred, (its heterogeneity) from Rudolf Otto’s influential work *Das Heilige* (1917)<sup>339</sup>, complete with the problematic notion of *sacer* – holy and damned. For fascist ontology, the sacred was a pure state that could, however, register in the formally and indeed socially raw (barbaric). This fascist treatment of the unconscious, its appropriation of it, co-opting it for the purpose of Sinnbildforschung, was made rather explicit yet again by Josef Plaßmann. In a text entitled “Sinnfälliges und Sinnbildliches” [The literal and the spiritual-symbolic] the entire thought process of psychoanalysis was decried for being utterly one-dimensional and flat-footed, a system of thought inferior to the conception of a Sinnbild aesthetic by catering to base instincts and simplistic associations. Plaßmann laid out this incongruity in the following way:

It is more palpable so to speak, to say: the steer is being worshipped as deity because he represents procreative, reproductive power; or when a menhir is conceived as a phallus. It is this comfortable and illustrative way of thinking which modern psychoanalysis has appropriated with great dexterity and success. It [psychoanalysis] represents the uttermost extreme opposite to the abstract-symbolic conception of the world [Weltauffassung] – so much so that a bridge between these concepts is entirely impossible. It simply pertains to two

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<sup>339</sup> *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen.* Breslau, 1917.

fundamentally opposed positions regarding the perceiving and interpreting subject.<sup>340</sup>

Echoing Dingler's condescension of that "psychological process", of "interpretation" [Deutung], presented as a kind of affliction of the modern-rational, over-analyzed, over-analytical, as well as visually overwhelmed "Machtmensch", Plaßmann positioned the affective-perceptive contact with the Sinnbild above psychological investment – the latter more often than not, at least in Freud, one of a libidinal nature<sup>341</sup>. This so-called "abstract-symbolic conception" [abstrakt-symbolische Weltauffassung] advanced here and elsewhere within the völkisch-fascist discourse thus demanded of the "perceiving subject" – clearly superior to the "interpreting subject" – the not easy task of bypassing psychology and materialistic rationalization in favor of an innate recognition of the abstract Sinnbilder, that would ultimately yield a positive, non-servile (sovereign) and non-materialistic (anti-capitalist) identification.

Following from this, the notion of Freudian sublimation – the transposition of instincts of that primordial Id to the Superego, which in turn

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<sup>340</sup> Plaßmann, "Sinnfälliges und Sinnbildliches", *Germanien*, Heft 2, 1933, pp. 36-37. While presumably coincidental it is noteworthy that these ideas appeared the same year as the various psychological examinations of Nazism mentioned above. (Trans by the author).

<sup>341</sup> To turn things around yet again, Freud had actually argued this libidinally – and scatologically – associative (thus foul, and indeed one-dimensional according to Plaßmann) phenomenology not at all to be specific to a repressed/discontent modern subject, but had early on made the case that it was in fact a central feature of folklore and vernacular myth in "Dreams and Folklore" (1911, with Oppenheim). I.e., it was precisely in this more "primitive" social context – rural Austrian and Slavic folktales, proverbs and anecdotes etc. – that a libidinal-scatological cathexis stemming from the unconscious was culturally acknowledged, integrated and thus "naturalized". Not that Freud seemed to derive much pleasure from this vernacular unconscious: "We wanted to suggest that one should not be deterred by the often repulsively dirty and indecent nature of this popular material from seeking in it valuable confirmation of psycho-analytic views." *Standard Edition, Vol. 12*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, London, 1958 p. 203

prescribed a socio-culturally acceptable rationale hopefully adhered to by the Ego's associative perception – was, unsurprisingly, similarly unacceptable for Plassman:

Its [psychoanalysis'] laws only ever pertain to the sphere of the Sinnfälliges [the obvious/literal] but also only there. That is because it [psychoanalysis] never achieves to exceed the sphere, precisely since this [Sinnfälliges] is its substantial, rationalized expression. A key notion in this regard is “sublimation”, the arguable “process” [Entwicklung] from the “vegetative-instinctive” [vegetativ-triebhaftem] towards “higher thinking”. [...] [höheres Denken]. From this to the phallic interpretation of the gothic church tower it is only a small step. Whence the fanatic consequence with which psychoanalytical theory wants to force everything into its system.<sup>342</sup>

On the one hand, this critique of contemporaneous psychological theory may simply exhibit a clever, if not fully compelling, case of Verneinung [negation] on the side of Plassmann and fascism's transposition of the sexual body onto the hopefully compensatory body politic generally – “negation” merely being “a substitute, at a higher level, for repression” according to Freud himself<sup>343</sup>. On the other hand, while Plassmann and other authors in his spectrum more or less directly discussing psycho-analytic theory never actually brought up Freud's name, it is noteworthy that this critique of “psycho-analytic theory want[ing] to force everything into its system” was almost identically perceived and articulated by Carl Einstein around the same time. Einstein, however, had no reservations in calling out Freud by name. In an exhibition review on Picasso in *Documents*

Einstein writes:

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<sup>342</sup> Plassmann, *Germanien*, p. 37 (Trans. by the author)

<sup>343</sup> “The Unconscious”, *Vol.14 Standard Edition*, p. 186



[...] With him [Picasso] we escape Freud's fatalistic and stable hallucination, this limited form, in which the unconscious is represented in a metaphysical way and as a lasting substance.<sup>344</sup>

Elsewhere, Einstein berated psychoanalytic theory for wanting to "translate" the images of the unconscious "into the house of language". Important here is that, while Freud's unconscious is defined by Einstein as a "hallucination", its shortcoming is that it is of a "stable" nature, crossing with one of Einstein's typically paradoxical terms devised for his aesthetic theory: "tectonic hallucination". (Which, to put it very crudely, was Einstein's aspired to aesthetic that derived its modern and revolutionary force as much from a formally Cubist/ Non-Western geometrical breakdown of subjects and objects as from an unhindered continually fluid imagination coming together on the picture plane<sup>345</sup>. (Einstein's other intriguing oxymora that basically entailed this same fusion were "formal mythology" and "formal animism", artistic acmes he almost exclusively reserved for Picasso.) Einstein's earlier discussed critique of allegory, in which it presents a "form of assassination because it disposed of the object, robbing it of its literal meaning" may serve as a template for his contemporaneous critique of Freud's unambiguously materialist rationale. Thus,

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<sup>344</sup> Quoted from Rainer Rumold: "'Painting as a Language. Why Not?' Carl Einstein in *Documents*", *October* 107, Winter 2004, p.91. Rumold goes on to further clarify Einstein's critique: "The difference from Freud here, [...], is that the psychoanalyst developed a language in which the forms of the unconscious could be interpreted in rational terms by the rational subject, terms which establish the unconscious as being 'elsewhere', as the 'mass of repression' (in that sense 'metaphysical' and 'stable')". For a further discussion on Einstein and the role/critique of the (Freudian) unconscious see Sebastian Zeidler, "Life and Death from Babylon to Picasso: Carl Einstein's Ontology of Art at the Time of *Documents*". *Papers of Surrealism* Issue 7, 2007. Online publication.

<sup>345</sup> Essentially as performed by Picasso in the later 1920s, see his "The Painter and his Model", 1926, or "The Milliner's Workshop" 1926, works Zeidler draws on in his discussion of Einstein.

not unlike the völkisch-fascist desire of reclaiming – tapping – the unconscious (the “soul’s deeper layer”), albeit with vastly divergent ideological and ultimately aesthetic programs, the unconscious had to be cut loose from Freud’s rationalizing and thus literalizing hold on it. In Einstein’s case, this was necessary for the unconscious to unrestrictedly serve as the generator of a boundless (i.e. formless as opposed to “limited form”) imaginary undermining rationality, forgoing classification and thus the eventual profitability of the unconscious by becoming in a sense available and acquiescent towards modern-industrial production of (computable) evidence and (quantifiable) value. Ironically, Freud had actually acknowledged psychoanalysis’, and by extension the unconscious’, *productive share* within that young enterprise called modernity, stating a few years before Einstein’s diatribe that: “Analysts are at bottom incorrigible mechanists and materialists, even though they seek to avoid robbing the mind and spirit of their still unrecognized characteristics”<sup>346</sup>. Freud thus pleaded guilty to Einstein’s incrimination of a Freudian unconscious which, however, as far as the relationship between visual art and the unconscious was concerned, Freud had conceived of entirely differently to begin with, offering rather reactionary ideas about art, especially given their historical context (1913)<sup>347</sup>.

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<sup>346</sup> Freud, “Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy” (1921), *Standard Edition Vol. 18*, ed and trans. James Strachey, London 1955, p.179

<sup>347</sup> “The artist’s first aim is to set himself free and, by communicating his work to other people suffering from the same arrested desires, he offers them the same liberation. [...] He presents his most personal wishful phantasies as fulfilled; but they only become a work of art when they have undergone a transformation which softens what is offensive in them, conceals their personal origin and, by obeying the laws of beauty, bribes other people with a bonus of pleasure.” Freud, “The Interest of Psycho-Analysis from the point of view of the Sciences of Aesthetics”, 1913, *Standard Edition Vol. 13*, ed. trans James Strachey, London 1955, p. 187. (Nevertheless Freud’s idea of art is still – or is that again? – going strong, i.e. the above paragraph is essentially a résumé of Jeff Koons’ entire career).

(Art for Freud seems to have served a kind of remedial/compensatory function quite at odds with the concurrent avant-garde's turn to abstraction and fragmentation of stable forms/subjects (Cubism, Futurism) and to representations of social dissonance, urban alienation, angst etc. (e.g. Die Brücke)). While the scope of this study cannot do justice to a comprehensive discussion of Einstein's overall aesthetic-political theory<sup>348</sup> (since his is certainly as complex and exhaustive as Bataille's – or Benjamin's for that matter), Einstein's particular usage of the unconscious and the place it occupies in his project of an anti-aesthetic do not merely reveal yet another aspect of the previously discussed mutual critiques and aspirations of ideologically irreconcilable movements. Furthermore, by examining these mutual conceptions of a new, to varying degrees barbaric, (anti-)aesthetic, their political ambitions become not only more conceivable but, moreover, their ultimate falling short of set expectations begin to show – whether arising out of these projects' inherent contradictions or due to rejection by and irreconcilability with the aesthetic program of the respective regimes to political and/or economic ends. (Evinced by Nazi fascism proper and the avant-garde's arguable resistance/failure in playing an active part in the production of (popular) culture). In this context it is important to not only recall Einstein's consistent political agenda (a communist-anarchic one) inseparably from his aesthetic theory, but to recall his actual conviction that a concept like “tectonic-hallucination” would meet with an enthusiastic response by a large audience (Einstein's counter-offer to the public so to speak to Benjamin's “positive barbarity” and Bataille's “base materialism”).

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<sup>348</sup> For this one may consult the special issue on Einstein of *October* 107, 2004 as well as David Quigley: *A Defense of the Real*, Vienna 2007, to name more recent studies.

In other words, key for this discussion is that: “As recently as 1931, Einstein had proposed that painting, by means of tectonic form, had the potential to convert subjective visual experience into collective signs”.<sup>349</sup> If Einstein, for all his idiosyncratic ideas, nevertheless presents a “classic” avant-garde vision that in hindsight became expectedly incompatible with the course of mass culture of the 1930s<sup>350</sup> – as utopian vision<sup>351</sup> – then it appears all the more absurd that Plaßmann, as late as 1933, would make the case for abstraction as the aesthetic paradigm for a supreme aesthetic to be invested in by a large (fascist) collective.

In the very same essay in which he sought to repossess the unconscious for his “abstract-symbolic conception of the world” (i.e., a fascist “formal mythology”), Plaßmann also laid out the necessity for the new/resuscitated hoped-for visual representation to part with literally wholesome mimetic figuration in favor of what he unworkably coined “Ausdruckskunst” [Art of

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<sup>349</sup> Charles Haxthausen “Reproduction/Repetition: Walter Benjamin/Carl Einstein”. *October* 107, 2004, p.74. His is an extensive discussion of just that complex and furthermore of Einstein’s quasi diametrically opposed program vis-à-vis Walter Benjamin’s contemporaneous work on corresponding questions relating to avant-garde aesthetics and mass experience.

<sup>350</sup> From a pop-cultural perspective, one could make the case for a delayed response to aesthetic propositions such as Einstein’s by way of psychedelic counter-culture emerging in the 1960s in the United States; to which notions of expanded cinema would provide the art historical context (see Gene Youngblood). (While keeping in mind though that Einstein had very little enthusiasm for film as a whole during his time, including its deployment by the visual arts). Or later VJ culture, i.e. the predominantly abstract or non-narrative montage projections playing an integral part in the crowd’s experience in techno/electronic music rave culture emerging in the early 1990s in Berlin and Detroit. (And notably, in the case of Detroit, an aesthetic initially conceived and appreciated in large parts by an indeed working-class (and largely Afro-American) audience.)

<sup>351</sup> Rumold calls it Einstein’s “revision of vision”.

Expression<sup>352</sup>]. An “Ausdruckskunst” that, in striving to be ultimately “meaningful” [sinnvoll], derived not from a reactionary turn to a petit-bourgeois “re-skilling” (Buchloh) but from “spontaneous” “purely instinctual” [rein triebhaft<sup>353</sup>] “Ausdruckslust” [desire to express]. As such, “Ausdruckskunst” became probable: “the more the expression of the work departs from direct [unmittelbaren], rationalistic reproduction, and the more it abstracts [abstrahiert].”<sup>354</sup>

To simplify the concept of abstraction for a readership presumably disinclined towards it, Plaßmann presented the following *clear-cut* scenario:

To abstract means: to remove from the concrete (leafed) tree or body its leafs or its flesh, to make the structure, the sensible construction of the whole visible and to think it through. Hence abstract symbolism is not all something “primitive” but something further developed than a naturalistic “life-likeness” [Naturtreue] – contrary to the common [landläufig] belief of some laymen and scientists [presumably here meaning art theorists?].<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Bearing in mind that this “Ausdruckskunst” was not in conversation with (German) Expressionism proper, although, as the so-called “Expressionismusstreit” (1933) literally reveals, the formal attributes and more importantly the ideological contextualization of an artistic “expression-ess” was less solidly agreed upon (or rejected) as one would assume – it was, in the early 1930s in Germany, “up for grabs” so to speak.

<sup>353</sup> Again for Plaßmann (and others of his milieu) to employ the very notion of “triebhaft” – essential Freudian terminology surely disseminated by the 1930s – in the service of a fascist aesthetic program is not only peculiar but suggests scant acquaintance with contemporary psychology, regardless of all the resolute criticism against it. “Triebhaft” cannot really be translated as “libidinal” in this ideological context since it here is a notion excluding drive as libido, thus I have translated it as “instinctual”.

<sup>354</sup> Plaßmann, *Germanien* 1933, p. 34 (Trans. by the author).

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

This kind of abstraction recommended to the fascist Sinnblid artist/researcher was not only “contrary to common belief”, but soon, unsurprisingly, anathema to fascist aesthetics proper as outlined in the beginning of this chapter. More problematically, in view of a quest for a völkisch-fascist aesthetic, Plaßmann had failed to consider that both the tree and the body, once shed of its greenery and skinned of its flesh, would potentially make for not exactly that elevated and “sensible construction” he hoped to gain from abstraction. For in *Documents*, Bataille more or less fully executed and paraded both of these “abstractions”, in which photographic close-ups of a “naked” flower’s interior by the photographer Blossfeldt and anatomical illustrations of the 17<sup>th</sup> century rather worked against notions of sublime or ideational “constructions”. While Bataille’s text accompanying the flower photographs merely used this subversion of the flower’s symbolism (traditionally that of beauty and love) as a stepping-stone for a wider philosophical debate on a denial of a kind of dialectic of the base and the elevated in Western aesthetic tradition, he asserted that “even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs.”<sup>356</sup> Consequentially, as the photograph substantiated, “if one tears off all the corolla’s petals, all that remains is a rather sordid tuft.”<sup>357</sup> The human body, once “removed from its flesh”, didn’t fare much better, the “sensible” aspect of a rationalistic-scientific anatomical partitioning as depicted in Amé Bourdon’s “Nouvelles tables anatomiques” (1678) unraveling into a kind of conundrum of the human form, thus posing a challenge to rather than establishing an immaculate and eternally

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<sup>356</sup> Bataille, “The Language of Flowers”, *Documents* I 3, 1929. In Bataille, 1985, p.12

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

noble “structure”. For Leiris, who discussed these 17<sup>th</sup> century tables, the laying bare of the human form divulging its inner “construction” – along with its not so abstract innards – was yet another case of “a wholly other”, “equally fascinating and terrifying”, undermining a notion of beauty and thus a celebration of humanity as presented by say Renaissance art, instead presenting “the true arcanum of human nature”. And more often than not, the stripping of the body pointed to the inescapable aging and withering of its “structure”, to decomposition, the “most precarious moments of its existence”<sup>358</sup>. With regard to artistic abstraction it therefore seemed only logical for Leiris to locate this upset to human existence in the work of Picasso, whose “barbaric phase”<sup>359</sup> (Alfred Barr), regardless of its supposed “formal animism” and “tectonic hallucination”, was “realism”, the “recognition of the real, which it seeks to hollow out and undermine”.<sup>360</sup>

With regards to abstraction in representation and the possible “side-effects” that came with it, Strzygowksi appeared more willing to admit that any anti-aesthetic defiant of power art would have to risk this departure from the ideal and beauty, as early as 1923. His already discussed *The Crisis of the Humanities*, is a case in point.

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<sup>358</sup> Leiris, “L’Homme et son interieure”, *Documents II* 5, 1930 (trans. by the author).

<sup>359</sup> Quoted in Robert Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, Cambridge/Mass., 1986 [1938], p. 152, a classic early (North American) study on non-Western imports to Modern Art. Goldwater, speaking about Picasso, states that with the latter modern art at that time evinces “an intensification from primitiveness to barbarity” which he discusses at another point in the context of a “hatred of culture” as a trait of artistic production during that period.

<sup>360</sup> Leiris, “Toiles récentes de Picasso”. *Documents II* 2 1930, quoted in Didi-Huberman, 2010, p.155.

## VI.2 The crisis of fascist anti-aesthetics

To summarize the context of the position taken by Strzygowski in this work: The stagnant and discriminating patriarchy of academic art history and the emptied out artistic prototypes it continued to uphold and enforce were what generated said “crisis”. Importantly, the crisis did not register merely as a socio-cultural dead-end or as resignation, but set off a critique and resistance that initially took the form of negation and from there onwards of a volatile anti-aesthetic. The social segment most active and effective in advancing such an anti-aesthetic, according to Strzygowski, were not even unorthodox art historians like himself but naturally the contemporary artist, “agents in the field” so to speak:

Die ersteren gehen voran [die Künstler] angeregt durch die Abwendung der Kunst von den Schönheitsgesetzen, die die humanistische Ästhetik im Anschluß an die Antike und Renaissance-Gestalt ausgebildet hatte. Der Naturalismus<sup>361</sup> brach damit. Er ist in seinen Modellen nicht mehr wählerisch, die Gestalt ist nicht mehr die “schöne Gestalt” an sich, sondern jede Gestalt, der Nachdruck liegt nicht so sehr auf ihr, als auf der Art wie sie in Form gebracht ist, das heißt in Masse, Raum, Ton und Farbe erscheint.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Presumably the “Naturalism” Strzygowski has in mind here is Realism by way of a Gustave Courbet, i.e., the depiction of anonymous subjects engaged in manual labor, on a scale and by deploying the representational modes reserved for nobility and the genre of history painting. It would be erroneous though to consider the depiction of an anonymous peasant/worker as unselective [nicht wählerisch], for it is the selection of the subject that lends the work political agency – it is precisely not “any/every subject [Gestalt]” but “The Stone Breakers” (1849-50), “The Sower” (Jean-Francois Millet, 1850) etc. The conscious choice of the subject portrayed is already made explicit in the title. Strzygowki’s suggestion that the emphasis in realism shifts from mimetic figuration to foregrounding the materiality of paint the work – as representation – is dependent upon seems valid on the other hand.

<sup>362</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.52



It is beyond question that the artist “leading the way” in Strzygowski’s conception of an anti-bourgeois anti-aesthetic, his prospect of an avant-garde, was to be of Aryan descent (keeping in mind the dubious nature of this classification alone)<sup>363</sup>. This was mandated by quasi ontological conditions enabling true artistic (counter-) production since, “the truly artistic, which lies in content and form, is borne by the free subject. This subject however is fundamentally tied to blood and soil”<sup>364</sup> (Strzygowksi).

The anti-aesthetic derived - attained, so to speak - in this configuration through “blood and soil” did, nevertheless, not preclude the artist from considering the various attacks exercised by the traditional avant-garde proper. “Gestalt” and “beauty”, according to Strzygowski, had to make way for “volume, space, tone and color”. In fact, these formal attributes, put forward by that newly

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<sup>363</sup> Which however especially in Strzygowski didn’t equal German, not even in terms of geography. In his catalogue publication from 1932 “The Afghan Stuccos of the N.R.F. collection”, contextualizing the artefacts from the archeological expedition he undertook with Andre Malraux, Strzygowksi, speaks of the “Barbarian Hero”, a title he gives to one of the three-dimensional stuccos featured, essentially presenting a bust. Here human representation is not reproached as it usually is by Strzygowski, for replicating the oppressive yet hollow representation of power (i.e., power art). The reason for this is that here artistic production emerges from the social base and the local, becomes validated as a vernacular aesthetic of sorts: “We owe the existence of the works of art which have just been reviewed solely to local creative desires” [...] this change [towards figurative representation] was accomplished freely, thanks to an independent impulse of the Iranian spirit, and not owing to the mere adoption of the forms of contemporary art already employed in the historic centres.” “[...] living autochthonal [sic] forces created a new art [...]”. Strzygowski, *The Afghan Stuccos of the N.R.F. Collection*, Stora Art Gallery, New York, 1932. NRF Paris 1932, pp. 9, 21/22 (Here again it is a group’s “impulse” and their ignorance of normative aesthetic that guarantee “veritable” agency and authenticity, in correspondance with the agency Bataille afforded the Gauls in “The Academic Horse”).

<sup>364</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p. 204

autonomous, free artist, had become imbued with agency defying *Machtkunst*, in this case echoing Plaßmann's call for abstraction<sup>365</sup>:

Every explicitly factually bound art striving for a calculated effect on the viewer will push the figures [Gestalten] to the edge towards appearing as a reality. The more the artist as an individual [Persönlichkeit] follows his inner urges the less important the figure as such, and the stronger the impact of form as such i.e. volume, space, tone, color will be. <sup>366</sup>

And it did not end with these formal categories now overcoming hitherto superior figurative /classicist representation, since Strzygowski went on to announce that:

The struggle for the justification of the non-beautiful, in fact of ugliness begins, in which the selection of the subject is greatly aided by drawing on aspects derived from the poor and the sick.<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> A scenario which is more broadly recognized and clearly identifiable in Italian fascism as informed by a Futurist formal vocabulary a decade earlier, e.g. the intensification and augmentation of the body in motion to develop machine-like features such as in Boccioni, in the process of which the body did of course risk to become not only re-formed but *deformed*, *misshaped*, altered in a negative sense from a reactionary-fascist perspective.

<sup>366</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p. 152.

<sup>367</sup> Strzygowski, 1922, p.53 This connection between precarious social groups, physically or mentally impaired and modern art was first maintained by the Zionist Max Nordau in his 1893 book *Entartung*. According to Christoph Zuschlag and in the context of cultural production which Nordau's text responded to, the notion of degeneration as applied to art addressed "symbolism, realism, impressionism". Especially with regard to impressionism, i.e. the genre's distinctive atomizing of subjects into color particles of dots it would make sense – from Nordau's point of view – to speak of impressionism's aesthetics and processes as symptoms for "the disturbance of the nerve apparatus and the retina". As far as this disturbance concerned the social it was "the Lumpenproletariat – criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, officially declared lunatics – that degenerated first. These groups' mental and at times physical traits are reflected in the modern artist." Zuschlag, *Entartete Kunst*, Worms, 1995, pp. 22-23.

While this recognition of a critique of the aesthetic status-quo did not mean that Strzygowski and the overall early fascist anti-aesthetic embraced the “poor and the sick” (i.e., to run the ideological *pre-bare life* gamut: the degenerate, the abject, les misérables, Lumpen) per se, it does reveal the existence of a genuine discourse on what exactly this fascist anti-aesthetic would entail, how “far” it would go in its “turning away from the laws of beauty” (hence, it seems fair to say in this context, in its conscious abandonment of Benjamin’s repudiated notion of “Schönheitsdienst”)

Bataille, on the other hand, made this connection of the “sick” with the formal attacks of the avant-garde on the human body, on its representation, explicit - as is exemplified by his text discussing illustrations from the 18<sup>th</sup> century depicting various “deviations of nature” as the article was called, the title directly taken from the eponymous original publication. Siamese twins, dwarfs, bodies born without heads or with two pairs of eyes, all kinds of astounding physical deformations producing figures clearly at odds with the properly proportioned anatomy the canon had recommended by equating it with power, functionality, grace, desire etc. Bataille laid out a trajectory in which these so-called “monsters” (often conceived as harbingers of crises in 16<sup>th</sup> century society) had turned into “freaks” in industrialized consumer culture. These “deviations” had become the stuff of funfairs, an odd spectacle, “a carnival pleasure”. Nevertheless, Bataille claimed, the “[...]freak’ in any given fair provokes a positive impression of aggressive incongruity, a little comic, but much

more a source of malaise. This malaise is, in an obscure way, tied to a profound seductiveness.”<sup>368</sup>

Didi-Huberman in his book juxtaposes these “deviations of nature”, herein resuming Bataille’s own practice of juxtaposition, with works by Picasso that were presented in the same issue yet not side-by-side (the simultaneous appearance nevertheless surely again a deliberate editorial decision by Bataille<sup>369</sup>). Didi-Huberman hereby intensifies Bataille’s layout strategy of correlation to augment the notion of a base materialism. A materialism, as the notion suggests, stemming from nature. The deviations’ very existence therefore spoil the ideal prototypes embraced by art, since both of these categories can lay claim to the same source and origin, which further means their purported distinction is the result of not only enforced but moreover forged “unreal” separation. It is in the context of exactly this material “fact” ensnaring idealism and deviation that Didi-Huberman quotes Michel Leiris’s text on Picasso. Leiris, by taking Picasso’s work as proof, disclaimed any association with Bréton’s surrealist project proper (“the most degrading escapism”, according to Bataille). With regard to these paintings’ alleged subversions of the human figure, Leiris put the onus on the works’ uncompromising “realism” that he equated with the artists’ “freedom”, presumably meaning his/her freedom from having to oblige

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<sup>368</sup> Bataille, “Deviations of Nature”, *Documents I 3*, 1929, in Bataille, 1985, pp. 53-54

<sup>369</sup> Picasso’s work was featured in the context of Michel Leiris article “Quelques toiles récents”. It is the work period of Picasso that MoMA’s Alfred Barr would refer to as the artist’s “barbaric phase” and that already presages Carl Einstein’s concepts of a “tectonic hallucination” and a “formal mythology” that would inform the works made a year later where the decomposition of the body is now further disintegrated by being suspended in an abstract space of intersecting lines and fields. The issue aside from Picasso and Bataille’s “Deviations of Nature” contained the article by Rene Groussart: “A case of Regression towards “Barbarian” Arts: the Kafiristan statuery. “ that immediately preceded Bataille’s text.

the constraints levied by an aesthetic mandate of idealization, sublimation, identification, representation. This (artistic) freedom importantly meant: “not to escape or negate the real but on the contrary to recognize it, to hollow it out, to undermine it”, to repeat Leiris’s judgment here<sup>370</sup>.

It should be noted in this context of equating artistic freedom with aggressively “deviating from nature” that consequently is considered to signify “the real”, but more importantly, in view of Didi-Huberman’s explicit juxtaposition of deviation with Picasso, that this kind of polarizing juxtaposition had a prominent predecessor. Two years ahead of Leiris’s text on Picasso, one of the key proponents of what I’d like to call official fascist art theory, Paul Schulze-Naumburg, in his influential *Kunst und Rasse* [Art and Race] (1928) employed precisely this juxtaposition to make the case for degeneration at work in avant-garde art. He squared off (convincingly) formal analogies between images of debilitated subjects, including, importantly, poor subjects, as evinced by an image of a homeless woman suffering from alcoholism, with work by Modigliani and Schmidt-Rothluff etc. serving as hard evidence for a direct relation between mental and physical debilitation and the avant-garde. With regard to these “deviations of nature” and deviations from the social and their impression onto modern art, in fact their complicity with it, Schulze-Naumburg wrote:

Daneben sehen wir überall eine Bevorzugung und Betonung der Erscheinungen der Entartung, wie sie uns aus dem Heer der Gesunkenen, der Kranken und der körperlich Mißgebildeten bekannt sind. [...]

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<sup>370</sup> All quotes by Bataille and Leiris in this passage from Didi-Huberman, 2010, pp. 154-155 (Trans. by the author).

Daß diese Bilder also Vorstellungen einer Wirklichkeit hervorrufen und daher auch wohl auch hervorrufen wollen, wird sich nicht leugnen lassen. Wo aber finden wir eine Welt, die den Gestalten und der Atmosphäre dieser Bilder entspricht?

Man muß schon in die tiefsten Tiefen menschlicher Not und menschlichem Abschaums hinabsteigen; in den Idiotenanstalten, psychiatrischen Kliniken, Krüppelheimen, den Stationen der Lepra oder in Schlupfwinkeln, in denen sich die Verkommensten verbergen, findet man zur Not und auch nur annähernd das Material, das solche und ähnliche Vorstellungen wachruft.[...] Es mag eine Aufgabe bedeuten, das Menschliche auch noch im Niedrigsten zu suchen.<sup>371</sup>

This clearly presented a critical precursor to the definite irreconcilability of a fascistic exploration of an anti-aesthetic with the anti-aesthetic project by way of *Documents*: Schulze-Naumburg's condemned descent into the realm of human scum ["Abschaum"], that sifting through and excavation of the lowermost ["das Niedrigste"], was of course precisely what Bataille was dealing with in *Documents*. Significantly though, Schulze-Naumburg did not discount these lowest-of-lowest aesthetics for being products of a crazed imagination, for products of fantasy. He actually acknowledged their reflective relation vis-à-vis the "appearances of reality", i.e.: confirming Leiris's claim for this anti-aesthetic to derive its force by signifying the real which, to recall, Schulze-Naumburg acceded "cannot be denied". Which, consequentially, would also mean that a position like Schulze-Naumburg's, certainly influential to the formative aesthetic

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<sup>371</sup> Paul Schulze-Naumburg, *Kunst und Rasse*, Berlin 1928, pp. 111, 113. This "army of the sunken", no doubt intended by Schulze-Naumburg to unambiguously project a kind of pariah minority could of course just as well denominate a large swath of a veteran generation as discussed in Benjamin's "Erfahrung und Armut"; those "whom life has treated as we commonly treat a piece of cloth" (Bataille); the, literally, damaged – all those dismal types and cripples populating the canvases of German expressionism and most famously Berlin Dada.

program over the course of the 1930s, implicitly acknowledged that a conception of a fascist art would, if necessary, evade if not fudge the real, i.e. admitting – however tightly regulated – the powerful imaginary component for fascist aesthetics for which it has been recognized – Buchloh’s “pornography of promises” (of inviolacy). (While, to recall, both *Documents* and the authors of *Germanien* were eager to disassociate their aesthetic concepts from the imaginary, albeit for opposite concerns<sup>372</sup>). Any hitherto aesthetic and ideological potential of the barbaric that within the trajectory laid out so far was claimed both by the avant-garde and a somewhat disorientated and contradictory subset of völkisch fascism as a seemingly inexhaustible vehicle for the raw, the formless, the desirable, the immediate, the authentic/unmediated, the freed, and ultimately the real – the latter by registering as a symptom<sup>373</sup> – was resolutely recanted and ultimately banned from Nazi Germany’s model of (high) art.

While for Bataille and *Documents* generally, the barbaric could indeed serve aesthetic and, to a lesser degree, socio-political ends as critical and formally inventive agency (as per Einstein), leading to an unequivocal endorsement of a relentless stirring up, disintegration and a hollowing out of

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<sup>372</sup> To recap, in the case of Bataille and his circle, since the imaginary was complicit with the corrupt realm of bourgeois diversion, entertainment industry and of course art in the guise of Surrealism that would allow only so much of the unconscious to peek through, at pains to stay clear of any “fouling” caused by a Freud fed through Bataille (“the excremental philosopher” as who Breton had labeled him). And in the case of völkisch-fascism by an anxiety over a precarious barbaric sublime supra-aesthetic cobbled together from a delusional re-assemblage of “national” history and racial identity, a projective infusion of raw and abject material culture of an instable legacy, of a Sinnbild aesthetic that was to be natural and congenital – beyond interpretation – so as to not be faulted for the phantasmagoria it was.

<sup>373</sup> Put differently “the barbaric is a dialectic” (Georges Didi-Huberman from a conversation with the author, February, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013).

“proper” representation, replacing it with images – both archival and novel – of the unstable, the vertiginous, the pathetic, the horrific, the foul and the unintelligible (read deformed, formless, base and perhaps at times *abject*) across historical periods and stages of civilization, this path was much less accessible for a confused (proto-)fascist aesthetic-political program of the late 1920s to early 1930s. Thus, while these groupings were basically in unison in their embrace of the pre-historic and certainly a “hard primitivism”, that next stride towards the contemporary, one very much taken by *Documents*, became severely stalled in this branch of fascist art theory. Or, differently put, one could say it did not become stalled, but the consequences drawn from this overlapping point of departure bifurcated radically once applied to the contemporary. Thus, in the little documentation there is on the Ahnenerbe’s, i.e. the völkisch-fascist actual program for a comprehensive contemporary artistic agenda, the regressive, deeply reactionary character quickly came to the fore. In a concise briefing regarding the setting up of a new sculpture shop for the institution, the following demands and aims were put forward:

After the Ahnenerbe’s work has brought valuable and directive scientific information, exploring the beliefs and attitudes of our ancestors, it is now necessary to make this knowledge effective for the people. It is the task of a determinedly conducted artistic practice, to mediate these findings through the immediate affect of art.

The sculpture studio therefore had the following overriding task:



By way of the artistic, in line with the formal sensibility of contemporary man, to design festival sites, monuments, settlements, graveyards, coffins [!] by employing the Sinnbilder which we attained through scientific work.<sup>374</sup>

That this was incredibly limiting to any artistic practice with even a minimum investment in reflexivity and engagement of any kind (other than engaging blood & soil) was settled by the assertion that this art/applied arts should be achieved “through a form that excludes anything willed”. Again presumably a direct stab at Alois Riegl’s notion of *Kunstwollen*, which Strzygowksi had earlier indicted as “art’s genuine enemy, being conscious work of the intellect”<sup>375</sup>, the fascist artistic student body was on the one hand expected to draw on aesthetic, forceful expression through a spiritual, immediate charge from the ground, abetted by that diligently studied up on yet no less flakey inventory of runic Sinnbild language, while simultaneously eclipsing further intellectual (worldly) investment, suggesting a sort of spiritual-völkisch artist-cum-medium. This, however, was not understood to be or presented as an oppressive situation but, on the contrary, a liberating one, safeguarding “the artist’s personal freedom” as Strzygowski maintained, since the young artist was no more bound to produce the corrupt artefacts requested by and devoted to Power Art. Which, needless to

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<sup>374</sup> BArch NS21/276, “Vorschläge für den Ausbau der Bildhauerwerkstatt des Ahnenerbes”, undated document.

<sup>375</sup> 1922, p. 204: “Das Wollen, das heißt die bewußte Verstandesarbeit ist der natürliche Feind der Kunst, bedingt geradezu die in die Entwicklung eingreifende Unfreiheit. Das Wollen ist Sache jener politischen Bändiger der namenlosen Masse, denen der Künstler in sachlicher Gebundenheit verfällt, wenn er sich zu ihrem Diener hergibt. Dagegen sind des die triebhaften Gewalten seines eigenen Innern, die ihn immer wieder gefühlsmäßig zum Gestalten drängen. Es ist die Natur selbst, die in ihm weiterschafft, in ihr liegt die persönliche Freiheit des Künstlers umschlossen, man mag hinterher aus dem Kunstwerk noch so sehr auf bewußtes Wollen zurückschließen.“

point out, was the height of cynicism (or naivety) since that was exactly what was entailed<sup>376</sup>.

So in view of laying out and pursuing an “avant-gardist” artistic program, völkisch-fascism’s interest and investment into heterogeneity failed at this point, not least by espousing forms and expressions that were too idiosyncratic to effectively relay an aesthetic language for the sake of a national-socialist collective<sup>377</sup>. The movement did not devise aesthetically popular solutions or exert further influence over the artistic program of the regime. The new national artist’s conception as “a free subject” “stirred on by the instinctive forces of his inner self towards emotional creation” (Strzygowski), the artist of “Ausdruckskunst” stemming from “purely instinctual” “desires of expression” (Platzmann) – basically a kind of new barbaric artist creating an art spiritually powerful through runic abstraction and in the service of no authority than himself and his people/“tribe”: Alfred Rosenberg, while somewhat sympathetic of these confused agendas, in 1934 declared them to be all but illegitimate :

In the course of an honest and justified search for new forms and experiences, a part of the German youth is inclined to embrace just this exciting

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<sup>376</sup> Strzygowski elsewhere had defined Power Art as follows: “Diese Machtkunst, bisher für die Kunstgeschichte als sogenannte hohe Kunst nahezu alleingültig, diene im wesentlichen der Aufmachung des Machtgeistes. Große Steinbauten und schauspielernde Menschengestalten waren ihre Wirkunsmittel.” 1940, p. 109

In other words Speer’s Luitpoldarena erected for the Reichsparteitag, with Goebbels’ crowd choreography famously captured by Leni Riefenstahl’s cinematography in her “Triumph des Willens” (1934).

<sup>377</sup> While for Einstein, it should be noted, “[...] the legitimacy of any art required of it its instrumentality in forming a collective subjectivity”. Quoted in Haxthausen, *October* 107, 2004, p.74

[nervenerregend] formula [abstraction, expressionism] as typical of the Germanic character. Ecstasy has nowhere been a pivotal element in German art history.<sup>378</sup>

Hitler himself had little taste for anything vaguely barbaric as far as aesthetics were concerned, which he made quite clear in his inauguration speech for the Haus der Deutschen Kunst:

Now however all these cliques of dilettantes and art frauds supporting and thus sustaining each other will be removed. These pre-historic Stone Age men of culture [Kultursteinzeitler] and stutterers of art [Kunststotterer] may, for all we care, return to the caves of their ancestors, to apply their primitive international [!] scribbles [Kritzeleien] there<sup>379</sup>.

Hence the “Great German Art” proudly presented in 1937 did not bear any traces of abstraction, of oblique runes, of quasi pre-historic legacies of Atlantis, of that treasured non-representational and non-human “German” ornamentation and geometric patterning, of an “emphasis on space, tone, color, volume”, etc., not to mention the grotesqueness and wicked expressions of German medieval folk art and rural carnival rites embraced by the völkisch segment<sup>380</sup>.

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<sup>378</sup> Alfred Rosenberg, *Revolution in der bildenden Kunst?*, Munich 1934, p. 6

<sup>379</sup> Adolf Hitler, “Aus der Ansprache des Führers zur Eröffnung des Hauses der Deutschen Kunst”. *Das Bild*, 1937, p. 259

<sup>380</sup> Christoph Zuschlag writes: “The hope of the ‘völkisch’ the regime would consider it a point of honor “to deploy the proven soldiers of the cultural war in the first row” would not be realized.” *Entartete Kunst*, 1995, p. 36

*Documents* on the other hand had, by 1937, long folded, while the Collège de Sociologie was founded that year, as was Bataille's journal *Acéphale*. Its content, predominantly stemming from Bataille, sought to further analyze fascism's energetic pull over a large mass, its co-optation of Nietzsche, its deployment of myth by way of Rosenberg et al, all in order to conceive an anti-fascist model for a society that not only rejected mass culture and failed parliamentary democracy but furthermore had evidently lost any interest in and expectation for art to play any significant part in this undertaking. The notion of a diverging "contradictory social state" that Bataille had linked to a deviating aesthetic in *Documents* had completely evaporated. In the somewhat cryptic and quite dramatic final text appearing in the last issue of *Documents* belatedly in 1931, Bataille conceived of art as the realm of endless and inconsequential "transpositions". "We enter art galleries as we do the chemist's, seeking well-presented remedies for accepted sicknesses"<sup>381</sup>, thus in a way confirming Freud's notion of art as merely serving an aesthetically compensatory function devoid of any political or social agency (while Freud of course did not even think of art as the realm in which symptoms were registered since art remedied these). No wonder, given the kind of scenarios Bataille envisioned for a social model in which art would essentially have to drop transposition and deliver the *real thing to (be)come alive*, essentially forsaking art altogether, especially modern art:

We are a long way from those savages who, at the time of their enormous festivals, suspend the skulls of their ancestors from masts of plenty, who press their father's shinbone into the mouth of a pig at the moment when the

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<sup>381</sup> Bataille, "The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions", *Documents* 8, 1931. In Ades/Baker, 2006, p.242

slaughtered beast vomits its flood of blood. We also play with endless shinbones and skulls; everywhere animal and human blood flows all around us. But we do not know how to use blood or bones to break the regularity of days which are lost to us like the contents of a badly made cask.<sup>382</sup>

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid.



### VII.1 Barbaric participation

Bataille's final conclusion at the end of *Documents*, in which he essentially divests art of any efficacy in contributing to a different social and political model through a combative anti-aesthetic (a divestment concerning a select and by and large French avant-garde which had throughout *Documents* featured as the promising vanguard<sup>384</sup>), seems inevitable given his desire to revive a barbaric community of

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<sup>383</sup> This chapter heading refers back to Denis Hollier's essay "The Use-Value of the Impossible" which appeared first, in French, as the foreword to the reprint of *Documents* (Paris, 1991) subsequently adopted by Bois and turned into the heading "The Use Value of 'Formless'" in his and Krauss's book *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York, 1997). (Hollier in turn referenced Bataille's text "The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade (An Open Letter to My Current Comrades)", 1929/30). The opposition of "class struggle" and "de-classing" refers to Bois's respective presentation of these terms in his discussion in *Formless*.

<sup>384</sup> Which is explicable in view of the trajectory of German avant-garde art of the late 1920s with the emergence of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, this expression alone presumably not met with much enthusiasm by either Bataille or Einstein. Einstein, despite his initial participation in Berlin Dada by way of his and George Grosz's satirical magazine *Der Blutige Ernst*, was skeptical of the movement as a whole though: their usage of (commercial) imagery and strategies directly relating to those of mass media and propaganda (photography, illustration, collage) in his view reproduced and thus reaffirmed a rationalizing "tectonic" aesthetic instead of countering it by offering the kind of abstracted-deconstructing "tectonic hallucination" as claimed for the Surrealism of a Picasso, Miro, André Masson etc. A notion of avant-garde that for Einstein as already mentioned derived its principal achievement from a collective "use-value": "Their images [Berlin Dada, *Neue Sachlichkeit*] do not have the power of binding symbols". *Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 1992, p.844

As for Bataille, one can only presume that on a formal level alone the work of the mid to late 1920s coming out of Berlin did not offer much in terms of formlessness, heterogeneity let alone aspects of an abject sacred.

sorts – one not confined to an anti-aesthetic project, as his attempt to form such a mythical-barbaric community by way of Acéphale confirms<sup>385</sup>.

Which is also to say that, if Bataille relegated avant-garde aspirations to a continual, yet basically impotent “play of transpositions”, the same could be said of Bataille’s relation to the barbaric, one essentially - and literally - travelling from one social-geographic imaginary to another. (I.e. Bataille *transposed* his ideas for a quasi-barbaric social model onto conceptions gleaned from perceptive archival research and thereof derived fantastic excesses, be that in form of a Gaulish, Aztec, Iberian, Chicago mob or Parisian demimonde-Lumpen “barbaric” community.)

When viewed separately from his objective to somehow reconnect with that dubious inner barbarian, Bataille’s overall judgment of the avant-garde at the end of *Documents* is far less idiosyncratic but posits, rather, the alleged failure of the avant-garde to successfully translate an anti-aesthetic revolutionary

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<sup>385</sup> Where as part of the meetings held in the Marly forest outside Paris one of the members (Patrick Waldberg, Bataille, Andre Masson, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Ambrosino, Jean Wahl, Jules Monnerot) was supposed to “volunteer” to be sacrificed for the group’s initiation rite, a plan that never came to fruition. (According to Moebius the member volunteering to be sacrificed was Bataille himself, a wish not granted by the other three members present on that occasion. Moebius, 2006, p. 271) That despite all these sectarian antics Acéphale may also be viewed as a sort of occultist proto-Situationism is plausible by anecdotes such as the group’s “rituals” (read cultic détournements) described by Allan Stoekl: “One of the Acéphale rituals – which was never carried out – was to soak a human skull in brine until it became soft and malleable, then place it at the base of the obelisk in the Place de la Concorde on January 21 (1938?); the Press was then to be notified of the very mysterious reappearance of the king’s skull.” Bataille, 1985, p. 263. For an extensive historical account of the group Acéphale see Marina Galetti *L’Apprenti Sorcier*, Paris 1999, Rita Bischof, *Tragisches Lachen*, Berlin 2010



program into a social reality, as claimed by Peter Bürger <sup>386</sup>. Bürger uses Hegel's notion of "aufheben" (sublate) for such an aspired to transformation, a sublation that according to him did not occur and therefore confirms his view of the impossibility of the avant-garde, in hindsight, to realize an anti-aesthetic revolutionary project within "social life" ("Lebenspraxis")<sup>387</sup>. Of particular relevance to this discussion is Bürger's elaboration of the anti-aesthetic device of shock as having become an "institutionalized" experience, a part of consumer culture, which would be a continuation of Benjamin's situating of shock around the early 1930s<sup>388</sup>: as an anti-bourgeois Dada tactic, becoming fully employed not as anti-aesthetic device, nor as a chief political-ecstatic instance of heterogeneity (Bataille), but as a key component to cinematic experience and

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<sup>386</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a.M., 1974. Here it would seem important to co-introduce Denis Hollier's critique of Bürger's critique issuing, as it does, a wholesale verdict of failure to the historical avant-garde. Hollier writes: "The iconoclastic radicalism of the avant-garde sets salvation through the group against salvation through works.[...] And it is precisely what is implemented by community authority: It requires a number of people to do nothing. How can one then blame the avant-garde for having failed "in its attempt to lead art back into social life", when the real content of most of the avant-garde groups was precisely a communal experiment, i.e. an experiment in transforming social life into art?" Hollier (ed), 1988, p. xiv

<sup>387</sup> "The avant-garde art intends a sublation of autonomous art into social life. This sublation has not taken place and presumably cannot take place in bourgeois society, unless in form of a wrong sublation of autonomous art. That there exists such a wrong sublation is evinced by popular literature and the aesthetics of the commodity.[...] In late capitalist society the intentions of the historical avant-garde are being realized under inverted signs" pp.72-73. Bataille's depreciated "play of transpositions" of modern art would thus seem to correspond with that of Bürger's "falsche Aufhebung" (even though Bürger's avant-garde's sublation into everyday life would doubtlessly yield a very different "Lebenspraxis" than the kind of "ecstasy of social life" project envisioned by Bataille).

<sup>388</sup> Regarding the socio-cultural trajectory of shock Bürger writes: "[...] one has to ask oneself if this provocation [i.e. Zurich Dada's evenings at the Cabaret Voltaire] actually doesn't reinforce existing attitudes [the bourgeois audience's] by providing an occasion for these to manifest themselves. [...] Nothing loses its affect more quickly than shock, because it is by nature a unique experience. [...] An institutionalized shock would most likely affect the recipients' social life [Lebenspraxis] the least; it is being 'consumed'". p.108.

therefore a perpetually recycled staple of popular culture devoid of any transformative value.

Bataille's resignation pertaining to the dissolution of an anti-aesthetic project such as *Documents* again refers, however, to Benjamin Buchloh's discussion of the last pre-war Surrealist exhibition in Paris 1938, organized by Breton, Paul Eluard and Duchamp: the "Exposition Internationale du Surrealiste". Buchloh revisits this exhibition as a quasi-final statement of the European avant-garde vis-à-vis the eradication of the avant-garde as evinced by the art of the new Germany: as a testament to a "universal prostitution" and, by extension, the avant-garde's admission to be (ineffectively) operating within or rather to have become fully absorbed by (or, to enlist Bürger, *wrongly sublated* into) "a community defined by commodity consumption"; all this while the Nazi regime had simultaneously successfully realized the "annihilation of the aesthetic sphere".<sup>389</sup>

If Walter Benjamin had stated more than a year ahead of the "Degenerate Art Exhibition", the parallel "Great German Art Exhibition" and the "Exposition Internationale du Surrealiste" that "[...] humankind's [i.e. Western society's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order"<sup>390</sup>, it is a diagnosis that in the context under discussion here pertains to not only one, or two but three (historical) scenarios. Firstly, Benjamin's own historical context: that of a large-scale

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<sup>389</sup> Benjamin Buchloh: "Designs and Dialectics of Annihilation". Lecture, Haus der Kunst, Munich, June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012

<sup>390</sup> Benjamin, 1936, penultimate sentence.

voluntary and participatory submission to Nazism and the promise of a kind of political ecstasy that perversely conflates politics and aesthetics. Secondly, the trajectory laid out by Buchloh, i.e. the voluntary “universal prostitution” of modern society to mass and commodity culture with its promise of a kind of material ecstasy. Doubtless, while “prostitution” does not equal “destruction”<sup>391</sup> and capitalist consumerism certainly does not equal Nazi fascism, the way “prostitution” is employed by Buchloh implies again a submission to a system of ultimately social deterioration by way of administered/managed consumerist desire. I.e., a submission to a *regime* of capitalism, one indeed sold as and “experienced [...] as aesthetic pleasure” (Benjamin). With Bataille, a third angle emerges when linked to a notion of barbarity. For if Benjamin asserted that the collective “experience[d] its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure”, this would in principal correspond with Bataille’s admired (phantasmagoric) Aztec culture’s excessive human sacrifices, which not only revealed “an astonishingly joyous character of [these] horrors”<sup>392</sup>, but which Bataille furthermore alleges was an instance of “[...] the Aztecs wanting to serve these strange people (Cortez’ Spaniards) as ‘spectacle’ and ‘theatre’, to tempt them to laughter’, to offer them ‘diversion’ ”.<sup>393</sup>

A collective-barbaric scenario in which “self-alienation” – conceived as a state not caused by but, on the contrary, co-opted or distorted by both mass

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<sup>391</sup> Although, one last time, according to Benjamin “distraction [Zerstreuung] and destruction [Zerstörung]” were “the subjective and objective sides of one and the same process”. Benjamin, 2008 [1936], p. 56

<sup>392</sup> Bataille quoted in Krauss 1985, p.55

<sup>393</sup> Bataille, 1928. in *Kulturgeschichte und Modernität Lateinamerikas*, ed. Constantin von Barloewen, Berlin, 1996, p.216. (Trans. by the author)

culture and a fascist surrendering of the self – could point to an “ecstatic loss of oneself” as much as it could point to an attainment of that “wholly other” state Bataille had discussed on numerous occasions<sup>394</sup>. (In the case of fascism, not a state of alienation but, on the contrary, one of coalescing with the tightly choreographed (homogenous and headed) body politic of the Volk). I.e., self-alienation as the desired sacred state of a transgressing of one’s own subjectivity, which Bataille envisioned taking place in a communitarian setting at the time of the Collège de Sociologie and which would subsequently form the central topic of *Inner Experience* (1943), as limit-experience: a recurring theme throughout

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<sup>394</sup> On this see especially Dominique Kunz Westhoff, “Face au nazisme: ‘faire image’”. In: *Critique* 788-789, Jan-Feb 2013, pp. 31-42. “Chez Bataille [...] cette reformation de la société autour d’une figuration de ce qui la terrifie n’est pas véritablement destinée à se stabiliser. Sa description du sentiment communiel semble plutôt conduire le groupe, *in fine*, à une dissolution généralisée [...] un sacrifice sans rémission de toute identité, et même de toute entité [...]”, p.38

Bataille, appearing as late as in the 1961 art historical study *Tears of Eros*<sup>395</sup>. “Self-alienation”, in Bataille’s conception of a re-sacralized social model, could essentially be redeemed from its corruption by fascism<sup>396</sup> and mass culture to become a central feature of “the true world of lovers”<sup>397</sup>, one in which a sovereign act to alienate oneself from the self would mark a condition for the realization of a group like *Acéphale* – not a condition symptomatic of decay/catastrophe (Benjamin), or of discontent (Freud), or of disenchantment (Weber),

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<sup>395</sup> Bataille annotated his valued illustration from the Codex Vaticanus depicting the “Aztec sacrifice through the tearing out of the heart” with the following caption, first in 1939: “Human sacrifice is loftier than any other – not in the sense that it is crueler than any other, but because it is close to the only sacrifice without trickery, which can only be the ecstatic loss of oneself”. “Le sacré”, *Cahiers d’art* 1939, in Bataille, 1985, p.244. The same image appears at the end of *Tears of Eros*, after the photographs of a Voodoo ritual involving trance and self-mutilation and next to the aforementioned image of the “Chinese torture of the 100 pieces” (a body pulled into hundred pieces), the “punishment reserved for utmost crimes” (Bataille).

This notion of “ecstatic loss” tied to a socio-political project is the crux underlying the irreconcilability of Benjamin with Bataille throughout the activities of the *College de Sociologie*, which Benjamin attended yet was not really a part of as such. All discussions on this disconnect (by Hollier, Moebius, Stoekl for example) point to the fact that according to Benjamin it was precisely the communitarian mythical-irrational tendencies (sought to be reinvigorated by the *College*) sprouting in fin-de-siecle Germany that contributed to the eventual pull of Nazism. In hindsight a pull that gained its efficacy not from offering anything substantial in terms of, say, irrational *völkisch*-pagan interests, but on the contrary, by providing very solid matrixes to absorb these earlier jumbled spiritual searches and wanderings: that of a concrete Reich complete with a solid system of initial separation and ultimate “*Selektion*”. It is not least due to these solid matrixes that the regime is wholly compatible with rationalizing aspects, with modernization including infrastructure, with industrial productivity and so forth. Departing from this episode of disjuncture in intellectual history to the wider historical context Bataille’s investment into communal human sacrifice as kind of ultimate state/State is problematic. To exalt human sacrifice for a social concept recuperating the sacred and ecstasy at the moment of an evolving organization of mass extermination is what makes Bataille’s exceptional theorization of fascism so challenging - and perplexing. (Keeping in mind that Bataille’s knowledge of the actual nature of the camps was either non-existing or very limited at the time).

<sup>396</sup> With regard to a “corrupted” notion of human sacrifice in view of Nazism, i.e. the holocaust, it is quite striking that Bataille’s in his text on the Aztecs (1928) concludes that despite their “bizarre ecstasy” in sacrificing themselves “they died as suddenly as insects being crushed.” Von Barloewen (ed.), p.216. Through which he actually prognosticates Agamben’s critique of a “misconstruction” of ecstatic/sacred notion of execution with a biopolitical rationale (for which Agamben quotes Hitler speaking of exterminating the Jews “like lice”). See chapter 3

<sup>397</sup> Bataille, “The Sorcerer’s Apprentice”, in Bataille, 1985, p.229 (First in the journal *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* No.228, 1938)

and of course not of self-estrangement as originally defined by Marx<sup>398</sup>. This situation, or rather the location of the barbaric as central to Bataille's thinking at the time of *Documents* (and surely continuing, indeed intensifying at the time of the Collège and *Acéphale*) was articulated by Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois in their revisiting of *Documents*. For, in their publication *L'Informe: mode d'emploi*, which appeared in conjunction with their influential 1996 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, Bois identified the barbaric as a crucial factor underlying Bataille's anti-aesthetic project of *Documents*. The following passage by Bois thematically touches on just that complex presented so far in this chapter, making it necessary to quote it at length. Significant for this discussion, Bois introduces his argument concerning a Bataillean barbaric with Bataille's polemic of the institution of the "Museum", an entry to the Critical Dictionary:

'The museum is the colossal mirror in which man finally contemplates himself from all sides, finds himself literally admirable, and abandons himself to the ecstasy expressed in all the art journals'; (an expression of ecstasy that the *Documents* reader would thus have the right to expect but which he would find no trace of in the review). We should resist the temptation to read these sentences by Bataille as a presage to the unforgettable phrase uttered several

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<sup>398</sup> This idea of a Bataillean sovereign self-alienation as positivity registers in part in the revised "rehabilitated" notions of community laid out by Jean-Luc Nancy, for example in *Being Singular Plural* (and in Agamben's *The Coming Community*). How such a reclaiming of self-alienation may have returned in culture generally, first as a counter-cultural political-sexual "liberation" and consequently reformulated as the various "lose yourself" esoteric-materialist-narcissistic pursuits and lifestyle trends, complete with a thriving industry advertising these prospects, necessitates yet another debate; i.e. any notion of self-alienation now, if one can call it that, is principally to satisfy a pampering and *productive* treatment for the self. It is from this context that a title and a work like *Get rid of yourself* (Bernadette Corporation, 2001-03) in part derives its concept: "*Get Rid of Yourself* is an encounter with emerging, non-instituted or identity-less forms of protest. [...] The crisis it announces is the sudden return of history, but this time without characters or a story, and of a politics without subjects". <http://anarchistwithoutcontent.wordpress.com/2011/07/04/get-rid-of-yourself-transcript/>

years later [1936] by Walter Benjamin (“There is no document of culture that is not at the same time a record [document] of barbarism”) since this would be to push Bataille’s thought toward Marxism, with which he was engaged only very briefly [...] always maintaining his distance. Bataille was less interested in class struggle than in de-classing, and barbarism was something to which Bataille appealed with all his might. No Marxist could have penned the following sentences: ‘Without a profound complicity with natural forces such as violent death, gushing blood, sudden catastrophes and the horrible cries of pain that accompany them, terrifying ruptures of what had seemed immutable, the fall into stinking filth of what had been elevated – without a sadistic understanding of an incontestably thundering and torrential nature, there could be no revolutionaries, there could only be a revolting utopian sentimentality’<sup>399</sup>

Several points can be extrapolated from this paragraph, from Bois’s veto of an alignment of Bataille’s appeal to “barbarism” with Benjamin’s dismal “document[s] of barbarity”; the object par excellence of historical materialism; the irrefutable evidence renewing the cause time and again for the historical to a

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<sup>399</sup> *Formless: A User’s Guide*, New York, 1997 [Paris, 1996], pp. 47-49. Bataille’s text “Museum” first published in *Documents*. Benjamin’s quote first appeared in “Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker” [Eduard Fuchs, collector and historian] (1937) and again in “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” [Theses on the philosophy of history] (1940). Bataille’s quote in the end is from “La valeur d’usage de D.A.F de Sade”, apx. 1929/30, posthumously published in the *Oeuvres Complètes* II, English version in Bataille, 1985, p. 101

post-War left to ask: “Barbarei oder Sozialismus?”<sup>400</sup>; *Socialisme ou barbarie?*<sup>401</sup>. And, last but not least, the implication of (contemporary) art as an *institution* (i.e. not primarily understood as a physical place, such as Bataille’s bourgeois “Museum”) arguably providing the space and the faculties to address barbarity (as a “dialectic”, if one will), employed as an instrument/procedure of critique<sup>402</sup>. Neither as (non-ironic) formal barbarization with the end of mere formal innovation nor as a (non-ironic) iconoclastic pose within the now rather flexible parameters of the institution; and not in the sense of mobilizing content that unambiguously cries out “barbarism!” consistent with visual culture at large, from the “true” depictions of photo journalism to “fictitious” ones of the entertainment industry. (Not because art is not at once “true” and “fictitious”,

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<sup>400</sup> A statement habitually attributed to Rosa Luxemburg who however in her 1916 text “Die Krise der Sozialdemokratie” pointed out her usage of this antagonism to be indebted to Friedrich Engels:

“Friedrich Engels sagte einmal: die bürgerliche Gesellschaft steht vor einem Dilemma: entweder Übergang zum Sozialismus oder Rückfall in die Barbarei.[...]. Dieser Weltkrieg – das ist ein Rückfall in die Barbarei. [...]. Wir stehen also heute, genau wie Friedrich Engels vor einem Menschenalter, vor vierzig Jahren, voraussagte, vor der Wahl: entweder Triumph des Imperialismus und Untergang jeglicher Kultur, wie im alten Rom, Entvölkerung, Verödung, Degeneration [!], ein großer Friedhof. [...] Dies ist ein Dilemma der Weltgeschichte, ein Entweder-Oder, dessen Waagschalen zitternd schwanken vor dem Entschluß des klassenbewußten Proletariats. Die Zukunft der Kultur und der Menschheit hängt davon ab, ob das Proletariat sein revolutionäres Kampfschwert mit männlichem Entschluß in die Waagschale wirft”.

<http://www.marxists.org/deutsch/archiv/luxemburg/1916/junius/teil1.htm> Retrieved April 19th 2013

<sup>401</sup> A group and a magazine founded by Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort in 1949 with an anti-Stalinist agenda, pursuing a pragmatic realization of Marxist concepts in post-war France. The magazine folded in 1965, the group in 1967 (Lefort had left it earlier).

<sup>402</sup> The changed role of the institution, its previous illiteracy in adequately dealing with this “document of barbarism” – a staple of any old biennial by now, a curatorial requisite – was pointed out by Hal Foster in his discussion of the eminent 1984 MoMA exhibition “Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art”: “In its very lack, the show suggested the need of a Foucauldian archeology of primitivism [...] Such an enterprise is beyond the museum, the business of which is patronage – the formation of a paternal tradition against the transgressive outside, a documentation of civilization, not the barbarism underneath.” “The ‘Primitive Unconscious’ of Modern Art”, *October* Vol. 34, 1985, p.55



since it is of course both, but if its exclamations do not differ conceptually from those above, it would make them superfluous, products of photo journalism arguably being more “informative” and those of entertainment industry arguably more “entertaining”).

First, rather than determining that “Bataille was less interested in class struggle than in de-classing”, one can posit rather that with/for Bataille “class struggle” ideally yielded or, in fact, is sublated in political/social “de-classing”<sup>403</sup>. This was a process through which a uniform, organized “Marxist” proletariat would ideally progress towards the formal (non-)structure of a counter-Marx Lumpenproletariat, which Marx had defined as “the whole indefinite,

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<sup>403</sup> Stephan Möbius actually makes a similar argument however explicitly in connection to *Acéphale*: “Acéphale was not only religiously motivated but strived to in a sense practice a sublation (in the Hegelian sense) of politics into religion, so that politics and everyday religious life would not pose oppositions [...]. 2006,, p. 254. Again the point is well taken in terms of the description of the process but just like Moebius’s earlier use of “order” in terms of the Collège’s aspirations for a social model to employ the very notion of “religion” as the desired realm of *Acéphale* (the group) makes for an unfortunate choice of terminology. Already in the “Use-value of de Sade” text (1929/30) Bataille clearly distinguished between “religion” and what he calls “practical and theoretical *heterology*” (essentially enacted by *Acéphale* the group and *Acéphale* the journal). “In practice one must understand by religion not really that which answers the need for the unlimited projection (expulsion or excretion) of human nature, but the totality of prohibitions, obligations, and partial freedom that socially channel and regularize this projection. [...] It [religion] betrays the needs that it was not only supposed to regulate, but satisfy.” 1985, pp.96-97.

disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither [hin- und her geworfen]<sup>404</sup>. A necessarily “de-classed” social primal structure, the only one plausible perhaps to allow for a consequent, and no doubt equally “utopian”<sup>405</sup>, not “disintegrated” (Marx) but “bi-or polycephalic” (Bataille) community. I.e., a community devoted to a “frenzy of forms” (1929) and acting as a “frenzied being” (1936), presenting a political *formlessness*, a “being” literally confounding identifiers such as “*the workers*”, “*the proletariat*”, “*the party*” etc., *homogeneities*

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<sup>404</sup> “...die ganze unbestimmte, aufgelöste, hin- und hergeworfene Masse...” Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*, Berlin 1960 [1852] p. 160.

English: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch05.htm>

And to further elucidate this structural correspondence Marx’s very expression, “thrown hither and thither” also resembles Bataille’s notion of the “va-et-vient” in the text “The Big Toe”:

“Although within the body blood flows in equal quantities from high to low and from low to high, there is a bias in favor of that which elevates itself, and human life is erroneously seen as an elevation”. Brotchie (ed.) 1995, p.20. “Va-et-vient” in French refers to both a vertical up-and-down (i.e. in this case class hierarchy) and a more horizontal “hither and thither” movement. Also see Didie-Huberman, 2010, p.185

Hollier makes a similar point: “By contrast, the Lumpenproletariat – which unlike an organized proletariat, represents nothing – would be a heterogeneity that, turned loose, would bring on the disintegration of all the structures guaranteeing the homogeneity of the social edifice”. *Against Architecture*, trans. Betsy Wing, Cambridge/Mass, 1992 p.125-126. “Social edifice” is a term used by Bataille in the DAF de Sade text.

(In a discussion by Krauss on the Batailleian Lumpenproletariat she draws on a translation in which “hither and thither” is replaced by “amorphous [...] flotsam and jetsam” “”. While less accurate in view of the original German text, this makes for a more palpable illustration of the “excremental and expelled” notion of the Lumpen/refuse (non)-constituency. Krauss, “Informe without Conclusion”, *October* Vol. 78, 1996, p.100)

<sup>405</sup> A utopian notion disclaimed by Bataille when he writes: “The revolutionary impulse of the proletarian masses is, moreover, sometimes implicitly and sometimes openly treated as sacred, and that is why it is possible to use the word *Revolution* entirely stripped of its utilitarian meaning, without however, giving it an idealist meaning.” 1985, p.100 What Bataille means by “utilitarian” is surely the post-revolutionary emergence of a heroic organized socialist/Marxist political system, Luxemburg’s “class-conscious proletariat” (thus the exact opposite of Bataille’s self-definition for such a group). The “revolution” is “utilitarian” also of course due to the actual redistribution of wealth and the reappropriation of the means of production for a collective worker state (again opposite Bataille’s ideal since while being affirmative of redistribution, his political teleology would be non-accumulative expenditure, not utility and production). “Idealist” in the sense of the revolution being orientated towards an abstract ideal (say, Jacobinian or bourgeois *liberté, égalité, fraternité*). Utopian, finally, because Bataille’s *revolting*, in the double sense, *being* is in itself idealist though: as a desired – and unrealized – anti-ideal.

as Bataille would say<sup>406</sup>. For Bois also omits the part directly preceding Bataille's typically excessive scenario of this formless frenzy. There Bataille's introduces the in this case odd term of "participation", i.e. a democratic process (albeit naturally not in the sense of parliamentary democracy). *Participation* is in fact defined (extra-)politically in this same paragraph Bois draws on:

Participation – in the purely psychological sense as well as in the active sense of the word – does not only commit revolutionaries to a particular politics, for example, to the establishment of socialism throughout the world. It is also – and necessarily – presented as moral participation: immediate participation in the destructive act of the revolution [...].<sup>407</sup>

So overall the actual political goal, or in fact the potential of Bataillean thinking, remains uncertain and therefore contested<sup>408</sup>. While some, such as Moebius, argue that the kind of revolutionary frenzy yearned for by Bataille serves as a

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<sup>406</sup> A later, more nihilistic than utopian version thereof is essentially outlined by Agamben in his own (a)political version of political formlessness: the *Coming Community* (1991) of "whatever singularities", of "scattered existences" (barbaric? nomadic? Or actually post-fordist hypermobile?), of "indifference", "amorphous" (i.e. already semantically indebted to Bataille's formless as well as Marx' Lumpenproletariat). A community in which, in accordance with Agamben's overall adoption of Bataille, transgressive ecstasy sobers up to a rationally calculating (un-)co-operativeness if not professionalized deviation, undermining/playing the system from inside, perverting its protocols (which as such would actually in part correspond to the demands of a "practice of resistance" from within the institution formulated by Foster in the early 1980s in *The Anti-Aesthetic*; who however never insinuates this kind of post-political illicitness). No doubt this explains Agamben's appeal – that of post-political *insurrection* – to not only para-anarchic groups (Tiqqun/Invisible Committee) but to their "transposition" onto certain artistic practices (say, Claire Fontaine) that in turn may present a post-institutional critique variant of Foster's quest to "dissolve the line between critical and creative forms" (Seattle, 1983).

<sup>407</sup> Bataille, 1985, p.100

<sup>408</sup> Specifically in regard to Marxism Stoekl writes: "Bataille's position vis-à-vis Marxism is, to say the least, a complex one. While it seems that at least up until 1936 he was trying to join his notion of expenditure to the negativity envisaged by Marxism [...] Bataille recognizes a rending conflict between a devotion to expenditure and a devotion to the revolutionary productivity and utility valorized by Marxism." 1985, p.xxv f22

transitional stage towards a “pragmatic” organization of a (sacred, sexual, decentralized-communist, transgressive) community, someone like Sylvère Lotringer seems to doubt this second stage to have ever been of interest to Bataille, not even in theory. Lotringer makes this point through an argument quite different from that of Bois (who removes the Bataille of the *Informe* from the quasi-activist Bataille writing for *La Critique Sociale*). Lotringer writes: “Expecting nothing else from the revolution than revolution itself, he [Bataille] remained this strange political hybrid – an ultra-leftist mystic; a fanatic without a cause”<sup>409</sup>. This is correct in so far as the idea of the revolution for the revolution’s sake does indeed seem to hold the highest value with Bataille, again in line with formlessness as a political process/event. To say, however, that Bataille is “without a cause” is irresponsible to the fact that the cause is indeed this *participation*, as problematic, “psychoaesthetic” (Bréton) and indeed “barbaric” as this participation and its “cause” may be: a cause which can almost exclusively only be one of a minority such as a secret society or a cult, in the vein of Bataille’s own attempt with *Acéphale*, (and Caillois’ more resplendent pipe dreams.)

Bataille not only spoke of revolution in his “Letter to my current comrades” but, further, of a “postrevolutionary phase”, (although it is somewhat difficult to make out how exactly this phase significantly differed from the “revolutionary phase”):

All organizations that have ecstasy and frenzy as their goal (the spectacular deaths of animals, partial tortures, orgiastic dances etc.) will have no reason to

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<sup>409</sup> Sylvère Lotringer (ed), *More & Less 2*, New York 1999, p.6. He also calls him – and Bréton – a “fascist by default”.

disappear when a heterological conception of human life is substituted for the primitive conception"<sup>410</sup>.

What is perhaps more critical though is that Bataille here introduces a demarcation of concepts, untying, as he does, the "heterological" from the "primitive" (even if it substitutes it, which is still a distinction). Crucial here, then, are not the already established Bataillean societal paradigms of "frenzy" and "ecstasy" – definitely means to an end in for example fascism; largely an end in themselves for Bataille – but this "substitution" he intends. Since he is speaking of a "postrevolutionary phase", i.e. something located in the near future, he also identifies the primitive as a category that can only be a stagnant concept, a regressive state, tied to a time and a place. Even if the primitive is conjured as a phantasmagoric time and place – which is how it traditionally appears in the history of Western art, as primitivism – it ultimately does not really provide the template for a "postrevolutionary phase" in Bataille's (a)political vision. (And, by extension, holds out little in terms of percipience in an aesthetic context).

The barbaric, by comparison, when "substituting" the surely no less abstract term of "heterology", is quite the opposite: its localization poses a continual challenge as to where to locate it and according to which criteria – it is locatable both at the heart of culture/society/politics as well as at its peripheries and is thus also a condition that is specifically tied to the present. Hence I think it would be appropriate to say that barbarism holds a more crucial position in Bataille's overall writing than primitivism (whether hard or soft): primitivism from the outset in *Documents* having been a subject of suspicion; purchased, as it

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<sup>410</sup> 1985, pp.101-102

was, by the gallery, as much as by the emporium. *Documents* addressed the problematic of primitive and primitivism, not least by accepting the resultant contradictions in applying and locating the term, evidently so in view of Leiris's writing discussed in the first chapter.

With regard to Benjamin's short-lived idea of a "positive barbarity", now again pertaining to a more or less strictly aesthetic project, the barbaric is conceived as situated in the near future, as progressive, in the form of an aesthetic critique and novelty. Which also explains why it would never have made sense for Benjamin in this context (and generally) to engage any notion of the primitive in the first place. The primitive cannot be new, the barbaric by contrast seems to be compulsorily tied to the new since it registers in the (drastic) changes of social and political realities. (And by new I do not mean to put forward a positivist progressive/linear term of novelty but to emphasize an untying of the barbaric from not only the primitive but furthermore the archaic: in other words, it is aligned with the everyday). And, just like these social and political spheres, the attendant notion of the barbaric is thus subject to continual instability.

Before discussing how the barbaric may "effectively" register or even engage in any *transpositional* context without evaporating into the art historically devaluated plot to supersede or transgress the market and the institution (which can of course easily be achieved by abandoning these) however, it is important to first look at how Krauss and Bois actually sought to realize this attempt by way of their Pompidou exhibition. And before re-assessing any "use-value of the formless" (Bois), i.e. of Bataille by Krauss and Bois, the art historical trajectory leading up to this deployment of Bataille ought

to be briefly revisited, since engaging Bataille to the ends of an art historical agenda whose aim it was to undo the theorization of high Modernism, “to read it against the grain” (Krauss), did not just suddenly occur in the mid 1990s. Rather, the show and the ideas presented in the book present a kind of conclusion of a discussion, which in Krauss’s and Bois’s case and in connection with a “rediscovery” of Bataille, had commenced roughly a decade earlier.

## **VII.2 Barbaric critique**

Krauss’s initial usage of Bataille, beginning in the mid 1980s, unfolds via two parallel and intersecting debates. One is her employment of the Bataillean formlessness, base materialism and heterogeneity in the context of her critique of a narrative that had unambiguously aligned the development and achievements of the avant-garde with an exotic primitivism first and foremost serving as a source for formal novelty and otherness and roughly speaking coming to fruition as new additions to the Western artist’s “toolbox” while confirming his ingenious talent. (Or, alternatively, out of an artistic crisis to remember Carl Einstein’s taunting “Hilflos negert der Unoriginelle” [The unoriginal artist helplessly copies the negro]). The avant-garde artist, in this critiqued development, had somehow ingeniously appropriated and fused the novelty and otherness of exotic primitivism with his (not her in this context) own advances in conceiving a vanguard aesthetic, and in which this otherness was enthusiastically embraced (essentially gleaned during a visit to the Trocadéro) by the modern artist without speaking to the underlying fraught colonialist

subtext that such an embrace would imply<sup>411</sup>. Her critique of this narrative likewise focused on the trajectory of “softening”, by which these modernist-primitivist works merely siphoned formal elements<sup>412</sup> from religiously or magically imbued objects linked to a social context, thus presenting a form of unreflected appropriation art. Furthermore, since the contexts of the respective tribal or archaic cultures frequently involved markedly corporeal, non-abstract scenarios, including utterly violent ones (e.g. the Aztecs), Krauss points to the contradiction in engaging this aesthetic otherness for the benefit of modernist “vision”, because this aesthetic other was inextricably bound up with the body and not with abstraction into non-corporeal experience and the artwork’s autonomy. This arc is contained or manifested in Krauss’s notion of a “soft primitivism”, a category that is both a contemporaneous consequence of and ultimately the avant-garde’s shortcoming vis-à-vis a project like *Documents*, which Krauss claims to have pursued this “hard primitivism” since it precisely tied these exotic novelties to phenomena of an assumed to be fully rationalized yet damaged everyday as well as to destabilized representations of the canon of

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<sup>411</sup> Which as Hal Foster points out is a scenario graspable within the actual historical context (which Foster however locates earlier in the kind of precursor artists of primitivism, notably Paul Gauguin). It is not acceptable though in view of an unrevised reactivation of this narrative which Foster sees to be at work in the already mentioned MOMA exhibition and its accompanying catalogue “Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern”, 1984, edited by William Rubin.

States Foster: “ To pose the relation of the primitive and the scientific as a benign dialogue is cruelly euphemistic: it obscures the real affiliations between science and conquest, enlightenment and eradication, primitivist art and imperialist power. (This can be pardoned of a romantic artist at the end of the last century who, immersed in the ideology of a scientific [sic] avant-garde, could not know the effectivity of these ideas, but not of an art historian at the end of this century [Rubin].” “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art”. *October*, Vol. 34, 1985, p. 60 One should add that Krauss’ essay “No More Play” which in part addresses this art historical revision called for by Foster saw its initial publication in this very catalogue.

<sup>412</sup> Which, to recall Einstein, would originally not have served an aesthetic-contemplative function.



Western art, countering sublimation, emphasizing decomposition and historico-aesthetic deviances (say, the Gnostics'). This differentiation between hard and soft is ultimately, in this case, what positions a political deployment, or at least ambition, of an anti-aesthetic à la *Documents* opposite a merely primitivist formal import, the latter eventually allowing for a smooth integration into bourgeois commodity culture: to cite Bataille; to be experienced in form of the "the ecstasy in art journals", and to cite Krauss; as "a primitivism gone formal and therefore gutless"<sup>413</sup>. Opposite this commercially successful yet "gutless" "soft" primitivism stands the "hard primitivism" whose historical, societal and political implications Krauss derives specifically from her analysis of *Documents*. The analysis therefore somewhat soberingly condenses into her discussion of the venerated *Suspended Ball* sculpture by Giacometti (1930-31). This work to her performs Bataille's formlessness as a process of a destructive destabilizing of neat dualisms, i.e. classifying systems:

Informe denotes what alteration produces, not by contradiction – which would be dialectical – but by putrefaction: the puncturing of the limits around the term,

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<sup>413</sup> Krauss, 1985, p.51

the reduction of the sameness of the cadaver – which is transgressive. Round phallicism [the “quality” of *Suspended Ball*] is a destruction of meaning/being.<sup>414</sup>

*Suspended Ball* for Krauss becomes a “machine[s]” that “collapse[s] difference”<sup>415</sup>: not, importantly, by sublating it (*aufheben*) (i.e. dialectically) but essentially by downright spoiling the assurance of difference, the assumption of the possibility of telling things apart, here the phallic from the emasculating round and so forth.<sup>416</sup> This application of the formless by Krauss is, however, also a first glimpse of how this hard primitivism ultimately speaks less - if at all - to any heterogeneities other than those registering in the fine arts proper (i.e. a Giacometti sculpture), and more importantly, along foremost formal parameters, which is already quite a different application than that of Bataille’s, even though he did employ this antagonism towards the dismissal of Bréton’s surrealism.

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., p.64. This is the key difference/critique vis-à-vis Didi-Huberman’s manifold dialectics of the informe described in his book. For all the differentiating between her non-dialectical informe that basically always “putrefies” any elevated, disincorporated form(alism) be that by decomposition or perversion thus leading back to the body, I don’t quite see the difference to Didi-Huberman other than rejecting the use of dialectic as a notion itself, “the third term” as Bois says. “The informe” which in Didi-Huberman after the various dialectics he plays through settles for the symptom, i.e. as Bois correctly points out spoils Hegelian sublation by “neatly substituting” it with the symptom (of crisis, trauma, discontent etc)... But then isn’t decomposition and perversion not *symptomatic* of a form of (the body’s) deterioration in the first place? Krauss aligns (as does Didi-Huberman) the informe with alteration which she however defines as a contradiction, contrary to the informe which is according to her precisely not unfolding as contradiction: “I said before that alteration functions as a Bataillean concept because of the primal contradiction that operates its relation to meaning, such that the signifier oscillates constantly between two poles”. Is this “oscillation between two poles” not equivalent with the “va-et-vient” of the formless, and since it is a declassing oscillation, symptomatic in the sense Didi-Huberman uses it? So I guess, it comes down to a rhetorical schism between unsettling non-meaning versus a no less troubling ambiguous symptom (as in, for what disease?); both of which, more important to this study, defy idealizing representation and a sublimation through formalism.

<sup>415</sup> Krauss, 1985, p. 64.

<sup>416</sup> Somewhat attenuating Krauss’s promotion of Giacometti to a proto-*gender-bender* polysexual sculptor are concurrent works of his like *Man and Woman* (1928-29) which could not be more clear in demonstrating its “meaning”.

(Which thus pertained much more to theory and literature than works of art since these were concomitantly claimed by both Bréton and Bataille for their respective (anti-)aesthetic position, e.g. Dali, Picasso etc.). Hard and soft primitivism is a conflict first and foremost between two Giacometti sculptures, between the aforementioned *Suspended Ball* and *Spoon Woman*, another Giacometti piece from 1926. *Spoon Woman* is Krauss's key example of this soft primitivism: the work being clearly formally imitative of the anthropomorphic spoon statuettes from the Ivory Coast held at the Musée de l'Homme, while furthering Giacometti's notion of sculpture that would decidedly settle for the "vertical", i.e. eschewing the occasional flirtation with the base, the body's *debasement*, its alteration and by extension "expansion" of any kind. (Except for, in Krauss's reading, as an upward expansion, i.e. as "erection", reaffirming the phallus/father etc.)

The second, and more "fateful" tangent in view of the decade later "Formless" show, is Krauss's resurrection of Bataille as a quasi-postmodern critic of high modernism, as a contemporary ally in Krauss's critique of this modernism as it was predominantly corroborated by the Oedipal figure of Clement Greenberg and her contemporary Michael Fried<sup>417</sup>. Bataille's contribution to Krauss's critique of modernism, of formal autonomy and

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<sup>417</sup> A criticism which of course took many forms, is not one single-themed critique, and comes not only in her deployment of Bataille but more famously in her renowned theorization of 1970s practices of (post-)minimalism and land art, her "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1977), basically an across-the-board eversion of Fried's critique of Minimalism of some years earlier in his "Art and Objecthood" (1969). An eversion/expansion that consequently returns in "Antivision" as a "witness [of] the alignment of the body with the earth [...]", "Antivision", *October* 36, 1986, p.154,

opticality, comes in the form of what she called “antivision”<sup>418</sup>, more or less around the same time of her coinage of a “hard primitivism”. Krauss, in the corresponding text, locates this anti-modernist postmodern critic Bataille not in the Bataille of *Documents* but in the mature art historian of his 1950s study on *Manet*, which is also the book’s title. Here, according to Krauss, Bataille reiterates his own refutation of the genesis of prehistoric art in his text in *Documents* entitled “Primitive Art”<sup>419</sup> of twenty years earlier, now applying it to a split genesis of modern art.

Goya then offers a quite different beginning for the history of modernism. Bataille characterizes it as an art of *excess*, an art that recalls the violence of the sacred, as opposed to Manet’s and dominant modernism’s art of *absence*. We thus end up with two beginnings that are opposed in character.<sup>420</sup>

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<sup>418</sup> ‘Antivision’, *October* 36, 1986.

<sup>419</sup> In this text Bataille refutes a contemporaneous evolutionary argument by which the abject, primitiveness of the exhumed pre-historic representation of man by man aligns with the rudimentary visual language of the child. Bataille claims that from the start man engaged a kind of self-debasing, heterogeneous anti-aesthetic, one denied by modernity. Thus any such abjectness is intentional, a “*willful* alteration” as he writes. A claim he further supports by pointing to the art of the “Aurignician” period, in which “*this crude and deforming art was reserved for the representation of the human form*” vis-à-vis the “meticulous” “perfect” renderings of “reindeer, bison and horses”. 2005, p.40. (A striking incongruity visualized, in 3d no less, in Herzog’s recent film *Caves of Forgotten Dreams* (2010), shot inside the Chavet cave in France). This in fact further reveals yet another instance of a Bataillean notion of self-alienation. Bataille would write about the African cave art discovered by Leo Froebenius in 1930: “The blatant heterogeneity of our being in relation to the world that gave birth to it, which we have become so incapable of proving through tangible experience, seems to have been, for *those among us* who lived in nature, the basis of all representation.” Ibid. p.46 “The Frobenius Exhibit at the Salle Pleyel” (1930)

<sup>420</sup> “Antivision”, *October* Vol. 36, 1986, p.152

She thus deduces a (her) critique of (high) Modernism from Bataille's scenario of a split 19<sup>th</sup> century modernism, basically conflating the two through the paradigm of dis-incorporated vision that serves as a pinnacle of modernity that from the outset is apparently sought to be brought down in this configuration: by degrading dis-incorporated opticality back to the (sexual, dead) body and consequently to the base, yielding a modernist proto-anti-aesthetic in the vein of Bataille's proto-anti-aesthetic prehistoric art, one that is "willfully" self-destructive.

The ambivalence that arises in this moment within the description of the founding moment of modernism is a struggle precisely between the values of opticality and those of an intensity of "blinding", "sight destroying", and in which representation dares to be neither appropriative nor productive<sup>421</sup>

The appeal of this argument, in view of engaging Bataille for a critique of "opticality", lies in fashioning Goya into the prototype artist depicting the real, i.e. a "documentary" artist in the spirit of *Documents*, documenting what Krauss calls "regressive, irrational power" in the painting *The Third of May, 1808* (1814-15)<sup>422</sup>. ("Irrational", I presume, because the sovereign brutality depicted thwarts the progressive idea of humanism as promised by reason). The problem is that this antagonism here plays out amongst two kinds of more or less historical representations (Manet vs. Goya, with Manet arguably blending out

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<sup>421</sup> "Ibid.

<sup>422</sup> Which depicts a group of suspected Spanish insurgents shot by a firing squad of the Napoleonic army in revenge/punishment for a preceding attack on the French by the Spanish resistance under Napoleonic occupation.

(messy, bloody) history in the sense of affording representation autonomy *from* it, a process which hence would shift the emphasis towards formal aspects and a corresponding analysis and reception). Whence to graft Bataille's reception of the painting as "sight-destroying" and "blinding"<sup>423</sup> - notions that are almost exclusively allegorical, i.e. signifying irrepresentable historical trauma, "death" as Bataille writes<sup>424</sup> - onto Bataille the critic pre-denouncing modernist vision, "destroying" "sight", i.e. for the benefit of him deflating the "values of opticality", is a rerouting that would be decisive in Bois's and Krauss's particular evaluation of any "use value of the formless" a decade later. In other words, since high modernism is *a priori* anti-representational, to apply the antagonism of two representations (as described by Bataille) to the antagonism of high modernism and post-modern critique is quite odd for a critique like Krauss's that stresses formal analysis, in the vein of Greenberg, to the ends of a representational critique, a critique of ideology.

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<sup>423</sup>Krauss, *October*, 1986, p. 153. A "blinding" if one wanted to discuss it formally, is usually attributed to the most *illuminated* part of the canvas, which is the glaring but certainly not blinding white shirt worn by the Spanish insurgent situated in the left half of the painting, at the moment of being shot by a death squad, i.e. the French army executing sovereign power. That this painting serves as a predecessor of sorts to Manet's later "The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian" (alternate versions, 1867, 1868-69) is not mentioned.

<sup>424</sup> Which is the overriding theme in Goya, i.e. his etchings of horrendous/barbaric tableaux of executions, the *Disasters of War* (1810-1820), representing not least a conflict between reason, Enlightenment (not avant-gardist de-enlightenment!), and clerical power, with religion in Goya indeed becoming aligned with the irrational, the church a rational body of power regulating the irrational investment into, in this case, Christianity (i.e. precisely as the church would be theorized later by Bataille). This is in a tradition of Western art to depict barbarity/atrociousness as critique, going back to e.g. Jacques Callot's *Les Grands Misères de la Guerre* (1633) graphically depicting a set of sovereign executions: "firing squad", "hanging", "stake", "wheel" etc.. (Or, at least, as "acts of mourning" as Thomas Crow would later interpret Warhol's *Death & Disaster* series from the 1960s). The opposite deployment of this kind of depiction of barbarity would be Hans Staden's *Wahrhaftige Historia* (1557), etchings depicting cannibalism in Brazil by the Tupinamba tribe, i.e. to assert colonialism as a judgment of ethical civilization over the colonized subjects' barbarity (or/and to also exploit the spectacular nature of these scenes, given that this publication was widely disseminated during Staden's days).

What emerges through a retracing of these two strands (“hard primitivism”, “antivision”) is that what is at stake is not so much Bataille being “less interested in ‘class struggle’ than in ‘de-classing’”, but rather Bois and Krauss being decidedly more interested in a declassing (of form(alism)) than in any aspects of class struggle (in content); not least by implicitly detaching the two from each other (or sublating class struggle in a formalist declassing in the actual Hegelian sense?) which, as discussed in the beginning of this chapter, are originally much more enmeshed in Bataille.

This ultimate detachment is, I think, the crux of the contradiction of Krauss’s/Bois’s “informe” serving as their key curatorial mission to “pick apart categories that seemed to us increasingly useless – even as they had become increasingly contentious – namely ‘form’ and ‘content.’”<sup>425</sup> . For the way the works were contextualized along the notion of the formless is precisely by being categorized in relation to a *User’s Guide* devised by Krauss and Bois that is part Bataillean terminology of the “Critical Dictionary” and part theirs:

A floor piece by Mike Kelley closed the section on “horizontalty”, several large mildew photographs by Cindy Sherman in the section devoted to “base

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Ibid. p.9. A further contradiction if not confusion around the term of the formless and its task to undo a dualism comes courtesy of the blurb inside the dust jacket of the *User’s Guide*, inconceivably to have been written by either Krauss or Bois: “[...] Only in recent years has the idea of the ‘formless’ been deployed in the theorizing and reconfiguring of the very field of twentieth century art. This is partly because that field has most often been crudely set up as a battle between form and content; whereas ‘formless’ constitutes a third term which stands outside that opposition of form and content, outside of the binary thinking which is itself formal.<sup>425</sup>” Compare Bois: “The ‘*informe*’, ‘base materialism’, ‘heterology’ and ‘division into two’ are to our minds all terms that imply the exclusion of the third term”. Ibid., p.69 Bois here refers to why his schema of the *Informe* cannot be a dialectic.

materialism”, a film by James Coleman figured in the “pulse” section, and Allan McCollum’s multiple casts of dinosaur tracks [...] devoted to entropy.<sup>426</sup>

“*Theme* turns out to be more tenacious (thematization is a danger that dogs all non-monographic presentations: nothing would be easier than to imagine something like the ‘formless in art’)”<sup>427</sup>: so Krauss and Bois alert themselves, yet the way these categories above *contain* the works, regardless of the professed curatorial “flagrant diversity”, seems to invite such a thematization. The limitation, however, lies not in the formalist or, better, structuralist organization of the works to the end of an argument *declassing* another formalist argument (of high modernism), which the show no doubt exactly enacted. Rather, if “content” and “form” are not thought of as discreet and autonomous entities in art but operate in a state of suspense or indeed contradiction (which is still a relation, not a separation), then issues/markers of class are of course entangled with a process of (aesthetic) declassing (while I should add that “class” in this context serves as a denomination of any form of *interest*, be that an economic, religious or post-colonial one etc., intertwined as these usually are). Thus, what is at issue here is that the clearly identified appeal of barbarism via a theorization of Bataille (for the benefit of this discussion, an appeal that lies in its critical potential) was recognized yet left unexplored, presumably out of the concern “to cater to voyeurism”, to pander to any notion of “the abject in art/ Powers of Horrors”, which as Krauss and Bois fully underwrite is not in fact really implied by Bataille in his text “Abjection and Miserable Forms” (1934) –

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<sup>426</sup> Krauss/Bois, 1997, p. 23

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., p. 22



miserable forms being an expression Bataille had seized on himself, emphasizing the enmeshment of class and declassing (of content and form if one must) by subtling the text “Les Misérables”. Thus, the politically and culturally “expulsory”/“excremental” processes that inform Bataille’s notion of abjection as much as they do his aforementioned text “The use-value of DAF de Sade” figured in the *Formless* show as for example the (formless) mass of Robert Smithson’s *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), i.e. as formalized “expulsion”.

That the notion of the “excremental” and “expulsory” developed by Bataille in the de Sade text would not have required including Manzoni’s in this case literalizing “Artist’s Shit” (1961) may actually come down to a respective reading of this text, not least to which part one picks, as already discussed above. Mike Kelley, whose work “Riddle of the Sphinx” (an earlier version of the later floor Afghan piece “Lumpenprole”) was featured in the *Formless* show, in fact referred to this very same text by Bataille in an essay from 1989, i.e. not long after Krauss’s initial deployments of Bataille. Quoting a different passage of the de Sade text (already partly introduced above), his reading centers on cultural production, very much situating the discussion around “class conflict”:

Bataille writes that there is “the necessity of division between the economic and political organization of society on one hand, and on the other, an antireligious and asocial organization having as its goal orgiastic participation in different forms of destruction, in other words, the collective satisfaction of needs that correspond to the necessity of provoking the violent excitation that results from the expulsion of heterogenous elements”. SRL aligns itself with this second category that exists in American culture. In contrast to culture-affirming, nationalistic, middle-class spectacles [...] there are those events that marry the

joys of conspicuous accumulation with those of mass destruction. SRL seems to have responded by creating an industrial machine show of mistakes infused with the negative images associated with rock music and horror films - the images of death, destruction, riot, crime and war so loved by the masses (yet denied by official culture).[...]. SRL's similarity to these low spectacles, and their use of kitsch, automatically raises questions of class conflict [...].<sup>428</sup>

"Death, destruction, riots, crime and war so loved by the masses"<sup>429</sup> in conjunction with Bataille was of course not addressed by Warhol's "Oxidation Paintings" (1978) (the "piss paintings" as they are also referred to) featured in the *Formless* show (which is not to say that something like the piss paintings would not have appealed to Bataille, although the work itself surely risks presenting yet another instance of sublimation by turning piss into "gold"). Rather, the Warhol of his earlier *Death and Disaster* series comes to mind, not only because the images depict violence, accidents, brutality etc. but because they furthermore speak to friction and crises in US society as much as to the investment and consumption of these mass media images which the work arguably both exploits and voids. This, it would seem, pertains more to this discussion, in that *Death and Disasters* negotiates the kind of aesthetic, social, economic and political enmeshment that Bataille located at the core of any barbarous aesthetics, if they were to suggest "a contradictory social state". (1929).

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<sup>428</sup> Kelley: "Mekanik Destruktive Kommandoh: Survival Research Laboratories and Popular Spectacle", in *Foul Perfection*, ed. John Welchman, Cambridge/Mass. 2003 [1989] p.130

<sup>429</sup> Bataille: "It seems that the desire to see is stronger than horror or disgust." "X Marks The Spot", *Documents* II 7, 1930



## VIII Barbaric Formation

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Since *Death and Disasters* - as a work of and “about” 1960s American politics and mass media - the economic incentive of widely disseminated depictions of the kind Warhol drew on has become further solidified and part of everyday visual consumption (and certainly had done by the time of Kelley’s aforementioned essay in 1989). Depictions not just of violence, but of spectacular violence (that in their pull as “media scandal” are valorized as what that same media proclaims to be “barbaric”) may still be “denied” (classified) by sovereign power in the management efforts over its public image (i.e. the scandal surrounding the leaked images of abuse at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003<sup>430</sup>). The potential however, of engaging these kinds of visual disruptions to the ends of artistic critique had already been severely doubted a few years earlier.

It was in 1983 that Fredric Jameson, in Hal Foster’s influential anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic*, sketched a trajectory by which in his view the traditional avant-garde notions of “ugly, dissonant, bohemian, sexually shocking” – in the sense of performing rawness if not “realness” – had not only been accepted by visual culture at large but were increasingly accumulating solid market value:

[...] There is very little in either the form or the content of contemporary art that contemporary society finds intolerable and scandalous. The most offensive forms of this art – punk rock, say, or what is sexually explicit material – are all

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<sup>430</sup> For a wide-ranging study on the various investments of these kinds of images within a contemporary image community see Judith Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?*, London/New York, 2009.

taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful, unlike the productions of the older high modernism.<sup>431</sup>

It was in conjunction with Jameson's cultural diagnosis above<sup>432</sup> that Foster himself enquired about the viability of any such anti-aesthetic in contemporary practice. "How can we break with a program that makes value of crisis (modernism) [...] or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant-gardism)?"<sup>433</sup> Foster asked. How to resist an "[...] 'anti-aesthetic' [...] which so often transgressed the law only to confirm it [...]?"

The notion of a revised anti-aesthetic proposed by Foster would thus have to significantly stay clear of so-called "transgressive" acts and signs vis-à-vis "the law" (thus rendering any deviating, intentionally inarticulate and lawless barbaric anti-aesthetic in the spirit of Bataille's Gauls arguably futile in this scenario). The "law" Foster speaks of presumably conceived twofold: bearing

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<sup>431</sup> Fredric Jameson: "Postmodernism and Consumer Society", in Foster (ed) *The Anti-Aesthetic*, New York 2002 [1983], pp.142-143. Somewhat unusual that Jameson here would conflate contemporary art and pop culture wholesale. One movement in the early 1980s in New York that certainly embraced such "explicit material" without however significantly partaking in either the contemporary art discourse or in the gallery scene of SoHo (let alone in mainstream culture) was the group of the "Cinema of Transgression" around Nick Zedd, Richard Kern and David Wojnarowicz (the latter however participating in for example the Whitney Biennial 1985).

<sup>432</sup> Which as persuasive as it is when situated in Jameson's overall argument did somewhat ignore that these "strides by society" are obviously not taken as one universal stride but are tied to local trajectories of cultural production and reception. As much as these strides seem to be suffering from non-linear intervals of setbacks: The Jesse Helms/Andres Serrano controversy only a few years after Jameson's statement above; Rudi Giuliani's public vilification of the *Sensations* show more than a decade later. The initially irate reception of the YBA's orthodox-transgressive histrionics/tepid post-Duchampian gestures in Britain itself. Which reaffirms a continued relevance of Bürger's notion of (now lucrative) "provocation" serving as "manifestation" for outrage and rejection/regression. That may actually be less a manifestation of (petit-)bourgeois bigotry per se than shielding the frustration of an audience faced with a system unintelligible to them due to a lack of information; not unlike the frustration and incomprehension experienced when filing taxes etc.

<sup>433</sup> Foster, "Introduction", *The Anti-Aesthetic*, pp. x, xvi

first on the historical legacy of the avant-garde, whether consciously or not, serving as propaganda for ultimately regressive political power (e.g. the Russian avant-garde's eventual partial alliance with Stalinism or Futurism's initial endorsement of Italian Fascism)<sup>434</sup>. And secondly, the already invoked "law" of capitalism's happily all-accommodating purchase of intentionally polarizing entities to be returned as profitable ones: basically Benjamin's presumption that shock would essentially lose any critical (or obsolete "moral") function it may have had as a negational-combative stance in, say, Dada. The "transgressive" in this trajectory turning from being the avant-garde's promise into being its problem, since its formerly critical expectancy had – in 1983 – been diagnosed as being fully subsumed, not merely by a Batailleian "play of transpositions", but by what Foster called the "official culture" both high and low: "in the university, in the museum, in the street"<sup>435</sup>. Which is to say in this constellation transgression had become safely (in)stalled in a Western *dispositif*.

When Foster here spoke about "transgressive" acts and practices as well as "transgressing" laws he most probably sought to distinguish these terms from *transgression* proper as Bataille had conceived it in *L'Erotisme* (1953), which was

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<sup>434</sup> T.J. Clark not long ago discussed a similar aspect pertaining to this problematic historical trajectory of an explicitly politically engaged anti-aesthetic vis-à-vis practices devoid of such revolutionary aspirations: "Better Chagalle's fetid fantasy of the shtetl [...] than Rodchenko's aesthetization of a death camp in the wilderness. Better Duchamp's silly secret peek-a-boo than De Stijl's dream of hygiene for middle management". (In reference to Rodchenko, Clark presumably refers to Stalin's Gulag "White Sea Canal" project (1931-33), forced labor dressed as a heroic public works project, not only obscured but lionized by Rodchenko's black and white photo series thereof. T.J. Clark, "The End of the Anti-Aesthetic", *Texte zur Kunst* 81, 2011, p. 164

<sup>435</sup> Foster, 2002, p. x

taken up by Michel Foucault a decade later in his “Preface to Transgression”<sup>436</sup> (published shortly after Bataille’s death). *Transgression* in Bataille via Foucault is precisely *not* negation or any form/act of illicitness. It is not *antagonistic*, but essentially an overcoming of delimitations, situated in the realm of personal expansion, suggesting a kind of secular sacred state:

Transgression, then, is not related to the limit as black to white, the prohibited to the lawful, the outside to the inside [...]. Since this existence [transgression] is both so pure and so complicated, it must be detached from its questionable associations of ethics<sup>437</sup> [...]; it must be liberated from the scandalous or subversive, that is, from anything aroused by negative associations. Transgression does not seek to oppose one thing to another, nor does it achieve its purpose through mockery or by upsetting the solidity of foundations<sup>438</sup>.

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<sup>436</sup> While not explicitly so in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, proof of this distinction would come a decade later in his brief discussion of Bataille’s transgression in the context of his *The Return of the Real* (1996). Foster here specifically tied the transgressive to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the “abject” which registers both as “disturbance” to the “symbolic order” as well as a regulatory procedure by that order (law): as “abjection”. Whence Foster delineates the transgressive from abjection as a kind of super-regulatory societal process (absolute exclusion and thus totality), structurally similar to Foucault’s reading of Bataille’s transgression (which essentially absorbs regulation, demarcation, antagonism – however not in the *name* of order but by precisely to *totally* dissolve order). Foster, 1996, p. 156. In a slightly earlier essay “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic” Foster suggested in a footnote a “third option” of “transgressive value [as] a function of ambiguity” that he associates as much with Bataille as with Freud. Foster, “Obscene, Abject, Traumatic”, *October* Vol. 78, 1996, p. 115 f12. More importantly an “ambiguity” that would seem essential to any anti-aesthetic Foster had discussed a decade earlier in the eponymous publication and which he would eventually associate with “[...] avant-garde practice at its best [that] is contradictory, mobile and otherwise diabolical”. Foster, *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge/Mass. 1996, p.16

<sup>437</sup> Cf. Agamben: “The only ethical experience (which as such cannot be a task or subjective decision) is the experience of being (one’s own) potentiality, of being (one’s own) possibility – exposing, that is, in every form one’s own amorphousness and in every act one’s inactuality.” *The Coming Community*, Minneapolis, 1993, p. 43.

<sup>438</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Interviews and Essays*, ed. Donald Bouchard, 1977, p.35 [1963, as an essay in Bataille’s journal *Critique*, No. 195-196].

While some of these definitions by Foucault seem to run counter to a Batailleian notion of transgression (at least at the time of *Documents*) – Bataille certainly being inclined towards “upsetting the solidity of foundations” – what Foucault seems to be saying is that transgression arises from not even recognizing, or better, not even thinking through a dualistic framework, in line with Bataille’s original definition: “Transgression does not deny the taboo but transcends and completes it”<sup>439</sup> (which essentially also means that *transgression* was to Bataille what *sublation* was to Hegel, needless to say structurally speaking only). Foster would, a decade after the *Anti-Aesthetic*, call this properly antagonistic/negational transgression that Foucault differentiated from Bataille’s transgression “this old vocation of the avant-garde”. As an alternative to historically deflated transgression – “to reformulate this vocation” as he put it – Foster proposed “to rethink transgression not as a rupture produced by a heroic avant-garde outside the symbolic order [...] but to expose it [order] in crisis”, the consequence drawn from a revised self-conception as a from thereon “strategic avant-garde within the order”<sup>440</sup>. This location of transgression as essentially a critique operating *within the order* is a methodology that Denis Hollier identified in the mid-1970s as being at the core of any notion of a Batailleian barbarism. Contrary to the historical usage of the barbaric to denote unintelligibility and, essentially, a kind of non-value as *external* expression of any kind (as did the

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<sup>439</sup> Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco, 1986 p. 63. [1953]

<sup>440</sup> Foster, 1996, p.157



Greeks vis-à-vis the Persians, seen in the *Histories* of Herodotus, with the Persians here replacing Bataille's Gauls<sup>441</sup>), Hollier posited that:

Barbarism [...] is characterized by a certain type of ideological expression [...] a phenomenon that, consequently, could not be more 'cultural', but in a manner that *attacks* a social order rather than *defends* it. Barbarism opposes to the defense system dominated by architecture [here thought as *dispositif*] and organized by it, to all these surrounding forms of expression – to all these languages that conform and reinforce each other – its noncumulative *counterattacks*.<sup>442</sup>

For Hollier this also meant that in the context of any "order" (symbolic, social, etc.), barbarism "[...] is not a type of society that is independent from civilization, and specifically would be distinguished from it from it by its lack of 'culture'". Presaging Foster's strategic transgression from within, the barbaric in this constellation was "not [an entity] in itself" – excluded/outside – but only became manifest in "operate[ing] in a relation with" a system. Contrary to Foster, while bearing in mind that Hollier's discussion of the barbaric still departed from the historical subtext of Bataille's Gauls, the latter's proactive "counterattacks" were in fact more that of an impertinent "*rupture produced*" than a strategic "*fracture traced*"<sup>443</sup>. Nevertheless, if the barbaric is not merely a "disturbance in the

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<sup>441</sup> *Histories*, 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., frequently treated as historical accounts as much as imaginary travelogues since the actual voyages undertaken by Herodotus providing the factual information to his *Histories* remain contested.

<sup>442</sup> Hollier, *Against Architecture*, Cambridge/Mass. 1992, p.50

<sup>443</sup> Foster, 1996, p.157

academic expressive code”<sup>444</sup> – in Batailles’s case study, affecting the “code” of Greek coins – but a disturbance that could potentially affect any “code” produced and disseminated by systems of image production, be that commodity culture or historical and political representations presented as truths by the respective institutions, it would reconvene with a strategy “to expose it [order/code] in crisis” (Foster). If Hollier spoke of these “*counterattacks*” as being “noncumulative”, he was directly referring back to the Gaul’s particular “*counterattacks*”, that because of their cultural make-up are “noncumulative” since concepts of intellectual and economic accumulation were quasi alien to them – at least according to the picture Bataille had painted of them. For a more general deployment of the barbaric as such a quintessential “cultural” expression, this “noncumulative” aspect is, in light of the discussion above, ambiguous to say the least: barbarism carrying use-value as a cultural expression certainly can accumulate exchange-value by being solidly integrated into cultural production in the form of an institutionalized and subsequently valorized “disturbance”/“*counterattack*” – not least because the distinction between the market and the institution has become largely untenable. Having said that, if the barbaric is not only a valid expression intrinsic to (any) culture but is, therefore, equally subject to constant redefinition and shifts, one could equally discuss its continued import for an artistic practice that invites or performs discord, discrepancy, disarray, disorder, dysfunction or, for a (only) slightly more

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<sup>444</sup> Hollier, 1992, p.50

contemporary choice of terms, dis-agreement and *dissensus*<sup>445</sup>, as a form of critique<sup>446</sup>.

Since there has been rather an abundance of heads in the course of this discussion – both right and left, decapitated and deformed – I would like to conclude with two works of the last decade that not only feature such afflicted heads but that contain visual material traditionally associated with barbaric content, or rather material pointing to barbaric conditions, arguably as a form of critique stemming from such conditions.

In 2007, Thomas Hirschhorn showed a series of collages titled *Concretions (I-XVII)* at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in Paris that were embedded into the

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<sup>445</sup> “The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectification that reveal the difference of a society to itself. The essence of consensus is not peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence is the annulment of dissensus as the separation of the sensible from itself, the annulment of surplus subjects, the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body, and of the political community to the relationship of interests and aspirations of these different parts. Consensus is the reduction of politics to the police”.

Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics”, in *Theory&Event*, Vol.5 , No.3, 2001. This notion of dissensus invokes Nancy’s community of *plural singularity* (and Chantal Mouffe & Ernesto Laclau who Clare Bishop draws on) while it furthermore betrays an import of Bataille when Rancière speaks of “the difference of a society to itself” the embrace of its own heterogeneity vis-à-vis social life which again strives for self-estrangement.

<sup>446</sup> At this point at the latest, the historical sentinel *critique* appears to not only having to recuse itself but in need of redefinition by a revised set of terms. Recent renegotiations of such terms, tied explicitly to the legacy of a 1980s anti-aesthetic, have been outlined by for example T.J. Clark and Juliane Rebentisch. Clark, interestingly enough for this discussion, proposes “immediacy”, “intensity”, “defensiveness”, “hiding”; a “radical worldlessness”, all of which sounds intriguing as much as it simultaneously readmits the ghosts of fallen vanguards through the back entrance. Clark, *Texte zur Kunst*, 2011, p. 164. Rebentisch, in a direct response to such a “radical worldlessness”, offers an already semantically less charged “aesthetic difference”; one very much situated in the *world* one should think, while being through with both “utopias”: “sublation” (in the sense of Bürger) and (Modernist) “autonomy” – presumably both as *tragedy* and as *farce*. Juliane Rebentisch, “On the Alliance between the Anti-Aesthetic and the Aesthetic of Experience”, *Texte zur Kunst* 86, 2011, pp. 167-168

artist's trademark overwhelming environments<sup>447</sup>. The collages are in a square format and condense the legible signature of Hirschhorn's aesthetic - large scale environments that exuberantly take over the space - by assembling all kinds of detritus and cheap materials (cardboard, packing tape, photocopies of philosophical texts, printouts of imagery from the internet alternating between explicit depictions of bodily violence, advertising and soft porn; as well as mannequins, banners, flea market "modernist" artworks, counterfeit merchandise etc.)<sup>448</sup>. In the *Concretion* series, images of women cut out of fashion and men's magazines share this square format with cutouts of bloody, severed body parts, seemingly of mostly male victims and obtained online. This crude collage is in all of the works in the series punctured by cut out images of bullet holes in a concrete surface. (A final element comes in the form of marker scribbles, the sole "hand-made" feature of this collage). This accumulation is finally shrink-wrapped in clear plastic foil. The following collage discussed here is titled *Power of Brazil* and is from 2006, presenting a kind of prototype to the following *Concretion* series. Here this middle area of bullet holes roughly diagonally dissects the square format. The upper right part centers on a female naked headless torso with the emphasis on the breasts, appearing doubly in

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<sup>447</sup> Hirschhorn's variety of collage is clearly a strategy deemed imperative by him to his overall endeavor since he has repeated it several times since, most notably in the *Ur-Collages* (2008), and as late as this year in the series *Collage Truth* (2013)(both series were shown at the Susanna Kulli Gallery in Zurich).

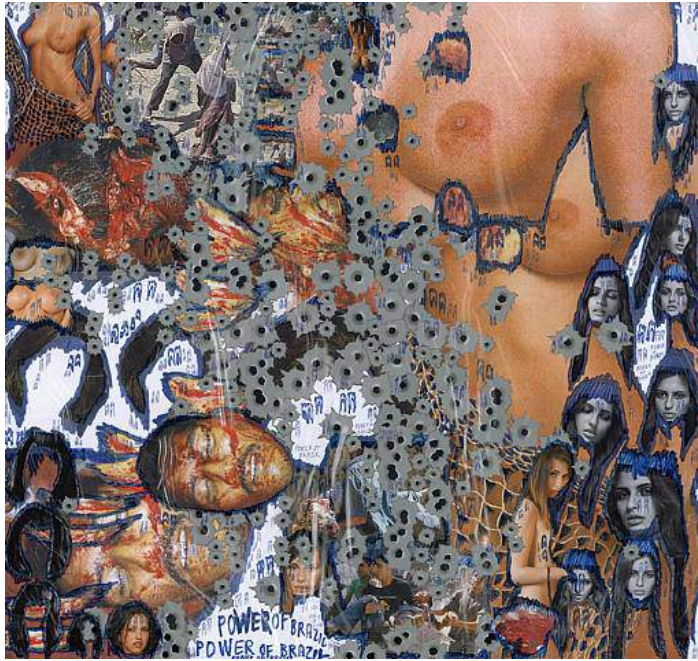
<sup>448</sup> This direct relationship between the self-contained collages and the "formless" large-scale environments is maintained by Hirschhorn himself, for whom all his work is essentially a collage: "I don't make 'installation art'. I never use this word! I want to confront my two-dimensional thoughts within the third dimension without thinking about volume". Hirschhorn, "Mit meiner Arbeit will ich Form geben. Form geben heißt nicht Form machen". In Michaela Ott/Harald Strauß (eds.), *Ästhetik +Politik*, Hamburg 2009, p.222 (Transl. by the author).

slightly different scales as a kind of imaged echo; the lower bottom corner is dominated by a severed blood-covered male head that repeats this above mentioned imaged echo. Smaller cutouts of a female model's head, of what seem to be surgically augmented breasts, and more mutilated body parts are interspersed more randomly across the collage. This bisection, this 50/50<sup>449</sup> deal between two image banks formally and thematically yields a kind of rectangular *yin and yang* of, in this case, the narcotics-body cult-advertising complex if one will: female/male, beauty/ugliness, mediated "pleasure"/mediated "pain", sex/death and so forth. A contextual place is hinted at by a hand-written, and equally echoed, "Power of Brazil" at the center bottom of the image. The collage thus *concretizes* first and foremost already circulating popular ideas about Rio de Janeiro: the exhibitionistic sexiness of flawless-to-grotesque bodies thronging the Copacabana flanking the savagery associated with the drug trade and gang wars of the bordering favelas. It reproduces a precarious Third World sexiness as successfully adapted for the screen by films like the Oscar-nominated *City of God* (2002). The "Power of Brazil" may thus ultimately be that of "Capital always wins"<sup>450</sup>, as Hirschhorn has previously stated in a different context.

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<sup>449</sup> One of Hirschhorn's earliest series of works is in fact titled *Fifty-Fifty* (1992-93), consisting of adhesive tape applied to pieces of wood, as well as cut out mass media images pasted onto pieces of cardboard, each covering roughly half of the respective substrate.

<sup>450</sup> As quoted saying in Pamela M. Lee, *Forgetting the Art World*, Cambridge/Mass. 2012, p. 118.



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Power of Brazil*, 2006

While the title of the later *Concretion[s]* clearly underlines the condensing, accumulative formal aspect it also asserts a rendering *concrete* – making visible – of a certain state of things that on the surface literally registers as messy, irreconcilable, disastrous, *heterogeneous*<sup>451</sup> if one will. (Such a claim to uncover this state, to expose the messy relations underneath a world of surfaces through sheer *surfacedness*, is quite obvious in titles of collages made that same year, such as *Collateral Thinking* and *Uncomfortable Truths*). Hirschhorn however has mostly spoken of these collages as “chaos”, one that, however, “asserts the Form”, that is “brave” and thus “accepts to be ridiculous and silly”; without ever failing

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<sup>451</sup> I’m using this term very much in the Batailleian sense not least since Bataille figures as one of the thinkers celebrated by Hirschhorn (he created a “Bataille-Monument” on the outskirts of Kassel for dOCUMENTA 11 in 2002). Hirschhorn frequently declares himself to be a “fan” of not only Bataille but furthermore Spinoza, Foucault, Deleuze & Guattari etc. Whether this clearly aspired to heterogeneity in Hirschhorn’s work is as such engaging Bataille’s thinking about heterogeneity is explored in this chapter.

however, since “defending the Form is never a lost fight”. “Asserting” and “Defending” the “Form” are acts of aggression: “a warlike act that makes one an artist”.<sup>452</sup> Furthermore, this method of *Concretion* is both a means and an end to yield “Truth”, that in its “clearness” “goes beyond history”. Hirschhorn’s deliberate heavy-handedness in claiming this uppercase “Truth” for his collages is meant to offer an aggressive counterpoint to what he considers conventionally accepted truths: those of the news media, journalism, research and by extension art history, art criticism etc. “Truth” resisting “information” and “Truth” “[...] that isn’t validated [...] through debate, discussion, communication or even analysis; but one that compels recognition through its capacity to enlighten the Form itself”<sup>453</sup>. Conceptually, Hirschhorn’s aspired “Form” thus aligns almost exactly with the demands for a kind of post-anti-aesthetic that T.J. Clark not long ago called “the non-discursiveness of visual depiction” and a “radical worldlessness”<sup>454</sup> (even though, with regard to the latter, Hirschhorn would presumably much prefer to see his work divulging the very radicalities *of* this world). Clark, who surely envisions the opposite from Hirschhorn’s ultimately referential

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<sup>452</sup> Which is as such an aggressive act being crucial to art Bataille had similarly conceived in his discussion of graffiti by Abyssinian children (“bizarre rantings”), applied to “the columns or doors of churches”; Bataille couched it in Freudian terms and with de Sade in mind: “Art [...] proceeds in this way by successive destructions. Insofar as it liberates *libidinal* instincts, these instincts are sadistic.” Bataille, 2009 [1930], p. 41.

<sup>453</sup> All quotations by Hirschhorn so far are from a two-page statement written by him on the occasion of his exhibition “Concretion Re” at the Galerie Chantal Crousel in 2007. Online at <http://www.crousel.com/static/uploads/collective/press/PRconcretion.pdf> . Retrieved March 5th 2013

<sup>454</sup> Clark, *Texte zur Kunst*, 2011, p.164. He continues: “[...] the possibility of at least partial escape from the time and the place of the slogan, the sound bite, the sentence, the image-that-obey-the-logic-of-a-sound-bite/brand-name/sales-pitch-world”.

collages<sup>455</sup>, equally speaks of a return to "defensiveness" and of "intensity" and "immediacy" that corresponds with Hirschhorn's repeated demands of (his) art's priority of "energy" over "quality" and the aforementioned "defending" of the "Form"<sup>456</sup>. This generous quoting of the artist speaking about his own work is necessary in this case because I think it is as, if not more important than the actual works themselves<sup>457</sup>. Not only do these persisting assertions and defenses on the side of Hirschhorn present a stark contrast to the actual formal logic of the works under discussion, which will be addressed in a moment. Furthermore, they illustrate a key contemporary example fraught with the historical ideological claims and aspirations of a counter aesthetic discussed so far, not least in connection with the barbaric as an aesthetic device and a social performative position complete with any acuity it may possess in a

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<sup>455</sup> Clark considers Philippe Parreno's film work *June 8, 1968* (2009) to be moving towards such a "non-discursiveness" and "worldlessness" (The film shows a highly stylized reenactment of Robert Kennedy's coffin's train journey from New York to Washington D.C., pointing the lens onto various groups of spectators beholding this procession, passing through a pristinely verdant countryside back to the city. It thus presents a completely different treatment of quasi-Warholian subject matter: a reversal of the gaze that dissolves Pop iconicity).

<sup>456</sup> "I have always believed in 'Quality = No, Energy = Yes' ". Thomas Hirschhorn, "Why Is It Important - Today - To Show and Look At Images Of Destroyed Human Bodies?" 2013. Text published on the occasion of his exhibition "Collage Truth", Galerie Susanna Kulli Zurich, 2013 [http://www.susannakulli.ch/sites/default/files/Thomas%20Hirschhorn\\_Why%20Is%20It%20Important\\_Galerie%20Susanna%20Kulli\\_Zurich\\_2013.pdf](http://www.susannakulli.ch/sites/default/files/Thomas%20Hirschhorn_Why%20Is%20It%20Important_Galerie%20Susanna%20Kulli_Zurich_2013.pdf) Retrieved March 6<sup>th</sup> 2013

<sup>457</sup> That Hirschhorn's so far sporadic manifesto-like written output is considered essential to his practice is evinced by the fact that his collected writings will be published in August of this year by MIT Press: *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*, edited by Hal Foster (with Lisa Lee).



contemporary context<sup>458</sup>. Just like Bataille's notion of a base materialism and formlessness, Hirschhorn seeks to furnish "chaos" and a virulent base heterogeneity with the power and the agency to undo and *declass* accepted configurations of power: of knowledge production, image hierarchies, the logic of rational organization of representation and the power relations these systems or codes seek to thereby maintain. Not at all unlike proto-fascist aspirations to conceive forms – Sinnbilder – that are *true* because they resist and denounce interpretation, are ahistorical<sup>459</sup>, divulge meaning through their very form independent of rationalizing *powers of the will*, Hirschhorn demands this kind of non-linguistic powerful "autonomy" for the images he creates. The interest and investment in universal totalities similar to the kind of "Ur-time" of both Bataille and the concurrent fascist aesthetic are implicated in Hirschhorn's work, not

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<sup>458</sup> Rancière: "The main procedure of political or critical art consists in setting out the encounter and possibly the clash of heterogeneous elements. The clash of these heterogeneous elements is supposed to provoke a break in our perception, to disclose some secret connection of things hidden behind the everyday reality. The hidden reality may be the absolute power of dream and desire hidden by the prose of bourgeois life, as it is in the surrealist poetics. It may be the violence of capitalist power and class war hidden behind the great ideals, as it is in the militant practices of photomontage, showing us for instance the capitalist gold in Adolf Hitler's throat" [John Heartfield, "Adolf der Übermensch: Schluckt Gold und redet Blech", 1932]. (Hirschhorn has mentioned these Dada works as "speaking to him", i.e. historically informing the ambitions of his work.)

From a lecture given in Frankfurt a.M. 2004, online at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877print.html> Retrieved January 23rd 2009

<sup>459</sup> Hirschhorn: "That is the point: to make a work in your time that goes beyond your time, a work that is a-historic" in "Im Rahmen der Ausstellung", online publication on the occasion of his "Ur-Collage show" at the Susanna Kulli Gallery in 2008, essentially a dialogue between Hirschhorn and Sebastian Egenhofer, 2008, p.49 Online at [http://www.susannakulli.ch/sites/default/files/Thomas%20Hirschhorn\\_Ur-Collage\\_a%20conversation%20with%20Sebastian%20Egenhofer\\_english%20and%20german.pdf](http://www.susannakulli.ch/sites/default/files/Thomas%20Hirschhorn_Ur-Collage_a%20conversation%20with%20Sebastian%20Egenhofer_english%20and%20german.pdf)

Retrieved March 12<sup>th</sup> 2013

least by titling a later series of collages *Ur-Collages* (2008)<sup>460</sup>. What makes his statements however wholly incompatible with any homogenizing (and needless to say, fascist) ambition/exploitation is his frequent emphasis on the exceptional individual vision and creation that informs his resistant “Form”:

A form which comes from me, from myself only, which can only come from me because I see the form that way, I understand it that way and because I am the only one to know that form. <sup>461</sup>

Drawing on Hollier’s definition of the barbaric as a “disturbance” and “cultural expression”, it seems not implausible for Hirschhorn to concur with such a barbaric formal methodology, one, to recall Hollier, that “oppose[s] [...] all these surrounding forms of expression – [to] all these languages that conform and reinforce each other [...]”. I.e., in Hirschhorn’s version, *all these languages* of conventional truths, to which he “opposes” an, in his estimation, unique quasi-unintelligible barbaric “Form[s]”. And, while his “Form[s]” may be “noncumulative” as knowledge production, i.e. in properly utilitarian terms, they of course not only accumulate significant market value as artworks but, as Peter Geimer has recently pointed out, are being praised by institutions and academics alike for their apparently already visually unflinching criticality in meeting the

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<sup>460</sup> The significant appeal of such anti-rational totalities for the Collège de Sociologie as much as to fascist propaganda has recently been briefly taken up by Didi-Huberman: “Quant à l’autre face du sacré, elle fait surgir [surge] la dépense [expenditure] ou la fête. [Roger] Caillois y voit une actualization de l’*Urzeit*, un phénomène de ‘dépense et paroxysme’ réperable [retrievable] depuis le carnaval jusqu’aux foules [crowds] électrisées de Nuremberg.” Georges Didi-Huberman, “La colère oubliée”, *Critique* 788-789, Jan/Feb 2013, p.24

<sup>461</sup> Hirschhorn, “Doing art politically: What does this mean?” (2008). Online manifesto <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v3n1/fullap01.html>  
Retrieved on March 12<sup>th</sup> 2013

barbaric conditions of our times head on (thus further consolidating the work's overall value<sup>462</sup>). Geimer writes:

To date, the art-critical and theoretical response to the 'Ur-Collages' has been exceptionally favorable. The work, a critic writes, possess 'both ethical and political force', achieving a 'creaturely opening' that allows the creature to appear in its obscenity and indicate cracks in the symbolic order.<sup>463</sup>

The "critic" Geimer paraphrases is Hal Foster, one of the staunchest champions to have further theorized Hirschhorn's work over the last few years (along with Benjamin Buchloh and Pamela M. Lee, to limit it to a North-American academic context). When Foster via Geimer speaks of Hirschhorn's collages' capacity to register "creaturely openings" and "cracks in the symbolic order" it becomes quite obvious that Foster considers Hirschhorn the legitimate heir to the Warhol of the *Death and Disasters*; or, at the very least, a Warhol of his time. For Foster located Warhol's works' intensity not primarily in the actual troubling content of the media images but precisely in the process of reproducibility of these images interrupted by technical errors and glitches. A treatment which, according to Foster: "[...] works less through content than through technique, especially through the 'floating flashes' of the silkscreen process [...]" with Warhol "[...]

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<sup>462</sup> "Thomas Hirschhorn's "Tattoo" series explores the themes of violence, sex, consumerism, and global politics. Photos of airbrushed breasts, tattooed limbs, and blown-up body parts of Iraqi citizens are buried among printed matter cut-outs, cryptic messages, signage, and obsessive blue and red scribbling. Hirschhorn's work summons references to philosophy, popular culture, mass media, economics, and poetry. Layering information and imagery, Hirschhorn wants to express the complexity and contradiction of our fragmented world through work that voices his discontent with contemporary politics and public discourse." Regen Projects press release, Los Angeles, 2009

<sup>463</sup> Peter Geimer, "The Necessity of Critique and the Love of Art", *Texte zur Kunst* 87, 2012. p. 54

selecting moments when this spectacle cracks (the JFK assassination, the Monroe suicide, racist attacks, car wrecks) but cracks only to expand.” Foster specified these “cracks” and “flashes” as the signifiers of trauma and shock which he, by drawing on Lacan’s irrepresentable *Real*, further tied to Barthes’ pictorial *punctum* and finally to Lacan’s own notion of “*troumatic*”, which comingles the gap/hole/opening (*trou* in French) with the traumatic, dodging representation, all “[...] at the level of technique, where the *punctum* breaks through the screen and allows the real to poke through.”<sup>464</sup>

I have chosen this *Concretion* series of Hirschhorn because if a similar process is indeed operative in the surfaces of Hirschhorn I would argue that it not so much registers or produces but that it *flashes* the *troumatic* via those bullet holes. Indeed, one could posit that with Hirschhorn the *troumatic* as initially tied to the intangibility of the *punctum* by Foster has become pure surface *effect*, and, if anything, is wholly integrated into the *studium*; as an *effect* by way of which Hirschhorn seeks to resist any “information” – truths – to be had from any distrusted *studium* for the benefit of “Truth”. (Differently argued, the collages render *punctum* and *studium* redundant terms, which may be their foremost achievement<sup>465</sup>). In Hirschhorn’s diction “Truth” is a stand-in for the “real” and thus, consequentially, when Foster spoke about Warhol’s works signaling a “rupture [...] between the perception and consciousness of a subject

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<sup>464</sup> Foster, 1996, p. 136

<sup>465</sup> For the original definition of these two terms by Barthes see his *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris, 1980)

*touched* by an image”<sup>466</sup>, this is no doubt exactly what Hirschhorn endeavors when he titled recent collages – again setting up fashion advertising imagery against grisly pictures of Iraqi or Afghan corpses – *Touching Reality* (2012). To touch reality is “being capable of touching this inconsumerable act”<sup>467</sup>; hence to deny the collage’s “relational antagonism” (Claire Bishop<sup>468</sup>) transfixed onto paper, now that of the military-industrial-commodity complex proper, equals to “avoid touching Truth” while this antagonistic collage “Form” is one of “resistance” and a “way to touch Truth”<sup>469</sup>. Why superimposing an explicit image of disaster and defacement over the brand name of a fashion ad constitutes a “warrior-like”, “brave”, “new” truth/act is also an act difficult to reconstruct, replicating as it does the dualistic attributes familiar from run-of-the-mill anti-War/anti-Globalization demonstration placards (which could make the (wobbly) case for a certain democracy of forms and contexts strived for, of a common

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<sup>466</sup> Foster, 1996, p. 132

<sup>467</sup> Hirschorn, Kulli PR, 2013

<sup>468</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics”, *October* Vol. 110, 2004, pp. 51-79. Bishop only skirted the collages in her discussion of Hirschorn’s overall practice, which she presented as a counter position of a more exacting criticality vis-à-vis concurrent practices commonly associated with Nicolas Bourriaud’s notion and eponymous book *Relational Aesthetics* (*Esthétique relationnelle*, Dijon 1998). I am using her neologism as an already established one here then, somewhat detached from her original (con)text.

<sup>469</sup> Which may be the very gist of the crass incongruity between the artist’s and his proponents’ claims for these collages and the latter’s amazingly orthodox formal logic. It thus appears that this incongruity boils down to medium-specificity: while the “3d” collages do succeed at a sense of entrapment through the sheer density and virulence of these images in conjunction with this human architecture of death/mannequins, indeed late capitalist surrogate *tzompantlis*/ossuaries, the neat juxtapositions of two image banks transfixed as a transgressivity in the most conservative sense simply does not generate anything close to the purported transfixion on behalf of the viewer in my view.

*fandom of ideas and/of resistance*<sup>470</sup>). Pamela Lee confirms as much in her recent discussion of these collages, which she contextualizes with Hirschhorn's brief stint at a politically engaged Paris graphic design firm in the mid-1980s:

Designing for Grapus – and by extension the 'Partie Communiste Francaise' – was no better, as he [Hirschhorn] put it, than designing advertisements for yoghurt. Audacious though the remark is – putting the interest of the communist Party on the same rhetorical footing as yoghurt, both neutralized through the ideological transparency of the graphic sign – it has the virtue of illustrating a central problem for any artist laboring under the long shadow not only of 1968 but by now of 1989: that is, the ways in which this kind of medium, the carrier of radically different types of information, can be mobilized to temporally specific purposes as the usual bait and switch of co-optation sets in. <sup>471</sup>

Lee however affords the works not only *this* "Truth" (the one underpinning this discussion as a given<sup>472</sup>) but this braveness, indeed, this "audacious[ness]" on the side of Hirschhorn, again begging the question as to why re-representing her

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<sup>470</sup> A similar point may be made in view of Martha Rosler's series *Bringing the War Home*, updated as they are by her to reflect on the respective wars being fought by the U.S. (1967-72, 2004, 2008). Hirschhorn, while calling her work "very beautiful", is anxious to differentiate his collages from what he calls are Rosler's "photomontages" that in his view derive their efficacy by "literally bringing the war home" whereas his *Ur-Collages* are "autonomous" and "cannot be 'discussed'". It should be noted that since then his latest series *Collage Truths* (2013) employ montage and spatial perspective. .

<sup>471</sup> Lee, 2012, p. 118

<sup>472</sup> As opposed to the "Truth" Hirschhorn, as Geimer argues in his essay, seems to deduce both from an orthodoxly irrevocable artistic autonomy as much as from "a diffuse awareness of shared humanity"; the latter a critique Geimer in turn extracts from Barthes' essay "Family of Man" in *Mythologies* on the seminal eponymous MoMA photography exhibition that was subsequently taken on a kind of world tour. Geimer, *Texte zur Kunst*, 2011, p.54

(and others') accepted analysis above, "Truth" if you will, through an antagonism of two image banks<sup>473</sup> (that are agreed to be held at the same *bank*), arguably obliging Foster's demand of "a fracture traced", is couched in the language of the "heroic avant-garde" "producing" "rupture"? Perhaps it is to be taken not at face value but as a performative gesture, within which the manifesto-like style of Hirschhorn's writing would further attest to this "neutraliz[ation]" and "co-optation" (by the market, by the institution) Lee speaks of. This discrepancy between the analysis and the claims made for illustrating it by the very means that are considered to have been shed of any acuteness – "the free play of the signifier"<sup>474</sup> – i.e., to literally juxtapose these signifiers back into a historical transgressive antagonism, also rolls back the trajectory of criticism over the last decade. Just at the same time that Foster had called for a critical art that would "expose" "crisis", to "register" "breakdown" within the "order", Georges Didi-Huberman exhumed Bataille's scorned art gallery-*cum*-pharmacy whose "windows", according to Didi-Huberman, had been "smashed" by the critical discourse and the art advanced in *Documents*. Didi-Huberman, however, did not leave it at this historical claim but restated it for a contemporary context: as "the most radical and paradoxical demand one can ask of the art world" – the "*will to the symptom*". [...] "Because the essential task of art is in general to 'communicate' disease, discontent, *being-unwell*"<sup>475</sup>, he wrote in 1996, using

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<sup>473</sup> Sebastian Egenhofer, a frequent dialogue partner of Hirschhorn's, calls it a 'bipolar battery'. Hirschhorn/Egenhofer, 2008, p. 41

<sup>474</sup> Lee, 2012, p. 120

<sup>475</sup> Didi-Huberman, Munich 2010 [1995], pp. 333-334. Translation by the author.

Freud against Freud's soothing and gratifying function of art. While on first reading Didi-Huberman's "demand" for art to "smash" any "windows" smacks of Foster's concomitantly dismissed "old vocation", one should not overlook that while Didi-Huberman called it "radical" he equally thought it to be "paradoxical."

Thus this essentially art *historical* discussion is indeed one of form and hardly of content. Does any barbaric "disturbance" to the "code" (Hollier) precluding classification, information, explanation, rationalization and voyeuristic consumption of the horrors and grievances of the world as clearly strived for by Hirschorn – his "*will to the symptom*" – register in the forms he devises? They may be *symptomatic* not because of any heterogeneity but, on the contrary, by being homogenous in the sense that the collages mirror and condense the *New York Times'* generic (in)form(ation), whose layout already contains incessant images of catastrophe placed next to a Tiffany/Gucci/Rolex advertisement and suchlike on a 24-hour basis.<sup>476</sup> Even though Hirschhorn is right to maintain that explicit images of the US' wars in the Middle East are hardly the *order* of the day in American mainstream media, the images he "shockingly"<sup>477</sup> exhumes and presents to the public are all easily retrievable online, raising the question as to who these gallery goers are exactly that are

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<sup>476</sup> Peter Geimer further points out the "assimilation" between these purported factions: "This arrangement [The *Ur-Collages*] generates a stark contrast between antagonistic visual domains; but then they are also assimilated to each other, as fashion and war appear as equally anonymous situations devoid of context. Like the paid models of fashion advertising, the dead of the Iraq War have no names. In the 'Ur Collages' they represent pure types of the victim, disfigured by a diffuse and unidentified violent power". Geimer, *Texte zur Kunst*, 2011, p.52

<sup>477</sup> Indeed there seems to be a re-investment taking place here into Benjamin's notion of Dada's "moral shock" effect, i.e. a return to that notion of shock despite – or because of – being safely installed and incorporated into popular culture at large, a situation the collages may seek to address (or overturn?).



apparently so appalled and shocked by the collages, seeking to “avoid touching Truth”<sup>478</sup>. (Elderly collectors unacquainted with navigating the Internet?)



**Photo: Soldiers from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division, along with Afghan police, pose with the mangled corpse of a suicide bomber.**

*Los Angeles Times*, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 (The image is no longer posted on the *LA Times* website but remains retrievable on [cbsnews.com](http://cbsnews.com) and various other sites).

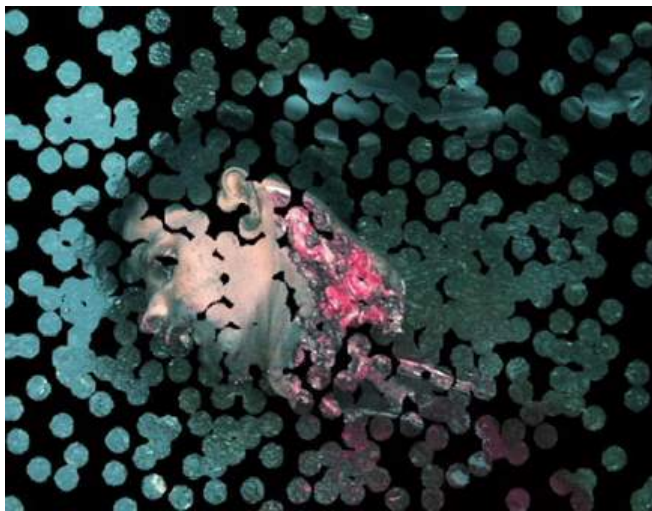
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<sup>478</sup> “I am astonished time and again when viewers say, ‘I can’t see that, or even worse, «I don’t have to see that» or ‘I don’t want to see that.’ That is an incredible thing to say, that is an exclusion of the other, and it is pure egotism when someone claims that he has the option of not seeing. Of not seeing the world as it is.” Hirschhorn, 2008, p.41

“Sometimes I hear viewers saying, while looking at images of destroyed human bodies, ‘I can’t look at this, I must not see this, I’m too sensitive.’ This is a way of keeping a comfortable, narcissistic, and exclusive distance from today’s reality, from the world”. Hirschhorn, 2013, p. 4



Thomas Hirschhorn, *Ur-Collage*, 2008



Seth Price, *Digital Video Effects (Holes)*, 2003 (video still)

Hirschhorn clearly considers his project of *truth touching* to be resuming the Western canon of a fearless enlightening à la Goya (reproductions of the latter's *Disasters of Wars* are sometimes integrated into his exhibitions), not least since he speaks about "enlightening" the "Form"<sup>479</sup>. Within this arguably already shelved discussion of critique and representation, a basically eye-opening, truth-telling position such as Hirschhorn's presents the alternative to a concomitant kind of jaded, self-conscious cynicism as told by for example Seth Price:

Whatever concepts you signal through your making of things, you end up sanctifying the current state of affairs. Anyone who gazes upon your products might well wonder: *'Must I consult some picture or trinket to learn that power corrupts, desires are commodified, control is paramount, subjectivity is administered?'*<sup>480</sup>

Price's comingling and indeed collaging of vanguard/drop-out aspirations with hands-on instructions for quasi-domestic terrorism seems, like Hirschhorn, to place the emphasis on the form(at), as in his 2008 book *How To Disappear in America*, from which the above quote stems. In his case, by accumulating "information" liberally scraped from online forums as much as from archival

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<sup>479</sup> Speaking of truth touching and Foster's notion of poking the real/a real poking through this may explain why Hirschhorn's latest treatise on "Why Is It Important-Today-To Show And Look At Images Of Destroyed Human Bodies" (2013) is illustrated with Michelangelo da Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (1601-02) in which the "Doubting Thomas" (we as spectators?) pokes a finger in Jesus' flesh wound.

<sup>480</sup> Seth Price, *How To Disappear in America*, New York 2008, p.6. It is perhaps due to this conclusion (that may well be a rhetorical gesture, performing a voice, since subjectivity and authorship is almost routinely thrown into limbo in his work) that Price's work has noticeably paused incorporating these kinds of images in his work roughly since the last five years.

arcana – both plausible and ludicrous – into what is essentially a heterogeneous *text/work*, with any artist’s voice authoritatively stating *truth* being paranoid-polyphonic at best (if not literally unemployable). Some years earlier though, at the onset of the Iraq war then led by the Bush administration, Price explicitly drew on material identical to Hirschhorn’s inventory stock of horrors. In lieu of the glossy makeweight courtesy of *Vogue* and mens’ magazines, Price’s take on the “endless logic of exchangeability”<sup>481</sup> took the form of *declassing* the atrocious content (severed and grossly disfigured heads, predominantly from accidents) to serve as disposable footage for demonstrating generic motion graphics effects such as spreading and receding perforation, turning – fusing – both video components into non-fixable digital formlessness<sup>482</sup>. In lieu of the literal *troumatic* bullet holes of *Concretion* the image here is *untroumatically* punched (only to be virtually reassembled by these punctures to its original if fleeting dismal spectacular) within Price’s framework of *Dispersion*<sup>483</sup>. An accompanying soundtrack consists of the artist’s base level enunciations of “Uhhs” and “Ahhs”

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<sup>481</sup> Lee, 2012, p. 138

<sup>482</sup> States Price: “The “content” here consists of pictures taken from websites that function as clearinghouses of grisly or brutal images, mostly pictures of people who have been in accidents, supposedly supplied by police examiners, morgue workers, or photojournalists who couldn’t publish the material. A lot of these could be fabrications, but the point is really about circulation and redundancy. You know, these kinds of images have been around forever, but now they have a new form of circulation.” Available on [distributedhistory.org](http://distributedhistory.org)

<sup>483</sup> The title of a text by Price that has been widely circulated, discussed and reprinted since its publication in 2002 and serves as kind of template to Price’s overall work/strategy. Available online at <http://www.distributedhistory.com/Dispersion08.pdf>. David Joselit has recently made an interesting observation that this detached non-corporeal “dispersion” Price applies to *whatever* content can nevertheless at times register as “an explicitly biological form of ‘dispersion’, in which a head is parted from its torso. The catastrophe of his [Nicholas Berg’s] decapitation results in the abject wasting of the body.” “What to Do with Pictures”, *October* Vol. 138, 2011, p. 85

having been fed through some sort of Auto-Tune software; a score which, interestingly in connection with Hirschhorn, has previously been described as a kind of “ur-voice”, “at once sexualized and deadened”.<sup>484</sup>

When Fredric Jameson turned his discussion of postmodern culture to the *Death and Disaster* works of Warhol he spoke of these works as exemplary of a “waning of affect”<sup>485</sup>, symptomatic of a postmodern audience’s reception and consumption in encountering these kind of images. Jameson however, similar to Foster, tied this change in affect not to the content depicted but to the form in which it was cast, a “new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense” as he wrote:

Here [in Warhol’s *Diamond Dust Shoes* 1980] it is as though the external and colored surface of things – contaminated and debased in advance by their assimilation to glossy advertising images – has been stripped away to reveal the deathly black and white substratum that subtends them. Although this kind of death of the world of appearance becomes thematized in certain of Warhol’s pieces, most notably the traffic accidents or electric chair series, this is not, I think, a matter of content any longer but of some more fundamental mutation both in the object world itself [...] and in the disposition of the subject.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Johanna Burton, “Seth Price: A Human Interest Story” in *Guyton, Price, Smith, Walker*, Kunsthalle Zurich Exh. Catalogue (ed. Beatrix Ruf), 2006, p. 76

<sup>485</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham/NC 1991, p.10. The essay drawn on here was originally published in 1984 in *New Left Review* No. 146

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.* p.9

In Price, one may see this in retrospect fairly tangible photographic “substratum that subtends” death and disasters to have been updated by the immaterial digital file circulating endlessly configurable, interchangeable content; circulating here “the ugliest lessons of general equivalence in a wholly mediated world”.<sup>487</sup> Which further means that with Price affect and effect are sought to be perpetually con- and deflated <sup>488</sup> (which they already are by default in Hirschhorn, yet where there seems to be a contradiction as to whether their distinctiveness is still claimed). With Price then, the horror of the mutilated body is less a “return of the real” or, if it is, it is returning incessantly, its subtending substratum (Jameson) not the photographic negative as the indexical matrix of barbarism, but that of the file subjected to endless *alterations*. Jameson’s notion of a “fundamental mutation in the object world” remains apposite though in this context, which in the case of Price however has *mutated* into the lingua franca of the digital age: of “formatting”<sup>489</sup> according to David Joselit. “Formatting [...] is as much a political as an aesthetic procedure because the same image may easily be adduced as ‘evidence’ in support of various and even contradictory propositions – determining a format thus introduces an ethical choice about how to produce

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<sup>487</sup> Lee on Hirschhorn, 2012, p.140. Lee continues to speak of Hirschhorn’s collages’ “Radical *heterogeneity* of his source material [that] is continuous with its nonhierarchical organization and lateral extension”, which may serve as an apt description of Price’s work in this case.

<sup>488</sup> Another description is offered by Tim Griffin who considers Price to act as a kind of Neo-Warholian “filter”: “Price looks at and mimics the ways in which meaning is both lost and produced with any change of context. He behaves as a kind of filter, continually reintroducing a sense of this loss in his work, this emptying of memory, in order to mine the effects and affects of such depletion.” “The Personal Effects of Seth Price”, *Artforum*, Summer 2008, p. 282

<sup>489</sup> David Joselit employs “formatting” to discuss the methodology of Price’s practice which he delineates from the notion of “medium”: ““Formatting” – the capacity to configure data in multiple possible ways – is a more useful term than “medium”, which, all heroic efforts to the contrary, can seldom shed its intimate connection to matter”. Joselit, *October* Vol. 138, 2011, p. 82

intelligible information from raw data.”<sup>490</sup> As much as these “contradictory propositions” turn out to be “adduced” in this very discussion since Price and Hirschhorn utilize the exact same image/file in their work, lifted from a presumably identical online source (see above).

Without discussing Hirschhorn’s collage format Joselit further speaks of “[...] forms of critique that once would have been conducted through dissonant content [...]” as opposed to for example Price, who, even when resorting to “heterogenous” content such as in the work discussed above “[...] seeks to format (and not merely ‘reveal’) image-power”.<sup>491</sup> Joselit focuses his discussion on another decapitation involving the American businessman Nicholas Berg, whose execution with a knife by an Iraqi militant group in 2004 went viral online at the time and which presented the raw material to Price’s work *Hostage Video Still with Time Stamp* (2004). In his reading Price, by printing almost wholly unrecognizable, reductive monochrome renderings of Berg’s head abstracted from video stills onto plastic film crumpled on the wall, “slows down the circulation of images”, “slowing down the trajectory”. Joselit writes:

Price curbs the frictionless motion and instantaneous spatial jumps

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<sup>490</sup> Ibid. For Joselit, Colin Powell’s notorious power point presentation before the UN security council in 2003 in support of the invasion of Iraq on the grounds of the country’s alleged weapons of mass destruction program is “one of the most powerful examples [...] of formatting.”

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., p. 86. This “image-power” for Joselit seems to be less one in the traditional sense of the image’s heterogeneity and thus visual force as disruption, nor does it derive its power now as Warholian mass iconicity, but has more to do again with the myriad capacities of re-contextualizing images to a *heterogeneity of contexts*, with image as data having become “a resource like coal or diamonds” (Joselit). A resource that however is not bound by scarcity and whose value is permanently tracked and reset through consumers’ and corporations’ interactions with it.

characteristic of navigation on the Internet and allows them to pile up in unruly masses; the gruesome decapitation he represents is also the figure of an acephalous media.<sup>492</sup>

Thus Price's "slowing down" and quasi non-legibility applied in the representation of this troubling content would again arguably deviate and frustrate this content's "natural behavior" in the reigning environment of visual consumption – of online consumption – thus enacting a kind of barbarism. A barbarism – now devoid of claiming to be an "ideological expression" (Hollier) of any kind – although, one might ask, to what ends. If there is such a thing as a boon to be had in the past from engaging both barbaric content and barbaric form, a hypothesis seemingly confirmed by and traceable from the history of modern (Goya/Manet) to contemporary Western art, has the trajectory of criticism inextricably tied to a trajectory of "image-power" not exhausted this boon? (Less abstractly: Is there more to it than a mere personal shift of artistic interests – which unromantically and non-heroically are informed by market and institutional considerations – if a practice such as Price's has largely discontinued to employ both "barbaric" form and content in the manner outlined above since the last five or more years? True, the Bush years have been swept up by the "change" brought on by the Obama era; which naturally has no effect on the unimpeded atrocities, with individuals outfitted with machetes hacking a person into pieces in daylight on a London street.<sup>493</sup>)

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<sup>492</sup> Ibid. p.86

<sup>493</sup> "The words "terrorist attack" only dignify the barbarism", *The Spectator*, May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013. Etc.



When Price discussed this *Digital Video Effects: Holes* (2003), he implicitly addressed what Jacques Rancière once called “some secret of power and violence”<sup>494</sup>; a “secret” however, to quote Rancière, that has largely “vanished”:

Last year [not specified] it came out that American troops in Iraq were being awarded free porn-site memberships in exchange for uploading grisly war photographs to these other sites [from which Price obtained the images for this work], which are often owned by the same company.<sup>495</sup>

Whether or not this obscene trivia of the military-industrial-porn complex is verifiable or not is actually less decisive than the very notion of alleged “exchange”, since it in fact bluntly performs another “ugliest lesson[s] of general equivalence” under the paradigm of late capitalist consumption which all parties from Buchloh to Lee to Hirschhorn, from Rancière to Joselit to Price seem to attest to. (In Rancière’s enviably suave diction this “equivalence” settles into an ethereal “mystery of co-presence”). However, the realm which partly serves as the very “raw material” for collages of global barbarity seems to actually operate along more archaic, strictly symbolic parameters, or better, *forms* of (self)

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<sup>494</sup> “The heterogeneous elements are put together in order to provoke a clash. Now the clash is two things at once. On the one hand it is the flash that enlightens [!]. [...]. It points to some secret of power and violence.” [...] The question is: what exactly happened to the dialectical clash? What happened to the formula of critical art? [...] So in both cases an image of American happiness was juxtaposed to its hidden secret: war and economical violence in Martha Rosler, sex and profanity in Wang Du. But in Wang Du’s case, both political conflictuality and the sense of strangeness had vanished. There remained an automatic effect of delegitimization: sexual profanity delegitimizing politics, the wax figure delegitimizing high art. But there was no more anything to delegitimize. The mechanism spun around itself. It played in fact a double play: on the automaticity of the delegitimizing effect and on the awareness of its spinning around itself.  
Rancière: “The Politics of Aesthetics” lecture Frankfurt a.M., 2004. Online at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/001877print> Retrieved January 23rd 2009

<sup>495</sup> Price, [distributedhistory.org](http://distributedhistory.org)

-representation. The Mexican drug cartel of the Zetas (the current candidate of Bataille's Aztec-Chicago Mob variety) routinely enralls the news cycle by way of their careful mise-en-scènes-cum-sacrifices-cum-slaughterings that betray an eerie discourse with Western art history's enlightening representations of barbarity. Their "image-power" (Joselit), its use- and exchange value, is of a systematic, unambiguous, stable nature; the spectacular atrocity serves both as the grim implementation of social cohesion of the cartel vis-à-vis rival cartels as much as possible apostates; and as media-savvy compositions created with the full knowledge and intention to be disseminated and consumed as striking content widening – *dispersing* – the cartel's sphere of symbolic recognition and thereby its barbaric power. Yet again, however, where is one to locate the *punctum* here? (Is it the, what appear to be plastic, garlands curled around the column, both kitschy yet somehow also classical? Is it the pastel palette of the photograph itself, the pale pink, green and alabaster hues of the corpses evocative of Caravaggio et al? Or is it the signifier/*Sinnbild* par excellence serving the *studium*: the "Z"-s carved into the bodies, an atavistic laceration/tribal ornament/registration mark/corporate logo?)

In terms of any "Truth" then as well as a kind of perverse, apolitical timelessness these images alone, along with the intermittently leaked images of snapshots taken by soldiers with corpses and body parts paraded as trophies of their "tour", out-enlighten their incorporation into "[...] endless dialectical mimicry of numbness and surface-ness"<sup>496</sup>.

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<sup>496</sup> Clark, *Texte zur Kunst* 2012, p.163. This "dialectical mimicry" corresponds to Rancière's notion of the "dialectical clash" operative in what Rancière terms "critical art", in which "it is that tension which underpins and somehow undermines the seemingly simple project of a political or "critical" art that would serve politics by arousing the awareness of the forms of domination and enhancing thereby energies of resistance or rebellion." Rancière, 2004.



Martha Rosler, *Make Up/Hands Up* (from *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, 1967-72)



Francisco de Goya y Lucientes, *Disasters of War* (Plate 39) (1810-14) Zeta cartel execution



Théodore Géricault, *Têtes de suppliciés*, 1810s



Zeta cartel execution



Archival online image from the US-army deployment in Vietnam



Online image from the US-army deployment in Afghanistan

Due not so much to these images' actual, real, *non-transpositional* barbarity as to their formal economy and their permeating circulation within the public sphere, they already render unmistakable the systemic and logical irrationality they are the products of; complete with all the irreconcilabilities and inexplicableness any

juxtaposition of these “bastard siblings”/“bad apples” etc. with that same civilization’s *models* seems to vie for. Consequently (or if being cynical) one could very well retort by asking why Rosler’s recurrences of *Bringing the War Home* should change at all in their formal and critical inertia, given that the images discussed above attest to just that timelessness and continuance, indeed to a classic iconography, *sublating art into life*. Or death, rather. (Note that the corpses’ private parts are commonly concealed by some kind of cloth in the manner of the Crucifixion). It thus appears that forms seeking to register barbarity or that attempt to barbarize an existing dominant code not only contend with capital that always wins but the real barbarity that also always wins, interrelated as these spheres are.

“*In nuce* – The task of art today is to bring chaos into the order”<sup>497</sup>. Hardly. And yet, as anachronistic as this call of chaotic duty reads now, what Adorno meant of course was less about any antagonism as it was to meet chaos with chaos, any other *form* presumably deemed utterly inapt by him in view of any so-called post-War “order”. Both the “damaged” order of the day as well as the order to *get on with it*.

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<sup>497</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “In nuce”. *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben*. In *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. 4* (ed. Rolf Tiedemann), Frankfurt a.M., 1980 [1946/47] p. 251. English translation:  
<http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/adorno/1951/mm/ch03.htm>





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