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Greg Kerr

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Drawing Blanks: Word and Image at the Expositions des Incohérents

Greg Kerr

School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

In the early 1890s, Jules Lévy organised a series of artistic exhibitions under the title of Les Arts Incohérents. Affiliated with Montmartre cabaret culture, the events lampooned the conventions of the Parisian salons and the conventions and institutions of the fine arts.

This article explores the importance of the figure of the blank in a selection of art exhibited by the Incohérents. Adopting a word-and-image-based approach, and drawing on theories of comedy and laughter, the article shows how the Incohérents' incipient avant-gardism interrogates the limits of the different arts and points to a novel inflection of humour in the period.

In the prologue to Alphonse Allais's 1880 story 'Les Deux Hydropathes: histoire fumiste en deux tableaux dont un prologue', first published in *L'Hydropathe* on 15 March 1880, two young men share a drink together at a café. The men then leave to attend a séance, before disagreeing over the route to follow, setting off in different directions, then finding themselves back at the same spot. In the story's second part, the narrator announces that some eight minutes later, two coaches have collided some streets away from the scene of the earlier action. Emerging from the carriage are two men dressed identically to the two protagonists. 'Je m'approchai pour voir … ', the narrator announces, before declaring, in a final line immediately subsequent to this ellipsis: 'Ce n'étaient pas eux'. Advertising its status as an 'histoire fumiste', this shaggy dog story's mystifying derailment of narrative intrigue for comic purposes is characteristic of the productions of the literary currents of both fumisme and the Hydropathes. Exploiting possibilities of humour that puncture the narrative conventions of a given medium (here, the *conte* or *nouvelle*), it presents what Julian Brigstocke sees as a hallmark of the kind of humour pioneered by the Montmartrois avant-gardes, namely 'the non-representational aspects of humour: the means by which humour moves us in ways that are not reducible to their semantic or discursive content' (2014, 24). Allais's 'Les Deux Hydropathes' seems to invite us to laugh in just such a way: laughing, that is, but somewhat at pains to identify quite what it is we are laughing *at*.

CONTACT Greg Kerr greg.kerr@glasgow.ac.uk School of Modern Languages and Cultures, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom

The humorous and metafictional effects to be had from diegetic interruptions of this kind can be approached through Peter Szendy's work on punctuation, especially in his reading of the novelist Laurence Sterne. For Szendy, Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* discloses a kind of originary 'punctuation' of experience. Punctuation, in Szendy's sense, stands for more than simply diacritical marks or the blank spaces between words in a text; it emphasises those discontinuities that are the stuff of the narrative imagination and of life. Szendy thus emphasises a dimension of reading that is activated in the margins of Sterne's famously digressive text and the story it tells: reflecting on the novel's digressions, as well as on its idiosyncratic punctuation and *mise en page*, Szendy writes that '[Sterne] multiplie et démultiplie les points en tout genre (points proprement dits, mais aussi tirets aux longueurs variables, astérisques, pages blanches ou noires …), comme si son plus grand jeu était l'arrêt, l'interruption, voire […] l'interruption de l'interruption, dans une quête infinie et infiniment mise en scène de ce qui pourrait enfin arrimer le texte à son sujet épinglé' (2013, 35–36). In this way, conventionally non-semantic elements such as diacritics and the space of the page trigger discontinuities that are fundamental to the story's ironic reflection on the fits and starts of narrative. This 'interruption' of 'interruption' coincides with a heightened awareness on the reader's part of Sterne's text, not simply in terms of the verbal 'message' for which it is the vehicle, but iconically, as a puzzling visual construction in itself: it is 'monumentalized', according to Szendy (47).

Szendy's conception of punctuation offers resources for a reading of Allais's 'Les Deux Hydropathes', since the latter story's delineation into two consecutive parts does not partake in the construction of a whole, but rather fragments wholeness. The story features ellipses and motifs of regression (the circular trajectory of the protagonists before their eventual disappearance from the narrative, the 'infinity' symbolism of the figure 8 that separates their disappearance from the appearance of their doubles), and it ultimately shifts from intrigue-driven narrative into a static 'tableau'. This involvement of iconic value in the text's ironic play on the expectations generated by narrative fiction is significant, because it is articulated through the motif of a lack of congruence between verbal and visual media, a motif which is present elsewhere in the creative output of Allais.

Taking as its focus the productions of the Arts Incohérents, a cultural movement broadly affiliated with Montmartre cabaret culture and the Chat noir, as well as with the Fumistes and Hydropathes, this article argues that the fascination for what lies in the margins of narrative and representational practices that is present in Allais's story finds a counterpart in the visual productions of the Incohérents. From Allais's own contributions to the movement, to others by numerous lesser-known figures, many of the productions of the Incohérents manipulate representational practices on the borders of visual and textual expression. Together these aspects of the Incohérents' incipient avant-gardism correspond to a significant inflection of humour in the modern period.

Les Arts Incohérents and *le Comique Moderne*

From August 1882 to the spring of 1893, Jules Lévy, a writer, publisher and founding member of the Cercle des Hydropathes, organized a total of seven Incohérent exhibitions in Paris (first at his home in the rue Antoine-Dubois, then later in the Galerie Vivienne or the Théâtre de l'Eden) plus several in regional locations, such as at Nantes in 1887. The

group mocked the conventions of the Parisian salons and the conventions and institutions of the fine arts. In the words of its founder, the aim of the Arts Incohérents was to organise 'une exposition de dessins exécutés par des gens qui ne savent pas dessiner' (Lévy 1885). Anticipating Dada, surrealism and conceptual art, the Incohérents' creations include found objects, blank canvases and ironic treatments of famed artworks such as the Venus de Milo and the Mona Lisa. Lévy claimed that their 1882 exhibition in his apartment attracted 2000 people (Lévy 1885) and they organised banquets and whimsical balls, of the kind featured in another story by Allais, 'Un Drame bien parisien'.[1]

Given the subversive qualities of many works associated with the movement, and the cultural sensation it generated, Lévy's own claims on behalf of it seem curiously modest, and he prefaces his most substantial text on the group, 'L'Incohérence: son origine – son histoire – son avenir', with a statement that downplays any iconoclastic associations it might garner: 'L'Incohérence est la rigolade sans méchanceté' (1885). In the same piece, he proclaims: 'les Incohérents n'ont aucune prétention, ils ne sont ni plus malins ni plus spirituels que tous les gens qui s'occupent d'art d'une façon quelconque, qu'ils soient peintres, poètes, sculpteurs ou menuisiers; mais ils ont cette conviction, qu'ils ne sont pas tout à fait des imbéciles'.

No doubt partly due to the underwhelming character of this kind of statement, the Incohérents never went on to attain the kind of notoriety of later movements such as surrealism or Dada. Daniel Grojnowski acknowledges that it is an 'avant-garde sans avancée' (1981), and it is clear that critical reception of the Incohérents has been muted by comparison with later movements of the avant-garde, with David Cottington arguing for the 'absence of an avant-garde consciousness' on the part of the Incohérents, 'and of a developed alternative and critical artistic discourse that could have provided a frame of reference for [their artistic] gestures, and underwritten their subversions' (1998, 39).[2]

Nonetheless, in an atmosphere where painters would compose texts, and writers and poets would produce paintings or drawings, there arose a playful kind of interdisciplinarity that rejected the institutional emphasis on formal training, and one that deserves renewed critical attention. As noted by Émile Goudeau, poet, journalist and a fellow founder of the Cercle des Hydropathes, in the milieu of the Arts Incohérents, '[des] poètes avaient envoyé des croquis informes, des auteurs dramatiques s'étaient improvisés sculpteurs' (1887). Away from the established salons and the Académie des Beaux-Arts, a kind of ludic inter-art space was thereby opened up, one where the skill and professional training of the artist receded in importance and, with them, the demonstration of mastery of those conventions that surround expression in a given medium. The resulting productions of the Incohérents include unsophisticated line drawings, jarring pictorial compositions, verbal[3] and visual[4] puns, and works that incorporate irreverent[5], ironic or nonsensical elements.

Key to these various efforts is their pursuit of what Grojnowski calls *le comique moderne*, a phenomenon he traces through the productions of the Hydropathes, the Incohérents and other movements of the *fin de siècle*. As well as being the pre-eminent authority on the Incohérents, Grojnowski offers the most conceptually-charged treatment of the humour-making mechanisms deployed by the Incohérents, through his notion of the *comique moderne*. Grojnowski argues that a traditional

variant of the comic relies on a duality of meaning that is either explicit (in puns or plays on words) or implicit (through the figures of satire, irony or parody). Meanwhile, the comic's modern counterpart is distinguished by what Grojnowski calls a 'double sens problématique', that is, one that seems to place the duality of meaning itself in question, and whose characteristics are derision, humour, mystification, 'le non-sens' and undecidability. Thus, 'alors que l'ironie, la satire ou la parodie désignent une cible aisément identifiable, le comique « moderne » accentue les effets de brouillage. Il affecte la signification d'un coefficient d'incertitude assez important pour provoquer le désarroi du destinataire. […] Parvenu à son point de perfection, il tend à accomplir ce dont rêvait Flaubert: 'un comique qui ne fait pas rire'' (1997, 249). Implicitly, then, what makes the fin-de-siècle comic so modern, for Grojnowski, is that the laughter it triggers does not always hinge on the presence of a laughable object or meaning: the exponent of fumiste humour, for instance, 'ne désigne pas en clair une cible. Il adopte une posture de retrait qui établit une indistinction généralisée' (1997, 51). As this article will argue, through discussion of individual works, many of the verbal/visual experiments of the Incohérents hinge on a spectacular conjuring-away of that object or meaning.

Becoming Incoherent: Laughter and the Limit Between Arts

Writing in the article 'Comment on devient incohérent' in an 1885 issue of *Le Courrier français* devoted to the Incohérents, that publication's editor Jules Roques argues that pictorial language has reached its limits. In a more assertive fashion than Lévy, Roques, at least, saw the movement as having a serious artistic purpose and constituting a 'new force':

> De même que la langue n'a à sa disposition qu'un certain nombre de mots pour exprimer la pensée, ce qui force l'écrivain à court d'érudition à créer le mot que Bescherelle ne lui fournit pas, de même la peinture et le dessin classiques n'ont que certaines lignes permises.
>
> Le dessin doit pouvoir noter par des traits et interpréter fidèlement tout ce que dit le texte. Se basant sur ce qui précède, allez donc dire à un classique de faire un dessin représentant: - Un ministre ayant l'oreille du gouvernement, ou bien – Un criminel étouffant la voix de sa conscience!
>
> Voilà ce qui vous explique la raison d'être de l'école incohérente, dont les disciples ne sont pas, comme l'a dit M. Gerôme, 'les anarchistes de l'art', mais une force nouvelle, un complément, un supplément aux règles de l'art. (1885, 2)

In its emphasis on literalist renderings of colloquial expressions[6], this excerpt underscores that, regardless of how aesthetically innovative he might claim the Incohérents to be, Roques's theorization of their activities remained wedded to an idea of drawing as an art essentially rooted in imitation. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Roques's essay is in the emphasis of its title, which would suggest that incoherence involves a form of agency or process. Among the dictionary definitions for the term 'incohérent' are the following: 'Qui manque de cohérence, de liaison entre les parties constitutives de quelque chose de matériel, d'un tout organisé. […] Qui manque d'accord entre ses parties […] Dont le comportement est bizarre, désordonné […] Qui est sans suite […] qui ne reflète pas la logique, la réflexion […] qui ne forme pas un ensemble rationnel, logique' (*Trésor de la langue française informatisé*). In addition to connotations

linked to the illogical or irrational, which are present through much of the work of the Incohérents, it is worth insisting on what the definition describes as an absence of connection '*entre*' (my emphasis) the constituent parts of an organised whole. My contention is that the '*entre*', this non-congruence of the elements that make a whole, corresponds to the figure of the blank, in other words, to that which is undifferentiated and unavailable to representation. Despite the position set out above by Roques, this article argues that artistic 'incoherence' is contingent less upon enhancing the representativity of drawing than in finding agency for the blank, or accentuating the space of that '*entre*' that separates and constitutes the different arts.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, writing in an essay on Charles Baudelaire's prose poem 'Le Désir de peindre' from *Le Spleen de Paris*, laughter coincides with an elusive threshold between the arts: 'The limit between arts – the limit which the desire to paint must confront – opens itself or comes forth in laughter. It does not open a way *through* the limit. Rather it opens itself, as if a limit could split itself open (which is impossible)'.[7] Nancy's remarks here – which pair the originary absence that is laughter with an interrogation of the limits of the different arts – speak acutely to the inter-art experiments of the Incohérents and to the function of the blank in their work. The works selected for analysis in this article include a variety of pictorial works and a theatrical scene. What they share is that they each focalize on the paradoxical presence of an absence, and exhibit patterns of referencing across media (of the visual by the textual, or vice versa) that serve to underscore the intermedial dimension of laughter as described by Nancy.

The blank, in the extended sense which is adopted in this article, is not exclusively a materialised white space, but equally a quality of absence or negativity that is *drawn out* of the work, in the sense of extracted or teased out. This can be achieved through manipulating the 'distance' between title and object, surface and depth in portraiture, figure and ground in drawing, or in text through the manipulation of linguistic matter within the space of the page.

In an important recent study of colour in the work of some major French poets of the modern period, Susan Harrow has argued that the interest of white for Stéphane Mallarmé lies in the ambiguities that surround white as colour and white as blank. White may be understood as one colour among others, but white as blank invites additional reflections upon motifs of textuality, spacing, pagination, and the conditions or scene of representation itself.[8] Thus, Harrow argues that white 'is not about asking what white might mean, but rather about speculating on what white might *do*' in combination with other chromatic values, and she proposes that Mallarmé invites the reader 'to shift our attention from identifying the signifying possibilities of white to tracking the agency of white' (2021, 58). While Harrow illustrates this thesis in relation to the high poetic modernism of Mallarmé, this article proposes to explore a related form of agency in the humorous work of the Incohérents that operate on the boundary of the textual and the visual.

Incohérents, Fumistes, Hydropathes …

While it is beyond the scope of this article to account comprehensively for the distinctions between the Incohérents and other avant-garde movements of the period, it will be useful for what follows to outline some broad points of development and comparison with movements and currents such as fumisme and the Cercle des Hydropathes. Phillip

Dennis Cate establishes a precedent for the Arts Incohérents and other movements of the Montmartrois avant-garde in the 'Bon Bock' dinners which brought together poets, writers and musicians in the mid-1870s, and which took their name from an 1873 painting by Edouard Manet, *Le Bon Bock.* For Cate, these gatherings saw the birth of a new artistic spirit which allied Rabelaisian humour with a liberal Republican politics that antagonised institutionality and conservative politics in the early Third Republic. The predilection shown by 'Bon Bock' participants for non-institutional settings such as the restaurant or café would be foundational for the *esprit de Montmartre*, as would their preference for 'ephemeral, photomechanically printed products and documentation of group activities' (Cate and Shaw, 7).

In a chapter of his *Dix ans de Bohème*, Émile Goudeau supplies a definition of fumisme as 'une sorte de dédain de tout, de mépris en dedans pour les êtres et les choses, qui se traduisait au dehors par d'innombrables charges, farces et *fumisteries*' (2000, 149), an understanding which he developed as the result of his association with the artist Sapeck (Eugène Bataille). Later in the same chapter, following an account of various situations that reflect the humorous and provocative spirit of fumisme, Goudeau states that these 'facéties et bien d'autres du même genre pouvaient distraire un instant; mais cela n'avait rien de littéraire' (2000, 151). On the other hand, he writes, the Cercle des Hydropathes (of which Goudeau was himself the founder in 1878) and the Chat noir cabaret (which he went on to found with Rodolphe Salis in 1880) would provide a more literary orientation for this kind of humour. Thus, from the point of view of Goudeau, in this text at least, while fumisme is indicative of an attitude, these two groupings succeeded in incorporating that attitude into a set of literary activities. It should be noted that recent scholarship by Alex Trott somewhat complicates this picture, arguing that this link to fumisme is but one component among others of the identity of the Cercle des Hydropathes (2014, 21). Taking this into account, when one considers how the Hydropathes relate to the Chat noir, it is instructive to note Trott's argument that the latter sought to maintain a 'clear distinction between the artists invited into the elite circle, and the guests who attended to spectate and consume' (23); Trott argues that this contrasted with the more inclusive quality of the weekly *séances* that had characterised the Hydropathes, which 'provided a greater possibility for the students and amateurs to contribute alongside more established artists' (23). This emphasis on amateur participation, coupled with the fact that Jules Lévy was himself a former member of the Hydropathes, is worth considering when it comes to understanding the Arts Incohérents' relationship to other artistic movements and the influences it received from them. In addition to the obvious point of contrast that Lévy's efforts were concentrated on the visual arts rather than literature or performance, it is worth noting also that the Arts Incohérents took the form of exhibitions, typically organised on an annual basis, rather than the kind of very regular ritualised club or cabaret setting adopted by the Hydropathes and the Chat noir. There was also some crossover between the groups, since *Incohérents* such as Lévy, Allais, Émile Cohl and Sapeck frequented the Hydropathes' twice-weekly meetings.[9]

The Album Primo-Avrilesque: not Showing, not Telling

While Jules Lévy was the leader of the movement, it was the comic writer Alphonse Allais who, as Corinne Taunay argues, emerged as 'la personnalité la plus passionnante des Arts Incohérents, leur figure la plus importante' (2019, 274).[10]

As part of what is possibly the most far-reaching contribution to the Expositions des Incohérents, Allais displayed an entirely blank canvas with the title 'Première Communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige' (Figure 1) at the 1883 exhibition. The work would later be collected in the volume *Album Primo-Avrilesque* published by Paul Ollendorff in 1897, along with a series of other works with titles suggestive of different colours, such as: 'Stupeur de jeunes recrues en apercevant pour la première fois ton azur, ô Méditerranée' (a blue canvas) or 'Récolte de la tomate par des cardinaux apoplectiques au bord de la mer Rouge' (a red one).[11]

Allais's forays into the monochrome have one significant precedent, in the form of an entirely black canvas with the title 'Combat de Nègres dans un tunnel' displayed by Paul Bilhaud at the 1882 exhibition. The *Album Primo-Avrilesque* itself features a 'Combat de Nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit' and in the preface to the volume, a note alludes to Bilhaud's image, stating it is reproduced 'avec la permission spéciale des héritiers de l'auteur' (1897, 1). Playful though Allais's *Album* might wish to be, the racist trope that underlies this part of it deserves interrogation, even if just in passing here. As James Smalls has argued regarding the trope of 'Combats de nègres dans un tunnel', this kind of trope masks modernism's debt to black culture, and through it, Smalls notes, 'blackness as a potentially explosive racial matter has been defused and conveniently subsumed within the rhetorical sanctuary of a (white) modernist thinking and practice' (2014, 148–49). A full understanding of the blank's link to the colour white in the rhetoric of modernism, then, needs to acknowledge its relation to other chromatic values in ways that may disclose or enable, as in this case, forms of racial prejudice.
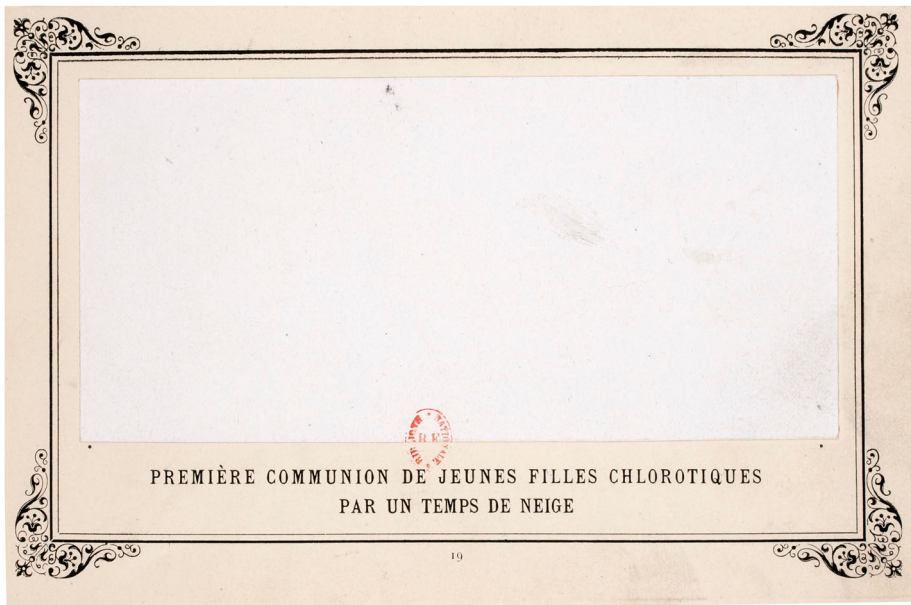

Figure 1. Alphonse Allais, 'Première Communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige'. *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, 1897), p. 1. Image by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Be that as it may, as Jean-Pierre Bertrand writes of the *Album Primo-Avrilesque*, '[chaque] couleur, sans être nommée, est définie, un peu à la manière des dictionnaires, par une accumulation de plus en plus arbitraire de signes au seul motif d'une cohérence chromatique' (1997, 262). The white canvas of 'Première Communion de jeunes filles chlorotiques par un temps de neige' is coherent on the level of chromatic value, but it is also markedly *incohérent* insofar as monochromatizing the pictorial field is not just a question of colour (the production of an image of white *as* colour) but of the negation of figure and ground, framing and other functions of representation. What is voided or 'blanked out' here is not just the likeness of the little girls and the snow designated by the title, but, as Michael Corris argues, a set of 'specific conventional expectations attached to representation; namely, that there ought to be a threshold level of differentiation within the pictorial field' (1998, 604). While it might be tempting to see Allais's monograph as a forerunner of the abstract monochromes of Kazimir Malevich or Yves Klein, Corris cautions against this, since this would be to overlook its ironic intent. Corris argues that Allais's approach 'recuperates the monochrome to language and ultimately marshals it as a form of representation' (604) since it returns the abstraction of pictorial space to a world of nameable objects.

Certainly, it seems far-fetched to argue that the *Album Primo-Avrilesque* represents an earnest contribution to the birth of monochrome abstractionism, and Daniel Grojnowski and Denys Riout in fact see it as alluding to the 'Symphonies in white' paintings of James McNeill Whistler (2015, 26). However, despite the proliferation of nomenclature in the titles of his monochromes and its apparent subordination of the visual to the verbal, in Allais's schema it remains that white itself is unnamed. When the purpose assigned to it is to register a single chromatic value across the whole of the pictorial field, *blanc* as colour suggests a kind of stasis; however, *blanc* as blank has a dynamizing effect in that it suggests a point of non-coincidence between the semiotic registers of the verbal and the visual. Compared with the static quality of the monochrome image, each of Allais's titles conjures up a nonsensical parade of incongruous elements that circles around the absence of the name 'blanc' and approximates to something like a genre painting. The titles rehearse a set of commonplaces of social or artistic discourse, reflecting the late nineteenth century's attachment to Catholic ritual, its lurid fascination with the hypochromic anemia (also known by names such as *morbus virgineus* or *les pâles couleurs*) known to affect women, and its pictorial innovations (the *plein-airisme* of 'par un temps de neige'). However, from the point of view of the *comique moderne*, the primary interest is the lack of congruence between these elements as they unfold in the sequentiality of reading. This is because, in something like a game of Taboo, the device turns on a non-disclosure, an unrevealing: it makes a show of not telling. From the point of view of the joke's reception, the comic response it provokes is experienced more in terms of a hesitation between our verbal and visual modes of understanding than as an effect of a laughable object. In its own ironic way, the *Album* participates in what Welchman describes as the 'zero economy in the naming of visual art objects in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries' (1997, 32).

If Allais's monochromes make a show of not telling, the following image by the painter Charles Le Roy Saint-Aubert from the 1886 exhibition catalogue makes a show of not showing: *Un rendez-vous au pont Royal* (Figure 2) captures the moment just before a male and female figure meet on the eponymous bridge (1886, 77).

This *rendez-vous*, however, is a *rendez-vous manqué*, both in terms of the titular encounter and pictorially, since the image *n'est pas au rendez-vous*, in the sense that it does not accomplish the illustrative function it is 'supposed' to from the point of view of the title. The fact that the moment captured here (which is seemingly prior to the meeting in question) yields no immediate significance might be read as caricaturing the emphasis on immediacy and instantaneity present within Impressionism. This effect is also analogous to what happens in Allais's stories 'Les Deux Hydropathes' and 'Un Drame bien parisien' in which the protagonists are conspicuously absented from the narrative at the dénouement.[12]

As a consequence of pictorial off-centring and cropping, the viewer is at pains to identify conclusively the figures in the scene, and the gaze is dispersed into the

Figure 2. Charles Le Roy Saint-Aubert, *Un rendez-vous au pont Royal* in *Exposition des arts incohérents: catalogue illustré 1886* (Paris: Imprimerie Georges Chamerot, 1886), p. 77. Image by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

foreground and background of the image. Meanwhile, the centre presents a patch of footpath between the figures that is conspicuously, or even provocatively, unmarked. If the notion of the blank is at issue here, it is in the incipient sense of visual uncertainty produced as an expanse of vacant footpath shades into a kind of pure negative space that recalls the space of a canvas. There are thus two kinds of distancing here: firstly, there is the distance between the event denoted by the title and the non-occurrence that is staged in the image; secondly, there is a distance, within the image itself, between the mimetic function it is conventionally assumed to serve, and another more provocative conception where it is offered only as the scene of its own making.

In the poetry of Mallarmé, the expanses of the unmarked page garner associations with sterility, yet here there is kind of lurking bawdiness. Commenting on the image, Grojnowski and Riout note 'les composantes d'une relation galante que suggèrent sur la droite de nombreuses formes phalliques (la canne, les becs de gaz et leurs ombres, toutes dirigées vers leur proie) et, sur la gauche, un suggestif triangle noir, inscrit contre le parapet' (2015, 139). In this way, it might be said that it is on the basis of an 'absence of the obscene', that the 'obscene absence' at the heart of this portrayal of the prelude to a tryst is produced: the yet-to-be-consummated sexual act is figured and displaced through the various genital signifiers identified by Grojnowski. And through a further kind of distancing, the signifiers that make the joke possible are themselves mere shadows: accidents of perspective produced by the play of objects against a blank background that makes them visible.[13]

Neutralising Surface/Depth: From Portrait to Text

Commenting on Jean-Luc Nancy's writings on laughter, Andrew Stott writes that: 'Laughter comes to symbolise the absent origin that has no full significance of its own, but which is constitutive of conceptual attempts to positively structure systems of meaning' (2014, 188). One such disruption to pictorial meaning in the work of the Incohérents can be seen in an example of portraiture by the group which plays with notions of surface and depth: with its hyperbolic and even hysterical-sounding title, *Cruelle énigme!!! Charmant!!!* (Figures 3–4) of 1886 by Marc Sonal is the faceless portrait of an elegantly dressed woman (1886, 57).

Like in the bridge scene of *Un rendez-vous au pont Royal*, the conceit here amounts to an absenting of the focal point of the image and a displacement of the gaze elsewhere. Imagery of this kind might be assumed to be intended to trigger an optical illusion. However, as the catalogue notes state, spuriously: 'Il suffit de regarder fixement le centre de ce dessin pour ne voir aucun changement se produire dans le portrait' (1886, 44). Occasionally in portraiture, the area surrounding the face is effectively a negative space; however, here, the blank portion of the image corresponds to the face itself, while hatching contributes to shadow or background effect. The viewer is presented either with a faceless female figure or a patch of negative space. Any survey of the kind of portraiture experimented with by the Incohérents would tend to suggest that its purpose is primarily either caricatural or to capture stereotype rather than to produce a unique individual likeness. The 'portrait' in question here sets out to meddle with our habitual physiognomic, face-reading impulses, and blocks the surface-depth relation that sees the face as the 'window to the soul': it thus eschews

MARC SONAL

Figure 3. Marc Sonal, *Cruelle énigme!!! Charmant!!!* in *Exposition des arts incohérents: catalogue illustré 1886* (Paris: Imprimerie Georges Chamerot, 1886), p. 44. Image by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

'depth' as a value. In comparable fashion, Amédée Marandet's 1884 'Portrait sans pieds d'un sociétaire de la Comédie-Française' shows nothing more of its subject than his torso and throat, placing the face outside the frame altogether (1884, 76-77).

If the faceless portrait can be said to neutralise pictorial depth and negate the gaze that seeks to gather all elements together in a continuous representation, the typographic
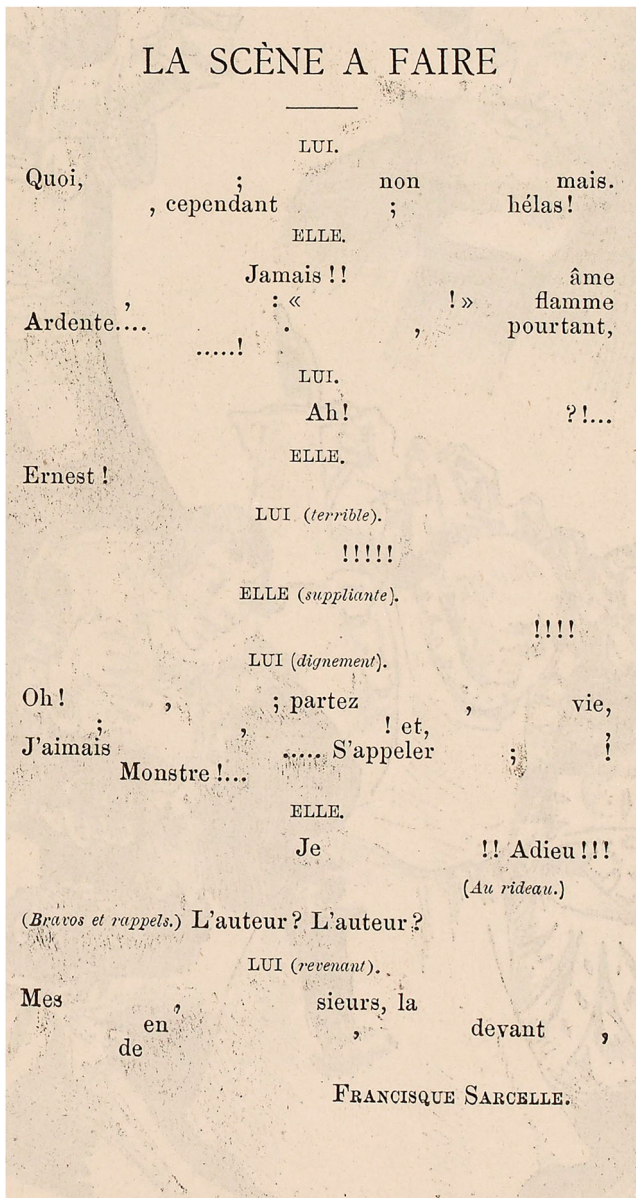
LA SCÈNE A FAIRE

LUI.

Quoi,   ;   non   mais.
, cependant   ;   hélas!

ELLE.

Jamais !!   âme
: «   ! »   flamme
Ardente....   .   ,   pourtant,
.....!

LUI.

Ah!   ?!...

ELLE.

Ernest !

LUI (*terrible*).

!!!!!

ELLE (*suppliante*).

!!!!

LUI (*dignement*).

Oh!   ,   ; partez   ,   vie,
;   ! et,   !
J'aimais   ..... S'appeler   ;
Monstre !...

ELLE.

Je   !! Adieu!!!

(*Au rideau.*)

(*Bravos et rappels.*) L'auteur ? L'auteur ?

LUI (*revenant*).

Mes   sieurs, la
en   ,   devant   ,
de   ,

FRANCISQUE SARCELLE.

Figure 4. 'La Scène à faire', *Le Courrier français*, 4 April 1886, p. 2. Image by permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

spacing of text can achieve a similar effect on the terrain of language. In the following example, the blanks and negative space present in some of the imagery discussed thus far finds a counterpart in verbal terms in a curious text that foregrounds its own 'depth-lessness', thus taking further the play on surface/depth and associated values of superficiality/profundity:

In an April 1886 edition of *Le Courrier français*, a humorous dramatic sketch presents a climactic encounter between two characters identified as 'Elle' and 'Lui' (1886).

However, little features in this sparse insert, aside from some isolated exclamations, conjunctions, punctuation marks and blanks. First scanning the page in vain for the substance of dramatic intrigue, the reader of the newspaper, bemused and amused, would soon grasp the mischievous import of the piece and its attribution to one Francisque Sarcelle. The latter name is tellingly close to that of Francisque Sarcey, a theatrical critic noted for his popularisation of a term which the author(s) of this eye-catching column insert borrowed for its title: the 'scène à faire'. This term, recurrent in *fin-de-siècle* theatrical discourse, designates an 'obligatory' scene, one demanded by the inherent progression of a drama and regarded by Sarcey as necessary to the fulfilment of audience satisfaction. Using as its point of departure the notion of a scene considered de rigueur for a coherent theatrical representation, the purpose of the piece is thus in part critical, and involves a mockery of the kind of theatre likely to meet with audience acclaim. The reader of *Le Courrier français* is likely to have eventually recognised in the short text's subversion of the concept (through its absenting of those elements essential to the impression of coherence) the hallmark of the *Incohérents*, not least since the edition in question was a 'Numéro incohérent' devoted to the movement.

So lacking in theatrical originality is this drama that it can be reduced to the expression of a set of basic affects or drives that register in the lovers' expressions of passion or scandalized bewilderment ('Ah!', 'Oh!', '!!!!'). Moreover, in the closing lines, it is apparent that what we are reading is offered not simply as a send-up of a text to be performed but as a textual account of a theatrical performance and of the audience's reaction. In this mise-en-abyme of the play and its performance, there is a sense that the theatrical scene (in the extended sense, encompassing performances and the behaviour of playwrights and theatre audiences) is as vacuous or formulaic as the *scène à faire* itself. The text thus arguably enacts a kind of brief, wry *sociocritique*, both of the predictable tropes of bourgeois drama and of the context of the latter's reception. And just as it gestures outwards to these external, social and ideological concerns, it also performs a pointedly reflexive move. This is insofar as the term 'scène à faire' might be said to allude just as much to the drama of a text's own taking-place: through its striking presentation, it invites the reader to contemplate the spectacle of its (de)composition within the space of the page. Here, we are reminded of Peter Szendy's conception of punctuation, which is understood, through its link to the notion of stigmata, as a 'puncturing' of language's wholeness: in this way, the wordless exclamations – the 'Ah!', 'Oh!', '!!!!' of the text's nameless protagonists – in Lacanian fashion are evocative of a kind of wounding or excessive pleasure. According to Laurence Petit and Pascale Tollance, in works which feature such experimental punctuation, 'everything in the text or in the image can hold or be held by what is, or what becomes like, a blind spot – a point where you can no longer see yourself or hear yourself' (2016, xi). As it teases the limits of both the iconic and the linguistic, the 'scène à faire' intimates a *jouissance* 'which bores its holes in the text in the same way as it marks the limits of the omnipotent gaze in the image' (xi).

Conclusion

The works discussed in this article offer an ironic, metageneric commentary on the symbolic capital accorded to a range of cultural forms, among them the genre painting, the

portrait, and the theatre of the *scène à faire*. Yet, what precisely does the tinkering with semiotic conventions, textual space and the mechanisms of pictorial representation in the works discussed here stand to tell us about *le comique moderne* and the Incohérents? Though their art is by no means limited to this kind of experimentation, the motif of the textual/visual blank can be considered as broadly emblematic of the enterprise of the Incohérents. The 'incoherent' works discussed here 'draw blanks' in a number of ways suggested by that expression. Firstly, the figure of the blank, with its connotations of absence, is evocative of the ephemerality of the productions of the Incohérents, which are available to us today only primarily in the form of published catalogues of the movement's exhibitions.[14] Secondly, these works tease out the creative agency of blank spaces, erasures and silences[15]; finally, as Welchman notes, the Incohérents' 'extraordinary funfair of jokes, put-downs and scatologies […] amounts, in the end, to a catalogue of insider one-liners' (1997, 112): in other words, the conceits they deploy are highly oblique and their comic significance is not always available to the contemporary reader, to the extent that they may fall short of being considered laugh-worthy.

Nonetheless, in these various creations, the Incohérents do not lose sight of that provocation to representational norms that inheres in the act of displaying blankness, that is, of occupying the terrain of signification with its counterpart. In an extended sense, the blank is operative across the works discussed here, whether through creative deployments of title and object, strategies based on punning and plays on words, or a kind of displacement at a pictorial level which moves the ostensible object of representation –and the notional 'laughable object' – beyond view. Invariably, the joke turns less upon the presence of an object than around a kind of 'constructed emptiness', to adapt a formula by Alenka Zupančič.[16] In this way, the progressive elision of the object of representation that occurs within their artistic practices itself mirrors the Incohérents' practice of the comic, for their catalogues present a series of works whose modernity is marked by a distinctive modulation of laughter, such that the question of *what* it is we are laughing at is obscured or elided.

At the very least from the perspective of theories of laughter and humour, the Incohérents raise questions of interest. Now, we are accustomed to understanding laughter as being caused by some laughable object that precedes it; recent theoretical treatments of laughter, however, offer a different understanding.[17] Following Alfie Bown (2019), it may make more sense to approach the laughter of the Incohérents through the logic of the event: for Bown, laughter 'shows something being produced', that is, laughter retroactively transforms what it responds to as well as those who laugh, in a manner that exceeds any effective cause lying in the object itself.[18] The event of laughter thus constitutes new subject positions and brings into being new sets of relations between those party to the joke. With this displacement of the laughable object, our attention shifts instead to the effects of laughter itself and its ideological force.

To mix Bown's (2019) analysis with Jean-Luc Nancy's assertions regarding laughter and inter-art experience cited earlier in this article, the laughter of the Incohérents retroactively transforms the notional limit between the arts, in ways that stand to expand understandings of the emergence of the avant-gardes and the place of humour in the serious business of the history of modernism. This limit does not refer to a fixed semiotic borderline, but designates a gap in the structure of representation that separates and constitutes the different arts. In the exhibitions of the Incohérents, the work of art

continually comes up against this gap/limit at precisely the moment when laughter, to use Bown's terms, 'shows something being produced': that is, when art alerts us comically to the scene of its own making and exposes a gap that is constructed in the act or process of its display.

Notes

1. Structurally similar to 'Les Deux Hydropathes', 'Un Drame bien parisien' is the focus of a celebrated analysis by Umberto Eco, who illustrates how the text sets up both 'naïve' and 'critical' readings (1979, 200-260).
2. Félix Fénéon's contemporary appraisal of the 1883 exhibition is also mixed, to say the least: 'Malheureusement, à coté d'élucubrations épileptiques et exhilarantes, il en est d'autres dont la drôlerie fait long feu. Quant aux facéties dont est criblé le catalogue de l'exposition, - trop souvent empruntées aux recueils de bons mots que vendent les pitres forains, - elles échouent dans le rabâchage' (68).
3. For Lévy and company, not least of these wordplays were those offered by the name 'Les Arts Incohérents' itself, also rendered as 'Laids Arts' or 'Lézards' (Taunay 2019, 266).
4. See, for instance, Boquillon Bridet's 1884 catalogue entry "Porc trait par Van Dyck" which shows a sow being milked by a figure in stereotypical artist's dress (1884, 118-119).
5. A case in point is "Saint Antoine et son torchon", a work by Jules Rainaud which features in the 1884 catalogue but which dates from the 1883 exhibition. Consisting of a piece of fabric pinned to a vertical surface and bearing the likeness of a bearded, haloed figure, it bears a resemblance to the Shroud of Turin; a note below the image, however, describes it as "dessin à la mouchure de nez" (122).
6. This kind of literalism can be seen in Émile Cohl's "Un leader parlementaire" which features in the 1886 catalogue. This drawing shows a tiny *chambre des députés* hanging from the lips of a figure in profile through whose ear can be glimpsed the interior of a parliamentary chamber. The catalogue notes state that "[l'assemblée] est suspendue aux lèvres de l'orateur, du reste, on voit que le personnage a l'oreille de la chambre" (1886, 82 and 18).
7. "The limit between arts – the limit which the desire to paint must confront – opens itself or comes forth in laughter. It does not open a way through the limit. Rather it opens itself, as if a limit could split itself open (which is impossible). Thus this is more than ever a limit; it reveals the gap within itself – the wide open mouth. But it enjoys this (impossible) opening. Laughter is the joy of art and language at this most extreme – of art as the limit of language, of language as the limit of art, of arts as the limits of other arts and of languages as the limits of languages. It is not another art, a kind of "total" art which would achieve all of the others together. Rather, it is the place where arts and languages as arts end and begin" (1987, 735).
8. See also Jacques Derrida's reflections on the figure of the blank in Mallarmé in the essay 'La Double Séance' from *La Dissémination* (1972, 201-86).
9. It should be acknowledged that the degree of crossover in turn poses a challenge for scholarship, since, as Trott notes, in Grojnowski's work on the Hydropathes, the latter group are 'seemingly interchangeable with the Incohérents and Fumistes' (52). Matthew Solomon (2018) has even detected an 'Incohérent' sensibility in the work of pioneer of cinema Georges Méliès. For his part, Solomon views *Incohérence* as 'une réponse esthétique au développement du mode de vie impersonnel et bureaucratique et à l'essor de la société industrielle, de la production de masse et des moyens de communication à Paris à la fin du XIXe siècle' (128).
10. Taunay's doctoral thesis (2013) is a major reference work on the Incohérents.
11. These tropes are also taken up in one-time Incohérent exhibitor Émile Cohl's *Le Peintre néo-impressioniste* of 1910, an early example of partially animated comic film which uses the same device to caricature the eponymous movement.

12. Among other Incohérent works, Jules's Rainaud's "Les Grandes manœuvres" shows an empty landscape with a patch of woodland on the horizon. The accompanying exhibition notes, however, describe it as the scene of grandiose military manoeuvres, with various military formations hidden "derrière un pli de terrain", "masquées par des taillis" or "en dehors du cadre de l'action" (1884, 122).

13. On this point, Phillip Dennis Cate shows the interest at this time of Montmartrois cabaret performers in the artistic potential of silhouettes and the medium of the shadow theatre. See Cate and Shaw 1996, 53–69.

14. As Albert Millaud declares: "J'aime l'Incohérent parce qu'il n'a pas de prétention, et qu'au contraire du wagnérien et de l'impressionniste, il ne pose pas pour régénérer l'art. Il s'amuse et veut amuser ; mais il a le tort de donner trop d'importance à ses amusements, aussi puérils qu'inutiles, et dont il ne restera rien" (1886; quoted in Cate and Shaw 1996, 92, fn. 55).

15. On these themes, see Dworkin 2013.

16. In her book *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, Zupancic writes 'we could say that true comedies are not so much involved in unveiling and disclosing the nudity and emptiness behind appearances as they are involved in *constructing* emptiness (or nudity)' (Quoted in Bown 59).

17. As Anca Parvulescu (2010) notes, "[what] we call "theories of laughter" share a focus on the object of laughter. Laughter is laughter *at*, and critical attention has concentrated on what follows the preposition" (4).

18. "The very fact that laughter can create truth in the service of ideology is also the fact that allows us to locate laughter's subversive edge. This is because laughter not only produces but potentially shows something being produced" (2019, 61).

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Notes on contributor

Greg Kerr is Lecturer in French at the University of Glasgow. He has recently published the articles 'Shattering the middle ground: violence and the imperatives of reportage in Felix Fénéon's Nouvelles en trois lignes', *Contemporary French Civilization*, 44(4), pp. 311–331 and 'Laughing matter: Charles Cros, from paléophone to monologue', *Nottingham French Studies*, 59(1), pp. 34–50. He is also the author of the monographs *Exile, Non-Belonging and Statelessness in Grangaud, Jabès, Lubin and Luca: No man's language* (London: UCL Press, 2021 – Open Access) and *Dream Cities: Utopia and Prose by Poets in Nineteenth-century France* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013).

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