

**Antonin Artaud, Walter Benjamin**  
**The Unconscious in the Remnants of Magic and Experience**

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Signature of candidate:

*To the unforeseen revolutionaries.*



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## Abstract

This thesis proposes a comparative approach to the writings of Antonin Artaud and Walter Benjamin. It is centred on the conceptualisation of the unconscious, and the two themes that derived from it in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin: *magic* and *experience*. The thesis departs from the Freudian understanding of the unconscious to explore the surrealist approach to this notion. It takes into account Freud's recourse to a broad basis of non-scientific expertise, as well as the different inputs of psychoanalysis, occultism and marxism in the constitution of surrealism. From this scenario it questions whether the unconscious is a liberating dimension of psychic life, or a limiting source of experience. The answers, different and unique, that the works of Artaud and Benjamin offer in their discussions of the role of the unconscious structure this project thematically. Above all, magic appears as a recurrent theme in the definition of experience, following the change in traditional configurations precipitated, significantly but not exclusively, by the work of Freud. The outcome of the present thesis identifies the affinities and dissimilarities between the writings of Artaud and Benjamin. The positive and constructive aspect of their formulations on magic and experience represents the high point of this comparison. They concern the progressive reconstruction of conditions for experience, in particular through the exploration of the field of language. The writings of Artaud and Benjamin express the necessary occupation with both the negative and positive aspects of the problem of experience at the present time.

## 1. INTRODUCCION

Antonin Artaud and Walter Benjamin, two well-known authors from the first half of the twentieth century, were figures embedded in the philosophical and cultural problems of their era. The vast range of their elaborations on themes such as literature, politics, cinema and theatre are marked, however, by the development of a personal point of view, a singular perspective that neither immerses itself completely in the subject in question, nor makes itself entirely explicit through it. The results of this attitude in the two writers are radically different. Nevertheless, an underlying kinship can be found in their texts, one that this work relates, above all, to the changes that affected the notion of experience, and its material possibilities, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The common philosophical understanding of experience at the time held that human beings were able to formulate a satisfactory understanding of themselves and the world. The most prominent trends of this understanding were represented by idealism and empiricism, with a particular dominance of the synthesis proposed by Immanuel Kant in *Kritik der Reinen Vernunft* ("Critique of Pure Reason," 1781). Correlated to this belief in the possibility of an enlightened command of oneself, and a positive transformation of the world, was the idea of material and spiritual progress that derived, just like the philosophical approaches mentioned above, from the precepts of the enlightenment. The natural progress of humankind, and the expected control of nature never actually took place in the terms envisioned by the eighteenth-century movement. The idea of man related to it, later assuming the form of humanism, seems to have had a more lasting destiny.

According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* ("Dialectic of Enlightenment," 1944), the enlightenment already contained the seeds of its own limitation. It envisioned the emancipated man as he who, with the help of science and technology, takes complete control of nature. But the knowledge produced by the enlightenment, by means of de-mystification of the world — according to Adorno and Horkheimer, "it wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (1) — produced a unique and exclusive version of reality, which became a further form of "false clarity." As the authors state: "myth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity" (Adorno and Horkheimer 6). This attitude means, in the final analysis, that the enlightenment was only able to recognise things to the extent that it could manipulate them. For Adorno and Horkheimer, that is one of the reasons why the movement, despite presenting itself as the bastion of freedom, gave way to attitudes of repression and domination.

While Adorno and Horkheimer connect the enlightenment to the European twentieth century wars and fascism, they also point to the absence in it of a larger understanding of psychic life, one capable of including aspects not identified with reason. Sigmund Freud is the figure who brought this understanding prominently to light. At the turn of the nineteenth century, he established a theory on dreams as a highly complex activity of the mind. In particular in *Die Traumdeutung* ("The Interpretation of Dreams," 1900), the meaning of dreams is sought in a work of analysis connecting their apparent content to ideas that appear disguised. What dreams conceal and at the same time reveal is an important dimension of psychic activity, different from consciousness. According to Freud, this dimension was broader and more influential than any other aspect of mental life — Freud describes the unconscious as "the true psychological reality" (*Dreams* 607) — and it sheltered people's most fundamental impulses and drives.

The dream process, according to Freud, accesses remote and recent memories, in order to dramatise an idea to the dreamer. This dramatisation is imagistic in nature: the dream "thinks" in images. The unconscious is here defined only through resemblance, but it is the concept on which Freud's theory is based. According to a formulation from 1933, "it is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organisation, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual" (Freud *Lectures* 105-6). From this account, the unconscious appears as an unco-ordinated arrangement of drives, regulated by the tendency to seek their discharge. It finds, therefore, a permanent obstacle in its way to consciousness. The dream is precisely a point in which a connection between the conscious and unconscious aspects of reality takes place. The same can be said of mind formations such as psychosomatic symptoms, jokes and lapses.

However negative, Freud's discovery would impact on many fields in both science and culture, and was fundamental to the set of changes taking place in the early twentieth century. Once imaginary formations began to be understood as possible emissaries of psychic truth, the role of the unconscious dimension in intellectual and artistic production, often underestimated, found through Freudian formulations a form of rehabilitation. Amongst the tendencies that followed and expanded Freudian propositions are the avant-garde movements of the first decades of the twentieth century in Europe, in which Artaud and Benjamin took part. The forms of their participation were distinct: Artaud as an active member in the twenties, and Benjamin as a critic and observer in the late twenties and thirties. Surrealism, in particular, envisioned the unconscious as an important element in the systematic exploration

of the contents lying beyond dominant forms of rationality and culture. In this context, Freud represented, to the surrealist movement, a powerful revelation. As André Breton states in “Manifeste du Surréalisme” (1924): “si les profondeurs de notre esprit recèlent d’étranges forces capables d’augmenter celles de la surface, ou de lutter victorieusement contre elles, il y a tout intérêt à les capter (...) pour les soumettre ensuite, s’il y a lieu, au contrôle de notre raison”<sup>1</sup> (*Manifestes* 20).

The ambiguous character of the surrealist explorations of the unconscious is evident: at the same time an incursion into a life beyond reason and an urge to include it amongst the recognisable human faculties. Despite Freud’s insistence on a distinction between dream and reality — or material and psychical reality — the surrealists envisioned the Freudian unconscious as an invitation to confuse such boundaries, giving the importance attested to the unconscious to all psychic matters. Freud had frequently had recourse to a varied store of non-scientific expertise while attempting to establish his theory as a recognised scientific field. This is a trend that the surrealists, as heirs to romanticism, were also willing to explore in their confrontation of reason and the “reigning logic.” For them, it couldn’t be more suitable that the unconscious should make its way to consciousness through dreams. Conducive spaces for the privileging of the imaginary and the marvellous, dreams were associated with non-rational forms of thought, mystic inspirations and clairvoyance.

Surrealism deliberately reaches beyond the boundaries of Freud’s doctrine, while also bringing contributions from nineteenth-century parapsychology and occultism to the fore. Its concern with the establishment of a new order of things, presumably of a broader and more flexible nature, took the form of a surrealist mystique, a topic to which Artaud made a particular contribution. The surrealist rehabilitation of excluded forms of knowledge, inaugurated by the unconscious, included all that “sous couleur de civilisation, sous prétexte de progrès, on est parvenu à bannir de l’esprit”<sup>2</sup> (Breton *Manifestes* 20). The thematisation of occultism, madness and oriental culture, and the different approaches to the matter of otherness, can be considered a part of surrealism’s exploration of pre-scientific knowledge. They also refused a set of social institutions, paving the way for concrete fights, which culminated in a commitment to communism in the late twenties. Stripped of its scientific character, the unconscious dimension was an important source for the construction of a

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<sup>1</sup> “if the depths of our minds conceal strange forces capable of increasing those on the surface, or victoriously fighting against them, there is all the more interest in having them captured ... in order to submit them, if applicable, to the control of reason”. All quotes were translated by me, with the assistance of Katy Stone and Rachael McGill.

<sup>2</sup> “under the guise of civilisation, under the pretext of progress, we managed to banish from the spirit”

revolutionary reality.

The original and controversial conjunction represented by the approach of surrealism to the unconscious, psychoanalysis, unconventional forms of knowledge and the methods and ideology of dialectic materialism exerted decisive influence on the works of Artaud and Benjamin. They are heirs to this intellectual trend that made use of the Freudian notion of the unconscious through the avant-garde and surrealist enterprise. More importantly, their writings questioned the traditional notion of experience, as expressed in the world view of the epoch, and participated in the re-emergence of forms of mysticism in the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> These gestures, according to Evelyne Grossman in “Modernes Déshumanités” (2012), were part of “la recherche constante d’une sortie de la *finitude* de l’humain”<sup>4</sup> (*Déshumanités* 49). In practical terms, Artaud and Benjamin criticised the presumption of supremacy of a self-centred, fully intentional and conscious human being. They appeal particularly for a “spiritualisation” of life and thought, as opposed to the scientific and individualising tendencies of the time.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretations that Benjamin and Artaud elaborated on the conditions of experience and magic in the twentieth century derive partially from their very different backgrounds. In fact, the writings of both authors are frequently approached from the point of view of their lives. This highlights a common critical bias that is at times facilitated by their own style and subjects. The discussion of the lives of Artaud and Benjamin, while it should not over-code their writings, is nevertheless able to provide elements of correspondence with them. That is, a form of communication that emerges from the confrontation of life and text. Having this in mind, some biographical landmarks are highlighted.

Walter Benedix Schönflies Benjamin was born in 1892 to a prosperous Jewish family based in Berlin.<sup>6</sup> He was the eldest of three children. Benjamin’s father worked as an antiques

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<sup>3</sup> The term *mysticism*, just like *magic*, alludes to a set of beliefs that prescind from immediate verification and logical explanation. Historically, such terms evoke the moment at which practices that were once constituent of the social sphere became estranged from it, and no longer integrated the tissue of experience. After the emergence of science, they designate prescientific forms of knowledge, such as folklore and popular culture, and the modern attempts to restore the value of such knowledge through rites evoking the magic worldview. A further discussion can be found in the forth chapter of this work (p. 115-207).

<sup>4</sup> “search for a constant output of the human *finitude*”

<sup>5</sup> The notion of spirit is privileged, throughout this work, over terms such as mind, intellect and soul. Our use, in consonance with the writings of Artaud and Benjamin, corresponds to the Greek *pneuma*, the German *Geist* and the French *esprit* or *élan vital*. It expresses the ideas of breath of life and vital spark. The call for “spiritualisation,” in this context, suggests the necessity to turn to substantial and non-evident aspects of live.

<sup>6</sup> The information summarised here is taken from Osborne and Charles’ entry in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and Scholem’s *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*. The biographical data on Artaud comes from the notes by Grossman to the volume *Œuvres* (Ed. Quarto).



trader, owning a number of investments, through which he guaranteed the family a high standard of living. Like many during that period, Benjamin's family followed the path of assimilation indicated by enlightened Judaism two centuries earlier. At the age of 13, Benjamin was sent to a boarding school in Thuringia. There he was introduced to the liberal reformist tendencies that would define his younger years. He became involved with what is today known as *Die Deutsche Jugendbewegung* ("The German Youth Movement"). In its journal, *Der Anfang* ("The Beginning"), he published his first essays, around 1910. Benjamin's texts concerned, for the most part, the theme of awakening of the younger generation, in relation to a spiritual transformation of society.

Later Benjamin attended the universities of Freiburg and Berlin, focusing his studies on philosophy. He remained active in the youth movement until 1914, when he denounced its leader, Gustav Wyneken, for supporting the war efforts. In 1915 Benjamin started a life-long relationship with Gershom Scholem, a fellow student at Berlin and a future Kabbalist, with whom Benjamin discussed Judaism in particular. At the age of 27, he defended his doctoral dissertation on German Romanticism at the University of Bern. Benjamin's *Habilitationsschrift* (thesis allowing entry to the academic profession), however, was rejected in 1925 on charges of incomprehensibility. It versed on the subject of the German *Trauerspiel* ("Mourning Play"), and an excerpt of it was published soon after with acclaim. An academic career being an impossibility for him, Benjamin worked on demand for literary journals, receiving lifelong financial support from his father.

In the mid-twenties, Benjamin's interests turned to marxism, a decision inspired by his reading of Georg Lukács, his friendship with Bertolt Brecht, and a visit to Moscow in 1926-7. The orientation of his work, from that period on, concerned the conjunction of different cultural analyses with the precepts of historical materialism, rather than being a work located within such precepts. In 1933, after a period of comings and goings, Benjamin left Germany for the last time. He travelled in exile through several European cities, sojourning in Paris for the longest period. In the thirties, he was supported by the *Institut für Sozialforschung* ("Institute for Social Research"), submitting his articles for the meticulous criticism of the group, and particularly of his friends Adorno and Horkheimer. During the war, he spent some time in a French concentration camp, after which he undertook failed ventures to leave the continent. Benjamin passed away in 1940, supposedly having committed suicide, during an escape attempt at the border city of Port Bou, Spain.

Antonin Marie Joseph Paul Artaud was born in Marseille in 1896, the eldest son of a trader family. The majority of Artaud's brothers and sisters were stillborn or died very young. While Artaud's father was French, his mother came from a multi-ethnic family based in Turkey. As a consequence, Artaud was in contact, from an early age, with Turkish, Greek and Italian, of which he learned to speak the last two. As a teenager, he suffered from an unidentifiable disease, consisting of confusion, pain and anxiety. From 1915 onwards, Artaud spent time in nursing homes. The diagnoses he received were usually vague, such as neurasthenia and hereditary syphilis. During these stays he was administered drugs to relieve his pain, including laudanum and opium. In 1916, Artaud published his first poems. The activity of writing was to remain continuous in the years to come.

In 1920, Artaud met the psychiatrist Édouard Toulouse, with whom he established an intellectual kinship. Artaud moved to the outskirts of Paris, to live in Toulouse's quarters. At this point, he painted, drew and wrote, encouraged by the physician and his wife, and frequently published in their journal, *Demain* ("Tomorrow"). His interests in theatre and dadaism led him to engage, particularly through the figure of Max Jacob, with the Parisian artistic scene. From that point on, Artaud was part of the theatre company *Atelier*, and started his long and profitable relationship with theatre. He actively participated in different aspects of the production of plays, and frequently appeared as an actor in them. In 1923, Artaud published the first issue of *Bilboquet* ("Cup-and-ball"), a journal written entirely by him. In the personal sphere, he experienced financial difficulties, while his health problems became characterised by the sensation of paralysis.

The year 1924 saw Artaud's cinema début, the publication of "Correspondence avec Jacques Rivière," and, as a result of the latter, his first contact with the surrealists, whose group he joined immediately. In 1925, Artaud was an active member, publishing in the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* ("The Surrealist Revolution"), as well as books of his own, such as *L'Ombilic des Limbes* ("Umbilical Limbo") and *Le Pèse-Nerfs* ("Nerve Scales"). By the end of the year, differences within the surrealist group started to emerge around the form to be taken by the surrealist revolution, leading to the formal expulsion of Artaud in 1927. Artaud and Breton, one of the central figures of the movement, remained in contact. Their relationship of mutual support, marked by a few periods of disagreement, would last all their lives.

In 1925, Artaud had already started working to establish the "Théâtre Alfred Jarry," that would function until 1930. He remained involved with theatre and cinema for many

years, and these art forms, to a great extent, offered him the financial and spiritual means to keep working. For some time in the thirties, Artaud carried out various trips. He travelled to Mexico in 1936, where he spoke at a series of conferences on surrealism and theatre, and spent some time with the Tarahumaras tribe. On his return, he continued to work on various texts and exhibitions, sojourning with friends or on the streets. In 1937 he undertook a trip to Ireland with very few financial resources. His letters of this period attest to the experiencing of a great mystic exaltation. Artaud was arrested and deported to France, met in Le Havre and sent to a psychiatric hospital. This was the beginning of a period spent in several psychiatric institutions, which only ended in 1947. In the meantime, despite dreadful living conditions, Artaud wrote and drew almost uninterruptedly, and many of his books were published while he remained hospitalised. He was released and returned to Paris in the first months of 1947. One year later, he died of rectal cancer, aggravated by his poor living conditions.

The public biographical data of Artaud and Benjamin give no evidence of a meeting between the two. Despite being contemporaries, they did not mention each other, at least as far as this writer is aware, during their life time. They at times frequented the same milieu, particularly the surrealist circles in Paris in the late twenties and early thirties. Perhaps they could have crossed paths there or in Marseille on a few occasions in the thirties, but no sign of any such meeting has been found. Amongst the few critics who have discussed the absence of references between them, Rainer Nägele, in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin* (2004), points to some similar aspects to be found in their views on surrealism. While identifying in Benjamin's essay on the avant-garde movement the reference to a crisis in the European intelligentsia, Nägele states:

Walter Benjamin does not mention the fact that at least one French writer, Antonin Artaud, shares the same perspective, insisting on the high stakes of writing beyond the limits of aesthetic concerns. It is indeed one of the most puzzling aspects of Benjamin's essay on Surrealism and his other writings on the French scene, that, as far as I know, there is not one single mentioning of Artaud. To be sure, Artaud had ruptured his relations with the Surrealists, but precisely because he saw their potential and their limits in the same terms as Benjamin. (175f)

The present work holds that the terms in which Artaud and Benjamin expressed their criticism to surrealism were not exactly the same. They point to a similar orientation in Artaud's and Benjamin's engagement with the movement, and the form of experience it produced.

As in the case of surrealism, the elements that link Artaud and Benjamin are also those that distance them. They are, for instance, the relationship with avant-garde movements, the acknowledgement of the crisis of enlightened reason, the input of magic in the constitution of a form of critique. While the themes, and, at times, even the notions used by them are the same or analogous, there is a stark difference in the nature of the writings of Artaud and Benjamin. This distance underscores their works, giving rise to different tones, different uses of language, which, while perhaps not completely incompatible, are not siblings.

The comparison of Artaud and Benjamin does not aim at reconciling their differences, let alone erasing unsolved problems that emerge from the examination of them. The notion of image, on these grounds, offers an unequivocal starting point. From Freud's definition of the dream as an imagistic dramatisation of the commitment between unconscious wishes and conscious life (*Dreams* 79; 87), to Benjamin's appeal to the political sphere "reserved one hundred percent for images" (*Surrealism* 191), and Artaud's evocation of the clear language of images in the thematisation of *la Chair* ("the Flesh") (*Œuvres* 148), this notion pervades these author's most important formulations. Also relevant to this issue is the surrealist "collection of images" from the unconscious, highlighting the articulation of an experience both imaginative and revolutionary.

The notion of image evoked in such contexts designates much more than an aesthetic sign. According to Didi-Huberman in *Survivance des Lucioles* (2009), it refers to the figuration, the act of *rendre présent* ("rendering present") something real, historical, and even oneself. Psychic and mental images are the most representative of this understanding, and cannot be separated from the process in which they are engendered. Didi-Huberman relates images to the imagination — "ce travail producteur d'images pour la pensée"<sup>7</sup> (52) —, suggesting that in ways of imagining lie ways of being political. As in a flash of lightning, images open the way to action. The writings of both Benjamin and Artaud, while they startle the reader with images, require imagination as part of the reader's engagement. Not in order to decodify metaphors, but to take part in the sensitive interplay between the production of images and forms of living.

Moreover, if Benjamin and Artaud testify to the decay and absence of traditional experience, their attempts to construct new forms from this diagnosis are permeated by images. Artaud's point of departure is the excruciating feeling that dominates his experience,

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<sup>7</sup> "the work that produces images for thought"

from which he acquires a radical perspective on the discontinuities of thought. Writing appears as one possibility of figuration, that is, the acquiring of distance from the fundamental distance within his own being. It is the dramatisation of this position that brings images to the front. Artaud is then confronted with an untranslatable knowledge, a terrible wisdom that accesses at once the imagination and the fundamental problems of living. This form of knowledge represents a thread, a point of connection amidst the eternal separation of instances of life. It is, for the most part, fragile and not comforting to Artaud. It represents, nevertheless, a step on the path towards the establishment of a *corps vivant* (“living body”). As Artaud states, his concern is with “une révolution de la conscience qui nous permettra de guérir la vie”<sup>8</sup> (*Œuvres* 728). The activities of figuration and dramatisation are vital to this endeavour.

In Benjamin’s writings, the problematisation of experience, while it takes into consideration the decay of a mystical world view, points to the reminiscent presence of magic in the current forms of living. Images are a privileged form of trace of this disappearing world view. According to Benjamin, they operate outside the chronological order, and are capable of both recovering and dispersing a forgotten or repressed past. By doing so, images are able to provoke a transformation of the present. Benjamin states: “the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (*Theses* 255). Surrealism, cinema and literary writing are some of the fields through which Benjamin investigates this reminiscent sphere, leading him to his ambiguous diagnosis on the impossibility of experience, but also the possible reconstruction of it, in a new, “synthetic” form.

The comparison between Artaud and Benjamin allows for an understanding of the extent to which the deviation and dramatisation performed by images in relation to pre-established situations plays an active part in building the conditions for a transformative experience. The dimension of the unconscious, permeated by images, appears in their works under different facets, of which those grouped under the notions of magic and experience are privileged in this work. What will become evident in the pages to follow, once again, is that the approaches of both authors are radically different. While Benjamin’s world view, and particularly his vision on language, is hermeneutically oriented, aiming, ultimately, at the restoration of an interpretation that allows the unveiling of potentially transformative significations, Artaud’s is the heir of a tragic orientation of thought, concerned with the

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<sup>8</sup> “a revolution of consciousness that will allow us to heal life”

irrecoverable fragmentation of the soul, preventing the formation of absolute meaning. Although Benjamin does not envision any ultimate resolution or restoration, and indeed at times expresses the fragmented dimension as the only experienceable one, and although Artaud recurrently nourishes ideas of recuperation and the joining of fragments into some new form of consistency, the thoughts' horizon of the two writers cannot be matched.

The interest of this work lies in capturing the formulations that emerge from the positioning of the writings of Artaud and Benjamin side by side. The positive, constructive aspect of their works represents the high point of this endeavor. It concerns Artaud's and Benjamin's attempts to overcome the darker aspects of the changes related to the field of experience in the twentieth century. Although traditional forms of experience were no longer available, and the dissolution in understanding of thought and the self had reached a point of no return, new conditions for experience were being slowly and tentatively constructed. Artaud and Benjamin give a testimony of radically different, but connected, forms of this construction.

Additionally to the different philosophical orientations, the formal dissimilarities between the writings of Benjamin and Artaud are illuminated by their comparison. Because the nature of their writings is very different, the point of departure of this work required the establishment of a common basis for analysis. While, for Artaud, writing is an act that cannot be merely operated *on* and *about* certain subject, but has instead to be "incarnated," Benjamin addresses his subjects of investigation in a more traditional fashion. Therefore, if the role of the distanced critic seems to fit Benjamin quite comfortably, Artaud intends to merge in the same act the roles of writer and critic, the actor and the spectator. According to Grossman, Artaud "pratiquera toute sa vie ce qu'il appelle 'la culture en action.' La littérature est donc un *acte*, la mise en jeu de forces, l'inverse d'une consommation à distance."<sup>9</sup> (*Œuvres* 25).

While Artaud opposes the idea that culture and life are separate fields, Benjamin, in contrast, is supposed to have aspired to the position of "the only true critic of German literature" (Arendt 4). As a consequence of these dissimilarities, which once again reflect the fundamental differences between Artaud and Benjamin, the interpretation of the notions of the unconscious, experience and magic in this work are the result of an effort that is at least partially interpretative towards their writings, while hopefully having remained true to their ideas.

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<sup>9</sup> "will practice all his life what he calls 'culture in action.' Literature is thus an *act*, the invocation of forces, the inverse of a distant consummation."

The theme of a comparison between Artaud and Benjamin propose some further questions. Artaud's texts seem to require a particular positioning on the part of the reader, questioning as they do the very nature of the writing process. Artaud problematises, for instance, the reader's conscious and unconscious engagement in his writings. In what concerns the engagement of this work, the emphasis is on bringing out his living legacy, that is, his consistent commitment with the constitution of vital forms of living. This opposes the interpretations that emphasise impotence and suffering in Artaud's writings, without highlighting the other facets of the tragic experience: of ecstasy, fury and passion. In relation to Benjamin, the question is that of escaping psychological and apolitical frameworks, particularly the search for a character to assign meaning to the "fragmented work." The aim here is to reveal Benjamin's at times erroneous, but always innovating, search for new forms of experience and political action, to take place at the crossroads between a disenchanted world and the remaining traces of magic.

Finally, the present work intends to approach the writings of Artaud and Benjamin through a comparative framework focused on the conceptualisation of the unconscious, particularly through the themes that derived from it in the work of the two writers: magic and experience. The research proposition concerns the intricate relationship of the notion proposed by Freud with the mystical aspect of both authors' writings, in order to propose the "image" of experience that permeates their accounts of modernity. It argues that the Freudian approach to the unconscious is a fundament of their works, although it is explored in contexts and directions distant from the precepts established by the Viennese psychiatrist. Also present in the surrealist perspective, these "estranged" tendencies do not coincide completely in the views of Artaud and Benjamin. They point to similar interests, and allow a criticism of different aspects of their writings.

Departing from the Freudian understanding of the unconscious in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, this work explores the surrealist definition of this same notion, particularly through the writings of Breton. It includes the different inputs of psychoanalysis and occultism in surrealism, as well as Breton's attempt to integrate the discoveries of Freud with the precepts of dialectic materialism. It considers that, from Freud's recourse to a broad basis of non-scientific expertise to establish his theory in the scientific field, to the concurrent influence of recent psychoanalytic theory and occultism in surrealism, the question that have remained open is whether the unconscious' relation to magic is a conditional or a determinant

one. From this issue derives the more general elucidation, evoked in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin, of whether the unconscious is a liberating or a limiting source of experience.

The answers, different and unique, that the works of Artaud and Benjamin offer in their discussions of the role of the unconscious, and, through it, of the spiritual and magical sphere of life in the constitution of experience structure this work chronologically and thematically. Magic appears, in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin, as a recurrent theme in the exploration of the forms of and means towards achieving truthful and significant experience, in opposition to the chronic condition that these authors name the dispossession or decay of experience. Artaud and Benjamin work, to some extent, against the grain of the scientific tendency of Freud's writings, as well as being in disagreement with some aspects of the incursion of surrealism into discussions of unconscious potentialities. Nevertheless, while both writers depart from the scenario established by these two trends, they also resort to them at various points in their work.

Artaud and Benjamin approached the unconscious as a sphere that shelters what magic and astrology used to reveal. While it operates as a substitute or remnant of this dimension in the secularised world, it is also engaged in manoeuvres that undermine individual and social development. Magical powers are mobilised either towards radical change or, conversely, towards the prevention of the conditions for this transformation. Within this framework, the field of magic undergoes a transformation, from having a restricted and almost marginal role, to participating in both authors' speculations on processes that affect the whole of society. While for Benjamin this transformation takes the form of an engagement in organising the communist revolution, in Artaud it is a revolt against all forms of oppression, both material and spiritual. As mentioned above, both authors explore this connection through the theme of images.

Permeated by the exploration of the magic or mystical dimension of life, Artaud's and Benjamin's investigations into experience not only elaborate a radical diagnosis of the conditions of living in modernity, but also outlines the different forms taken by this notion following the crisis of traditional definitions precipitated by the work of Freud. Artaud and Benjamin envision, through a combination of forms of communion and solitude, represented by language or writing, and religion or spiritual transcendence, the possibility of both dramatising and gaining distance from the negative diagnosis of contemporary experience, in order to engender the procedural construction of new forms of it.



In this context, language appears as related to an “original” sphere, in which both the fragmented and decayed forms of experience are explored through the idea of the trace. In relation to language, the fundamental distance separating the writings of Artaud and Benjamin becomes once again evident. If this distance does not constitute an estrangement, this is partially due to both having attempted to create new forms of consistency from their analyses of the thresholds of experience, of the emergence of a “new consciousness” of the fading of traditional forms. The kinship or *parenté* between the works of Artaud and Benjamin, in this regard, concern the connecting of underlying tendencies, instead of the establishing of identities.

## **PART I**

### **The Unconscious: From Sigmund Freud to the Avant-Garde Movements**

## 2. THE DISCLOSURE OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

In the theory progressively elaborated by Sigmund Freud in the book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, two instances of the psychical life — here understood in the original Greek sense of *psukhē* (Psyche), i.e. the breath of life, the human soul — are described. One of these instances, today familiar in popular discourse, is itself unconscious, remote from rational thinking, and unable to emerge without the intervention of the second instance, that of consciousness (Freud *Dreams* 169). However, despite making use of a negative definition of the unconscious, Freud considered this dimension to have a much larger role in human life than the conscious one (Freud *Dreams* 607). His theory, initially dramatically rejected by both the general public and specialists, has come to exert influence on a number of intellectual fields. In its philosophical aspect, for instance, the notion of unconscious becomes the umbrella beneath which a variety of phenomena, hitherto only marginal in the history of thought, can be explored.

In the framework of the present text, analysis of Freud's first extensive work, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is privileged over a more comprehensive examination of several of his writings. This is due to the inaugural nature of the book's presentation of Freud's notion of the unconscious, as well as its significant cultural impact. It represents the line that connects Freud and the avant-garde movements, particularly surrealism, to the complex unfolding of the unconscious dimension of experience in the works of Antonin Artaud and Walter Benjamin. No less important here is the fact that, in the book in question, the notion of the unconscious is "revealed" throughout via Freud's exploration of the dream, that eternally-disputed subject that became a crucial part of the work of the Surrealists and also of the cultural milieu that fed into both Artaud and Benjamin's writings.

Moreover, as an inaugural work in the field of psychoanalysis, *The Interpretation of Dreams* is an exemplary dramatisation of the way in which control of the domain of valid knowledge was under dispute: Science was pitted against a vast and disparate body of non-scientific wisdom, from traditional lore accumulated and transmitted over centuries, to more recent developments in mysticism and popular culture. This is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the later establishment of science as the principal, and arguably single, source of truth and valuable knowledge in the twentieth century. One of the central aims of the present work is therefore to demonstrate the survival of one facet of the conflictive development of the notion of the unconscious in the works of authors relevant to

the twentieth century. They are, in this sense, the enduring connection between a dimension beyond rationality and elements of prescientific thinking about the soul.

This approach follows the logical development of Freud's book, taking into account the intricate and multifold nature of its genealogy. In doing so it hopes, on the one hand, to render the different elements involved in the complex emergence of the concept of the unconscious visible; and, on the other hand, to demonstrate the parallel operation of two fields of reference in Freud's theory, namely a scientific and a non-scientific one. It begins by briefly contextualising *The Interpretation of Dreams* in relation to both Freud's own trajectory and the recent ancestry of the unconscious in the history of thought. This is followed by a review of the presentation of the unconscious through the course of the book, paying special attention to those elements that contradict the dominant tone of the work, that of a dialogical process between writer and the reader, leading to a recognition of Freud's postulates. The third section of this text focuses on a few elements that point to the singular place occupied by prescientific notions in Freud's work. Through analysis of these, it attempts to characterise the ambiguous status of such elements in the early expression of psychoanalytic theory, a status that would influence the treatment of the notion of the unconscious throughout the twentieth century.

In conclusion, the thesis proposed here with regard to the emergence of the unconscious in Freud's theory is that it is as close to nineteenth century science as it is to prescientific thinking on dreams and other psychical formations. In methodological terms, Freud's approach differs enormously from that of either of these fields. However, a defining element seems to lie in the fact that Freud, when writing *The Interpretation of Dreams*, was eager to be accepted by the ruling scientists of his time, a desire which necessitated the limited space assigned to non-scientific wisdom in his theory. Artaud and Benjamin, on the other hand, work against the grain of this scientific trend, presenting an experience of unconsciousness immersed in the remnants of magic and mystical practices.

## **2.1. Freud and the Theory of Dreams**

According to the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (11), the book that Sigmund Freud expected to provide him with great personal and professional recognition, took eight years to sell out its first edition. *The Interpretation of Dreams* — originally titled *Die Traumdeutung* — represented a departure from the short essays and reviews Freud had published before 1899. From accounts of animal physiology to clinical medicine and

neurology, the psychiatrist's trajectory can be traced back through these rarely-read early publications (Freud *Three Essays* 223-257). First as a laboratory technician, later as a hospital clinician, Freud wrote about topics that were relatively significant to the fields of physiology and medicine at the time. The nature of scientific discovery at the end of the nineteenth century, for instance, can be charted through Freud's studies of cocaine, which were gathered together in a paper in 1884. In this case, believing in the effective therapeutic use of the substance, Freud recommended it to colleagues and patients. This was unfortunately partly responsible for the early death of one of his colleagues, Ernst Fleischl. Although not an exceptional fact in the nineteenth century medical field, this event precipitated intense feelings of both lack of recognition and guilt on the part of Freud (Anzieu 13). He displayed such reactions at different points in his life, including during his sleep, as he later made public in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

Freud's interest in the functioning of the psychical life became decisive when, in 1885, he travelled to Paris to study under the French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot, who was famous for the use of hypnosis in the treatment of hysteria (Souza and Endo 47). Back in Vienna, he resigned from his position at the hospital in order to devote himself completely to private practice, while starting to treat nervous diseases with hypnotic suggestion (Freud *Three Essays* 4). It was through his fellow psychiatrist Josef Breuer, and the much-discussed case of Anna O. — originally Bertha Pappenheim — that Freud became acquainted with the concept of the retrogression of neurotic symptoms once the patient had “freely” addressed the afflicted manifestations and, particularly, after he or she had recalled the original experiences related to them (Freud *Hysteria* 262-3). This was named cathartic analysis by Breuer and Freud, and is characterised by its orientation towards the patient's expression of emotions, leading to those supposedly present at the original scene of trauma and later repressed. Hypnosis, in this case, was the tool used to suspend the critical instance that prevented such emotions from emerging.

According to Souza and Endo (48-9), Freud began to adopt the cathartic method in his practice, subsequently altering it once he abandoned the use of hypnosis. His collaboration with Breuer, however, proved to be prolific. The two published *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895, introducing the idea that symptoms of this illness were symbolic representations of traumatic memories, often of a sexual nature (Freud *Hysteria* 210). This was not the first book published by Freud. In 1891 *On Aphasia: A Critical Study* had appeared, in which Freud reviewed previous theories on brain damage and challenged them using clinical material. It

was, however, the first of his works to have a psychological orientation. It is worth noting in this context that Freud and Breuer would later disagree on the importance of sexual aspects in the aetiology of mental conditions (Souza and Endo 44). In any case, *Studies on Hysteria* represented Freud's commitment to the analysis of psychical afflictions through approaching hidden aspects of the mind, precisely ten years after he made his decisive journey to Paris.

The year following the book's publication, 1896, was significant in Freud's life and work. This was due above all to the death of his father, an event that engendered, after a period of deep sadness, what the author called his process of self-analysis (Freud *Drafts* 257). Through this, Freud would put to the test his recent theories on the functioning of the mind, paying particular attention to dreams. However, the self-analysis was not a solitary process. Instead, it was based largely on Freud's constant exchange with the German otolaryngologist Wilhelm Fliess, his main supporter and close friend at the time (Souza and Endo 51). Due to findings obtained through this process, Freud abandoned, for instance, the trauma theory of neurosis, while recognising the importance of infantile sexuality. In the same year, according to letters exchanged between Freud and Fliess, the structure behind *The Interpretation of Dreams* had already been sketched (Freud *Drafts* 233-9). The book, however, was not completed until three years later, in 1899. Freud dated it 1900, intending to situate it in a new era. And indeed, in relation to previous theories of dreams, the work of Freud did inaugurate a new period, based on the establishment of a distinction between the manifest and the latent contents of dreams. It is in the "gap" opened up by this distinction that Freud makes his major contribution to the understanding of the Psyche, the notion of unconscious.

Freud was not a pioneer of his times when it came to dealing with the notion of the unconscious (Kirchner 684). As pointed out by Arnim Regenbogen, "the history of the unconscious can be understood both as the history of a philosophical problem (*Problemgeschichte*) and as the history of a concept (*Begriffsgeschichte*)" (Nicholls and Liebscher 3). While the concept of the unconscious is quite recent in the history of thought, the philosophical problem concerning the existence of such a dimension can be dated back to ancient times. In the latter case, according to Nicholls and Liebscher in *Thinking the Unconscious: Nineteenth-Century German Thought*, the problematic extends from Buddha, Plato and Plotinus, through the writings of the Middle Ages, up to its modern expression (Nicholls and Liebscher 4). In the former case, the concept's complex genealogy in nineteenth-century German philosophy and literature is immediately evident. This is the

context from which the work of Freud emerged. Here follows a short recapitulation of this genealogy, largely based on the retrospective proposed by Nicholls and Liebscher (3-25).

The first text to use the word *Unbewußtseyn* (“unconsciousness”) is widely accepted to be Ernst Platner’s *Philosophical Aphorisms* (1776). Its framework, however, is far from original. Platner’s approach inherited its structure from the writings of philosophers such as René Descartes, John Locke and Gottfried Leibniz, who in turn influenced and responded to each other’s work (Nicholls and Liebscher 6). Briefly, the reception of Descartes in England and Germany resulted in various assertions regarding the impossibility of limiting the human experience to rational consciousness and thought. The definition of what might lie beyond this dimension, however, was not thoroughly established. For Leibniz, for instance, this sphere was concerned with the multiplicity of perception of which the human being is capable, elements of which must necessarily exist at a level beneath consciousness, the so-called *petites perceptions* (Kirchner 684). It was Leibniz who ultimately established a German philosophical discourse on the unconscious, with Platner and Christian Wolff amongst his prominent successors. If, for Wolff, the unconscious manifests itself in the failure to differentiate what is perceived by the human senses, leading to the “darkness of thoughts,” for Platner, it includes ideas both with and without consciousness, characterised as intrinsic parts of the soul’s life.

Alongside the Leibnizian tradition, Kant’s ideas also contributed to establishing the nineteenth century discourse on the unconscious. Despite their blatant differences, in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, published in 1798 — but probably written between 1781 and 1787 —, Kant formulated a notion of obscured ideas that is very close to the theories of Leibniz. He mentions the existence of representations without consciousness, pointing to a sphere of intuitions and sensations that would go on to inspire the speculations of Romantic writers. His later works on critical philosophy, however, focus almost exclusively on the exploration of reason, leaving little space for the darkness he once envisioned, or at least reserving a much more privileged role for the faculty of understanding than for the sensibility of the self. The transcendental idealism formulated by Kant, however, would lead to a tradition in which a divided “I” — an object of inner sense or intuition at the same time as it is a subject thinking through the operations of understanding — is at times minimised in favour of what is often conceived as the “not-I.” An example is Friedrich Schelling’s attempt at a Kantian project in *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), in which the term unconscious is used in connection with subjectivity, freedom and nature. This

relative “empowerment” of the not-I would remain important in the works of Schiller, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, before entering, directly or indirectly, into the work of Freud.

The philosopher Eduard von Hartmann also occupied a prominent place in the field of speculation on the unconscious in the German-speaking world of the nineteenth century. His book *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, published in 1869, appeared in eleven editions and was supplanted only by Freud’s work as the chief theory in the public sphere. Despite the public acclamation he received, however, Hartmann was severely criticised by the academic elites of the time, as was Freud some decades later (Nicholls and Liebscher 1). The author described the unconscious in terms of the Absolute, an all-inclusive whole that is both will and idea, suffering and order (Hartmann E. 58-60). On a practical level, he considered the role of this dimension in a large range of fields including language, religion, history and social life. On an abstract level, the two poles of the unconscious were described as being exchanged along the world’s development and as being responsible for the intercalation of pleasure and pain in the human experience. Finally, as summarised by Henri ElleMBERGER, Hartmann’s approach traversed different fields of knowledge, in that he distinguished three layers of unconsciousness:

- (1) the absolute unconscious, which constitutes the substance of the universe and is the source of the other forms of the unconscious;
- (2) the physiological unconscious ... at work in the origin, development and evolution of living beings, including man;
- (3) the relative or psychological unconscious, which lies at the source of our conscious mental life. (ElleMBERGER 210)

It is remarkable how little the unconscious described by Hartmann resembles the scattered, though strict, philosophical approaches of Leibniz, Kant and their followers. With *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, the unconscious was elevated from being a notion that had been modestly and carefully put forward, and been relegated to a secondary place in the rank of philosophical matters, to a comprehensive idea, present at every level of experience, from the origin of all things to everyday life. Hartmann was therefore responsible for a popularisation of the term within academic and public spheres, paving the way for Freud’s work, even if their definitions of it consistently differed. It is worth noting here that, in addition to the comprehensive approach that distinguishes his work from both that of Freud and of the other authors previously mentioned, Hartmann was a pessimist. He believed that the resolution of the two poles of unconsciousness constituted a voluntary departure from life, that is, the triumph of idea over will (Hartmann E. 386).



The context in which Hartmann's work appeared, of laboured philosophical approaches on the one hand and growing popular interest on the other, is characteristic of how the notion of the unconscious was viewed in the nineteenth century. Nietzsche, in 1873, expressed it ironically thus: "In the entire world one does not speak of the unconscious since, according to its essence, it is unknown; only in Berlin does one speak of and know something about it, and explain to us what actually sets it apart" (262). In this sense the work of Hartmann, a Berlin-based transcendental realist, is the exception in terms of nineteenth century philosophical treatment of the unconscious. It emerged in a cultural atmosphere that could conceive of and receive such thematisation, albeit subjecting it to sharp academic criticism.

## **2.2. Die Traumdeutung**

Considering the medical context within which Freud develops most of his ideas, together with the philosophical approaches to non-consciousness prevalent in the German-speaking world at the time, *The Interpretation of Dreams* emerges as a radically different account of the unconscious that is, however, not without ancestry. Freud himself opened his book with a review of previous texts on dreams, establishing a very different lineage to that presented above, with the exception of references to Hartmann and Kant (Freud *Dreams* 35-120). In both cases, however, Freud acknowledges no influence. In the case of Kant, he refers to his affirmations that dreams give a glimpse into one's inner nature, and that they are connected to mental illnesses (Freud *Dreams* 98; 115). In the case of Hartmann, Freud highlights his pessimism, asserting that, in common with other observers, the German philosopher envisions dreams as painful experiences (Freud *Dreams* 159). The first remarkable feature of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, then, is its open intention to take its place as part of a field of scientific research. As Freud himself states in 1904, while presenting the notion of the unconscious to his readers, "please do not be afraid that this is going to land us in the depths of philosophical obscurities. Our unconscious is not quite the same thing as that of philosophers" (Freud *Three Essays* 266). However, while showing that his orientation is principally scientific, Freud could not completely obscure the humanistic aspect of his work.

In fact, as pointed out by Bruno Bettelheim in *Freud and Man's Soul* (1983), a word often used by Freud to designate his object of study and its dynamics was *Seele* ("soul"), a notion that, together with its derivatives, virtually disappeared in James Strachey's

translation. It has been most frequently translated as “mind,” which fits well with Freud’s scientific aspirations. However, it also obscures the original context, that of a non-alienated relationship between the intellectual and the emotional aspects of life. The dream, for instance, was described as the result of *Seelentätigkeit* (“the soul’s activity”). In fact, Strachey recognised having translated *psychisch* as psychical and *seelisch* as mental, even though he believed them to be synonymous (Strachey xix). On this point, Bettelheim (4) contends that the fact that Strachey was personally designated, together with Alix Strachey, as the English translator of Freud’s oeuvre, did not prevent him from producing mistranslations. Moreover, Freud and his daughter Anna Freud personally supervised the process, hampering posthumous criticism.

This shift of emphasis leaves the reader of the Standard Edition with the general impression that Freud’s work was relatively abstract and depersonalised (Bettelheim 10). Another reason for this, of a more cultural nature, could be the distance separating readers from the context in which *The Interpretation of Dreams* was written. The metaphors used by Freud, for instance, demand some knowledge of the German used in Vienna, and the literary and mythological references evoked throughout the book require familiarity with classical literature (Bettelheim 37). Strachey, in the General Preface to the Standard Edition, mentions Freud’s knowledge of the Greek and Latin classics, as well as the literatures of Germany, England, France and Spain. On this point, he states that: “most of his allusions may have been immediately intelligible to his contemporaries in Vienna, but are quite beyond the range of a modern English-speaking reader” (Strachey xvi). Also relevant is the particular place occupied by psychoanalysis within the field of modern science at the time, a field in which philosophy and scientific research were still not completely distinct areas of study, but were engaged in a constant struggle for delimitation.

In the section of *Die Traumdeutung* presenting the review of scientific literature dealing with the problems of dreams Freud can therefore be seen giving an account of what are for the most part medical and psychological essays published in the fifty years previous to 1899.<sup>10</sup> The few “philosophical” works he approaches are mostly secondary literature on ancient philosophy and books on mythology. In these cases he gives only schematic accounts of their understanding of dreams, considering the reader to be acquainted with such material. The bibliographical narrative produced by Freud highlights, on the one hand, the general

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<sup>10</sup> In newer editions of the book, however, Freud incorporated later publications, specifically those reacting to *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

medical understanding that dreams are irrelevant activities of the mind that hold no special meaning, and on the other hand, the belief that the production of dreams is related to causes outside mental life, from disturbances of sleep to internal organic sensations related to illness. Concerning the material of dreams, the bibliography generally places their origin in waking experience, considering that dreams bring into play no more than fragments of this, in a visual format. There is, therefore, the recognition that dreams “think” essentially in images, and construct a situation from them. For many authors, dreams simply “hallucinate” the information from waking life, the act of dreaming being considered to be outside the limits of the authority of the self.

On the moral sense of dreams the authors brought up by Freud diverge. Whereas for some “the purer the life, the purer the dream” (Freud *Dreams* 95), for others the morality in dreams has a specific psychological source, making the dreamer free of responsibility for them. The first view is related to the belief that dreams are the language of truth, as was evident in the use of dreams in inquisition trials, for example. In the second approach it is the instinctive man who is revealed by the dream, a man subjected to his passions once his will has been suspended. All this is reflected in different theories of the function of dreaming. Freud distinguishes three of them, according to which: 1) the whole of psychological activity continues in dreams, but producing different results influenced by the state of sleep; 2) dreams imply a lowering of psychological activities, an impoverishment of connections; 3) dreams have the capacity to carry out special psychological activities (Freud *Dreams* 102-9). One can see how each of these approaches has different implications for the role and the assessment of dreams. In the first, no special value is attached to the act of dreaming, and no particular reason is offered as to why one should dream. In the second case, dreams are conceived as being the result of a weakened state of mind and therefore cannot be expected to hold any particularly significant meaning. It is in the third case that something exceptional is attributed to dreams, leading to assumptions that range from the liberation of the imagination to healing and artistic functions within the dreaming act.

Finally, on the relation between dreams and mental diseases, Freud states briefly that for some authors there is a close connection between the two, in consonance with the view that dreams are part of a chaotic functioning of the mind. In some cases the dream is seen either as the cause of the madness, or as its first manifestation. Some of the philosophical approaches that Freud brings up in his literature review of dreams also appear at this point, including Kant’s quote that “the madman is a waking dreamer” (*Dreams* 115), as well as

Schopenhauer's two-fold description of dream as a brief madness, and madness as a long dream.

Freud's own position in relation to the sources he describes is not immediately clear, despite the fact that throughout the literature review he makes both favourable and hostile comments. The review serves more than anything as the platform from which Freud can launch his own project, starting, in the book's second chapter, with the direct presentation of one of his own dreams and his interpretation of it. However, one should point to the place occupied by Freud's opinions in the bibliographic narrative he establishes. First of all, dreams obviously hold a meaning for Freud, and moreover have significance for the understanding of an individual's whole psychological life. In this sense external causes, such as a noise disturbing sleep or a physiological malaise, might have an influence on the formation of dreams, but this is nothing compared to the power of psychological forces. These usually proceed from an alliance between a recent waking experience and a remote memory inaccessible to consciousness, the latter being more important in the formation of the dream. For Freud, some of the mind's activities simply continue to function during sleep, while others are diminished. Crucial, however, is the fact that dreams present special features because they operate using the same mental tools as waking life, but in a different fashion. The morality that society imposes on the dreamer can therefore not be of the same nature as that imposed on the waking man; dreams may be said to speak the truth, but it is a truth of another order, cloaked in its own particular disguises.

The fact that dreams can be interpreted is, according to Freud, the key contribution made by his theory in relation to the previous approaches he analyses. This assumption finds no parallels in the dominant dream theories of the nineteenth century. However, the exception, brought up by Freud, of Karl Albert Scherner, must be highlighted. In *Das Leben des Traumes* ("The Life of the Dream," 1861), the author points to the fact that human imagination makes use of symbolism in the construction of dreams, and that such symbols are therefore interpretable. Scherner is particularly attached to a few specific elements of dream representation, related to the dreamer's internal organs. In this sense, he makes an attempt at interpreting dreams that is similar, in many ways, to prescientific dream-interpretation based on fixed symbols. As we will see, this is not very distant from Freud's ambiguous approach to dream symbolism. However, as Freud himself points out, no function is attached to symbols in Scherner's account, and by extension, no function is suggested for

the dream. In this sense, Freud's theory does bring a new emphasis when contrasted with the dominant dream theories of the nineteenth century.

This makes Freud perhaps the first author, in the context of enlightened knowledge, to make a systematic effort towards determining the significance of the dream in relation to general psychological life. Through dreams, he established a whole new approach on the functioning of the mind, an approach that, as mentioned above, was particularly innovative because of its systematic exposition of the unconscious. In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud had defined, together with Breuer, the actual psychological force of unsuspected traumas from the patient's past. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the role of the unconscious in a large spectrum of mental activities is established, including those that form part of the regular functioning of the mind. In Freud's words, dreams are a universal fact, and their interpretation is "the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (*Dreams* 604).

Curiously, though, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* there is the sense that the notion of the unconscious emerged unintentionally, as a side effect of the investigation of dreams. Freud's literature review shows that the unconscious is far from being his initial target. The structure of the book invites the reader to follow Freud's incursion, step-by-step, into the dream universe. He offers careful and consecutive descriptions of dream phenomena, lucubration on their significance and refutation of his hypothesis until a synthesis is proposed, usually not of a permanent nature. In this regard, Freud's style is remarkably dialectical, clear and convincing, as many critics have pointed out. According to Stéphane Mosès, it transforms the reader into a singular addressee, who incarnates, through the text, the author's opposite number. This dialogical structure displays some principles of Freud's theory of knowledge, namely that the truth can never be apprehended in the abstract sphere of ideas, but "qu'elles se déploient tout d'abord au cours du processus de l'échange linguistique entre deux sujets"<sup>11</sup> (Mosès *Rêves* 37).

This seems to be the case in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud imagines his reader to be sceptical and averse to his propositions. In his dialogue with this opponent, he appears to present and work through his arguments completely exhaustively, though in fact this is rarely the case. The impression usually left for the reader is that the author has pre-empted all possible holes that might be picked in his theory, or at least enough of these to make the reader carry on reading. In this way, after an extensive literary review on dreams, the content

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<sup>11</sup> "That they first of all unfold in the process of linguistic exchange between two subjects"

of which he largely dismisses, Freud presents the reader with the thorough analysis of one of his own dreams, a “specimen dream.”

### 2.3. Dream and Wish-Fulfillment

In the first interpretation of a dream presented by Freud, through which he claims to reveal the millennial secret of this psychical phenomenon, a very particular process takes place.<sup>12</sup> It seems, at first, very improbable that Freud’s interpretation can be accurate. He begins by defining the work of interpretation as the replacement of the dream “by something which fits into the chain of one’s mental acts” (*Dreams* 121). Such a formulation is the result of associations that the dreamer “freely” establishes from the dream’s content. Freud also reports two previous existing approaches to dream interpretation: the replacement of the dream’s content by an intelligible and in certain aspects analogous one, as in the case of the prediction of the future through dreams; and the decoding method, which translates specific signs into arbitrary meanings, as in the case of the dream manuals. Criticism of Freud points to the absence of scientific treatment of the subject in both cases. In other words, the application of these approaches as credible dream-interpretation theories is considerably restricted, despite their similarities with the Freudian method.

Freud’s own approach is not immediately graspable. As *Studies on Hysteria* tells us, a dream can be part of the psychical chain that refers to the memory of a pathological idea. Once the element in the patient’s mental life from which this idea originated is revealed, the pathological arrangement tends to collapse. In the presentation of the inaugural analysis of his own dream, however, Freud remarks that it is the dream of “an approximately normal person” (*Dreams* 129). This is in the context of the reasons given by the author for not having privileged the dreams of patients in his analysis, in order to emphasise the universality he intends to attach to his theory.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to Freud’s previous considerations on dreams, therefore, *The Interpretation of Dreams* proposes that dreams are formed from materials that are not necessarily pathological in nature. They usually represent a particular state of affairs as the dreamer would have wished it to be, and in this sense they represent a commitment towards the fulfilment of a wish.

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<sup>12</sup> For the description and full interpretation of the dream, see Freud *Dreams* 130-44.

<sup>13</sup> In other sections of the book, however, Freud analyses various patient’s dreams, starting from the fourth chapter.

The presentation of the dream begins with a preamble, which gives an account of some of the events that took place the day before the dream. This is followed by a transcription of the narrative of the dream, produced after waking. Once this dream narrative is established, the analysis pursues the separation of the dream into its constituent parts and the elucidation of associations brought up by each part. Initially, the interpretation consists of contextualising the dream in terms of the events of the previous day, which function as starting points for the associations. According to Freud, feelings or scenes evoked by such events usually lead to the latent content of the dream. Freud suggests that traces of the previous day appear in the dream because they somehow continue to occupy mental activity until the state of sleep occurs. The elements evoked through these associations, in turn, usually relate to significant past experiences of the dreamer, as well as to his/her expectations for the near future.

What Freud's specimen dream presents, briefly, are distorted versions of such recent and remote elements. Through the act of associating, Freud is able to develop awareness of his current feelings in relation to past experiences, in a way that proves the extent to which their significance and power remains active in the present. Other important features of the dream are the replacement of one person in reality for another in the dreams, as well as the use of exact opposites in relation to values and feelings, presenting the situation as the dreamer would have wished it to be. The path from the associations to the analysis, as evidenced by these examples, is never obvious. Freud connects different elements of his past and present experiences in order to determine to which event or emotion a certain element of the dream refers. Also particularly important in Freud's method are the exact words in which the dream is described, which usually lead to the original incidence of a verbal expression or usage, whether from the context of popular culture or from the dreamer's own experience. In this sense the narration of the dream is part of the elaboration that takes place in the dream itself.

The scene dramatised in Freud's dream represents a revenge enacted on two people who had previously hurt his self-image. The dream achieves this by presenting a situation in which these people are proven to be wrong or discredited. Through his dream, Freud felt reassured that he was right, crediting, as he did, great significance to the dream. In other words, it fulfilled certain wishes on the part of the dreamer, wishes that were prompted by, but did not originate from, the events of the previous day. In addition, the conclusion the dream intended to bring in relation to recent events was that the dreamer had no

responsibility for a certain condition in a patient, but someone else did. In order to do this, it referred to other earlier situations in which the dreamer had his ability questioned, and presented them as proof of him not being wrong. Following consideration of all of this, Freud is convinced he has discovered the meaning of dreams, even if at this point he has guided the reader through the analysis of no more than his specimen dream, believed to be exemplary. On the one hand, the detailed description of his associations present a convincing frame for the final interpretation, even after Freud has admitted the occultation of certain “indiscreet” information. On the other hand, the egoistic character of the dream's motivation and scenes seems to demand further investigation.

Wish-fulfilment, therefore, attainable through a tortuous interpretative path, is a fundament of Freud's theory. In order to give more consistency to his argument, he first presents what he considers to be simple dreams. Before that, however, one is reminded of an important distinction. As pointed out above, Freud insists on discrimination between the manifest and the latent content of dreams. The manifest content is what occurs in the dream, namely the source of the narrative established after waking; the ideas behind the dream's construction, on the other hand, are its latent content. These ideas or thoughts precede the dream's existence, and are to be extracted from its manifest content through an analytic process. As Freud schematically states, the extrapolation from latent to manifest content is the work of the dream. The inverse operation is what the process of analysis intends to undertake.

In order to further access the dream's latent content, therefore, Freud starts by considering children's dreams, in which the manifest content has a clear proximity to an expressed wish from waking life. Freud provides examples that demonstrate how children usually dream of what they desire, creating a situation in which the wish figures as fulfilled. The dreaming figuration of the desire usually operates through sensorial and visual situations. As an example, Freud describes a situation in which his daughter was heard calling out, while asleep, for strawberries, omelette and pudding, precisely after being prevented from eating during the day due to an illness. According to Freud, these were her favourite foods. In this sense, the child's psychical life is portrayed as much less complex than the adult's: it seems to lack many of the critical systems that prevent the expression of certain contents in adults. In the adult, what Freud terms the dream-work operates much more sophisticated transformations. The first example that Freud shares in this regard is the compression of different elements of waking life into one in the dream.



This is related to the theme of distortion in dreams, a motif approached by Freud from the perspective of wish-fulfilment. If dreams are the fulfilment of a wish, he asks, how and why does the dream-work operate so many distortions in the adult's dream, instead of presenting the wish plainly and simply, as is the case in the dreams of children? The answer, one can suppose, lies in a critical system that prevents the passage of certain mind contents into consciousness, during the day as well as during the night. Freud explains the reason for such a phenomenon in the following terms: if the wish-fulfilment is unrecognisable, "there must have existed some inclination to put up a defence against the wish" (*Dreams* 166). Seeking a social parallel for this internal event, the author refers to the common act of dissimulation or "politeness" amongst people of differing social classes, which prevents the free expression of certain issues.

In this context Freud also quotes one of his favourite passages from Goethe's *Faust*: "Das Beste, was du wissen kannst / Darfst du den Buben doch nicht sagen"<sup>14</sup> (*Dreams* 166). This saying refers to politeness in social relations, but also to the fact that Freud, during the presentation of his theory, is compelled to stay silent about his most intimate experiences and, specially, the sexual character of his dreams, even if they hold the key to his insights. It is also not gratuitous that the phrase from *Faust* was pronounced by Mephistopheles, with whom Freud seems to have identified himself, in the sense that he is bringing to the field of science the darkest human impulses, such as those which appear in dreams, leading to the attribution, by his critics, of a "diabolic" element to him (*Mosès Rêves* 110).

The prevention of the expression of certain contents in these situations is what Freud terms "censorship." He further exemplifies his usage with a political example, that of the writer who has to disguise truths about those in authority in order to prevent the suppression of his words. With these two examples, Freud describes the formation of dreams in terms of truth and disguise, pointing to the ultimate necessity of the latter in situations in which the truth is unbearable, or even dangerous. He presents different life scenarios, featuring various degrees of normality, with the intention of affirming the necessity of a filter or disguise that guarantees the existence of at least a version of psychical truth (better than no truth at all). The existence of a restricting system in mental life, moreover, is the *raison d'être* of psychoanalysis, in the sense that this discipline intends to systematise knowledge capable of decoding the distorted messages transmitted by the soul about its contents, as well as working

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<sup>14</sup> "The best of what you know may not be told to boys"

towards the construction of a social space within which such expressions can be made and studied.

Freud here describes two instances of the operation of the psychological apparatus,<sup>15</sup> both of which play a role in the formation of dreams and other mental activities. The action of the first instance is in itself unconscious and cannot appear in consciousness without the intervention of the second instance. Between the two, the element of censorship prevents the passage of material that might be unpleasant or shocking to the subject, even if this is content constructed by the person himself or herself, and based on past experience. Of the two psychological forces that give shape to the dream: “one of these constructs the wish which is expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish ... forcibly bringing about a distortion in the expression of the wish” (*Dreams* 168). Consciousness is thus conceived as a sense organ able to perceive data originating from elsewhere, that is, the unconscious wish that precipitates the dream. The action of consciousness in relation to the formation of the dream is therefore not creative, but defensive.

Having guided the reader through the analysis of a specimen dream, with all of its indiscretions and improbable associations, and having discussed the discovery of disguised wish-fulfilment and the necessity of censorship over the soul, Freud proposes the following modified formula for the definition of dreams: “a dream is a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish” (*Dreams* 183). But what is the nature of the wish, and how does it enter the construction of the dream? His identification of the wish as stemming from the unconscious allows Freud to delineate the reach of this dimension much more clearly. These are the developments that led his theory to become a major influence on twentieth century culture.

#### **2.4. The Material of Dreams**

From superficial daily experiences to deep egoistical wishes, “dreams can select their material from any part of the dreamer’s life, provided only that there’s a train of thought linking the experience of the dream-day (the ‘recent’ impressions) with the earlier ones” (*Dreams* 192). In relation to such recent impressions, even the lay observer can conclude that

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<sup>15</sup> Remembering that Freud did not use a technical nomenclature that included the German word *geistig* (“mental”), as the English translation suggests. Instead he made use of *seelisch*, as in his reference to the soul’s organisation in *die seelische Organisation*, usually translated as “mental apparatus.” The Greek-derived Psyche, according to Freud, is closer to the meaning of *Seele*.

dreams have a preference for the unimportant details of waking life. From the analysis of many dreams, his patients' and his own, Freud concludes that the reason for this preference lies in the necessity for some sort of displacement, since "ideas which originally had only a weak charge of intensity take over the charge from ideas which were originally intensely cathected" (*Dreams* 200).<sup>16</sup> This is one of the first mentions Freud makes of the existence of psychical energy and its role in the functioning of the mind. Dreams are the combination of these two categories of material, from recent and from remote experiences. Energy transference allows them to become a lasting mind formation.

The material of dreams can stem from different sources, from one or several recent and psychically significant experiences, or from internally significant experiences, as long as they are combined into a unity, however "absurd" of this unity might appear. For Freud, internal experiences, in other words, experiences that are not immediately accessible to consciousness, are often traced back to childhood. In fact, according to the author, "the deeper one carries the analysis of a dream, the more often one comes upon the track of experiences in childhood which have played a part among the sources of that dream's latent content" (*Dreams* 219). In the various dreams analysed in this section of the book, Freud revisits scenes from his childhood that he considers to have played a founding role in his personality. Such scenes are most commonly remembered as part of the process of dream interpretation, even if they do not seem to have been completely forgotten before this exercise.

The great emphasis given to childhood experiences is continually apparent in Freud's writing. At times, he comes close to claiming a total prevalence of infantile scenes in the dramatisation of a dream. On this point Mosès (*Rêves* 100-6) highlights the figure of the *revenants*, i.e. characters "coming back" from childhood memories at various moments in one's life, as ghosts that perpetually "haunt the scene." According to the author, the word *revenant*, employed by Freud in the context of a dream interpretation, has two main usages in the French language: it may designate a spirit or figure from another world (especially the world of the dead) that enters into our world, or it may refer to someone returning home after a long period of absence.

The dream in question is given the title "Non vixit" by Freud (Freud *Dreams* 430-4; 488). In it Freud gives expression to his wish for the death of some of his work colleagues,

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<sup>16</sup> Note that the original word for cathexis, a Greek term chosen by Strachey, was *Besetzung*. Many criticise this as unnecessarily esoteric, since other English options were available, such as "charge."

who in this context are haunted by the ghost of his first enemy in life, a boy with whom Freud used to play. According to this childhood memory, the criteria for the resolution of a conflict, and the establishment of the power balance between the two children, lay in the establishment of “who came first.” Similarly, in Freud’s understanding of his career, the question of who came first proves to be very important, providing appropriate material for dreams and other symptomatic formations in association with this infantile scene. As Mosès puts it: “à cet égard, la totalité des personnages du rêve “*Non vixit*” (mais cela vaut pour ceux du rêve en général et même de l’inconscient) ne seraient en réalité que les réincarnations d’une préhistoire archaïque, c’est à dire ... des *Revenants*”<sup>17</sup> (*Rêves* 100-1).

Since they are part of an archaic pre-history stored unconsciously, the *revenants* are not only figures connected with early childhood experiences relating to antagonism and the consequent questioning of one’s primal right of existence, but also characters from a distant time and world, such as the world of the past. As Mosès (105) states, in the context of the reception of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud himself was also a *revenant*, especially in relation to the dominant scientific ideas of the time, with which he intended to combine other sources of knowledge. These originated, on the one hand, from mythology and popular culture, and on the other, from the recondite parts of the soul, vide the sexual elements of his theory.

On this concern Freud is content to state, at the end of the section on the material of dreams: “every dream was linked in its manifest content with recent experiences and in its latent content with the most ancient experiences” (*Dreams* 239). In fact, despite highlighting the importance of infantile experiences, Freud later added footnotes to subsequent editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in which he proposes alternative interpretations to the ones presented in the main text. These interpretations usually relate to mythological or literary aspects, and are described as “further interpretative material” or “another interpretation.” While mythology was always one of Freud’s sources, the frequency with which he mentioned it increased over the years, in tune with certain developments in his theories that will be examined below.

As well as infantile material, Freud also establishes the purport of somatic sources in dreams, a controversial theme in the literature he analyses at the beginning of his book. It is through this approach that Freud characterises dreams as the guardians of sleep: when a

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<sup>17</sup> “in this regard, all the characters in the dream ‘*Non vixit*’ (but this applies to those in dreams in general and even in the unconscious) would actually be reincarnations of an archaic prehistory, i.e. ... *Revenants*”

somatic input threatens to interrupt the individual's sleep, the dream usually incorporates this element into the dream formation, presenting the urge in question as satisfied. The classic example used by Freud is that of the sensation of thirst participating in the formation of a dream, leading to representations such as the dreamer swallowing down water in great gulps. Freud treats somatic sources as sort of second-rate dream formation materials, in contrast with many nineteenth-century authors, who presented them as the main reason for dreams.

When dealing with what he calls “typical dreams,” i.e. dreams that almost everyone dreams alike, Freud adopts the ambiguous attitude that he also displays in his discussion of the symbolism of dreams. On the one hand, he claims it is impossible to interpret another person's dream unless that person is prepared to “communicate to us the unconscious thoughts that lie behind its content” (*Dreams* 259). This seems to make the use of symbolic interpretation impractical. On the other hand, if the dreamer has employed symbolic elements in the content of the dream, Freud considers it possible to make use of this “second and auxiliary method of dream interpretation” (*Dreams* 260f). The determination of whether or not there are symbolic elements in the dream, as well as of the possible meaning of such elements, is part of the task of the interpreter.

Freud goes on to make various attempts at interpreting certain types of dream, such as dreams in which the individual is pictured as naked, and dreams in which the subject witnesses the death of a loved one. In these examples, Freud identifies the dream's wishes as feelings of shame from childhood and egoistic impulses. What takes shape here is Freud's famous and infamous Oedipus complex, an emotional and behavioural pattern built on childhood experiences and re-enacted through symbolism, though going beyond it in terms of complexity. According to Freud, the Oedipus complex can be structured according to different variants that define its meaning but are not universally interpretable, even if the general pattern is to some extent.

The first mention Freud makes in relation to this psychical structure comes after a long digression beginning with the observation that dreams about the death of parents usually represent the parent of the same sex as the dreamer. At this point Freud states the following: “I cannot pretend that this is universally so, but the preponderance ... is so evident that it requires to be explained by a factor of general importance” (*Dreams* 273-4). The author traces a brief cultural map of the hostility concealed in the relationship between parents and children, starting from mythology and legend — the devouring of his children by Kronos and the emasculation inflicted by Zeus on his father — and moving on to cultural practices of

middle-class families in the nineteenth century, in which parents only reluctantly give independence to their children. The examples also include cases of psychoneuroses, in which Freud observed the early emergence of death wishes towards parents, more precisely after the awakening of both sexual wishes and the child's affection for the parent of the opposite sex.

The legend of Oedipus is then presented as a confirmation of Freud's assumption that has come down from antiquity, that is, "a legend whose profound and universal power to move can only be understood if the hypothesis I have put forward in regard to the psychology of children has an equally universal validity" (*Dreams* 278). In other words, according to Freud, the legend's ability to affect us can only be explained through the trans-generational recurrence of its plot, which mirrors the hypothesis formulated by Freud. The legend's great value, accordingly, lies in the fact that it casts light on human history, as well as on the evolution of religion and morality. In Jacques Rancière's words, the "legendary material" presented by Oedipus is universalised by Freud in two ways: "comme explicitation de désirs infantiles universels et universellement réprimés, mais aussi comme forme exemplaire de révélation d'un secret caché"<sup>18</sup> (15). The Oedipus complex in Freud's theory operates on two levels. One is strictly related to the inhibited affections the child has for one parent, while the other is concerned with the tragedy of living in error without being aware of it. Regarding this second aspect, the combination of blindness and progressive revelation, together with the conduct of Oedipus throughout this process, is comparable to the work of psychoanalysis on the contents of the unconscious.

In Freud's theory, as in the legend, desires of the sort experienced by Oedipus can only be accompanied by feelings of repulsion and disgust, leading to horror and self-punishment, as expressed in the tragedy. Here Freud is alluding not only to the emotions that take place between two generations, but also to the strong resistance that this part of his book met with from readers. In order to support his assertions, in the 1914 edition Freud included a section on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, pointing out that, despite important differences, this tragedy "has its roots in the same soil as *Oedipus Rex*"<sup>19</sup> (*Dreams* 282). In a sort of defensive move, however Freud remarks, that all creative writings are open to more than one interpretation, and that his attempt was to interpret the deepest motives of the writer. As noted by Rancière (11), perhaps more than just material to be interpreted, Freud finds in literature and art a sphere in which a certain unconscious mode of thinking already operates effectively.

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<sup>18</sup> "as a demonstration of universal and universally repressed infantile desires, but also as an exemplary form of revelation of a hidden secret"

<sup>19</sup> Previously to 1914, the section on *Hamlet* was included as a footnote.

The material of dreams, therefore, may vary from irrelevant details from recent waking life to abstract arrangements transmitted through tradition. The unconscious is home to an inexhaustible and fluid range of experiences. Its different formations, however, some of which come into contact with consciousness, are ultimately arranged according to a logic defined by the individual. One thing seems to stand out in the study of unconscious material in Freud's dream interpretations: that it is the most remote, usually infantile, memories which seem to provide the non-rigid pattern for adult experience. The interactions of the different sources that feed into consciousness and unconsciousness, resulting in the thought-formations that reach the waking spirit, point to the complexity of the mind's dynamics. The ways in which the dream works on the materials available to it, therefore, reveal the kinds of activities that psychological life is capable of. The dream, according to Freud, illuminates the soul.

### **2.5. The Dream-Work**

Unlike other theories, psychoanalysis searched for the meaning of the dream in the material dramatised in it. Having introduced the notion of dream-thoughts, i.e. the latent content of dreams, Freud defines the task of interpretation as that of investigating the links between the manifest and the latent contents of dreams or, more precisely, "of tracing out the processes by which the latter have been changed into the former" (*Dreams* 295). It is through this process that the dream's mode of expression can be understood, as well as its relation to the unconscious dimension of life.

The first thing that becomes clear to an observer comparing dream-thoughts with dream-contents is that the latter are usually more condensed than the former. In other words, if one compares the quantity of memories and experiences that lie behind every dream scene with the scene itself, a work of condensation seems to have taken place. This condensation gives the impression of having been a process of omission, since "the dream is not a faithful translation or a point-for-point projection of the dream-thoughts, but a highly incomplete and fragmentary version of them" (*Dreams* 298). In fact, dream-thoughts and dream-contents are presented by Freud as being two different modes of expression of the same material, the latent content having been transcribed into another "language," the manifest content, the laws of which must be studied and revealed.

So what is the connection between the elements present in the manifest content of the dream and the dream-thoughts? If the condensation takes place through a process of omission, why do certain elements remain expressed in the dream, and not others? First of

all, as Freud stresses throughout the analysis of different dreams in this section, the elements of a dream are determined by dream-thoughts repeated many times over. In other words, it is not that every individual dream-thought finds a separate representation in the dream, but that the whole mass of dream-thoughts are subjected to a process whereby “those elements which have the most numerous and strongest supports acquire the right of entry into the dream-content” (*Dreams* 302). In other words, a multiplicity of connections links the two instances, and that is precisely part of the process of condensation.

Here Freud reminds us of an example from his specimen dream. In it a patient, Irma, was translated into a collective image that grouped together three people: a patient, Freud’s daughter and one of his acquaintances. All of these figures, according to the author, were “concealed” behind the figure of Irma, which was then required to contain a number of contradictory features. The condensation process had sacrificed the other figures: everything that reminded the dreamer of them had been passed to Irma. A collective figure can also be produced through the conjunction of features of two or more people in the dream, as for example when a figure bears the name and the physical characteristics of one person together with the psychical features of another. According to Freud there is always, however, a single feature shared by the two. Freud (*Dreams* 311) here mentions the Galton pictures as illustrations of condensation.<sup>20</sup> In these portraits, two or more family members have their images projected onto one photographic plate, in order to emphasise similar features and to distinguish others.

According to Freud, it is when words are expressed in dreams that the work of condensation can be at its clearest. Considering that words are treated in dreams as concrete things, they are apt to be combined in the same way as other elements, giving birth to neologisms. Freud describes a variety of dreams that feature not only neologisms but also lapses and scrambling of words. The same syllabic “chemistry” appears in waking life in the form of jokes, and it’s no coincidence, Freud tells us, that many dreams are amusing, given the similar conditions in which dreams and jokes are constructed. Both formations are forced into finding a creative way to express of unconscious material, since the most direct route is barred.

The other feature of dream-work observable in Freud’s analysis of latent and manifest materials is that certain elements of the dream-thoughts are displaced. While assuming

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<sup>20</sup> Francis Galton [1822-1911] was an English artist and scientist. The technique of “composite portraiture” was originally devised in order to investigate the “average face.”



central importance in the latent contents, in the dream they may appear as relatively insignificant: “the dream is, as it were, differently centred from the dream-thoughts” (*Dreams* 322). Freud takes this to mean that what is presented in dreams is not necessarily what is most important in dream-thoughts, but rather what occurs repeatedly in them. In common with its treatment of events from the previous day, the dream-work privileges material of low psychological value, which then gains a higher value in a displacement of energy as other related instances “buy their way” into the dream. After this has occurred, the dream no longer resembles the core of the dream-thoughts and is more suitable to pass through the censorship process: “displacement is one of the chief methods by which that distortion is achieved” (*Dreams* 325).

In consonance with the notion of displacement, Freud observes that, what the dream actually draws from the various dream-thoughts is their subject matter, rather than the connections between them. In one example, he observes that dreams “reproduce *logical connection by simultaneity in time*”<sup>21</sup> (*Dreams* 330). In this sense, the fact that two elements are presented together in a dream usually indicates a particular link between them, or rather between what corresponds with them in terms of dream-thoughts. This seems to be particularly striking in the case of relations of opposition, which are usually disregarded in dreams. Dreams can combine contraries into a unity, and seem to have no difficulty in presenting an element by means of its wishful contrary, pointing to a certain permeability of opposites in the unconscious. If one thinks of common reactions such as “if only it had been the other way around!” in relation to a disagreeable event or memory, it is plausible that the act of disregarding, uniting or reversing opposites may give expression to the fulfilment of a wish. It is in this context that Freud delivers his advice to the analyst to revert some elements of the dream if it resists interpretation.

A study of historical linguistics would suggest the notion has more ancient origins. In a footnote added to the book in 1911, Freud refers to a pamphlet of Abel,<sup>22</sup> entitled *The Antithetical Meaning of Primal Words* (1884). In it the author reviews the origin of antithetical meanings in ancient languages, particularly Ancient Egyptian. According to Abel, in the first instance such languages “have only a single word to describe the two contraries at the extreme ends of a series of qualities or activities (e.g. ‘strong-weak,’ ‘old-young,’ ‘far-

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<sup>21</sup> Emphasis in the original. Unless indicated, the emphases are identically reproduced in the quotations throughout this work.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Abel [1837-1906] was a German comparative philologist. His investigations of the Egyptian-Semitic-Indo-European roots were acclaimed at the time.

near, 'blind-sever')" (*Dreams* 334f). For Freud, this further confirmed his conviction that his ideas on the nature of the unconscious were correct. According to Abel, it was only in the second phase of their development that these languages distinguished contraries, by making small modifications to the original words. The ancient languages, in this sense, mirror the treatment of oppositions of the unconscious, opening the way for Freud to later connect ontogenesis and phylogenesis.

Closely related to this is the fact that similarity is the only logical relation represented in dreams. According to Freud, this relation is somehow assisted by the work of condensation, since it helps to reduce the number of elements contained in the dream. The composite figures created by the agglomeration of similar elements, as mentioned above, form their own new images. This is sometimes responsible for the fantastic or absurd character acquired by dreams, representing figures "which could never have been objects of actual perception" (*Dreams* 339). This takes place in accordance with the necessity, on the part of the dream-formation, to escape censorship, as well as being a result of the fact that composite figures allow for the integration of elements usually not accepted as part of one's Psyche.

Freud attributes one of the most remarked-upon features of dreams, that of the presence of fantastic features — traditionally discussed in relation to the theme of imagination — to the operation of dream-work on completely non-fantastic material. In this sense, the fantastic appearance of dreams is above all the effect of dream-distortion. As mentioned above, the material of dreams might be composed of trans-individual and even tradition-transmitted elements. The creative arrangements produced by the dream-work, however, have to be understood as effects of the combining of the available materials, independently of their origin. Moreover, Freud states that dream-thoughts are never absurd in themselves, instead "the dream work produces absurd dreams and dreams containing individual absurd elements if it is faced with the necessity of representing any criticism, ridicule or derision which may be present in the dream-thoughts" (*Dreams* 452). Absurdity being the result of a contradiction in the dream-material, dreams are often more profound the crazier they seem.

In the same sense, as mentioned above, the intensity with which the different elements of dream-thoughts are represented in dreams varies, and does not coincide with the importance given to them in the latent content. The opposite is in fact usually the case. Freud makes use of a Nietzschean expression in this context, stating that "a complete

‘transvaluation of all psychical values’ takes place between the material of the dream-thoughts and the dream” (*Dreams* 345), even if what seems to be taking place is more an inversion than a transvaluation. Regarding the multiple-determination of elements entering a dream, Freud concludes that the elements reaching the dream form the starting-point for the numerous trains of thought that constitute the interpretation process. This logic implies that the work of condensation must have been more intense at the points at which more trains of thought are produced in the analysis process. With this statement, Freud opens up an ambiguity of causality that is not at all uncommon in his oeuvre. The dream-work apparently relates to all material more or less independently of its origin, importance and value, but it also seems to be more sensitive to quantitative features in dream-thoughts than to qualitative ones.

A third factor must also be added to condensation and displacement in the process of dream-formation. Freud calls it “considerations of representability.” That is, the preference for visual representations in dreams, which are described as richer in associations than conceptual ones. According to Freud, a dream-thought is not usable by the dream-work while still in an abstract form; “but once it has been transformed into pictorial language, contrasts and identifications of the kind which the dream-work requires ... can be established more easily than before” (*Dreams* 354). The visual appeal of dreams is a direct result of the attractiveness of visual content to the dream-work while undertaking its selection process. The transformation of conceptual material into images also forms part of the requirements of the censorship process. It is curious to note, in this regard, that the value Freud gives to words in dreams seems to stand in contrast to his emphasis of the importance of visual features. It could be said that Freud characterises the visual aspect of dreams as part of what is misleading about them, since it is only through words, during the narration of the dream, that one can access to its real meaning and the psychical benefits of that understanding. It is precisely due to their abundance of associations that images are not a good aid to the analytic process, despite being the “original” form of the dream. Freud identifies the tracks to the dream’s meaning as being the verbal connections that emanate, accurately though in limited form, from the dream-content, within the strict borders of “free association.”

The fourth and final aspect involved in the construction of dreams is secondary revision. This is perhaps best understood through consideration of the idea that sometimes appears in dreams in the form of the phrase “Is this only a dream?”. According to Freud, this happens when an element of the dream bypasses the censorship process, preventing it from

interfering with the dream-content in order to soften it. As a result, “the dream loses its appearance of absurdity and disconnectedness and approximates to the model of an intelligible experience” (*Dreams* 495). The critical function of secondary revision is never completely “asleep,” even in the midst of dreaming. In practice, one activity of the dream-work is filling in the gaps in the dream-structure. In fact, the waking mind seems to act towards perceptions in a very similar way, namely establishing order, setting up relations and creating a more or less intelligible whole.

According to Freud, in dreams it is actually “normal thinking” that interferes with the demand for coherence, showing the continuity of some mental functions between the states of sleep and waking. This fourth aspect of the dream-work, therefore, plays a smaller part in the dream-formation than the other three. Despite being present from the first activities that lead to the formation of dreams, it does not play a major role in the process of selection and combination of materials. In fact, all four functions of dream-work exert their influence through “preferences and selections from psychical material in the dream-thoughts that has already being formed” (*Dreams* 496). They very rarely perform a creative role, in the sense that they do not come up with new dream-material, and instead work with what is available in the dream-thoughts.

Briefly, therefore, two separate functions guide mental activity during the construction of a dream: the production of dream-thoughts and their transformation into the content of the dream. Dream-thoughts, according to Freud, are rational constructs formed with the “expenditure of all the psychical energy of which we are capable” (*Dreams* 510), i.e. they form part of mental processes that, while they have not become conscious themselves, also give rise to conscious thoughts. The second function, on the other hand, the transformation of unconscious thoughts into the content of the dream, is peculiar to dream-life. In this context Freud highlights the particularity of dream-work in comparison with conscious mind activities: the former does not judge or calculate, but “restrict itself to giving things a new form” (*Dreams* 510). Freud also points to the impossibility of comparing these two activities. Despite the interference of “gap-filling” functions, such as secondary revision, Freud insists that dream-work is fundamentally different in nature from waking thought.

Dream-work, through all of its features, can be said to act towards the evasion of the censorship imposed on unconscious elements that try to make their way towards consciousness. In order to accomplish this goal, it performs the *condensation* of materials and the *displacement* of psychical energy from one element to another, so that the content of the

dream does not resemble the dream-thoughts. It presents the dream in a *visual format* that is allowed passage through the censorship process as an innocent entertainment for the sleeping mind. Finally, the *logical relations* between the thoughts are given representation in a specific format characteristic of dreams. Consequently, as a result of the process of its creation, the dream is conceived by Freud as a mind formation that has its roots in unconscious, mythological and primeval sources. Due to a quasi-conscious critical barrier, however, most of these elements are discarded or compounded into a montage ultimately constructed to deceive the sleeping mind.

## 2.6. Why Does One Dream?

In his final attempt to tie together all of the theories in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud admits that one cannot *explain* the psychical processes taking place in dreams, “since to explain a thing means to trace it back to something already known” (*Dreams* 515). In other words, Freud concedes that his theory is lacking an established psychological knowledge-base from which to approach the examination of dreams. Determined to still do so, however, he speculates on the functioning of the mind from the perspective of the elements presented in the previous chapters of his book, and proposes a new systematisation of the general operation of the Psyche, to which he gives the schematic title of *ψ-system*.

The idea proposed by Freud is that the soul’s apparatus be imagined as a compound instrument, the components of which are called “systems.” These systems are not necessarily arranged in a spatial order. For schematic purposes, however, it can be imagined that during a psychical process, excitation passes through them in a temporal order. The apparatus has, in addition, a sense of direction, since every psychical activity starts from stimuli and ends in innervations, the term used for any system of nerves. More precisely, according to Freud, “at the sensory end there lies a system which receives perceptions; at the motor end there lies another, which opens the gateway to motor activity” (*Dreams* 539).

When a perception impinges on us, a trace of it is left behind. This can be described as a “memory-trace.” It cannot be part of the same system involved in its perception, otherwise that system, which Freud calls *Pcpt.* (Perception), would not be able to remain constantly sensible to stimulus.<sup>23</sup> Thus, behind the *Pcpt.* lies another system, this one

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<sup>23</sup> The curious nomenclature designed by Freud for the psychic systems seems to serve the purpose of preventing the direct identification between his schematization of mind function and the actual mind function. However this does not detract from the fact that at some point the schematization supplants what it is referring

occupied with the registering of excitations as traces, called *Mnem.* (Mnemonic). The *Mnem.* system not only retains the content of a perception, but also the connections it has with other memories, constituting associations. Consequently, while the *Pcpt.* system provides the multiplicity of elements of consciousness, and cannot be obstructed by the accumulation of perceptions, the traces contained in the *Mnem.* are in themselves unconscious.

Applying this system to his theory of dreams, Freud stresses that two agencies participate in the dream-formation, one occupied with the creation of dream-thoughts, and the other with the conversion of these thoughts into the dream format. The second agency, a “critical agency,” operates in closer proximity to consciousness than to the unconscious, since it has similarities with the operations of waking life. When these agencies are replaced by systems, this critical element operates at the motor end of the apparatus, that is to say, “after” the registering of perceptions as memories and on the way towards their discharge as innervations. This last system before the motor end is what Freud calls “the preconscious” or *Pcs.*, “to indicate that the excitatory processes occurring in it can enter consciousness without further impediment provided that certain other conditions are fulfilled” (*Dreams* 542). The system lying behind it is therefore “the unconscious” or *Ucs.*, since it has no access to consciousness except via the *Pcs.* system.

The impetus for the construction of a dream comes from the *Ucs.*, and “like all other thought-structures, this dream-instigator will make an effort to advance into the *Pcs.* and from there to obtain access to consciousness” (*Dreams* 543). As previously mentioned, however, this path is barred by the critical system, which inflicts censorship on the contents intending to enter consciousness. So how does this impetus proceed in order to fulfil its intention? First, there is the fact that the resistance is lowered during sleep, since even the critical system has, in some sense, to sleep. Even in its weakened state, however, it allows the passage of only a few inoffensive dreams. The only explanation that Freud can propose for this problem is to suppose that at this point the excitation moves backwards towards the sensory end of the apparatus, reaching the perceptual system, thereby returning to the raw material of thought and the traces of previous experiences that lie beyond consciousness. At this point the excitation or thought-formation acquires a visual character, linking with memories couched in visual form close to the *Pcpt.*, memories that were suppressed or did not become conscious. These connections happen not least due to the fact that these thoughts have connections to memories which participated in their formation. The most constitutive

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to, since Freud does not give any further explanation of the terms chosen. The words in parenthesis, therefore, are not originally from Freud.

memories, usually from childhood, are the most attractive for the expression of unconscious wishes. Not least, in this case, because childhood memories are more likely to have been stored in a visual or acoustic form. In this sense, Freud describes a dream as a “substitute for an infantile scene modified by being transferred on to a recent experience” (*Dreams* 547).

Traces of recent experiences are then selected for their ability to give rise to the revival of these infantile scenes, through the transference of energy taking place between them and the formation of the unconscious, as described above. As part of this process, the childhood memory somehow becomes concealed behind the recent idea. The regression of the excitation towards the perceptual system (*Pcpt.*) is the effect of the resistance of the preconscious system (*Pcs.*), but also of the attraction exercised by the presence of memory, which possesses a large amount of sensory force. What the state of sleep actually facilitates, in this context, is the moving of excitations in the contrary direction performed during wakefulness, which is usually from perceptions to discharge in consciousness. The dream can therefore be seen as a sort of revival of the instinctual impulses that usually dominate the early human condition of childhood, together with the methods of expression available at that time.

For Freud, as mentioned above, dreams generally arise from the emergence of unconscious wishes striving to reach consciousness. They begin by connecting with mnemonic traces of the current day, namely traces of the waking mind's activity that have retained a certain amount of psychical energy, probably because they evoked or referred to certain unconscious contents. This process implies a transfer of energy from the latter to the former. The energy held within the unconscious wishes, which usually stem from infantile or other constitutive experiences, is stronger than that possessed by recent elements of the mind. This is why dream formation features the conjunction of usually quasi-irrelevant traces of the previous day with unconscious wishes.

Freud goes on to explain that this linking process usually takes place during the day. A coalition of wishes and memories is formed, as described above, then tries to force its way through the preconscious system towards consciousness, where it meets with the resistance of the critical element, fully-functioning at this point, which thus exerts a censorship on this mind-formation to the point of imposing a deformation or distortion onto it. This censorship, is triggered by the feeling of displeasure or anxiety that the topic or the wish deriving from it provoke in the system and, ultimately, in the subject. The formation originally rejected by the censorship could become an obsessive idea or delusion in consciousness if it was not halted,

during sleep, by the sleeping state of the preconscious. The preconscious interrupts the activity of thinking, so that the formation cannot advance as a thought. As mentioned above, it enters a regressive path where it becomes attached to groups of memories. These take the form of unconscious scenes, and will give the dream-formation the attributes of representability. Having become perceptual, the formation is able to evade the censorship and the preconscious state of sleep. In other words: as a perception, the dream-formation is able to excite consciousness, and is therefore treated by the preconscious in the same fashion as anything else perceived. Finally, the dream is submitted to a second revision, concerned with its relative intelligibility.

One can see how the formation of the dream brings different elements concerned with the functioning of the mind into play, giving a privileged role to the critical system, which is central to Freud's theory of thought. The censorship is actually what prevents humans from living an instinctual life, as well as what allows the development of abstract thinking. Accordingly, it is what develops the latest in life. Indeed Freud observes that this system is practically absent in children, providing a reason for why children's dreams express the fulfilment of a wish with little or no distortion. The idea of censorship, moreover, is in accordance with the conception of the dream as the guardian of sleep: if something abrupt or outrageous emerges in the dream, sleep might be interrupted. Dreams need to appear, at least at first glance, to be inoffensive formations of the mind for the subject experiencing them. This is in fact the case for all mind-formations in Freud's theory: a strict censorship process is also imposed on unconscious issues during the waking functioning of the mind.

In such a compound systematisation, temporal function is working at full capacity. Freud remarks that this is an obligation inflicted by the requirement of a minimum level of intelligibility. In reality, he believes, what takes place is a simultaneous exploring of more than one path by the excitation, until it acquires the most suitable form to pass through censorship. It is important for an understanding of Freud's system to recognise that this process in its entirety, like all other psychical structures, is a compromise: "it is in the service of both of the two systems, since it fulfils the two wishes" (*Dreams* 577). In other words, the dream discharges the unconscious excitation from which it originates, at the same time as preserving the sleep of the preconscious system in return for a small amount of its work, namely that allowing the passage to consciousness under certain conditions. The reason why one dreams, therefore, is the need to give expression to an unconscious wish in a way that is better accomplished during the state of sleep.



The wish that motivates the dream, in addition, usually involves the revival of the earlier instinctual life, which can be revisited through the dream without the risks usually implied in such a revival. In this context Freud expresses one of his famous assertions connecting phylogenesis and ontogenesis: “Behind this childhood of the individual we are promised a picture of a phylogenetic childhood — a picture of the development of the human race” (*Dreams* 550). According to this vision, the development of the individual is a recapitulation of the development of human beings as a whole.

Freud envisions, specifically, a revelation of “archaic treasures” through dream interpretation, which apparently re-situates his theory in close proximity to ancient theories on dreams. According to Freud, the discovery of the continuing influence of early instinctual life in adult experience, through its appearance in dreams, is a form of preservation of traces of instinctual life from the early stages of the human race. In this sense, the revelation of what is “psychically innate” in humankind would align psychoanalysis with other sciences concerned with the uncovering and reconstruction of earlier periods of human existence. Despite Freud’s method being very different from the mystical explorations of mind paths undertaken by older theorists, he shares their goal, based on the belief that the human mind is ultimately analogous to nature, i.e. the physical forces regarded as causing and regulating the phenomena of the world.

In a general sense, therefore, the analysis of dreams allowed Freud to develop a system to explain the functioning of the mind beyond the state of sleep, often through complementing his dream interpretations with observations from his work with neurotic patients. In a comparison of the dreams of “normal” subjects with those of people with mental impairments, *The Interpretation of Dreams* tells us: “Flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo”<sup>24</sup> (Virgil qtd. in *Dreams* 604). Freud uses this word-play to reject the low status reserved for the interpretation of dreams in the history of thought, and declare it “the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind”<sup>25</sup> (*Dreams* 604). But the phrase is also a reflection on the functioning of the soul, which, according to Freud, is able to mobilise repressed instinctual impulses, thereby both shaking up and integrating higher thought.

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<sup>24</sup> “If I cannot bend the Higher powers, I will move the Infernal Regions.” In Virgil’s poem, Juno enunciates this phrase in a moment of desperation, when she fails to get help from the gods and must turn to the infernal regions. It suggests, according to Bettelheim (69), that if the superior world (consciousness) does not respond to the human drives, the underworld of the unconscious will shake it up.

<sup>25</sup> Emphasis added.

## 2.7. The Exceptional Life of the Unconscious

From the insertion of dreams into a schematic explanation of mind functioning one learns how the activities of the unconscious are focused on the fulfilment of wishes, with the unconscious impulses making use of the system in order to find discharge in consciousness. However, if these unconscious drives meet the censorship function without finding a means of discharge, they are retained in their repressed state. In this case, such formations are not completely inaccessible to the psychical system, but are able to influence mind functioning during unconsciousness. This schematic explanation of psychical life therefore shows how the most complex levels of thought are possible without the assistance of consciousness.

The closing movement performed by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is an attempt at replacing a topographical way of representing the unconscious with a dynamic one. He stresses that “ideas, thoughts and psychical structures in general must never be regarded as localised in organic elements of the nervous system but rather, as one might say, *between them*” (*Dreams* 606). In Freud’s words, the objects of inner perceptions are virtual objects, akin to the image produced in a telescope by the passage of light beams. Consequently, mind objects can be said to be no more than interstitial. It is in this kind of consideration, according to Freud, that the paths of the physician and the philosopher converge. The speculation on the unconscious undertaken by both professions could produce a common ground for further developments on the subject. For this to happen, both sides would have to “recognise that the term ‘unconscious psychical processes’ is ‘the appropriate and justified expression of a solidly established fact’” (*Dreams* 616). In the context of a still hesitant reception for the notion of the unconscious in academic spheres, the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* is not willing for his discoveries to go un-noticed.

Freud believed he had contributed towards this development of a common ground regarding knowledge of psychical life, in particular through his demonstration that complicated thought processes, such as the dream, can occur without the help of the subject’s consciousness, but in association with instances of it. For that assumption to take place, as his method exposes, one must feel comfortable to proceed by inference from a conscious effect, which is the only way to learn of the existence of unconscious formations, to the unconscious psychical process itself. In a departure from the approaches to dreams that had appeared before, Freud is also responsible for a differentiation of different parts within the unconscious, one part being inadmissible to consciousness, the other being able to reach the

conscious mind after having fulfilled certain rules — namely, in his terms, the systems *Ucs.* and *Pcs.* In this scenario, consciousness is presented as no more than a sense-organ, susceptible to excitation in response to contents external to it but unable, like the perceptive system, to retain traces of alterations provoked by such perceptions. Thoughts are occupied only with the connections between different contents present in consciousness.

From these assumptions Freud affirms that, since every conscious process can be traced back to its unconscious origin, the unconscious must be the larger sphere of psychical life, “the true psychical reality” (*Dreams* 607) in fact. But due to the censorship imposed on this reality, it remains as unknown to humans as the reality of the external world is; both accessing consciousness through certain filters. In this movement of the book, Freud isolates the psychological system in relation to each of these “realities,” the material and the psychical, treating them as equally inaccessible to human beings. This seems to be a retreat from his previous position, closer to general relativism, in which everything outside consciousness was considered unknown, despite the fact that, up to this point, material reality had not suffered any questioning of this kind, additionally being considered the ultimate source of dream-material in the form of memories of experiences.

At the same time, Freud speaks of an “unconscious thinking” that is not restricted to dream activities, but it plays an important role in both the sleeping and the waking mind. On the one hand, a dream is a form of expression of impulses active but censored during the day. This chimes with older beliefs relating to uncontrolled and indestructible forces producing dreams. On the other hand, however, the same dream is a continuation and complementing of the waking life, merging in deep unconscious thoughts in order to give birth to an authentic mind formation. In this scenario, Freud takes care to allocate equal importance to conscious and unconscious life. Despite affirming that the unconscious is the true and larger psychical reality, he assigns to consciousness the control over all contents that might gain access to knowledge, as well as to the contents of “material reality.”

This is reinforced when the author considers the ethical implications of the theories in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud first highlights that he had not deeply considered “this side of the problem,” then evokes a dictum from Plato: “the virtuous man is content to dream what a wicked man does.” This is what seems to guide the Freudian approach to the theme of sublimation and general thought, in which he considers such “elevated” formations to be interesting supplanters of instinctual wishes, as the dream also is. In order to give further weight to this view, Freud discusses whether one should attribute reality to unconscious

wishes, again affirming the “two-realities” model: “If we look at unconscious wishes reduced to their most fundamental and truest shape, we shall have to conclude, no doubt, that *psychical* reality is a particular form of existence not to be confused with *material* reality” (*Dreams* 614).

In this sense, according to Freud, a man’s actions, and not his various mind formations, should be enough to determinate his character. Consequently, while the unconscious is at the centre of psychical life, it should not be held responsible for its actions, i.e. the expression of unconscious impulses forms part of the psychical reality, not to the factual one. This expresses the singular place assigned to the unconscious from the outset in Freudian theory: a special, limited and not fully accessible dimension of life, which is nevertheless at the basis of all human actions. The work of psychoanalysis, therefore, is to discover ways in which this life might be encouraged to make appearances in the factual world, finding outlets for the discharge of its energy there, without however completely disrupting the terms in which a subject structures his or her experience. In other words, the expression of unconscious contents is always subject to the limitations imposed on it by conscious life, even if it tries to disrupt and change such limitations. Freud’s theory, however, has the capacity to call attention to such unconscious contents and to their strength and significance in psychical life. His work is an exhortation to explore and to “release” this dimension of life.

Two elements from the last section of Freud’s book, entitled “The Unconscious and Consciousness – Reality” (*Dreams* 605-15), played a key part in what came to be his legacy. The first refers to the extent to which the barriers separating psychical and factual life are contingent. Freud says: “when the mode of functioning of the mental apparatus is rightly appreciated and the relation between the conscious and the unconscious understood, the greater part of what is ethically objectionable in our dream and phantasy lives will be found to disappear” (*Dreams* 614).

Here Freud seems to be pointing to the existence of conditions which restrict not only the full appreciation of the functioning of the psychical life, but also a more general understanding of the effects of such functioning in terms of social rules and morals. The historical conditions in which *The Interpretation of Dreams* emerged, as discussed above, offered a limited openness, of complex and fragile construction, towards thematisation of what might lie beyond the rational mind. The strong criticism levied at the ideas expressed in the book, however, especially those regarding the importance of sexual and infantile aspects

to his thought, can be partially interpreted as a sign of historical resistance. Freud sought an understanding of the human mind through revealing the powers of the unconscious by immersing himself in the turgid waters of dreams. This came with a cost. The author himself was aware of the “price to be paid” for having brought to scientific attention material that previously lay outside its margins.

This cost has two dimensions. The first is related to the cultural sphere, briefly described above, in which the idea of a role for the unconscious was only slowly gaining territory, particularly through the work of Hartmann. On this concern, Freud expanded, in the reach of his work, the place assigned to the unconscious in cultural life. The other dimension is related to resistance at a psychological level, an opposition to the idea that such troublesome impulses might form the basis of life. This particular element has the feature of mingling a social diagnosis with a psychoanalytic precept, namely the theory that unpleasant contents are repressed, and that one resists revisiting them. But the tendency to reduce criticism to psychological resistance, as dramatised by Freud himself in the end of his book, arguably had more nefarious than beneficial effects for psychoanalysis: there was a tendency to despise even the most accurate criticism and opposition, although these were simply part of the conditions required for the acceptance and diffusion of psychoanalysis. The vein opened by Freud that allowed the incursion into “dream and phantasy lives,” a vein that was able to transcend moral objections, experienced not only social and cultural impediments, but also the resistance of psychoanalysis itself.

The second element to emphasise concerning Freud’s legacy is his intriguing evocation, in the last paragraph and the appendix of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of a relationship between dreams and premonition. It appears in the following informal fashion, as if from nowhere, at the beginning of the book’s final paragraph: “And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future? There is of course no question of that” (*Dreams* 615). While disregarding the use of dreams as speculations on the future, and emphasising that the knowledge they offer is usually related to the past, Freud considers that as presentations of a fulfilled wish, dreams are, in a way, leading us into the future. “But this future, stated Freud, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past” (*Dreams* 615). This “indestructible wish” related to the past was to be the object of much speculation, not least because, as mentioned above, the unconscious as revealed by Freud led to the exploration of ambiguous areas of psychical life in directions that did not coincide with his vision. The Freudian commitment to an almost exclusive

referencing of dream material to childhood experiences, for example, did not always remain intact. It was as if Freud had guided the reader, by the hand, into an unknown landscape: despite his guidance being indispensable, once there, interaction with the new space happens independently of the guide. One is, however, always compelled to return to Freud's writings once the unconscious landscape shows new and unexpected facets.

It is remarkable that Freud, having started his book by setting himself up in opposition to incorrect accounts of the world of dreams, including mystical interpretations, finishes the volume with an ambiguous account of the relationship between dreams and premonition. As well as this, in the central part of the book, he presents superstition and popular culture as "closer to the truth" than the ruling scientific approach. From this one can surmise that Freud's intention to situate his theory within the norms of nineteenth century science — which required the repudiation of superstitious beliefs — did not preclude his recurrent realisation, throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of the similitudes between his own approach and prescientific accounts of the nature of human experience, as well as their common basis of core source material. The unconscious, in fact, is the dimension in which Freud locates all of these elements, scientific and prescientific.

## **2.8. One or Two Lives?**

In *Les Vases Communicants* (1932), André Breton proposes an alternative analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth century theories regarding dreams, with special attention to that proposed by Freud. He highlights the extraordinary vicissitudes experienced by the subject in the past, not only in terms of the ascription of a minor place to it in the history of thought, but also of the way it was commonly presented by different writers, from mystics to philosophers, in the most obscure and ambiguous fashion. According to Breton, Freud himself did not resist the temptation to declare the nature of the unconscious to be as unknown to us as external reality, and in so doing he aligned himself with the majority of authors before him (Breton *Vases* 18). This failure to take a stand against the reluctance to approach the problem of dreams might seem surprising coming from Freud, especially if one considers the advancements he proposed in relation to the dream's importance to psychical life. In fact, as mentioned above, Freud's attitude towards the relationship between waking life and dream life, or the conscious and the unconscious dimensions of the Psyche, is ambiguous at best. This section tries to clarify some of these elements by considering the activity of day-dreaming, as discussed in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

According to Freud, day-dreams, or waking fantasies, are the fulfilment of wishes just as dreams are. Considered to be harmless enough to occupy consciousness for short intervals of time, day-dreams also suffer a minimal logical revision, which seems to work in the same way as it does in dreams. They also present distortions and displacements of the original material, but on a minor scale. The difference between a day-dream and a delirium, in turn, lies in the fact that, in the latter, the censorship function makes no attempt to conceal its operation; it deletes the non-approved excerpts leaving disconnected material behind. Daydreams, however, give expression to certain wishes without overly arousing the attention of consciousness, since they are at the same time unusual and consistent with other mind formations. Day-dreams do not leave the impression of an actual experience, since, unlike in dreams, the thoughts in day-dreams are not transformed into sensory images (*Dreams* 537). What daydreams do, however, is allow the presence of unconscious contents within conscious thought, albeit only for short periods of time.

The power of day-dreaming, therefore, lies in the contents it brings up from unconscious thoughts, contents that usually amaze and surprise as much as they are disregarded. Their ideational material, according to Freud (*Dreams* 496), is also formed mostly from childhood impressions. Both dreams and day-dreams provide insight into more primitive ways of looking at things, allowing contact with traces of experiences that form “the core of our being.” Such ancient and foundational elements, being unconscious and therefore primal to the formation of conscious thought, can neither be destroyed nor inhibited. They remain at the basis of life without ever having to touch consciousness, despite the latter’s continuous attempts to conceal them and thwart their emergence. It is now generally acknowledged that the supposition and systematic exploration of such a dimension by Freud is a rich proposition that changes our understanding of human nature.

Many who followed Freud attempted to privilege the exploration and expression of this larger sphere of being, from which a truer self might emerge. In this context they pursued Freud’s statement that “it is essential to abandon the overvaluation of the property of being conscious” towards the “true psychological reality” (*Dreams* 607). Freud’s full statement continues as follows, after affirming that a conscious thought is only a remote effect of an unconscious process:

The unconscious is the true psychological reality; *in its innermost nature it is as much unknown to us as the reality of the external world, and it is as*

*incompletely presented by the data of consciousness as is the external world by the communications of our sense organs. (Dreams 607)*

At the heart of this statement lies an attempt to remove the unconscious dimension from the uncertain field in which it had been placed so far in relation to consciousness. With that in mind, Freud seems to be ready to sacrifice some of the common understandings to which his own work gives expression. In so doing, his intention is explicitly to restore the old antithesis between conscious life and dream life to “legitimate proportions,” through the assertion that they are *at least* equal in relation to the access one may have to them.

In what seems to be a rhetorical tool, Freud appears throughout the book to genuinely believe, that the tacit reliance of humans on the existence of the factual world through consciousness should not prevent them from admitting the existence of something that is not perceived and recognised by this consciousness in the same way that the factual world is. This is a key problem for Freud in the context of scepticism towards his theory, which ultimately states that the unconscious is the basis of both waking and dream life, being active “during the day no less than during the night” (*Dreams* 608). On the subject of how this dimension is “revealed” by the interpretation of dreams, as well as of its relationship with other instances of mind, Freud stresses in another section that “the core of our being, consisting of unconscious wishful impulses, remains inaccessible to the understanding and inhibition of the preconscious” (*Dreams* 599). In other words, in order to reach the centre of psychical life, one must give up one’s reliance on consciousness.

This way of presenting things might be appropriate if it were not for the fact that this centre is unattainable. That is, the final aim of psychoanalysis is not the revelation of the unconscious as part of conscious life. Rather, it is the retracing of those unconscious thoughts that happened to reach consciousness, in the process suffering modifications to their unconscious form. Freud attests to the impossibility of accessing the unconscious through any method other than consciousness. It would likewise be impossible to trace back an unconscious thought if not through the work of censorship, which is active during both wakefulness and sleep. Precisely because of these features, the unconscious force can only be investigated in relation to conscious life. Therefore, if, on the one hand, dreams, day-dreams, and other formations that give a partial access to the unconscious are described by Freud as no more than a faint expression of an already-transformed portion of their constitutive materials, on the other hand, they can, as others as well as Freud have noted, offer a taste (if



not a form of experience) of the life of the soul which is somehow free from the limitations and moral impositions of consciousness.

Here is a key expression of another important aspect of Freud's theory, namely the theme of ambiguity. This could arguably be at the root of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as well as of much psychoanalytic theory. From the child's ambiguous first emotions towards the nurturing figure — an affective pattern to be resumed throughout the adult's life — to the view of the unconscious as a part of psychical life graspable through effects taking place in an instance which is, in many ways, its opposite, the ambivalent character of Freud's postulates seems to be an intrinsic and irresolvable part of his theory, a part that many refer to as being related to the ambiguous nature of his object. On the other hand, when submitted to a dialectical point of view, such aspect acquires the character of the intrinsic inseparability of apparent contradictions, which are both constituent parts of the whole.<sup>26</sup>

One remarkable element from the book neatly illustrates this state of affairs. Freud (*Dreams* 144-5) confesses to being incapable, either through embarrassment or fear of scandal, or out of respect for the characters of his dreams, of fulfilling the interpretation of the dreams on which his theory is ultimately based. By not revealing "the best of what he knows," Freud relies upon the dialogical process of the book, a process related to the theory of knowledge in psychoanalysis. As mentioned above, the knowledge on dreams is being constituted within the discourse itself, not outside it, in the same way that a patient, in dialogue with a therapist, constitutes his or her psychical history during the treatment. The pedagogical and exemplary content of Freud's interpretations shows that, despite being lacunar, these interpretations are able to constitute a convincing approach to the elements they do take into consideration, provided the reader accepts the invitation to be part of this dialogic process.

In fact, this implicit agreement between writer and reader is the only element that can offer a provisional resolution to the problem of the ambiguous propositions contained in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Hopefully, this does not mean that all readers should become prototype patients: what is demanded by this reading process is arguably not that one begins analysis, but that one agrees to question, together with Freud, the nature of some of the phenomena of psychical life. In this "psychoanalytical dialogue," to use an expression from Mosès (*Rêves* 37), there is no abstract truth to be apprehended, only the display of the process

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<sup>26</sup> On this concern, Breton's criticism of Freud in *Les Vases Communicants*, to be explored in the next chapter, is informative.

of discovering a possible truth. This *mise-en-scène* of psychoanalysis through the course of his book is precisely what calls the idea of objective knowledge into question, in favour of an expertise built exclusively on inter-subjectivity. In this sense, Freud proposes a new form of knowledge that differs from the ruling scientific methods, and that relies on a dialogical process instead of an objective one.

In this context, Freud's insistence on the necessary separation of psychical and material existence points to the impossibility of using his theory to establish any resolution between the life of the dream and the factual life, or superposition of one over the other. Accordingly, psychoanalysis is more interested in the reality built up by a personal narrative, than in the one taking place beyond consciousness. The fact that Freud's theory is committed to the *expression* of the unconscious locates it firmly within the context of general trends in Western modernity, in which the pre-eminence of the subject, even if it is a non-conscious subject, is emphasised.

### **2.9. The Magic of *The Interpretation of Dreams***

According to Mosès (*Rêves* 55), as a consequence of its reliance on language, psychoanalysis suffers from the kind of distrust aimed at all practices that cannot refer to evidence from the "outside world." In this sense, the discipline created by Freud is similar to mythology. As Mosès goes on to point out, since the logic they both employ predicates linguistic immanence, they must be approached as narrations in which one can engage in order to possibly rewrite, complete or transform the contents. In psychoanalysis as much as in mythology, a question arises concerning the efficacy of the language they use, which operates between different levels of psychical life and, in the case of the former, from the depths of unconscious memories to the current flow of conscious thoughts.

This efficacy is related to the ability of language to change reality, placing the use of language in psychoanalysis in close proximity to ancient descriptions of the power of the word to enchant. This magical feature is described by Freud to have left remnants in contemporary speech, and it is clearly present, in a modern guise, in the dialogic process of psychoanalysis. Freud gives simple examples of the ability of words to interfere in factual situations, such as in determining people's emotions, in transmitting knowledge, and in establishing one's judgments and opinions. Through all of these, he highlights the power attributed to language in the discipline he created, a potential arising from its magical potential.

Other than the clinical techniques of medicine, language is the field in which the Freudian interpretation of dreams can be most easily related to other practices. Perhaps the most obvious such connection is the similarity of the treatment of the dream-narrative with the practice of Hermeneutics. The method of interpretation developed by Freud begins with the translation of a sequence of images into a written report, and followed by the contextualisation of the dream in a series of events, just as in hermeneutical methods. The proper interpretation process, in turn, intends to reach the unconscious thoughts behind the appearance of the dream, departing from the words in which the dream was expressed. Mosès, in this context, speaks of a re-translation of the dream's manifest content into its latent ideas, that is to say, "le travail d'interprétation consiste donc à ramener le contenu apparent du rêve à un autre, caché"<sup>27</sup> (*Rêves* 115), a process which reveals the incongruous content of unconscious thoughts. This multiple transposition from one kind of content to another through the investigation of the *apport* of language is constitutive to the act of interpretation in Freud's theory. It also forms part of the traditional hermeneutic method.

Such correspondences can shed new light on the relationship between the discipline Freud is delineating, psychoanalysis, and the various areas of study he refers to as "science." In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the process by which Freud's theory is established as a valid form of knowledge involves the presentation of its interrelation with all the other disciplines discussed. As Mosès (*Rêves* 65) stresses, Freud is differentiating his work both from ancestral and popular knowledge on dreams and from the sceptical science of the turn of the century. An example of this occurs in a passage from the book in which he confesses a change in his opinion regarding lay knowledge on the meaning of dreams, which he initially considered to be of no use for scientific purposes:

Thus one might feel tempted to agree with the philosophers and the psychiatrists and, like them, rule out the problem of dream-interpretation as a purely fanciful task. But I have been taught better. I have been driven to realise that here once more we have one of those not infrequent cases in which an ancient and jealously held popular belief seems to be nearer the truth than the judgment of the prevalent science of today. (Freud *Dreams* 124-5)

If on the one hand Freud is bemoaning to the rigidity of contemporary science, on the other he acknowledges the lack of rigour in the assertions of popular culture. In the case of

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<sup>27</sup> "the work of interpretation consists therefore in bringing the apparent content of the dream back to another, hidden content"

science, Freud resents its inability to produce a new kind of knowledge, into which ideas from non-scientific fields might be integrated. In this sense he considers medicine to be particularly conservative when compared with other fields in which positivist parameters were being revolutionised, such as physics. But at the same time he is unable to recede from the scientific parameters that, according to himself, allow for the generalisation and validation of his theory. In this sense, Freud's work occupies a middle ground. The scientific work undertaken throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams* is not in complete accord with the dominant scientific methods of the nineteenth century, making it wrong to assume that Freud's scientific intentions completely superpose his use of sources from popular and ancient culture. At the same time, science is the arena within which he seeks acceptance of his discoveries, and he is consequently engaged in a struggle to change its norms. There are two operative notions of science in the book, which can be summarised as the dominant science and the science practiced by Freud.

One might also expect the operation of two versions of mysticism in the book, namely the one in which Freud finds the intuitions that are closest to the propositions of psychoanalysis, and the one that inaccurately attributes sense to dreams as well as to other psychical phenomena, usually making use of fixed symbolism and the treatment of signs. As with the two varieties science, the two types of reference to prescientific knowledge are at many points indiscernible. It is only from the treatment they receive through the course of the book that distinctions can be made. Accordingly, the ancient methods of dream interpretation based on fixed significations, should, according to Freud, be disregarded, while the presence of accurate dream interpretations in popular culture points in the other direction. On many occasions, when dealing with such material, Freud does not express a fixed opinion.

As Mosès has noted, “il ne s'agit pas pour lui [Freud] de retourner naïvement à des formes de pensée prérationnelles ... mais plutôt de les intégrer, un peu comme des citations, dans son propre discours scientifique”<sup>28</sup> (*Rêves* 67). One important expression of such integration is to be found in the claim that the primal phase of psychical development is analogous to the most archaic periods in the history of humanity. This analogy serves as a model of how the integration of non-scientific material works in Freudian theory: the references to ancient understandings of nature are related to the primal dimension of life, that is to say, the dimension that appears first in human development, the unconscious. In this

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<sup>28</sup> “for him [Freud] it is not a question of naively returning to pre-rational forms of thought ... but rather of incorporating them, in the form of quotations, in his own scientific discourse”

construction, the secondary process of the constitution of consciousness and rationality comes later in both individual development and in “civilisation,” or human evolution. However schematic, Freud envisions this relation as more than an analogy, asserting that the exploration of the unconscious may contribute to the study of ancient forms of living. The hypothesis behind this statement supports the idea that the unconscious holds traces of previous ways of life, being the bearer of the perception of causal relations between different elements in nature. Needless to say, such a world vision, in its completeness, is unattainable nowadays, no matter how many traces of it have been left.

In Freud’s book, the subject that best expresses this hypothesis is symbolism. Examining the methods of interpretation disregarded by Freud as “non-scientific” and non-generalisable in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, one finds that, despite numerous differences, these methods have much in common with his technique of interpretation.<sup>29</sup> Firstly, in the cryptographic method the interpretation is performed with the help of a precise code engaging with the text of the dream, which is considered as a form of encrypted writing. The dream-text is thus translated into another text with the help of the lexicon. The treatment of a dream as a coded wording that has to be translated is not far from the transposition of the manifest content of dreams into dream-thoughts, showing the latent content of the dream as the decoded result of interpretation.

In another method mentioned by Freud, that linked to Artemidorus of Daldis,<sup>30</sup> the pattern of similarities continues. This interpretive technique is defined in the following terms: “a thing in a dream means what it recalls to the mind - to the dream-interpreter’s mind” (*Dreams* 123f). The method of association in this case is remarkably similar to the Freudian one, despite the fact that in the latter the associations should be established by the dreamer. Additionally, the interpreter in this practice takes into account the circumstances in which the dreamer finds himself. He then formulates an interpretation using skills acquired over an extensive practice, such as intuition and imagination. Despite having the last word, therefore, the interpreter cannot be said to act arbitrarily in his definition of the meaning of the dream.

Finally, in the symbolic method of interpretation the dream is considered to be a distorted reflection of reality. The interpreter has thus to establish the analogies between the elements presented in the dream and those to which these elements refer, with the ultimate goal of making the language of the dream intelligible. Also called “symbolic,” this theory is

<sup>29</sup> For a broader description of such methods, please see Freud *Dreams* 122-5.

<sup>30</sup> Also known as Ephesius, Artemidorus of Daldis was a Greek diviner who lived in the second century. He is the author of the five-volumed *Oneirocritica*, on the interpretation of dreams.

different from the approach to symbols presented by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, as outlined below. Their similitudes are detectable, however, for example in the fact that both involve the revelation of a hidden sense, which is revealed through the establishment of the links connecting the distorted material with the original material. Freud's disregard for such theories, therefore, concerns only their non-scientific nature, since in all other features they display much affinity with his approach. Freud explains that such "popular procedures" cannot "be employed for a scientific treatment of the subject" (*Dreams* 124). The acknowledgement of the similarities falls to the reader to observe.

A further step towards realisation of the closeness of his theory to marginal scientific knowledge is made in Freud's proposition of the use of symbolism for the interpretation of dreams. This element is representative of the conjunction of different sources in his theory, amongst them popular culture, in the form of common word usage. On this subject, Freud mentions various examples, including the correctness of ordinary wording regarding the recognition of dreams as the fulfilment of wishes, especially in the form of adages, as well as in the use of foreign languages for the interpretation of specific words in dreams. An example of the first case would be the following: "'What,' asks the proverb, 'do geese dream of?' The answer: 'Of corn.'" (Freud *Dreams* 157). On the subject of the use of foreign languages, Freud proposes, for instance, that the word "box," appearing in the dream of a German speaker, can be related to the German term *Büchse* ("receptacle"), used vulgarly to refer to the female genitalia (Freud *Dreams* 178; 376). In these cases, the determination of a relatively common source for the meaning of the psychical formations again takes place in the field of language.

In the same fashion, the emergence of symbolism in dreams, according to Freud, points to a general presence of symbols in unconscious ideations. Sexual symbolism, for example, "is to be found in folklore, and in popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom and current jokes, to a more complete extent than in dreams" (*Dreams* 365). Curiously, in this case the broader presence of symbolism in its different cultural manifestations seems to serve for Freud as a guarantee of the legitimacy of his claims regarding access to dream symbols. If such symbols also find expression in media other than the dream, Freud seems to argue, their validity must be unquestionable. The same logic is apparent when the reception of literary works is used to legitimate Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex. In these cases, the cultural phenomena work as justification for the validity of the scientific postulates.

Moreover, it is precisely in relation to sexual symbolism in dreams, an element that increases in importance in Freud's theories over the years, that a discussion takes place about whether symbols occur with a fixed meaning, or whether their significance can vary according to the dreamer and the circumstances surrounding the dream. Here Freud questions the very definition of symbol, concluding that it does not generally act as a direct form of representation connecting two or more elements. In Freud's conceptualisation the element represented in the dream is concealed, throwing light upon the symbolic relation. According to Freud, "Things that are symbolically connected today were probably united in the prehistoric times by conceptual and linguistic identity. The symbolic relation seems to be a relic and a mark of former identity" (*Dreams* 365). Freud establishes a theory of a common original language, in consonance with his interpretation of separate words in dreams, and a concept of extra-sensorial similarities that were once perceived by human beings and are retained today in the form of unconscious traces that emerge in dreams and other psychical formations. Although these ideas are remarkably remote from any possible verification, for Freud they form part of the above-mentioned scientific legitimacy, which he sets in opposition to "symbolic" methods that makes use of arbitrary codes. In other words, science at the time, as today, allowed itself to believe in unprovable things. In addition, Freud saw the unconscious as the dimension in which such unprovable things were revealed, the dimension that was at the same time "a relic and a mark."

One should not forget, however, that, for Freud, symbols are not limited to ancient identities, but continue to evolve in relation to objects of present day life. Once Freud has set down some precautionary rules, he mentions a few symbols that seem to have a fixed meaning. The examples are familiar today. They include the idea that boxes, ovens, cupboards and hollow objects stand for women in dream-thoughts, while all kinds of elongated objects refer to the male sexual organ, and the climbing of stairs and ladders symbolises the sexual act (Freud *Dreams* 367). The origin of such findings is the recurrence of these symbols in dreams analysed by Freud and his fellow psychoanalysts.<sup>31</sup> This element might leave room for the supposition that such symbolism is characteristic of the epoch and culture in which Freud lived, as well as the psychoanalytic framework. In a further attempt to legitimise his clinical findings, Freud integrates mythology and folklore into his symbolic scenario, naming beasts and different animals as symbols of elements that include genitals,

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<sup>31</sup> According to Bettelheim (51), on this subject in particular, the English translation tends to generalise what in Freud's usage is a specific instance. From *der Ofen* ("the oven") and *ein Weib* ("a woman") in the original, the translation becomes "ovens" representing "women."

men, women and also children (the latter represented by small creatures appearing in dreams) (Freud *Dreams* 370).

As arbitrary as this aspect of the theory might seem, Freud's approach to symbolism intends to adopt a "combined technique," at least in relation to the ancient symbolic method of interpretation. In this, the dreamer's associations *and* the interpreter's knowledge of symbols — as well as the dreamer's, one might add — should be taken into account. Once again we find Freud drawing on a non-scientific source of information (the symbolism of latent thoughts as traces of a former identity from prehistoric times) and combining it with a "scientific" method of investigation (psychoanalysis, according to the terms of scientific knowledge as defined by Freud). Freud tells us:

Regard for scientific criticism forbids our returning to the arbitrary judgment of the dream-interpreter, as it was employed in ancient times ... We are thus obliged, in dealing with those elements of the dream-content which must be recognised as symbolic, to adopt a combined technique. (*Dreams* 366)

The use of the words "forbids" and "obliged" might indicate a rhetorical rather than a *de facto* aspect to Freud's view, since the inclination towards science occupies a prime position in the book, as previously discussed. However, his approach to symbolism denotes, perhaps more clearly than other sections of the book, the extent to which the integration of elements of the worldview of earlier phases of the development of psychical life, as well as of contemporary experiences that hark back to such views, are a constitutive and indispensable part of his theory. In fact, if dreams can "go back" to primitive phases in the evolution of language, symbolism and pictorial significance, Freud's theorisation of the unconscious is more than just a practical grounding based on clinical work and self-analysis. The world views related to ancient mystical experiences, and described as part of the unconscious in the form of traces, are equally central to the theory. These traces, he tells us, integrate human experience and can at times reach consciousness. In them, the interpretation of dreams finds a legitimate and important source, which also connects it with the fields of mythology, folklore and symbolism.

Bettelheim establishes a connection between the title of Freud's book (*Die Traumdeutung*) and that of other fields of knowledge, such as Astrology (*Sterndeutung*). He argues that the German word *Deutung* designates an attempt at elucidating a meaning, rather than at making it explicit, somewhat like the English term "interpretation." *Sterndeutung* and



*Traumdeutung* deal with ancient experimental efforts to make sense of something. More precisely, Bettelheim states:

By giving his book a title that he knew must evoke associations to the ancient but still popular superstitious and fantastic attempts to make sense of incomprehensible phenomena, Freud indicated that he did not shun efforts to make sense out of what all serious-minded, scientifically inclined people were convinced was utter nonsense. (Bettelheim 67)

The relationship of Freud's work to bodies of non-scientific knowledge, therefore passes through many phases, some of which are apparent in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud's own prescientific beliefs were superseded by his growing effort to integrate the "mystical" discoveries of psychoanalysis into scientific patterns. However the process that led to his disclosure of the unconscious in the context of modern knowledge and civilisation brought with it traces of various non-modern beliefs. The establishment of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century has erased many of these traces.

Detouring back to Breton's *Les Vases Communicants*, dream theorists are divided into three groups. The first includes the "more or less conscious" followers of a rough materialism that does not distinguish dream from the reality. The second group those of a positivist inclination, who see the dream as a degradation of waking activities. The third is formed of the idealists, who see dreams as "precious liberations" from waking life and assign to them a superior activity of mind (Breton *Vases* 16-7). It is perhaps not so striking to observe that Freud, despite his eloquent scientific efforts, must be placed, within Breton's scheme, in the third category, together with the mystics. This view marks the appropriation of Freud by the surrealists.

### 3. SURREALISM, THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE UNCONSCIOUS

In 1932, when Breton and Freud were exchanging letters, Europe was steeped in the maudlin mood of the interwar years, a time marked by the growth of a mainstream culture of consumerism, which attempted to counteract the misery and hunger left behind by the First World War. The euphoria that marked the end of the conflict proved to be superficial, a delusion that could no longer be maintained once states started to prepare the next war. Freud was by this time a renowned psychoanalyst and intellectual who did not fear the possible effects of Hitler's rise to power, while Breton was the key figure of surrealism, an important cultural phenomena committed, on its own terms, to the communist revolution.

Freud represented, to the surrealist movement in general, a potential revelation. According to Maurice Nadeau, in *Histoire du Surréalisme* (1964), "Une immense espoir est né. Les surréalistes trouvent dans les découvertes de Freud une solution provisoire."<sup>32</sup> (16). As André Breton states in 1924, Freud's work represented the end of an era of disregard for the dream in philosophical, physiological and even artistic spheres. Surrealism took part in this movement of rediscovery, but with a very different project. As stated in the first "Manifeste du Surréalisme" (1924), if the movement intended to capture the forces at the depths of the human mind, it did so in order to fight those at the surface, that is in order to submit them to the control of reason (Breton *Manifestes* 20).

*Surrealité* means the amalgamation of instances of dream and reality to form an "absolute reality" (Breton *Manifestes* 24). Despite Freud's insistence on a distinction between the two dimensions, the surrealists took his theories as an invitation to explore these boundaries, recognising the importance attested to the unconscious in all psychic matters. Surrealism deliberately reaches beyond the boundaries of Freud's doctrine, while also bringing contributions of nineteenth-century parapsychology and different forms of occultism to the fore. Moreover, after 1927, it was the part played by surrealism in the social revolution taking place at the time that instigated the promising encounter between the theories of Freud and Marx.

Surrealism must also be inserted into the avant-garde current that was flowing through Europe in the early twentieth century. Heir of the artistic Secession Movements, as well as part of a larger political awareness of the context that had led Europe to the wars, this movement combined heterogeneous manifestations of the will to break with current cultural values. In surrealism, the avant-garde is defined as "une attitude de vie intransigeante, fondée

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<sup>32</sup> "A great source of hope is born. In the discoveries of Freud, the surrealists see a temporary solution."

sur une conception du monde et de l'homme qui n'est pas celle de l'époque, mais en avant d'elle"<sup>33</sup> (Nadeau 116). The theme of progress, as defined by bourgeois society at the time, becomes one of the touchstones of the movement. While futurism, for instance, believes that technical progress occupies a leading role as part of a necessary renewal of society, both moral and behavioural, dadaists and surrealists condemn the belief that a technically advanced civilisation is the unquestionably positive outcome of past struggles, let alone a desirable future.

Together with this negation of certain modern ideologies, surrealism questions in particular the dominance of science in the quest for knowledge. It initiates a search for other sources that allow an appreciation of the "true value of life," sources lying outside the normalising framework of logic. In this sense, surrealism recovers, alongside Freud's official legacy and in spite of the psychiatrist's own methods, the kind of references he tried to subsume to science. The thematisation of occultism, madness and oriental culture, and the different approaches to the matter of otherness, can be considered a part of surrealism's exploration of pre-scientific knowledge.

The movement's attempt to enlarge the comprehension of the real and potential role of the unconscious in human experience, particularly in relation to waking life, is an interesting off-shoot of psychoanalytic theory. This attempt gives space in particular to the expression of aspects such as the disinterested play of thought, the fearlessness of imagination and the immersive fantasy. In all this is implied the possibility that one can be, at least temporarily, outside the world of judgment and exempt from social censure, as in a continuous monologue of free association. In other words, surrealism proposes the experience of the unconscious "in its pure form" (*Manifestes* 36).

The effort to prove the compatibility between the interpretation of dreams and a revolutionary perspective, undertaken by Breton in the Second Manifesto and, most particularly, in the book *Les Vases Communicants* (1932), establishes some meeting points between trends of marxism and the surrealist elaboration of the legacy of Freud. More than anything, however, it exposes theoretical clashes. The discussion, including its contradictions, finds echoes in the work of Benjamin, not least when he seeks to create a useable fusion of magical awareness and dialectic materialism, that is, to draw attention to the magical aspect of words and objects capable of enhancing the revolution (Löwy *Estudos*).

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<sup>33</sup> "an intransigent attitude towards life, based on conceptions of the world and of man that do not coincide with those of the current time, but which prefigure it"

At the same time, it is pertinent to see how the change in orientation of surrealism towards marxism provoked a conflict with the precepts defended by the movement up to that point, that is 1926. One aspect of this conflict is expressed in the impossibility for the surrealists of continuing to defend the exclusivity of a revolution of the spirit in the face of the marxist's conception of revolution, with its key facet of class struggle. Artaud's vision grows incompatible with the position assumed by the surrealists from 1928, when the forms of revolution, social life and personal attitudes become prescribed by the movement's appropriation of marxism. This, in turn, is largely defined by a belief in the necessity of an intellectual vanguard capable of leading the masses towards the development of its own class consciousness.

In view of this context, this chapter aims to explore the various developments in the approach of surrealism to the notion of the unconscious, here chiefly defined by the first and the second surrealist manifestos (1924 and 1930), together with Breton's book on dreams, *Les Vases Communicants* (1932). In order to propose a contextual understanding of the movement's precepts, it briefly explores the scene of European avant-garde movements, which broke with many of the values rejected by the surrealists in the works of Freud and his contemporaries. It offers the hypothesis that the original and controversial conjunction represented by the approach of surrealism to the unconscious, psychoanalysis, unconventional forms of knowledge and the methods and ideology of dialectic materialism was an important influence on the works of Artaud and Benjamin.

### **3.1. The Europe of Avant-Garde Movements**

Europe immediately prior to the First World War was a continent engaged in an accelerated process of industrialisation. Following the technical revolution of the mid nineteenth century, a mass of workers was emerging as the new population of cities, while certain older modes of existence were gradually disappearing. It is within this context, in which a relative optimism followed the profusion of technical developments and gradually fed international disputes for markets, that the emergence of the earliest European avant-garde movements can be located.

The promise of progress related to modernity, which can be traced back to the enlightenment movement, persisted in the technological history of the twentieth-century. However, disputes over colonies and the First World War had begun to unsettle the assumption. According to Evans, expectations surrounding the war were connected with

previous experiences of conflicts, in which rapid advances were established through a few important clashes, and without the cost of many lives. The First World War, however, took four years to be over, and brought with it, alongside an unexpected level of physical destruction, the destruction of certain notions previously innocently accepted, such as an ideological optimism towards the use of machinery.

The war crystallised the astonishing level of the human capacity for destruction, as well as the casualness with which this power could and would be put into action. Moreover, the values on which the war was primarily based became for the most part untenable after its occurrence. The grand, romantic justifications that pictured it as a duel for honour, for instance, and even as a means towards finding some meaning in existence, became less convincing in the face of such heavy losses. Nevertheless, nationalist appeals about strength and domination still continued to find favour.

In general, the sense of disillusionment towards the traditional values of European civilisation was strong. According to Nadeau (12-13), post-1918 Europe experienced multiple failures. These included the fact that political regimes proved incapable of organising their forces for anything other than war, while science came up with discoveries that perfected different killing machines and philosophers sought to justify men in uniforms. Such tendencies were fed by the nationalism and rivalry encouraged by states at war, which at the same time unquestioningly followed the world-view demanded by the apparatus of war in many different fields of knowledge.

The avant-garde movements rejected the values of a civilisation that presented itself as heir to an unquestionably superior culture and mentality, while at the same time promoting increasing inequality, ostracism and destruction. However, while futurism praised the technological developments as the elements capable of constructing a more dynamic and organic society, even associating its activities with the Italian fascism, dadaism and surrealism expressed defiance towards the ideology of progress. These two movements were profoundly disgusted by a civilisation that had happily embraced war, and come out of it with laws and morals the surrealists found repugnant. All of the movements had in common the will for and the belief in a transformation at various levels of society.

### **3.2. Futurism: The Enlightenment of Speed**

The vision of futurism, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, saw humanity being pushed towards an absolute, although still vague, liberation. According to Mario Verdone (9),

when life acquired an accelerated rhythm, resilience and power it began to progressively change the aesthetic make up of society. As Filippo Marinetti stated in *Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo* (“Futurist Foundation and Manifesto,” 1909): “we affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed”<sup>34</sup> (Marinetti qtd. in Verdone 84). In order to understand the aesthetics of this new framework, the soul should “once again become pure; the eye must be free from the veil of atavism and culture”<sup>35</sup> (Marinetti qtd. in Verdone 87).

Marinetti’s fictional book *Tripoli’s Battle* (1911), for instance, was a futurist evocation of the machinery-like values that he believed should replace sentimentalism and other traditional values evoked by works of art. One excerpt, relating to the novel’s feminine character, gives the following description: “you are, small machine gun, a charming woman, and sinister, and divine, at the wheel of an invisible hundred-horses chestnut, roaring with outbursts of impatience”<sup>36</sup> (Marinetti qtd. in Verdone 89). Alongside the stereotyping approach to the woman as a malicious and impetuous figure, an alignment between instinctive features of humanity and machinery was evident, an ideal sought by the futurists not only in literature and the arts, but ultimately in life.

The desire to link human features with the flat, bright, functional objects so recently created was, according to Marinetti, a question of intuition. Futurist calls for “lyrics in matter,” for instance, arose from a belief in the necessity of a return to nature, and away from established culture, since the former was the source of human intuition. The human intuitive ability was moreover the key to surpassing the hostility between human flesh and metal engines, in an ideal mixture of nature and technique that evoked the ideals of the enlightenment movement, which saw the control of nature as a potential breakthrough for humanity. The futurists proclaimed themselves the new *Signori della Luce* (“Masters of the Light”), primitivists with a new sensibility connected to the lucidity of the sun (Verdone 88).

The negation of tradition and past models played a central role in the futurist’s battle for a new form of intelligibility. This negation was related not only to a desire to administer a shock to a world seen as lethargic, but also to a wish to create a space for new generations, that is, in this case, the futurists themselves, defined as those who saw the inevitable internal

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<sup>34</sup> “noi affermiamo che la magnificenza del mondo si è arricchita di una bellezza nuova: la bellezza della velocità”

<sup>35</sup> “(...) bisogna che l’anima ridiventi pura; che l’occhio si liberi dal velo di cui l’hanno coperto l’atavismo e la cultura”

<sup>36</sup> “voi siete, piccola mitragliatrice, una donna affascinante, e sinistra, e divina, al volante di un’invisibile centocavalli, che rugge con scoppi d’impazienza”

changes brought by the advent of industrialisation. In this sense, the Italian movement was unique amongst the avant-garde groups in that it envisioned machines as the most relevant element of the new society, through which the establishment of new values can arise. The desire to dismantle the current culture, however, was an element of futurism that would also be taken up by other movements. The question of precisely which tradition was being discarded is elucidated by the manifesto quoted above. In it the futurists expressed their desire to destroy museums, libraries and all kinds of shelter for institutional memory. Comparing museums with cemeteries, the movement rejected what it saw as the unproductive reverential place occupied by cultural establishments in society: they were places one should visit once a year in order to salute the dead, and no more.

The futurists regarded themselves as activists, but intend to adopt an activism informed by what they called the “angularity” of things, an alternative to traditional forms of appreciation of objects. Futurist activism is intended to act as a rather violent reminder of the colourfulness of life, in opposition to the lifelessness of institutional culture. Moreover, in a gesture that is less easily grasped today, but makes sense within the premises of the movement, Marinetti and his group envisioned war as the highest expression of the conflict of things, as a spontaneous eruption of possibilities that embodied an attempted solution to the problem of life in motion (Verdone 63).

The futurists could conceive of no possible co-existence between past and future. The admiration of works of art from the past was, according to them, a waste of the best of human abilities, and as harmful as “prolonged paternal protection for young spirits.” The present, alongside a constant projection towards times to come, was in itself the movement. The futurist disregard for the accounting of time was expressed in another excerpt from the Manifesto: “Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, since we have already created the eternal omnipresent speed.”<sup>37</sup> (Marinetti qtd. in Verdone 84). It is easy to see how such a vision could coincide with that of fascism, in which a halt in chronological time was involved in the establishment of a perfect social form. Velocity, in this sense, is responsible for an enlargement of sensibility that should be followed to the letter.

For the futurists, the act of publishing their manifestos in newspapers was of crucial importance in showing the consonance of avant-garde ideas with the instantaneous

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<sup>37</sup> “Il Tempo e lo Spazio morirono ieri. Noi viviamo già nell’assoluto, poiché abbiamo già creata l’eterna velocità onnipresente.”

information of daily news. Futurist techniques of promotion illustrated this well. Narratives of the group's activities were distributed in different media, creating abundant exposure, which, despite the questionable level of acceptance they enjoyed, served to popularise the movement, as did with brand new products and simplified news of distant worlds. Such strategies were alien to the arts establishment of the time; they were seen as making dubious use of an appeal to motivations other than recognition of artistic quality. Avant-garde criticism of establishment culture was also aimed at the functioning of the artistic world. Futurism advocated a complete disregard for public and success, at least in any traditional form. The only criticism of interest to the movement was the evaluation of their work as a cultural commodity.

As an exasperated form of modernism, futurism was full of the originality and extravagance that would feature in other avant-garde movements. And indeed, according to its participants, it was not a school but a trend, a forward momentum that transcended its members and its time. It is clear, therefore, that some of its perceptions and aspirations were shared with dadaism and surrealism. However, futurism was distinct in its urge for novelty and admiration of machinery, and its envisioning of war as an appropriate form of “cleansing”: a pairing of man and machine in a spontaneous eruption of new possibilities. This fact inevitably precluded the recognition of a legacy, or even continuity, between other avant-garde projects and the futurist “new world.”

### 3.3. Destructive Dada

When dadaism emerged in 1916, the disconnectedness it advocated became part of an already-established ethos. Dadaists affirmed their intentions to break from previous forms of art and convention, by advocating spontaneity and active simplicity. The story is often told of Tristan Tzara, Jean Arp and Richard Huelsenbeck “finding” the word dada from the random sliding of a paper knife between the pages of a dictionary. Dada presented itself as the urge to disorder any established order, to destroy any previous form or formula, to laugh at all seriousness and respectability. The movement expressed an acute sense of the arbitrariness of recognition and success, as well as of the generally short duration of these phenomena. It asserted, for instance, “que notre anti-dogmatisme est aussi exclusiviste que le fonctionnaire et que nous ne sommes pas libres et crions liberté”<sup>38</sup> (Tzara *Lampisteries* 15).

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<sup>38</sup> “that our anti-dogmatism is just as exclusivist as that of the bureaucrat, that we are not free and that we proclaim freedom”



In many ways, dadaism evolved in opposition to futurism. Emerging in the middle of the First World War, and mostly amongst immigrants living or taking refuge in Switzerland, it positioned itself clearly against the conflict and as belonging to a generation that had inherited its damage. However, both movements had in common what would become some of the diffused emblems of the European avant-garde. These include contempt for past models and traditions, especially in the artistic sphere, the systematic dissemination of ideas through popular media, and the search for new forms of expression that dispense with immediate comprehensibility and, ultimately, with public recognition.

When set against futurism, perhaps the most distinguishing feature of dadaism is its self-irony. In this, the dadaists aligned themselves neither with previous nor with contemporary social trends. Dada, as they often called, could be defined as a spirit of revolt against all conformity, a hatred of systems, and a philosophy operating through spontaneity and decomposition. According to the famous formula of Raoul Hausmann, member of the German branch, “DADA is what you can make out of yourself” (Herbst), expressing the new kind of mentality that included the arts in what was seen as the search for a new ethics. For Georges Hugnet, in turn, the movement also gathered “ceux qui, par le mépris de la logique et la négation érigée en système, par le scandale et le rire dans leur attitude devant la vie et devant l’art, participèrent de cet état d’esprit visant au renversement de toutes les valeurs admises”<sup>39</sup> (Hugnet 73)

This passage reveals the new features that the disregard for past traditions acquired in dadaism. As well as a rejection of institutionalised culture and values, it was a state of mind that rejected the guidance of logic and was based on systematic negation. Tzara, in “Manifeste Dada 1918,” expresses it thus:

Que chaque homme crie: il y a un grand travail destructif, négatif, à accomplir. Balayer, nettoyer. La propreté de l'individu s'affirme après l'état de folie, de folie agressive, complète, d'un monde laissé entre les mains des bandits qui déchirent et détruisent les siècles. Sans but ni dessein, sans organisation: la folie indomptable, la décomposition.<sup>40</sup> (Tzara *Lampisteries* 33)

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<sup>39</sup> “those who, through their contempt for logic and systematic denial, through scandal and humour in their attitude to life and art, participated in this state of mind that aimed to overthrow all accepted values”

<sup>40</sup> “Let each man proclaim: there is a great negative work of destruction to be accomplished. We must sweep and clean. Affirm the cleanliness of the individual after the state of madness, aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries. With neither aim nor plan, without organization: uncontrollable madness, decomposition.”

Here, the sense of revolt and the negative work of destruction, very dear to dadaism, was amusingly paraphrased using a watchword, so fashionable in periods of war. The use of the term “cleanliness,” moreover, marked dada’s commitment to getting rid of old values, more than with establishing new ones. This activity was likened to a mad state of mind, apparently incomprehensible from the exterior, whose actors were envisioned as “bandits.” Curiously enough, Tzara’s text could fit a futurist motto if it was not for the appearance of the concept of “foolishness.” The wish to get rid of previous values through a foolish activity implied the prevention of the establishment of new ones, since such activity was developed “with neither aim nor plan.” Futurism, conversely, as seen above, positively proposed new social values.

The particularity of dada lies in its desire to abolish convention through a break with the past, considered to be a source of disappointments, but also by promoting a break with the future. More precisely, in this case, this is the future foreseen by the particular past that the movement rejects. The expressions *contre le future* (“against the future”) and *abolition du future* (“abolition of the future”) (Tzara *Lampisteries* 15, 35) appear in the context of discussion of the inevitable transience of all beliefs. They criticised the values based on a measurement of the supposed worth of human acts, the so-called great deeds capable of deliberately and systematically leading humanity towards a progressive future. The dadaist opposition to the future was therefore linked with its opposition to vanguardist “prophets.” For dadaism, an actual novel future should not be systematically investigated, since this already implied a predetermination of it. Together with its disconnectedness, what distinguished dada most strongly from previous and contemporaneous movements was its traumatic experience of the war. The ideology of progress, as defended by the futurists, was profoundly discredited. Its related promises of a positive domination in the re-establishment of equality amongst men, and fulfilment of material needs in a near and reachable future were likewise rejected.

In sum, the dadaist movement sought, on various levels, to be a shock to the European culture of the time. Its open hostility to the established social order was a consequence of the carnage of war. In complete opposition to the futurist’s praise for technical development, dada proposed an absolute derogation of progressive values. The interwar period would make the dadaist tone even more strident. Surrealism was at the same time the continuation and the transformation of dada’s cry for suspicion, destruction and illogicality.

### 3.4. Surrealism and the Enlarged Reality

The first issues of the magazine *Littérature* — edited by André Breton, Louis Aragon and Philippe Soupault from 1919 to 1924 — already proclaim the intention to revisit certain traditional values, as well as to question the understanding of the concept of artistic creation (Nadeau 27). Specifically, they promote the appreciation of new trends in the field that gives the periodical its name. In 1920, however, the work was somewhat derailed by the arrival of Tzara in Paris. Tzara began to steer the course of *Littérature* towards dadaist precepts. The Parisian dada was born, and it gave a home to the restless tendencies that were already animating the group. The divergences between dada and the earlier association, however, would soon emerge.

As soon as 1921, Breton evinced a concern with the establishment of more “efficient” and less anarchic ways of approaching the issues occupying the movement (Nadeau 31). To some extent, the destructive character of dada created a limitation for its participants. As Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes explains, surrealism came to be “une solution intelligente au drame interne du mouvement dada”<sup>41</sup> (qtd. in Fauchereau 24). Instead of disregarding the constituted forms of art in general, as dadaism proposed, Breton and his friends intended to attack the official representatives of contemporary cultural expression, incarnated by those they saw to have betrayed “la cause de l’esprit et de l’homme”<sup>42</sup> (Nadeau 31).

Remarkably, the break between the two movements first became apparent through an event that took the form of a trial, that is *Le Procès Barrès*.<sup>43</sup> In this, while the emerging surrealist movement tasked itself with judging those who had denigrated or prevented the development of a free spirit in France, the dadaists demonstrated no faith in justice or judgment at all, even their own a burlesque representation of justice. Dadaists saw themselves as no better than those being judged, all humans ultimately “striving for the same piece of bread.” From such discrepancies it is clear that the surrealists intended to be taken seriously, while the dadaists retained a stance of permanent defiance and contempt, including towards themselves.

It was in 1922 that a formal rupture took place. The new group openly intended to “construct from destruction,” without however abandoning their corrosive criticism of the culture surrounding them. After the break, *Littérature* continued to be published until 1924,

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<sup>41</sup> “an intelligent solution to the internal drama of dadaism”

<sup>42</sup> “the cause of the spirit and of man”

<sup>43</sup> For more, please see Fauchereau 15-24.

giving voice to the new current. It claimed a nearly forgotten lineage of French poets as predecessors, as well as some of the darker products of romanticism. In this regard the latter is considered more as a *Weltanschauung* (“world-view”) — that formulated, according to Michael Löwy, a cultural criticism of modern capitalist civilisation (*Incêndio* 18) — than as a literary movement. On the other hand, as Umberto Eco (95) suggests, the twentieth-century avant-garde movements also defied the Romantic idea of genius and “creation from nothingness,” while making use of techniques such as collage, and, one could add, automatic writing. Yet the surrealists made use of these texts to praise the obscure, strange and mysterious aspects of experience. The surrealist movement, therefore, had as a starting point the acknowledgment of a much larger reality than that one perceived by consciousness.

Fascinated by the world of reverie as revealed by Freud, the surrealists intended to live and encourage the experience of the entire and complete man, who finally displayed his obscurities in the open. The means of achieving this experience, however, was not predetermined. According to Nadeau, it could be summarised thus: “laisser s’exprimer ‘l’hôte inconnu’ dans sa profondeur, dans sa totalité, automatiquement”<sup>44</sup> (17). In this sense, the Freudian concept of the unconscious, i.e. the rediscovered attributes of the “unknown host,” paved the way for the investigation of a whole new dimension of the psyche, one that the surrealists, at this point, saw as an important weapon in their fight against the reigning logic. Freud was of course not alone in exploring this new perspective. Discoveries taking place in other fields of knowledge, most notably physics, also helped create an atmosphere of suspicion towards traditional notions of sense and causality. The unstable economic and political situation in interwar Europe also played a part.

It is important to note that the search for *l’homme entière* (“the entire man”) had already begun much earlier. From 1919, before Tzara’s arrival in Paris, immersed in an atmosphere of distrust of rationality, the group around *Littérature* had been undertaking collective experiments in which altered states of consciousness were provoked. They also visited mediums and clairvoyants, in blatant defiance of the scientific order of the day. These experiments were attempts to achieve the fusion of action and reverie they envisioned as the ultimate *surréalité*. In the flux of words and partial phrases that emerged in such states, they noticed surprising meanings, which they interpreted as coming from unexplored and purer parts of the mind.

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<sup>44</sup> “let the ‘unknown host’ express itself, in its depth, in its entirety, automatically”

These were the first experiments with automatism, a technique the surrealists privileged over other forms of expression. A mode intended to follow the speed of thinking as it emerges, automatism sought the release of a primitive and emotional “poetry” free from the rational constructs of culture. This rejection of the contents dictated by convention, along with the disregard for aesthetics and morals, aligned surrealism with other avant-garde movements. What strongly distinguished it from them, however, was its intention to go beyond the boundaries of reason, in the search for an absolute reality as an alternative to the modern world. In addition, surrealists defined their common sensibility as a certain state of fury. Their concern, at least during the first years of activity, was with the life of the spirit, and the creation of open, non-conformist ways of developing its possibilities.

After the break with dadaism, the surrealist group was formally founded. Breton, by dint of his personal charisma and intellectual force, could be said to have been its centre. As well as the surrealists manifestos, published in 1924 and 1930,<sup>45</sup> the group expressed its vision through both the *Bureau des Recherches Surréalistes* (“Bureau of Surrealist Research”) and the periodical *La Révolution Surréaliste*. The first manifesto, in particular, marked the irruption of surrealism on the avant-garde scene, as well as promptly distinguished its singular nature, which combined a systematic character with obscure spiritual activities.

### 3.5. “Manifeste du Surréalisme,” 1924.

“L’homme, ce rêveur définitif, de jour en jour plus mécontent de son sort, fait avec peine le tour des objets dont il a été amené à faire usage, et que lui a livrés sa nonchalance, ou son effort”<sup>46</sup> (Breton *Manifestes* 13). The first “Manifeste du Surréalisme” opens thus, picturing man as a dissatisfied figure, placed amongst objects he is constrained to make use of, and compelled to make an effort to try his chance in life. This man is described as being attuned to his adventures and misfortunes, but affected by neither regret nor bad conscience. If he has any lucidity, Breton alleges in the manifesto, it is in thinking of his childhood. This part of life, destroyed as it may be, retains its attractiveness in adulthood. In infancy, man can

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<sup>45</sup> The short document “Prolégomènes à une Troisième Manifeste du Surréalisme ou Non,” published in 1942, is not analysed here. It is more often interpreted as an assessment of the later movement than as a statement of a new direction. For more, please see Breton (*Manifestes* 149-62).

<sup>46</sup> “Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use, objects that his nonchalance has brought his way, or that he has earned through his own efforts.”

find an experience free from severity, in which “les pires conditions matérielles sont excellentes”<sup>47</sup> (*Manifestes* 14).

By growing up, man is forced to abandon part of the territory he once dreamed of conquering. Life imposes restrictions on him to which he yields. For Breton, the faculty of imagination in particular suffers from such limitations. It gradually becomes merely a utilitarian instrument, leaving man to his own destiny. At times, he will try to rediscover his creative abilities, for instance when in love. He then experiences a sense of expropriation of his own life, which is patent in his inability to respond to a spiritual urge because his everyday experience has become completely focussed on practical achievements.

Breton declares: “chère imagination, ce que j’aime surtout en toi, c’est que tu ne pardonnes pas”<sup>48</sup> (*Manifestes* 14). Neglect of the imaginative ability leads to problems in accessing it, meaning it is not fully available to man throughout his life. As well as being conceived of as precious, the imagination is also linked to the concept of freedom, which appears in the manifesto as the expression of Breton’s “seule aspiration légitime”<sup>49</sup> (*Manifestes* 14). He identifies the pleasures bestowed by the imagination on insane people, for instance, as the result of their ability to immerse themselves in it. They are able to experience a complete disregard for criticism and opinion from the external world, and a relative indifference towards corrupt behaviours directed towards them, due to the fact that they live permanently within their delusions and hallucinations.

This is the liberty espoused by the manifesto: indifference to the moral behaviour and dictates of society, together with an enjoyment of the pleasures of imagination. A realistic attitude is described by Breton in strictly negative terms. He critiques the attention given to the empty, weak moments of life, the ultimate expression of this being modern novels. According to Breton, these writings display “l’intraitable manie qui consiste à ramener l’inconnu au connu, au classable”<sup>50</sup> (*Manifestes* 19). The detailing and explanations offered by the novel are responsible for a reduction in force of the act the author intended to transmit. According to the manifesto, the source of life lies in the pure disinterested act, not in its rationalisation.

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<sup>47</sup> “the worst material conditions are excellent”

<sup>48</sup> “beloved imagination, what I like most in you is your unsparing quality”

<sup>49</sup> “only legitimate ambition”

<sup>50</sup> “the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable”

Breton professes: “nous vivons encore sur le règne de la logique”<sup>51</sup> (*Manifestes* 19). In this reign, experience itself is limited by the focus on immediate utility, which does not allow for the exploration of unexpected aspects of life. The pattern of explication seen in novels allows no place for the unknown, elusive or fleeting aspects of human experience. The revelation of the unconscious by Freud is announced in this context as the act of *bringing to light* the most important part of intellectual life. Breton suggests that “l’imagination est peut-être sur le point de reprendre ses droits”<sup>52</sup> (*Manifestes* 20). As his metaphors suggest, he seeks the exposure of the unconscious domain. The means of achieving this are at this point unclear, but have been the subject of exploration by both poets and sages.

One route is known, however; that explored by Freud, the dimension of dreams. According to Breton, there is no reason why one should attribute more certainty to waking reality than to dreams, or to make it a privileged object for the exploration of different layers of experience. “Selon toute apparence le rêve est continu et porte trace d’organisation. Seule la mémoire s’arroge le droit d’y faire des coupures.”<sup>53</sup> (*Manifestes* 21). At the same time, “nous n’avons à tout instant des réalités qu’une figuration distincte, dont la coordination est affaire de volonté”<sup>54</sup> (*Manifestes* 21-2). Breton points to the fragmentary character of both reality and dream, raising the dream to the level of an experience capable of containing a truth about life, at least to the same degree that as consciousness can.

It is not only within dreams or within consciousness that the issue of continuity-discontinuity is at stake. Breton is also aware of the apparent exclusiveness of these two dimensions: reality becomes submerged and inaccessible to memory whilst one is dreaming; the dream quickly dissolves on waking. Freud, as mentioned above, recognises the emergence of fragments of reality in dreams, while the opposite cannot be said to be the case, at least not in the strict sense of dreams taking place whilst one is awake, with the particular exception of daydreaming (*Dreams* 200). Breton, however, seems to situate the dream within a large range of imaginative activities, which can be in full operation during the day, alongside consciousness.

Analysing waking life, Breton notes that the stability and balance traditionally identified with it are relative. The spirit only rarely expresses itself and when it does, this is

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<sup>51</sup> “we are still living under the reign of logic”

<sup>52</sup> “imagination is perhaps on the point of reclaiming its rights”

<sup>53</sup> “Within the limits where they operate (or are thought to operate) dreams give every evidence of being continuous and show signs of organization. Memory alone arrogates to itself the right to excerpt from dreams.”

<sup>54</sup> “at any given moment we have only a distinct notion of realities, the coordination of which is a question of will”

commonly the result of an effect something else has had on it. For Breton, there is no guarantee that this effect, usually attributed to mere subjectivity or to an extrinsic cause such as destiny, is not connected to the world of dreams. In fact, Breton questions the very reason that “confère au rêve cette allure naturelle, me fait accueillir sans réserves une foule d’épisodes don’t l’étrangeté à l’heure où j’écris me foudroierait?”<sup>55</sup> (*Manifestes* 24). In other words, the dream might hold a certainty that is only apparently when fully present in consciousness. Certainty, in any case, should not be attributed only to events and feelings that take place during waking life.

Breton believes that developing a collective awareness of dreams, beginning with the registering of prominent elements in them, can contribute to a better appreciation of their importance, as well of as the values they embody, which seem to bear little relation to those of consciousness. It is in this context that Breton first uses the word that forms the title of the manifesto and the movement it describes: “je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*, si l’on peut ainsi dire”<sup>56</sup> (*Manifestes* 24). He seeks the resolution of the discontinuity between the two states of dream and reality, through the promotion of an absolute reality that can include both dimensions in a new form. The concept of the *merveilleux* (“marvellous”) becomes a kind of touchstone for the activities and analysis of the surrealists, since it encompasses the world of dreams as well as the whole spectrum of imagination in reality.

As an example of a work fully engaged with the marvellous, Breton offers the novel *The Monk*, by English novelist and dramatist Matthew G. Lewis. Originally published in 1796 and translated by Artaud in 1931, it is described as a piece infused with a passion for eternity, and filled with “ce qui de l’esprit aspire à quitter le sol”<sup>57</sup> (*Manifestes* 25). Representations of temptation and enchantment, for instance, feature in the book not as extraordinary absurdities, but as natural elements of life, part of the activities of a critical spirit. This referencing of previous works of literature forms part of Breton’s efforts to situate surrealism within the historical development of a certain current of sensibility, which appears in literary writings as well as in other works of art, and predates the emergence of the movement itself. Surrealism, therefore, is not to be seen as one more avant-garde trend

<sup>55</sup> “makes dreams seem so natural, and allows me to welcome unreservedly a welter of episodes so strange that they could confound me now as I write?”

<sup>56</sup> “I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak”

<sup>57</sup> “what in the spirit aspires to leave the ground”



intending to break with tradition. Its claim to a continuity with the works from previous epochs is meant to reinforce its validity. *The Monk* is an example of one of its major concurrent “influences,” that of romanticism.

Breton highlights the existence of the marvellous character claimed by surrealism at different points in time, pointing out that it has not been homogeneous:

Le merveilleux n'est pas le même à toutes les époques; il participe obscurément d'une sorte de révélation générale don't le détail seul nous parvient: ce sont les *ruines* romantiques, le *mannequin* moderne ou tout autre symbole propre à remuer la sensibilité humaine durant un temps.<sup>58</sup>

(*Manifestes* 26)

The relics of the affections of previous eras, the effects of an on-going current of disquietude, the role of ecstasy and dream through human history; all of these are elements also claimed by surrealism as part of the backdrop to its own productions, and to its perspective on modernity. The members of the movement at the time are presented by Breton through a scenario that combines the ruins of an ancient castle with the comforts of modern life, and merges his own daydreams with the visions of actual people, presented simply as *mes amis* (“my friends”). Possible objections to this format are anticipated by Breton: in fact he does not live in a castle, but at Fontaine street in Paris. He considers the category of poetic lie, and replies to his own counter-arguments: “c’est vraiment à notre fantaisie que nous vivons, *quand nous y sommes*”<sup>59</sup> (*Manifestes* 28).

Another version of this precept would read: when one is *actually* living, one is living inside fantasies. The practice of poetry, according to Breton, should be a well-informed guide to such a life. That is, not a vacuous act of lyric expression, but a movement engendered by constant creation within the domain of poetic imagination. For the surrealists, as discussed above, one of the paths leading to this realm is available in situations freed from extrinsic influences, such as the state of being close to sleep. Breton testifies to having himself experienced the organic generation of distinct phrases while in such a state. They appear to arrive “from nowhere,” and are usually followed by a succession of sentences expressed in a rhythm resembling *la pensée parlée* (“the spoken thought”). In another comparison, Breton associates such manifestations with the monologue endorsed by psychoanalysis, a discourse

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<sup>58</sup> “The marvelous is not the same in every period of history: it partakes in some obscure way of a sort of general revelation only the fragments of which come down to us: they are the romantic *ruines*, the modern *mannequin*, or any other symbol capable of affecting the human sensibility for a period of time.”

<sup>59</sup> “it is really is our imagination that we live, *when we are in it*”

“sur lequel l’esprit critique du sujet ne fasse porter aucun jugement, qui ne s’embarrasse, par suite, d’aucune réticence”<sup>60</sup> (*Manifestes* 33). To live the poetic life of immersive and continuous fantasy, therefore, is to live outside the world of judgement, exempt from censure, as if in a monologue of free association. As will become apparent, the contempt for literariness also finds unexpected expression here.

To contextualise the possibility of spontaneous poetry, Breton concludes: “la vitesse de la pensée n’est pas supérieure à celle de la parole”<sup>61</sup> (*Manifestes* 33). One could, in principle, write and express in words the precise operation of thought. At the core of the surrealist exploration of altered states of consciousness is a conception of the pure spirit, which, through its own actions, can be captured, in disinterested, reflective situations. The profusion of words and images produced through these activities is related to the more philosophical act of “céder la place à tout ce qu’il y a d’admissible, de légitime au monde”<sup>62</sup> (*Manifestes* 35). Neither *l’écriture de la pensée* (“the writing of thought”) nor *la pensée parlée* (“the spoken thought”) are free from impurity, however. This can include defects in construction, repetitions and clichés. Breton attributes these “weaknesses” to suggestions and distractions coming from outside thought itself, a fact that does not prevent the particular emotion or the picturesque features of its wordy formations from taking place, nor from convincing the surrealists of the existence of a poetic vein outside conscious life.

The antecedents of such forms can be located within types of poetic production that had been explored before the emergence of surrealism. Breton’s poetry, for instance, was concerned with giving brief accounts of events in the form of recipes, cuttings and advertising, as well as with exposing the blank space between the lines by filling it with tangential words. If, on the one hand, these techniques had much in common with the products of dadaism, on the other hand they were related to a movement that took place in the poetic field itself. This was precipitated by Guillaume Apollinaire, a poet whose innovative work greatly influenced the avant-garde movements. Apollinaire is from whom the term *surréalisme* was taken.

Breton having claimed the right to use the term surrealism in the particular sense described above, the movement’s famous definition in the manifesto reads as follows:

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<sup>60</sup> “without any intervention on the part of the critical faculties, a monologue consequently unencumbered by the slightest inhibition”

<sup>61</sup> “the speed of thought is no greater than the speed of speech”

<sup>62</sup> “give way to everything that is admissible, everything legitimate in the world”

SURRÉALISME, n.m. Automatismes psychiques purs par lesquels on se propose d'exprimer, soit verbalement, soit par écrit, soit de toute autre manière, le fonctionnement réel de la pensée. Dictée de la pensée, en l'absence de tout contrôle exercé par la raison, en dehors de toute préoccupation esthétique ou morale.<sup>63</sup> (Breton *Manifestes* 36)

The term *automatisme* refers to this mode of production taking place at the boundaries of consciousness, which can be expressed through different means. The absence of rational control and the lack of preoccupation with aesthetic concerns also form part of this practical definition, followed by an assertion of a fundamental belief in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought, in “la réalité supérieure de certaines formes de association négligées jusqu’à lui”<sup>64</sup> (*Manifestes* 36). The definition of surrealism is of a psychic activity occupied with the expressions of the spirit, particularly when detached from external determinations.

Breton lists public figures who, in one way or another, though never definitively, were surrealists before the movement’s emergence, declaring them the bastions of a spiritual trend now being resumed through the movement. Among them are the writers Lautréamont, Sade, Poe, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Jarry, Swift, Rabbe and Roussel, and the artists Picasso, Chirico, Picabia and Duchamp (*Manifest* 37-8). The contemporary surrealists claim to be no more than human recording devices: they have no talent in the literary sense, but serve as receptacles for the dictation of thoughts. The result of such availability is described by Breton as the production of strong unexpected images, perhaps the best emblems of the contents of the spirit, which might be transposed to words or into any other plastic representation.

This activity relies on the inexhaustible nature of thought. Or, according to Breton, “à chaque seconde il est une phrase étrangère à notre pensée consciente qui ne demande qu’à s’extérioriser”<sup>65</sup> (*Manifestes* 41). The strangeness of the thought formations should not be ordered or corrected by consciousness, since the invisible connections amongst them are part of the mysterious operations of the spirit. At the same time, surrealistic activity requires certain simplicity, that is, a disinterest in any supposed personal ability that allows complete passivity in relation to one’s own thought creations. It is through the atmosphere created in

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<sup>63</sup> “SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express — verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner — the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”

<sup>64</sup> “the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations”

<sup>65</sup> “every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness, which is simply crying out to be heard”

such a state that “l’esprit se convainc peu à peu de la réalité suprême de ces images”<sup>66</sup> (*Manifestes* 49), an effect which leads to an enlarged awareness of reality. Breton reminds us of a formula devised by the German romanticist Novalis, according to which an ideal series of events runs in parallel with actual events, allowing for the possible modification of particular facts as you go along (*Manifestes* 51).

One example of this “supplementing” of the actual experience is related to childhood, and helps to clarify Breton’s assertion that singular features of infancy can be recovered in adult life. In his words: “l’esprit qui plonge dans le surréalisme revit avec exaltation la meilleure part de son enfance”<sup>67</sup> (*Manifestes* 52). Childhood is considered by the surrealists to be of great fecundity, and close to what they call *la vraie vie* (“real life”). It is the time “où tout concourait cependant à la possession efficace, et sans aléas, de soi-même”<sup>68</sup> (*Manifestes* 52). The unusual combinations arising in surrealistic images can also be correlated with the state of childhood, in which genuine horror is commonly accompanied by thrill, and lurid monsters incarnate marvellous figures of thought. The effective possession of oneself, in this sense, does not come with rational thinking, but instead with the fearless exploration of one’s imagination.

Surrealistic assemblages of different contents, whether in the form of words or images, are often humorous. They include the instant jokes brought up by the association of titles and fragments of titles cut from newspapers (Breton *Manifestes* 54-6). The comic features that emerge through these unexpected lyrical juxtapositions draw their power from a questioning of the facts of everyday life through rearranging them, showing the questionable relevance of such tacitly accepted forms of communication. Another part of the surrealistic gesture consists of revealing the multiple facets of things, as a means of pointing to a much broader existence within the existence we know of. It exposes the profession of abundant contents that are not necessarily or usually perceived, but that nevertheless exist.

Since the movement’s intention is not merely to question reality, but to question the way in which it is represented, the refusal of dogmatism runs parallel to the surrealist commitment to invention, as well as to the minimal attention it devotes to consciousness. According to Briony Fer, surrealism’s aim above all is to work “*from the point of view* of the unconscious” (176). Considering the ambiguous nature of the latter, surrealist experiments are at constant risk of being high jacked either by incomprehensibility or by convention.

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<sup>66</sup> “the spirit gradually becomes convinced of the supreme reality of these images”

<sup>67</sup> “the spirit which plunges into surrealism relives with glowing excitement the best part of its childhood”

<sup>68</sup> “where everything nevertheless conspires to bring about the effective, risk-free possession of oneself”

However, in its references to childhood and to the power of dreams, the first manifesto expresses a profound admiration for situations in which life is exempt from the control of rationality and conscious thinking. In this sense, infancy is generally understood in the same terms in which Freud describes it in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that is, as the period in which instinctual impulses dominate and imaginative powers find almost no restriction (Freud *Dreams* 547). Equally compelling to the surrealists are the pervasiveness of fantasies, the uncanny truth coming from dreams, the marvellous life of the spirit; all of these notions are central to the Freudian approach to the unconscious.

While the idea of pure and automatic psychic activity might seem to have been inspired by this same source, for Freud, the life of the spirit in its totality cannot be accessed. The attempt of surrealists to envision a resolution between the unconscious life and the material one could not be more distant from the perspective of Freud. According to the latter, any attempt at voluntarily excogitating the effects of the unconscious is a contradiction in terms, since all unconscious formations would suffer the interference of censorship (*Dreams* 166). The surrealist gesture intends to repeat that performed by Freud some decades before, of allowing hideous contents to come to light. However, it does this by extrapolating what in Freud's own theory had remained obscure, the unconscious "in its pure form."

The commitment of surrealism to breaking with rationality aligns it with other bodies of thought, beyond those evoked by psychoanalysis. The movement's attraction to mysticism and occultism can be described as another facet of this commitment. As the manifesto tells us: "sous couleur de civilisation, sous prétexte de progrès, on est parvenu à bannir de l'esprit tout ce qui se peut taxer à tort ou à raison de superstition, de chimère; à proscrire tout mode de recherche de la vérité qui n'est pas conforme à l'usage"<sup>69</sup> (*Manifestes* 20). Curiously, this extract echoes Freudian claims about the correctness of popular and ancestral knowledge on dreams, which were completely disregarded by modern science (Freud *Dreams* 124-5).

As detailed in the previous chapter, Freud integrates such marginal contents into his own scientific discourse. Surrealism seems to be attempting the same in relation to occult practices, by engendering a discourse that is also self-instituting. However, while Freud focuses on getting his work accepted by a scientific community, and therefore promotes the submission of popular culture to the test of science, the surrealists seek the establishment of enlarged perception of reality, of which the unconscious, to some extent stripped of its

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<sup>69</sup> "under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which does not conform with accepted practices"

scientific character, is an important source. Accordingly, Breton closes the first manifesto with the following words: “C’est vivre et cesser de vivre qui sont des solutions imaginaires. L’existence est ailleurs.”<sup>70</sup> (*Manifestes* 60). To live in this *other* existence, unconcerned with questions of living and dying, and, therefore, with rationality and necessity, is the critical aim of surrealism in its first manifesto.

### 3.6. The Second Surrealist Manifesto, 1930

Six years after the “Manifeste du Surréalisme” had appeared, a second manifesto emerged, informed by the mood of the time leading up to the Second World War. Much had changed in the social milieu since 1924, and also within the surrealist group, with early experiences having given way to accomplishments. Many surrealist writings had by then been published, and the magazine *La Revolution Surréaliste* was appearing periodically. At the same time, the group had acknowledged the existence of surrealist painting. Its public activities had been marked by scandals, in which the polemic opinions of the members took centre stage.

In accordance with the first manifesto, the years following 1924 saw the so-called surrealist revolution being explicitly located in the field of ideas, beyond political battles. The following excerpt from an internal document, dated 1925, is exemplary: “la réalité immédiate de la révolution surréaliste n’est pas tellement de changer quoi que ce soit à l’ordre physique et apparent des choses que de créer un mouvement dans les esprits”<sup>71</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 155). The movement defined its goal as that of creating a new kind of mysticism, a new order of thinking, a collective myth. According to Nadeau (71), the use of such terms exposes the intention of surrealism to move towards concrete matters, these being expressed, however, through the form of myth.

The Moroccan War contributed to a change in orientation. In 1925, in order to form a front of support for the rebels, the surrealists aligned themselves with communists and other sympathiser groups. From these meetings, issues of political economy began to enter the discourse of surrealism. The spiritual revolution, therefore, started to take the form of a social revolution, while the initial idealism of the movement's precepts was gradually replaced by dialectical materialism (Nadeau 86). Through Breton’s particular admiration for the Russian

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<sup>70</sup> “It is living and ceasing to live that are imaginary solutions. Existence is elsewhere.”

<sup>71</sup> “the immediate reality of the surrealist revolution is not so much in changing anything related to the physical and apparent order of things, as to create a movement in men’s minds”

revolutionary Leon Trotsky, surrealism manifested its intention to conceive of revolution solely in the form of economic and social transformation. Russia was incorporated into the pre-existing admiration of the surrealists for the Orient.

In 1927, the movement allied itself to the French Communist Party without however giving up its status of a separate group. This move resulted in the expulsion of some of its most important members, such as Artaud, Soupault and Naville. In the political sphere, the superficial post-war euphoria was definitively over, and states were resuming conflictual dynamics. The “Seconde Manifeste du Surréalisme” attempted to deal with this switch in the movement’s revolutionary perspective, while at the same time reinforcing some of the trends present from its inception.

Interestingly, the manifesto opens with the reproduction of an extract from the *Journal de l’Aliénation Mentale* (“Journal of Mental Alienation”), in which the psychiatrist Paul Abély calls on his colleagues to react to what he defines as a *danger exogène* (“exogenous hazard”) to the psychiatric practice. This refers specifically to a passage from Breton’s novel *Nadja* (1928), in which the author offers a suggestion to the insane: to make use of any phase of remission to kill people from the psychiatric service, preferably doctors. After blaming the psychiatrists’ own passivity for the proliferation of such “insolences,” Abély invokes society’s responsibility to protect these professionals, precisely from what they supposedly protect society from, that is the mentally ill: “cette société semble oublier quelquefois la réciprocité des ces devoirs”<sup>72</sup> (Abély qtd. in Breton *Manifestes* 69). The piece is accordingly titled “Légitime Défense.”

This open “attack” coming from the psychiatric profession is followed in the manifesto by a discussion between a group of psychiatrists, reproduced by Breton. Here the group gives a verbose definition of surrealism as part of the framework of European weaknesses. The comic seriousness of these assertions exposes the disturbance caused by surrealism in fields that should not, in principle, be concerned by its activities. In response to this, Breton re-situates the movement’s goal as the attempt to provoke, intellectually as well as morally, “une *crise de conscience* de l’espèce la plus générale et la plus grave”<sup>73</sup> (*Manifestes* 72).

In other words, surrealism should provoke the revelation of artificially fixed dichotomies — those forming the basis of psychiatric assumptions, for instance — which are

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<sup>72</sup> “this society seems at times to forget the reciprocity of these duties”

<sup>73</sup> “a *crisis of conscience* of the most general and serious kind”

responsible for the propagation of impoverished ideas about the means of revolution. The fact that all dichotomies have a point of indiscernibility provides the overlap between the movement's fight for a generalised revolution and the Freudian notion of the unconscious. It is only following the determination of the point of encounter, at which all divergences coincide and where contraries become the same, that various social structures lose their meaning. It is here that the quest for a positive social form should begin.

In times of desperation, as Breton underlined in the Preface to the manifesto,<sup>74</sup> the themes of indocility, revolt and violence must be approached unambiguously. From its defence of the act of randomly shooting into the crowd, to its strong criticism of bourgeois values, the second manifesto bears the traces of the nervousness with which the movement faced the horizon of the new "catastrophe" represented by the Second World War. Breton justifies the harsh judgment meted out to surrealism's antecedents, as well as the criticism of its former members, as the expression of intransigence "à l'égard d'un appareil de conservation sociale"<sup>75</sup> (*Manifestes* 77). On this concern, he states:

Tout est à faire, tous les moyens doivent être bons à employer pour ruiner les idées de *famille*, de *patrie*, de *religion*. La position surréaliste a beau être, sous ce rapport, assez connue, encore faut-il qu'on sache qu'elle ne comporte pas d'accommodements.<sup>76</sup> (*Manifestes* 77-8)

It is in relation to this impossibility of "accommodation" or flexibility that the case of expelled members is discussed.

Artaud, who had been part of the surrealist movement since 1924, having directed the *Bureau des Recherches Surréalistes* and participated extensively in the group's activities and publications, is the first object of Breton's attack in the manifesto. Breton evokes the occasion on which the surrealists protested Artaud's staging of a play by Strindberg, claiming, amongst other things, that it had been motivated by reasons other than the artistic. At the time, the surrealists professed to fight "sous toutes leurs formes l'indifférence poétique, la distraction de l'art ... la spéculation pure"<sup>77</sup> (*Manifestes* 78). In fact, it seems that the reason behind Artaud's expulsion had more to do with his defense of the idea that the

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<sup>74</sup> Written in 1946, the preface deals with the period in which the second manifesto was published, around 1930. See Breton *Manifestes* 63-5.

<sup>75</sup> "concerning an apparatus of social preservation"

<sup>76</sup> "Everything remains to be done, every means must be worth trying, in order to lay waste to the ideas of *family*, *country*, *religion*. No matter how well known the surrealist position may be. With respect to this matter, still, it must be stressed that on this point there is no room for compromise."

<sup>77</sup> "in whatever form they may appear, poetic indifference, the distraction of art ... the pure speculation"



revolution should be conceived in purely spiritual terms, than with any artistic quarrel. The details of Artaud's expulsion being related elsewhere,<sup>78</sup> its prominence in the manifesto is surprising. Some lines from Artaud himself, claiming a lack of honour on the part of the surrealists, are quoted and reacted against. The recording of such apparently petty details attests to the high esteem in which Artaud and Breton held each other, and the degree to which they were personally affected by the rupture. The only other response from an excluded member quoted in the manifesto is that of Soupault (Breton *Manifestes* 83).

A derogatory tone characterises this whole section of the document. It enumerates different former members, together with their misdeeds, all of which are described as being no longer part of surrealism. The criticism inflicted of them, as mentioned above, relates largely to the recent and important "addition" made to the surrealist movement, described by Breton as the deepening of existing precepts, namely, the political direction taken by surrealism and its embracing of communism.

Breton opens this section of the manifesto with praise for the contributions of thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Hartmann and Freud to the general understanding of humanity, then goes on to make the following statement: "je pense qu'on ne se étonnera pas de voir le surréalisme, chemin faisant, s'appliquer à autre chose qu'à la résolution d'un problème psychologique, si intéressant soit-il"<sup>79</sup> (*Manifestes* 88). Although the movement considers its application to psychological matters to have been a fruitful trajectory, Breton feels that the time for something else has arrived. A question is posed in the second manifesto concerning the social regime, and whether this regime should be accepted or rejected. This question guides the different analyses that emerge in the later sections of the text, including the assessment of surrealism itself.

In theoretical terms, Breton envisions the general tendency of surrealism as analogous to the tendency of historical materialism. That is, the starting point of both is the *avortement colossal* ("colossal abortion") undertaken by the Hegelian system, namely the negation of the disbelief in the material world promoted by idealism. In this sense, materialism is the negation of a negation, a movement towards a concrete understanding of reality and history. What surrealism intends to contribute to this vision is "de lui fournir des possibilités de

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<sup>78</sup> In the pamphlet *Au Grand Jour* (1927), signed by Breton and others. This theme is approached in detail below, in the pages 152-9 and 169-79.

<sup>79</sup> "I don't think it would be surprising to see surrealism, in time, applied to something other than the solving of a psychological problem, as interesting as that may be"

application nullement concurrentes dans le domaine conscient”<sup>80</sup> (*Manifestes* 89). More precisely, it aims to approach with the problems of love, dreams, insanity, art and religion through the use of a dialectic method.

The passionate discrediting of the former members of the surrealist movement is extended, in the subsequent pages of the manifesto, to the members of the French Communist Party and the intellectuals surrounding them. It is a response to the contempt they directed towards the surrealists, which is described by Breton as transient in relation to the actual revolution, the result of the selfish aspirations of some individuals. He attributes their mediocre acts “bien plutôt dans une perte progressive de conscience que dans l’explosion d’une raison soudaine”<sup>81</sup> (*Manifestes* 94). Surrealism is described as the agent of a form of *contrôle des idées* (“control of ideas”), in the absence of which such intellectuals would be free to give expression to their latent individual ambition. Here the negative connotation given to the expression *perte de conscience* (“loss of consciousness”) displays the new direction taken by surrealism in relation to consciousness as a result of its adherence to the principles of historical materialism. Becoming aware of one’s position within the capitalist process of production, i.e. *la prise de conscience de classe*, is an important value for the communist revolution. The surrealists believe that a certain level of idea control is necessary to prevent individual needs from overshadowing collective interests. In this context, a concept such as “loss of consciousness” can only be negative, despite the group having used similar phrases with a positive connotation in the past.

The surrealists go on to assign themselves an avant-gardist role, this time in relation to the proletariat, that is, according to the classic definition, those who do not own their means of production, but have to sell their labour power to survive (Marx and Engels 19). This position can be inferred from statements such as the following: “notre intervention ... ne tend qu’à mettre en garde les esprits sérieux contre un petit nombre d’individus que, par expérience, nous savons être des niais, des fumistes ou des intrigants mais, de toute manière, des êtres révolutionnairement malintentionés”<sup>82</sup> (*Manifestes* 99-100). By assuming the role of guide, the surrealist movement repeats, on a smaller scale, the founding intention of communist political parties. According to Lukács (40), the Party structure is the bearer of the proletariat’s class consciousness, as well as of the consciousness of its historical vocation.

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<sup>80</sup> “to provide opportunities for application that have no correspondence in the conscious field”

<sup>81</sup> “rather to a loss of consciousness than to a sudden outburst of reason”

<sup>82</sup> “our intervention ... only intends to warn serious minds against a small number of individuals who, from experience, we know to be fools, phonies or plotters, in any case, persons malicious to the revolution”

Not as an “organisational” structure, however, but in the sense that this consciousness, through articulating its demands, creates a new reality, that of the Party. This guiding role was however necessarily limited by the bourgeois background of most of the intellectuals of the pre-revolutionary period, which made them unable to relate to the aspirations of the proletarian class. In relation to this, Breton asserts, with reference to Trotsky,<sup>83</sup> that the notion of a “proletarian culture” can only be grasped through analogies and in terms of an antithesis to the bourgeois establishment, for the reason that such a culture does not yet exist. The limitations of the guiding role were therefore quite perceptible, even to the surrealists.

On the subject of the impossibility of discerning, a priori, between revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forces, the manifesto interestingly proposes a return to the original surrealist investigations, since, it claims, the problems of social action are no different from “un problème plus général que le surréalisme s’est mis en devoir de soulever et qui est *celui de l’expression humaine sous toutes ses formes*”<sup>84</sup> (*Manifestes* 101). In other words, surrealism envisions its revolutionary task as that of dealing with the problem of language. Breton points to the interesting, but so far rather timid, experiments in the rampage of words promoted by dada and by surrealism itself. The effects of these experiments include upheaval in traditional poetic value-systems and the destruction of the illusion of tacit understanding. Despite its new engagement with communism, therefore, surrealism surprisingly judges there to be no need for it to review the methods it has used so far.

Furthermore, according to Breton, this “marxist form” of surrealism “n’entend pas faire bon marché de la critique freudienne des idées”<sup>85</sup> (*Manifestes* 109). Instead it celebrates “la donné freudienne”: the important contribution of Freud to the critique of the dominance of rational thinking. That is, whilst adhering to the marxist discourse, which praises, perhaps above all, awareness of the material conditions of existence, Breton does not discard the critique of pure rationality. It is important to notice in this context that the marxist notion of consciousness corresponds neither to a psychological nor to an empirically measureable one. In fact, according to Lukács, “regarded abstractly and formally, class consciousness implies a class-conditioned unconsciousness of one’s own socio-historical and economic condition” (*History* 52). That is to say, it implies the “imputation” of reactions to a particular position in the process of production; the thoughts men “would have in a particular situation if they were

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<sup>83</sup> Marx and Engels also go on to be frequently mentioned in the second manifesto, particularly through quotations from the latter.

<sup>84</sup> “a more general problem that surrealism has set out to address; that of *human expression in all its forms*”

<sup>85</sup> “does not intend to make cheap criticisms of Freudian ideas”

able to access it and the interests arising from it” (Lukács *History* 51). In this sense, the accomplishment of class consciousness means filling the gap between this “imputed” consciousness and the psychological one.

The surrealist manifesto highlights the human desire to express itself through creation, as well as destruction. This desire is described by Freud in terms of sublimation, the “gifted” solution to the impossibility of transmuting human phantasies into reality. This notion represents the transformation of the dream-life into artistic creation, allowing the establishment of a connection between reality and phantasy (Freud qtd. in Breton *Manifestes* 110). In this sense, the “artistic gift,” for Freud, is, psychologically speaking, a mystery. Breton, however, seeks to challenge its “sacredness,” not only in terms of Freud’s theory, but also of a general intellectual elitism.

He defines inspiration as the moment in which one’s spirit is released from its bondage to rational solutions. Such episodes of relative awareness are often experienced as a kind of possession, recognisable from the “court-circuit qu’elle provoque entre une idée donnée et sa répondante”<sup>86</sup> (*Manifestes* 111). Surrealism, according to Breton, has done its utmost to multiply these short-circuits, in order to reproduce the moments in which “l’homme, en proie à une émotion particulière, est soudain empoigné par ce ‘plus fort que lui’ qui le jette, à son corps défendant, dans l’immortel”<sup>87</sup> (*Manifestes* 111). In this sense, inspiration is strictly related to the unconscious, since it results in the expression of the passive life of intelligence, in moments in which “pure” psychic activity takes precedence over the abstract will towards self-signification. It also corresponds to an awareness of the possibility of removal from rational thinking, the existence of a meaningful life beyond lucid control.

This ambiguous “solution” to the problem of inspiration recalls Freudian attempts at demonstrating the existence of the unconscious, while at the same time declaring its complete dependence on conscious formations. The solution is of a singular dialectic nature: if inspiration is a short circuit amidst logical thinking, it is also an awareness of this possible exemption from it. This definition allows Breton to make use of both sets of nomenclatures within surrealist discourse: awareness and unconsciousness, activity and passivity, direction and disposability.

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<sup>86</sup> “short circuit that it [inspiration] causes between a given idea and its respondent”

<sup>87</sup> “man, when plagued by a particular emotion, is suddenly caught by something that is ‘stronger than him,’ which will throw him, against his will, towards the immortal”

For Breton, surrealism should make itself responsible for the expression of this elusive imaginative life, by allowing it to emerge through the activities of automatic writing and dream narration, the two forms privileged by the surrealists in their attempts to express the full resources of the spirit. Since such resources exist in a state of disregard for premeditated activities, as well as for the social values relating to them, they are described as gratuitous thinking. In Breton's words, this is a *féerie intérieure* ("inner magic"), which can be obtained through methods accessible to everyone (*Manifestes* 112f). He goes on to emphasise the accessibility of these surrealist methods.

It is at this point that Breton presents an analogy between the goal of surrealism and that of another field of knowledge distinct from marxism. This has been present since the first manifesto, as discussed above, and here appears under the name *recherches alchimiques* ("alchemical researches") (*Manifestes* 124). The analogy is established in the following terms:

La pierre philosophale n'est rien autre que ce qui devait permettre à l'imagination de l'homme de prendre sur toutes choses une revanche éclatante et nous voici de nouveau, après de siècles de domestication de l'esprit et de résignation folle, à tenter d'affranchir définitivement cette imagination par le "long, immense, raisonné dérèglement de tous les sens" et le reste.<sup>88</sup>  
(*Manifestes* 124)

Here Breton reprises the theme of imagination in relation to the material world, in order to assert again the necessity of provoking the derangement of all the senses. Alchemy is offered as a model of this disturbance, one engendered through a long and reasoned process. The important new point that he makes here is that strictly reproducible methods should be used in the search for knowledge.

The expression *alchimie du verbe* ("word alchemy"), taken from Arthur Rimbaud's *Une Saison en Enfer* (1873), is used in the second manifesto to link the surrealist view of language, as specified above, with the need to provoke, through the imaginative powers, a reconfiguration of the world. In its "magic experiences with words," to use an expression from Benjamin (*Surrealism* 145), surrealism is close to the Kabbalah, in which the word is no less than the model for the soul's creation, and leads to the revolutionary pursuit of man's

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<sup>88</sup> "The philosopher's stone is nothing other than that which allows man's imagination to take its final revenge over all things, and here we are again, after centuries of spiritual domestication and insane resignation, trying to definitively free our imagination, through a 'long, immense, reasoned derangement of all the senses' and the rest."

liberation from exploitative conditions through the reinvention of his or her relationship with the material world.

This approximation to the occult has many effects. The question of malediction, for example, evoked mainly through the writings of Lautréamont, leads the surrealists to a renewal of their commitment to disregard for public opinion. This takes on the aspect of an effort to prevent the public from taking part in the deeper aspects of the movement. According to Breton, “il importe de réitérer et de maintenir ici le ‘Maranatha’ des alchimistes, placé au seuil de l’oeuvre pour arrêter les profanes”<sup>89</sup> (*Manifestes* 127). The Maranatha is an Aramaic formula that, in the Christian context, corresponds to a blessing — that is, “The Lord is coming!” — whilst, in alchemical writings, it functions as a curse (Stavish 197). The word appears in the latter context in the Bible, at the end of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians: “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha.” “Anathema” here means “cursed”: the people who do not embrace God on his imminent return to earth shall be cursed. Breton, for his part, is probably referring to both the curse and the protection that is seen to be the effect of the cryptic aspect of alchemical writings. As with alchemy, he seems to suggest that the ordinary public must be prevented from knowing the secrets of surrealism, in order to avoid a diminution of its powers.

This leads to the famous formula demanding the occultation of surrealism: “JE DEMANDE L’OCCULTATION PROFONDE, VÉRITABLE DU SURREALISME”<sup>90</sup> (*Manifestes* 128). The background to this, as well as the above-mentioned risk of normalisation in the public sphere, is the need to recognise the contributions of astrology and *métapsychique* (“metapsychology”) within the frame of modern science (*Manifestes* 128f). The second manifesto testifies, as the first did in relation to dreams, to the importance of acknowledging supernatural powers, such as those of mediums, which, though rare, according to the surrealists, do exist.

This rehabilitation of excluded forms of knowledge appears, for instance, in references to famous names in alchemy and hermeticism, alongside Sade and Lautréamont, in Breton’s writings in particular. According to Michel Carrouges (22), these elements are not just traces of esotericism displayed as a sign of erudition, but should be recognised as cornerstones of the movement, inspiring its fundamental notions. However, if surrealism praises mysticism, it also repels any traditional form of spiritualism. As Nadeau puts it, “il ne

<sup>89</sup> “it is important here to reiterate and maintain the ‘Maranatha’ of the alchemists, to place it at the threshold of the work to prevent the entry of the profane”

<sup>90</sup> “I DEMAND THE PROFOUND, TRUE OCCULTATION OF SURREALISM”

servait à rien d'avoir ramené l'*inspiration* sur la terre pour s'évader à nouveau dans le surnaturel"<sup>91</sup> (50).

If at some times the occultist aspect of surrealism seems to be based on actual mystical practices, which take place outside of and independently from the movement, at others it is clear that the kind of alchemy practiced by the surrealists is of a different type. The expression "mental alchemy" (*Manifestes* 131) points to this. It is used to compare the precautions taken by magicians before undertaking alchemical activities with the measures required to enter, as the surrealists do, into "mental alchemical" duties. This refers to a necessary moral asepsis that, according to Benjamin, prevents surrealism from becoming assimilable by bourgeois morality (*Surrealism* 154).

Another aspect of the surrealist vision of revolution is close to a concept of revelation. The theme of love is key to this context. It is initially accessed through the feminine figure, which is described as somehow containing "tout ce qu'il y a de merveilleux et de trouble"<sup>92</sup> (*Manifestes* 129f) in the world. Love is then endorsed as the activity capable of unifying, under the same symbol, the ideas of both the salvation and the perdition of the spirit. Clearly understood solely from a masculine perspective, and necessarily addressed to a woman, love seems to be, for the surrealists, one of the only activities remaining that can reconcile men with life. It provides a reflection of the spirit which is only partial, and which cannot be controlled. Breton conceives love "comme le lieu d'occultation idéale de toute pensée"<sup>93</sup> (*Manifestes* 130f), an occultation that allows for the coincidence of opposites.

The call for occultation reveals a belief in secrets that surrealism, at least to some extent, is also intending to reveal. The contradiction lies in the fact that these secrets exist yet are both accessible and inaccessible to everyone. The surrealist movement, as a methodical process that attempts to bring hideous contents to light, without however diluting their magic, represents an experience that maintains the dialectic existence of such ambivalences. While there are points of convergence between the second manifesto's call to revolution and its elaboration of the legacy of Freud — such as the indiscernibility of false dichotomies — the themes of *prise de conscience* and *contrôle des idées* inevitably clash with the claim for *crise de conscience*, not to mention with the concepts of *féerie intérieure* and *courtcircuit logique*. It can be said that the psychic life as described by Freud is certainly an influence in the

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<sup>91</sup> "it would be useless to bring *inspiration* to the earth if we are to escape once again into the supernatural"

<sup>92</sup> "all that is wonderful and disturbed"

<sup>93</sup> "as the ideal place for the occultation of all thought"

determination of this particular version of the conscious-unconscious dynamic, but not the only one.

Recapping some of the fundamental aspects of surrealism, Breton ends the second manifesto with an abstract call for the conflation of traditional definitions of being and non-being. At the same time, he calls on men to assume their freedom, in defiance of all the failures of history. These aspects are both connected to the role of surrealism as the revolution's avant-garde — according to which it must direct intellectual forces towards the inevitable insurgence — as well as to its leading role in the acknowledgment of alchemical interferences in the “natural” order of things, including the spirit.

The surrealist engagement with issues of the spirit, especially in terms of so-called “human expression,” merges with its commitment to a socio-political process that goes beyond its own activities, namely that represented by communism. The integration of occultist sources together with the other fields previously explored by the movement is part of the effort to enrich the revolutionary process with aspects that go beyond those experienced by consciousness. Despite all of these trends, the idea of revolution occupies centre stage. If the final lines of the first manifesto professed existence to be elsewhere — “l'existence est ailleurs” (*Manifestes* 60) —, the second manifesto closes on quite a different note. It urges men to revolt, to use ideas as weapons against different forms of “bestiality,” and finally, to welcome the discharge of guns, once defeated, “comme un feu de salve”<sup>94</sup> (*Manifestes* 137). At once salutation and salvo of guns, defeat contains either the beginning of a new world or the real possibility of its end. There is no sign of a world elsewhere, however. On the threshold of the Second World War, surrealism aspires to merge the dimensions of human fantasy, mystical power and social revolution, with its feet still planted on the ground.

### 3.7. Breton's Dreams: Between Freud and Marx

The goal of Breton's book *Les Vases Communicants*, written between 1931 and 1932, is to show that the interpretation of dreams is compatible with a revolutionary perspective. This intention is announced in the following terms: “la conversion de plus en plus nécessaire ... de l'imaginé au vécu ou plus exactement au devoir-vivre”<sup>95</sup> (Breton *Vases* 10-1). The

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<sup>94</sup> “as a burst of fire”

<sup>95</sup> “the increasingly necessary conversion ... of the imaged to the lived or, more precisely, to the ways one should live”



work investigates the means of directing the “constitutive forces” of dreams towards “experiences to come,” leading to the discovery of new ways of living. References to Freud and excerpts from Marx, Engels and particularly Lenin, are abundant. Breton’s approach moves through a heterodox reading of these authors and culminates with a personal account of dreams, daydreams and fantasies.

As part of this, Breton offers his own definition of dreams. He sees them as “essentially movement” in dialectic sense, their content moving from real contradictions to a resolution through the taking of an action (Breton *Vases* 59). The dream can reveal the past as much as it can expose the future, since it encompasses the moving nature of psychic life. Here the emergence of a marxist component takes the form of an engagement with Hegel. In fact, as Gérard Durozoi explains in “Les Vases Communicants: Marx-Freud” (1992), at the time of the book’s publication, the affiliation between Hegel and Marx was perceived as a peaceful kinship. The issue of a so-called “epistemological rupture” initiated by Marx over Hegelian dialectics, much present in today’s discourse, would emerge only decades later, particularly with Louis Althusser’s *Pour Marx* (1965).

In *Les Vases Communicants*, both the understanding of the dimension of dreams and the task of their interpretation take part in the surrealist conception of the entire man, in its full imaginative and revolutionary aspects. Curiously, Breton opens his book with the figure of the French Sinologist Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denis, who reported his experiences of provoking and guiding his own dreams in *Les Rêves et les Moyens de les Diriger* (1867). Breton presents Saint-Denis in a positive light, while reproaching the lack of rigour of the Marquis’ methods. This figure will not be unfamiliar to the reader of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Freud’s account of Saint-Denis deals with his “premonitory” dreams, which Freud sees, unsurprisingly, as the result of the dream’s ability to access unconscious memories (*Dreams* 571). Just like Freud after him, the Marquis stated that even the most chaotic dreams have a sense, and can be explained. But in the most remarkable feature of his accounts, namely the capacity to guide dreams, Freud sees no more than the preconscious wish to observe dreams overlapping with the wish to sleep.

Breton’s choice of Saint Denis for the opening of *Les Vases Communicants* is unequivocal. On the one hand, it allows him to launch a notion of dreams based on a collaboration between conscious and unconscious features, that is, rational command and unconscious imagination. On the other, it makes explicit his move beyond Freudian ideas towards a more comprehensive understanding of dream interpretation, one that includes a

dialectical approach — and therefore does not exclude a connection with the future. In this context, Breton criticises Freud’s conceptualisation of the continuity between dream and waking life as a back-and-forth movement (Breton *Vases* 20).

Freud, having recognised the principle of conciliation of contraries, as well as the unconscious basis of human “mystic” beliefs, then seems to retreat by affirming that psychic reality should not be confused with material reality. This move is a great disappointment to Breton, particularly in the context of Freud’s innovative formulations on dreams. It is not Breton’s only objection, however. Freud’s approach to prophetic dreams in particular strikes Breton as lacking a dialectic understanding, a recurrent theme in *Les Vases Communicants*. That is, the conception that the future might be foreseen through the dream’s resolution of contradictions is absent from Freud’s considerations.

Another lacuna in Freud’s theory identified by Breton leads him to elaborate on an important branch of his approach on dreams. Where Freud hesitates in offering up intimate information, and indeed leaves the interpretation of many of his dreams patently incomplete due to an apparent fear of infamy, Breton rushes to announce his intention to break down the *mur de la vie privé* (“privacy wall”), namely this “barrage social derrière lequel il est entendu que l’homme, sans coupable indiscretion, ne peut chercher à rien voir”<sup>96</sup> (*Vases* 28).

Breton’s gesture is more likely intended as a provocation against the accusation of indiscretion, than a naive belief that a voluntary attempt to trespassing this social barrier might be successful without the intervention of certain filters. In other words, Breton’s move crosses the limits of politesse, but not the barriers of unconscious censorship. What lies behind it, unsurprisingly, is far from extraordinary, pointing to the fact that Freud’s reticence might have been more stylistic than honour-related. It is nevertheless undeniable, as Breton himself emphasises (*Vases* 29), that the role played by sexual concerns is almost absent in Freud’s analysis of his own dreams, while it is quite abundant in the interpretations he offers of the dreams of other people.

Considering these and other objections, therefore, Breton’s evaluation of Freud’s theory on dreams is up to this point quite negative. In his view, what should be retained from Freud’s theory is the method of interpretation, due to both its originality in relation to previous theories and its practical character, derived from the psychiatrist’s work in the domain of mental disorders (Breton *Vases* 28). However, beneath Breton’s tone of contempt

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<sup>96</sup> “social barrier behind which it is understood that man may not seek to see anything without guilty indiscretion”

lies the influence of Freud's theory on *Les Vases Communicants*, not to mention on Breton's general approach to the theme of dreams.

The nature of the questions posed by Breton while interpreting dreams, and the very fact that he attempts to "fill" some lacunae in Freud's theory, act as a tribute. Declaring that he intends to extrapolate from the theory of the Viennese psychiatrist, Breton looks also to authors mentioned by Freud in the bibliographic review of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Breton therefore quotes from sources such as Volkelt, Hildebrandt, Ellis and Saint-Denis, sometimes reaffirming and sometimes explicitly opposing Freud's authority on the subject. At the same time, he points out the insufficiencies in the theories of these authors in relation to the attempts of both Freud and himself. Breton's literature review forms the backdrop to his own approach on dreams, which has the basic elements of Freud's theory as a constituent part.

Similarly, quotations from Lenin are used to "unmask" the bourgeois constraints of many attempts at interpreting dreams, as well as at determining the exact relationship between dream life and waking experience. This is particularly significant, as expected, in relation to Freud. In one of these cases, for instance, Breton criticises Freud's "manque à peu près complet de conception dialectique"<sup>97</sup> (*Vases* 20). In this context, he makes use of a quotation from Lenin, according to which the educated bourgeoisie makes use of refined tactics to keep knowledge associated to certain beliefs, which in the masses are engendered either by ignorance or by the contradictions of capitalism (*Vases* 21). Freud is designated part in the intellectual bourgeois attempt to prevent the working classes from participating in the production of knowledge, in particular because he does not realise the fundamental role played by contradictions in the construction of knowledge itself.

This criticism is related both to Breton's dialectic definition of dreams, as described above, and to his belief in the dream's role in the processes of realisation and *prise de conscience* ("realisation"). Breton describes the dream thus: "à la très courte échelle du jour de vingt-quatre heures, il aide l'homme à accomplir le *saut vital*"<sup>98</sup> (*Vases* 59). Breton is particularly interested in the relationship that can be established between dreams and actions, i.e. in how the formulations used by the former can give way to the latter. In order to investigate this association, he analyses some of his own dreams and waking activities in the

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<sup>97</sup> "an almost complete lack of dialectic conception"

<sup>98</sup> "in the very short course of a twenty-four-hour day, it helps man to perform the *vital leap*"

light of dialectics, by resuming the theme of a continuation of waking activity in the dream, which was made explicit in the first surrealist manifesto.

Breton rejects the idea that we go into exile every night, remaining outside the limits of the self during sleep. Supporting this argument is a consideration of time in dreams. Here Breton makes use of a quote from the British physician Haverlock Ellis, according to which, in the waking state as well as in the dreaming one, an intense emotion provokes the sense of a loss of time. If this is equally true of both states, according to Breton, “Le temps et l’espace du rêve sont donc bien le temps et l’espace réels: ‘La chronologie est-elle obligatoire? Non!’ (Lénine)”<sup>99</sup> (*Vases* 62). That is, in a rough use of dialectics — which needs, in Breton’s view, to replace the common formal mindset — neither time nor space can be measured absolutely when dreams and reality are treated separately, but only when considered in relation to each other. The use of a quotation from Lenin in this context is intended to support the analysis of the dream from an “exterior” and dialectic-revolutionary point of view. In this sense, the absence of chronology can be related to what Benjamin calls the “explosion in the continuum of history” (*Theses* 261) that is caused by revolutionary action.

At this point one might ask whether the dialectic materialism assumed by the surrealist movement in the late twenties differs from their general dialectic point of view, which had been present in terms of the search for an analytical synthesis of contraries, and expressed through Breton’s admiration for Hegel from his student days onwards (Durozoi 32). If one takes, for instance, the call for a resolution of the discontinuity between dream and reality, which should be attained through the promotion of an absolute reality (surreality), one sees that the precepts presented in *Les Vases Communicants* had already been expressed from the time of the first manifesto (Breton *Manifestes* 24).

Therefore, as the group develops and embraces communism, what seems to be at stake is not the adoption of a philosophical point of view, but of a positive form of social revolt, that is, as mentioned above, a criticism of a social regime and the struggle for another. Specifically, while advocating the negation of idealism in favour of a concrete understanding of reality and history, as presented in the second manifesto, Breton points to the transformation of Hegel performed by Marx, that of the abandonment of an analytical theory for a revolutionary one. The contradictions within surrealism resulting from this new direction should be related not to the adoption of a dialectic point of view, which already existed and which did not suffer significant modifications, but to the assumption of a

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<sup>99</sup> “Time and space in dreams are the same time and space in reality: ‘Is chronology required? No!’ (Lenin)”

necessarily practical aspect of communism, which cannot be separated from the vanguardist trend adopted by the movement.

However, even on the long-explored theme of the resolution of dream and reality, some small variations are introduced in *Les Vases Communicants* in relation to previous approaches. According to Breton, the assumption that the world of dreams and the real world do not differ much from each other does not negate the task of “faire apercevoir sur quelles différences de relief et d’intensité repose la distinction qui peut être faite entre les opérations véritables et les opérations illusoires”<sup>100</sup> (*Vases* 70). This distinction remains important for the determination of what are illusory operations. A quote from Engels about the phantasmatic figures created by the clergy and cultivated by oppressed people is relevant here: these figures are described as “les mauvais produits d’un mauvais régime social”<sup>101</sup> (Engels qtd. in Breton *Vases* 62). In this sense, the idea of the illusory acquires a counter-revolutionary character, which should be distinguished from the imaginative source that Breton refers to, and aims to put at the service of the revolution.

The final distinguishing criterion of the illusory is expressed through a quote from the mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré, who features amongst the heterogeneous group of authors quoted in the book. According to him, the objects around us “sont réels en ce que les sensations qu’ils nous ont fait éprouver nous apparaissent comme unies par je ne sais quel ciment indestructible et non par un hasard d’un jour”<sup>102</sup> (Poincaré qtd. in Breton *Vases* 76). The principle is therefore defined through a sensation, which has practical effects on human behaviour. According to Breton, the indication of the existence of this “cement” connecting all perceptions lies in human habit. Through the regular practices executed by people in everyday life comes the sensation that the objects surrounding them are real. For Breton, this habit is “lui seul qui préside, pour ce monde, au prétendu mystère de son non-effacement”<sup>103</sup> (*Vases* 76).

This “alleged mystery” centres on the belief that the world exists only to the extent that it is perceived, in fact a very anti-materialistic notion. Here one finds a shred of idealism

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<sup>100</sup> “discovering in which differences of relief and intensity the distinctions lie that can be made between real and illusory operations”

<sup>101</sup> “the bad products of a bad culture”

<sup>102</sup> “are real in that the sensations they provoke in us appear to be united by some sort of indestructible cement, and not by chance”

<sup>103</sup> “the only part that exists, for this world, of the alleged mystery of its own un-fading presence”

in the “communist” Breton.<sup>104</sup> He then describes a structure that assures passage between the dream and reality, that is, the existence of a capillary fabric or *tissu capillaire* connecting the two dimensions (Breton *Vases* 161). The importance of the distinction between dream and reality thereafter assumes a secondary role to the tasks the movement assigns to itself. Breton uses a metaphor to remind his reader of these: “jeter un *fil conducteur* entre les mondes par trop dissociés de la veille et du sommeil, de la réalité extérieure et intérieure, de la raison et de la folie, du calme de la connaissance et de l’amour, de la vie pour la vie et de la révolution, etc.”<sup>105</sup> (*Vases* 103).

Here one can see the recapitulation of various surrealist mottos, united in the familiar task of building conditions in which presumably opposing spheres of life can converge. This is an attempt to approach the radical transformation of the world, but also to interpret it in the most complete form. For Breton, this should be the dual goal of surrealism: transformation and interpretation. Every mistake in the interpretations made by men gives rise to a mistake in the interpretation of the world, which becomes an obstacle to its transformation (*Vases* 152).

Before this transformation can be achieved, there are all sorts of prejudices to be overcome, whose origin Breton situates, without hesitation, within the individual unconscious. “La transformation sociale ne sera vraiment effective et complète que le jour où l’on en aura fini avec ces germes corrupteurs. On n’en finira avec eux qu’en acceptant, pour pouvoir l’intégrer à celle de l’être collectif, de réhabiliter l’étude du moi.”<sup>106</sup> (Breton *Vases* 152). At this point, clearly directing his efforts towards the psychological dimension of revolution, Breton expresses the possibility of transformation as contingent upon an understanding of its psychological barriers, in a move that gestures towards the appearance at the time of *Die Massenpsychologie des Faschismus* (“The Mass Psychology of Fascism,” 1933), by Wilhelm Reich. Moreover, the shape to be given to this *étude du moi* (“study of the self”) is not that of psychoanalysis. Instead, it is an exploration of the unusual, uncertain paths to knowledge contained in mystical practices, paths that should, according to Breton, be left open, despite all the disdain directed towards them by civilized culture.

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<sup>104</sup> According to Löwy in *Morning Star* (Chapter 5, “The Revolution and the Intellectuals”), Breton considered himself a marxist, “But for him Marxism dialectically superseded the old oppositions between materialism and idealism, the internal and the external.”

<sup>105</sup> “cast a common thread between the dissociated worlds of waking and sleeping, external and internal reality, reason and madness, the quiet of knowledge and love, the meaningless life and the revolution, etc.”

<sup>106</sup> “The social transformation will only be truly effective and complete when we have rid ourselves of these corrupting germs. This can only come through agreeing to rehabilitate the study of the self, in order to integrate it with that of the collective being.”

If on the one hand Breton seems to align himself with the traditional idea of the revolutionary vanguard — that is, “agir sur le prolétariat pour élever son niveau de conscience”<sup>107</sup> (*Vases* 142) — on the other hand he diagnoses a missing link in this very action: that of desire, the feature capable of effectively uniting men’s wishes so that they may confront a world that does not correspond with their feelings. The previous experience acquired by the surrealist movement in the field of human affections allows it to assume a connecting role for this in relation to dreams and revolution. The dream’s illumination of characters and objects effects a restitution of the sensible world; it allows one to revive, to come to one’s senses in relation to material experience.

The sphere of emotions is vital to Breton’s attempt to conflate the real and the imaginary dimensions of life, as was already apparent in the first surrealist manifesto. The dream is the experience that best expresses emotion:

Rien ne me paraît de nature à mieux illuminer la sphère du sentiment, à laquelle le rêve appartient en propre, ce qui le désigne électivement comme terrain d’expérience dès qu’il s’agit, comme il continuera toujours à s’agir, de sonder la nature individuelle entière dans le sens *total* qu’elle peut avoir de son passé, de son présent et de son avenir.<sup>108</sup> (Breton *Vases* 165-6)

The dream is at the core of Breton’s revolutionary discourse, the place in which men’s emotions and desires can be grasped in their clearest form. It is through dreams that one’s past, present and future experiences can be probed. This too is a dialectical conception, since “le désir révèle le devoir être”<sup>109</sup> (Durozoi 42).

Breton’s definition of dreams is of an essential human activity, through which all beings, animate or inanimate, can participate in the existence of the dreamer. The author emphasises the importance of the dream amidst the destruction and euphoria of European post-war society, by saying that, in the dream, “le monde entier se recompose, dans son principe essentiel, à partir de lui [l’homme]”<sup>110</sup> (*Vases* 160). This statement refers again to Breton’s ambiguous conception of reality, at times that of a materialist, at times that of an idealist. Unlike Freud, for whom the unconscious “is as unknown to us as the reality of the

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<sup>107</sup> “act on the proletariat to raise one’s level of consciousness”

<sup>108</sup> “Nothing seems to better illuminate the sphere of emotions than the dream, making it an elective terrain for experiences through which it can, and will always, continue to probe the entire nature of the individual in *the most complete* sense, with awareness of its past, its present and its future.”

<sup>109</sup> “desire reveals the must-be”

<sup>110</sup> “the whole world is recomposed, in its essential principle, from him [the human being]”

external world” (Freud *Dreams* 607), Breton seems to believe in the relative attainability of both. Accordingly, he states that “ce monde extérieur, pour moi tout voilé qu’il fut, n’était pas brouillé avec le soleil”<sup>111</sup> (*Vases* 125). This is a reference to a comment by Nerval on the absence of the sun in dreams: for Nerval, poetically speaking, light is much clearer “away from the sun,” as it is in all the details of reality “revealed” by dreams. Breton attests to his belief in a type of reality that can only be described as surreality. In this reality, the exterior and interior worlds, both attainable and real, share more than a few features. They exist in as far as our sensibility is able to perceive them.

Breton affirms the constant exchange between the material of dreams and of waking life, promoting an articulation of both the subjective and objective aspects of experience. He is at his most revolutionary in *Les Vases Communicants* when he confesses the very banal behaviours, the meanderings of desire, everything pertaining to his concrete existence. Presented as the result of the intention to “reveal everything” — in contrast with Freud — this aspect is what he considers to be missing from the general revolutionary discourse. It is also the recapitulation of his claim for a complete man, this time also sought for revolutionary reasons.

Breton’s attempt to building a case for the study of the individual, particularly through dreams, with revolution as the ultimate aim, links him with others, also oriented towards an encounter between the theories of Freud and Marx. According to Löwy in *Morning Star*, this is one of the currents that runs beneath orthodox marxism, “a kind of thought which is fascinated by certain cultural forms of the precapitalist past and which rejects the cold, abstract rationality of modern industrial civilization.” This marxism, like that of Benjamin and of Ernst Bloch, does not exclude the envisioning of the future through the eyes of the unconscious. That is, the unconscious is conceived not only in relation to the past, but also to times to come.

Breton’s fusion of Marx and Freud in *Les Vases Communicants*, however, is weighted towards marxism. According to Durozoi (33), this is related to Breton’s eagerness to show a full commitment to the cause, since his engagement had more than once been questioned by the French Communist Party. At the same time, the fact that his approach of Freud occasionally sounds like an apology can be accounted for by noting not only the virtual absence of references to the Austrian psychiatrist amongst communist groups, but also

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<sup>111</sup> “this external world, as veiled as it was for me, was not blurred by the sun”



Breton's assessment of Freud as an "esprit philosophiquement assez inculte"<sup>112</sup> (Breton *Vases* 28). This alleged lack of a sustainable philosophical basis in Freud is what Breton intends to overcome through the use of dialectic materialism, while at the same time enriching the revolutionary cause through a greater understanding of concrete emotional experience. The question of whether Breton accomplishes this goal is relativised through his frequent designation of his attempt as "experimental." Years later, in fact, Breton would dismiss the importance given to materialism in the book, suggesting that the dialectic between imaginary and real was its most important element (Durozoi 45-6). The appendix to *Les Vases Communicants* reproduces part of the correspondence exchanged between Breton and Freud in 1932, which will be discussed below.

In his book's conclusion, Breton returns to the familiar call for the establishment of both a new man and a new world through surrealism. Its agent is the poet: "le poète à venir surmontera l'idée déprimante du divorce irréparable de l'action et du rêve"<sup>113</sup> (*Vases* 170). According to Breton, only this figure will be able to execute the magical act of transposition, that is the immediate unconscious mediation between the internal and the external dimensions of experience. We return to the power of language. In a sense, for the surrealists, this was always the material of work, the territory for transformation, the voice of another world within this one.

### 3.8. A Troubled Heritage

According to Branco Aleksić in "Freud et les Surréalistes, ses 'Fous Intégraux'" (2011), Freud and Breton first met in Vienna in 1921, after which they kept up a sparse correspondence through the twenties, consisting mainly of Breton sending his books and Freud sending letters of acknowledgment (Aleksić 96). In 1932 Breton sent *Les Vases Communicants* to Vienna. Freud then answered with a more extensive letter, in which he referred to the use of his theory in the book, thereby beginning the exchange that is partially reproduced in the Appendix of Breton's book (Breton *Vases* 173-80).

The correspondence, as it appears in *Les Vases Communicants*, consists of three letters sent by Freud followed by a replica by Breton.<sup>114</sup> They start with the discussion of one

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<sup>112</sup> "philosophically, a somewhat uneducated spirit"

<sup>113</sup> "the poet of the future will overcome the depressing idea of an irreparable divide between actions and dreams"

<sup>114</sup> The original letters sent by Breton could not be accessed. Starobinski and Aleksić quote some extracts from them to be mentioned below.

of Breton's first references to Freud in *Les Vases Communicants*. Breton must have sent the manuscript to Freud earlier that year, since he confesses he had not advanced much in the reading of it before the letter was written in December 1932. Freud responds to Breton's comment on the absence of Volkelt in the bibliography of *The Interpretation of Dreams*: "Freud lui-même ... semble, en matière d'interprétation symbolique du rêve, n'avoir fait que reprendre à son compte les idées de Volkelt, auteur sur qui la bibliographie établie à la fin de son livre reste assez significativement muette"<sup>115</sup> (Breton *Vases* 18)

It is not possible to know whether the manuscript sent to Freud in 1932 contained this passage exactly as above, but a note added by Breton indicating the page referred to by Freud in the edition quoted from above argues positively for this. Freud, for his part, claims to have acknowledged, in various passages of his book, the contribution of Volkelt, despite admitting that the reference is absent in the French edition of 1926. This absence leads to further stipulation on the part of Breton, which would be clarified by Freud as an omission attributable to his colleague Otto Rank, who was responsible for the bibliography of the German edition.

Despite its anecdotal character, this omission is the focal point of their short correspondence. However, this discussion seems to also stand for others, and Breton's tone on the subject does not suggest a desire to go more deeply into these. Freud briefly mentions, as an aside, Breton's criticisms of the absence of the sexual element in the analysis of the significance of his own dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. According to Freud, this was not due to backwardness on sexual matters, but to the exceptional fact that most of his dreams were related to the recent death of his father (Breton *Vases* 175-6). Once again, this seems rather unconvincing, considering that none of the more than thirty personal dreams narrated by Freud in the book touches on sexual significations. One can suppose instead that the "father of psychoanalysis" did not expose his full frailties in order to sustain an authoritative position. Breton makes this one of the major concerns of *Les Vases Communicants*, as mentioned above: the need to trespass in the sphere of privacy.

Freud's response to Breton's comments about his use of Volkelt's ideas takes the form of a "confession" regarding surrealism:

Bien que je reçoive tant de témoignages de l'intérêt que vous et vos amis portez à mes recherches, moi-même je ne suis pas en état de me rendre clair ce

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<sup>115</sup> "Freud himself seems, as far as the symbolic interpretation of the dream is concerned, to have simply assimilated the ideas of Volkelt, whilst the author remains conspicuously absent from the bibliography at the end of his book"

qu'est et ce que veut le surréalisme. Peut-être ne suis-je en rien fait pour le comprendre, moi qui suis si éloigné de l'art.<sup>116</sup> (Freud qtd. in Breton *Vases* 176)

This assertion contains much more than a humble acknowledgement of ignorance. While recognising the public acclaim for surrealism, Freud also reveals his distance from and misgivings towards it. Not only does he indicate that the movement might be inappropriately aligning itself with his research he also points to its inability to make itself clearly understood, a quality that Freud obviously valued highly.

According to Jean Starobinski in the essay "Freud, Breton, Myers" (2001), Freud was probably convinced that the surrealists did not understand his work. However, "en homme bien élevé, il met le malentendu à sa charge et déclare ne pas comprendre le surréalisme"<sup>117</sup> (Starobinski 381). By confessing his ignorance of the world of the arts, Freud perhaps intends to induce from his addressee a similar confession, of his ignorance of psychoanalysis. Freud was certainly not in accordance with the surrealist claim that art should be no more than a medium, *lieu de passage* between desire (or unconscious wishes) and actions. Freud acknowledges the proximity of artistic works to unconscious matters as well as the presence within it of many of the problems with which psychoanalysis is concerned. However, as Starobinski explains, for Freud "les artistes, rêveurs supérieurs, ne peuvent qu'éprouver et manifester avec force ce qu'il appartiendra à la science d'interpréter dans son langage spécifique"<sup>118</sup> (382). Freud therefore reserves for himself, and for psychoanalysis, the role of the interpreter, and through this emphasises the gulf between art and science, a gulf that the surrealists sought to close.

In conclusion, the contempt evident in Freud's declaration on surrealism is not surprising considering the distance he saw separating the world of arts from the world of science, while surrealism was occupied precisely with the transgression of such boundaries. This probably induced Freud, in the correspondence, to concentrate his efforts on the designation of their differences. The fact that Freud is presented, together with other

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<sup>116</sup> "Although I have received many testimonies of the interest you and your friends show in my research, I myself am not able to be clear on what surrealism is and what it means. Perhaps am I not equipped to understand, since I am so distant from the arts."

<sup>117</sup> "being a well-brought up man, he charges himself with the misunderstanding and asserts that he did not understand surrealism"

<sup>118</sup> "artists, as superior dreamers, can only strongly feel and demonstrate that which science must interpret in its specific language"

“liberators” such as Sade and Marx, as a predecessor of the surrealist movement, is likely to have made this task feel even more relevant to him.

As mentioned above, Breton had also sent some of his previous books to Vienna in the twenties (Aleksić 96). After their first contact in 1921, when Breton visited Freud on a dadaist “mission” to interview him, he reported his disappointment at finding a bourgeois family man when he hoped to meet a figure of romantic magnetism. Nevertheless, the correspondence persisted. Therefore, the confession of Freud in 1932 must be related to his having read, or at least made some contact with, texts such as the first manifesto, *Nadja* (1928) and probably *Surrealism and Painting* (1928) (Aleksić 98). The unfairness of Breton’s accusation of plagiarism is intensified by the fact that he does not publish his own letters to Freud in *Les Vases Communicants*, one of which certainly contained his apology for the accusation concerning Volkert, which Freud thanks him for in his final missive.

If Freud is to be considered a predecessor of surrealism, the differences in the two approaches should be clarified. Starobinski, for instance, refers to the surrealist account of Freud’s concept of the unconscious using terms that were introduced in the previous chapter. The existence of the unconscious, in Freud’s vision of it, does not imply a necessary prevalence of it over other instances of the psyche. Freud is rather occupied with the establishment of an appropriate role for the unconscious in the functioning of psychic life (Freud *Dreams* 670). This role is very significant and is related to the cause of human actions. However, Freud never asserts that one should be governed by it, instead he values the filters imposed by consciousness, so that social life and its correlated cultural and artistic forms can take place. Surrealism, conversely, is a champion of the unconscious, demanding a deliberate re-direction of the polarity between conscious and unconscious matters. This could only appear to Freud as a *folie*, an act lying somewhere between extravagance and madness. This is indeed what emerges from Freud and Breton’s short correspondence.

If Freud seems excessively concerned about Breton’s allegation that he gave inadequate recognition to another author’s contribution to his theory, this is because the implication is that his methods are not suitably serious and rigorous. There is also the matter of Freud’s personal phantoms regarding the originality of his work. Regarding the first of these factors, Freud emphasises in the letters his discordance with Breton’s worldview, and with that of surrealism in general. Referring to Breton’s reproach about the omission of Volkelt, Freud comments: “Voilà qui est grave, qui va tout à fait à l’encontre de ma manière

habituelle!”<sup>119</sup> (Freud qtd. in Breton *Vases* 173). That is, the accuracy which Freud claims for himself in regard to his work clashes with Breton’s fluid and “impertinent” style.

As regards the second aspect, Breton seems to be fully aware of it, and in fact suggests to his addressee that he has a “particular susceptibility” on the theme of his debts to other authors. To this Freud responds that it is doubtless “une forme de réaction contre l’ambition démesurée de l’enfance, heureusement surmontée”<sup>120</sup> (Freud qtd. in Breton *Vases* 175). As far as an analysis of his intellectual obsessions is concerned, then, Freud seems willing to make concessions. What remains in some doubt is his openness in relation to themes such as the limits of psychoanalysis as established by his publication of 1900, and subsequent undogmatic appropriations of his work, as in the case of surrealism.

While Breton is willing to apply the Freudian notion of the unconscious and expand it in previously unexplored directions, fully aware that this is not in accordance with the reach of Freud’s work, he maintains a relationship with the “master,” as if defying him to confront some aspects of his oeuvre that have remained marginal so far. What becomes clear is the size of the gap between their approaches, despite the historical and thematic connections they maintain. Hence, in response to Freud’s insistence on maintaining the borders around traditionally established areas of knowledge, an inheritance from rationalism that informs the commitment of psychoanalysis to be part of science, Breton and the surrealists provoke a voluntary confusion between wish and knowledge, *désir* and *savoir*. In the words of Starobinski:

Breton travaille au triomphe d’un monisme à la fois magique et matérialiste, où l’énergie du désir puisse être mobilisée dans tous les sens, et où la transformation psychique des rapports avec autrui (selon Freud) et la transformation matérielle de la société (selon Marx et Trotski) puissent être entreprises dans un même élan tout ensemble instinctif et raisonné.<sup>121</sup> (385)

The fact that this momentum should be instinctive and rational, and should unite magic and materialism, constitutes a major difference between the surrealist and the Freudian projects. At the same time, the very existence of surrealism would not have been possible without the more scientifically rigorous theories of Freud. The surrealist use of the term

<sup>119</sup> “This is very serious, and goes quite against my normal habit!”

<sup>120</sup> “a form of reaction against the overweening ambition of childhood, happily overcome”

<sup>121</sup> “Breton seeks to propagate a monism that is both magic and materialistic, in which the energy of desire can be mobilised in all directions, and in which the psychic transformation of relationships with others (according to Freud) and the material transformation of society (according to Marx and Trotsky) can be undertaken in one movement, at the same time instinctive and rational.”

*rigueur* is related to the methods which should be used for a monist approach, mainly conceived in opposition to the confusion evoked by dadaism on the one hand, and the surrender to false images of redemption on the other.

To return to the definition of surrealism from the 1924 manifesto, quoted above, in which it is described as pure psychic automatism, it is salient that the terms used by Breton exist in both occultist and psychological contexts (Breton *Manifestes* 36). In the case of the former, automatism is, according to Nevill Drury's *Dictionary of Mysticism and the Esoteric Traditions* (1992), acts "performed in trance without the conscious awareness of the medium" (26). What spiritualists see as the workings of a disincarnate entity or spirit entering the body of the medium, psychologists describe as a dissociation leading to manifestations from the unconscious.

In the case of the psychological usage of the term, it is interesting to speculate as to whether it refers to Freud's psychological theories in particular. According to Fer (52), for instance, the notion of automatism has its antecedents in the technique used by psychoanalysts and patients in order to find tracks leading to the unconscious. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, writing indeed occupies a privileged place in the process of analysis. It is by writing down his dreams that Freud begins his conjecture about their possible significance beyond the manifest content. This suggests that the technique of automatic writing in surrealism might be inspired by psychoanalysis, with the difference that in the former it is not used as a means to help individuals to adjust to social or psychological norms, but to systematically deviate from them.

However, in the psychiatric field, and particularly in France, the term has a broader history. For Aleksić (94), the use of automatism in surrealism comes from Pierre Janet's *L'Automatisme Psychique* ("The Psychic Automatism," 1889). Janet, who, like Freud, studied under the guidance of Charcot, sees the psyche as non-unitary and oriented towards complex levels of organisation (Freud *Three Essays* 114). He describes automatism as a process through which various elements that should remain subconscious acquire autonomy, as a consequence of the splitting of the mind into separate "consciousnesses." Despite the resemblance between this discussion of the emergence of subconscious elements and automatic writing, this idea remains close to the dualism that the surrealists protested against in the "at-times monist" Freud — lamented for not having being a "full-time" monist. In addition, it describes automatism as negative. Meanwhile, Aleksić (95) claims that Breton's intention is to apply the idea of the Freudian *monologue incontrôlé* ("uncontrolled

monologue”) or free association to surrealist discourse, suggesting a connection between this technique and that of automatism. For Freud, however, free association is a technique that works as a medium for analysis, the products of it not being valuable per se.

For Starobinski (387), in turn, the manifesto barely invokes Freud, and refers more extensively to a school of psychiatry other than that represented by Janet. For him, the use of automatism by surrealism owes a debt to a branch of psychiatry concerned with problems such as somnambulism, hysteria and personality issues. It is true that Freud only rarely mentions the notion of automatism, in his descriptions of the work of other authors. It was however a common term in French psychiatric texts from the nineteenth century onwards, with a negative connotation. While automatism was related to low-valued psychic actions, such as spasms, consciousness was seen as the integrative and necessary function for the activity of thought to take place. The notion, then, was approached quite differently in French psychiatry, in the Freudian account of dream narration, and in the products of automatic writing created by the surrealists.

Alongside their efforts to define a psychological system in their own terms, the surrealists had to find a theory to justify their championing of automatism. According to Starobinski (394), they chose that of Frederic Myers, an English poet who turned to psychological research late in life. Myers combined marvellous facts with established psychological theory, coming up with the idea of a “subliminal self,” a kind of valued unconscious. The unconscious or the subliminal self, for Myers, contains both aspects that connect to our animal ancestors and superior aptitudes that appear to us only occasionally — due to the inappropriateness of our bodies — in the form of phantoms, visions and other supernatural phenomena. A superior reality exists in which human beings participate only partially, on those occasions when the unconscious trespasses on the ordinary personality.

Starobinski (393) situates the antecedents of this theory in the parapsychology of the eighteenth century. For one branch in particular, led by Franz Mesmer, the German physician who developed the idea of “animal magnetism,” automatism was most likely the expression of a possession of the human body by external forces, an “inspiration” that had more positive than negative connotations. This is very similar to the definition of automatism in occultist practices. In fact Starobinski, while establishing a historical lineage of the presence of mystical interests in medicine, tells us that “la parapsychologie du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle prolonge, sous une forme dégradée, et avec les secours d’une théorie pseudo-physiologique, la tradition

millénaire de l'enthousiasme sacré et de la dictée surnaturelle de la parole poétique"<sup>122</sup> (393). Surrealism is understandably comfortable in such a frame, although its vision departs from that of the parapsychologists by dint of its focus on the material rather than the spiritual.

It seems that Breton intended to use the products of parapsychology in the surrealist argument, while entirely disregarding its methods. He states in *Les Vases Communicants*: "il y'a toutes sortes de moyens de connaissance et certes l'astrologie pourrait en être un, des moins négligeables, à condition qu'en soient contrôlées les prémisses et qu'y soit tenu pour postulat ce qui est postulat"<sup>123</sup> (Breton *Vases* 125). Breton envisions the "alternative" forms of knowledge, such as astrology, the ephemerides, as well as the products of vision, prophecy and telepathy, as the expressions of a larger reality. However, if it is to be placed centrally in the human experience, this reality should not be searched for through random experimentation, but through controlled methods.

For Starobinski (398-9), in turn, it is impossible to separate the products of parapsychology from its methods, since in most cases the method and the anticipation generated by them participate in the production of the expected supernatural effects. Breton however proposes a new interpretation that will allow these phenomena to retain an important value, that of demonstrating the richness of "incarnated thought." It is this richness to which automatic writing also gives expression. Instead of a communication with external forces, automatism is related to the *dictée de la pensée* ("dictation of thought"), that is, to a magical obedience of contents to their origin, the centre of life, wherever that may be situated. This is perhaps why Starobinski asserts that "de l'héritage spirite, le surréalisme ne collectionne que les images"<sup>124</sup> (401), that is, figures from other cultures, other times, other states of mind, which can be interrogated with the purpose of enlarging consciousness.

Starobinski claims that "sur tous ces points, le rationalisme freudien était incapable de donner satisfaction"<sup>125</sup> (402). The process of defining surrealism is testimony to the concurrent influence of psychoanalysis and occultism on the movement's members. The "sacred enthusiasm" for the supernatural aspects of psychic life, prolonged by nineteenth-century psychiatry and still significant in Freud's theory of dream interpretation, is refreshed

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<sup>122</sup> "the parapsychology of the nineteenth century prolongs, in a degraded form, and with the aid of pseudo-physiological theory, the old traditions of sacred enthusiasm and the supernatural dictation of poetic speech"

<sup>123</sup> "there are many kinds of knowledge, and astrology could certainly be one of them, amongst the most significant, provided its claims are monitored and what is a postulate is held as a postulate"

<sup>124</sup> "from the spiritualist heritage, surrealism collects no more than images"

<sup>125</sup> "on all these points, Freudian rationalism was unable to give a satisfactory answer"



by the surrealists in the form of practices that combined fabulous inspiration with automatic availability. The dictation of thought made men mere receptacles for marvellous contents, operating at the limits of reverie and concrete life. Dialectic materialism could enrich the meaning of concrete life, while itself being enriched by incursions into reverie.

The notion of unconscious that emerges from the surrealist experience is detached from the cultural context in which it was conceived by Freud, that is, it is isolated from established scientific thinking as well as from the cultural milieu within which Freud's theory sat. This must be related, at least partially, to the influence of the avant-garde movements, and their arguments for a detachment from the traditional values of a reverential, civilised, progressive Europe. The notion of the unconscious offered by the surrealists is however not free from other ideological connotations. The movement sought to expand its appeal through a consistently positive allure, locating itself as an infinite source for the marvellous, but also as a social-revolutionary form. Artaud and Benjamin push these ideas to their extreme when they pick up some of the threads left by the surrealists in their approach to the unconscious.

## **PART II**

### **Artaud and Benjamin: Magic, Experience and the Unconscious**

#### 4. MAGIC

In Freud's approach, the unconscious is the sphere of psychic life that gives access to an ancestral and somewhat mystical past. This past, of indefinite historical character, can be described as a psychological and social configuration that has left remnants in the current setting of experience, one that can be accessed in various ways. The assumption of two different mind configurations, the current and the mystical one, implies two forms of understanding that transcend individual experience. While a few traces, to be found in the current mindset, guarantee access to the mystical sphere, those are mere inscriptions and are never readable in their totality. They are, at once, signs of survival and disappearance, of access and obstacle. These traces point to the process of decline of certain forms of life, while also acting as reminders of both the transience of cultural and social structures, and the urge to actively build ways of living from the discontinuity of the past.

In the writings of Antonin Artaud and Walter Benjamin, magic appears as a recurrent theme in the exploration of the forms of and means towards achieving truthful and significant experience, in opposition to the chronic condition that these authors name the dispossession or decay of experience. The question that seems to guide these explorations is whether and to what extent magic exists in the contemporary world. Their approach to the notion of the unconscious, and with it the sphere of magic, seems to be embedded in the legacy left by Freud and the surrealists. Artaud and Benjamin work, to some extent, against the grain of the scientific tendency of Freud's writings, as well as being in disagreement with some aspects of the incursion of surrealism into discussions of unconscious potentialities. While both writers depart from the scenario established by these two trends, they also resort to them at various points in their work.

The notion of unconscious is related, in Artaud and Benjamin's work, to prescientific forms of knowledge. It is not, however, restricted to offering access to a mythological, folkloric and ancestral past. The unconscious partakes in the enlargement of man's awareness and field of action, at the same time as being mobilised for processes that lead to alienation and the prevention of individual and collective accomplishment. It is approached as a space that shelters what magic and astrology used to reveal, operating as a substitute or remnant of this dimension in the secularised world. However, it is also the sphere engaged in manoeuvres that undermine individual and social development.

In the first texts approached in this chapter, Artaud's "Excursion Psychique" (1921) and Benjamin's "On Language as Such and on the Language of Men" (1915), the magical

dimension is expressed as “tucked away” in particular forms of contemporary life, such as dreams and poetry. While Benjamin’s approach to language as the aspect through which remains of divine powers can be exercised by men remains practically unchanged throughout his oeuvre, Artaud’s definition of magic in terms of practices of incantation is a undercurrent in his later writings, one that gains great strength in the last years of his life, while assuming a somewhat tragic character.

Surrealism is the next focus of the texts approached here: they concern Artaud’s publications in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, as well as some internal documents of the movement, all of which date from the period between 1925 and 1926. The pamphlet *À La Grande Nuit* (1928) is also covered in this section, since it offers a lucid account of Artaud’s view of the movement. Together with Benjamin’s essay “Surrealism: the Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia” (1929), they present the understanding of these authors of the presence of magic in surrealism. Finally, the texts “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1939) and “Lettre sur Lautréamont” (1946) propose a relationship between magic and the emerging theme of the masses or “general consciousness.” These texts are marked by a gloomy tone when identifying the operations in which the masses engage and are engaged.

Three sections constitute this chapter. The first compares texts of Artaud and Benjamin from 1921 and 1915 respectively, proposing a treatment of the notion of magic as a trace. In the second section, the surrealist texts of Artaud and the pamphlet *À La Grande Nuit* are juxtaposed with Benjamin’s 1929 essay on surrealism. The focus is on both authors’ assessments of surrealism in terms of its engagement with magic and communism. Finally, in the third section, texts from the late thirties and forties present their view of the masses and their singular association with enchantment and ritual practices. Within this framework, the sphere of magic undergoes a transformation, from having a restricted and almost marginal role, to participating in both authors’ speculations on processes that affect the whole of society. These three sections are preceded by a short introduction to the theme of magic, in which some of the different status it has had through the centuries are presented.

And finally, in the writings of Benjamin and Artaud, magic entertains a close relationship with the theme of transforming social structures and psychological experience. While for Benjamin this transformation takes the form of an engagement in organising the communist revolution, from the point of view of an intellectual, in Artaud it is a revolt against all forms of oppression, both material and spiritual. This connection is explored, by

both authors, through the theme of images, through which magical powers are mobilised either towards radical change or, conversely, towards the prevention of the conditions for this transformation. For Artaud, the enchantment works through the preclusion of the emergence of truth. For Benjamin, magic is deployed in both the enlargement of the human field of action and in the diversion of mass consciousness towards more self-absorbed forms of expression.

As a trace that allows for a deviance from the current world, via the past and opening up a view towards a different future, the reminiscent magic or simply “une nouvelle sorte de magie”<sup>126</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 238), retains the power of transformation that is associated, from its first appearances in the Old Persian term *magói*, to religious rites and the interpretation of dreams (Otto and Stausberg 16). The comparison between Artaud and Benjamin allows for an understanding of the extent to which, in their works, this form of “deviation” plays an active part in building the conditions for a transformative experience.

#### 4.1. Magic: An Introduction

According to Otto and Stausberg in *Defining Magic: A Reader*, the etymology of the word “magic” relates to the ancient appellative *maguš*, more commonly defined by Greek sources through the term *magói*, meaning those “in charge of religious rites such as sacrifices and the interpretation of dreams” (Otto and Stausberg 16). The *magói* were also functionaries at the Persian court. This lent the term, once it was incorporated into the Greek language, connotations relating to the military dispute between Greece and Persia. It became associated with charlatanism, fraud and unconventional rites, a meaning that remained present for the Greek and Roman authors who followed. Plato, for instance, condemned magical practices while relating them to the worship of Gods by Persians (Otto and Stausberg 16). In the Roman world, on the other hand, Plotinus opposed the general negative assumption by proposing a theory of the operations underlying both magic practices and thought (Otto and Stausberg 17).

Once the term was picked up by Christian authors in the first centuries of the Common Era, its meaning suffered major modifications. Polarised with religion, it signified fraudulent and undesirable rituals, related to entertaining an exclusive relation with demons and, consequently, with Satan. This meaning represented, according to Otto and Stausberg, the enhancement of “the negative stereotypes already implied in the Greek and Roman

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<sup>126</sup> “a new form of magic”

understanding of ‘magic’” (17). The magician was seen as an enemy of God, while the “common people” were at constant risk of being put in contact with demons. Thomas Aquinas exemplifies this in straightforward fashion in his 1274 book *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas affirms, in his traditionally rhetorical manner: “When things are used in order to produce an effect, we have to ask whether this is produced naturally” (Aquinas 50). If the answer to this question is negative, Aquinas maintains, “it follows that they are being used for the purpose of producing them [the effects], not as causes but only as signs, so that they come under the head of a compact entered into with the demonic” (50). The boundaries between magic and non-magic therefore become nebulous, and defined only *a posteriori*.

The work of Agrippa of Nettesheim, whose *De Occulta Philosophia* (or *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*) was published around 1510, also had a major impact on the understanding of the term. This early modern concept of magic covers, in practice, all aspects of human knowledge. Accordingly, in order to be a magician one should be versed in natural philosophy, mathematics and theology. Magic is, in this sense, “the most perfect, and chief science” (Agrippa 56). Consequently, anyone who intends to study and practice it cannot do so without being skilled in the above areas, “for there is no work that is done by mere magic, nor any work that is merely magical that doth not comprehend these three faculties” (Agrippa 58).

The notion of natural magic is Agrippa’s most influential. It is based on the understanding of the world as a threefold structure:

Seeing there is a threefold world, elementary, celestial, and intellectual, and every inferior is governed by its superior, and receiveth the influence of the virtues thereof, so that the very original, and chief Worker of all cloth by angels, the heavens, stars, elements, animals, plants, metals and stones convey from himself the virtues of omnipotency upon us. (Agrippa 55)

The nature-based conception of Agrippa therefore structures the world in three dimensions, departing from the model of an omnipotent force expressing itself in all things. In this scheme, the elementary world corresponds to human life on earth, while the celestial refers to the ethereal bodies. The human mind and soul, the angels and the demons, as well as God, are all situated in the intellectual world. In Agrippa’s scheme, a different type of magic corresponds to each of these worlds.

For the German writer, therefore, magic “instruct us concerning the differing, and agreement of things amongst themselves, whence it products its wonderful effects, by uniting

the virtues of things through the application of them one to the other” (Agrippa 56). Since it includes a thorough knowledge of all aspects of nature, magic is conceived as somehow intrinsically “natural,” that is, related to the correlation of the elements in the existing world. In relation to the threefold world, natural magic makes it possible for humans to ascend to the other spheres. In fact, the magician is a specialist in controlling the powers of the three dimensions: he or she seeks the virtues of the elementary world with the assistance of the sciences, and of the celestial world by means of doctrines, in order to join and confirm all of them “with the powers of diverse intelligence, through the sacred ceremonies of religion” (Agrippa 55). In this third aspect of the world, an “intellectual” dimension validates the knowledge acquired from the other spheres, and the magic becomes ceremonial.

The notion of natural magic in Agrippa’s work is equated with “natural philosophy,” that is, the knowledge acquired from both experience and abstraction in the living world, with the help of the sciences. These might be strictly “scientific,” such as physics, or they might be of another order, as in the case of astrology or mathematics. However, such forms of existing knowledge are only the means: the magic ultimately has to be validated by the intellectual dimension implied by the existence of the soul and the higher beings. Agrippa’s notion of magic is therefore of mixed formation. Its main contribution lies in the establishment of a comprehension deeply rooted in the study of nature and the existing world. In relation to previous approaches, especially those of Christian writers, it enhanced an affirmative interpretation of magic that had started with the works of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, both authors who had already “regarded ‘magic’ as an elementary force pervading all sorts of natural processes” (Otto and Stausberg 17). In this sense, the tradition that includes Agrippa promoted the notion of magic “to the rank of a new philosophical discipline that ought to systematically investigate this natural force” (Otto and Stausberg 17).

In sum, the notion of magic emerging from Agrippa’s approach is that of a “wonderful virtue” containing the “most profound contemplation of most secret things” (Agrippa 56), things which represent the knitting together of different elements of nature through the powers of the superior bodies. The nineteenth-century idea of magic as the direction and controlling of forces of nature therefore owes much to Agrippa’s *magia naturalis*, as is apparent in the work of authors such as Helena Blavatsky. However, before the rediscovery of magic could take the form of an approach to the “hidden mysteries of Nature,” the eighteenth century account, marked by the world vision of the enlightenment, would also

leave its impression, and its contempt towards magical practices would continue to resonate in later eras.

In his famous *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisoné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, edited between 1751 and 1780, Denis Diderot defines magic as “the daughter of ignorance and pride” (60). However he also distinguishes three types of magic: divine, natural and supernatural, identifying the latter with Agrippa’s notions of celestial and ceremonial magic. In fact, it is only this latter category that Diderot disdains. He begins by defining the general notion of magic in the following fashion: “magic, considered the science of the first mages, was nothing but the study of wisdom; for at the time it was well-taken” (Diderot 60). In a second moment, while identifying magic with ancient forms of wisdom, Diderot pointed to a time of decay in which men, through such knowledge, “succumb to the temptation to appear greater than human” (Diderot 60). It is to the knowledge emerging from this attempt that he attaches the meanings of “illusory and contemptible,” also relating it to barbarism, coarseness and savage peoples.

While this suggests a description of magic more characteristic of the enlightenment’s project, Diderot manages to keep some ambiguity through his threefold distinction. Divine magic, for instance, is defined in a strictly biblical manner, since it is related to the practices that allow the “knowledge of the plans and visions of sovereign wisdom that God (in his grace) has revealed to holly men filled with his spirit” (Diderot 60). Magic is considered here to be independent of one’s knowledge and will, a gift from God and, therefore, beyond one’s engagement and interest. Natural magic, in turn, is conceived as the “in-depth study of nature and the amazing secrets that we find there” (Diderot 60). Although apparently inoffensive, this latter category is also related to the superstitious tendencies of dark magic. Diderot’s decisive blow comes with the affirmation that humanity, with the advent of science, is gradually “recovering” from this kind of attitude:

The awareness of this so-called natural magic is, even in the eyes of the multitude, continually retreating. Under the light of science we are, happily, continuously discovering the secrets and systems of nature, supported by many sound experiences which show humanity of what it is capable itself and without magic. (Diderot 61)

Here the distinction and even opposition between magic and science becomes clear. When describing what he calls “supernatural magic,” that is, what “is properly called magic” (Diderot 61), and which leads its subjects to an ignorance of science, Diderot has Agrippa as



a target. He ostensibly disqualifies the work of the medieval writer, though without going into detail. Characterised as a “confused heap of obscure, ambiguous and inconclusive principles,” and as “pathetic collections of material” (Diderot 61), Agrippa’s scholarship is reduced to an arbitrary system of useless practices, which are moreover a stimulus to errors and prejudices on the part of people. In contrast, “philosophy’s ultimate task is to finally disabuse humanity of these imaginary humiliations” (Diderot 62), by leading the public towards the recognition of scientific values.

Diderot adds a cultural anecdote to his encyclopaedic entry on magic, probably in order to prevent malignant associations. While praising the fact that “in countries where people think, reflect and doubt, demons play a small role and diabolical magic remains discredited and held in contempt” (Diderot 62) — assumingly Europe —, he goes on to describe medieval proceedings against sorcerers and witches as acts of people “blinded by the unhappy passions of envy and vengeance” (Diderot 62). It could be said that for Diderot, while magic is the childish system of barbaric peoples, the persecution of it represents a departure from reason that is no less foolish. Finally, Diderot’s conclusion is that the end of the horrors of the inquisition owed much to the rise of science.

The enlightenment’s attitude of disdain towards magic remained a major trend until the “rediscovery” of mysticism in the late nineteenth century. Terms such as “occultism” and “esotericism” would then emerge, surrounded by language that, once again, defined magic as the bearer of powers and hidden truths of existence. It represented, therefore, a continuation of the “long and on-going history of positive interpretations of the concept of ‘magic’ in Western history” (Otto and Stausberg 64). However a psychological aspect was added to the early modern vision. Magic was seen not only as the system and the practices organised around a particular wisdom, but also as an expression of what takes place in one’s own experience in relation to this structure. Helena Blavatsky is one of the main voices in this nascent Western esotericism. She redefined magic in line with the occult powers of nature, while at the same time giving it a new psychological touch, in consonance with the concerns of her time.

Blavatsky’s definition is as follows: “Magic is the science of communicating with and directing supernatural, supramundane Potencies, as well as of commanding those of the lower spheres” (Blavatsky 65-6). Here one sees the shift of focus from acquiring knowledge to interfering with nature through knowledge. Human beings are the bearers and masters of an ability that allows governance of the forces of life. The more explicit psychological aspect of

it is expressed in the statement that “faith (in one’s own self) is an essential element in magic, and existed long before other ideas which presume its existence” (Mackenzie qtd. in Blavatsky 66). That is, in order to be a magician one needs not only to gather all possible knowledge in relation to ways of understanding and governing the forces of nature, but also to increase one’s own mental abilities far beyond the average, “almost to madness,” for “a pursuit of this science implies a certain amount of isolation and *an abnegation of Self*” (Blavatsky 66). The limited number of magicians is therefore justified by the fact that this science is very difficult to acquire, not only in terms of learning, but also in terms of the psychological preparation it demands.

Therefore, departing from a vaguely negative origin in antiquity, the notion of magic acquired positive interpretations, particularly during the early modern period, which related it to the understanding of nature and all existing things. Following a long period of relative neglect, it was reanimated by Christian authors, who set it in opposition to religion and sacred matters. It began to emerge in the writings of authors who united under the concept of magic knowledge of the material and immaterial worlds and the attempt to ascend to higher levels of experience. The enlightenment period represented a retreat of the notion to the margins of valuable learning. While it was recognised as once having been part of the origins of wisdom, it was generally seen as a decayed and arbitrary system, leading to error.

Finally, the nineteenth century would see a renaissance of the positive aspects of magic for the emerging groups occupied with esotericism, occultism and spiritual practices. In this context, according to Antoine Faivre in *Access to Western Esotericism*, nature should be known and experienced as alive in all its parts (Faivre 10). In order to understand the connections between these parts, imagination and mediation are required, including the use of rituals, symbols and intermediary beings. Together with the concept of transmutation, namely that the knowledge of magic is inseparable from one’s experience of it, these features characterise the approach to magical practices of the early twentieth century, the increased interest in which was also propelled by surrealism.

The surrealist approach to magic, as explored above, takes at least two different forms: the experience of profane forms of magic such as hypnosis and clairvoyance, and the conceptual appropriation of notions such as automatism and mental alchemy. The approaches of Artaud and Benjamin, as will become clear in the following pages, are highly influenced by surrealism. However, they give much subtler and deeper accounts of magic when

compared to the avant-movement. In this sense, both authors resurrect a number of trends surrounding the uses of magic that were present at different historical moments.

#### 4.2. Psychic Excursion

The writing life of Antonin Artaud could be described as being deeply tied to disruption. In 1916 and 1918 he published poems and short texts, around the same time at which he received a diagnosis of hereditary syphilis and was required to undergo injection treatments. At the age of twenty-four, Artaud was entrusted by his parents to Édouard Toulouse, a famous psychiatrist who also dabbled as an amateur in arts and literature (Grossman *Œuvres* 1712). Toulouse edited the magazine *Demain* (“Tomorrow”), to which Artaud contributed various articles between 1921 and 1922.

Toulouse’s psychiatric approach was guided neither by the principles of enclosure and constraint — which Artaud would experience a decade later — nor by the values of physical treatment. Having fought against psychiatric confinement himself, Toulouse proposed “open door” treatment, an important component of which was Artaud’s collaboration on *Demain* (Baillaud 190). Consequently, while staying at Toulouse’s clinic near Paris, Artaud wrote and published extensively under the encouragement of both the physician and his wife, Geneviève Toulouse. The texts appear in a range of different forms, from poetry to short essays on theatre, cinema, and art exhibitions. Most already exhibit the concise and passionate style later identified with Artaud. According to Grossman (*Œuvres* 24), the same can be said of his creative force, which was characterised from the beginning by an ability to write many different types of piece within a short period of time.

One of the most remarkable texts written by Artaud during this period is called “Excursion Psychique.” It is a two-page account of the world of magic, presented in an outspoken manner. Written in the summer of 1921 for *Demain*, it ended up not being published. In it Artaud envisions the close connection between magic and death as a means of exploring the intrinsic secret of life, the mystery of existence itself. In this sense, the title seems to make a double allusion: both to the article’s theme and to Artaud’s digression into it. The piece opens with the following statement:

Le point de départ de la magie réside dans l’incantation. Le mot de magie éveille confusément dans l’entendement de la plupart l’idée de pratiques

occultes capables d'éveiller les forces sombres de la nature et d'asservir jusqu'aux phantasmes de la mort. Et c'est en partie vrai.<sup>127</sup> (*Œuvres* 28)

The notion of magic as approached here is related to incantation, a theme that impregnates Artaud's work as a whole. According to him, the enchanting practice of incantation is the "starting point" of magic. At the same time, he denies that magic is "ce fait seul de [dévoiler] les rapports des choses créées, de jouer avec le temps et la distance, et les antagonismes des éléments"<sup>128</sup> (*Œuvres* 28).

By situating the original element of magic at the point of mediation, that is, where human actions intersect with non-human forces, Artaud's text aligns itself with the trend of nineteenth-century magic, which located the source of natural magic in the self. Artaud, however, clearly intends to expand on the commonsensical notion of incantation, by moving towards the assumption of a broad group of occult practices only partially related to magic. The latter are "cet ensemble de pratiques quasi historiques, les attributions très précises de tels personnages merveilleux, cette galerie de fantômes humains, qu'on appelle magiciens, sorciers, derviches, fakirs"<sup>129</sup> (*Œuvres* 28-9). For Artaud it is not only human desire that awakens in intelligence the inspiration to seek the marvellous power of magic. This group of ancient practices, which differ for Artaud from vulgar conjuring, is also responsible for this inspiration.

Aware of the risks involved in the evocations of such figures of "mysterious flora," Artaud replaces his inaugural claim that existing ideas on magic are *en partie vrai* ("partially true") with a jesting complaint about humanity's inability to construct general visions into valid notions. As it is not uncommon in Artaud's texts, at this point he intercalates general assessments of the state of culture with the text's particular theme. In this case, he does so by mentioning the famous grimoire attributed to Albertus Magnus,<sup>130</sup> which Artaud describes as "ce régal des cuisinières hystériques"<sup>131</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). Artaud rejects the set format that had become popular in relation to incantation practices, while at the same time advocating a strict

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<sup>127</sup> "The starting point of magic lies in incantation. In the mind of most people, the word 'magic' awakens confusing ideas of occult practices capable of awakening the dark forces of nature and enslaving even the ghosts of death. And this is partly true."

<sup>128</sup> "this fact alone of [revealing] the relations between created things, of playing with time and distance, and with the antagonism of elements"

<sup>129</sup> "this set of quasi-historical practices, the careful attributions of such wonderful characters, the gallery of human ghosts called magicians, sorcerers, dervishes, fakirs"

<sup>130</sup> *Les Secrets d'Albert le Grand* first appeared in 1703. It is in fact wrongly attributed to the German monk Albertus Magnus [1193-1280], the master of St. Thomas Aquinas (Artaud *Œuvres* I,1 305).

<sup>131</sup> "this feast of hysterical culinarians"

distinction between magicians and chemists/conjurors. The replacement of “common sense” with appropriate notions — here highlighted by the distinction between “culinarians” (chemists/conjurors) and proper magicians — allow men to break from the confusion that constitutes general culture. By rejecting a banal approach to magic, the result of the recent resurgence of mysticism, Artaud situates the magical field elsewhere, out of sight, accessible only through an evocation of past figures and their rituals.

In relation to the broad corpus of Artaud’s work, the rejection of popular culture is not an isolated act. What is remarkable in this early approach to magic, however, is the apparently ambiguous definition of the notion as based on incantation practices — a rejection of the transcendental viewpoint — and the privileging of a field that had nothing to do with popular forms of magic ritual at the time. This focus is apparent in the statement that follows Artaud’s evocation of past magical figures: “nous ne savons pas s’il a jamais existé dans la suite des jours des magiciens tels qu’il en pousse à tout bout de champ sur la terre bénie des *Mille et une Nuits*”<sup>132</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). This ambivalent gesture of contempt and fascination towards a past and, in Artaud’s time popularised, wisdom can also to be found in surrealism, to which Artaud would ally himself three years later. In the same way, the attraction of surrealism to a new kind of mysticism, mediated by the notion of *merveilleux* (“marvellous”), incorporated the rejection of any traditional forms of spiritualism.

Despite his rejection of figures and rituals of the time, Artaud revisits a common theme in nineteenth century magic, namely the connection between magic and death. Artaud suggests, in “Excursion Psychique,” that death is a medium for the exploration of the primal dimension of life. For him, it is through the investigation of death “que nous rencontrerions le secret de l’emprise divine et de la configuration spirituelle du monde”<sup>133</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). The reason for that, according to Artaud, lies in the high probability that, once spirits are relieved of their “corporal crust” and finally capable of returning to the spiritual circuit, they are immediately able to penetrate the mystery of the origin of things, whatever that may be.

The question of how one might explore the world of death remains moot. At this point, by establishing an association between the state of sleep and the afterlife — probably relating to the provisional or permanent “abandonment” of the body — Artaud announces a medium that allows one *se promener* (“to wander”) on this plane. That medium is hypnosis. For Artaud, this technique “délivre en nous le subconscient au visage de verre et l’envoie

<sup>132</sup> “We do not know whether there ever existed, in the days following [ancient practices], magicians such as those that recurrently emerged from the blessed land of *The Arabian Nights*.”

<sup>133</sup> “that we encounter the secret of divine influence and of the spiritual configuration of the world”

s'ébattre en liberté sur les lisières de l'autre monde"<sup>134</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). The intriguing reference to a *visage de verre* ("face of glass") may be related to the sinister facial expression that Artaud identifies in the sleeper. Because the fixed body is "left behind" once one is no longer awake, and because experience in the dimensions of both sleep and hypnosis is disturbing by dint of lying "at the edges of the other world," the hypnotised's face appears as somehow rigid, encapsulated, trapped. After all, for Artaud, to venture into the world of magic reveals the "other world" in all its rigidity. Such pursuit can only be freeing in the sense that it allows one to get in touch with the spiritual dimension of life.

It is interesting to notice that in an alternative version of this same text, disseminated by Geneviève Toulouse and reproduced in the first book of Artaud's *Œuvres Complètes*, hypnosis is both linked with science and set in opposition to ancient incantation practices. Artaud begins by conjecturing that nature, "qui a joint si miraculeusement en nous l'impondérable au connaissable" (Artaud *Œuvres I,1* 305), has left in humans a bridge to the unknown, that is, to the "superior" dimension of life. Artaud here introduces the idea that the *souffle* or spirit is made from the same material in both humans and this other world. Otherwise, he asks, how could the spirits recognise themselves, once they join the afterlife? This element works in the text as an argument for the supposed connection between the two worlds or dimensions. Acknowledging this, Artaud argues:

Mais lorsqu'il y a une cinquantaine d'années la Science a cru avoir trouvé le moyen d'émouvoir l'Emmanuel Immanent, de faire converser ces impondérables, d'amener à la face de la conscience les signes de l'au-delà au moyen des miroirs, de boules, de passes et de tout l'appareil des hypnotiseurs, qu'a-t-elle fait du rituel ancien des pratiques magiques ou autrement dit de l'Incantation?<sup>135</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres I,1* 305)

Here science is envisioned as having interfered between the two worlds, obstructing their communication while precisely claiming to have brought them closer. Consequently, even hypnosis, while it represents the efforts of science to move the immanent dimension,<sup>136</sup> is aligned with other senseless practices that try to bring the other world to conscious

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<sup>134</sup> "delivers in us the subconscious with a face of glass, and sends it to play freely at the edges of the other world"

<sup>135</sup> "But while for fifty years Science has believed it had found a way to move the Immanent Emmanuel, to converse these imponderables, to bring to the forefront of consciousness the signs of the beyond, by using mirrors, bowls, passes and all the apparatus of hypnotists, what has it made of the ancient ritual of magic practices, in other words, of Incantation?"

<sup>136</sup> The reference to "Emmanuel Immanent" could not otherwise be tracked.

awareness. Artaud again opposes these practices to the ancient rites of incantation, evoking caricatured forms of mediation: mirrors, bowls and passes. At the same time, the identification of “Incantation” with ancient magic rituals shows how closely connected Artaud understands these two dimensions to be, while the capitalised use of this and other words in this version of the text denotes their difference from common sense uses. Finally, if hypnosis is part of an artificial effort by science to bring signs of the other world to consciousness, and by means of caricatured methods, what else can serve as a significant means to explore the magic dimension?

Artaud finds himself at an impasse in the fact that spiritual life is misleadingly related, in popular culture, to the other world through practices dissimilar from Incantation in its original form. At the same time, this spiritual life is unable in itself to create a true connection with this other dimension. Artaud proposes the following: “seulement alors que nous fatiguons les Esprits de nos puérils radotages, de nos malsaines préoccupations et nous laissons asservir par eux, ils avaient trouvé le moyen de leur commander”<sup>137</sup> (*Œuvres I, I* 305). Artaud here introduces the theme of spiritual cleansing or refinement, in which the bad features of one’s character must be purged before the spiritual dimension can take over. This is a form of restoration of the original forces of the spirit, which maintains the above-mentioned connection with the superior world.

Artaud’s text retains a witty approach to magic rituals and beliefs. Referring to the manuals of magic, for instance, he argues: “il est assez évident qu’il importerait assez peu à l’homme de pouvoir renverser l’ordre des éléments, s’il n’avait pas de prise sur le vertigineux déchaînement des phantasmes de la mort”<sup>138</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). Here, the reversing of elements, a typical alchemic theme, is mocked as an irrelevant motive in the face of the control over the mysteries of death. The same can be said for the reference to science, and its alleged seriousness and ability in relation to the imponderable features of the spirit, which results, for Artaud, in no more than the production of “the whole apparatus of hypnotists.”

In these aspects, “Excursion Psychique” presents many themes that will prove to be central to Artaud’s oeuvre, such as the paralysed body and dispossession. Regarding the

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<sup>137</sup> “it is only when we wear out the Spirits with our puerile nonsense, our insalubrious concerns, and let ourselves be enslaved by them, that they will have found a way to control them.” — The construction proposed by Artaud is not very clear. We understand the last phrase as referring to the Spirits [they] commanding the “unhealthy” aspects of inner life [them]. These “unhealthy” aspects constitute, for Artaud, intrinsic impediments to the free exercising of magic powers.

<sup>138</sup> “it is quite clear that it would not matter much for man to be able to reverse the order of the elements, if he had not taken control over the vertiginous charge of the phantoms of death”

latter, the vision of death as a dispossession or *dépouillement* (“denudation”) retains in this context the sense of a liberation, the character of which is not necessarily positive. That is, while death is a privileged theme in the approach to magic, here understood as the access to life’s mystery, the liberation it promotes from the limiting body does not necessarily represent a deliverance of the soul. The particular kind of deliverance it promotes unites an experience of awareness and realisation with the exposure of the rigid parts of spiritual life.

In this text, the attraction exerted by magic in relation to death is neither related to a morbid impulse towards the world of the dying, nor to the act of leaving life in itself. Instead, Artaud claims, while referring to the Ancient Egyptian knowledge of words capable to keep the soul within the borders between life and death, that: “c’est là que se révèle la solennelle puissance de l’Incantation”<sup>139</sup> (*Œuvres I, I* 305). On the same lines, he states: “l’incantation a pu servir par la suite à capter les forces brutes de la nature, mais la grande vertu de la Magie réside dans la subjugation de la Mort”<sup>140</sup> (*Œuvres* 29). In this sense, Artaud deviates from the traditional vein of natural magic, not only because he proposes incantation as a point of departure, but also because he situates the true scope of this practice within the investigation of death. In this, his approach also differs from that of the mainstream elements of the nineteenth-century magical renaissance.

Finally, Artaud’s account of magic in “Excursion Psychique” focuses on a discussion of the practices capable of controlling the forces of death in order to understand the secret of life. These acts of incantation are traced back to an ancient line of characters which apparently no longer exist. At the same time, a recent technique, that of hypnosis, is highlighted as a possible medium for the exploration of the worlds of sleep, death, and therefore magic — even if this is expressed with reservations. In fact, Artaud proposes that the fascination with magic comes precisely from the possibility, attributed by him to wisdom from Ancient Egypt, of exploring the limits between life and death. Only as a secondary aspect magic should be occupied, through incantation, with collecting and directing the forces of nature.

The terms in which Artaud treats the notion of magic in this early text point in particular to the original relationship he conceives of between this field and the “quasi-historical” figures that once incarnated its powers, as well as to a mediating dimension implicated in the operation of magic. Generally speaking, however, the approach to magic in

<sup>139</sup> “there the solemn power of Incantation reveals itself”

<sup>140</sup> “incantation has been used subsequently to capture the raw forces of nature, but the highest virtue of Magic lies in the subjugation of Death”



“Excursion Psychique” is somewhat detached compared to the tone adopted by Artaud in later works, when referring to different aspects of *envoûtement* (“enchantment”). This notion occupies an important place in the author’s understanding of the “constitutional infirmity of his being,” as well as in the humorous and correlated forms of dealing with and escaping from the dispossession of one’s own experience.

Perhaps the detached tone of the text can be related to an external cause. In a letter to Geneviève Toulouse in September 1921, with which Artaud encloses the article for publication, he comments on the text: “l’ Excursion Psychique est une mise au point dans le mode littéraire et d’un style assagi, rien qui puisse effaroucher qui que ce soit”<sup>141</sup> (*Œuvres I,2* 87). This statement firstly draws attention to the fact that Artaud considers the text to be set in a literary style, the result of an effort he only rarely employs. In his own words to G. Toulouse: “vous savez pourtant bien la peine qu’on a à caser sa littérature”<sup>142</sup> (*Œuvres I,2* 87). In this sense, compared to other productions from the same period, this text approaches an abstract theme in a more concise and impersonal way, even if one can find some characteristic features of Artaud in it, as discussed above. Artaud also suggests that his texts had already provoked some form of protest or discomfort by underlining the harmlessness of “Excursion Psychique,” and its suitability for the magazine.

“Excursion Psychique” proposes, in its features and particularities, the importance of the aspect of magic in Artaud’s world vision from very early on, even if the theme underwent important changes in the course of his work. The most original aspect of the text is the presentation of the spiritual world, accessible through incantation, as offering an experience of both liberation and limitation, of *délivrance* (“deliverance”) and *dépouillement* (“denudation”), but also of *radotages* (“drivel”) and caricatured rigidity. Both aspects are related, at this point in Artaud’s vision, to the powerful force of death.

### 4.3. Magic Immediacy

While the notion of magic in Artaud’s work is explicitly approached from very early on, the first writings of Benjamin are focused on the thematisation of youth, as well as of the means for its “awakening.” This is related to his participation in what is known today as the *Die Deutsche Jugendbewegung* (“The German Youth Movement”) in the years before the

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<sup>141</sup> “Psychic Excursion is focused on the literary mode and on a mature style, nothing that would frighten anyone”

<sup>142</sup> “yet you know the trouble one has finding room for one’s literature”

First World War. Focused on educational and cultural reform, this organisation may have served as a platform for the elaboration of Benjamin's own ideas at the time, which already represented a mixture of values drawing from German Romanticism as well as from a free approach to Jewish mysticism, not to mention the reformist trend particularly influenced by Gustav Wyneken.<sup>143</sup> Benjamin's first short texts are therefore focused not so much on calls to action as with the reorientation of the reader's view on society and on the need for change. Although the aspect of magic is not explicitly brought up by Benjamin in his early writings, it is however not absent.

As a philosophy student in Freiburg and Berlin, Benjamin published essays on metaphysics as well as on poetics and language. It is in particular while dealing with the latter subject that he introduces the notion of magic, in relation to his conception of language as a spiritual and ultimately divine feature of humanity. The analysis presented here focuses on the article "On Language as Such and on the Language of Men," written in 1915 and published only posthumously. It is the result of a meditation by Benjamin on the theme of language, which started as a response to a conversation with Scholem initiated earlier that year (Scholem *Friendship* 43). In his text, Benjamin asserts that "all communication of spiritual contents is language" (*Early* 251), pointing to both a "spiritualist" approach to language and a far-reaching conceptualisation of it. However, the feature of an intimate address, originally directed to Scholem, is maintained throughout the text, while a number of assertions remain scarcely explained, as if the author was hastily trying to define, through a dialogue, what so far had remained unclear.

This dialogical character is visible from the essay's first sentence. Benjamin is guided by the search for an answer to the following question: Is it possible to talk about a language of music, of sculpture, of technology, which is not identical with the specialised language of such fields? His elaboration on this issue proceeds as follows: "every manifestation of the life of the spirit in humanity can be understood as a kind of language" (*Early* 251). All the above-mentioned expressions are thus languages, and consequently there are as many languages as there are life manifestations. The reason for this diversity, according to Benjamin, lies in the fact that language, in these contexts, is the principle that orients the communication of the spiritual or intellectual contents of the subjects concerned. Therefore, sculpture

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<sup>143</sup> Gustav Wyneken [1875-1964] was a German educational reformer under whose guidance Benjamin studied between 1905 and 1906. According to Wyneken, the awakening of youth should take the form of living culture, which he understood to be a transformation of tradition in the light of present-day experience (Eiland 2). Benjamin cut short their relationship when Wyneken supported the militarisation of Germany before the war.

communicates in the language of sculpture, and all other spiritual contents are communicated in a language specific to their origin, be that living beings or matter.

What language communicates, for Benjamin, is the *gesitiges Wesen* (“spiritual essence”) of things (*Early* 253). That is, contents are not located outside language and expressed *through* language, but located *in* it, since what is communicable in a spiritual entity *is* its language. This communicable aspect of things is language itself. One might say, in the case of sculpture, for example, that what is communicable in a statue is no more than its sculptural language. Humans may, and often do, relate such language to the language of living beings, and therefore to certain ideas. In these cases, however, the communication of a sculpture remains strictly “sculptural.”

The question that then emerges for Benjamin concerns the *Unmittelbarkeit* (“immediacy”) of language: the actual and immediate communication of spiritual contents. How does this process take place? To whom are all these languages communicating? Because languages are what they communicate, their being cannot be limited: there is always an incommensurable aspect to every language, since instead of translating things into language, languages communicate the spiritual essence of things. It is precisely this last feature that can never be exhausted, because, despite being able to communicate itself only through language, reality is inexhaustible. According to Benjamin, the fact that languages communicate can be called *magisch* (“magic”) (*Early* 258). Magic, here used in an attributive way, is the most distinctive feature of this definition of language, which is capable of expressively transmitting spiritual essences, without depleting them or the things they express.

Benjamin then attempts to demonstrate the operation of “the language of men,” through which this immediacy takes place. He begins by highlighting the self-evident fact that humans speak in words. Therefore, he asserts, man “communicates his own spiritual being (insofar as it is communicable) *by naming* all other things” (*Early* 254). At the same time, the act of naming recognises that all aspects of the material world are communicating with men, in their own various languages, to the point that man communicates with them by giving them a name. That is, “if the lamp and the mountain and the fox did not communicate themselves to man, how could he name them? For he names them; *he* communicates himself in naming *them*” (*Early* 254). According to Benjamin, this does not constitute a form of anthropomorphism, being based on the fact that one knows of no other naming language than that of humans. If the act of naming is how humans communicate, it is also how their essence, reminiscent of divine powers, is expressed.

Moving through Benjamin's text, it is possible to follow the evolution of this pattern towards his final spiritual comprehension of language. The author interrogates the addressee of human communication. In other words, why do humans name things? According to a common notion, this is due to the necessity for communication between men. For Benjamin, this vision is not only equivocated, but also the product of a "bourgeois conception of language," according to which men communicate themselves *through* names, not *in* them. In this case, it is not one's own spiritual content that is communicated through language, but things themselves. In this bourgeois conception of language, the word is the means of communication, "its object [is] the thing, and its addressee a human being" (*Early* 255).

In opposition to this, Benjamin resumes his approach as the following: "the other conception of language, in contrast, knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It says: *in the name, the spiritual being of man communicates itself to God*" (*Early* 255). By accepting that the content of linguistic communication is the spiritual essence of existing things, which are, in turn, their own language as much as they are communicable, one arrives at the conclusion that human beings can only communicate themselves, their spiritual being, to a dimension able to capture this form of expression. According to Benjamin, this constitutes "no addressee," indicating that God is understood here more in terms of a philosophical category than a religious entity.

This communication takes place "in the name." Here it is possible to conjecture that, if the immediacy of language, namely the fact that it communicates, is designated "magic," the act of naming is, in itself, of a divine nature. One does not have to go back to the book of Genesis, which is the reference employed by Benjamin, to surmise that the act of nomination retains an originary feature in relation to the nominated things. The "set of quasi-historical practices" related to different incantation rituals, as indicated by Artaud, maintained and re-enacted such powers through the centuries, against the backdrop of various cultures, as the characters of *sorciers*, fakirs and dervishes illustrate. Here the use of the expression "quasi-historical" is precise in its very indefiniteness, especially if one considers the nebulous status of such practices in relation to a logical account of human history.

The name is, therefore, "the inmost essence of language itself," and "only for this reason is the spiritual essence of man, alone among all forms of spirit, entirely communicable" (Benjamin *Early* 255). In other words, the magical language that "speaks" from man in his ability to name things is at the same time the expression of his own essence and a form of communication between the essences of things. Benjamin asserts, once more,

that the essence of man lies in the exercising of this magical power over things, reminiscent of divine creative powers. Benjamin makes here a connection with the notion of revelation, which he defines through the following formula: the most precise and definitive expression of things is at the same time a purely spiritual expression. The revelation of God or the divine in language, therefore, is an intrinsic part of the act of naming, at the same time being a limited but creative human act.

Scholem, in his book *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, exemplifies the notion of revelation through the biblical episode in which a voice spoke to Moses from the Sinai. This voice, not meaningful in itself, represents “that which is capable of assuming meaning, which needs interpretation in the medium of language in order to be understood” (Scholem *Messianic* 50). At first incomprehensible, the voice of God thereby acquires a frame that renders it utterable. In Judaism, particularly, that frame is related to tradition, which begins with the fixation of the divine expression into words, so that it may become comprehensible to men, before it can reach the state in which it becomes law, that is, a way of life determined by revelation.

In Benjamin’s work, the act of naming is also the provider of such a frame. Divine creativity, when operated by men, becomes knowledge: “man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator” (*Early* 259). It is through the essences that silently radiate from things that the divine word is captured by men, giving birth to knowledge. The language of things themselves, “from out of which the word of God silently radiates in the mute magic of nature” (*Early* 261), is translated into that of man. According to Benjamin, things “can communicate among one another only through a more or less material community. This community is immediate and infinite, like that of every linguistic communication; it is magic (for there is also a magic of matter)” (*Early* 258).

The relative “mute magic of nature,” as mentioned above, does not exclude the communication of things among themselves, in the form of a community whose efficacy, like that of every language community, is defined by Benjamin as magic. The translation of nameless into name departs from a “communicating muteness” of things, which man not only expresses in his own language, but also transforms, by adding something to it, in the form of knowledge. According to Benjamin, what distinguishes the language of men from other languages is the use of sound. The *magic* lies in both the facts that things are able to communicate themselves and among themselves, as well as that man communicates his own

essence by expressing such things. Consequently, the human spiritual being is completely dependent on the communication of things, and intrinsically magic.

By the end of the article, Benjamin proposes a displacement of the notions he has developed thus far, arguing that the magical power within human language, that contained in the act of naming, is only residual. For him, this is metaphorically marked by the passage in the book of Genesis in which the fall from paradise takes place. As Benjamin argues: “In stepping outside the pure language of name, man makes language a means (that is, a knowledge inappropriate to him), and therefore also, in one part at any rate, a *mere* sign; and this later results in the plurality of languages” (*Early* 264). From being immanently magic, therefore, language becomes *expressly* magic: its instrumental aspect becomes prominent. However, as Oneide Perius highlights (101), the Adamic language remains present, in the language’s very structure, as the ideal of fair expression, that is, as a constitutive dimension of language. Here, as in other cases, Benjamin’s notion of origin does not refer to a chronological location, but locates the operation of an actual thing as a place of convergence of different temporalities. Benjamin’s theory of language thus distinguishes from both an instrumental and a mystical approach. In the first case, it is because magical immediacy, in his theory, remains a possibility in the structure of language. And in the second case, it is because for Benjamin words are not, in themselves, the essence of things, but rather the expression of essences.

In this scenario the “muteness” of nature in relation to the sound language of men becomes an act of mourning, the mourning of its own ability to fully communicate. That is, if the remaining magic aspect of language is not exercised, nature remains silent. This situation is close to the generalisation Benjamin earlier called the “bourgeois conception of language,” in which the human being is envisioned as communicating different contents through language, and not being in it, that is, not taking part in the communication of things. Consequently, in relation to the present necessary mediation of all communication, Benjamin asserts: “the enslavement of language in empty talk is followed by the enslavement of things in folly almost as its inevitable consequence” (*Early* 264). The author here relates to the bourgeoisie both the meaningless talk and the ornamental use of objects, a theme he resumes many times over.

In the scenario portrayed by Benjamin, men’s entanglements with language as a limited and, at the same time, powerful human feature signifies the engagement with the residues of a magic dimension that used to be immanent. This diagnosis marks Benjamin’s

understanding of this notion throughout his oeuvre. The essay finishes with an interesting notation: “the language of nature is comparable to a secret password that each sentry passes to the next in his own language, but the content of the password is the sentry’s language itself” (Benjamin *Early* 267). That is, if on the one hand reality expresses itself only through language, on the other hand it exists to human beings solely in that they are able to express it.

#### 4.4. Remaining Traces

The two texts from Artaud and Benjamin presented here allow the reader to visualise their early approaches to magic. They represent a starting point that was subject to both dispersion and restoration in their later writings. For while the theme of magic appears in different guises in Artaud and Benjamin’s works, some of the basic assumptions concerning it are already present in the essays introduced here. While Artaud locates the starting point of magic in practices of incantation connected both to past magical figures and the exploration of the theme of death, Benjamin delimitates its residual character within the human use of language. In formal terms, Artaud’s text is a short account apparently written expressly for the magazine *Demain*. Its style is evocative and spontaneous, in common with many texts of Artaud. Benjamin’s has as its starting point a dialogue with a friend, and was reworked, over a fairly long period, into an academic text. Bearing in mind the different scope of the two essays, this section is intended to provide an initial comparative approach to the authors’ assessment of magic, presenting the hypothesis that it is envisioned by both in terms of a trace.

In “Excursion Psychique” Artaud presents magic as intrinsically related to the themes of incantation and death. This implies that the encounter with the magical dimension encompasses an important human facet, and a depersonalisation. Acts of incantation are traced back to an ancient line of rituals that apparently no longer take place, while the exploration of the magical dimension at present might be facilitated by recent techniques, such as that of hypnosis. According to Artaud, all these aspects can be subsumed under the exploration of the limits between life and death, one that originated in Ancient Egypt and survived for centuries to the present day. For Benjamin, in turn, magic appears in terms of the immediacy of language, while the human use of it is described, through the notion of denomination, as the translation of the language of things into that of men. In this sense, the magic dimension is a survival element that maintains a relationship with a different world configuration.

Here the German word for trace, *Spur*, will be used to access the meaning of magic in the works of Artaud and Benjamin. Freud's use of *Spur* clarifies its multiplicity of senses. As in the English equivalent, these vary in intensity and context, encompassing meanings such as track, lead, mark, sign and vestige. Freud, resuming his first attempts at schematising the psychic apparatus in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, uses the term to refer to the emergence of consciousness at the location of a memory. He asserts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1919): "consciousness arises in place [*an Stelle*] of a memory trace [*Erinnerungsspur*]"<sup>144</sup> (Freud qdt. in Wiegel 104). On the one hand, it brings forward the idea of a coincidence or, one might also say, a dialectic relationship, between two different instances of the psychic life, consciousness and memory. On the other hand, there is the description of memory as a form of register analogous to writing, albeit one which, according to Wiegel, "is never readable as such and in its entirety" (105). The trace is precisely this "written" form: inscribed, retained and nevertheless inaccessible in its totality.

Benjamin's use of the term seems to follow the same guidelines.<sup>145</sup> That is, the magic traces in human language are to be understood not as fixed and forever determined signs of a disappearing world or dimension, but instead as inscriptions that actively imply another worldview, which remains present in the current one, precisely through such traces. They are, therefore, the surviving access point to different social and psychological configurations, which are subjected to re-signification as soon as they are touched upon. The access allowed by them, however, is only partial, due to the "decayed" character of the former world views contained within them.

Benjamin situates magic as a residue intrinsically present in the actual functioning of language. According to him, in activities such as reading, the remaining magical traces can emerge, particularly through the association of sounds. The mode of operation of this dimension, in this context, seems to depend on the extent to which humans access its potential, particularly through creativity. Benjamin understands language as an intermittent exercise of expression, since it cannot exhaust reality by fully expressing the essences of things. His theory asserts the inexhaustible character of reality, at the same time that it affirms the dynamism of the human spirit, in its attempts at capturing the multi-faceted aspects of the

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<sup>144</sup> Here the translation of Wiegel is privileged over Strachey's, since it keeps the important sense of location from the original. The Standard Edition goes as follows: "Consciousness arises instead of a memory-trace" (Freud *Standard XVIII* 25). The thematisation of memory and trace can already be found, almost in the same terms, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 610.

<sup>145</sup> Benjamin quotes this very passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the text "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940), while proposing the notion of shock experience (*Schockerlebnis*) (Benjamin *Motifs* 160).



world. As Leandro Konder suggests (qtd. in Perius 104), the exercise of human abilities in relation to the magical aspect of language suffers at the time of writing from both abstract detachment and the crass empiricism with which humanity relates to things. Consequently, according to Konder, the creative use of words is mostly restricted to the spontaneity of children and the audacity of poets.

While Benjamin envisions traces of magic persisting in language, Artaud mentions actual magical practices as those through which a sense of the other world can be explored. His approach relates different and, at times, ambiguous, elements to magic, such as the state of sleep and the practice of hypnosis. The latter, for instance, while described as a medium that allows men “to wander in death,” has a status for Artaud that remains unclear, since it is also related to the “paraphernalia” brought up by Science in its attempts to “deal with the unknown.” The hypothesis put forward here is that the element through which a bridge between the worlds of magic and reality should be explored, in Artaud’s essay, is rather the *souffle*. Artaud, having defended the existence of a remaining link between the human and the superior dimensions, asks: “comment le souffle de l’au-delà qui est en chacun de nous, et qui un jour s’éveillera au souffle de l’Esprit pur, se reconnaîtrait-il s’il n’était pas d’une essence identique”<sup>146</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres I,1* 305).

One must consider the possible meanings of *souffle* in this case. The French term stands for breath, puff of air, as well as for the idea of artistic and intellectual inspiration. Its most abstract meaning, however, is that of vital impetus, i.e. the spirit. Artaud seems to privilege this latter meaning, which is also consonant with uses that arise in later works. This does not mean, however, that *souffle* and *esprit* are interchangeable. Importantly, this early use of *souffle* seems to denote a connection not only to the “other world,” but also, in this particular scenario, to the quasi-historical figures united under the sign of “ancient ritual of magic practices” or incantation.

Artaud asserts that if the human *souffle* is made from the same material as the other world, that is, if they share an “identical essence,” their connection is somehow given. He proposes two different aspects of this relation. The birth of Science is implied as having caused an interruption in the exchange between the human *souffle* and the “pure Spirit.” Science, for Artaud, opposes the ancient practices (Artaud *Œuvres I,1* 305). The *souffle*, being a trace of a different configuration of things, of the “other world,” it is in itself a

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<sup>146</sup> “How the breath of the afterlife, that is found in each of us, and that one day will wake up to the breath of the pure Spirit, would recognize itself if it was not of an identical essence [to the pure Spirit]?”

connective element that represents the spiritual while it integrates human nature. It is a remaining connection between two currently distinguished, but once potentially and virtually indistinguishable, dimensions. Artaud does not develop this notion any further at this point. In his texts from the thirties, on the other hand, the *souffle* acquires an interesting and even practical signification, becoming the means for an individual's realisation of their vital forces (*Œuvres* 588).

Artaud and Benjamin propose different locations where these traces have remained present and, therefore powerful, in contemporary experience. It is interesting to observe that, for Benjamin, the magical aspects of language integrate the diagnosis of a particular way of performing communication in modernity, which he describes as instrumental and "bourgeois." This performance is connected, as mentioned above, to the "muteness" into which objects have fallen since language no longer entertained a close relationship with things, that is, since things have not been able to express their essences *in* language. The theme of a decay of reality into darkness or muteness, in which its potential powers become only residual, and its inner vitality can no longer be appreciated, is described by Benjamin as part of the processes of instrumentation of both nature and language. There seems to be a similarity between this process of instrumentation and the action of science described by Artaud.

The theme of spiritual refinement thus acquires another connotation. Coming, in Artaud's text, after the description of scientific intervention into spiritual matters, it seems to signify the need to purge not only the "intrinsically" unhealthy aspects of inner life, mentioned as *malsaines preoccupations*, but also the stereotyped elements of its working, related to an entire apparatus which is, in Artaud's words, destined to make "the imponderables converge" (*Œuvres I,1* 305). In this sense, the inner being made free to explore the limits of life and death is not only divested of single, and perhaps personal, preoccupations, but also of the machinery provided by repetitive social life. This is necessary if it is to be available to be "commanded" by spiritual life in its highest form, that is, to live a fulfilled psychic life.

In time, Artaud's use of the word *esprit* in "Excursion Psychique" develops at least two very different connotations. Firstly, in the context of the above-mentioned refinement, the *Esprits* are identified with the unhealthy aspects of inner life, as beings that influence the state of the soul in a maleficent way. This use will re-appear in various Artaud texts in discussions of *parasites de l'être* ("parasites of being"), as explored below. The second usage

occurs in descriptions of *l'Esprit pur*, the pure spirit positively identified with the other world: the “superior dimension.” Both these connotations will give ground to a more prevalent meaning — that of the life of the soul, the inner being — in Artaud’s surrealist texts. This is also the usage employed in this text, except where otherwise indicated.<sup>147</sup>

If both Artaud and Benjamin connect a change or decay from one social and psychological configuration to another with a process of instrumentation and automation of social life, they are certainly not alone in doing so. This pattern of transformation has been approached, from different perspectives, by other authors. Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) is one important reference. It characterises modern times by rationalisation and intellectualisation, and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world.” That is, the retreat of sublime values into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of personal relations. It is the work of Georg Lukács, however, that presents more analogies with Artaud’s and Benjamin’s.

Lukács, in the famous book *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), proposes two different modes of civilization, the integrated and the problematic, which are related, respectively, to the worlds of the epic and the tragedy in ancient Greece. In the first mode, life and essence are identical concepts. It is a rounded world, in which “there is not yet interiority, for there is not yet any exterior, any ‘otherness’ for the soul” (Lukács *Novel* 30). From the time of tragedy on, the substance of the world pales and it is no longer immanent, giving way to a rift from which the notions of creation, destiny and soul emanate. From this break in the rounded world, thinking emerges as an attempt to describe “inside” and “outside,” “a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world” (*Novel* 29).

Lukács envisions the Renaissance — he mentions Dante, Giotto and St. Thomas in particular— as a period in which “the world became round once more, a totality capable of being taken in at a glance” (*Novel* 37). A new equilibrium “of mutually inadequate, heterogeneous intensities” (*Novel* 38) emerged for the first time, but also for the last. Perhaps the synthesis proposed by authors such as Agrippa in the notion of *magia naturalis* can be considered part of this attempt at totality, in which magic permeated the very notion of nature. However, as “the most perfect, and chief science” (Agrippa 56), it is not immanent in the world. It is, in turn, an “equilibrium of mutually inadequate” elements, as Lukács puts it, reunited *under* a totality. On this concern, the Hungarian author also situates all Greek

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<sup>147</sup> We have decided to use the word “spirit” instead of “mind,” which would be a common English translation for *esprit*. The reason lies in the use and connotation of “mind” as associated with intelligence, consciousness and, ultimately, the brain, while “spirit” maintains the link with the Latin *spiritus*, that is breath and spirit.

philosophy, even when professing absolute transcendence, to be part of the dramatic or problematic configuration (*Novel 35*).

While referring to the first of these configurations, Lukács professes ideas that are close to Artaud and Benjamin's descriptions of magic. "The world of meaning can be grasped, it can be taken in at a glance; all that is necessary is to find the *locus* that has been predestined for each individual" (*Novel 32*). In this scenario, there is no chasm to be overcome by creation, since, for Lukács, "the world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars" (*Novel 29*).

The question, however, remains. Can Lukács' notion of a "complete change in our concept of life and its relationship to essential being" (*Novel 41-2*) be analogous to what Benjamin and Artaud suggest in relation to the shift from a immanently magic world to one in which magic is contingent? According to Lukács, the section of the book in which he compares the modes of totality in epic and dramatic art is essentially determined by Hegel (*Novel 15*). This means that the categories he proposes are not so much historically significant as intended to function dialectically in relation to both the movement toward a recovery of a totality and the inhabitation of a fragmentary world.

Benjamin's description, in turn, points the magic dimension as dealing with mythological and theological aspects. It concerns the narrative about different world configurations and the reminiscent power of men in relation to an immanent form of power. This can be said to be close to the "rounded world" proposed in Lukács' epic configuration. Artaud's notion of magic is expressed through mystic figures concerned more with their relationship with a superior spiritual dimension, than with a cosmogenesis. The incantation practices and the *souffle* are signs of the spiritual world in human flesh, related to a notion of magic that, just like *magia naturalis*, permeates the natural world. Artaud's description of science, similar to the one historically represented by the enlightenment, intervenes in this world view. However, the dimension that the human spirit bridges, for Artaud, is not an epic one. It is a sphere made from heterogeneous elements and consisting of a recovered totality.

In both "Psychic Excursion" and "On Language..." magic is approached as a remnant of an earlier order of things, but only to the extent that it is the effect of the conflictive forming of two different configurations. While these configurations are not clearly defined in the above texts of Artaud and Benjamin, it can be surmised that in one configuration magic is to be taken as an immanent aspect, while, in the other, it is only a detached and residual dimension. As mentioned above, it should not be assumed that one

form has historically replaced the other, just as consciousness, in Freud's scheme, does not replace memory. The idea of trace holds, in turn, that the interaction between the two different dimensions has led to the occurrence of inscriptions, which function as portents of magical experience.

This understanding aligns with that of Jeanne Marie Gagnebin in *História e Narração em Walter Benjamin* (2007), according to which Benjamin's thematisation of the notion of *Ursprung* ("origin") does not propose the nostalgic return to a former world, nor the projection of it over the current one. It instead operates a leap outside the chronological order, one capable of at once recovering and dispersing a forgotten or repressed past (Gagnebin *História* 10). Therefore, as a remnant, the magic dimension is at the same time a sign of conflictive development and a trace that allows the reactivation of some of its aspects. In this sense, the different configurations cannot be recovered separately. In a practical sense, this means that one cannot experience, through discovering the traces of magic, the ancient world vision in which it once integrated the very conception of life, just as one cannot escape, during one's lifetime, from experiencing moments that detach from the very facts of life, that is, of accessing traces of a different perceptive configuration.

Both Artaud and Benjamin saw ground-breaking potential in encounters with this other world or dimension of experience. To some extent, these depended upon producing a significant confrontation with the past, however not necessarily a historical past. This theme is so strong that their texts often evoke a pattern of revelation. The idea of becoming aware of magical traces, and of being able to explore them through appropriate media, carries a promise of experiencing a more fulfilling life, or ultimately of finding a more significant existence. A few years later Artaud stated in "Adresse au Pape" (1925): "dans ce dédale de murailles mouvantes et toujours déplacées, hors de toutes les formes connues de pensée, notre Esprit se meut, épiant ses mouvements les plus secrets et spontanés, ceux qui ont un caractère de révélation, cet air venu d'ailleurs"<sup>148</sup> (*Œuvres* 153).

The question of how exactly one should explore the remaining magical dimension, and for which purposes, remains relatively open for both Artaud and Benjamin. Their texts suggest, however, that contact with the magical dimension retains the meaning of an encounter with the unconscious. This can be assumed from both the references to death, sleep and residual elements of experience, and to the precise functioning of this magical dimension,

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<sup>148</sup> "in this labyrinth of moving and ever-displaced walls, away from all known forms of thought, our Spirit moves, watching its most secret and spontaneous movements, those which have the character of revelation, of an air from elsewhere" — From "Lettre aux Recteurs des Universities Européennes," published in 1925.

which in many senses evokes Freud's description of unconscious memory traces. As Freud explains, these traces can never be experienced while unconscious. Their obscure character may either remain concealed, and therefore unknown, or become conscious, and consequently radically transformed.

For Benjamin, the act of naming evokes the premise proposed by Freud in relation to the efficacy of language. That is, language, through its ability to interfere with reality, demonstrates its competence to enchant. This ability is present, if garbled, in the dialogic process proposed by psychoanalysis. The ancient belief in changing the state of matter through words, mentioned above, is described by Freud as having left remnants in contemporary speech (Freud *Dreams* 365). This aspect is, once again, full of resonances with Benjamin's account. If for Benjamin the act of naming is the sign of a spiritual communication between men and things, it is no surprise that this immediacy of language is named *magic*. The spiritual content expressed in such a denomination, consequently, is that of its relation to ancient meanings.

Despite the evidence of proximity with Freudian terms, however, Artaud and Benjamin's descriptions of the means by which magic can be explored cannot be contained within them. Since for Benjamin magical power, even in its reminiscent form, is constitutive of language itself, it is not completely absent from linguistic practices, even if it suffers from increasingly less creative use. It remains virtually present and can be perceived in flashes, such as in one's learning of language, in children's use of words and in poetry and the arts. Artaud, on the other hand, proposes the states of sleep and hypnosis as channels for the magical dimension, while remaining suspicious of the methodic incursions into these proposed by scientific approaches. His recourse to ancient ritual practices and figures can be understood as a resort to "traditional" forms of magic, envisioned as the holders of truth in the field. These forms are distinguished from the practices proposed by contemporary "manuals of magic." Magic remains, to some extent, inaccessible: the quasi-historical status of the practices evoked by Artaud makes them non-replicable. As he himself comments, it is impossible to know whether forces as powerful as those evoked by such figures have ever existed. This statement leaves the door open for both the inclusion of past and present magical figures, and the rejection of ordinary forms of magic.

And finally, Artaud and Benjamin do not perceive the traces of the magical dimension in modern life as sensory data to be processed by the psychic apparatus, as is the case in the Freudian model. As mentioned above, the traces are the cultural imprints of a different world

configuration which, despite being generally understood as historically completed, is constitutional of the present forms, and therefore in a constant dialectical relationship with them. Always virtually present, the traces are constantly liable to be actualised in one's experience. The form taken by this actualisation becomes clear in other texts by Artaud and Benjamin, to be approached below. The consideration of magic as a trace illuminates the role of this aspect in their works, while their points of convergence and departure with the work of Freud is of key interest, since magic and the unconscious are commonly related in both Artaud and Benjamin's writings.

Artaud closes his text with the following consideration: "Et j'imagine qu'il doit y avoir dans la mort cette inquiétude de l'homme qui dort et se demande avec angoisse si c'est vraiment un rêve. Affolante question."<sup>149</sup> (*Œuvres I,1* 305). In surrealist fashion, Artaud proposes that magic can be found in the scenario of dreams. The themes of sleep, dream and death once again appear to be interwoven. Considered together, Artaud's and Benjamin's approaches to the confrontation of death, and the originative power of language, can be seen as appeals to the theme of origins. That is, if death is the dimension through which the mystery of life can be understood, it is also the one in which the constitution of the existing world is questioned. In Artaud's words, "c'est pourtant dans l'investigation de la mort que nous rencontrerons le secret de l'emprise divine et de la configuration spirituelle du monde"<sup>150</sup> (*Œuvres* 29).

This theme is echoed in Benjamin's perspective on the act of capturing and expressing the spiritual essence of things through language. It is while man is expressing himself that humanity is at the height of its spiritual relation with the inexhaustible world. Benjamin concludes his essay thus: "The language of an entity is the medium in which its spiritual being communicates itself. The uninterrupted flow of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest form of existence to man, and from man to God." (*Early* 267). The pervasiveness of the magic dimension is envisaged as part of the human practice of expressing essences through language. If the useful survival traces of magic present in this world appear to be the access channels to a divine dimension of humanity, through voluntary as well as fortuitous actions, it is an access that takes place through the dialectical relationship between different world views or configurations. It is in the exploration of this

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<sup>149</sup> "And I imagine that there must be in death this uneasiness of the man who sleeps and wonders anxiously if it is really a dream. A maddening issue."

<sup>150</sup> "yet it is in the investigation of death that we will find the secrets of divine influence and of the spiritual configuration of the world"

contingent dimension of life, in which established forms lose their definition, and the existing world can be genuinely questioned, that Artaud and Benjamin's thinking meet.

#### 4.5. The Irreducible Spirit

Around 1921, Artaud connects with dadaism and the first writings of Breton, Aragon and Soupault, the same time at which his texts appear in the magazine *Demain*. The first personal contact between Breton and Artaud takes place in late 1924, following the publication of "Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière," Artaud's exposition, in epistolary form, of the intricate problem of expression. Soon Artaud is collaborating on the periodical *La Révolution Surréaliste*, and, from 1925, he is assigned the direction of the *Bureau des Recherches Surréalistes*, which elucidate the precepts of the surrealist revolution in the following terms: "cette révolution vise à une dévalorisation générale des valeurs, à la dépréciation de l'esprit ... au dénivellement de la pensée"<sup>151</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). At this point surrealism is defined as an *état d'esprit* dealing with the establishment of a new kind of mysticism, for which surrealists are considered to be living neither in the world, nor in the present, but "in the spirit." Artaud is very much in line with the surrealist project of the time, participating intensely in the advancing of particular issues.

Artaud's first text in the surrealist periodical appears in its second issue, of January 1925. The article's first sentence, "le monde physique est encore là"<sup>152</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 123), marks the beginning of a discourse of disintegration inspired by a painting by André Masson, who joined the surrealists during the same period. It is however in the third issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*, named "1925: Fin de l'Ère Chrétienne," that Artaud's imprint on the movement is best observed. According to Pierre Naville (14), Artaud not only coordinated this issue, but brought to the movement a new concept of revolt. The short text "À Table" ("At the Table") opens the edition with the following lines: "Quittez les cavernes de l'être. Venez. L'esprit souffle en dehors de l'esprit. Il est temps d'abandonner vos logis. Cédez à la Toute-Pensée. Le Merveilleux est à la racine de l'esprit."<sup>153</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 130).

While calling for an abandonment of the "lodgings" of being, which can be understood here as the spheres of logic and rationality, Artaud proposes the inventiveness of

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<sup>151</sup> "this revolution aims at a general devaluation of values, at the impairment of the mind ... at the unevenness of thought"

<sup>152</sup> "the physical world is still there"

<sup>153</sup> "Leave the caves of being. Come. The spirit blows outside the spirit. It is time to abandon your houses. Give way to the All-Thinking. Wonderfulness is at the root of the spirit."



an “outside” dimension, corresponding to “wonderfulness” and “all-thinking.” These are to be found not through a detour from life, but instead in its very roots. Artaud urges an examination of the core of reality, the place where its principles, even the most obscure, can be appreciated. According to him, “à travers les fentes d’une réalité désormais inviable, parle un monde volontairement sibyllin”<sup>154</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 131). Here the term *sibyllin*, just like the English “sibyl,” refers to the mythological context in which cryptic content flows from an oracle to be decrypted by priests.

Artaud refers to another world being cryptically announced in this one: from an unviable reality, of rational foundations, speaks another one, voluntarily obscure. The very notion of *surrealité*, as mentioned in the previous chapter, relies on the possibility of accessing a reality that lies within the perceptive one. In this context, the claim for “another world” keeps at least two meanings: the shifting from a material situation perceived as exhausted and limiting towards an inner dimension of marvellous features, and the reconstruction of reality from the imaginative and “all-thinking” aspects of experience. These elements are not mutually exclusive: while surrealism, when understood as a transformative force, has had periods of greater focus on issues of the spirit, and periods of more affinity with political and social reality, the understanding of the spiritual dimension did not at any point exclude a “material” feature, or vice versa.

“À Table” also presents an interesting, though obscure, distinction between different conceptions of “spirit.” One of these seems to be its popular use, while another corresponds to the use made by the surrealists. Artaud states: “qui nous juge, n’est pas né à l’esprit, à cet esprit que nous voulons vivre et qui est pour nous dehors de ce qui vous appelez l’esprit”<sup>155</sup> (*Œuvres* 130). The “real” spirit, according to the text, is related to a notion of eternity that comes through the non-impediment of spiritual activities. In this sense, Artaud situates the surrealists as “du dedans de l’esprit, de l’intérieur de la tête”<sup>156</sup> (*Œuvres* 130).

As well as the two short texts by Artaud, the third issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* is filled with important texts addressed to the Pope, the Dalai Lama and the “Schools of Buddha.” According to different testimonies, these texts were largely written by Artaud, while other surrealists proposed a few adjustments (Thévenin *Œuvres* I,2 234; Naville 15). The most remarkable aspect of them is their attack on institutions, something the surrealists

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<sup>154</sup> “through the slits of a now unsustainable reality, speaks a deliberately cryptic world”

<sup>155</sup> “those who judge us are not born in the spirit, this spirit that we want to live and that for us is outside of what you call the spirit”

<sup>156</sup> “inside the spirit, from the interior of the head”

had so far not undertaken. The “Adresse au Pape,” for instance, contains the following statement: “il n’y a Dieu, Bible ou Evangile, il n’y a pas de mots qui arrêtent l’esprit”<sup>157</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 133). The institutions are here understood as arbitrarily imposing a discontinuation of spiritual practices, whose original activity is continuous and independent from organised establishments. Artaud seems to have brought to the movement a strong impetus towards this critique.

While the address to the Pope expresses the alienation of religion from the spirit, that directed to the Dalai Lama opens with an acknowledgment of the inferiority of Occidental culture compared to that of the Orient, as a result of “nos esprits contaminés d’Européens”<sup>158</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 136). That is, while the former maintains a strict tone of scorn and reproach, the latter favours a positive acclamation that flirts with submission. According to Nadeau (72-3), this *Orient mystérieux* appears for the surrealists as the right emblem to express their opposition to the confusion of Occidental values. On the one hand, it is understood that the Oriental sages dismissed any form of mechanical, compartmentalised knowledge, while, on the other hand, they could be called “barbarian,” due to their contempt for detached forms of art and culture.

The Dalai Lama is envisioned as a superior entity, well-versed in the valuable knowledge of a purer, freer spirit. He is in fact called the *Pape acceptable*, a move that is in consonance with the issue’s title, “The End of the Christian Era.” The periodical’s intention seems to be the inauguration of a new period focused on another age-old, and no less traditional, religion: buddhism. The contaminated European spirit is described as follows: “nous sommes environnés des papes rugueux, de littérateurs, de critiques, de chiens, notre Esprit parmi les chiens, qui pensent immédiatement avec la terre, qui pensent indécrottablement dans le présent”<sup>159</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 136). In opposition to this, the teachings of the Dalai Lama are described as leading to transparent liberation, including detachment from the carnal world and the abolishment of suffering.

The text “Lettre aux Écoles du Bouddha” assumes the same tone of a call for “salvation” coming from a vaguely-defined Orient. It is also an address from apprentice to master, and abounds in formulations attesting to the Orient’s existing knowledge of ideas pursued by the surrealists “on this side of the world.” It describes, for instance, the current

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<sup>157</sup> “there is no God, no Bible, no Evangel, there are no words capable of stopping the spirit”

<sup>158</sup> “our contaminated European spirits”

<sup>159</sup> “we are surrounded by rough popes, writers, critics, dogs, our Spirit is amongst the dogs, who immediately think with the earth, who think hopelessly in the present”

suffering within Occidental culture as related to a *pourriture* (“rotting”) of reason, that is “l’Europe logique écrase l’esprit sans fin entre les marteaux de deux termes, elle ouvre et referme l’esprit”<sup>160</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 140). It also presents the intellectual class as mere larvae, incapable of instigating transformation while so occupied with *rater la vie* (“missing life”).

The text evokes the Oriental spirits by contrast, but also establishes a broad similitude to surrealist thinking, since, despite it all, the surrealists “avons capté la pensée la meilleure”<sup>161</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 140). The contempt for progress is another feature connecting both groups, here expressed through an envisioning of the Orient as a prosaic, but deeply spiritualised, society. That is, “comme vous, nous repoussons le progrès: venez, jetez bas nos maisons”<sup>162</sup> (*Œuvres* 140). If the institutions of civilised Europe, on which the notion of progress is based, are to be destroyed, Artaud and the surrealists must also launch the quest for a new society. The cry is thus: “Sauvez-nous de ces larves. Inventez-nous de nouvelles maisons.”<sup>163</sup> (*Œuvres* 140). While buddhists are seen as highly spiritualised — immersed in the “liberated spirit” that is so attractive to the surrealists — theirs is not seen as a form of incarnated life. Instead, Artaud’s text opens with the call “vous qui n’êtes pas dans la chair”<sup>164</sup> (*Œuvres* 140). For those who happen to be “in the flesh,” like the surrealists and all occidentals, the only available path is the “carnal path,” at some point on which the soul may find its “inner land” and dedicate itself entirely to spiritual matters.

The mysticism of the Orient was bound to find a correspondent amongst the surrealists. In an account of the activities of the *Bureau*, which remained open to the public until the end of January 1925, Artaud and his colleagues re-elaborate the precepts of the surrealist revolution. The text first presents the themes of devaluation of values, rupture with logic and elaboration of a deeper order of things, then goes on to state surrealism’s need for a philosophy, “ou ce qui peut en tenir lieu”<sup>165</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). This philosophy, according to Artaud, must address the investigative methodology of surrealism, and allow landmarks to be fixed. The document reads: “on peut, on doit admettre jusqu’à un certain point une mystique surréaliste, un certain ordre de croyances évanescentes par rapport à la raison ordinaire,

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<sup>160</sup> “logical Europe continuously crushes the spirit between the hammers of two terms, it opens and closes the spirit”

<sup>161</sup> “have captured the best thought”

<sup>162</sup> “just like you, we reject progress: come, bring down our houses”

<sup>163</sup> “Save us from these larvae. Let’s invent new houses for ourselves.”

<sup>164</sup> “you who are not in the flesh”

<sup>165</sup> “or something that can take its place”

mais toutefois bien déterminées, touchant à des points bien fixés de l'esprit"<sup>166</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141).

What kind of mystique could this be? At this point, surrealist philosophy seems indistinguishable from the yet-to-be-defined mystique. For the surrealist revolution "vise au reclassement spontané des choses suivant un ordre plus profond et plus fin, et impossible à élucider par les moyens de la raison ordinaire, mais un ordre tout de même"<sup>167</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). The establishment of an order "all the same," that is, an order that does not coincide with that of logic and rationality, but which is nevertheless well-defined, is at the core of this attempt. If it is a more or less organised system of beliefs derived from the investigative methodology of surrealism, it must take into account the phenomena that occupy the movement, that is, above all, phenomena transcending conscious experience.

The mystique can be better expressed here as a belief in the potentiality of states of spirit that escape the control of reason and move beyond logic, such as those expressed through automatic writing or daydreaming. The first lines of the document are elucidative in this regard: "le fait d'une révolution surréaliste dans les choses est applicable à tous les états de l'esprit, à tous les genres d'activité humaine, à tous les états du monde au milieu de l'esprit, à tous les faits établis de morale, à tous les ordres d'esprit"<sup>168</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). Here the revolution is described as taking place "in things" and through the spirit. The products of the latter, however, are significant only insofar as they differ both from a chaotic expression of emotions and the errant character of the imagination. The surrealist sensibility, at this time as well as throughout its course, holds fast to its traces of organisation.

According to Nadeau (71), Breton summarises the surrealist activities of this time as moved by the fundamental ambition of "creating a collective myth." A *mystique surréaliste* is in this sense also a myth, a narrative on the origins and functioning of surrealism. It emanates a new world view, which attaches significance to the discoveries being made through the surrealist "experiments," and particularly the discrediting of the privileging of the rational mind and "civilised" institutions. Following the statement on the need for the establishment of a sequence of beliefs, the document reads: "le surréalisme, plutôt que des croyances,

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<sup>166</sup> "we can, we must, admit to a certain surrealist mystique, a certain order of evasive beliefs in relation to ordinary reason, but nevertheless well defined, touching on many fixed points of the spirit"

<sup>167</sup> "aims at the spontaneous reclassification of things, following an order that is deeper and more refined, and impossible to elucidate through ordinary reason, but an order nonetheless"

<sup>168</sup> "the fact of a surrealist revolution taking place in things is applicable to all states of mind (spirit), to all kinds of human activity, to all states of the world concerned with the mind, to all the facts established through morals, to all levels of the mind"

enregistre un certain ordre de répulsions”<sup>169</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). Finally, the positive aspect of the mystique is enquired into, but not objectively defined.

The “Déclaration du 27 Janvier 1925,” another text largely written by Artaud, states that “Le SURREALISME n’est pas un moyen d’expression nouveau ou plus facile, ni même une métaphysique de la poésie; Il est un moyen de libération totale de l’esprit et de tout ce qui lui ressemble.”<sup>170</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 151). Setting surrealism and literature apart, Artaud focuses on the theme of a “liberation of the spirit.” That is, in order to bring down the barriers preventing the spirit from accomplishing its full potential, surrealism makes use of abstract means, but also, if needed, “des marteaux matériels”<sup>171</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 151). In an anticipation of the later assumption of a material basis for the surrealist revolution, here the total liberation of the spirit professedly assumes a concrete facet, through, for example, the attacks on institutions. It is conducive to remember what Nadeau (71) noted on this subject, namely that such terms expose the desire of surrealism to move towards concrete matters, as well as to produce the specific form of concreteness that is myth.

It is exactly during this period that the movement approaches the theme of whether surrealism equates with revolution, or whether these two terms differ, inaugurating the space for a choice. A small group meeting on April 2, 1925 opted for a common denominator, that is, “un certain état de fureur”<sup>172</sup> (Nadeau 71), the application of which was not immediately determined. Artaud was part of this group and, most certainly, this trend. According to the same document — an internally circulated resolution —, the surrealists “pensent que ce sur le chemin de cette fureur qu’ils sont le plus susceptibles d’atteindre ce qu’on pourrait appeler l’illumination surréaliste,”<sup>173</sup> and that the spirit, moreover, “est un principe essentiellement irréductible et qui ne peut trouver à se fixer ni dans la vie, ni au-delà”<sup>174</sup> (Nadeau 71f).

The state of fury is here assigned a central character in surrealist activity. As well as its conciliatory role in the above situation, it also allows for the determination of the spirit as a notion irreducible to any subject either in life or beyond it. This irreducibility is already present in early affirmations such as “nul surréaliste n’est au monde, ne se pense dans le

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<sup>169</sup> “Surrealism, rather than beliefs, records a certain order of repulsions”

<sup>170</sup> “SURREALISM is not a new or easier way of expression, or even a metaphysic of poetry; It is a means of total liberation of the spirit and all that resembles it.”

<sup>171</sup> “through material hammers”

<sup>172</sup> “a certain state of fury”

<sup>173</sup> “think that it is in the path of this fury that they are most likely to achieve what might be called the surrealist illumination”

<sup>174</sup> “is an essentially irreducible principle, that cannot be fixed either in life or beyond it”

présent”<sup>175</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). The connection between the state of fury and the expression *illumination surréaliste* cannot go unnoticed. It expresses a state of spiritual insight and clarification associated with the fury, and, if approached via buddhism, of a freeing awareness. One can assume, however, that the surrealist illumination takes a very different form from the religious one. While surrealism is immersed in its obscure mystique and engaged in the exploration of the “eternal” aspects of the spirit, its form of illumination cannot be defined a priori. Benjamin expressed this idea in 1929, in terms of a “profane illumination,” that is a non-religious and materialist-inspired rapture (Benjamin *Surrealism* 146).

Along with his attack on the established system of values and thought, Artaud approaches another target of the revolution, the inept arrangement of human thinking. The direction of the surrealist revolution is professed to be a movement towards “une confusion absolue et renouvelée des langues”<sup>176</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 141). At the same time that the superstructure should be shaken up and “confused,” on the personal level there is a need to make explicit the non-rational aspects of thinking. Artaud professes to a belief that the flaws in thought can be revealed in a productive way. His words, directed in particular towards the spiritually confused, testify to “la volonté de mettre au jour les détours d’une chose mal faite, une volonté de croyance”<sup>177</sup> (*Œuvres* 142). That is, from the exposure of such discontinuations “s’installe une certaine Foi”<sup>178</sup> (*Œuvres* 142). Here Artaud attempts a resolution: at the same time that the surrealist, in his words, “désespère de s’atteindre l’esprit,”<sup>179</sup> he is finally “dans l’esprit ... et devant sa pensée le monde ne pèse pas lourd”<sup>180</sup> (*Œuvres* 141).

According to Artaud, it is in the intervals between thinking, in the moments of reabsorption of the spirit that *la bête blanche* (“the white beast”) of thought appears. This assures the surrealists, for him, of their place in the present. The last excerpt of the text is remarkable in expressing this position:

Au nom de sa liberté intérieure, des exigences de sa paix, de sa perfection, de sa pureté, il crache sur toi, monde livré à la desséchante raison, au mimétisme

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<sup>175</sup> “no surrealist is in the world, nor thinks of himself in the present”

<sup>176</sup> “an absolute and renewed confusion of languages”

<sup>177</sup> “the will to uncover the detours of something done badly; a wish for belief”

<sup>178</sup> “a certain Faith is established”

<sup>179</sup> “becomes desperate to attain the spirit”

<sup>180</sup> “in the spirit ... and before his thought the world does not feel heavy”

embourbé des siècles, et qui as bâti tes maisons de mots et établi tes répertoires de préceptes où il ne se peut plus que le surréel esprit n'explose, le seul qui vaille de nos déraciner.<sup>181</sup> (*Œuvres* 142)

Despising the world for its insipid devotion to rationality, the surrealists retreat and at the same time participate in the attempt to change the precepts that guide it. This statement is followed by a comment in the text in which Artaud addresses the “marginals of traditional thinking.” Marginality here goes hand in hand with the search for modalities of knowledge outside the canon, such as Oriental culture, while also aiming at nonconforming forms of expression such as coprolalia and aphasia.

In this context, it is no accident that mystic elements permeate the language used. The character of revelation, for instance, is described in “Lettre as Recteurs des Universités Européennes” through movements of the spirit that are “secrets et spontanés, ceux qui ont un caractère de révélation, cet air venu d'ailleurs”<sup>182</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 153), as mentioned above. A similar theme is at work in “Lettre aux Médecins-Chefs des Asiles de Fous,” in which physicians are criticised for considering themselves able to measure a patient's spirit. References to mysteries that lie outside the limits of “une quelconque métaphysique”<sup>183</sup> (*Œuvres* 153), mysteries ungraspable to these professionals, attest once again to the obscure aspects of knowledge identified by Artaud and the surrealists.

One particular text of Artaud from this period deserves consideration in this context. In *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, a collection of texts published in August 1925, Artaud presents the “cosmology” surrounding his idea of writing, and particularly the suffering coming from the impossibility of accomplishing it. One excerpt is notable for its reference to magic: “Et il y a un point phosphoreux où toute la réalité se retrouve, mais changée, métamorphosée, — et par quoi?? — un point de magique utilisation des choses. Et je crois aux aérolithes mentaux, à des cosmogonies individuelles.”<sup>184</sup> (*Œuvres* 162). Artaud seems to be signalling the virtual existence of a point at which all real things meet, but do not necessarily coincide, a point that

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<sup>181</sup> “On behalf of his inner freedom, of the requirements of his peace, of his perfection, of his purity, he spits on you, world given over to desiccating reason, to mimicry muddled by centuries, which has built your houses of words and set your repertoires of precepts until it is no longer possible for the surreal spirit not to explode, the only spirit worthy of uprooting us.”

<sup>182</sup> “secret and spontaneous, those with a character of revelation, with an air from elsewhere”

<sup>183</sup> “a whichever metaphysics”

<sup>184</sup> “And there is a phosphorous point where all reality comes together, but is changed, transformed, — and by what ?? — a point of the magic use of things. And I believe in the mental fireballs, the individual cosmogonies.”

can be expressed through writing. It is y a very personal cosmogony that can allow the conjecture of such an arrangement, whose central element remains to be defined.

Artaud refutes, in the same text, the traditional notion of oeuvre as the body of work of an author. This denial is related to the impossibility of disposing of one's spirit in an instrumental and conscious sense. If there is not a body of work, the usual notions of language and spirit also come under scrutiny. In fact, Artaud states in a famous expression, that all there is is "un beau Pèse-Nerfs"<sup>185</sup>: "une sorte de station incompréhensible et toute droite au milieu de tout dans l'esprit"<sup>186</sup> (*Œuvres* 165). As Grossman (*Œuvres* 65) has pointed out, the notion of *pèse-nerfs* functions as a double reference, both to the words *penser* ("to think") and *peser* ("to weigh"). The surrealist Artaud oscillates between the exaltation of the profusion of spiritual manifestations and the profound pain of non-fulfilment, due to the malformation of thought. In this context, the mysticism that emerges from the exploration of the spirit is that of an obscure order of elements and beliefs, at the intersection between individual cosmogonies and collective myth. In this sense, in relation to Artaud's texts form the period, the magical aspect of the spirit is at the same time nowhere to be found, and entrenched in essential reality.

The focus on the notion of spirit, particularly through the attempt at elaborating a collective mystique, is in fact a constant in the texts written by Artaud or with his collaboration in the first years of surrealism. The spirit appears as a vital element of life, closely connected to a notion of "essential reality" that differs from materiality. It is seen to be at the core of the eternal, marvellous, detached reality. While divorced from reason, in terms of both established forms of logical knowledge and metaphysical aspects of thought, this spirit is irreducible either in terms of life or the dimension beyond life. As Artaud states in "Fragments d'un Journal d'Enfer" (1926), "à côté de l'esprit il y a la vie, il y a l'être humain, dans le cercle duquel cet esprit tourne, relié avec lui par une multitude de fils..."<sup>187</sup> (*Œuvres* 178). Separated and united, spirit, being and life remain connected. The delimitation of a place of "all-thought," while it nurtures Artaud's affinities with surrealism, is also a factor in their separation.

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<sup>185</sup> "a beautiful *Pèse-Nerfs*"

<sup>186</sup> "a sort of incomprehensible station, right in the middle of everything in the spirit"

<sup>187</sup> "beside the spirit there is life, there is the human being, in the circle in which the spirit turns, connected to it by a host of threads ..."



#### 4.6. *À La Grande Nuit*

In common with most posterior accounts, *À La Grande Nuit*, published in June 1927, casts light on Artaud's engagement with the prominent issues for surrealism, not to mention his texts from the period. That his pursuit remained, up until 1927, that of a revolution of the spirit, is no secret. In a letter to Max Morise in April 1925, Artaud clarifies his position concerning the polemic of surrealism versus revolution. He states: "la question de Révolution était déjà résolue quand je suis arrivé parmi vous. Je n'ai jamais conçu que le Surréalisme pût s'occuper de la réalité."<sup>188</sup> (*Œuvres* 156). According to Artaud, in the midst of this contradiction both the notion of spirit and the condition of revolt remain as guides. In this sense, Artaud believes that the fights to be fought concern the confrontation of aspects affecting the spirit's movement along already-known paths: habits, manias and traditional lines of thought. A revolution, *tout de même*: "je ne vois pas, pour ma part, un autre but immédiat, un autre sens actif à donner à notre activité que révolutionnaire, mais révolutionnaire bien entendu dans le chaos de l'esprit"<sup>189</sup> (*Œuvres* 156-7).

Unlike *Au Grand Jour* — the surrealists' angry statement of the reasons for Artaud's exclusion, published in May 1927<sup>190</sup> —, Artaud's own explanation is not concerned with personal intrigue. It focuses instead on his general vision of surrealism, in particular on what sets him apart. Artaud states at the beginning of the text:

Que le surréalisme s'accorde avec la Révolution ou que la Révolution doive se faire en dehors et au-dessus de l'aventure surréaliste, on se demande ce que cela peut bien faire au monde quand on pense au peu d'influence que les surréalistes sont parvenus à gagner sur les mœurs et les idées de ce temps.<sup>191</sup>  
(Artaud *Œuvres* 236)

Artaud challenges, from the start, the importance given to the disputes around surrealism's integration with communism, at the same time asserting the continuing existence of a "surrealist adventure" outside this sphere. This is particularly important in the context of Artaud's claims for the inclusion of aspects exterior to the official frame of surrealism —

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<sup>188</sup> "the problem of the revolution was already solved when I arrived amongst you. I never conceived that surrealism could deal with reality."

<sup>189</sup> "I do not see, for my part, another immediate aim, another active meaning to give to our activity that is not revolutionary, but revolutionary, of course, in the chaos of the spirit"

<sup>190</sup> According to Grossman (*Œuvres* 172), the rupture between Artaud and the surrealists is effective as early as November 1926. *Au Grand Jour* is signed by Breton, Aragon, Éluard, Peret and Unik.

<sup>191</sup> "That surrealism is consistent with the Revolution or that the Revolution should take place outside of and above the surrealist adventure, one wonders what good it can do in the world, considering the little influence that the surrealists managed to win over the manners and ideas of this time."

which he designates as being controlled by “Breton et ses adeptes”<sup>192</sup> (*Œuvres* 236) — as a response to what he envisions as the ineffectiveness of the group.

This kind of differentiation between the practices and conceptions of Artaud and the group permeates the whole text and applies to a variety of notions, such as those of *âme* (“soul”) and *révolution* (“revolution”). Regarding the former, Artaud points to an interesting aspect of the accusation made by the surrealists, that of Artaud’s vision coinciding with “ce qui est le propre des débiles mentaux, des impuissants et des lâches”<sup>193</sup> (*Œuvres* 235). Artaud’s answer is as follows: “comme si un homme qui a éprouvé une fois pour toutes les limites de son action, qui refuse de s’engager au-delà de ce qu’il croit en conscience être ses limites était moins digne d’intérêt, au point de vue révolutionnaire, que tel braillard imaginaire”<sup>194</sup> (*Œuvres* 236f), the last term referring to the surrealist “revolutionaries.” That is, while for Artaud a positive notion of soul includes its flaws and debilities — which should be consciously considered in terms of one’s actions — for the surrealists this aspect appears as a defect that can prevent righteous work.

The disputes around the term revolution have similar connotations. For Artaud the communist agenda is concerned only with changing “l’armature sociale du monde”<sup>195</sup> (*Œuvres* 236), having close to no interest in matters of the spirit, while “je sais demeurer éternellement douloureux et misérable au sein de mon propre charnier”<sup>196</sup> (*Œuvres* 237f). Artaud’s demand, in relation to surrealism and to the surrealist revolution, is for a transformed spirit, one capable of doing justice to its potentialities and rolling back its impediments. Communism, in this context, would represent only a superficial change. Artaud also proposes a definition of revolution: “que chaque homme ne veuille rien considérer au-delà de sa sensibilité profonde, de son moi intime, voilà pour moi le point de vue de la Révolution intégrale”<sup>197</sup> (*Œuvres* 237f).

In relation to this conception, the true scope of surrealism, for Artaud, is “ce décalage du centre spirituel du monde, de ce dénivellement des apparences, de cette transfiguration du

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<sup>192</sup> “Breton and his acolytes”

<sup>193</sup> “that which is proper to the mentally ill, the impotent and cowards” (except taken from *Au Grand Jour*)

<sup>194</sup> “as if a man who has experienced once and for all the limits of his action, who refuses to commit beyond what he consciously believes to be his limits, were less worthy of interest, from the revolutionary perspective, than some imaginary bawler”

<sup>195</sup> “the world’s social armature”

<sup>196</sup> “I know to remain eternally in pain and miserable in my own charnel-house”

<sup>197</sup> “that every man should consider nothing beyond his profound sensitivity, his inner self, that for me is the perspective of the complete Revolution”

possible”<sup>198</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). Assuming a rather mystic connotation, this definition deals with different aspects already present in a range of surrealist texts, particularly Artaud’s. However, it proposes a world view that is increasingly distant from that of surrealism in the late twenties, and ever closer to Artaud’s own. Artaud states that “toute matière commence par un dérangement spirituel”<sup>199</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). By classifying matter as secondary to the spirit, he seems to want to draw the surrealists’ attention to the fact that their interest in the material world — in terms of historical materialism, or what Artaud names “les cadres désespérants de la matière”<sup>200</sup> (*Œuvres* 238) — should remain subject to spiritual issues.

The above-mentioned “transfiguration of the possible” aimed towards the creation of a substantial space at the margins of the concrete world. This represents a broad definition of spirit as conceived both by early surrealism and by Artaud. Later in the text Artaud clarifies: “la métamorphose extérieure est une chose à mon sens qui ne peut être donnée que par surcroît”<sup>201</sup> (*Œuvres* 240). That the spirit-matter relationship should take the form of a disturbance is not surprising in this context, even less so if one considers Artaud’s convoluted understanding of spirit and flesh.

What then emerges is an interesting finding. Artaud states: “le surréalisme n’a jamais été pour moi qu’une nouvelle sorte de magie”<sup>202</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). This new form of magic also has a strict relationship with the unconscious:

L’imagination, le rêve, toute cette intense libération de l’inconscient qui a pour but de faire affleurer à la surface de l’âme ce qu’elle a l’habitude de tenir caché doit nécessairement introduire de profondes transformations dans l’échelle des apparences, dans la valeur de signification et le symbolisme du créé. Le concret tout entier change de vêtue, d’écorce, ne s’applique plus aux mêmes gestes mentaux. L’au-delà, l’invisible repoussent la réalité. Le monde ne tient plus.<sup>203</sup> (*Œuvres* 238)

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<sup>198</sup> “this shift in the spiritual centre of the world, this unevenness of appearances, this transfiguration of the possible”

<sup>199</sup> “all matters begin with a spiritual disturbance”

<sup>200</sup> “the hopeless frames of matter”

<sup>201</sup> “the external metamorphosis is something that, in my opinion, can only take place through an addition”

<sup>202</sup> “surrealism has never been anything other for me than a new form of magic”

<sup>203</sup> “The imagination, the dream, all this intense liberation of the unconscious intend to bring to the surface of the soul what it used to keeping hidden, must necessarily introduce profound changes at the level of appearances, in the value of significance and symbolism of the created. The whole concrete dimension changes its habits, its crust, it no longer applies to the same mental gestures. The dimension of the beyond, of the invisible, pushes reality. The world cannot go on.”

Here Artaud not only elaborates on the possible powers of surrealism, he also formulates a framework for a transformation that takes place when unconscious contents move into the material world. According to Artaud, such transformations occur through the action of unconscious forces when they reach the surface of the soul, that is when they become conscious. Implicitly meant is that the act of bringing content to the edge of reality is or should be listed within the activities performed by surrealism.

This change is described by Artaud as taking place within the appearance of things. The words *vêture* (“habits”) and *écorce* (“crust”) are significant for the exterior aspect of the transformation, while the spirit, in this case, remains an “interior” dimension. In fact, Artaud seems to rely on a definition of reality as essentially immutable, a dimension in which only superficial changes can take place. While opposing two points of view on the revolutionary subject, Artaud qualifies the world as “le monde étouffant où nous vivons, monde fermé et à tout jamais immobile”<sup>204</sup> (*Œuvres* 236f). This is particularly interesting in the context of Artaud’s refusal to engage in such changes, or, as he describes, “pour avoir refusé de m’engager au-delà de moi-même”<sup>205</sup> (*Œuvres* 237f). The world of the spirit is, for Artaud, the only dimension in which fundamental changes can occur. In relation to it, as mentioned above, material mutations are no more than additions.

As well as expressing contempt for material changes, this position implies that the basis for “exterior” transformation should be properly appreciated. Described as profound and having effects in terms of values and symbols, the changes that take place in reality are pushed forward by the “invisible.” They are originated in a dimension that lies beyond materiality. In these terms, Artaud invalidates the possibility of a transformation that does not have in its genesis a change or a force in the spirit. He in fact goes further by stating that failure to imagine a revolution outside the frames of materiality culminates in fatalism towards reality. The diagnosis of this resignation is presented by Artaud as the reason behind the ongoing immobility of surrealism, leading to a pessimism that he and Benjamin thematise similarly, the latter only two years later (Benjamin *Surrealism* 190).

It is particularly in relation to this perceived sterility that Artaud’s identification of surrealism with magic must be understood. Magic, in this context, provides a milieu in which the concrete world is rich in connections with the beyond, that is a setting in which material changes are inseparable from spiritual circumstances. Artaud’s idea of magic, in *À La Grande*

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<sup>204</sup> “the suffocating world we live in, forever closed and immobile”

<sup>205</sup> “for having refused to engage beyond myself”

*Nuit*, as in “Excursion Psychique,” includes the unconscious liberation “on the surface of the soul” through dreams and imaginative activities.

Although powerful and deep, this dimension does not seem to have an end in itself. Following its emergence, and the corresponding material changes it provokes, Artaud asserts, “on peut commencer à cribler les fantômes, à arrêter les faux semblants”<sup>206</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). As a consequence, criteria come into view that allows the sorting of the different manifestations of imagination, the range of unconscious expressions. From spirit, through reality and back to spirit: this is the course of Artaud’s expected transformation, schematically speaking. In his own words: “N’importe quelle action spirituelle si elle est juste se matérialise quand il faut. Les conditions intérieurs de l’âme! Mais elles portent avec elles leur vêtue de pierre, de véritable action.”<sup>207</sup> (*Œuvres* 239f). While spiritual issues necessarily materialise, the interior conditions of the soul cannot but assume a concrete, practical form.

Surrealism, in this sense, remains in touch with the invisible. As opposed to the group’s spirit of *désordre* (“disorder”) and *mesquine chicane* (“petty chicanery”), Artaud claims that “Pour moi le surréalisme a toujours été une insidieuse extension de l’invisible, l’inconscient à portée de la main. Les trésors de l’inconscient invisible devenus palpables, conduisant la langue directement, d’un seul jet.”<sup>208</sup> (*Œuvres* 239). These words evoke the “psychic automatism” so important in the first years of the movement. In a sense, Artaud has remained faithful to the principles of surrealism, in terms of its intention to reveal “le fonctionnement réel de la pensée”<sup>209</sup> and “la réalité supérieure de certaines formes de associations négligées jusqu’à lui”<sup>210</sup> (Breton *Manifestes* 36). Artaud’s devotion to the spirit and to everything related to it is no less strong than his belief in surrealism’s ability to bring the unconscious “within a hand’s reach” and, directly or indirectly, to push reality towards change.

What attitude could be more sympathetic to surrealism than a judgement of the achievability of its promises? While detailing what is left of the “surrealist adventure,” Artaud claims the following:

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<sup>206</sup> “we can begin to screen off the ghosts, to stop the fake semblances”

<sup>207</sup> “Any spiritual action, if it is just, materialises when needed. The internal conditions of the soul! But they carry with them their garments of stone, of real action.”

<sup>208</sup> “For me Surrealism has always been an insidious extension of the unseen, the unconscious within arm’s reach. The treasures of the invisible unconscious becoming palpable, leading language directly, in a single burst.”

<sup>209</sup> “the real functioning of thought”

<sup>210</sup> “the superior reality of certain forms of association ignored until its appearance”

De la bonne utilisation des rêves pouvait naître une nouvelle manière de conduire sa pensée, de se tenir au milieu des apparences. La vérité psychologique était dépouillée de toute excroissance parasitaire, inutile, serrée de beaucoup plus près. On vivait alors à coup sûr, mais c'est peut-être une loi de l'esprit que l'abandon de la réalité ne puisse jamais conduire qu'aux fantômes.<sup>211</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 239)

While the first phrase suggests a negative evaluation, the lines that follow describe the early days of surrealism in a relatively positive light. However, in a surprising turn, Artaud locates a departure from reality in this early period, a departure that he describes as related to the emergence of *fantômes* (“phantoms”).

Artaud considers the inefficacy of surrealism in attaining the goals it set for itself to be a result of its abandonment of the cause of the spirit. What becomes clear here is that this assumption is valid not only with regard to surrealism's alignment to communism, but also to its early disbelief in both the capacity of the spirit and its competency to provoke changes. Here Artaud is possibly identifying the later surrealists with *fantômes*, a word he seems to use in a negative sense in this text. Another possibility, however, is that he is pointing to the fact that illusory elements, i.e. the material changes, have assumed the foreground of the movement.

In more detail, for Artaud the surrealists' claim that an alignment with communism is a logical development of the movement's principles — the argument presented in the second manifesto and connected to Artaud's expulsion — is a fallacy. Firstly because “l'intérieur du surréalisme le conduit jusqu'à la Révolution”<sup>212</sup> (*Œuvres* 239), that is, the association with communism adds nothing to the efficacy of the movement. Secondly, because all logical preoccupations that are not related to the reality of one's own being are, for Artaud, exterior to the internal development of a cause. On this concern Artaud asserts his refusal to submit to any discipline or superior morality, and considers the recent change of guidelines in the movement a deviation, and not a logical development, from its original principles.

Artaud's conclusion is no less surprising. After having analysed his own scruples in relation to real action, he arrives at the judgement that he and the surrealists share the same

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<sup>211</sup> “From the proper use of dreams a new way of thinking, of locating oneself in the midst of appearances, could emerge. The psychological truth was stripped of all parasitic and useless growth, and it was brought much closer. We certainly lived back then, but it is perhaps a law of the spirit that the abandonment of reality can lead to nothing but ghosts.”

<sup>212</sup> “surrealism's interior leads it to Revolution”

reservations on this concern. Namely, a certain pessimism towards social change, even though it is a pessimism that carries a grain of lucidity, and the belief in an unconscious spontaneity “qui pousse malgré tout à l’action”<sup>213</sup> (*Œuvres* 240). According to Artaud, the surrealists are resolved in favour of action, at the same time that they declare themselves incapable of it. Artaud closes the article eloquently with the following lines: “Et moi en ce qui me concerne ai-je jamais dit autre chose? Avec en ma faveur tout de même des circonstances psychologiques et physiologiques désespérément anormales et dont, eux, ne sauraient se prévaloir.”<sup>214</sup> (*Œuvres* 240-1).

Through the outlining of these deeply-rooted differences but also striking similarities, Artaud presents an image of surrealism that expresses both his admiration of and disillusionment towards the movement. Even more important is the emergence of a vision that, through surrealism, developed within Artaud’s own worldview, a vision full of obscure tones but also luminous in terms of the positions it takes. That surrealism was for Artaud a new form of magic is discernible in his engagement with the spiritual verve of it, one that he, of all the surrealists, possibly explored the most. His particular perspective on it would become a collective assumption, as he himself points to in a letter to Joseph Barsalou. It concerns the group’s incorporation of the notion of *impuissance* (“powerlessness”) as an article of faith (Artaud *Œuvres* 243).

The definition of surrealism as magic is also subject to Artaud’s understanding of the real problem posed to the movement as being that of life and death. He re-affirms this proximity in a brochure published in August 1927, “Point Final”: “il ne faudrait pas beaucoup appuyer sur certaines tendances intimes du surréalisme saisissable pour le faire verser dans l’occultisme, voire dans une sorte très particulière de magie”<sup>215</sup> (*Œuvres* 241). However, the question of life and death is also a concrete one. Artaud testifies, in the same document, to the state in which he discovered surrealism — “la vie avait parfaitement réussi à me lasser”<sup>216</sup> (*Œuvres* 241) —, as well as to the movement’s assurance of sense amidst disconnectedness, like that offered by many forms of magic. According to Artaud, surrealism made him believe in the fragments offered by his thought, and to stop looking for its impossible continuity. That

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<sup>213</sup> “that urges, despite everything, towards action”

<sup>214</sup> “And I, concerning myself, have I ever said anything else? Having in my favour nonetheless abnormal and desperate psychological and physiological circumstances which, themselves, cannot prevail.”

<sup>215</sup> “it would not take much pressure on certain intimate tendencies of graspable surrealism to tip it into occultism or even into a very special kind of magic”

<sup>216</sup> “life had been very successful in boring me”

is, “je me réapprenais à croire de nouveau en ma pensée”<sup>217</sup> (*Œuvres* 241). Artaud then asks himself: What could be more revolutionary than a change such as this? And how much more could this movement have accomplished if it had continued to follow the powerful thread evident in these concerns?

Another question seems to remain open in Artaud’s account. It touches upon the importance of a notion of spirit, and consequently of a “magic” worldview, to his rupture with the surrealists. If, on the one hand, the change in focus from a revolution of the spirit to a revolution in the material world — even if, as discussed above, such terms are not in complete opposition — is the point on which both Artaud and the surrealists claim to diverge, on the other hand, the similarities to be found in their attitudes, precisely in relation to revolution and visible through Artaud’s account, seem to point in another direction. This might suggest a motive that lies outside notional arguments, perhaps in more personal concerns. Both motives, however, point to a dispute around the possibilities of transformation of the human spirit and the material world. This dispute occupies Artaud, the surrealists and also Benjamin.

#### 4.7. A Gothic Marxism

Benjamin devotes an enthusiastic essay to surrealism in 1929, the same year in which the second manifesto appears. It is known that the German author had been following the movement with interest in the twenties, and most particularly during his stays in Paris, in the summers of 1926 and 1927 (Löwy *Radical* 17). Little information survives, however, on actual contact between Benjamin and the surrealists. According to Scholem, Benjamin and Breton exchanged letters for a period, but these have never been retrieved (Scholem qtd. in Löwy *Radical* 17). The few remnants of this contact concern the period following Benjamin’s emigration to France, in 1933. Pierre Klossowski gives a short account of Benjamin’s attendance at the meetings of *Contre-Attaque*, the ephemeral fusion of groups surrounding Breton and Georges Bataille in 1935. His presence is evoked by Klossowski as that of a character showing consternation and curiosity towards the group’s activity (Klossowski 85).<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> “I taught myself to believe in my thoughts again”

<sup>218</sup> Klossowski wrote “Lettre sur Walter Benjamin” (1952) at the request of Adrienne Monnier. The occasion was the French publication of Benjamin’s manuscript “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.”



With only these few anecdotes, Benjamin's relationship with the French movement is better known in terms of his essay "Surrealism: The Latest Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," which was first published as three sections in *Die Literarische Welt* ("The Literary World"). By the time of its publication, surrealism already enjoyed great influence inside and outside avant-garde circles. Many saw the original surrealist spirit as fading away, however, following the expulsion of not few of its original members, and through the group's courting of political revolutionaries who ultimately could not see surrealism and communism converging.

Benjamin seems to have found in surrealism a practical version of many of his beliefs. According to Scholem, surrealism "embodied much of what had erupted in him during the years just past" (*Friendship* 163). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this encounter concerns the convergence of interests in language, psychoanalysis, mysticism and historical materialism. Scholem goes on to say that, for Benjamin, "surrealism was something like the first bridge to a more positive assessment of psychoanalysis" (*Friendship* 163). Even if Benjamin does not subscribe to all surrealist attitudes and practices, his fascination with the movement lasted and gave birth to what is considered by many to be as his masterpiece, the *Passagenwerk* ("Arcades Project").

Benjamin opens the essay on surrealism by pointing to his privileged position as detached observer, from which he can assess the movement's strength. He characterises himself as a German observer familiarised, as he puts it, with the crisis of the humanistic concept of freedom. In detail, the metaphor is that of the German critic locating his power station beside the stream of surrealism. While he attests that this stream might be meagre in its origin, it gains momentum with the "difference in intellectual level between France and Germany" (Benjamin *Surrealism* 177). Here could perhaps be added to the elements increasing the stream, the almost idealised view of France amongst some of the German intelligentsia, a feeling survived from the ideals of the French Revolution. Benjamin also points to the familiarity of the German critic — who with every sentence acquires more of Benjamin's personal features — with the frantic determination "that has awakened in the movement to go beyond the stage of eternal discussion and, at any price, to reach a decision" (*Surrealism* 177). This feverish mood can be perceived, as discussed above, as early as 1927, at the time of the disputes around the notion of revolution.

Though Benjamin does not mention Artaud in his text, some elements of the essay touch on key elements of the movement in which the latter's contribution was important. This

is the case with what Benjamin calls the issue of the “poetic life,” that is, surrealism’s rupture with the praxis that “presents the public with the literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself” (*Surrealism* 178). Nowhere is the proposition of the inseparability between the spirit and its creations, between the engendering of both existence and the work of art, stronger than in Artaud’s text. Benjamin’s own heterodox engagement with marxism at that time must be counted amongst the possible reasons for his lack of interest in what, in the broader movement, did not echo his view. To follow the same line of argument, while referring to the “dialectic kernel” that later evolved in surrealism, Benjamin qualifies the period around 1924, that of Artaud’s integration into the movement, as “a time when its development could not yet be foreseen” (*Surrealism* 178).

Benjamin further characterises this initial moment as focused on the precedence of language over meaning and the self. In his words, language has precedence over meaning since, in surrealism, “image and sound interpenetrated with automatic precision” (*Surrealism* 178-9). As for the self, the reason lies in the fact that “dream loosens individuality like a bad tooth” (*Surrealism* 179). This vision of surrealism has echoes in at least two moments in Benjamin’s own work. In the first, which has already been approached here — concerning “On Language as Such and on the Language of Men” — Benjamin criticises the instrumentalisation of language and situates it as a spiritual medium of being. The second moment concerns the sparse but insistent references to dreams and the important threshold between sleeping and awakening, particularly in “One-Way Street,” written between 1924 and 1928. Even while Benjamin defines this early “heroic period” of surrealism as thankfully past, he outlines similarities between the movement’s worldview and his own.

The theme of the loosening of the self is privileged by Benjamin in the essay. It is further approached through what he calls *Rausch* (“intoxication”). This word had equally appeared in “One-Way Street,” fragment “To the Planetarium,” in the context of the magical relationship between ancient men and the cosmos, a relationship that disappeared in modern society (Benjamin *One-Way* 92-4). For Benjamin that relationship was rediscovered, albeit in a new form, in surrealism. What he defines as intoxication is strictly related to the surrealistic *experience*, as opposed to a vision of the movement as a form of literature. This intoxication brings about a form of illumination, which differs radically from both religious and drug-related ecstasies. Benjamin proposes that surrealism enacts “a *profane illumination* [*Erleuchtung*], a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (*Surrealism* 179). “Profane” can

here be understood in at least two senses: as secular, non-religious; and as coming before religion and the sacred, as the Latin terms *pro-* ‘before’ and *-fanun* ‘temple’ indicate.

The examples of profane illumination brought up by Benjamin point to this double meaning. He speaks of love, revolt, objects and the surrealist “experiments with words” as the bearers of profane illuminations. In all cases, it is a “fruitful, living experience” that departs from the present, while retaining a secret bond with the historical facet of things. In outmoded objects, for instance, this is evident in their short lives, that is, in the future abolition that their past and present already contain. In this context, Benjamin mentions Aragon’s book *Paysan de Paris* (1926), which deals with the recent and paradoxically obsolete *Passage de l’Opéra*, which was about to be destroyed by the progressive projects of Haussmann. In another surrealist book, Breton’s *Nadja* (1928), Benjamin identifies further motifs of profane illumination.

*Nadja* describes the unusual encounter of Breton with a mysterious female figure, their perambulations through Paris and the throwing open of their affections. Its nature as one exemplar of the books “qu’on laisse battants comme des portes”<sup>219</sup> (Breton *Nadja* 18) represents, in Benjamin’s view, an interesting counterpoint to the development of the cult of the interior by the petit bourgeois. The clarity with which Breton presents the facts experienced by him and Nadja, as well as the frank display of his feelings towards her, are to be praised as revolutionary virtues. This explicitness, according to Benjamin, “is also an intoxication, a moral exhibition, that we badly needed” (*Surrealism* 180). The next lines focus on surrealism’s access to spiritualism, i.e. the frequenting of clairvoyants and the interest in foreseeing the future, explored in some episodes in *Nadja*.

Having stated his displeasure in acknowledging such activities, Benjamin’s tone is almost paternalistic: “Who would not wish to see these adoptive children of revolution most rigorously severed from all the goings-on in the conventicles of down-at-heel dowagers, retired majors, and *émigré* profiteers?” (*Surrealism* 180). Here the German critic clearly no longer sees himself on a level below the French intelligentsia. One reason can be found in Benjamin’s assumption that these “mystical” interests assume a superficial, spiritualistic form. As pointed out by Löwy (*Radical* 22), the image of the “fortune-teller,” amongst other figures in *Nadja*, is presented as having more of a profane nature than a spiritual one. Benjamin’s mention of *émigrés* in this context also draws attention. Its condescending tone betrays Benjamin’s origins as part of a social elite, which, as much he made efforts to reframe

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<sup>219</sup> “that we allow to swing like a door”

them, often surfaced. If he himself was not an *émigré* at this point, it is not only because his exile in Paris started in 1933, but also due to the classist connotation of this word.

If Benjamin expects no illumination from mediumship, however, he certainly shares the surrealist view on love. In fact, he envisions it as a distinguishing element of the movement, one that he relates, without hesitation, to the mystical conception of love of medieval authors, above all Dante. Nadja is, on this regard, just like Beatrice, the portent of a new life in *Vita Nuova*. Through both the loosening of individuality and the experiencing of an ecstatic transmutation, love more closely resembles an illumination than a source of sexual pleasure. However, as in other forms of “esoteric love,” the great power of such an encounter lies not in the beloved herself, but in the world surrounding her. For Benjamin, Breton “is closer to the things that Nadja is close to than to her” (*Surrealism* 181).

In this context, the importance of objects in surrealism is an element in which Benjamin finds another correspondent to one of his most cherished insights into modern life. Namely, that objects are part of a “topographical consciousness” that develops independently from people, a *Dinglichkeit* (“thingness”) that roams the cities in particular. The merit of Breton — and Aragon, it could be added — is that of having perceived the revolutionary energies “that appear in the ‘outmoded,’ in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct” (Benjamin *Surrealism* 181). For Benjamin, it is as if the material destitution of modern life — not only in terms of objective material poverty, but also in relation to the fetishisation of objects, a theme similar to the decay of language into instrumentalisation — mirrors the social destitution, a hypothesis to be expanded later in this text.

Benjamin then describes the “trick,” not easily graspable, through which modern experience is converted into revolutionary experience by surrealism. “The trick by which this world of things is mastered — it is more proper to speak of a trick than a method — consists in the substitution of a political for a historical view of the past.” (*Surrealism* 182). Is Benjamin referring to the assessment of the objects’ recent past of novelty and imminent future of insignificance? Or is he referring to a remote past, in the sense of another time? What would be the “political view of the past” in question? Benjamin does not answer these questions. His statement is followed by a long quotation from Apollinaire, in which the latter calls up the dead from castles, palaces and monasteries to return to earth and mingle with “all the people who today are still proud of their privileges” (Apollinaire qtd. in Benjamin *Surrealism* 182). An important element of this decadent meeting is the dead being invited to

feel at home in contemporary automobiles and sleeping carriages. Apollinaire's account is certainly ironic, signalling, on the one hand, the inner absurdity of admitting the life of the privileged as the portent of an era, and, on the other hand, the ongoing isolation of the privileged classes and their correlated objects in relation to the rest of the population, which "will give them short shrift" (Apollinaire qtd. in Benjamin *Surrealism* 182).

According to Benjamin, Apollinaire is who originated this technique, that is he substituted a political for a historical view of the past. Benjamin seems to be pointing to the revolutionary character of this unusual encounter between past and present, as a result of which both are somehow reframed. In this sense, Apollinaire's words become, in Benjamin's voice, a criticism of the bourgeoisie and its way of living. The confrontation with a "historical view of the past" seems to reveal the intrinsic ideology of progress espoused by the elite at different historical moments. The "trick" performed by the surrealists could perhaps be expressed in a simpler form: objects are the portent of the ruin of modern life. Löwy, using an equally enigmatic formula, states that this trick meant "seeing a very 'object' in terms of its future — imminent — revolutionary abolition" (*Radical* 20). That is, on the one hand, the perspective of the extinction of everything bourgeois during and after the communist revolution, and, on the other hand, the view of disappearing objects as the signs of the imminent revolution. In dialectic terms, it could be expressed thus: modernity, and with it capitalist society, produces the signs of its own transience and destruction even while it reproduces itself indefinitely. The objects, for Benjamin, are the touchstones of this process.

The city of Paris seems to represent, for Benjamin, the ultimate surrealist object. In an interesting association, he suggests that one must overrun the city's inner strongholds "in order to master their fate and, in their fate, in the fate of their masses, one's own" (*Surrealism* 183). That is, through the inhabitation of city landscapes one can access the masses "contained" within them. Landscapes are here conceived as mirrors that retain part of what they reflect, in this case, urban citizens. The figure of Nadja, for Benjamin, is another exponent of these masses, and in this she is commanded by her "living unconsciousness." The masses are here the undetermined, unorganised human element of the city, one to which both the surrealists and Benjamin desire access. One could not say, up to this point, that their interest takes the form of an immediate intention to organise the revolution. But if access to the masses' fate assures an entrance to one's own, the topography of a city is the all more important. In this vein, Benjamin praises the use of photographs in *Nadja*: "all the parts of Paris that appear here are places where what is between these people turns like a revolving

door” (*Surrealism* 183). The visibility of this space “in-between” gives way to the emergence of social activity, hopefully, for Benjamin, in the form of revolution.

Perhaps in a gesture that intends to clear the way for the latter, Benjamin attempts to dismiss misunderstandings around the term *l’art pour l’art* in relation to the avant-garde movements. He situates the literature of the avant-garde, as mentioned above, as “magical experiments with words, not as artistic dabbling” (*Surrealism* 184). While exploring language from within, the avant-garde relies on the magical aspect of language, with its revolutionary implications. In this context, although Benjamin makes no distinction between futurism, dadaism and surrealism, he seems to be referring to the last two in particular.<sup>220</sup> One might ask what is the precise nature of the notion of magic implied in this definition. If Benjamin is not interested in any form of spiritualism, just as the surrealists are not interested in institutional forms of belief, the magic suggested here resembles the reminiscent presence of enchanting powers. Just as Freud describes them in relation to discourse in psychoanalysis — evoked by the early Benjamin in terms of the expression of essences — magic reminiscences seem to be key to Benjamin’s conception of profane illuminations.

Finally, Benjamin relaunches the questions that so fiercely occupied Artaud and the surrealists in the years before 1929: “Where are the conditions for revolution? In the changing of attitudes or of external circumstances? That is the cardinal question that determines the relation of politics to morality and cannot be glossed over” (*Surrealism* 190-1). According to Benjamin, these questions have remained relatively open within the framework of surrealism. His own view is that the “communist answer,” to which the surrealists are very close, means absolute pessimism: “mistrust in the fate of literature, mistrust in the fate of freedom, mistrust in the fate of European humanity” (*Surrealism* 191), not to mention a lack of hope in any form of reconciliation between the classes. This pessimism, as opposed to the dilettantish optimism of the bourgeois parties, even those on the left, is not a contemplative one. As Löwy puts it, it is an active attitude “totally dedicated to preventing, by all means possible, the advent of the worst” (*Radical* 20). For Benjamin, this is the direction that surrealism should take, that is, a full alliance with communism, and the embracing of pessimism.

The form proposed by Benjamin, however, is that of an “organised pessimism,” an expression that he borrows from Pierre Naville’s *La Révolution et les Intellectuels* (1926).

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<sup>220</sup> Considering that the futurists had aligned with Benito Mussolini and fascism at least ten years earlier, Benjamin’s praise is puzzling in the given context, but not at all exceptional at the time.

Benjamin praises this as an “excellent essay,” subscribing to its evaluation of the movement. In it, Naville, who was part of the foundation of surrealism and left it to pursue a full commitment to communism, calls upon the surrealists to follow his example. He identifies in the movement a positive pessimism towards the promises of progress of bourgeois society, but criticises in them “a negative and anarchist attitude” (Naville qtd. in Löwy *Radical* 20). To organise pessimism means, therefore, to abandon an anarchist attitude towards organisation in favour of communism. Benjamin, however, describes it in his own terms as the following task: “to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images” (*Surrealism* 191). Before entering this sphere of images, it is instructive to take a glimpse at Benjamin’s position on communism.

As far as the essay on surrealism is concerned, Benjamin’s political stance is at first ambiguous. His article evokes an unusual lineage of “great anarchists” such as Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud and Lautréamont, as the antecedents of surrealism.<sup>221</sup> Mikhail Bakunin, one of the most prominent figures of anarchism, is evoked in terms of offering a notion of freedom that only the surrealists were able to replace. Benjamin’s main critique of surrealism, however, is its hesitant alliance with communism, which, for him, should become absolute. In other words, surrealism should mobilise the energies of intoxication towards methodical preparation for the revolution (*Surrealism* 189).

One possibility, therefore, is that suggested by Löwy (*Radical* 18): Benjamin is above all a proponent of a *libertarian* current that takes inspiration from both anarchist and communist sensibilities. However, the constant resort of Benjamin to marxist theory after 1923 leads to the lasting formation of the assumptions that underlie his most important insights. While his constant attempts at producing new ideas and insights from this theory lead to anything but orthodox marxism, Benjamin remained faithful to the most important insights of historical materialism. The fact that he never joined the communist movement should not obscure this theoretical commitment, which took the form of a constant and creative rereading of Marx and Engels.

In this sense, Benjamin and the surrealists seem to have shared a singular approach to marxism. According to Löwy, this marxism did not exclude a “fascination with *enchantment* and the *marvellous*, as well as with the spellbound aspects of pre-modern cultures and societies” (*Radical* 18). Löwy names this trend “Gothic Marxism,” inspired by Margaret

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<sup>221</sup>“Unusual” since this feature is neither assumed nor usually attributed to such authors. The remarkable attribute of these “anarchists,” for Benjamin, lies in their “cult of evil as a political device” (*Surrealism* 187), one that prevented their incorporation by the bourgeois left.

Cohen's book *Profane Illumination*, even while he reproaches her use of "gothic" as meaning an interest in the irrational aspects of society (Cohen 1-5).<sup>222</sup> In any case, what Benjamin identifies in surrealism is "a radical concept of freedom" (*Surrealism* 189), related to mankind's struggle for liberation in both the subjective and social aspects of life. To this aim, the surrealists propose their attempted conjunction of psychological and material transformation or, according to Starobinski, "un monisme à la fois magique et matérialiste"<sup>223</sup> (385).

The question here revolves around the success of surrealism in "welding this experience of freedom to the other revolutionary experience" (Benjamin *Surrealism* 189), that is the communist one. The particular task of the movement, according to Benjamin, is precisely the mobilisation of energies from the experience of freedom to be found in intoxication, towards "the methodical and disciplinary preparation for the revolution" (*Surrealism* 189). That is, if intoxication was to be considered an end in itself, limited to the enjoyment of its ecstatic component, this would be an undialectical experience, with no revolutionary consequences.

At this point, Benjamin clarifies his vision of the ideal form that an exploration of intoxication should take:

For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize in it the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday. (*Surrealism* 189-90)

The mystery thus serves as a function that, through a "dialectical optic," allows for a view of quotidian life in its impenetrability, in its occult facet. This dialectic is indeed close to the surrealist view of the occult as not part of another world, but instead experienced through the everyday in the form of coincidences, found objects, and not least the mystification of technical development.

Surrealist thinking transitioned, according to Benjamin, from a "highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition" (*Surrealism* 185). In the organisation of pessimism, as suggested above, the moral metaphor is expelled from politics, leaving the space open for images. Just as in poetry, image and metaphor tend to collide. Without the metaphor, the

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<sup>222</sup> As Löwy suggests, the notion of the "irrational" is absent from the work of Benjamin, as well as not being very central to surrealism (*Radical* 18). We here subscribe to his approach to the gothic from the point of view of romanticism.

<sup>223</sup> "a both magic and materialistic monism"



sphere of images is disposable, but it should not be approached through contemplation. According to Benjamin, for the revolutionary intelligentsia, leaving the position of contemplation implies, on the one hand, interrupting the artistic career, and on the other hand, making contact with the proletarian masses. Here again is the “organised pessimism.” The latter of these elements, however, can only be accomplished through an engagement with the sphere of imagery. The best expression of this attempt so far, according to Benjamin, is the joke: “for in the joke, too, in invective, in misunderstanding, in all cases where an action puts forth its own image and exists, absorbing and consuming it, where nearness looks with its own eyes, the long-sought image sphere is opened” (*Surrealism* 191-2). In this sphere, “political materialism and physical nature share the inner man, the psyche, the individual ... with dialectical justice” (*Surrealism* 192).

Here Benjamin seems to be dealing, once again, with several issues at the same time. The passage from a contemplative to a revolutionary approach is re-enacted through a further passage, that from the metaphysical to anthropological materialism. This passage, according to Benjamin, cannot take place without a rupture. In other words, it leaves a residue: the body, whether individual or collective one. The organisation of this body, according to Benjamin, can only take place in the sphere of the image. This is why profane illumination is so important: it introduces imagery into the revolutionary process. Benjamin says: “only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge” (*Surrealism* 192). To understand this claim, an excerpt from another text of Benjamin’s is helpful, although belonging to a later phase: “Mass reproduction is aided specially by the reproduction of masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves.” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 251).

This seems to argue that it is only when the collective body, i.e. the masses, is able to perceive itself by means of an image, that it acquires consciousness of its own existence as a mass, and can organise itself and be organised. Benjamin is here describing the fascist manipulation of the masses through the technology of reproduction. The surrealists had opened the way for a revolutionary entrance into this sphere of imagery, one that could mobilise the mysterious and impenetrable aspects of everyday life, as well as the intoxicating energies of love and language, towards a material and psychological revolution. In this sense, according to Benjamin, they were the only ones to have understood the “present commands”

of Marx's and Engel's communist manifesto. Needless to say, the establishment of transcended reality that Benjamin envisioned as a consequence of the revolutionary discharge of such a collective body did not take place. Many paths of access to the energies of revolt have remained open, however. So has the quest for the conditions for revolution.

#### 4.8. Magic and Pessimism

Artaud and Benjamin's texts on surrealism propose an interesting relationship between the notions of revolt and revolution, on the one side, and magic or the mystic dimension of experience, on the other. In Benjamin's approach, this subject takes the form of an analysis of the means through which surrealism is able to mobilise the energies of magic towards revolution. For Artaud it is the quest for a revolution of the spirit, and the issue of surrealism as a form of mystique or magic. This section intends to explore this relationship as it appears in Benjamin's and Artaud's texts, proposing a juxtaposition of their views. Underscoring this thematisation is the pessimism that both authors identify in a materialistic understanding of the world, which assumes a particular form in surrealism. They each illuminate different aspects of the issue, without however providing a final resolution. The "remedies" presented by Benjamin and Artaud to the pessimism they identify are somehow analogous, even if they assume different complexions. For both, to advance towards revolution requires an engagement with the magic and mystic aspects of life.

On this concern, Naville is one possible connecting thread between Artaud and Benjamin. Admired by Benjamin and an admirer of Artaud, Naville, in the 1975 re-edition of the above-mentioned book *La Révolution et les Intellectuels*, not only argues, like Benjamin, for the need to organise pessimism, but also traces the revolutionary forces of surrealism back to Artaud. His account of the debates in the surrealist group around 1925 forms part of the introduction written for the book's republication. Referring to the first months of 1925, Naville states: "c'est Antonin Artaud qui nous avait entraînés, ce qui peut surprendre, sur la voie d'un révolte d'un nouveau genre"<sup>224</sup> (14). Artaud was entertaining a vague sense of dissatisfaction in relation to the group's activities, at the time focused on language. Distrustful of his own poetic attempts, and uneasy with the productions of automatic writing, Artaud proposed a focus on existence, on what could be found "en deçà des mots"<sup>225</sup> (Naville 14).

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<sup>224</sup> "it was Antonin Artaud who had set us, perhaps surprisingly, on the path to a new kind of revolt"

<sup>225</sup> "underneath words"

This led to the establishment of a new constellation of interests and, above all, to the designation of a group of adversaries. Naville is unambiguous on the role of Artaud in the third issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*:

A vrai dire, ce fut beaucoup plus qu'une collaboration. En peu de semaines, nous convînmes tous qu'Artaud apportait beaucoup de ce qui manquait assez gravement aux ouvertures du *Manifeste du Surréalisme* que Breton venait d'écrire et de publier: l'attaque furieuse des intuitions où la société cristallise ses contraintes maudites.<sup>226</sup> (Naville 15)

Naville proposes that Artaud caused a shift in the group's interests, a shift towards concrete issues. The surprise evoked by him must be related to the subsequent development of Artaud's relationship with surrealism, and, above all, to the general understanding that the reason behind the rupture lies in Artaud's disinterest in concrete matters.

The important aspect concerning these intrigues is the acknowledgement of the role of Artaud in expanding the preoccupations of surrealism well beyond "l'agitation inconsciente ou médiumnique"<sup>227</sup> (Naville 19). In other words, "Artaud nous sommait d'attaquer, et pas seulement de prospecter, et d'engager une lutte avant de récolter quoi que ce soit"<sup>228</sup> (Naville 19). This narrative helps to reframe not only these disputes, but also the commitment of Artaud to the theme of revolt and revolution. If he was responsible for the introduction of political perspectives that engaged the movement in "chercher dans la *révolution* un objectif défini ailleurs que dans les livres"<sup>229</sup> (Naville 19), Artaud's own commitment to the "concrete" aspects of the revolution must be evaluated in terms of what has been defined before, in this work, as an engagement with issues of the spirit.

As previously discussed, Artaud's notion of spirit does not exclude the material dimension of experience. If the exhortations made in his surrealist texts focus on a total liberation of the spirit, together with the consideration of all spiritual states as equally valuable, this must be framed in the context of an attack on the limiting rationality in vogue at the time, a rationality that was especially undermined by the discoveries of Freud. For

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<sup>226</sup> "As a matter of fact, it was much more than a collaboration. Within a few weeks, we all agreed that Artaud had brought much of what was severely lacking in the opening of the *Surrealist Manifesto*, which Breton had just written and published: the furious attack on the intuitions in which society crystallises its cursed constraints."

<sup>227</sup> "the unconscious and mediumistic agitation"

<sup>228</sup> "Artaud summoned us to attack and not just prospect, and to engage in a struggle before harvesting anything"

<sup>229</sup> "finding in the *revolution* a goal defined beyond books"

Artaud it was important in particular to uncover the detours of thought, the discontinuations that usually occupied a marginal place in the understanding of the mind. From this uncovering, he believed, valuable and new knowledge about the spirit could emerge, which might reveal aspects of its secret movements.

This spirit, it should be remembered, cannot be contained in physical substance, nor in the mind. For Artaud as well as for the surrealists, it is neither material nor transcendental. Particularly in *À La Grande Nuit*, the interpenetration of spiritual and material issues is expressed in terms of a continuity: the spirit necessarily materialises righteous ideas, while these materialisations open the way for the consideration of spiritual issues. What Artaud explicitly refuses is the limitation of the idea of revolution to what he calls “les cadres désespérants de la matière”<sup>230</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). In this regard, his approach is much closer than it may at first seem to that of Breton, who, in “Légitime Défense” (1926), refuses to separate “internal reality” from the “material world.”<sup>231</sup> If the Breton’s position was to change considerably in later years, it never really took the form proposed by Naville, that of a complete abandonment of idealism in favour of materialism.

In this context, Artaud’s criticism of surrealist pessimism, expressed in terms of the group’s failure to imagine a revolution outside the frames of materiality, does not seem to contradict surrealist conceptions. Artaud’s belief is that only the spirit, in this case “the invisible,” can be the propellant of revolution. The surrealists abandon the primacy of the spiritual in relation to the material world, but do not necessarily adopt the latter as pre-eminent. The issue seems to be more one of emphasis than of distinct worldviews. Even so, however, the irreducibility of both positions does not allow for an abstract resolution. Benjamin’s approach to the surrealist conception of materialism can be illuminating in this regard.

Benjamin identifies in surrealism a sensibility to the magical aspects of everyday life that could be mobilised towards revolution. He identifies the fact that the surrealists opened the way for a revolutionary use of the sphere of imagery — through the approach of the experience of intoxication — that is indispensable for the mobilisation and organisation of the masses. The materialism that Benjamin perceives in surrealism is, therefore, permeated with non-materialistic elements. The profane illumination is “a materialistic, anthropological inspiration” (*Surrealism* 179) that captures the “magic” energies of material reality. The

<sup>230</sup> “the desperate frames of matter”

<sup>231</sup> Curiously, this takes place in the context of a defence of surrealism’s autonomy before the French Communist Party.

“propeller” of revolution is also the “spiritual” aspect of things, but only in the sense that it is perceived as encapsulated in the material world, and inseparable from it.

For Artaud these two dimensions are also inseparable, although, in common with the surrealists, he occasionally envisages detachment from the carnal world in a positive sense. What seems to have taken place is a shift in perspective. While the surrealists, in Benjamin’s vision, approach the spiritual world from the standpoint of material reality, for Artaud the material dimension is secondary to the spirit. Artaud’s explanation for the inefficacy of surrealism in attaining the goals it has set for itself, as mentioned above, is its abandonment of the cause of the spirit. Historically, surrealism had indeed abandoned *l’esprit* as the movement’s most important cause. The question remains of whether surrealism has ever been other than an attempt at monism, at times setting its store by the spirit, at times by the material. Artaud certainly shared this attempt, but with a more definitive focus, one that did not exclude the concretisation of spiritual inspirations in the form of actions and concrete attacks, as *La Révolution Surréaliste* attests. The concept of revolution, that is, the form to be taken by the state of revolt and *fureur*, seems to have alienated Artaud and the surrealists significantly more than did any materialistic or monist world view.

Another issue of interest regarding surrealism and spiritual matters is highlighted by Artaud in *À La Grande Nuit*. He says: “le surréalisme n’a jamais été pour moi qu’une nouvelle sorte de magie”<sup>232</sup> (*Œuvres* 238). This statement resumes the topic of surrealism as a new form of mysticism, which had been introduced in the group’s documents from 1925. Artaud’s assertion is also a challenge to the surrealist embracing of materialism, which he perceives as a recrudescence contrary to his view of surrealism as “une insidieuse extension de l’invisible, l’inconscient à portée de la main”<sup>233</sup> (*Œuvres* 239f). Here Artaud presents a polarised opposition in order to suggest that the new worldview of surrealism is devoid of the mysticism it once sought for itself, that of an obscure and powerful order of beliefs. While the surrealist submission to a materialist perspective develops, for Artaud, into an arid and static conception of reality, his own vision of the movement as a new form of magic provides a notion of reality embedded in the invisible, unconscious, spiritual aspects of life.

It is clear that Artaud does not envision surrealism as intrinsically magic, as the expression “a new form of magic” denotes. Similarly, in 1925 it was a matter of creating a “new form of mysticism.” In line with the hypothesis of traces presented above, Artaud and

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<sup>232</sup> “surrealism has never been anything other for me than a new form of magic”

<sup>233</sup> “an insidious extension of the unseen, the unconscious within arm’s reach”

the surrealists possibly consider magic as a remnant of a different social configuration, in relation to which “a new form of magic” can be established, rather than magic itself. Historically speaking, their sensibility opposes the precepts of the enlightenment, while being particularly attuned to themes popular during the Middle Ages and early modernity, as Breton’s references to love, to give one example, suggest. The form of magic they sought to create had to be independent from other existing forms, most probably considered to be decayed and spiritualistic, as Starobinski suggests in a statement that is worth reproducing here: “de l’héritage spirite, le surréalisme ne collectionne que les images”<sup>234</sup> (401). That surrealism should form a nexus with the rich store of images it accesses through its contact with spiritual energies, is a claim very similar to that of Benjamin. As a new form of magic, it is through images that surrealism mobilises not only the spiritual energies, but also, potentially, the masses.

Despite the surrealist references to the Middle Ages, for Artaud, the ultimate status of magic must remain open. For Benjamin, as mentioned above, the intoxication to be found in surrealism is a re-enactment of the magical relationship between ancient man and the cosmos, a relationship that has disappeared in modern society. In “One-Way Street,” the intoxication or *Rausch* that characterised the “cosmic experience” of ancient man is described thus: “it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remote to us, and never of one without the other” (Benjamin *One-way* 93). Here a phrase from Lukács on the epic civilisation is apt: “Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventures and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home.” (*Novel* 29). In this order of things, the cosmos intersects with everyday experience. Benjamin identifies the decay of this form in “the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age” (*One-way* 92), making the link, in this instance, with the discoveries of Renaissance science.

The intoxication captured by surrealism is that of a new form. For Benjamin, it assumes a particularly profane intonation, one of materialistic inspiration. In the profane illumination, the material world, in its immediate presence, is united with the marvellous features associated with a remote point in time. The idea suggested by Löwy that surrealism, just like romanticism, might be imbued with “an ardent, and sometimes despairing, desire to re-enchant the world” (*Radical* 19), makes sense in the context of this wish to regain some of the last remaining magical energies still available in the modern world. For Benjamin, these energies manifest themselves in experiments with words, outmoded objects, and

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<sup>234</sup> “surrealism collects nothing more than images from the spiritualist heritage”

coincidences. But they are found above all in the places where capitalist society produces the signs of its own transience and destruction: the capture of these forces gains its meaning in the context of revolution.

The surrealist illumination proposed by Artaud and his colleagues, on the other hand, is connected with what they call “a state of fury.” It expresses the spiritual insight and clarification gained through an exploration of the “eternal” aspects of the spirit, as well as through an attack on all instances of its oppression. As such, it keeps the same sense of a revealing and ecstatic inspiration, but without the explicit references to either cosmic experience or the material world in terms of places and objects. While engaging with the obscure set of beliefs that the surrealists associated with their “mystique” at the time, *l'illumination surréaliste* lacks a detailed elucidation. Artaud’s definition of surrealism as part of “ce décalage du centre spirituel du monde, de ce dénivellement des apparences, de cette transfiguration du possible”<sup>235</sup> (*Œuvres* 238) is a good example of what might be thought of as a surrealist illumination.

In both cases, one should not forget the connection of illumination with a state of fury, as well as with the revolution. As mentioned above, Artaud uses his diagnosis of the surrealist pessimism of the late twenties to explore the issue of what the alignment with communism has brought to the movement. In his opinion, revolution has always been within the frame of surrealism. His issue is with the fact that the surrealists, as he sees it, have begun to deny that all revolution starts in the spirit, within the unconscious forces that reach the surface of the soul, and can then provoke changes in reality or the “vesture” of things. For Artaud, by denying the importance of the spirit, the surrealists have subscribed to a state of immobility and fatalism, since reality is ultimately of a static nature. Artaud identifies the reason for the surrealists’ pessimism as the abandonment of a “magical” understanding of reality, that is, a dynamic and spiritual one. At the same time, he acknowledges his own “lucid” pessimism towards social change. Artaud sees no difference between his and the surrealists’ conjunction of a disposition to action and a sense of incapacity in relation to it. More importantly, Artaud identifies in the association with communism a moral attitude that Benjamin also touches upon. Artaud’s objection to it seems to be to the submission to any form of morality that is not one’s own.

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<sup>235</sup> “this shift in the spiritual centre of the world, this unevenness of appearances, this transfiguration of the possible”

For Benjamin, communism is the solution to the surrealist impasse over which is the most significant form of social change. He also identifies in pessimism a particular aspect of this impasse. That is, if an embracing of communism allows surrealism to differ from the “dilettantish optimism” of the bourgeois left, it also risks imposing a limitation on its capacity for action, in the form of a commitment to a deeply negative attitude related to the moral element of politics. Benjamin does not make clear what this moral dimension is, but his writings suggest this is related to the question of whether the conditions for revolution are to be found in a change in attitudes or in external circumstances. He says: “that is the cardinal question that determines the relation of politics to morality and cannot be glossed over” (*Surrealism* 191). It seems that Benjamin is for a combination of these two dimensions in the revolutionary cause. For Artaud, this morality can only be valid if the changing of attitudes somehow precedes, in terms of relevance, the transformation of external circumstances.

Benjamin’s definition of organised pessimism, however, takes the form not only of a move towards organised revolution — as opposed to the “anarchist” attitude —, it also embraces the concept of imagery. That is, to organise pessimism, as mentioned above, means “to expel moral metaphor from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images” (*Surrealism* 191). This notion of image encompasses much more than optical perceptiveness, as suggested in the discussion above about the awakening of the consciousness of the masses through an image-based depiction of themselves. Images here must be related to impressions, representations and ideas, as Benjamin’s praise of jokes suggests: they are described as the “best expression so far” of the attempt to contact the proletarian masses through images. More particularly, Benjamin’s notion of dialectic images, briefly discussed below, complements and enriches this description.

Both Artaud and Benjamin identify in the pessimistic attitude of surrealism a limitation to action. In Artaud, this takes the form of a conceptualisation of surrealism as “a new form of magic,” one that provides an understanding of reality as embedded in the invisible, unconscious, spiritual aspects of life. He is opposed to materialism and to a notion of reality as profoundly immutable and static. He considers engagement with the “invisible” forces of the “spiritual centre of the world” to be indispensable in the pursuit of any form of revolution. The inclusion of these immaterial energies in the revolutionary cause is also a necessity for Benjamin, even if the realms of spirit and matter are not clearly distinguished in his essay. For Benjamin, surrealism should fully engage with the mobilisation of the “ecstatic



energies” as part of its methodical preparation for the revolution. For Benjamin, unlike for Artaud, this implies a full commitment to communism.

It could be said that for both authors the advancement of the revolutionary force in surrealism is related to it recognising the “magic” and “spiritual” energies it has proved capable of mobilising, rather than committing too strictly to a pre-defined form of revolution. However, this is made more explicit by Artaud than it is by Benjamin. It can only be inferred from the latter, if one considers that the act of “expelling the moral metaphor from politics” in order to “discover the sphere of images” means focusing more on the experience of intoxication than on the Party guidelines. That pessimism should be an active attitude, in terms of what Löwy (*Radical* 20) defines as a dedication to preventing the advent of the worst, is another belief that can be attributed to both Artaud and Benjamin.

Conceptualisations of the magical, spiritual dimension of modern experience are envisioned, for Artaud as well as for Benjamin, in close relationship with an urge to transform both spiritual and material reality. They give different forms to this urge, and, in particular, different emphases to the elements of this relationship. A comparison of their views allows for a better understanding of the revolutionary aspect of Artaud’s thought, for instance, as a highly spiritual, but also material transformation. Naville, emphasising Artaud’s impact on the early phase of surrealism, points to his criticism of the surrealist “réussites publiques, assez mal masquées par un sourire modeste et attristé ou de subtils regrets”<sup>236</sup>(16). What Artaud brought to the movement also took the form of pessimism and mistrust, particularly of the written form, not to mention the idea of a literary career.

Benjamin praises the fact that surrealism allows for the loosening of individuality, Artaud, that it allows the ultimate expression of one’s spirit. Both reveal surrealism’s nexus with the rich space of images drawn from its contact with spiritual energies, the act of “revelation” also being an important aspect in their own thought. For Artaud, from the materialisation of spiritual ideas, including the exposition of the moments of discontinuation of thought, one is able to access different imaginative formations. For Benjamin, the sphere of images is key to the constitution of a potential communion of action between modern men. The masses, the automatised life and the possibility of developing one’s own thought are the themes through which Artaud and Benjamin investigate the notion of magic in the texts approached in the following section.

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<sup>236</sup> “public successes, poorly masked by a modest, sad smile or by subtle regret”

#### 4.9. “Lettre sur Lautréamont”

Isidore Ducasse, the author of *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869), is the object of a passionate essay written by Artaud one hundred years after Ducasse’s birth. “Lettre sur Lautréamont” was published in 1946 by Jean Ballard in *Cahiers du Sud*, and reprinted in *Suppôts et Supplications* in 1948.<sup>237</sup> Ducasse, who published under the pseudonym of the Comte de Lautréamont, seems to have lived a poor, itinerant life in the nineteenth century Paris. His work was damned as intolerable by the public at the time, mostly due to the unusual cruelty and viciousness presented in it. Ducasse died mysteriously at the age of twenty-four, in a Paris besieged by the Prussian army. In a sense, the defiant images he brought to light remained dormant for years until the surrealists helped them to re-emerge in elegiac praises. As mentioned above, Ducasse could be counted as one of the predecessors of the French avant-garde movement. An image from *Les Chants de Maldoror*, to mention just one example, appeared recurrently in Breton’s writings, as the ultimate surrealist encounter: that of an umbrella and a sewing machine over a dissecting table (*Breton Manifestes* 50).

Artaud’s piece appears at a time when, having been an in-patient in psychiatric hospitals since 1937, he was privileging the epistolary form to give expression to his ideas. As the letters from *Suppôts et Supplications* elucidate, around 1946 Artaud frequently thematises the invasion of consciousness by infamous magical practices, whose goal is to prevent the emergence of the potentialities of a few extraordinary minds. Artaud particularly relates such practices to the events that lead to his imprisonment in Dublin in 1937, the consequent extradition to France and the beginning of a long journey through various French psychiatric hospitals in the difficult years immediately before and during World War II.

Artaud’s thematisation of consciousness invasion can be observed, for instance, in letters exchanged with Breton, Henri Thomas, Anie Besnard and Marthe Robert (*Œuvres XIV* 55-162). However, “Lettre sur Lautréamont” does not appear in the epistolary section of the book. It is one of the texts in “Fragmentations,” a segment that Artaud describes as “une espèce de révision haletante de la culture, une abracadabrante chevauchée du corps à travers tous les totems d’une culture ruinée avant d’avoir pris corps”<sup>238</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 9). Artaud seems to wish for the text to be received as a document of cultural analysis, rather than a personal plea. Its first lines are a request to the reader to recognize this distinction.

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<sup>237</sup> *Suppôts et Supplications*, the book Artaud starts to compose in 1946, is a collection of different texts organised under three axes: Fragmentations, Letters and Interjections.

<sup>238</sup> “some sort of breathless review of culture, a preposterous ride of the body through all the totems of a culture that has been ruined before taking shape”

The text opens in the following fashion: “Oui, j’ai des confidences à vous faire sur le comte impensable de Lautréamont”<sup>239</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres XIV* 32). By proposing an open dialogue whose elements disappear and reappear in the text, Artaud addresses the distance that separates him from the public, but also himself from the subject of the text, Lautréamont. The dossier of *Œuvres Complètes* tells us that the piece was composed from a few notes and an actual letter sent to Ballard in response to his request for a text (Artaud *Œuvres XIV* 185). Here the dialogical aspect, present at various points in Artaud’s work, assumes the form of a first person address, while making use of a few elements of epistolary writing, following the format of an open letter. The fact that Artaud chooses such a format to express his account of Lautréamont is significant. If the text’s first lines suggest a confession limited to the initiated, they also appear to assume a required, necessary public interest in Lautréamont.

The first subject Artaud considers is that of the remaining letters of Ducasse, in part due to them having retained some of the few pieces of biographical information to survive his death. According to Thévenin (*Œuvres XIV* 296), Artaud accessed Ducasse’s letters previous to writing his text, probably in the edition that presents *Les Chants de Maldoror* followed by epistolary writings and poems (Lautréamont 231-7). As part of his promised “confidences,” Artaud mentions the tone of menace, coercion and dictation in Ducasse’s letters, which he qualifies as extravagant and elegant. On Ducasse, Artaud declares: “il ne peut écrire une lettre usuelle simple sans qu’on y sente cette trépidation épileptoïde du Verbe, qui, de quoi qu’il puisse s’agir, ne veut pas être utilisé sans frémir”<sup>240</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 32). It is not surprising that these words evoke the writings of Artaud himself. From an excerpt from Ducasse’s correspondence, Artaud indirectly thematises his own address of the reader.

The discussion is built around a detail in which Artaud identifies a surreptitious humour. In Ducasse’s exchange with his editor, the expression *timbres de la poste* substitutes the usual *timbres-poste* (“postage stamp”). The issue at stake is Ducasse’s dispatch of stamps in order to pay for a book by Baudelaire, and the substitution is related to using postage stamps as money, a usual practice at the time. According to Artaud, the reader that does not realise the significance of this *la* amid Ducasse’s words has proven to be unfit for the text. His opinion of this reader is: “celui-ci n’est que le goujat rétensif d’une pute, et la matière incarnée d’un porc”<sup>241</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 32-3). As a document of culture, Artaud’s essay is not

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<sup>239</sup> “Yes, I have something to confide in you about the unthinkable Count of Lautréamont”

<sup>240</sup> “he cannot write a simple, ordinary letter without one feeling this epileptoid trepidation of the Word, which, whatever it concerns, does not wish to be used without a shudder”

<sup>241</sup> “he is no more than the retentive lout of a whore, and the embodied material of a pig”

only an analysis of the state of society, it is a demand to the reader to choose a position in relation to its content, that of Ducasse's destiny and the practices influencing it.

The main issue that occupies Artaud is the proposition that Ducasse, together with other poets and artists, is engaged in a clash with the bourgeoisie. Through the reference to a number of evil-intentioned practices and figures, the characterisation of the bourgeoisie is a continuum from the "imbecilic" reader, who has no clue about the subtle humour of Ducasse. These people incarnate the forces of bestiality in society, those interested, in Artaud's view, in exploiting the artist's heart for their own indulgence. The figurations go further, in terms of associations between these forces and some mystic symbols, among which we can mention "ce vieux singe du Ramayana"<sup>242</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 33). In an imagined dialogue between these forces and Lautréamont, Artaud expresses the poet's attempt at resisting the imposition of normality onto his work.

One of Artaud's quotations from the letters of Ducasse exemplifies the tone of his account. Discussing the forces trying to prevent Ducasse from attaining his true expression, Artaud states: "Mais Lautréamont ne se laisse pas arrêter. 'Laisse moi, dit-il, à son éditeur, reprendre maintenant d'un peu haut.' L'un peu haut de la mort, sans doute, qui, au jour louche, l'a emporté."<sup>243</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 33). The note of sarcasm and the cutting from one narrative scenario to the other is indicative of the way Artaud approaches the story of Lautréamont, as if trying to express the intrinsically tormenting and humorous features of his life and death. Artaud's taunting remarks are somehow in consonance with the mixture of devilishness and tactile humour of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, but more than anything they express the realisation of a process that intends to assault the writer through tricks that will lead to his destruction.

Artaud considers the death of Ducasse as being *trop anodinement plate* ("too anodynely flat"). In other words, "on n'a jamais considéré avec assez d'attention, et j'y insiste, de *remords*, la mort si évasisément plate du comte impensable de Lautréamont"<sup>244</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 33). The emphasis on the word "remorse" points to the accountability of the

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<sup>242</sup> "this old monkey from the Ramayana" — The Ramayana is a Sanskrit epic poem in which the "monkey people" or Vanara form an army to help the protagonist Rama. They are depicted as amusing, childish and honest, and have some divine features.

<sup>243</sup> "But Lautréamont will not be stopped. 'Let me,' he says to his publisher, 'now resume from a little way above. The little way above meaning his death, no doubt, which carried him off on that disreputable day.'" — In fact, this expression is one that Ducasse addresses not to his editor, but to the banker Darasse (Artaud *Œuvres XIV* 247).

<sup>244</sup> "we have never considered with sufficient attention, and I stress, *remorse*, the evasively flat death of the unthinkable Count of Lautréamont"

general public for the death of the Count. This theme re-emerges later, not only in many of Artaud's letters, in relation to himself and to other writers, but also prominently in his well-known text "Van Gogh le Suicidé de la Société" (1947). According to Artaud, the dull death of Ducasse draws attention to the mystery of his life, leading to the assumption that he was unwanted in this world, or at least as unwanted as Poe, Baudelaire, Nerval and Rimbaud. In Artaud's words, "on a voulu l'empêcher non ouvertement mais occultement" (*Œuvres XIV* 186).

Artaud's analysis of the death of Ducasse assumes a tone at times sarcastic, at times prophetic, but always severe, a feature that is also visible in his characterisations of evil forces. Describing the voice that once addressed the writer, Artaud examines the difference between being inside and outside the norm, the former being related, quite particularly, to the unconscious desires of the bourgeoisie. In the text contained in the dossier of *Suppôts et Supplications* — another version, possibly a draft, of the same piece —, his words are: "Car le bourgeois hypocrite et rétif de toute pulsation de poésie instante, en instance de grésillement, dit au comte de L[autréamont]: Cesse, rentre dans la norme, ton cœur bat d'horreur."<sup>245</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 189). According to Artaud, Lautréamont is from the outset not swayed by these demands, although they demonstrate the nefarious forces directed at him. The mystery surrounding Ducasse's death — the cause of which is absent from the death certificate —, is another sign pointing in this direction. If, in relation to his life and genius, "irreducible to the world," the anonymous death of Ducasse is improper, it fits very well, Artaud adds, with "tout le simiesque de ce subreptice de haine par lequel la sottise bourgeoise escamote tous les grands renoms"<sup>246</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 34).

In other words, if the petty and gratuitous death of Ducasse does not echo his life, it echoes the narrow-minded aversion towards all that escapes the norm, such as the gratuitous wickedness of *Les Chants de Maldoror*. In Artaud's words, this "imbécillité enracinée"<sup>247</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 34), which, in relation to the work of the above-mentioned authors, "a peur que leur poésie ne sorte des livres et ne renverse la réalité"<sup>248</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 34), is the same force

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<sup>245</sup> "For the hypocritical bourgeois, retentive of any pulsation of instant poetry, in the moment of crackle, told the Count of L[autréamont]: Cease, return to the norm, your heart beats in horror." — The texts presented in the dossier are composed of different versions of the final text, as well as, in this case, Artaud's notes on Ducasse and drafts of letters to Ballard.

<sup>246</sup> "all the simian aspects of this surreptitious hate through which the stupid bourgeois leaves aside all the great names"

<sup>247</sup> "deep-rooted imbecility"

<sup>248</sup> "is afraid that their poetry might leave books and upset reality"

that has *interned* some of them (here referring particularly to psychiatric hospitals). The reverse of reality is an interesting expression used in this context, particularly in terms of the need to return to the norm, a dimension described in terms of an “interior.” The expression *aliéné* (“alienated”), referring to someone’s *moi de poète* (“poetic self”), figures as part of the same association. That is, for Artaud, it is while one is outside and alienated from the norm that one is able to develop a work, becoming, consequently, the possible target of the normalising forces, whose methods may include that of internment. If a “reversed reality” might threaten this state of things, it must be also related to the remote allusion, here, to the position of the bourgeoisie in this process.

In consonance with this aspect, Artaud situates everyday life as an element contributing to the situation of the poet as an enraged being: “et on a fermé la bouche à Lautréamont tout jeune afin d’en finir tout de suite avec cette agressivité montante d’un coeur que la vie de chaque jour catastrophiquement indispose”<sup>249</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 34). It seems, however, that for Artaud reality is not necessarily maleficent. It becomes so once one’s clear vision is poisoned. In the case of Ducasse, he was once able to see reality clearly, a fact to which his work testifies. This vision, though true, could not remain untouched: “à force de venins refoulés, de miasmes pesteux retenus ... la réalité ait fini par en devenir maléfique”<sup>250</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 186). One might ask whether the reversal of reality is not in fact Lautréamont’s act of showing, through images of gratuitous maleficence, the fact that reality is not necessarily maleficent. If this is the case, the bourgeoisie is interested in maintaining a world view of naturalised evil so that its own maleficent actions remain unnoticed. This leads to the question of what exactly Artaud sees in *Les Chants de Maldoror*. His answer is not consonant with the understanding of moral character contained in words such as “evil” and “maleficence.” According to Artaud, in Maldoror “tout est atroce”<sup>251</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35).

At this point, the scope of Artaud’s hypothesis emerges: it concerns the practices undertaken by those forces in society that coincide with the norm and act towards the conservation of its homogeneity. Their targets are great individuals, those capable of disarranging the state of things while expressing the “transcendental” truths of the world. In the case of Ducasse, Artaud interestingly situates the origin of this process in his act of assuming the name Comte de Lautréamont. This is explained in the following passage:

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<sup>249</sup> “and Lautréamont’s mouth was shut while he was very young in order to put an immediate end to the rising aggressivity of a heart that everyday life had catastrophically injured”

<sup>250</sup> “by dint of repressed venoms, of retained miasma from plagues ... reality has finally become evil”

<sup>251</sup> “everything is atrocious”

Et je dis que l'invention du nom de Lautréamont, si elle a servi à Isidore Ducasse de mot de passe pour couvrir et pour introduire la magnificence insolite de son produit, je dis que l'invention de ce patronyme littéraire, tel un habit au-dessus de la vie, a donné lieu, par son soulèvement au-dessus de l'homme qui l'a produit, au passage d'une de ces saloperies collectives crasses, dont l'histoire des lettres est pleine, et qui a fait fuir, à la longue, l'âme d'Isidore Ducasse de la vie.<sup>252</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35)

According to Artaud, Ducasse's assumption of another name — and not just any name, but “un très beau nom, un très grand nom”<sup>253</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35) — provoked an elevation above his human level, which in turn allowed the passage of the so-called *saloperies* (“misdeeds”). This notion introduces the idea that, when aiming at remarkable spirits, conservative and evil forces do not act at random, but collectively and with coordination. At the same time, this process could only take place through some sort of collaboration, probably an unconscious one, on the part of Ducasse. Artaud identifies in Ducasse “un esprit qui voulait toujours laisser tomber Isidore Ducasse au profit du comte”<sup>254</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35). The existence of a spirit inside one's own personality, and particularly one that acts against the survival of this same character, point to the different levels at which the conforming forces act.

It is important to note that, according to Artaud, “...c'est bien Isidore Ducasse qui a trouvé le nom de Lautréamont. Mais quand il l'a trouvé, il n'était pas seul.”<sup>255</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35). In the manner of a mystic dictation — in no way exceptional for his work — Artaud formulates the process followed by this operation:

Je veux dire qu'il avait autour de lui, et de son âme, cette floculation microbienne d'espions, cette baveuse, acrimonieuse ruée de tous les parasites les plus sordides de l'être, de tous les revenants antiques du non-être, cette

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<sup>252</sup> “I say that the invention of the name of Lautreamont, if it served Isidore Ducasse as a password to cover and to introduce the unusual magnificence of his product, I say that the invention of this literary surname, as a garment worn on top of life, gave way, through the elevation of the man who produced it, to the passage of these crass collective misdeeds, of which the history of literature is full, and which made the soul of Isidore Ducasse flee, eventually, from life.”

<sup>253</sup> “a very beautiful name, a great name”

<sup>254</sup> “a spirit that always wanted to let Isidore Ducasse go in favour of the Count”

<sup>255</sup> “...it was Isidore Ducasse who found the name of Lautréamont. But when he found it, he was not alone”

teigne de profiteurs innés qui à son lit de mort lui a dit: “Nous sommes le comte de Lautréamont, et tu n’es qui Isidore Ducasse.”<sup>256</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35-6)

Once again, the qualifications given by Artaud are rich and provocative. Here the parasites of being meet the ancient revenants of non-being, giving place to a numerous and profuse fauna of malicious entities. In a variation of the text, Artaud names this “la conscience conformiste bestiale du plus grand nombre”<sup>257</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 187). Once it assumes the identity of the Count and replaces Ducasse as the author, it leads to his early and anonymous death. The motivation behind such activity occupies the next lines of Artaud’s text.

The belief that Ducasse was a genius is implicit from the opening lines of the text. His ability to see and express himself more clearly than most men is the reason for the wish for his abolishment. In Artaud’s words, Ducasse “regardait et tisonnait dans la jachère de l’inconscient encore inutilisé”<sup>258</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 36), opening the way for the expression of what had so far remained unknown. This naturally constituted a threat to the stability of the social order. However, for Artaud this unconscious space concerns only Ducasse, “car il n’y a pas dans notre corps de points où nous puissions nous rencontrer avec la conscience de tous”<sup>259</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 36). This intrinsic and almost absolute solitude within oneself stands in opposition to the world’s intentions: the world invades certain consciences in order to assure the access to everyone’s ideas (Artaud *Œuvres XIV* 36).

Here, in particular, Artaud seems to use the terms *conscience* and *inconscient* interchangeably while referring to the distinguishing vision of Ducasse. One may suppose that access to this “fallow land” of the unconscious is, at least partially, what allows the development of Ducasse’s great conscience.<sup>260</sup> Even if he is able to access only his own unconscious, this entry gives an insight into the general consciousness, otherwise his vision would not be seen to be dangerous. In other words, it is only through one’s own body and experience, for Artaud, that valuable knowledge can be attained. Nevertheless, one’s own body is something one can only partially possess.

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<sup>256</sup> “I mean to say that around him and his soul was a microbial flocculation of spies, a slobbering, acrimonious rush of the most sordid parasites of being, all the ancient ghosts of non-being, this innate fungus of profiteers who on his deathbed said to him: ‘We are the Comte de Lautréamont, and you are no more than Isidore Ducasse’”

<sup>257</sup> “the bestial conformist conscience of the majority”

<sup>258</sup> “he looked and stirred in the fallow land of the still-unexplored unconscious”

<sup>259</sup> “because there is not one point in our body where we can meet with the conscience of all”

<sup>260</sup> In previous texts, such as “Fragments d’un Journal d’Enfer” (1926), access to the unconscious can result in states of paralysis, but also in the establishment of valuable knowledge. This ambiguous character is analysed closely in the next chapter.



At this point, Artaud describes the clash between individual and collective in terms of “la partouze de l’inconscient interlope de tous contre la conscience interloquée d’un seul”<sup>261</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 36). The insistence on a conflict of individual versus collective points to the significance of intellectual self-determination in Artaud’s work, a position he assumed openly in relation to his own work. In common with other writers evoked by Artaud, Lautréamont imprinted an *archi-individualiste* (“arch-individualist”) character on his writing (*Œuvres XIV* 37). This is what the co-ordinated rise of conformist spirits threatens. Artaud explains:

Car l’opération n’est pas de sacrifier son moi de poète, et, à ce moment-là, *d’aliéné*, à tout le monde, mais de se laisser pénétrer et violer par la conscience de tout le monde, de telle sorte qu’on ne soit plus, dans son corps, que le serf des idées et réactions de tous.<sup>262</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 36-7)

To become the servant of the ideas and reactions of others: that is how Artaud describes the death of a poet, a writer, a “great conscience.” The diversion of the work from its individual character, in turn, is what the general consciousness attempts in order to neutralise the truth emanating from a “poète enragé par la vérité”<sup>263</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 37).

Whether the truth owned by the poet is capable of reversing reality can never be known. Artaud does not explain whether such forces have always accomplished a neutralisation of the vision of poets and artists, nor to what extent they can act once one of these testimonies of clarity reaches the public. It is quite possible that, considering the existence of a subjective level of action of these same conforming tendencies, the general consciousness remains intact, with a few exceptions here and there. That is why a position on the part of the public is required, and the question of whether one believes in the maleficent incantation or not constantly poses itself, through Artaud, to the public. To ignore and to forget, in this context, is also to be bewitched and take part in practices of enchantment.

Artaud’s view coincides, to some extent, with an ideological position that identifies the bourgeoisie with deep-rooted conservative and conforming forces. According to Lukács (*History* 11), for instance, it strives for the preservation of a structure of exploration, which is expressed particularly through the effort to maintain the illusion of the immutability of the categories created by capitalism. In “Lettre sur Lautréamont,” Artaud writes: “car le

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<sup>261</sup> “the orgy of the doubtful unconscious of all against the disconcerted consciousness of one”

<sup>262</sup> “Because the operation does not consist of sacrificing one’s poet self, and at that time, one’s *alienated* self, to everyone, but of allowing oneself be penetrated and violated by the conscience of everyone, so that one is, in one own’s body, no more than the serf of the ideas and reactions of all.”

<sup>263</sup> “poet enraged by the truth”

bourgeois hypocrite et méprisant, confit, dopé, poussah de la certitude méprisante, n'est, en réalité, que cette antiquité charardeuse ... [ce] antique escamoteur"<sup>264</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 33). By identifying the bourgeois with ancient villainous forces, but also with bygone conjurers, Artaud points to the double character of his own criticism. That the unconscious is implied in his analyses is consistent with the extent to which vague notions of mysticism and magic are intrinsic to the ideas of himself and his contemporaries, just as they integrate the thought of Freud. On the other hand, the fact that the bourgeoisie is unconsciously implicated in the criminal acts of society against its own development is only a consequence of the notion of class consciousness. According to Artaud, it is the bourgeoisie that instructs Lautréamont, in patronising tones, on the subject of his "atrocious" individualistic writing: "Mais ça ne se fait pas, non, ça ne se fait pas ... Cesse. Rentre dans la norme."<sup>265</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 33).

#### 4.10. Anti-Fascism and the Work of Art

Departing from a quote from Paul Valéry, who describes the relationship between the field of fine arts and the technical conditions of the late nineteenth century as being on the verge of a transformation, Benjamin proposes an analysis of this state of affairs aimed at producing revolutionary tools in terms of cultural politics. More precisely, he intends to hamper the use of the concepts emerging in this context "for the purposes of Fascism" (Benjamin *Work of Art* 218). This is the political tone with which Benjamin opens the famous article "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Anticipating the gap between revolutionary interests and his theses, Benjamin proposes that "they brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery — concepts whose uncontrolled (and at present almost uncontrollable) application would lead to a processing of data in the Fascist sense" (*Work of Art* 218).

In 1936 Benjamin is in exile in Paris, living off his sparse publication of essays, as well as from a regular stipend from the *Institut für Sozialforschung*, of which he had been a member since 1935. For the last seven years of his life, Benjamin lived an émigrés life, making efforts "to be paid a decent fee for an occasional review, to avoid the attention of the French police ... or to find somebody willing to help with a visa that would open the doors to England or the United States" (Demenz xvii-xviii). The essay on the work of art is destined

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<sup>264</sup> "because the hypocritical and contemptuous bourgeois, who is candid, doped, full of contemptuous certainty, is, in reality, nothing but this villain antiquity ... this ancient conjurer"

<sup>265</sup> "But one cannot do that, no, one cannot do that ... Cease. Return to the norm."

for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (“Journal for Social Research”), the Institute’s publication, where it appears for the first time in 1936, in a French translation by Klossowski. The text approached here is that of its final version, from 1939, which appeared posthumously in Benjamin’s collected work.

That nowadays study of “The Work of Art...” takes place above all within the field of Media Studies is indicative of the neutralisation of the political content of Benjamin’s ideas, particularly of his marxism (Clark 81). This process can be observed in relation to other writers of this period, an irony if one considers the quasi-extemporaneous declarations of intentions found in texts such as this. Scholem characterises the context in which the essay was written as one of a still-hesitant marxism on the part of Benjamin. Having criticised his friend’s use of the notion of aura in what he called a “pseudo-marxist context” in the second section of the essay, Scholem sees Benjamin’s answer as a justification that his marxism was “not dogmatic but heuristic and experimental in nature” (Scholem *Friendship* 260). It is possible that this character has remained constant throughout his work.

By schematically retracing the history of the relationship between the work of art and the techniques of its reproduction in the first section of the article, Benjamin proposes that, on the one hand, the work of art has always been somehow reproducible while, on the other hand, the extent and form of its reproducibility changed dramatically from the turn of the century onwards (*Work of Art* 218-9). At this time technical developments acquired a place in artistic processes, as is exemplified, for instance, by the early use of photography by painters (Benjamin *Photography* 174).

Benjamin goes on to point out that technical reproduction has affected not only the authenticity of the work of art, but also its authority (*Work of Art* 220). Even where these notions can be considered as interlinked, however, the authority of a work of art remains more deeply modified by the fact that it can be reproduced independently of manual work than does its authenticity. That is, technical reproduction allows the copy to reach a much larger world than the original, particularly in terms of the public, which might range from an expectant audience to the walker of a busy street. Therefore, according to Benjamin, “the situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated” (*Work of Art* 221).

Benjamin defines authenticity as the essence that the work of art transmits and has transmitted since its creation. This definition recalls Benjamin’s treatment of language as the communication of the essences of things. The authenticity of an art object is also strictly

connected to “its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (*Work of Art* 221). The changes in the level of authenticity inevitably affect the historical legacy of a work of art. Benjamin envisions this as “jeopardised by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter” (*Work of Art* 221). This has consequences for the possibility of experiencing a work of art, as becomes clear in Benjamin’s approach to the notion of aura.

Initially presented as a constitutive element of the authority of the object, aura is further defined by Benjamin in relation to natural objects, as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (*Work of Art* 222). The social basis of the decay of the aura, in turn, is considered to be the “increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life,” that is, their desire to “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 223). In this definition, Benjamin attests to the power of the masses, whose desire is ascribed the capability of generating deep transformations in social life, as well as in collective forms of perception. In relation to the processes of technical reproduction, the position of the masses is that of a definitive bent towards getting hold of an object “by way of its likeness, of its reproduction” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 223), that is, by somehow overcoming its uniqueness. What Benjamin refers to as the masses’ perception of a “sense of the universal equality of things” is the consequence of an adjustment of reality that has unprecedented effects on contemporary experience, having the work of art as a touchstone.

In opposition to this appropriation of objects from the perspective of likeness, Benjamin describes the uniqueness of a work of art as “inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” (*Work of Art* 223). Tradition, however, is not that of a fixed canon, but one that is extremely changeable in accordance with the social conditions in which a work of art is perceived. With this, Benjamin avoids the simplified argument of a positive liberation coming from a break with tradition. As should become clear in the following, he is neither a defender of tradition per se, nor blind to the interesting effects that this change has brought.

Benjamin situates the origins of the integration of the work of art into tradition in the cult, that is, the service of a magical-religious ritual (*Work of Art* 223). Its aura must then be related to this early ritual function. In this context, the definition of aura as distance is “nothing but the formulation of the cult value of the work of art in categories of space and time perception” (*Work of Art* 243), having the unapproachability of the cult image as its prototype. Therefore, the unprecedented situation created by mechanical reproduction is not comparable to the process of secularisation, which resulted, for its part, according to

Benjamin, in a “theology of art” expressed in the maxim *l’art pour l’art*. Mechanical reproduction gives rise not only to a decay of the aural function, but a situation in which, “for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipated the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 224).

According to Benjamin, the change in the quantitative availability of the work of art, facilitated by its reproduction, led to a change in its qualitative value. From being an early instrument of magic, to being a piece designed for exhibition, the work of art undergoes a transformation in which even its artistic function becomes incidental, despite the possibility that the features related to the magical context may have been retained as part of in the object’s values of uniqueness and authority. For Benjamin, both photography and cinema are the best examples of objects of art as bearers of exhibition values.

Regarding photography, Benjamin points to the processual change from the cult value of portraits, through the remembrance of absent loved ones, to the role of photography in establishing evidence of the world, as it is the case in Eugène Atget’s portraits of a deserted Paris (*Work of Art* 226). In relation to cinema, Benjamin notices the transformation of the actor’s performance into a commodity while the actor, in exile in relation to the public as well as to him/herself, “has to operate with whole living person, yet forgoing its aura” (*Work of Art* 229). The cult of the movie star is an imperfect substitute for the former aura of the stage actor.

The subsuming of film to a marketplace leads, according to Benjamin, to a situation in which “as a rule no other revolutionary merit can be accredited to today’s film than the promotion of a revolutionary criticism of traditional concepts of art” (*Work of Art* 231). If, on the one hand, Benjamin recognises the possibility that films promote some form of social criticism, on the other hand he describes their relationship to the public as generally taking the shape of non-engagement. The equipment is so intrinsically part of cinematic reality that reality itself, in films, becomes the height of artifice. As Benjamin puts it, “the sight of immediate reality has become an orchid in the land of technology” (*Work of Art* 233). However, such negative evaluation is not the full account of his assessment of cinema.

For Benjamin, notions of distance and proximity in relation to the work of art and its public become more complex with the advent of new media. He makes use of an analogy to exemplify this transformation, using the figures of the surgeon and the magician. While the latter heals a person by the laying on of his hands, the former does so by penetrating into the patient’s body. That is, “the magician maintains the natural distance between the patient and

himself; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 233). The surgeon, for his part, keeps no physical distance from the patient, while abstaining from facing him “man to man.”

This does not mean, of course, that the surgeon sustains no authority; in fact he shares many features of the magician’s aura. However, Benjamin says, it is from the penetration that his authority emanates, in the same way that cinema gives an impression of ultimate truth through its “penetration into reality” by means of technology. The multiple fragments produced in the making of a film prescind from the notion of totality and uniqueness characteristic of the painting. Nevertheless, the impression of reality they give is not comparable to that of the painter, since, according to Benjamin, “it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment” (*Work of Art* 234).

This dual metaphor subsists in the text, and recurs in Benjamin’s reference to Freud’s revealing analysis of slips of tongue — in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1904) — as comparable to the extent to which film “has brought about a similar deepening of apperception” (*Work of Art* 235). In film, images present such preciseness that their artistic value becomes as fascinating as their scientific one. However contradictory it may seem at first, this particular feature is part of the revolutionary function of film, according to Benjamin.

The reason for this lies in increased awareness. That is, by exploring hidden details of the things around us, “the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action” (*Work of Art* 236). Benjamin further states:

Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (*Work of Art* 236)

It is easy to see, from this excerpt, the kinds of experience to which cinema and technological development bring liberation. The similitude of tone with the theme of intoxication here is no coincidence, to the point that some commentators have identified in Benjamin an exaggerated optimism towards newer forms of media.

To the informed reader, however, film is linked with other motifs in Benjamin's work, which usually relate to contemporary currents of thought. They bring innovation in the same breath as announcing the decay of traditional forms of experience. This process of decay is however not all negative. Imagery expressing stuffy rooms, small streets, genteel railway stations and controlled factories had to find ways of escaping their own limitations. What is not certain, as Benjamin himself attests, is that the technological developments would bring about a liberation that did not bring with it other forms of limitation.

If for Benjamin film opens up spaces that have seem to have been closed off, it is because it reveals "entirely new structural formations of the subject" (*Work of Art* 236). That is, the maximum permeation of technology allows for a deepening of perception, an incremental increase of awareness in relation to elements that used to be retained, if at all, only unconsciously. The use of the notion of unconscious in this context is similar to the one in which the revelations provoked by photography are discussed in "Short Story of Photography" (1931). Here Benjamin uses the expression *optical unconscious* to refer to what photography reveals as present in the world and invisible to the human eye. It has a privileged connection with space rather than with the mind. According to Benjamin, "the fact is, it is a different nature that speaks to the camera than speaks to the eye; different above all in that, rather than a space permeated with human consciousness, here is one permeated with unconsciousness" (*Photography* 176). Since photographs show objects and landscapes as they appear, in principle, independently of the human eye and presence, the space they present is pervaded by unconsciousness. It is in this space, Benjamin argues, that magic used to be found.

Due to this feature, "faultless technique is capable of conferring on what is evoked a magical value such as, for us, a painting can no longer possess" (Benjamin *Photography* 175). It seems that the expression of unknown aspects of reality assumes the provisional role of a space permeated by magic, while adopting, to the human eye, certain magical features. It is not as if, for Benjamin, technology has simply revealed that magic is not "out there." On the contrary, technology exposes to view that matter still has unexpected facets, and can assume some of the features that used to be found in magic. It becomes somehow "magical" itself.

In the particular case of photography, Benjamin points out its ability to reveal unconscious registers of what has been "sufficiently tucked away to have found shelter in daydreams" (*Photography* 176). Once these pictorial worlds are visible, the differences

between technology and magic are illuminated: what distinguishes them is a historical variable. Benjamin argues that there is an interrupted passage from the ancient mystical world view to the viewpoint of reality as it is exposed by technology, having as a possible mediator the unconscious registers of the human mind. Here magic appears again as a remnant, to be found only in particular forms of current reality. What sets the concept as understood here apart from its occurrence in the essay on surrealism is the clear appeal to a notion of the unconscious, which Benjamin presents in accordance with Freudian ideas of repression and the emergence of repressed content through daydreams (Freud *Dreams* 537). In a further extract from the essay on photography, the ability of psychoanalysis to reveal unconscious contents serves as a model: “only photography can show him [oneself] the optical unconscious, just as it is only through psychoanalysis that he learns of the compulsive unconscious” (*Photography* 176).

In the essay on the work of art, Benjamin repeats almost the same words he used for photography to speak of the enlargement of awareness occasioned by film: “evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye — if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 236-7). By turning unconscious spatial perception into conscious data, the film, as well as the photograph, enlarge the human field of action. Here Benjamin seems to be aligned with the general thrust of psychoanalysis, since the awareness of “new structures of matter” carries in itself a powerful value, capable of engendering transformations, if not in reality, at least in the subject.

If in the field of psychoanalysis, the narrative aspect capable of engendering meaning in the newly-emerged content proves to be more important than the content itself, the new material from the optical unconscious is not awarded similar treatment in Benjamin’s essay. Benjamin affirms: “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses” (*Work of Art* 237). The fact that there is an introduction to the unconscious field seems to be the most important feature of the technology. This is perhaps the “pseudo-marxist” context evoked by Scholem in his criticism of the artificial optimism of Benjamin towards cinema (Scholem *Friendship* 260). The essay on the work of art takes up the idea of the role of this emerging content — coming from profane illuminations, from photographs, from films — in the mobilisation towards revolution, but it does not make explicit how this role might develop.



Benjamin goes on to pair the effect provoked by a dadaist work of art, which aims ultimately, according to him, at diverting the public from contemplative immersion, with the audience's response to the film. Both media are described as putting into action the act of distraction (Benjamin *Work of Art* 238). To some extent, Benjamin considers film to be a later manifestation of the issue at stake in dadaism. According to him, the latter "promoted a demand for the film, the distracting element of which is also primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator" (*Work of Art* 238). That is, distraction is the effect of the constant interruption of the public's associations by moving images. In a statement that is key to the consideration of the notion of experience in Benjamin's works, he attests that "this constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind" (*Work of Art* 238).

This idea of shock informs Benjamin's view on the general behaviour of the masses. He defines the masses, in this context, as "a matrix from which all traditional behaviour toward works of art issues today in a new form" (*Work of Art* 239). However, while trying to avoid the cliché that the masses seek distraction where art demands reflection, Benjamin affirms that "the distracted mass absorbs the work of art" (*Work of Art* 239), just as the inhabitants of a city absorb its architecture. That is, the masses' mode of appropriation has more to do with the habits created through tactile and visual contact with objects than it has to do with attention and voluntary dedication. Distraction provides a change in perception that turns the public into a distanced critic or, in the words of Benjamin, an absent-minded examiner (*Work of Art* 241).

The consequences of this fact are explored in the article's epilogue, in which Benjamin resumes the theme of the relationship between new forms of technical reproduction and fascism. The criterion is the notion of masses. For Benjamin, "...mass reproduction is aided specially by the reproduction of masses. In big parades and monster rallies, in sports events, and in war, all of which nowadays are captured by camera and sound recording, the masses are brought face to face with themselves" (*Work of Art* 251). That is, the mass reproduction of everything social participates in the constitution of the social category of the masses. This takes place not only because mass movements are more accurately perceived by mechanical apparatus than by the human eye, but also because the impact of mass reproduction in social relations brings about a detachment that allows the aesthetic experience of the masses to have itself as its object.

Benjamin then describes one of the manoeuvres of fascism in relation to the self-consciousness of the masses: this consciousness does not result in a social revolt that affects the structure of property. Fascism gives these masses “not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves” (*Work of Art* 241). The result, according to Benjamin, is the introduction of aesthetics into political life, including mass appreciation of mass movements as an aesthetic experience. However, the culmination of this spectacularised logic, according to Benjamin, is the fascist glorification of war, which presents itself, like the cult of the *Führer*, as immersed in ritual values. Benjamin quotes from the futurist manifesto, in which Marinetti presents war as the ultimate expression of a progressive aesthetics, the flagship of new forms of literature and graphic arts.

If the futurists, aligned with fascism, claimed war to be the resolution of the “millennial conflict” between man and nature, establishing in fact “man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery” (Marinetti qtd. in Benjamin *Work of Art* 241), Benjamin’s analysis points in the opposite direction. That is, “the destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ, that technology has not been sufficiently developed to cope with the elemental forces of society” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 242). As a consequence, Benjamin envisions the increase in technical devices as a factor that increases the likelihood of its “unnatural” utilisation, of which war is an example. This will remain the case, according to him, as long as there is no change in the property system. It is implicit that the latter would bring to the employment of the means of production an actual utilisation of natural materials, aimed at improving life-sustaining structures.

In sum, Benjamin connects the changes in perception brought by technical reproduction, which both engender and propel the mass phenomena, with the aestheticising of politics. He concludes that fascism “expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology” (*Work of Art* 242). That the mass, in contemplation of itself, is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure, is part of what Benjamin diagnoses as a process of self-alienation. Its nefarious consequences, in this particular situation, should not prevent one from realising the possibilities of liberation offered by the break with traditions in the field of imagery. Benjamin himself is perhaps inaccurate, but definitively innovative in pointing to potentialities in cinema and photography as forms of visual and emotional appropriation of surrounding objects, even if the popularity of such media signifies the expiry of other modes

of contemplation and reverence for the work of art. Benjamin is likewise inaccurate when he goes on to affirm that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (*Work of Art* 241). Even if this were correct in the highly ideological milieu of the Third Reich, and even if it has remained accurate in nationalist perceptions up until today, the political actions of the masses have taken multiple aesthetic forms, of which self-alienation and politicisation of art remain part.

Benjamin’s claim for the acknowledgement of the connections between the splintering of the aura and the role of the masses in a process of adjustment of reality towards proximity and likeness, even if it takes place in a “pseudo-marxist” context, provides the material for an analysis of the ambiguous character of technology once it becomes part of the structures of perception. As Didi-Huberman suggests, Benjamin “avait articulé toute sa critique politique à partir d’un argument sur l’apparition et l’exposition réciproques des peuples et des pouvoirs”<sup>266</sup> (29). The sphere of imagery, being the locus of deepening of awareness and enlargement of the human “field of action,” is also where the mutual engendering of the masses and their power takes place, a potential for transformation that can have multiple utilisations.

#### 4.11. The Spirit of the Masses

In the analysis of texts from Artaud and Benjamin from the late thirties and forties presented here, one feature becomes clear, namely the significant increase in thematic scope of their writings. In terms of the treatment of the notion of magic, this takes the form of a sharpening of its importance in the political and general senses. For Artaud, magic assumes a principal role in the practices that contributed, amongst other things, to the events leading to his internment, from 1937 on. As his letters in *Suppôts et Supplications* suggest, “c’est de magie subreptice qu’il vit, ce monde, et pour rien au monde il n’aurait voulu que je le dise”<sup>267</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres XIV* 135). For Benjamin, the magic element that is somehow “tucked away” in the notion of aura, that of the decayed authority of the work of art, makes its reappearance in the new media created by technical progress.

The theme of decay in relation to an ancient form is well-known in Benjamin’s oeuvre. It represents not only the significant change occasioned by factors such as the

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<sup>266</sup> “had articulated his entire political criticism based on an argument on the development and reciprocal exhibition of peoples and powers”

<sup>267</sup> “it is on surreptitious magic that this world lives, and it would not for anything have wanted me to say so”

emergence of science, the ideology of progress and the modernisation of urban life; it is also a thematisation of the idea of a “natural” dispersion of everything incarnate. If one considers the theological foundations of Benjamin’s writings — a key influence on his thought, although it never appears in a pure form — the theme of decay can ultimately be associated with the constant exodus of matter from the outset of material existence, a notion rooted in Jewish mysticism (Scholem *Mysticism* 15). Decay, in this context, is a type of migration of form, from one modality to the other. Despite its flexible character, Benjamin continuously attempts to capture it in a detailed account, while establishing its social and psychological implications.

Aura is defined by Benjamin as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (*Work of Art* 222). The distance is a derivative of the authority of certain images in magical-religious rituals, to be found at the origins of the insertion of works of art into tradition. The framework of this definition has appeared, as mentioned above, in other writings by Benjamin. It has been related to both the cosmic experience of ancient man — described as the act of realising “what is nearest to us and what is remote to us, and never of one without the other” (Benjamin *One-way* 93) — and to the object’s “ability to look at us in return” (Benjamin *Motifs* 188). Both of these ideas relate to the theme of a dialectics of distance presented by the 1939 essay. Here, distance encompasses at least two different aspects: one is the “proximity” that exists between works of art and the public, a closeness that dismisses the authority of the object and prevents an attitude of contemplation; another is the awareness allowed by the mass reproduction of “wide-shot” images of big parades and mass movements. In both these aspects, the notion of aura appears as shattered through a process that involves specialised techniques, but also through the social and psychological attitudes related to the material development.

The notion of the masses appears only towards the end of Benjamin’s text. It assumes a rather important position, however, once it leads to the connection between his analysis on the work of art and the political context in which he envisages the analysis as a tool. The connection can be described as follows: at the same time that technical development serves to enlarge human perception and the field of action, it also inaugurates the space for processes of manipulation. According to Benjamin, through photographic and filming devices the masses can see themselves face to face: a reassuring image that no human eye is able to grasp. Referring to the mass parades of Nazi Germany, Benjamin is convinced that the masses are sufficiently alienated from themselves to experience their own destruction as

aesthetic enjoyment. This kind of alienation would not be possible without the devices that allow the impression of the objects of perception, the masses being one of these, nor without the distracted mode of interaction established as the pattern for their relationship with the new media. Here, as in Benjamin's essay on surrealism, there is the realisation of the revolutionary potential of a new form of perception, which could participate in changing the social structures.

In Artaud's "Lettre sur Lautréamont," the masses have a different role in the functioning of society. Through the engagement with the life and work of Isidore Ducasse, the Count of Lautréamont, Artaud refers to the process in which conforming forces or *la conscience générale* ("the general consciousness") act in order to preserve the status quo, particularly through the neutralisation of a few outstanding individuals. These are people described as being able to see through to society's workings, particularly through their access to so-far unexplored aspects of the unconscious. The goal of the conforming forces, in turn, is to invade the extraordinary minds or *consciences toujours seules* ("single consciousnesses"), in order to prevent the emergence of their perception. The fear that mobilises them is related to the possibility that these individuals might provoke a "reversal of reality," a notion that is not particularly clarified by Artaud. The hypothesis presented here is that it encompasses the revelation that reality in itself can assume forms different to its present one, which has only arisen as a result of the continuous investment of the conforming forces in it. Artaud describes the conforming forces as coinciding with the norm, to the extent that they are associated with the bourgeoisie in the social structure of that time. In this context, the atrocious character of Lautréamont's work disturbs the conforming forces by reflecting the evil deeds that they perpetuate and continuously manage to forget.

While in Artaud the masses are the agents of homogenising processes, for Benjamin they are, at the same time, the subjects and the objects of different social tendencies. They incarnate the desire for likeness and homogeneity, one that manifests itself through different means, while entertaining a privileged relationship with magic. Benjamin and Artaud's ideas on this politically-sensitive aspect of social life reflect a traditional usage that sees in the emergent urban population a conglomerate of incoherent particles that nevertheless forms one body. Benjamin in particular thematises Baudelaire's use of *foule* ("crowd") to describe the "amorphous crowd of passers-by" (Benjamin *Motifs* 165) imprinted as a hidden figure in the author's poems. But perhaps the early writings of Marx and Engels, referred to by Benjamin in the same essay on Baudelaire, are those that best characterise the emergence of the masses

as a political concept. That is, at the same time that these authors describe, in a conglomerate urban scenario, the thousands of people that “rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another” (Engels qtd. in Benjamin *Motifs* 167), they mention that this “agglomeration of three and a half million people on a single spot has multiplied the strength of these three and a half million inhabitants a hundredfold” (Engels qtd. in Benjamin *Motifs* 166).

The combination of strength and distraction, of social significance and absent-mindedness, is also present in the accounts of Artaud and Benjamin. The former, however, avoids the term “masses” in “Lettre sur Lautréamont,” even if it appears on many occasions in which enchanting practices are described in his work. Artaud’s most common expressions, as seen in the previous section, are *l’inconscient de tous* (“the unconscious of all”), *la conscience de tout le monde* (“the consciousness of everyone”) and finally “la conscience conformiste bestiale du plus grand nombre”<sup>268</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 187). These formulations suggest a mindset that, despite originating within a particular group of interests, is experienced and reproduced as the opinion of the majority. The ambiguous features of strength and distraction do not entirely qualify the mindset of the masses, even if they are important consequences of the intrinsic reproductive aspect of it.

In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud gives an account of the interesting combination of consciousness and unconsciousness in the behaviour of groups.<sup>269</sup> He proposes an understanding of the masses in terms of their similitude to primitive mindsets. Above all, he identifies the phenomenon of “the influencing of an individual by a large number of people simultaneously, people with whom he is connected by something, though otherwise they may in many respects be strangers to him” (Freud *Group* 70). Freud initially explores the nature of this connection through an analysis of Gustav Le Bon’s *Psychologie des Foules* (1895). Le Bon’s main argument is that individuals in a group exhibit an average character, guided by the unconscious foundations of their personality. Three elements are striking in relation to this idea. The first is that individuals in a group yield to instincts or the unconscious, “in which all that is evil in the human mind is contained as a predisposition” (Freud *Group* 74). The second is that groups are sensible to phenomena of hypnotic order, leading them to assume attitudes that are contrary to their individual

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<sup>268</sup> “the bestial and conformist conscience of the majority”

<sup>269</sup> In his translation of Freud’s essay into English, Strachey privileged the term “group” over “masses,” despite the fact that Freud’s use of the German *Masse* indicates a more comprehensive meaning. While referring to Freud’s text, we will use “group” and “mass” interchangeably.

nature. And finally, in the group the individual can be lead into a “state of ‘fascination’ in which the hypnotised individual finds himself in the hands of the hypnotiser” (Freud *Group* 75-6).

Many elements of this account can be related to the approaches of Artaud and Benjamin. Firstly, the association between the unconscious and evil, as the sphere to which the behaviour of the masses resorts, is akin to Artaud’s description of general consciousness. Its acts, even if they concern a certain “consciousness” — and here Artaud seems to be using this term in the sense of *Bewußtsein*, that is the awareness of a particular group of its social role — yield to the unconscious foundations of personality, engendering a process that takes place, in Freudian terms, at the limits between consciousness and unconsciousness. This is highlighted by the fact that individuals in a group are able to assume features that do not coincide with their personal characters, an element that fits in the framework of Artaud’s understanding of this conflict as that of individuality against collectivity. In this context, the collective sphere is envisioned as the domain of “invasion,” where exceptional thoughts and tendencies are overrun by the consciousness of everyone else, in their attempts at homogenisation. Benjamin, in this context, focuses on the “adjustment of reality” generated by the homogenising trends of the masses, that is, the perception of likeness and proximity that results from processes of artistic reproduction. However, Benjamin also points to the revolutionary potential created by the masses, and in that regard moves beyond the negative connotations present in the accounts of Freud and Artaud. His focus is on the role of the masses in organising a communist revolution.

The notion of distraction in Benjamin’s essay establishes a connection with Artaud’s account of the forgetfulness of the masses regarding their own evil deeds, while bearing an association with the above-mentioned “state of fascination” of the masses identified by Freud. Distraction, according to Benjamin, is the masses’ mode of relating with the work of art in an era of technical reproduction. It is defined in terms of “absorption,” as opposed to “contemplation”: “the distracted mass absorbs the work of art” (Benjamin *Work of Art* 239). The model for this relationship is to be found in the urban citizen’s engagement with the architectural form of art: it encompasses neither reflective thought nor meditation. It is instead based on the habits of the citizen in question in relation to the places where the particular architecture stands. The mode of examination, if any, is absent-minded, and marked by the interruption of associations, an issue that Benjamin and other writers found to be at the core of modern experience. The dialectic of proximity and distance is crucial here: while the

objects one sees on a walk through the metropolis, in cinema, and in petit-bourgeois interiors seem to be all transient and viewed from a distance, they are perceived in terms of their reproducibility and therefore lack the authority of a work of art. The “quality of their presence,” to use an expression from Benjamin, is subject to their accessibility.

The absent-mindedness of the masses in relation to the objects and images surrounding them allows an unprecedented distracted relationship with reality. This attitude enables, for Benjamin, the mobilisation of the consciousness of the masses, from a possible engagement with changing the structures of society, to the introduction of aesthetics into political life, so that the masses gain “a chance to express themselves” (*Work of Art* 241). The enjoyment associated with this activity is unlimited, as Guy Debord pointed out in his *La Société du Spectacle* (1967), while the revolutionary potential of the masses is continuously prevented from emerging. Benjamin situates this process within the early tactics of European fascism, pointing to its important articulation with capitalism. Both Artaud and Benjamin identify a process in which amusement and gratification exploit the energies that might otherwise be engaged towards a revolution or “reversal of reality.” The collective willingness to remain ignorant holds a special place in the alienation process of the masses, one that is approached differently by the two authors.

For Artaud, the crimes carried out by the masses cannot be understood without an acknowledgement of the concept of dissimulation. The practices of enchantment aimed at erasing the exceptional awareness of some individuals of the operations of society encompass both forgetfulness and the forced disappearance of awareness. This aspect is mentioned in detail in the epistolary written by Artaud from the Psychiatric Hospital of Rodez, where he spent the period between 1943 and 1946. In a letter to Breton in June 1946, for instance, Artaud describes acts of enchantment in the following terms: “Cela se fait un peu partout. C’est pour vous dire en deux mots comme en quatre que tout le monde fait de la magie, jusqu’à votre épicier du coin, il ne le sait pas toujours, mais il l’a su et ça lui reviendra.”<sup>270</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 134). The at times conscious, at times unconscious character of the enchanting acts is highlighted by the fact that magic is widely and repeatedly practiced. An association with Freud is propitious here, since while the acts of the masses express the unconscious foundations of personality, the individuals engaged in them remain conscious of their acts, even if they do not feel fully liable for them. Artaud proposes that these two dimensions are

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<sup>270</sup> “It is done everywhere. This is to tell you plainly that everyone is engaged in magic, even your local grocer; he may not always know it, but he knew it and it will return to him.”



united by the very nature of such practices, which is that of engaging individuals by means of their irrational features. It is through this engagement that individuals become a mass, in other words, magic engages them as a mass.

The theme of the gratification of the masses through acts of enchantment is mentioned in Artaud's letter to Georges Braque, from January 1947. He says: "la conscience de cette soi-disant masse amorphe et inconsciente du grand public actuel est: faisons du mal à cet homme blessé et malade pour avoir voulu nous empêcher de profiter du superflu"<sup>271</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 159). This notion of "surplus" points here to an excess that the masses normally enjoy as part of lifting their morale, "de l'invocation à la jouissance pour elle, de *la libido* libérée et sans frein"<sup>272</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 159). It is a surplus that can be acquired through erotic satisfaction. For having opposed this form of enjoyment, while attempting to stay pure, Artaud and other extraordinary consciousnesses are bound to suffer and satisfy the masses through their suffering. The enjoyment aspect that Benjamin identifies in the self-expression of the masses, while their own consciousness deviates from the natural path of engaging in the fight for its own development, corresponds, in the view of Artaud, to the self-indulgence of the masses through erotic means, while in the "figures of exceptional consciousness," all potentially transforming knowledge is effaced. In this sense both authors diagnose a process of alienation and homogenisation that acknowledges a social situation perceived as deplorable.

According to Artaud, "Sur ce plan tout le monde est sorcier, tout le monde est ce magicien qui envoûte un artiste humble et retiré. J'ajoute que tout le monde le sait."<sup>273</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 159). As far as profiting from the suffering of artists is concerned, as well as enjoyment derived from their attempts to veer away from the generalised morale, everyone is a sorcerer. This is the extension of Artaud's understanding of practices of enchantment: they concern the silencing of lucidity and abstinence in favour of a common and unrestrained enjoyment. This fact, according to Artaud, is no secret, but neither is it openly addressed in society: "cette magie, sur 5 milliards d'hommes il y en a plus de 3 milliards qui la font

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<sup>271</sup> "the consciousness of this so-called amorphous and unconscious mass of the general public today is: let us harm this wounded and sick man for trying to prevent us from enjoying the superfluous"

<sup>272</sup> "from invocation to enjoyment for its own sake, the liberated and unrestrained *libido*"

<sup>273</sup> "On this plane everyone is a sorcerer, everyone is a magician who bewitches a humble and removed artist. I would also add that everyone knows that."

*sciemment et consciemment* et envoûtent la flicaille et les psychiatres pour fermer la bouche aux lucidités”<sup>274</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 159).

The theme of addressing in Artaud’s text gains a new implication. In the above-mentioned 1946 letter to Breton, Artaud describes acts of enchantment as “des attitudes impératives de conscience que la masse à de certaines heures du jour ou de la nuit sort des interstices de son giron”<sup>275</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 133). Here is remarkable that the enchanting acts are not described as emanating from spirits or spiritual subjects, but as attitudes of the masses. Concerned, as he is, with the reader not as an individual, but as the portent of an attitude, the question that poses itself for Artaud is that of the extent to which a person passively participates in normalising acts. As mentioned above, acts of forgetting and ignoring are to be considered part of the performance of the masses. Reading Artaud’s texts as mere “literature,” without engaging with his assertions, is to be part of the acts of enchantment, whether consciously or unconsciously. In a letter to Colette Thomas in March 1946, Artaud writes: “le service que vous pouvez me rendre est de *croire* que toute la terre n’est qu’un immense théâtre truqué, un Châtelet de magie noire que les imbéciles ne veulent pas voir et que la crapule des initiés dissimule tant qu’elle peut”<sup>276</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 100). The only thing Artaud asks of others is to believe, however not in an abstract way. Kaufmann suggests, in relation to Artaud’s epistolary:

Recevoir une lettre d’Artaud, c’est toujours avoir le “choix” entre prendre place, en tant qu’être de langage, parmi ses ennemis, ou se transformer en une “âme” et occuper un point d’un réseau télépathique planétaire voué à sa défense, au soutien de sa protestation contre l’Autre.<sup>277</sup> (Kaufmann 149)

For Benjamin, in turn, the notion of distraction, while representing the dismantling of a tradition based on elitism and privilege — but also on a meditative, transformative experience — is the sign of a distance that allows for an absent-minded absorption of the surrounding world. This state of affairs allows the masses to repeatedly “forget” the contingent character of the current structure of society, as well as their ability to change it.

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<sup>274</sup> “this magic, out of 5 billion people there are more than 3 billion who practice it *knowingly* and *consciously*, and bewitch the police and the psychiatrists so that they silence the lucid”

<sup>275</sup> “mandatory attitudes of the masses that at certain times of the day or night leave through cracks in their milieu”

<sup>276</sup> “the service that you can do me is to *believe* that the earth is a huge fake theatre, a small Castle of black magic that the fools do not want to see and that the scoundrel insiders conceal as much as they can”

<sup>277</sup> “To receive a letter from Artaud is to always have the ‘choice’ between taking one’s place, as a being of language, amongst his enemies, or turning into a ‘soul’ and occupying a point on a planetary telepathic network dedicated to his defence, in support of his protest against the Other.”

Instead they inattentively observe the crimes against those who oppose this forgetfulness. The potential new space offered by technology is repeatedly occupied with compartmentalised fragments of self-expression that reiterate the general impression of enclosure. Benjamin, in consonance with Artaud's hypothesis of "social amnesia," characterises the modern experience by the forgetfulness of the shock, in which most daily impressions are perceived in such a haste that they are unfit to constitute a proper experience (Benjamin *Motifs* 163).

However differently, Artaud and Benjamin both express the idea that the mass phenomenon precipitates an adjustment of reality, in which magic is assigned the role of the medium. Benjamin relates this to an assessment of the remnants of magical-religious rites in modern forms of ritual. In his article on photography, he identifies the passage of magical values from traditional beliefs to the products of technology. The technological apparatus explores the space where magic used to dwell, the aspects of reality that were mystified but that have remained unconsciously present. Like photography, film creates a state of fascination in relation to this new awareness, that is to the presentation of unknown aspects of reality that are brought closer, "spatially and humanly." But magic is also present in the processes that stand between the potential of the masses and their accomplishments. The cult of the *Führer*, Benjamin reminds us, is embedded in ritual values, through which the masses appreciate mass movements as an aesthetic experience. It is as if magic is playing a trick, while any potentially positive consciousness is caught up in a manipulative process that limits the subject's development.

Artaud speaks of a "trick" in the origin of practices of enchantment, one that initially concerns the writer. In "Lettre sur Lautréamont," he describes the process in which Ducasse is assaulted by *mauvais esprits* ("evil spirits"). The writer's process of production, within the "unused unconscious," is subject to this trick, which succeeds in attributing the writer's work to the general consciousness. Artaud reproduces the spirits' speech: "mais je suis ce génie qui inspire ta conscience, et c'est moi qui écris tes poèmes en toi, avant toi et m[ieux]"<sup>278</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 192). The writer is thus reduced to a mere instrument of the conforming forces, in a process that prevents him from expressing his individuality. As mentioned above, this trick ultimately leads to the disappearance of the writer.

The operation of the trick, in the case of Ducasse, is achieved through the use of names. According to Artaud, Lautréamont is, in relation to Ducasse, "une manière

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<sup>278</sup> "but I am the genius that inspires your conscience, and it is I who writes your poems in you, before you and better than you"

d'indéfinissable assassin"<sup>279</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 35). Because the name elevates Ducasse above his original self, it opens up a space within which the spirits can insert themselves and perform their bewitchment. As mentioned above, Benjamin proposes in the essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Men" that the magic feature of language lies in its ability to communicate the spirit of things. As far as human beings are concerned, this takes place through the act of naming, which bears a trace of the divine powers of men. On the one hand, this suggests that in the execution of a reminiscent divine power man can convey his specific and definitive essence, part of the highest expression of his humanity. On the other hand, it advances the idea that human beings are capable of expressing the spiritual essence of things — at least those they enter into communication with — as well as that this process takes place through denomination. It is through naming that the magic of communication is performed.

Artaud's reference to the mistake made by Ducasse in taking up the name of Lautréamont can be inserted into this same logic. If the name is the portent of the magic powers of language within human acts, as well as the expression of the essences of things, in this case the human essence, Ducasse's change of name could not but entertain a connection with his essence, as well as with the magic powers enacted in the process of naming. Even if, in Artaud's writings, the reference to the notion of name is not easily traceable, it certainly profits from an approximation with the idea of a transformative act, connected with the essence of the thing denominated. Throughout his work, Artaud undergoes transformations which he expresses through the adoption of different names, *Artaud-le-Mômo* being the best known. Names occupy the threshold between finite and infinite language, the liminal space between the material world and the spiritual.

The trick concerning the masses is a process that normalises the extraordinary aspects of life. It is experienced collectively, consciously or unconsciously, and operates on different levels, openly but also surreptitiously, at times giving the impression of a deception that diverts thought and consciousness from their original course. In Artaud's text, the intermingling of "traditional" magical forces — incarnated, for instance, in the monkeys of the Ramayana —, with a current form of enchantment points to the longevity of, and association between, these configurations in his understanding. It is as if the same maleficent attitude had engaged in acts of enchantment through the centuries, assuming different forms every time. In the current case Artaud identifies a bourgeois mode of thinking, as if

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<sup>279</sup> "a form of indefinable assassin"

expressing the extent to which this class represents the root of many social problems. Here Artaud proposes a vague connection with marxism.

In a 1947 letter to Breton, however, Artaud questions the very notion of magic, pointing to his particular understanding of it. He states: “il n’y a pas d’occultisme et pas de magie, pas de science obscure, pas de secret caché, pas de vérité irrévélée, mais il y a l’effarante dissimulation psychologique de tous les tartuffes de l’infamie bourgeoise”<sup>280</sup> (*Œuvres* 1211). This perhaps surprising testimony to the absence of magic comes, however, with the affirmation that acts of bewitchment take place continuously within civilised and bourgeois society. Artaud’s is a refusal to frame his beliefs in traditional structures of thought, in the context of the defence of a singular dimension of incantation. That is: “de la nature et des choses j’ai mon idée personnelle, et elle me ressemble en rien à celle de qui que ce soit et je n’admets pas que des civilisations, des nations, des religions et des cultures viennent m’emmerder avec leurs conceptions”<sup>281</sup> (*Œuvres* 1208). While the refusal to conform to established forms of knowledge and culture is Artaud’s act of autonomous “alienation,” his finding of the high penetration of enchanting practices signals the constant struggle within his thought. The variety of figures through which magical practices are realised points to Artaud’s dynamic understanding of the sphere of magic: while the conforming tendencies remain unaltered in their character despite different temporal registers, their appearance can change according to social configurations.

Benjamin and Artaud’s approaches to the notion of magic in the texts explored here point to the emergence of an understanding of the collective dimension of experience, particularly in terms of the masses, as an important aspect of their search for elements capable of revealing the true or revolutionary facets of reality. From being the indeterminate, disorganised human element of the city, one that is courted by the surrealists and Benjamin alike, the masses become the actors and the subjects of a variety of social techniques, and attain remarkable political importance. It could be said that it is only when the reproduction of certain notions reaches the level of a general worldview that a conglomerate of individuals becomes a mass. This process is engendered, according to Benjamin, in the context of the shattering of the experience of authenticity related to the work of art. While the quality of presence is depreciated, the reproduction of objects allows for the establishment of a

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<sup>280</sup> “there is no occultism and no magic, no obscure science, no hidden secret, no unrevealed truth, but there is the frightening psychological dissimulation of all the hypocrites of bourgeois infamy”

<sup>281</sup> “of nature and things I have my own idea, and it does not resemble that of anyone else. I will not allow civilisations, nations, religions or cultures come and piss me off with their conceptions”

generalised perception of proximity, both “spatially and humanly” speaking. The desire for homogeneity, so important in Artaud’s account of the processes engendered by general consciousness, motivates the will to suppress extraordinary minds and their perceptive ideas. This process is akin to the imposition of a normalising veil that paints existing social structures as immutable.

The question that remains open, in both Artaud’s and Benjamin’s account, is the form that this sought-after transformation should take. For Artaud, it concerns the content known by the extraordinary consciousness, the truth that the masses make so much effort to erase. Artaud gives a clue to his understanding of this aspect in the notion of body. More precisely, the transformation is related to the moment when “l’architecture de l’homme sera refaite”<sup>282</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 158). In the writings of Benjamin, the nature of change is related to an exploration of the dimension of images, in a way that enables the reconstruction, following the decay of traditional experience, of “synthetic” and aesthetic forms of living, taking into account bodies as important residues of social processes.

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<sup>282</sup> “the architecture of man will be re-built”

## 5. EXPERIENCE

The discovery of the unconscious dimension of psychic life by Freud, and his inclusion of this dimension in a general understanding of human nature, represented a rupture in philosophical tradition, one that affected the conception of experience. The traditional notion of experience derived from these trends, discussed in the sections below, consists of the general idea that human beings, either through the senses or the intellect — or, most likely, through a straightforward combination of the two —, are able to formulate a satisfactory understanding of themselves and the world. Far from being the first to bring to light aspects of personality that shake this understanding, Freud popularised a conception of the self divided within itself, a conception that, albeit not without a good deal of simplification, captured the public imagination. Owning as much to the expansion of printing as to Freud's teaching style, this understanding changed the notional foundations of modern experience.

If the concept of the unconscious represented the almost complete inaccessibility of a part of the human personality, it also pointed to the larger, unexploited aspects of psychic life. Freud's followers and contemporaries envisioned the unconscious dimension with both suspicion and wonder. Surrealist explorations tried to give consistency to the unconscious as part of an experience with as many connection points with the imagination as with reality, particularly the reality-to-come concerned with revolutionary action. Artaud, an incorrigible surrealist, assumed the task of investigating the spiritual sphere from the point of view of fury, that is, of the intensities to be found within the self. Through the questioning of the notions of flesh and thought, Artaud followed the path of separation, or “cette puissance de détachement qui traverse la vie”<sup>283</sup> (Dumoulié *Artaud* 12), to its logical conclusion in experimental forms of experience, in which writing had a prominent place.

Benjamin, from his first published writings, addresses the notion of experience while pointing to different facets of the crisis he believed to be underway. His vision of experience as a gospel, transmitted by the adult, and curtailing the youth's development, marks the beginning of his tendency to oppose plain, fully conscious, individual experiences against non-apprehensible, spiritualised and non-self-aware ones. To some extent, language is the model he uses for experience, citing its mediating role between the human, material dimension of life and the divine, mystical one. Benjamin envisions through surrealism an

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<sup>283</sup> “this power of detachment traversing life”

integration of these dimensions, seeing the movement as proposing not just artistic forms, but also a form of experience, that of intoxication.

Through the exploration of the magic or mystical dimension of life, Artaud and Benjamin investigate and define a form of experience that not only elaborates a radical reading of the conditions of living in modernity, but also outlines the different forms taken by experience following the crisis of traditional definitions precipitated by the work of Freud. In the first texts approached in this chapter, Benjamin's "Experience" (1913) and "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" (1918), and a selection of Artaud's writings and letters from the period between 1921 and 1923, together with "Correspondence with Jacques Rivière" (1924), the limitations and discontinuities of experience are thematised in different contexts, while the sense of impossibility of a traditional understanding of experience emerges. Artaud and Benjamin envision, through a combination of forms of communion and solitude, represented by language or writing and religious or spiritual transcendence, the possibility of both dramatising and gaining distance from their negative diagnosis of contemporary forms of living.

In a second section, the relationship between language and experience is explored through Artaud's texts from the surrealist period, *L'Ombilic des Limbes* and *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, both from 1925, and the later "Fragments d'un Journal d'Enfer" (1927), together with Benjamin's essays from the thirties, "Doctrine of the Similar" (1933) and "Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview" (1935). Language appears as related to an "original" sphere, in which both the fragmented and decayed forms of experience are explored, through the idea of the trace. In this section, the fundamental distance separating the writings of Artaud and Benjamin becomes evident: while the French author's perspective is of a tragic nature, that of the irrevocable separation of being, in relation to which all union is artificial, even if longed for, the German critic departs from the diagnosis of breaks and changes in modern experience to aim for a hermeneutic restoration of an interpretation that combines the continuation and discontinuation between past and present forms.

If the distance between Artaud and Benjamin is not a complete alienation, this is partially due to both having attempted to create new forms of consistency from their analyses of the thresholds of experience, a theme explored in the third section of this chapter. Here Benjamin's famous essays on experience from the thirties, "Experience and Poverty" (1933) and "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936) are analysed, together with Artaud's "Nouvelle Lettre sur Moi-Même," "Position de la Chair" and



“Manifeste en Langage Clair,” once again all from 1925. The emergence of “synthetic” forms of experience — after the Greek *sunthetikos*, based on *suntithenai* ‘to place together’ — are a positive aspect in the writings of Benjamin and Artaud, a high-point of their attempts to overcome the dark forces of change. Although traditional forms of experience may no longer be experienceable, and the dissolution in understanding of thought and the self may have reached a point of no return, new conditions for experience are being slowly and tentatively constructed. Artaud and Benjamin testify to radically different, but essentially connected, forms of this construction.

### 5.1. Experience: A Short Review

According to Paul Foulquié in *Dictionnaire de la Langue Philosophique* (1962), two word-groups derived from the Greek *peira* (“attempt, trial”) have developed into the notion of experience. One of them, related to *empeiria* (“experience”), designates “la donné du fait brut”<sup>284</sup> (Foulquié 255). As opposed to *epistèmè* (“science”), it is used to signify an activity that takes its inspiration *d’après l’expérience* (“from experience”), that is, a vulgar or immediate practice that has not undergone methodical control. The second is linked to the Latin *experientia* and *experiri*, meaning “the act of experiencing.” The first word, *empeiria*, was commonly used to refer to the medical profession — as in *Sextus Empiricus* (Sextus the Doctor) — because their practice takes place through immediate contact with the patient. Still impregnated with its medical context, the term has a negative connotation in the work of rationalist philosophers such as Leibniz. He wrote in *Monadologie* (1714): “les hommes agissent comme les bêtes ... ressemblant aux médecins empiriques, qui ont une simple pratique sans théorie”<sup>285</sup> (Leibniz qdt. in Foulquié 255). Its full philosophical use, however, comprises a much larger field.

Kant, in a derivation from the above usage, describes empirical experience as related to knowledge coming from the senses. In the above-mentioned *Critique of Pure Reason*, he states that the faculty of cognition is awakened “by means of objects which affect our senses, and partly of themselves produce representations, partly rouse our powers of understanding into activity” (43). The pure elements of knowledge are those in which the representation, in the absence of the object, is independent from sensations. The notion of experience is here

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<sup>284</sup> “the crude facts given”

<sup>285</sup> “men act like animals ... resembling empirical physicians whose practice is simple and without theory”

based on a scientific description of reality, one that Benjamin criticises in an article in 1918, as detailed below.

Unlike Kant's view, empiricism as a philosophical doctrine proposes that all knowledge is acquired through experience (Foulquié 256). On this concern, it opposes both rationalism and idealism. Some of its trends contend that experience is the basis of all knowledge. The scientifically-described reality appears as an ideal in this context, one that is explored through the inductive method. The philosophical principles, therefore, are conditioned by experience, and sensations, unlike in Kant, should not be absent from them. In an approximation with Leibniz, rational or metaphysical empiricism attempts a conjunction of sensation and reason, including the consideration of intuition and God, that is, mystical experience. Henri Bergson's belief in the significance of immediate experience for an appropriate understanding of reality can be seen as part of this trend. According to Bergson in *La Pensée et le Mouvement* (1934), *un empirisme vrai* ("a true empiricism") attempts at "approfondir la vie, et, par une espèce d'*auscultation spirituelle*, d'en sentir palpiter l'âme; et cet empirisme est la vraie métaphysique"<sup>286</sup> (qdt. in Foulquié 257).

Here one can observe signs of the drifting from a science-oriented definition of *empeiria* towards a larger field of experience. In this context, it is neither sensations, nor rational intelligence, taken in isolation, that explain experience. In a sense, this notion expresses "un commerce de l'esprit avec les choses"<sup>287</sup> (Rabier qdt. in Foulquié 257), one that is not contained in either empiricism or idealism. If both these trends agree on the fact that experience is organised by reason, they disagree in terms of the origins of this reason, which for one of them emerges from sensuous experience, while for the other from a rational structure that pre-exists it. From this scenario one more trend is worthy of consideration, that of nominalism, according to which knowledge of reality is organised and coordinated, by reason, into a system of statements that constitutes language. In its simplest form, philosophy assumes the role of a grammar of knowledge and science.

The second series of words derived from the Greek *peira* are related to the Latin *experientia*. According to Kirchner et al. in *Wörterbuch der Philosophischen Begriffe* ("Dictionary of Philosophical Terms," 1998), this word first appeared in the work of Paracelsus. Usually related to a *savoir-faire* acquired through practice, this notion corresponds to the German *Erfahrung*, of which Kant, Freud and Benjamin make use. This

<sup>286</sup> "to deepen life, and, through a kind of spiritual auscultation, to feel the soul pulsating; this empiricism is the true metaphysics"

<sup>287</sup> "a trade between the spirit and things"

sense is present in the approaches mentioned above, its distinctive character being a more transcendental usage. That is, one can possess experience and be experienced, in the sense of *experientia*, without having experienced a specific thing, in the same sense that having sensuous experiences does not necessarily mean acquiring an experience. According to Kant, “though all our knowledge begins with experience, it by no means follows that all rises out of experience” (43).

If this form of experience cannot be identified with empirical knowledge, it is also true that the Latin *experientia* branched into a multiplicity of terms related to the notion of experiment. In this context, experience is an active means of instruction, one that is provoked, most commonly, in the attempt at the testing of a hypothesis: an observation becomes an experience, for instance, once it has undergone comparison and control (Foulquié 259). The terms “experimental” and “experimentation” are related to this sense, at the same time as different types of mental operation, whether rational or not, are assigned the name of experience when they make use of evidence that is analogous to the direct intuition of things. This is the case, for instance, in a logical experience, as well as metaphysical or mathematical one. In a definition that is both cognitive and affective, to experience means to engage in an experiment with things, usually in a personal sphere — such as to experience solitude —, and to know them through experience. This use is similar to the German *Erleben* and the French *éprouver* (Foulquié 260).

One common element can be identified in the different terms derived from *experientia*, that of processual duration. While the uses rooted in *empeiria* keep the sense of immediateness, of relatively new and unprocessed perceptions or data, the notions springing from *experiri* and *experientia* involve transformation. As Jean Wahl suggests in *Traité de Métaphysique* (1953), with reference to the Greek origins of the notion of experience, one can observe “une sorte de dialectique dans les changements mêmes de la signification du terme ‘expérience’: ce qui, d’abord, était routine ensuite devint ce qui devait libérer l’homme de la routine”<sup>288</sup> (Wahl qdt. in Foulquié 258). That is, the notion that evokes the given facts of life is the same one that, in an interesting twist, also evokes what is not given: the transcendental and transformative dimensions of experience.

Barbara Cassin, in *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies* (2004), relates the French word *expérience* to the Latin *experientia*, but also to a constellation derived from the root

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<sup>288</sup> “a form of dialectics in the very changes suffered by the meaning of the term “experience”: that which first meant routine then became that which was supposed to free man from routine”

*per-*, which means “quelque chose comme ‘aller de l’avant, pénétrer’”<sup>289</sup> (436). This constellation includes *periculum* (“test, risk”), *peritus* (“skilful, expert”) and *peras* (“limit”). Cassin states: “le mot connote ainsi à la fois une percée et une avancée en soi et dans le monde, un gain de connaissance et l’habilité cumulée d’un acquis”<sup>290</sup> (436). The concepts of risk and limit express an important connotation of experience, one that is expressed by Foucault when he describes literary experience as the “crossing of a field,” the transgression of limits that imposes a change on both author and reader. Referring to the relationship with experience in a book, Foucault defines the term as “quelque chose que l’on fait tout à fait seul, mais que l’on ne peut faire pleinement que dans la mesure où elle échappera à la pure subjectivité et où d’autres pourront, je ne dis pas la reprendre exactement, mais du moins la croiser et la retraverser”<sup>291</sup> (60). Here the features of subjective engagement and collective availability appear combined in the notion of experience.

Cassin (436) distinguishes two forms of experience: *expérience intérieure* (“interior experience”), related to the German term *Erleben*, and *expérience comme connaissance* (“experience as knowledge”), associated with *Erfahrung*.<sup>292</sup> The first of these combines the senses of experimenting with life, the experience of oneself and the relationship between personal experience and morals. In the second, experience is a form of construction and knowledge, as well as the correlated issue of the relationship between subject and object. Under the entry for *Erleben* in the same vocabulary list — a section edited by Natalie Depraz —, this distinction is briefly historicised. From the classics to German idealism, *Erleben* is characterised through the trait of immediacy and passivity that designate the simple fact of living. The usual translations into French, however, express the notion of experience more than that of life. As Depraz states, “das war ein Erlebnis” becomes “c’était une expérience (marquante),” while the latter sentence would be translated back quite differently, appealing to the notion of *Erfahrung*. That is: “l’allemand fait immédiatement référence à un processus cognitive, même élémentaire (*etwas erfahren*: apprendre quelque chose, même par ouï-dire)”<sup>293</sup> (Cassin 370).

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<sup>289</sup> “something like ‘go ahead, enter’”

<sup>290</sup> “the word denotes at times a breakthrough and a step forward into oneself and the world, a gaining of knowledge and the accumulated skill of learning”

<sup>291</sup> “an experience is something that one does quite alone, but that one cannot do fully without it escaping pure subjectivity, and without others being able to, I do not say resume exactly, but at least cross and re-cross it”

<sup>292</sup> While *Erleben* is related to the verb *leben*, meaning to live and being alive, *Erfahrung* refers to the verb *fahren*, which has in its origins, and, retains today, the meaning of traveling and roaming.

<sup>293</sup> “the German language immediately refers to a cognitive, even elementary process (*etwas erfahren*: to learn something, even from hearsay)”

The untranslatable aspect of experience, in this case, points to “un excès de la vie sur elle-même”<sup>294</sup> (Cassin 369), one that assumes a distinguished form in *Erfahrung*: it concerns not only lived experience, but the process of having learned and earned a significant experience. *Erleben* becomes, in the nineteenth century, a fundamental concept in the theory of knowledge, and its use as “the simple fact of living” loses strength in favour of a notion of “interiority,” particularly within phenomenology. This is the context evoked above, in which the differentiation between *Erleben* and *Erfahrung* becomes prominent. The first continues to describe a state more than an action, and is characterised by the reflexivity of personal experience; the second is related to a process of learning and transformation, one that frequently expresses the inclusion into a community. The sense of experience, in its everyday usage, charts a course between these two different connotations. The French term *expérience* and the English word *experience*, while they carry and express within them the exploratory term *experientia*, do not express these two senses simultaneously.

Freud’s thought, occupied as it was with understanding “inner life” and its interdependence with the “outside world,” presupposes a notion of experience derived from unconscious dynamics. Rotstein and Bastos, in the essay “The Freudian Conception of Experience” (2011), reconstruct different moments on the Freudian trajectory of discussions around experience, although the notion is not highlighted as a specific theme in his work. Through discussion of the principles of pleasure and reality, Freud suggests that humans access reality as part of the search to appease a drive or satisfy a desire. The interest in knowledge is therefore not a primordial one. However, in humanity’s quest for satisfaction, reality must be constantly accessed and checked, otherwise the knowledge produced by it may be merely speculative, or even hallucinatory, without “recurrence to experience.” Freud characterises religion and philosophy as this type of knowledge, and opposes them to the sciences, which attempt to apprehend objective connections from material reality (Rotstein and Bastos 374). Experience, as approached here in the sense of access to reality, plays a fundamental role in the acquisition of knowledge, but it is secondary to the internal impulses. That is, if we turn to the world “in order to experience, we do so while expecting to find among its objects the one that is missing in us, the one that will bring us satisfaction”<sup>295</sup> (Rotstein and Bastos 374).

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<sup>294</sup> “an excess of life over itself”

<sup>295</sup> “a fim de experienciá-lo, é porque esperamos encontrar entre seus objetos aquele que nos falta e cuja obtenção traria satisfação”

The notion of experience that can be surmised from Freud's principles of pleasure and reality is one motivated by the search for something absent. This something, according to Freud's early description of the psychic system, is to be found in "exteriority," the material world. At the same time, as Rotstein and Bastos (374) suggest, the psychoanalytic form of research is one that goes beyond sensory experience, since its ultimate object of study, the unconscious, can only be described as being "out there," in the "exterior facet" of traditional sensitivity and also logicity. Freud's attempt to provide scientific basis for this form of research borrowed the empirical fundamentals of the science of the time, which was largely influenced by the philosophy of Kant. The French physician Claude Bernard and the Austrian philosopher Ernst Mach proposed an influential incorporation of Kantian notions into general definitions of science, to which Freud and a whole generation of psychiatrists subscribed (Rotstein and Bastos 375).

Kant's postulate that experience is a product of both the senses and of understanding culminates in the conception, presented by the above-mentioned authors, that scientific investigation rests on experience. Experience is defined as "the intellectual activity that seeks knowledge of things through a determinate orientation of the phenomena and the facts"<sup>296</sup> (Rotstein and Bastos 375). It is the result of the submission of sensory data to the rules of understanding. This use also denotes the author's efforts to distance scientific activity from the negative connotations of empiricism mentioned above in relation to medicine, that is, of a practice without theoretical basis. To be based on experience means that science is, on the one hand, experimental, in the sense that its knowledge takes reality and the senses, rather than abstract ideas, as its starting point, and, on the other hand, that it is intellectual, since the sensory data is submitted to reason, and this leads to the hypotheses and principles that are then shared amongst the scientific community.

While this form of "experimental reasoning" gives an account of experience as one element in a mode of investigation, it does not explore the notion of experience at the basis of Freud's practice, that is the experience that underlies and is referred to in his clinical practice. The clinical setting of psychoanalysis suggests that the "analytic" experience does not correspond to the scientific one, above all because the subject of investigation, the person being analysed, also performs the experience, preventing the complete control of manifestations taking place in such a setting (Rotstein and Bastos 378). There are, therefore,

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<sup>296</sup> "a atividade intelectual que busca o conhecimento das coisas através de uma determinada ordenação dos fenômenos e dos fatos"

at least two notions of experience in Freudian thought, one, the scientific one, that describes experience as a means of achieving knowledge and another that is inseparable from the psychoanalytic technique, that is, an experience produced at the same time that it is investigated. A third notion of experience can be added, derived directly from Freud's conceptualisation of psychological life, presented in the first chapter of this work.

The unconscious being the "true psychological reality" (Freud *Dreams* 607), the subject's experience is fundamentally based on it. However its contents are filtered by the conscious and preconscious systems. This implies that one's experience is permeated by the unknown, not only in the sense that the unconscious appears, transfigured, in dreams, daydreams, jokes and other formations, but also in the extent to which one's motivations are, for the most part, not evident to oneself. In relation to day dreams, Freud suggests that they do not leave the impression of "an actual experience" on the subject, since, unlike dreams, the thoughts they express are not transformed into sensory images (*Dreams* 537). This suggests that unconscious formations only form part of experience in particular cases, of which dreams, if they are remembered, are one. They allow one to see from the perspective of primitive ways of looking at things, promoting a contact with traces of experiences that form "the core of our being." These ancient elements, being unconscious and therefore primal to the formation of conscious thought, can neither be destroyed nor inhibited. They remain at the basis of life without ever touching consciousness, despite the latter's continuous attempts to conceal them and prevent their emergence.

Freud proposes a problematic notion of experience: the approaches mentioned above identify it neither with the immediateness of consciousness and lived reality, nor with the transcendental knowledge acquired over time. It should be remembered, however, that Freud considered inner reality to be as inaccessible as external reality. Through this assertion, as mentioned above, Freud intended to restore the antithesis between conscious life and dream life to "legitimate proportions," stating that they are at least equal in relation to the access one has to them. Knowledge of the unconscious is derived through discourse, within a dialogic process. What takes place, as suggested by Mosès (*Rêves* 37), is not the apprehension of an abstract truth, but the display of the process of discovering a possible truth. Freud proposes a new form of knowledge that differs from established science, and relies on a dialogical process rather than an objective one. This takes place in parallel with his defence of the scientific aspects of psychoanalysis. The experience that emerges from Freud's theory is that of a suspension of certainty, of the permeation of known and unknown aspects into one's

personality, of a knowledge of oneself and the world that takes place on different levels and never definitively. This can occur in a troubling as well as a clarifying context.

From the notion of experience suggested by Freud's theory, to the philosophical approaches derived from the Greek term *peira*, the word for trial and essay, the sense of an open and continuous attempt to be part of the "liveliness of life itself" has remained present. The discussion of experience emerged together with questioning of the meaning of life, and whether this resides in the fact of living and staying alive, in the face of all known and unknown threats, or in a specific form of action, more keenly subject to the risks of cessation and transfiguration of life than ordinary activity? The answers that this work attempts to extract from the writings of Artaud and Benjamin make use of both extinct and current usages of the term experience.

## 5.2. Undesirable Wisdom

Benjamin's occupation with the notion of experience appears to have started very early. In the short essay "Erfahrung" ("Experience," 1913) he addresses the theme from the point of view of the admonishing and limiting function the notion exercises over young people. It is because of their focus on experiencing virtually "everything" that adults disregard juvenile values as transitory and inconsequential. The context in which the essay was written, as mentioned above, is that of Benjamin's engagement in what is known today as *Die Deutsche Jugendbewegung* ("the German Youth Movement"). From when he was a secondary school student in Berlin, Benjamin published short essays in the periodical *Der Anfang* ("The Beginning"), run by student members of the movement. According to Howard Eiland (2), he dedicated his last two years of secondary school and the following two years of university to student activism, an engagement that culminated in his assuming the presidency of the Berlin University *Freie Studentenschaft* ("Independent Student Association") in 1914, a post he held until the outbreak of the war.

At the time, Benjamin, particularly in his essays, took it as his mission "to restore people to their youth." Youth here means, according to Eiland, "the capacity for experience that exceeds the rational framework of life, is readiness for a 'radically new way of seeing'" (4). For Osborne and Charles, Benjamin's concern with delineating an immediate and metaphysical experience of the spirit, filtered through the cultural ideals of the Youth Movement, "contrasts the empty, spiritless [*Geistlosen*] and unartistic 'experiences' accumulated over a life merely lived-through [*erlebt*] with that privileged kind of experience



which is filled with spiritual content through its enduring contact with the dreams of youth.” The short essay “Experience,” analysed below, is exemplary of Benjamin’s categorical opposition to an “empty” notion of experience imposed on youth. However, it is in the longer and more philosophical “Program der Kommenden Philosophie” (“On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”), written in 1918, that Benjamin provides a deeper expression of his early approach to experience. This section will address these two texts in order to give an account of this approach, the seeds of which were further cultivated in his later texts.

The short article “Experience” was published in *Der Anfang* in October 1913, under the pseudonym “Ardor.” It was, in fact, Benjamin’s last contribution to the journal organised by the Youth Student Movement at the University of Freiburg, where he spent the summer semesters of 1912 and 1913. “Experience” opens with the following lines: “In our struggle for responsibility, we battle someone who is masked. The mask of the adult is called ‘experience.’” (Benjamin *Early* 116). The phrase “struggle for responsibility” is characteristic of the tone used by the movement, which is also preoccupied with the notion of *der Geist* (“the spirit”). Benjamin’s use of the term “awakening” in relation to youth is informative in this context: it denotes the reform of consciousness capable of bringing the rising generation to the point where it can achieve its mission of transforming society. The starting point, and perhaps the most relevant aspect of this transformation, is within young people themselves.

As Eiland (9) points out, in Benjamin’s early writings, youth has an “inevitable dissonant” sense of itself, one that is expressed through the communion and solitude required by the movement’s precepts. That is, youth can only take itself seriously when it feels the sense of a genuine community, defined as a collective of individual consciences, which in turn can only be attained through the “deepest solitude” of each of its members. The sense of responsibility, therefore, constitutes part of the moral element of the youth movement’s mission, that of transforming itself spiritually in order to achieve a community that can undertake a larger transformation.

The adult, in this context, makes use of his supposed accumulated experience to prevent the youth from engaging in a process of transformation. According to Benjamin, “in advance he devalues the years we will live, making them into a time of sweet youthful pranks, of childish rapture before the long sobriety of serious life” (*Early* 116). In this context, youth is envisioned as a “brief night” preceding the years of maturity. Benjamin defines the latter as the time “of compromise, impoverishment of ideas, and apathy” (*Early* 116-7). The experience of adulthood contains no more than the realisation of the

meaninglessness of life and its brutality. It is precisely this feature, according to Benjamin, that leads to the adult's use of the term "experience" as his gospel: because he has not "raised his eyes" to the transcendent, experience becomes "the warrant of life's commonness" (*Early* 117).

In "Experience," Benjamin commonly refers to the adult as "the philistine," in the sense of narrow-minded and anti-intellectual, a use that was also common amongst the German romanticists. Key to his conception of the philistine is the absence of a spiritual life. In comparison, youth knows that "there is truth," and is faithful to it. Benjamin poses the question of whether the elders are right about one thing, "namely, that what we *experience* will be sorrowful and that only in the inexperienceable can we ground all courage and meaning" (*Early* 117). If this were so, he argues, life would be without solace: "Each of our experiences has its content. We ourselves will give it content from out of our spirit." (*Early* 117). It is youthful experience that endows its own meaning, and not a future life or goal. Error, in this context, is assigned the role of an aid to truth. According to Benjamin, the philistine dismisses discoveries of youth by rejoicing in "every new meaninglessness." Thereby "he reassures himself: spirit does not *really* exist" (*Early* 118). While the dreams of youth are reminders of the call of the spirit, the philistine battles them: "he tells young people of that gray, overwhelming experience and teaches them to laugh at themselves" (*Early* 118).

Benjamin's essay refutes the notion of experience in which the transforming and spiritual aspects of the youth are disregarded by the older generations, and reaffirms precisely these aspects as part of the most important mission of youth. By the end of "Experience," he is suggesting an alternative approach to the notion expressed in his title, that is "a different experience": "it is the most beautiful, most untouchable, most immediate, because it can never be without spirit while *we* remain young" (*Early* 118). The highlighted "we" in this sentence is characteristic of the polarising tone of Benjamin's essay. In a reference to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, Benjamin states: "always one experiences only oneself" (*Early* 118). He resumes the theme of deep personal experience being the basis for the transformation to be achieved by youth. Above all, this "different" experience relies on the notion of spirit. In fact, "the youth will experience spirit, and the less effortlessly he attains to anything great, the more he will encounter spirit everywhere in his wanderings and in every person" (*Early* 118). The spirit appears here not only as the medium, but also as the very content of experience. In contrast, adulthood is de-spiritualised, referring to the spirit only to the extent that it allows it as a form of nostalgia, diminishing youth as the time of "foolish" dreams.

Two distinct notions of experience had already emerged in Benjamin's 1913 essay. However, while one is defined and detailed, even if expressed as a negative, the other is only touched upon, its full expression assigned to the future of current youth. Five years later, Benjamin would propose a philosophical approach to the notion of experience, while criticising Kant's philosophy as based on "self-evident" experience. Scholem describes the context in which, around 1918, he and Benjamin discussed "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy," along with Hermann Cohen's book *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* ("Kant's Theory of Experience"). For Scholem, Benjamin's text presents a notion of experience that "encompassed man's intellectual and psychological connection with the world, which takes place in the realms not yet penetrated by cognition" (*Friendship* 73). The criticism of Kant's categories and the attempt to supersede his notion of experience is evident. For Benjamin, Kant had encouraged an inferior understanding of experience, one that he categorises, in his essay, as being of the "lowest order" (*Philosophy* 101).

The essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy" remains unpublished in Benjamin's lifetime. It aims at a "philosophy of the future," and takes upon itself the task of sorting out "which elements of the Kantian philosophy should be adopted and cultivated, which should be reworked and which should be rejected" (Benjamin *Philosophy* 102). This goal is evidently based on recognition of the importance of Kant's philosophy, at the same time as asserting its failings in regard to specific issues. Although in a very different form from the essay "Experience," the 1918 article also relies on criticism of a common usage of the notion of experience, this time in the philosophical field, to launch the basis for a new approach that would only take shape in the years to come.<sup>297</sup>

Benjamin approximates the philosophy of Kant with that of Plato: "both of these philosophers share a confidence that the knowledge of which we can give the clearest account will also be the most profound" (*Philosophy* 100). He identifies a problem: Kantian epistemology is based on a "low" notion of reality. In his words, "the reality with which, and with the knowledge of which, Kant wanted to base knowledge on certainty and truth is a reality of a low, perhaps the lowest, order" (*Philosophy* 100). This notion of reality comprises the first element of Benjamin's criticism of Kant. But the problem faced by Kant's epistemology, according to Benjamin, was not only that of the lasting certainty of knowledge, but also of the belief in the integrity of an experience that is ephemeral. Kant wanted to "take

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<sup>297</sup> The following lines approach Benjamin's article without going into the details of his criticism of Kant, which would fall outside the purpose of this text.

the principles of experience” from the sciences, particularly mathematical physics. What is at issue, Benjamin states, is “the concept of the naked, primitive, self-evident experience, which, for Kant, as a man who somehow shared the horizon of his time, seemed to be the only experience given — indeed, the only experience possible” (*Philosophy* 101). This experience, in other words, is that of the enlightenment.

Benjamin’s objection to this form of experience is firstly that it is “unique and temporally limited” (*Philosophy* 101). For Benjamin, it would be more appropriate to call it a *world view*, a view of the world that assigned a minimum of significance to knowledge acquisition. He suggests that this type of experience, “reduced to a nadir,” was perhaps a necessity of Kant’s work: “one can say that the very greatness of his work, his unique radicalism, presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its (we may say) sad significances only through its certainty” (*Philosophy* 101). Benjamin then proposes a “correction,” in the terms mentioned above, to this notion of experience, while evoking the restricting effect of it on Kantian thought. This correction consists in giving experience a “higher context,” one that illuminates the black spots he identifies in the enlightenment and beyond. That is:

It is obviously a matter of that same state of affairs that has often been mentioned as the religious and historical blindness of the Enlightenment, with no recognition of the extent to which these features of the Enlightenment pertain to the entire modern era. (Benjamin *Philosophy* 101)

The “religious and historical blindness” identified by Benjamin in the modern era suggest a partial disclaimer of Kant, one that concerns the virtual absence of metaphysics in his philosophy. Benjamin identifies a “higher context” of experience that comprises the possibility of a theory of being. He states that “the notion of experience held in the Kantian age did not require metaphysics” (*Philosophy* 102). Benjamin thus assigns a historical cause to the blindness of the era, while identifying in Kant’s philosophy the “primitive elements” of an unproductive metaphysics — which were in fact the philosopher’s criticism of the “weakness or hypocrisy” of his contemporaries — that ultimately separate knowledge “from the realm of experience in its full freedom and depth” (*Philosophy* 102). At the basis of this separation are two ideas: Kant’s conception of knowledge as a relationship between subjects and objects, and Kant’s association between knowledge and human empirical consciousness.

Regarding the first of these, Benjamin suggests that the notion on which the distinction of subject and object is based, that is the notion of “an individual living ego which

receives sensations by means of its senses and forms its ideas on the basis of them” (*Philosophy* 103), is no more than a mythology. He then lists other forms of “epistemological mythologies,” such as primitive peoples’ identification with sacred plants and animals, to highlight the content underlying them: that the everyday sensory and intellectual knowledge of an epoch is very much an organised set of beliefs. In his own era Benjamin sees the clairvoyants and the insane as specimens of a claim to knowledge based on variant forms of object-subject relationships.

In relation to the second of the above-mentioned problems, that of the connection of human empirical consciousness with knowledge, Benjamin criticises the fact of experience being the mere *object* of knowledge in Kant’s scheme, and “specifically of its psychological branch” (*Philosophy* 103). This critique is similar to that of the 1913 essay, in which Benjamin’s envisioning of the significative and spiritual value of experience is ultimately incompatible with it being the object of a form of consciousness, particularly a psychological one. In 1918, Benjamin questions the extent to which “true experience” can be related to psychological consciousness. He proposes a rapprochement with the field of religion, and through this, it could be argued, with transcendental experience. He presents this approach from the point of view of the traditional link between philosophy and religion:

Philosophy is based upon the fact that the structure of experience lies within the structure of knowledge and is to be developed from it. This experience, then, also includes religion, as the true experience, in which neither god nor man is object or subject of experience but in which this experience depends on pure knowledge as the quintessence of which philosophy alone can and must think god. (Benjamin *Philosophy* 104)

While in the first lines Benjamin reaffirms the scope of experience in Kant’s theory as developing from knowledge, he proposes, in the lines that follow, the inclusion of religion in this field. Benjamin defends religion as the perfect example of pure knowledge due to the indiscernibility of object and subject in religious experience. Here the “correcting” of Kant’s theory is visible in all its ambiguity: while the ultimate goal of the consideration of religion is the improvement of the Kantian system in terms of the establishment of an “autonomous” sphere of knowledge, in regard to the concepts of subject and object, this inclusion also allows the establishment of a new direction for this philosophy, that of “thinking god.”

Benjamin goes on in the article to repeat his plea for metaphysics, for its “universal power to tie all of experience immediately to the concept of God, through ideas” (*Philosophy*

104). Here, for the first time in the text, “God” appears capitalised, as a philosophical concept that allows Benjamin to unite the fields of “true experience,” pure knowledge and metaphysics. Benjamin’s criticism of the Kantian notion of experience takes the form here of a claim for the inclusion not only of generally-designated religious experience, but also of the realm of religion as a theological influence, that is, one that should occupy itself with the study of the nature of God.

While theology is, for Benjamin, one missing aspect in Kant’s theory, language is the other. Just as Kant had to find the principles of experience in science, the “new philosophy,” according to Benjamin, will have to find a reference-point from which to define its own guidelines. This should take place through the relating of knowledge to language. Here Benjamin evokes the philosopher Johann Georg Hamann, who he claims suggested this connection during Kant’s lifetime (*Philosophy* 107). Hamann’s appeal to affection and intuition would have a great influence on the authors of the *Sturm und Drang*: his ideas reached Benjamin’s generation via the “counter-enlightenment” thinkers. “On Language as Such and on the Language of Men” already bears traces of Hamann’s influence, particularly in the relating of the human and the divine through words.

According to Benjamin, “a concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematise” (*Philosophy* 108). Of these realms, the realm of religion is the foremost for Benjamin. His definition of language as a dimension that keeps the remnants of a divine language alive, as mentioned above, is active in this context. The new philosophy, Benjamin says, “in its universal element would either itself be designated as theology or would be superordinated to theology to the extent that it contains historically philosophical elements” (*Philosophy* 108). The reference to history, here, is perhaps related to what Benjamin calls the “historical point of view” of primitive peoples’ relationship with the cosmos. The question, for Benjamin, is of the relationship between knowledge in general and knowledge of religion. Only through considering transcendental experience can the Kantian system advance. In the article’s final lines, Benjamin suggests a definition that summarises his criticism: “experience is the uniform and continuous multiplicity of knowledge” (*Philosophy* 108). Here the concept of continuation denotes the intention to regard human consciousness as more than empirical intervals of awareness, and, perhaps, as mentioned above, as the overcoming of an experience that is ephemeral.

While arguing for the inclusion of religion and other realms into the Kantian system, Benjamin criticises the “naked” notion of experience that emerges from this theory of knowledge, based as it is on an empirical notion of consciousness and a scientific notion of reality. Benjamin sketches an alternative notion of experience that emerges from the exploration of the relationship between knowledge and language, one that he argues exceeds the Kantian system, through the consideration of those aspects of knowledge in which subject and object are not easily differentiated, such as religion, and in which physical reality, as explained by the sciences, is extrapolated.

The notion of experience that emerges from the essays of Benjamin considered here is above all a transcendental one, in the sense that it is related to a spiritual realm. This notion is not particularly explored nor detailed in Benjamin’s pieces of criticism, but some aspects would have a lasting presence in his later writings, including the non-coincidence of experience and psychological consciousness, the relative inaccessibility of its contents in everyday life, and its connection to a notion of truth. Finally, the special relationship that the notion of experience entertains with the field of language, touched upon in these early writings, would remain a constant in Benjamin’s work, taking multifaceted forms, from discussion of the written script to different approaches to the concept of the image.

### 5.3. The Separation

In Artaud’s writings from the early twenties, a notion of experience can be sketched. It is composed of aspects of life that disrupt the order of things through enthusiastic uproar. For instance, while reviewing various art exhibitions for the magazine *Demain* in 1921, Artaud designates the most important aspect of painting as the expression of the ideals of the artist. If the object depicted is secondary, what gains prominence in painting is “tout ce qui, à travers le modèle, peut être dit de vie battante et trépidante, angoissée ou lénifiée”<sup>298</sup> (*Œuvres* 32). This sphere, close to a tragic world view, punctuates the writings of Artaud throughout his life. In connection with the issues of consciousness and unconsciousness in particular, it occupies an important place in some of the first texts he published in the twenties.

In another article destined for *Demain*, Artaud touches on the theme of consciousness while discussing cubism. This form of art, he says, presents different states of consciousness

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<sup>298</sup> “all that, which through the model, can be called a pounding and hectic, anxious or concealed life”

as “plans séparés et sans rapports”<sup>299</sup> (*Œuvres* 33). Cubist paintings offer a mosaic of “subconscious images,” which follow an “irrational disorder.” To Artaud, this form of separation seems artificial, since it is based on an unsustainable exclusion. He asks: “qui admettrait seulement des sensations d’un ordre purement intellectuel, qui ne devrait rien à l’apport des sens proprement dits, des nerfs, en un mot, en nous”<sup>300</sup> (*Œuvres* 33). Artaud suggests that the different planes of consciousness are not accurately expressed in cubism, and his belief in the interdependence of thought and feeling is the principle through which he challenges the “new art.”

In discussing the painting of Moïse Kisling, Artaud proposes the idea of an image of an experience impregnated with unconsciousness. He describes this in the following terms: “celui-ci [Kisling] ne s’attache qu’à nous rendre la vie, vue de son angle le plus aigu, chargée d’inconscience profonde et de sens”<sup>301</sup> (*Œuvres* 34). The unconscious, in this context, is related to the possibility of envisioning life as a continuous state of novelty, an act capable of producing a new angle on reality. The unconscious is brought to light through the sensual intensity of painting. It is also approached in terms of a reservoir of sense, that is, it assumes a positive connotation that prefigures later surrealist writings of Artaud.

It is in the short texts concerned with the theatrical techniques of Charles Dullin, with whose company Artaud was involved between 1921 and 1923, that a more elaborate approach to consciousness takes form. Here consciousness is the domination of the movements of the soul that is necessary for the creation of the means and the spirit of theatre. In order to accomplish this creation, Artaud writes, “il fallait constituer un petit noyau d’acteurs parfaitement disciplinés, parfaitement au courant des exigences de leur métier, parfaitement *conscients*”<sup>302</sup> (*Œuvres* 35). The demand to consider the soul’s movements, instead of merely figuring them, situates this activity as that of a possession, the opposite of a belief in the soul’s “natural” expressive ability. For Artaud, it is through conscious hard work that this movement becomes meaningful in theatre, providing it with increased significance.

Artaud’s belief in the need for a depuration of human activities is made explicit in the idea of theatre espoused here, that is, a theatre “outside” the text, a theatre in and of itself:

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<sup>299</sup> “separate and disconnected planes”

<sup>300</sup> “who would only admit feelings of a purely intellectual order, which should owe nothing to the contribution of the senses themselves, the nerves, in a word, in us”

<sup>301</sup> “ee aims to render our lives, seen from the most acute angle, charged with deep unconsciousness and sense”

<sup>302</sup> “it would be necessary to constitute a small kernel of actors, perfectly disciplined, perfectly aware of the demands of their job, perfectly *conscious*”



“Ça se passerait comme dans la vie. Mais une vie décantée, essentialisée.”<sup>303</sup> (*Œuvres* 36). This form of life is made explicit through the immediate feelings arising in the scene, a “direct theatre” in which “plus loin que de jouer des textes, il y a un certain idéal du théâtre qui résiderait dans la figuration d’une vie *vécu au moment même où elle se fabrique*”<sup>304</sup> (*Œuvres* 36). The consciousness of the actor in relation to his or her expression is vital for the theatrical endeavour, in which life, more than figured, is lived within the scene. The positive status of consciousness in theatre, and the form of expression that this consciousness allows, is in consonance with the forms of life conveyed in painting, particularly when the “new art” is not fully occupied with breaking away from conventions.

In the personal sphere, while 1922 was marked by Artaud’s participation in plays with Dullin’s company, *Atelier*, he also suffered from extreme tiredness and frequent headaches (Grossman *Œuvres* 1714). In the letters and poems sent by Artaud to Génica Athanasiou between 1922 and 1923, the discussion of consciousness, praised for its connectedness to life, acquires a more personal tone. Athanasiou and Artaud met at *Atelier*, of which she was part between 1920 and 1926, and soon began a romantic relationship. After his departure from the group, she took part in many of his shows, and they remained linked until 1927. In a letter written in July 1922, Artaud tells Athanasiou: “il me semble que je suis séparé de *mon propre corps*”<sup>305</sup> (*Œuvres* 52). He goes on to relate this situation both to the suffering caused him by the absence of Athanasiou, and to his own attempts to stop ingesting opium, which he had consumed, since 1919, “pour lutter contre des états de douleurs errantes et d’angoisses dont je souffrais depuis l’âge de 19 ans”<sup>306</sup> (*Œuvres* 1712). Both situations resulted in a distancing from physical reality that intensified fundamental spiritual issues for Artaud.

A year later, in July 1923, Artaud would detail this feeling of separation in another letter to Athanasiou. He describes it as a sense of numbness, or “un sentiment d’engourdissement général et de faiblesse intense et qui serait en même temps une douleur”<sup>307</sup> (*Œuvres* 55). Despite the apparent abstract character of this feeling, Artaud urges Athanasiou to consider “que cela soit vrai, corresponde à quelque chose, soit aussi vrai

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<sup>303</sup> “This would happen as in life. But in a decanted, essentialised life.”

<sup>304</sup> “much more than playing texts, there is an ideal theatre that represents a life *lived at the same time that it is produced*”

<sup>305</sup> “I feel as though I am separated from my own body”

<sup>306</sup> “to fight against the states of wandering pain and anguish that I have suffered since the age of nineteen”

<sup>307</sup> “a feeling of general numbness and intense weakness that is, at the same time, a pain”

qu'une douleur localisée, ou un choc, la rencontre d'un obstacle"<sup>308</sup> (*Œuvres* 55). "As true as" a pain and a shock, this sensation dominates Artaud's preoccupations at the time. The idea of an obstacle between Artaud and his own perception is central to his concern. While he identifies feelings of torpor in many parts of his body, he asserts them to be part of the same condition:

la même sensation d'engourdissement, de séparation de moi-même de chacun de mes membres, de mes organes ... et que lorsque je me touche, je n'aie pas le sentiment de ME toucher moi-même mais de rencontrer un obstacle conscient, que je me fasse la sensation d'être un squelette sans peau ni chair, ou plutôt un vide vivant<sup>309</sup> (*Œuvres* 55)

The feeling that a "conscious obstacle" separates his perception from his actions brings Artaud unprecedented suffering, leading him to assert that he would exchange his entire life for a few moments of peace: "Il n'est pas question ici de médecine. Comprends enfin, une fois pour toutes, que je considère ma vie comme perdue."<sup>310</sup> (*Œuvres* 56). Dramatised in the epistolary exchange, Artaud's suffering lies "outside human reason." He proposes the consideration of suffering, which is responsible for his *état d'esprit*, as a defining and unique character of his experience. In October 1923 he writes to Athanasiou: "...la chose primordiale, la chose qui est la question est l'INTENSITÉ de la souffrance. Tu me parles toujours de ma vie, de guérison future, mais comprends que *l'idée de la souffrance* est plus forte que l'idée de la guérison, l'idée de la vie."<sup>311</sup> (*Œuvres* 58). The idea that suffering, through its sheer intensity, can superimposes itself on the idea of life, is part of a defining element in Artaud's writings, that of cruelty.

The only sense remaining in a suffering life is the search for a means to relieve the on-going pain. This search takes the form of an urge, preventing the emergence of any form of thinking. There is no possibility of contemplation or passive waiting. Artaud states: "mon

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<sup>308</sup> "that this is true, this corresponds to something, it is as true as a localised pain, or a shock, an encounter with an obstacle"

<sup>309</sup> "The same sensation of numbness, of separation from myself from each of my limbs, my organs... and when I touch myself I do not feel as though I am touching MYSELF but that of meeting a conscious obstacle, as I feel like a skeleton without skin or flesh, or rather a living emptiness."

<sup>310</sup> "This is not a question of medicine. You should understand, once and for all, that I consider my life to be lost."

<sup>311</sup> "...the primary issue, the issue that is at stake is the INTENSITY of suffering. You always talk to me about my life, my future cure, but you should understand that the idea of suffering is stronger than the idea of healing, than the idea of life."

corps tordu, mon corps coupé, mon cerveau scié ne me donnent pas le temps d'attendre"<sup>312</sup> (*Œuvres* 58). Outside the reach of medicine, this state is not only chronic but also essentially immutable. Throughout the correspondence, Artaud reminds Athanasiou that this condition is not transitory, particularly not in relation to his personality traits. He often claims: "il aurait fallu me connaître avant tout ceci"<sup>313</sup> (*Œuvres* 60), indicating that his state has a remote origin, the understanding of which could make apparent contradictions fade away.

This excruciating scenario is re-enacted, and launched to another level, in the letters exchanged between Artaud and the editor of *La Nouvelle Revue Française* (NRF), Jacques Rivière, between May 1923 and June 1924. As well as a correspondence, this was Artaud's first publication to reach a wide audience, nowadays known as "Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière." This work first appeared in the above-mentioned literary journal, in the September 1924 edition, under the title "Une Correspondance." At that time Artaud, twenty-six years old, was frequenting artistic circles, acting in cinema, and had published a collection of poems entitled *Tric Trac du Ciel* (1923). As the correspondence makes evident, he harboured some hope for the literary society of that time, and valued the recognition he was to receive from it. The correspondence began when Artaud sent some of his poems to the magazine, of which Rivière was the editor. The poems were rejected, and the two exchanged letters on the reasons for this. Artaud gives expression to his conceptions on writing and thought while attempting to make his "case" to Rivière.

The letters open with Artaud highlighting the fact he has not changed the poems addressed to the NRF following their rejection due to their coming from the profound incertitude of his thinking. He attests to his happiness when this incertitude is not overwhelmed by the sense of absolute non-existence, from which he suffers from time to time. He calls this non-existence "une véritable déperdition"<sup>314</sup> (*Œuvres* 70), and also describes it in terms of a "total absence." It is faced with this fact that Artaud cannot conceive of "correcting" his poems. The question he addresses to Rivière expresses this conviction: "Pensez-vous qu'on puisse reconnaître moins d'authenticité littéraire et de pouvoir d'action à un poème défectueux mais semé des beautés fortes qu'à un poème parfait mais sans grand retentissement intérieur?"<sup>315</sup> (*Œuvres* 70). Here the privileging of content over form, which

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<sup>312</sup> "my twisted body, my cut-up body, my sawed brain do not afford me time to wait"

<sup>313</sup> "you would have had to know me before all this"

<sup>314</sup> "a real loss"

<sup>315</sup> "Do you think that we can find less literary authenticity and power in a poem that is defective, but sown with much beauty, than in a poem that is perfect, but with little internal resonance?"

was present in Artaud's short essays on painting, takes on a more complex form in relation to his process of creation.

The question that interests Artaud in the act of writing concerns not the form, but the content and the possibility of its expression. Considering the inseparability of spiritual products from the spirit itself, Artaud writes: "il ne s'agit pas pour moi de rien moins que de savoir si j'ai ou non le droit de continuer à penser, en vers ou en prose"<sup>316</sup> (*Œuvres* 70). The correspondence with Rivière allows Artaud to question of his own thought. He addresses Rivière not as a confessor, however, but as a *guarantor* (Kaufmann 100). Through this dynamic, he attributes to his addressee the power to judge the validity of his writing, thought and existence, these aspects being interdependent in his view. At the same time, he protests his disregard for public opinion. The following excerpt from Artaud's letter of 29<sup>th</sup> January 1924 points to this aspect, but also to something beyond it. According to Artaud, "j'ai pour me guérir du jugement des autres toute la distance qui me sépare de moi"<sup>317</sup> (*Œuvres* 72). While saying that his "mental confession" was not an attempt to justify himself in the eyes of Rivière, Artaud implies that other people's judgements are generally a cause of harm, following which he makes use of the distance that "separates him from himself" to heal.

This distance, understood in the usual way, could mean the difference between the author-persona and one's real self. In Artaud's writings, however, it points in other directions. He seems to propose that his relationship with public opinion is analogous to his relationship with himself: a distance separates the two, and while this distance usually signifies an obstacle, it might also serve as a provisional aid. Artaud submits himself to a judgement that is equally or more severe than that of public opinion, so that the criteria for accessing his work lies elsewhere: "...si je juge très bien mon esprit, je ne peux juger les productions de mon esprit que dans la mesure où elles se confondent avec lui dans une espèce d'inconscience bienheureuse. Ce sera là mon critérium."<sup>318</sup> (*Œuvres* 73).

The "blissful unconsciousness" in which the spirit merges with its productions is the criteria for accessing his work that Artaud is searching for. While he does not possess these criteria, the correspondence enacts his projection of it onto Rivière, who, through an act of speech, could assure the validity and quality of Artaud's writing. On the question of his right

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<sup>316</sup> "It is a question, for me, of nothing less than knowing whether or not I have the right to continue thinking, in verse or prose."

<sup>317</sup> "To cure myself from the judgment of others I have all the distance that separates me from myself."

<sup>318</sup> "...if I judge my spirit very well, I can only judge its productions while they merge with my spirit in some kind of blissful unconsciousness. This will be my criterion."

to write, Artaud himself forges an answer in the post-script to the same letter: “je suis un homme qui a beaucoup souffert de l’esprit, et à ce titre j’ai le *droit* de parler”<sup>319</sup> (*Œuvres* 74). The right to write *à tout prix*, which is assured, does not guarantee any form of recognition. Artaud’s insistence on knowing the destiny of his poems throughout the correspondence — that is, whether they will be published in the NRF or not —, testifies to the value he attaches to acknowledgement of his writing. Rivière assumes the position of the appeasing confidante, by stating the uncertainty of all souls, as well as the difficulty intrinsic to all creation. Artaud rejects his arguments, and continuously points to the singularity of his own case, as well as to the faulty analyses of his correspondent.

While the original rejection of Artaud’s poems was explained as being because of the lack of “une unité suffisante d’impression”<sup>320</sup> (Rivière qtd. in Artaud *Œuvres* 71), the editor’s appreciation of Artaud himself shifts during the course of the correspondence. In his letter of 25<sup>th</sup> March 1924, Rivière recognises the faults in his attitude, and describes it as “comme ces médecins qui prétendent guérir leurs patients en refusant de les croire, en niant l’étrangeté de leur cas, en les remplaçant de force dans la normale”<sup>321</sup> (Rivière qtd. in Artaud *Œuvres* 75). This does not prevent Rivière from continuously giving Artaud conciliatory advice, or from comparing his and his correspondent’s spiritual situations. In the same letter, Rivière suggests that the “erosion” of thought identified by Artaud might be due to “la trop grande liberté que vous lui [à l’esprit] laissez”<sup>322</sup> (Rivière qtd. in Artaud *Œuvres* 76). This evidences the strictly literary approach of Rivière, while Artaud requests a spiritual, fundamental appreciation of his writings.

The different approaches of Artaud and Rivière are notable in some of the most famous lines in the correspondence. While answering Rivière’s proposition that he publish the letters under “invented names,” Artaud writes: “Pourquoi mentir, pourquoi chercher à mettre sur le plan littéraire une chose qui est le cri même de la vie, pourquoi donner des apparences de fiction à ce qui est fait de la substance indéracinable de l’âme, qui est comme la plainte de la réalité?”<sup>323</sup> (*Œuvres* 79). That is, Artaud’s understanding of the fragility of his spirit and the erosion and destruction of his thought “in its substance” is a condition integral

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<sup>319</sup> “I am a man whose spirit has suffered greatly, and as such I have the *right* to speak.”

<sup>320</sup> “sufficient unity of impression”

<sup>321</sup> “like the doctors that claim to cure their patients while refusing to believe them, denying the strangeness of their case, restoring them to the norm through force”

<sup>322</sup> “the excessive freedom that you allow it [the spirit]”

<sup>323</sup> “Why lie, why seek to put on a literary footing something that is the cry of life, why give fictional appearances to what is due to the ineradicable substance of the soul, which is like the lament of reality?”

to the state of his soul. This is a subject that cannot profit from being fictionalised or romanticised.

The position assumed by Rivière in his letters seems to instigate Artaud to detail the singular condition of his soul throughout the correspondence. On 25<sup>th</sup> May 1924, Artaud describes the possible state of dominance of the spirit, which can never be total: “Un homme se possède par éclaircies, et même quand il se possède il ne s’atteint pas tout à fait. Il ne réalise pas cette cohésion constante de ses forces sans laquelle toute véritable création est impossible.”<sup>324</sup> (*Œuvres* 79). In the face of the impossibility of full accomplishment of oneself, on which creation depends, Artaud defends the right of expression of even the most defective spiritual forms, simply because they exist. He also makes an important distinction between flawed forms of expression that are the effect of a cultural atmosphere, and those that, as in his own case, come from the profound uncertainty of being.

Artaud relates *arrêts et saccades* (“discontinuities and cracks”) in his own poems to the *faiblesse physiologique* (“physiological weakness”) of his soul, while works by other people are said to be the result of a weakness characterised as part of *l’air de l’époque*. Here the idea of physiology is connected to a definition of the soul as “l’émanation de notre force nerveuse coagulée autour des objets”<sup>325</sup> (*Œuvres* 79). It is a spiritual and, at the same time, “materialistic” notion that finds its ultimate medium in the nerves. In relation to the current cultural environment, Artaud mentions the writings of Tzara, Breton and Reverdy, then goes on to object: “mais eux, leur âme n’est pas physiologiquement atteinte, elle ne l’est pas substantiellement, elle l’est dans tous les points où elle se joint avec autre chose, elle ne l’est pas hors de la pensée”<sup>326</sup> (*Œuvres* 79). A soul that has points of contact with the objects to which it applies itself, according to Artaud, cannot be considered lost.

The distinction made by Artaud between the spiritual weakness he experiences and the “infirmity” described by many authors of the same period intends to situate his writings as the expression of something other than cultural malaise. His experience is more accurately defined as suffering. As he says of the above-mentioned authors: “Il n’en reste pas moins qu’ils ne souffrent pas et que je souffre, non pas seulement dans l’esprit, mais dans la chair et dans mon âme de tous les jours. Cette inapplication à l’objet qui caractérise toute la

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<sup>324</sup> “A man possesses himself through fissures, and even when he does so, he does not quite reach himself. He does not accomplish that constant cohesion of his forces without which any real creation is impossible.”

<sup>325</sup> “the emanation of our nervous force coagulated around objects”

<sup>326</sup> “but them, their soul is not physiologically affected, it is not substantially so, it remains in all the points where it joins with something else, it is not *outside of thought*”

littérature, est chez moi une inapplication à la vie.”<sup>327</sup> (*Œuvres* 80). The fact that the suffering pervades spirit, flesh and every aspect of daily life, is one element of the distinction. The other is to be found in the differentiation between the artistic dimension and the experiential one, indicating that the work of Artaud cannot be approached solely as an exercise of language, at least not while language is understood as separate from life.

The theme of “inapplicability” brought up by Artaud does not concern, in his case, only the “gaucheness” he refers to in his dealings with quotidian matters. It also describes his “indélébile impuissance à me concentrer sur un objet”<sup>328</sup> (*Œuvres* 79), that is, the “erosion” of thought that Rivière, perhaps optimistically, sees as part of the normal functioning of the spirit. In the last letter of the correspondence, the editor of the NRF suggests that Artaud’s injured soul may be an advantage in his writing. From the point of view of clairvoyance, according to Rivière, a damaged soul can give access to special knowledge of oneself. His argument can be summarised in the following lines: “Comment distinguerons-nous nos mécanismes intellectuels ou moraux, si nous n’en sommes pas temporairement privés?”<sup>329</sup> (Rivière qtd. in *Œuvres* 83). Artaud contends, both here and in his writings in the period immediately following this, that weakness and discontinuity of thought allow for the emergence of a new form of knowledge, an *intraduisible science* that needs to be appreciated for the understanding of the spirit (*Œuvres* 146). Rivière, in turn, proposes a simple knowledge by contrast, as if forgetting that the condition referred to by Artaud does not offer an opposite.

This spiritual illness acquires a new facet in the last letter sent by Artaud to Rivière, on June 6<sup>th</sup> 1924. It reads:

Il faut que le lecteur croie à une véritable maladie et non à un phénomène d’époque, à une maladie qui touche à l’essence de l’être et à ses possibilités centrales d’expression, et qui s’applique à toute une vie. Une maladie qui affecte l’âme dans sa réalité la plus profonde, et qui en infecte les manifestations. Le poison de l’être. Une véritable *paralysie*.<sup>330</sup> (*Œuvres* 80)

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<sup>327</sup> “It nevertheless remains true that they do not suffer while I do, not only in spirit but in the flesh and in my every day soul. Such inapplicability to the object that characterises all literature, is in me an inapplicability to life.”

<sup>328</sup> “permanent inability to focus on an object”

<sup>329</sup> “How could we distinguish our intellectual or moral mechanisms, if we were not temporarily deprived of them?”

<sup>330</sup> “The reader must believe in a real disease and not in the phenomenon of an epoch, in a disease that touches the essence of being and its central possibilities of expression, one that applies itself to a whole lifetime. This is

Here the idea of illness, and particularly that of poisoning, introduces the theme of causality to the configuration of the soul that evolves in different directions. The poisoning, an “exterior” element, transforms the original state of the soul and deteriorates its functions. It opens the way for the consideration of forces alien to thought, and of the consequent bad intentions, into the cosmology of Artaud’s *érosion de la pensée*.

The introduction of these forces is related to what has been referred above as the “trick,” exemplified, for instance, in the invasion of the author’s thoughts by a general consciousness. In “Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière,” it is not clear whether the poisoning is actually an exterior element in relation to thought. However, Artaud’s words are unmistakable on the subject of the distinct nature of this element: “une volonté supérieure et méchante attaque l’âme comme un vitriol, attaque la masse mot-et-image, attaque la masse du sentiment, et me laisse, moi, pantelant comme à la porte même de la vie”<sup>331</sup> (*Œuvres* 81). “Vitriol,” the archaic name for sulphuric acid, occurs here as an analogy for the action of the superior will. The linking of the idea of poisoning with that of a vicious superior force points to a possible externality of the illness’s causality. This is a recurring theme in Artaud’s writing; it is present in many letters from the forties, for instance, in the form of “Prussian poisons” associated with evil forces.

Artaud goes on to conjecture about his position in the “field” of writing. The above-mentioned obstacles separating him from himself acquire here another spacial metaphor, that of him panting, either after having had to pursue the materials of writing — probably the “masses of word-images and sentiment” —, or after having had to escape the invasion of the superior force. While the “masses,” in this context, appear as being under attack, it is Artaud himself who is left out of breath “at the door of life,” separated from the latter as well as from other matter that he could, hypothetically, possess. It is not a poor image in the context of a violent poisoning of the creative process, one in which the author appears as the lowermost element.

This form of attack and its singular effects are what Artaud claims, if nothing else, to be particular to his writing. He asks his addressee: “et dites-moi si une œuvre littéraire quelconque est compatible avec de semblables états”<sup>332</sup> (*Œuvres* 81). Artaud ends by

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a disease that affects the soul in its deepest reality, and infects its manifestations. The poison of being. A true *paralysis*.”

<sup>331</sup> “a superior and vicious will attacks the soul as a vitriol, attacks the mass word-image, attacks the mass of feeling, and leaves me panting, as if at the door of life itself”

<sup>332</sup> “and tell me if any literary work is consistent with similar statements”



professing his faith in the genius that his own work, paradoxically, simultaneously possesses and hides, while pointing to the error of public judgement:

Ces œuvres hasardées qui vous semblent souvent le produit d'un esprit non encore en possession de lui-même, et qui ne se possédera peut-être jamais, qui sait quel cerveau elles cachent, quelle puissance de vie, quelle fièvre pensante que les circonstances seules ont réduits.<sup>333</sup> (*Œuvres* 81)

Just as the drama of writing cannot be reduced to language, since it requires consideration of the whole of spiritual and incarnated life, the act of writing stages the issues of life, and the non-accomplishment of an oeuvre and the non-accomplishment of the spirit are one and the same.

Unable to abdicate from the striving for expression, Artaud forwards, in his letter to Rivière of 29<sup>th</sup> January 1925, a newly-written piece, asking for the merciless judgement of his addressee: “Vous le jugerez, vous, du point de vue de l'absolu. Mais je vous dirait que ce me serait une bien belle consolation de penser que, bien que n'étant pas *tout* moi-même, aussi haut, aussi dense, aussi large que moi, je peux encore être quelque chose.”<sup>334</sup> (*Œuvres* 73). To be capable of something, despite the impossibility of complete being: that is the ultimate plea of Artaud. That so much is at stake for him is indicative of more than doubts, also of dangers.

From his description of life as an essential and intense deliverance, related to the view of the unconscious as a reservoir, and to consciousness as a form of positive possession, Artaud goes on, in some of his first published writings, to identify and analyse the obstacles preventing a full spiritual and material experience. The finding of a *véritable maladie* puts him on the trail of an inquiry that would take different paths through the years, all of which were concerned with establishing the proper place of thought, and the related fruition of flesh, and in the search for which he can do no more, and no less, than write.

#### 5.4. Experience Thresholds

The notion of experience, as expressed in the early writings of Artaud and Benjamin, is, to some extent, a notion established through contrasts. While Benjamin employs two

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<sup>333</sup> “These works of chance that often appear to you as the product of a spirit that has not yet possessed itself, and which, perhaps, never will, who knows what brains they conceal, what power of life, what feverish thinking that only the circumstances have reduced”

<sup>334</sup> “You will judge them, you, from the point of view of the absolute. But I would say that it would be a great consolation to me to think that, although I am not *entirely* myself, as high, as dense, as wide as myself, I am still capable of being something.”

different usages of experience, one from a relatively informal context, the other from the philosophical field, Artaud expresses, in short essays and correspondences, the theme of a fundamental separation of being, a subject that he details through the example of his personal case. Whereas the conceptualisation of experience emerges in a philosophical context, its presence in everyday discourse is marked by heterogeneous perspectives, making it sometimes difficult to identify the precise nature of its usage in the writings of Benjamin and Artaud. The approach established in this section attempts to consider the extent to which their early texts propose a questioning and a modification of the meanings of experience, as outlined in the section above.

In the writings of Artaud, the exploration of a spiritual and material condition, particularly through epistolary writing, takes the form of a general criticism against the ideas of self-conscious, attainable, intelligible life. This scenario is first brought into question in Artaud's articles on painting — where he mentions an “anguished or lenited life,” the “divorce of senses from reason” —, and on theatre. The latter art form is already understood here as offering a possibility for the appropriation of a “decanted, essentialised life,” by “perfectly conscious actors.” In both his letters to Athanasiou and his published correspondence with Rivière, this perspective is dramatised through a form of “self-writing” that attempts to express the obtuseness of accessing oneself. The ideas of separation, obstacle, illness within one's being, and the correlated perceptions of incertitude, numbness, suffering and ultimately detachment from life enact Artaud's testimony that experience is what one is prevented from determining, making use of and, ultimately, owning.

Artaud's account of the non-disposability of oneself must be situated at the limits of the traditional notion of experience, while it is understood as the amount of insight and living baggage owned by a person. It neither coincides with the idea of an appropriating reflexivity expressed as *expérience intérieure* (Cassin 436). In a sense, the philosophical transposition that takes place from an “excess” of living to a cumulative knowledge of the self and the world is problematized in Artaud's writings. On the other hand, it is precisely this “inhabitation at the margins,” which is anything but passive, that makes of Artaud the perfect candidate for a singular experience, that of producing creation in thought. Gilles Deleuze, in *Difference and Repetition* (“Difference and Repetition,” 2000), proposes that Artaud's problem “was not to orientate his thought, or to perfect the expression of what he thought, or to acquire application and method or to perfect his poems, but simply to manage to think something” (*Difference* 147). While in Artaud thought is forcibly directed towards its own

natural powerlessness, the “fracture” that it demonstrates is also part of its greatest power. That is, Artaud’s experience is an interrogation of experience, in the sense that he acknowledges that thinking is not given, that it has to be engendered through the process of thought itself. The inability to think leads, in fact, to a revelation, not so much about the “nature” of thought as about its potency and operations.

Benjamin’s critique, in turn, considers a number of philosophical discussions of experience, as well as informal uses that he intends to enhance with a “superior” formulation. He writes the first of the texts approached above from the point of view of youth, more precisely the German student movement of the first decades of the twentieth century, through which he questions the suggestion of a meaningless experience as the only possible experience. The agent of this suggestion is the adult, described as devoid of spirit and disinterested in culture and intellectuality. Later on, in 1918, Benjamin criticises another approach to the notion of experience in terms of its “de-spiritualisation.” This is the notion stemming from the Kantian theory of knowledge, which Benjamin describes as being based on a poor vision of reality and a limited definition of consciousness.

Benjamin’s perception of the absence of a transcendental dimension in the above-mentioned approaches to experience highlights his criticism of the limitations imposed on it, in both the concrete and the philosophical senses, through the disregarding of realms beyond the immediate, conscious, accessible aspects of reality. Benjamin’s critique of experience forms part of his general rejection of instrumentalisation. In the same sense that he pointed out the impoverishment inherent in the “bourgeois” use of language, and, later, of objects, here Benjamin highlights the reduction of experience to a manageable “thing” — a “warrant” of life’s commonness, as detailed in the essay “Experience,” and a mere content of consciousness, according to the article “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy.”

Artaud and Benjamin’s texts point to a problem in the definition of experience that, while not identical, in both cases, questions some of the same givens of the field, including the relation of experience to knowledge of oneself and the world, and consequently to thought. They also sketch forms of “experimental” experiences that emerge from the inaccessibility of some of these elements, a subject that Artaud details from his personal position, while Benjamin makes use of notions formulated elsewhere. Benjamin, on this concern, assigns a much more prominent place to experience than the one ascribed by the philistine and Kant. Experience, Benjamin states, has the spirit as its content, being related to higher realms of knowledge such as religion and language. A new notion of experience that

encompasses this feature would enable an investigation of the Kantian concept of “pure knowledge,” and, through it, of human spiritual capabilities.

For Artaud, the experimental form that emerges from having questioned the idea of ownership of experience seems to take place in the act of writing itself, that is, in the dramatisation of the inaccessibility of being, through the particular form of exposition allowed by composition. As Dumoulié points out, this in no sense means that the reflexivity of writing allows Artaud a recovering of the self. Ultimately, it is in consonance with Artaud’s finding that “l’automatisme inconscient des ‘êtres’ a pris la place du plus propre et lui dicte le texte de sa vie”<sup>335</sup> (Dumoulié *Artaud* 5). According to Dumoulié, it is language, however, and particularly the epistolary form, that allows Artaud to “mettre sa douleur en scène sous le regard de l’autre”<sup>336</sup> (*Artaud* 9), an operation detailed below. Artaud and Benjamin’s suggested methods for dealing with a turning point in the discussion of experience both touch on the ideas of incomparable solitude and forged communion.

The theme of separation, essential to the problematisation of the concept of experience, and re-enacted in different forms in Artaud’s later texts, makes one of its first appearances in the letters sent to Athanasiou in 1922. While stating to feel “separated from his own body,” Artaud presents a scene in which his suffering is dramatised through the communicative dynamic of epistolary writing. This setting, as Kaufmann points out, is a “terrain vague ... dissimulé entre la vie et l’œuvre”<sup>337</sup> (8), where takes place the exploitation of a misunderstanding. That is, the letters seem to foster communication and proximity, but actually create and reinforce distance, something which Kaufmann equates to the emergence of literary writing. If, for some writers, the epistolary is a necessary step towards literature, for the majority it is at least a laboratory. In the case of Artaud, the distance allowed by the correspondence allows for the exploration of a deeper understanding of distance.

The finding of a conscious obstacle between him and himself leads Artaud into an analysis of the idea of separation. When writing to Athanasiou, Artaud mentions that she should have known him “before all this.” This should not be taken as a statement on a recently established situation: it is not that Artaud used to be different, it is, precisely, that the state he describes in himself is immutable, as are the effects it has had over him. If the expression of separation is favoured by the epistolary form, it is because it implies the act of

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<sup>335</sup> “an automatic unconscious of “beings” has taken the place of himself and dictated the text of his life”

<sup>336</sup> “put his pain on stage under the gaze of the other”

<sup>337</sup> “vague field ... dissimulated between the life and the oeuvre”

establishing distance. In fact, the theme of separation, in Artaud's writings, has the ambiguous feature of being able to recast, through the problematisation of what he sees as the corroded foundations of being, the "artifice" of creation.

In Artaud's assertion to Rivière that his writing is non-literary, this ambiguous feature is explicated. The act of defence (of the non-literariness) takes place in the same gesture that exposes the problem of separation: "il faut que le lecteur croie à une véritable maladie et non à un phénomène d'époque"<sup>338</sup> (Artaud *Œuvres* 80). In opposing *maladie* with *phénomène d'époque*, Artaud highlights the first as a chronic or immutable state of affliction, and the second as the cultural malaise that he and Rivière identify in the literary productions of the time. Literary artifice, in this sense, risks falsifying the true illness of being, however Artaud's proposition to remain true to the condition affecting him is in fact an essentially literary act.

The "refusal to lie" serves to redouble the literariness of the writing, just as the original gesture of literature contains both separation from reality, and the promise of giving away its most precious secrets, perhaps the very cry of life. Artaud famously questions Rivière: "pourquoi mentir, pourquoi chercher à mettre sur le plan littéraire une chose qui est le cri même de la vie"<sup>339</sup> (*Œuvres* 79). Artaud's belief in the significance of sharing his experience is further expressed in his insistence, mentioned above, on having his poems published, because of the "interior resounding" of his loss rather than the perfection of their form. This suggests that an important aspect at stake in these texts is the possibility of communication of a deeply solitary condition. That the theme of inaccessibility to himself is evoked through correspondence points to the role of the other in Artaud's explorations of the problem of creation. The distance enacted through the epistolary serves as a vehicle through which the distance of one's thought from the actual act of thinking, to use an expression from Deleuze, can be expressed. But this expression is only possible if Artaud is able to dramatise, and put before the public — everyone from his close correspondents to all potential readers —, the drama of separation.

If Artaud, in the letters to Athanasiou, compares separation with pain and shock, this may be due to the intermediate character of these sensations, their status of belonging to both spirit and flesh. The notion of shock, in particular — also explored by Benjamin in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1940) —, is described as leading to the impossibility of a proper

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<sup>338</sup> "the reader must believe in a real disease and not in a phenomenon of the epoch"

<sup>339</sup> "why lie, why seek to put on a literary level something that is the cry of life itself"

registering of life's impressions in the mind or the spirit, a useless form of perception that cannot engender any significant experience. The act of writing, in this context, is perhaps a privileged, though imperfect, palliative. As Freud suggests, it is a method that *keeps* at the same time that it *conceals* (*Dreams* 610). Artaud's position in relation to his *maladie* is, analogously, a unique possession and a radical dispossession, in relation to which he can only write, but only on condition that "le corps momifié de l'œuvre ne se substitue pas au corps vivant de son auteur"<sup>340</sup> (Dumoulié *Artaud* 5).

In *Le Pèse-Nerfs* (1925), discussed below, the act of negating an oeuvre is expressed as an attempt to sustain the author's "alive body." In the same text, Artaud states, while referring to the general misunderstanding about the unique condition of his spirit: "je suis le seul témoin de moi-même"<sup>341</sup> (*Œuvres* 161). As the only testimony of himself, he re-enacts, through writing, the "artificial" distance that allows the expression of a more fundamental separation. For this, the presence of the other is a condition, however the author does not expect compassion from it. As suggested by Dumoulié (*Artaud* 9), Artaud is engaged more in a search for conviction. This might be related to the above-mentioned complicity of the reader with the forces engaged in preventing the accomplishment of thought, detailed in Artaud's texts from the forties.

For Benjamin, it is the ideal of a forged community that first emerges as an experimental form of experience. From the rejection of "experience as meaninglessness," proposed by the philistine, this community is necessarily of a spiritual nature, since the spirit is the very content of the experience of youth. This spiritual dimension also has a strong basis in an idea of individual conscience. As suggested above, youth appears as having an "inevitable dissonant" sense of itself, expressed through a combination of communion and solitude (*Eiland* 9). A genuine community is defined as a collective of individual consciences, which can only be attained through the "deepest solitude" of each of its members. Benjamin expresses this in a 1913 letter to Carla Seligson, a member of the youth movement: "...if we keep our gaze free to see the spirit wherever it may be, we will be the ones to actualise it. Almost everybody forgets that *they themselves* are the place where spirit actualises itself." (Benjamin *Early* 8).

The definition of spirit in this context is not made particularly clear by Benjamin. It is something to be awaited and actualised by the youth movement itself, whose "mission" is to

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<sup>340</sup> "the mummified body of the work does not replace the living body of its author"

<sup>341</sup> "I am the only witness to myself"

remain attentive and open to it. Benjamin also calls it “soul,” stating, in the same letter: “This soul is something *eternally actualising*. Every person, every soul that is born, can bring to life the new reality” (*Early* 8). The fact that many members of the youth movement were Jewish is not irrelevant here, considering that this is the context in which Benjamin, according to Eiland, first felt his Jewishness as something more than an “exotic ‘aroma’ in his life” (8). That is, the imagined community in Benjamin’s critique must be related to Benjamin’s new awareness, gained through his participation in the youth movement, of his Jewishness. Nevertheless, the spiritual connotation of “Experience” cannot be directly identified with a Jewish context, even if it indirectly expresses the approximation of Benjamin to related themes, as highlighted in Scholem’s account of this period (*Friendship* 66-70).

A context for understanding the notion of spirit is suggested by some of the pieces written by Benjamin during this period. Eiland states, in fact, that running through the early writings of Benjamin, from the period 1910-1917, is “a dialectical mode of thought involving the transcendence — not abandonment — of traditional metaphysical oppositions (such as form and content, word and thing, spirit and nature), together with a critique of the instrumentalizing of spirit” (11). The first of these is particularly clear in the article “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” while the second is already present in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” One facet of Benjamin’s critique of Kant is the proposition that religion and language are the realms from which, within the Kantian system, a new notion of experience might emerge. The essay from 1915, in turn, proposes the “expressly magic” feature of language, which contains, within its structure, the possibility of expressing the essence of things.

Examining Benjamin’s articles from 1915 and 1918, it is evident that the impossibility of distinguishing subject and object, a feature that Benjamin highlights as a contribution to Kant’s theory of knowledge that comes from religious experience, is already constituent in language. For Benjamin, humans express their own essence while also expressing the essence of things. This is more a form of spiritual exchange than it is the acquisition of knowledge on the part of a determined subject. The exchange represents the “decayed” form of communication, contrasted with a supposed “original” communion between language and things, but it is also the way in which essences can still be touched upon, assigning to language its intrinsic creative and spiritual character. The “higher” context in which Benjamin wants to insert Kant’s theory is a spiritual one, but only to the extent that it

represents “the transcendence of traditional oppositions,” that is, the inapplicability of specific notions of subject and object, as in the case of language.

If religion gives a spiritual context to Kant’s theory, it is because the notions of object and subject are also inapplicable to religious experience. The “true experience” is described by Benjamin, as mentioned above, as the one “in which neither god nor man is object or subject of experience” (*Philosophy* 104). This sense can be approximated to the idea of communion, at least in that it represents a transcendental alternative to both the scientific view of reality and the psychological understanding of consciousness. However, the frame of Benjamin’s essay does not allow an extrapolation of the philosophical field: the ultimate goal of his criticism is to motivate the establishment of metaphysics from Kant’s theory.

The “spiritual” approach identifiable in the two texts of Benjamin that deal with experience centres on his criticism of the use of the notion in an instrumental sense. Despite being a constant in Benjamin’s texts of the time, the concept of spirit can be understood more as a virtual point around which his criticism turns than a dimension that he explores specifically. It could be said, in fact, that the spiritual dimension remains an implicit vanishing point in Benjamin’s pieces on experience, considering that the positive approaches he elaborates in the thirties take the form of materialistic, rather than spiritual considerations. At most, they assume the hybrid shape of materialism infiltrated with “gothic” inspirations, as suggested by Löwy (*Radical* 18). In a note probably written in 1929, Benjamin comments on the essay “Experience” in view of his current approach to the notion:

In an early essay I mobilised all the rebellious forces of youth against the word “Erfahrung.” And now this word has become a basic element in many of my things. Nevertheless I have remained true to myself. For my attack broke through the word without destroying it. It reached the centre of the matter.  
(*Early* 119)

As will become clear, the “centre of the matter” is Benjamin’s critique of experience as a form of “enclosed living,” a fixation on one’s own triviality, a recrudescence of the bourgeois notion of individuality. This once more represents the highlighting of a form of instrumentalisation. In these terms, the unique “testimony” of Artaud coincides with Benjamin’s approach. Neither the implicit notion of reality as accessible and achievable, nor immediate psychological consciousness are to be found in their versions of experience. In general terms, Artaud and Benjamin criticise, from different angles, the notion of subject, and the correlated conception of knowledge, part of the inheritance of the enlightenment. While



Benjamin makes the targets of his attack explicit without developing a positive formulation of experience, in Artaud the criticism is implicit in the description of a personal case that is anything but private. Artaud's "testimony" in fact recalls Benjamin's reference to Nietzsche in "Experience": "always one experiences oneself" (*Early* 118).

The notion of spirit assumes different connotations in the writings of Benjamin and Artaud. In the letters sent to Athanasiou, for instance, Artaud describes his "exile" from the spirit as one of the elements of separation. As discussed above, Artaud's commitment with the theme takes shape before his engagement with surrealism, even if the movement supplied him of a collective and perhaps defined agenda for this commitment. Exile from the spirit, in this context, leads to the impossibility of accessing a "land" that one feels to be one's own, and obstacles to "going back." This metaphor suggests that Artaud once felt at home in the spirit, or, at least, that the idea of a retreat into the spiritual plays a role in his thought. But the spirit is, above all, through its differentiation from the flesh, an indicator of detachment and separation. As Dumoulié suggests, "malgré ses rêves de fusion et de retour à l'origine, il [Artaud] sait que l'union est à jamais perdue. Naître, c'est se séparer."<sup>342</sup> (*Artaud* 12).

If the spirit is not the ultimate dimension in which Artaud and Benjamin's criticisms might find resolution, neither is the dimension of language. It appears not as the promise of resolution, but as the necessary form for an attempt to find a way out of the limitations of experience. Considering Benjamin's essays from 1915 and 1918 together, one has the impression that all experience is essentially linguistic. The theme of an experience sketched in and through language is not alien to Artaud either. In his texts, the act of writing is a dramatisation, that is, the "taking of a distance" from the excruciating separation. It does not express a belief in appeasement through communication with the other, but rather functions as a form of exorcism (in relation to the forces that invade and appropriate one's being) that requires the other's conviction. Here, a supposed non-literary text touches upon the mystery of language itself.

As distinct as the approaches of Benjamin and Artaud are, they both point to a problematisation of the notion of experience that focuses on much more than just their personal views, and at the same time are out of step with the thought of others of their time. A comparison of their writings suggests that experience, far from being a given, is a highly problematic notion, in abstract as well as practical terms, particularly at that historical

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<sup>342</sup> "despite his dreams of fusion and return to the original, he [Artaud] knows that unity is forever lost. To be born is to be separated"

moment. The forms of “experience” described in Artaud and Benjamin’s texts at this point can be paralleled with the above statement from Foucault, in which experience appears in the interlacement of soliloquy and dialogue, inaccessibility and availability, uniqueness and absence of value. One is necessarily alone in relation to experience, but it can never be restricted to one’s subjectivity. The form of “communion” that Benjamin and Artaud attempt following their different diagnoses of the limitations of experience is a very particular one. It concerns the possibility of sharing, but not of homogenising. It presupposes the assumption of a form of communicability, but one that remains immersed in the condition of inaccessibility. Their approaches to language, detailed below, lead to the formulation of more elaborate, and affirmative, conceptions of experience, the foundations of which are contained in these early accounts of its limitations.

### **5.5. Mimesis and Phonetic Archive**

Benjamin’s first exploration of language, the early article “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,” is a “theological” reaction to the philosophical trend most prominently represented by Kant (Osborne and Charles). According to the view of the enlightenment, language has the least formative role in the process of universal rational thought. Benjamin intended to counter this with a notion of experience that was not based on the positivist tradition. Instead of placing experience in the encounter between the distinct instances of object and subject, he proposed the conjunction of knowledge and language in one instance, stating that “all communication of spiritual content is language” (Benjamin *Early* 251). This means that language exists even outside human experience, since inanimate as well as animate beings possess it. It also suggests that what language communicates is the “spirit” of a certain thing or event, its essence. According to Benjamin, the essence of things is their language, and the fact that man, in his own language, partakes of these essences, if not rendering the notions of “object” and “subject” in language, invalid, at least complexifies them. The relationship becomes that of an underlying kinship.

As discussed above, the distinctive feature of human language is its relationship to the language of things through the naming of them. That is, when human beings name things, they express their essence. For Benjamin, this denominative feature of man’s language is a re-enactment of God’s power. If the act of naming is, in itself, of a divine nature, for “in the name, the spiritual being of man communicates itself to God” (*Early* 255). This, perhaps, is the core of the “theological” element of Benjamin’s proposition. He has this in common with

counter-enlightenment thinkers such as Hamann, the German philosopher contemporaneous with Kant, who proposed an antithesis to the latter's ideas. According to Hamann, language has a mediating role between God and humans, and represents creation as the physical imprint of the divine "Word of God" (Osborne and Charles). Benjamin himself quotes the German philosopher in his discussion of the idea of revelation through language: "language, the mother of reason and revelation, its alpha and omega" (Hamann qtd. in Benjamin *Early* 258).

In the essays "Doctrine of the Similar" and "On the Mimetic Faculty" — which are, roughly speaking, the first and second drafts of the same text, one written in early 1933 in Berlin and the other reformulated later that year in Ibiza— Benjamin's ideas on language appear under a different focus. As the titles suggest, the essays are concerned with the notions of mimesis and similarity. The term mimesis can be referred back to Aristotle, for whom it was the "imitation of reality." Within literary studies, it has been used to describe the operation of aesthetic representation, involving the transfiguration and transformation of reality in an artistic piece. Erich Auerbach, known for his studies on mimesis, describes it as the master technique of literary creation. For the German critic, who was an acquaintance of Benjamin, mimesis is the operation through which political, social and ideological issues enter the literary field (Auerbach E. 253).

The fundamentals of mimetic activity, in Benjamin's view, are to be found in the natural correspondences presupposed by the earliest mimetic acts. As he states in the opening of "Doctrine of the Similar," "nature produces similarities" (Benjamin *Similar* 65). Of all beings, humans are assigned the highest ability, that of performing the task of producing similarities. However, according to Benjamin, the human mimetic faculty used to be much more powerful than it is now. The mental world of primitive peoples included the perception of various similarities between different elements of nature, which they were capable of "reading." Benjamin highlights that human perception, in its current form, does not allow one to speak, for instance, of the similarity between a constellation of stars and a person. He suggests, in turn, another form of determination of similarities: "the cases in which people consciously perceive similarities in everyday life are a minute of those countless cases unconsciously determined by similarity" (*Similar* 65). For Benjamin, language is the thing that emerged alongside disappearance of these abilities, since mimetic behaviour was "granted a place in the origin of language as the onomatopoeic element" (*Similar* 67).

The relationship of language to sound, and of sound to things and events, even if it has remained present, does not allow in most modern languages for the realisation of the onomatopoeic element. It is for the most part impossible to determine the meaning of a word through its sound. Benjamin, aware of this impossibility, states that the onomatopoeic element is somehow concealed in language, through what he calls the *non-sensuous similarities*, based on unconscious determination (*Similar* 67). He suggests an exercise: to collect around a certain meaning the words corresponding to it in different languages. Benjamin envisions in this case a non-apparent but underlying resemblance, related to the relationship between sounds and meanings. If language has kept traces of these sorts of similarities, Benjamin states, it operates as the reminder of a lost experience, as the “archive” in which non-sensuous similarities were stored. He describes this aspect as, “if you will, [the] magical side of both language and writing” (*Similar* 68). The unconscious determination of similarities is to be found through language, while the investigation of this field, as Benjamin suggests in the opening lines of the essay, “has a fundamental importance for the illumination of large areas of occult knowledge” (*Similar* 65).

In relation to the change in the human ability to perceive similarities, Benjamin asks whether one should consider it a disappearance or a migration towards other forms of discernment. During the act of reading, he believes, the similar may unexpectedly emerge, in a “fleeting and transitory” time-moment (*Zeitmoment*). For Benjamin, “the nexus of meaning implicit in the sounds of the sentence is the basis from which something similar can become apparent instantaneously” (*Similar* 68). In other words, non-sensuous similarities can be at least partially perceived through the act of reading. He highlights the different uses of the verb “reading,” related to both the stars and printed words. In the first example, reading the position of the stars and reading the future from them are two facets of the same gesture. Benjamin believes this connotation to have remained present in the contemporaneous use of the word “reading.”

Benjamin’s supposition, therefore, is that the perception of similarities has not disappeared, but migrated to other forms of human expression, such as writing. This idea is present in at least two of Benjamin’s texts. One is the above-mentioned “On Language...,” which discusses the ways the essences of objects are expressed, passing through fleeting similarities, in the language of men. They no longer require, Benjamin notes, the sage or the augur. This is another example of Benjamin’s linking of magic and the unconscious. The second reference can be found in the mention, close to the end of “Doctrine of the Similar,”

to “transmission,” connected with the act of reading and its ability to unearth similarities in brief flashes. It is through this event that the reader — and one can add, the listener — takes part in the critical moment of transmission, which allows him or her not to “go away empty handed.” This idea is revisited in the essay “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskóv” (1936), discussed below.

According to Scholem, many of the issues explored in “Doctrine of the Similar” were anticipated by Benjamin in 1918, when the two friends discussed the subject of the worlds of myth and of prehistoric man. It is in this context that Benjamin located the beginning of reading in the emergence of constellations “on the surface of the sky,” a moment that coincided with “the formation of the mythic world age” (Scholem *Friendship* 75). It is, however, the primacy of the sensuous and onomatopoetic aspect of language over any form of semiotics what takes the forefront in Benjamin’s argument. Like “On Language...,” it also introduces a historical aspect, connected with the phylogenetic and ontogenetic origins and development of the mimetic faculty. This must be related to Benjamin’s attempt to explore a link between his previous theory of language and historical materialism. According to Anson Rabinbach, Benjamin recognised, around 1931, that “his philosophy of language did contain the possibilities of a mediation to the mode of perception of historical materialism, but this course was ‘full of tension and problematic’” (60).

The shift in Benjamin’s view of language cannot, however, be entirely explained through his movement towards marxism. For Rabinbach (61), Benjamin’s aim in “Doctrine of the Similar” is close to that of “On the Program of Coming Philosophy,” that is, the introduction of a historical-anthropological dimension of experience. The recurrent references to anthropologists in another text on the subject — the scholarly “Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview” (1935) — show how distanced Benjamin’s view is from that of the linguists of the day, whose efforts were generally centred on the construction of an abstract system of language. In the 1935 piece, Benjamin summarises some of the trends that make up this general tendency, while reasserting his own commitment to a notion of language that considers onomatopoetic aspects.

“Problems in the Sociology of Language,” written on demand for *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, shows that Benjamin’s position on current theories of language does not depart too far from his early view on the subject, as it appears in the texts approached so far. In relation to the disciplines that inspired his vision, he professes the necessity in the field of an eclectic approach, one that draws not only on the areas of linguistics and sociology, but

also of psychology and ethnology. In his words, “on close examination, we see that this area [*Problemkreis*] extends to a considerable number of other disciplines” (Benjamin *Sociology* 68). Benjamin is here writing consciously as what he referred somewhat ironically to Scholem as “a scholar” (Rabinbach 63).

Benjamin considers a cardinal problem in the field of the sociology of language to be the investigation of the origins of language. He highlights the interest, alive from the seventeenth to the twentieth century — though with some significant intervals — in the phonetic aspects of it. Benjamin quotes Johann Herder, who highlights the hypothesis according to which “man himself invented language from the sounds of living nature” (Herder qtd. in *Sociology* 69). The importance of the onomatopoeic factor in these theories, according to Benjamin, has been constantly limited by scientific criticism, even if this criticism has not been successful in making the onomatopoeic tendency completely disappear.

Most authors who have remained attached to the onomatopoeic element of language see it as no more than “missed opportunities,” that is, as traces which are active only in particular parts of words. For Benjamin, “this is the case today, just as it was earlier” (*Sociology* 69). The onomatopoeic aspect of language has from some time been not the most prominent, despite being continuously present. It is, at best, according to Benjamin, “merely tolerated” by known languages. Likewise, linguistic theories have always been partially based on phonetic aspects and their particular effects on some elements of words. The more recent visions of language as a system of symbolic representation, however, attempt to subsume the onomatopoeic element to the position of an aspect that is “only partially valuable.”

In his attempt at exploring the onomatopoeic dimension Benjamin resorts, once again, to investigations into the “mentality of primitive peoples.” They are represented, in his essay, by the studies of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. In the book *Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inférieures* (“The Mental Functions in Lower Societies,” 1918), Lévy-Bruhl presents the language of the Ewe tribes, from Togo, whose language “is richly endowed with the means of reproducing an impression directly through sounds” (Lévy-Bruhl qtd. in *Sociology* 70). This richness is a consequence of the tendency to imitate everything perceived. Lévy-Bruhl does not call this form of expression onomatopoeia, but “descriptive vocal gestures.” Benjamin, in turn, attributes to these gestures the magical quality of language in primitive cultures. At the same time, he notes, these very languages are usually ascribed an inclination to the concrete,

a position he opposes. Making use of references from Olivier Leroy, Benjamin refutes the positivist idea of opposing “primitive” to “rational” — without however abandoning such a denomination in his own text. According to Leroy, primitive languages are inseparable from their social and economic conditions, and these should be investigated in the search for their inner logic, rather than merely compared with “more civilised ones” (*Sociology* 72).

In this context, Benjamin introduces Leroy’s position on witchcraft. Opposing the psychological interpretations of “primitive magic,” Leroy demands that “the degree of reality, or of evidentiality, attributed to the objects of magical beliefs by the community upholding such beliefs” is taken into account (*Sociology* 16). His underlying argument is that such beliefs are not necessarily restricted to “primitive states” of mind, since their inner logic can be analogous to the order organising other forms of culture, such as the Europeans. Here Benjamin resumes his position on the need to combine different fields of knowledge in order to formulate a general understanding of language, particularly in relation to its origins. The sociology of language should not abandon any of the other disciplines potentially relevant. On the theme of the “magical use of words,” according to Benjamin, psychopathology is particularly relevant (*Sociology* 73).

At this point, Benjamin risks a few associations between the state of psychosis and “primitive” languages, centred on the idea, borrowed from Lévy-Bruhl, that primitive people did not have a fully-developed consciousness of their own identity. That is, in both cases “it is possible to experience the identity — not the likeness or similarity — of two different objects or situations” (Benjamin *Sociology* 73). Benjamin gives as an example the case in which the members of a tribe sacrifice a certain bird, at the same time but in different locations, defining the birds as being the same whichever place they are in. According to Benjamin, just as, in the case of psychosis, a psychological explanation is given for the acts in question, in the case of “primitive” cultures, a historical explanation should be sought.

Here, in a leap that is common of his writings, Benjamin moves from an abstract discussion of magic to interest in the material realities of the world. He quotes the work of Nikolaus Marr, who, pointing out the important role of the human hand in early communication, suggests it to be “entirely inconceivable that the hand could have been replaced as the producer of a mental value — language— before it was replaced by tools as the producer of material goods” (Marr qtd. in *Sociology* 74). Likewise, the possible origin of language — here defined in terms of a pre-Indo-European linguistic family called “Japhetic,” allegedly spoken from the Caucasus to the Pyrenees — is here based on class movements.

That is, the Indo-European languages are not connected to a specific race or people, but to a dominant class (Benjamin *Sociology* 74). In this sense, the Japhetic languages can be considered “pre-historic,” while the Indo-European should be considered “historic.” This argument represents a new typological formation in the field of language study, that is, a historical configuration, rather than the identification of the languages of defined peoples. Marr dismisses the existence of national languages connected to populations.

Benjamin then briefly approaches an allegedly forgotten aspect of the sociology of language, namely the correlation between languages and material conditions. In another reference to Marr, he qualifies “the sociological problems concealed in the languages of oppressed strata of populations” (*Sociology* 75). This attempt is not dissimilar from Leroy’s call for a better understanding of the social and economic scenarios that can more accurately contextualise “primitive” languages in relation to current ones. Benjamin also describes the work of Alfredo Niceforo, who dedicated a book to the study of slang. This is defined, strictly, as the “vernacular,” or “one of the weapons with which the suppressed people attacks the ruling class it sets out to displace” (Niceforo qtd. in *Sociology* 75). Language being a weapon in the class struggle, at the service of revolutionary experience, its operation is described as that of “shifting images and words toward a vividly material realm” (Niceforo qtd. in *Sociology* 75).

Other texts evoked by Benjamin on this subject mostly concern technical approaches to the field of labour, such as Rudolf Meringer’s considerations on the penetration of technical words in the language of migrant labour forces. These issues, Benjamin says, occupy the margins of linguistics, and are concerned with its demarcations (*Sociology* 76). The main trend is to be found in the new logical procedures, influenced by Hermann Paul and Ferdinand de Saussure, and summarised by Bühler as the transposition of methodological categories to a historical perspective. In these theories, the development of language is described as following typical phases of presence and then absence of the objects referred to:

Within the broad development of human language, we can imagine that single-class systems of deictic utterances were the first stage. But then came the need to include what was absent, and that meant severing the direct link of utterance to situation... The liberation of linguistic expression from the field of showing — from the *demonstratio ad oculos* — had begun. (Bühler qtd. in Benjamin *Sociology* 79)



The genealogy of language is here understood as a continuum between the early contextual calls and the later linguistic signs, which appear in response to the object's absence. However, while signs are "liberated" from concrete linguistic situations, they are also subject to a new symbolic order.

In opposition to these "progressive" trends, Benjamin highlights the existence of other, conservative approaches. These make use of notions such as race and peoples in order to defend the idea of the "nation." They are characterised by what he describes as "the irrationalism which is usually the norm in nationalistic literature" (Benjamin *Sociology* 80). According to Benjamin, the authors of these theories are significantly inferior in relation to those who advocate multidisciplinary approaches, and the scope on which they base their affirmations is described as highly limited. Benjamin then turns to psychological research, which he considers able to address, even if indirectly, many of the problems of the sociology of language.

In a conceptualisation that recalls Freud, Benjamin proposes an analysis of the ontogenesis of language, that is, its development within an individual life, to be a counterpoint to the ethnological approach adopted so far in his text. Through references to Lev Vygotski and Jean Piaget, he affirms that "egocentric" language —that spoken by the infant without full-developed communicative aims — "takes exactly the place reserved at a later stage for the thinking process itself" (*Sociology* 82-3). In this sense, the grammatical development precedes the logical development or, as Benjamin has already mentioned earlier in his text, the intellectual operations are independent from language, if we understand the latter as a set of interdependent signs.

Benjamin focuses on the theories he feels could lead to far-reaching conclusions. He mentions in particular that elaborated by Richard Paget, who departs from a definition of language as "gesticulation of the speech organs" (*Sociology* 83). The gesture is envisioned first in relation to sound. In fact, according to Paget, the phonetic element of language is founded upon the mimicry-gestural element. That is, the gestures are accompanied by the sounds, which are described, in this context, as "laryngo-mouthed gestures" capable of retaining their original concrete sense for a long time. A detailed study of the origins of every sound, according to this theory, might allow for the establishment of its initial concrete correlative. Benjamin argues that the "...articulation as the gesture of the speech organs falls within the large sphere of bodily mimicry. Its phonetic element is the bearer of a communication, the original substrate of which was an expressive gesture" (*Sociology* 84).

The mimetic element of this theory has a much broader scope when compared to the same element in the onomatopoeic approach: in this case the sound is also a gesture, one that is figured through the resonant body parts.

In general terms, Benjamin says, “from the metaphysical speculations of Plato to the findings of modern thinkers, language theory forms a broad, vaulted arch” (*Sociology* 84). What connects the different theories of which Benjamin gives a positive account is their intuition that spoken language is just another form of animal instinct, that of expressive mimicry. He proposes, for instance, in reference to dance as the expression of elemental forms of human existence, that “linguistic expression and choreographic expression are rooted in one and the same mimetic faculty” (*Sociology* 84). The term “physiognomy of language” — already used by Heinz Werner — is chosen by Benjamin to express the mimetic faculty capable of uniting different human expressions under the same sign. In a statement reminiscent of some expressions in of “On Language...,” Benjamin asserts, regarding Werner, that “the expressive means of language are as inexhaustible as its representational means” (*Sociology* 85). This assertion of inexhaustibility opposes, on one level, the instrumentalist and bourgeois use of language, and, on another, the understanding of language as an arbitrary system of symbols.

Paget, referring to the admirable fact that civilised men have not abandoned the simplest meaningful gestures, such as moving the head and the hands, conjectures that the full potential of voice has not yet been learned. According to him, “all the existing works of literature and eloquence are as yet merely elegant, inventive applications of formal or phonetic elements of language which, in themselves, are wholly wild and uncultivated” (Paget qtd. in *Sociology* 85). Benjamin, in turn, sees that such an approach connects the sociology of language with important ancient tendencies, which he is interested in recovering in order not only to understand, but also to change language. These are expressed in the view of language not as a mere instrument, but as a manifestation of the human’s innermost being.

Benjamin considers the idea of manifestation or revelation in language as, explicitly or tacitly, the point of departure for the entire sociology of language. The idea that language is not an instrument but a manifestation, a revelation of human essence, both in its intimate and its social aspects, had already been asserted by Benjamin elsewhere, in his discussions of the humanly divine feature of communication. With the addition of his notion of non-sensuous similarities, which make language the archive of the original connectedness between objects, sounds and words, Benjamin’s understanding of this rich field of human

creation and communication borders on the magical or intoxicated experience he wanted to align with revolution. Finally, if the origin of language is to be found in gestures, Benjamin's "discovery," and that of the authors mentioned above, that sound is just a gesture expressed through resonant body parts, the onomatopoeic element gains prominence in an understanding of language. As the expression of the animal instinct of mimicry, language has attained diverse, but perhaps still wholly unexplored, forms of phonetic development.

### 5.6. The Stupefaction of Language

The theme of language in the writings of Artaud is inextricably intertwined with that of separation. In "Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière," the quest for language as that for a form that is not completely disposable or, as Cermakian suggests, a language that is en route "vers un langage épuré — auquel on ne parvient de toute façon jamais entièrement sur cette terre,"<sup>343</sup> intersects with Artaud's query on his right to think, "in verse or prose." The moment at which the correspondence becomes a literary oeuvre is central to this investigation, since it launches the discussion of the meaning of writing to the level of a literary piece in itself. Kaufmann, for instance, considered Artaud's epistolary and his desire for it not to be taken as literature in the terms already mentioned above, that is, as the definition of literary writing per se: "ses lettres, c'est déjà de la littérature"<sup>344</sup> (98).

As mentioned above, the supposed non-literary writing of Artaud here touches on the fundamentals of language. His is a work that evokes the absence of work, but in a radically different way to that of his contemporaries, and even to those who followed him. In April 1924, he writes in a letter to Edmond Jaloux: "Ce que j'écris n'est qu'un pis aller, un moyen de me prouver à moi-même qu'il n'y a pas rien dans mon esprit. Mais la valeur exacte de ce que j'écris je l'ignore, je ne la sens pas bonne, voilà tout, et m'en réfère à l'avis des autres."<sup>345</sup> (*Œuvres I*, 2 109). The function of writing is similar to that of a covering, one that does not hide an absence, but instead proves its existence. However, there is no intention or belief in the act of writing as a liberating, artistic act. Writing itself is a palliative that relies on the view of others to acquire value. At the same time, as mentioned above, the spiritual and material experience is strictly connected with the intricate and flawed functioning of

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<sup>343</sup> "to a pure language - which cannot in any case ever succeed fully on this earth"

<sup>344</sup> "his letters are already literature"

<sup>345</sup> "What I write is only a stopgap, a way to prove to myself that there is nothing in my mind. But the exact value of what I write I do not know, I just do not think it is good, that's all, and I refer myself to the opinion of others."

language: “et pour tout dire mes pensées exprimées ne sont pas du tout à l’ hauteur de mes pensées matérialisables, extériorisées”<sup>346</sup> (*Œuvres I,2* 109).

In a text from April 1924 that accompanies “Paul les Oiseaux *ou* La Place de l’Amour” — probably called “Une Prose pour l’Homme au Crâne en Citron” (“A Prose for the Man with a Lemony Skull”) — Artaud elaborates on the particular dramaturgy that allows for the blending of spirit with production, here not restricted to writing. He begins by defining an object, that is, “l’Esprit se fixe arbitrairement sur un thème, sur un effet, le thème réclame sa consistance et les mots leur sonorité”<sup>347</sup> (*Œuvres* 89). A fusion between spirit and object then takes place, from which develop “tous les plans, toutes les qualités, tous les courants”<sup>348</sup> (*Œuvres* 89). Here Artaud clarifies that everything real is interesting, and any subject can produce significant effects on the spirit. What he calls “sautes brusques de l’impuissance”<sup>349</sup> (*Œuvres* 89) are not absent from this process, and should be carefully registered. More importantly, what gives validity to the enterprise is the truth of the emerging materials, and not necessarily the form in which they are arranged. Artaud’s “guidance” touches upon the notion of mimesis, the artful expression acquired through approximation.

The products of the spirit, particularly writing, should be one with the spirit itself. The detail in which Artaud’s subsequent publications deal with this subject points to a persistent concern for him, which would combine with his surrealist preoccupations in a singular manner. Grossman writes on Artaud’s texts from the period 1924-1925: “tous les textes qu’il écrit dans ces années-là oscillent ainsi entre l’exaltation surréaliste des ‘mots écrits avec la vitesse de la lumière’ (‘Lettre aux écoles du Bouddha’) et la souffrance de l’impuissance à écrire, la douleur d’être ‘un abîme complet’ (*Le Pèse-Nerfs*)”<sup>350</sup> (*Œuvres* 65). *L’Ombilic des Limbes* and *Le Pèse-Nerfs* — the latter followed by “Fragments d’un Journal d’Enfer” in an edition from 1927 — herald an investigation into the spirit that extrapolates from the precepts of surrealism. Appearing in mid-1925, a few months after Artaud’s formal inclusion into the group, both pieces combine texts of different formats.

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<sup>346</sup> “and frankly my expressed thoughts are not at all comparable to my materialised, externalised thoughts”

<sup>347</sup> “The Spirit fixes arbitrarily on a theme, on an effect, the theme requires consistency, and the words, their sound”

<sup>348</sup> “all levels, all grades, all currents”

<sup>349</sup> “sudden leaps of impotence”

<sup>350</sup> “the texts he wrote in those years range from the surreal exaltation of ‘words written at the speed of light’ (‘Lettre aux écoles du Bouddha’) to the suffering through writer’s block, the pain of being in an abyss” (*Le Pèse-Nerves*)”

In *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, published in July 1925, alongside a portrait of Artaud by André Masson, Artaud advances his by now well-known formula concerning life and work: “là où d'autres proposent des œuvres je ne prétends pas autre chose que de montrer mon esprit”<sup>351</sup> (*Œuvres* 105). In opposition to the detached work of art, Artaud proposes the *œurement* of his own spirit. If the accomplishment of a work is dependent on the accomplishment of spiritual expression, Artaud also proclaims the urge to be done “avec l'Esprit comme avec la littérature”<sup>352</sup> (*Œuvres* 105), a statement that can be understood to refer to the sense in which these two instances have become separated. In opposition to this, he proposes “que l'Esprit et la vie communiquent à tous les degrés”<sup>353</sup> (*Œuvres* 105), while suffering is situated at the point of stratification. That is, “je souffre que l'Esprit ne soit pas dans la vie et que la vie ne soit pas dans l'Esprit”<sup>354</sup> (*Œuvres* 105).

Artaud proposes that his own book, *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, should function as a “porous” object in relation to life and to himself: “ce livre je le mets en suspension dans la vie, je veux qu'il soit mordu par les choses extérieures, et d'abord par tous les soubresauts en cisaille, toutes les cillations *de mon moi à venir*”<sup>355</sup> (*Œuvres* 105). This idea of porosity is also expressed in terms of Artaud's desire to produce a book “qui soit comme une porte ouverte ... une porte simplement abouchée avec la réalité”<sup>356</sup> (*Œuvres* 105). The ideal “work of art,” therefore, seems to function as a mediator between “external things” and the “future self,” a precious role in Artaud's description. At the same time, it holds no secrets in relation to the spirit and the reality that has “engendered” it, a claim that recalls Benjamin's praise of *Nadja* and other surrealist productions as books of *portes battantes*, their openness being characterised as highly revolutionary (Benjamin *Surrealism* 183).

Among texts and poems addressing tortuous physical states, the benefits of drugs, theatrical scenarios and parodies, Artaud describes, in *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, the “decorporalisation of reality” in relation to which “les mots pourrissent à l'appel inconscient du cerveau, tous les mots pour n'importe quelle opération mentale, et surtout celles qui touchent

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<sup>351</sup> “where others propose *œuvres*, I claim no other than to show my spirit”

<sup>352</sup> “with the Spirit as well as with literature”

<sup>353</sup> “that life and the Spirit communicate on every level”

<sup>354</sup> “I suffer from the Spirit not being in life, and life not being in the Spirit”

<sup>355</sup> “this book, I put it into suspension in life, I want it to be bitten by external things, and first of all by all the shredded turmoil, all the blinks *of my future self*”

<sup>356</sup> “which is like an open door ... a door simply tied up with reality”

aux ressorts les plus habituels, les plus actifs de l'esprit"<sup>357</sup> (*Œuvres* 110). Words are described as failing the unconscious call, incapable of expressing the intentions of the spirit. This scenario complements Artaud's description, in the section addressed to the "Legislator of the Narcotics Act," of different *troubles graves de la personnalité* ("severe personality problems"). Apparently, the condition of failing to find words is related to the particular condition that Artaud tells Rivière distinguishes him from his friends.

The problem being discussed is that of *avoir de la pensée* ("having thought"). Artaud states: "Il ne s'agit pas cependant que cette pensée joue à faux, qu'elle déraisonne, il s'agit qu'elle se produise, qu'elle jette des feux, même fous. Il s'agit qu'elle existe. Et je prétend, moi, entre autres, que ja n'ai pas de pensée. Mais ceci fait rire mes amis. Et cependant!"<sup>358</sup> (*Œuvres* 115f). Having a false, or unreasonable thought is not opposed to thinking. Here Artaud assumes the terms identified by Deleuze (*Difference* 147), of engendering thinking through thought. *Avoir de la pensée* means being capable of manifesting thought to oneself, in response to the various circumstances of sentiment and life. According to Artaud, thinking can be summarised as "se répondre à soi"<sup>359</sup> (*Œuvres* 115). Here spiritual, intellectual activity is again related to the need to overcome separation. This is possibly why "the most familiar springs of the spirit," referred to above, are those for which words fail the most.

The interconnectedness of thought and expression, which appears in *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, takes the form of a concern with the activity of writing in *Le Père-Nerfs*, first published in August 1925. There Artaud presents the "cosmology" surrounding his idea of writing, while refuting the traditional notion of oeuvre. This denial is related to the impossibility of disposing of one's life in an instrumental way. The well-known sentence of *Le Père-Nerfs* expresses this negation in radical tones, while the subtleties of it tend to be obscured. Artaud writes, in the context of disregard for the "professionals of language and the spirit": "Toute l'écriture est de la cochonnerie."<sup>360</sup> (*Œuvres* 165).

The text opens with a description of the operations of fixation, segmentation and *mise en monument* on states and elements of the spirit, before actual thought takes place. This is related to what Artaud calls "cette obstination de l'esprit à vouloir penser en dimensions et en

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<sup>357</sup> "words rot before the unconscious call of the brain, all words for any mental operation, and especially those related to the most familiar springs of the spirit, the most active amongst them"

<sup>358</sup> "It is not, however, that thought plays false, that it rambles, it is that it happens, it lights fires, even crazy ones. It is that it exists. And I claim, among others, that I have no thought. But this makes my friends laugh. And yet!"

<sup>359</sup> "answering oneself"

<sup>360</sup> "All writing is [of the order of] crap."

espaces”<sup>361</sup> (*Œuvres* 159). This form of “thinking in segments” means, according to Artaud, that thought is not in uninterrupted communication with things: there are gaps and crystallisations, which are necessary for “the good condition of creation.” However, even more surprising is the illusion that these fixed segments of the soul appear “comme s’ils étaient une grande page plastique et en osmose avec tout le reste de la réalité”<sup>362</sup> (*Œuvres* 159). The ambiguous aspects of segmentation and apparent osmosis here introduce the theme of writing as an operation based on both characteristics of the spirit: its crystallisation of states of the soul, and the subtle, tenuous nature of its connection to reality.

In the sections of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* that follow, Artaud mentions “un impouvoir à cristalliser inconsciemment,”<sup>363</sup> as well as a difficulty of “trouver sa place et de retrouver la communication avec soi”<sup>364</sup> (*Œuvres* 162). The above-mentioned aspects of the spirit, crystallisation and closeness to reality, are here found to be missing. Artaud describes the absence of a point of cohesion, in which the “flocculation” of things can be reassembled. The other name he assigns to this point is “inspiration,” described in terms already discussed above: “a point of magic utilisation of things,” one that is favoured by an individual “cosmogony,” that is a form of personal mystique. In other words, Artaud situates expression as dependent on one finding one’s own place amidst the spiritual dispositions of things.

Artaud finds this kind of cohesion to be lacking in himself. He asserts in a section that opens with the vocative *Chers Amis* (“Dear Friends”): “ce que vous avez pris pour mes œuvres n’était que les déchets de moi-même, ces raclures de l’âme que l’homme normal n’accueille pas”<sup>365</sup> (*Œuvres* 163). In relation to a defective functioning of life — namely the inability to find a point of cohesion amongst the spiritual fixations of reality, or, in other words, the lack of a personal consistency through which reality, as filtered by the soul, can be approached — Artaud describes his works as being no more than the debris of himself. Notably, this inability is strictly related, in *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, to what he calls the “stupéfaction de ma langue”<sup>366</sup> (*Œuvres* 163). The ideas of oblivion and perplexity in relation to language, expressed by the use of the term *stupéfaction*, here evoke a mixture of amazement and

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<sup>361</sup> “this obstinacy of the spirit in wanting to think in dimensions and spaces”

<sup>362</sup> “as though they were a large plastic page and in osmosis with the rest of reality”

<sup>363</sup> “the inability to unconsciously crystallise”

<sup>364</sup> “finding one’s place and in regaining communication with oneself”

<sup>365</sup> “what you took to be my work was nothing more than the wreckage of myself, these scrapings of the soul that the normal man does not welcome”

<sup>366</sup> “stupefaction of my language”

paralysis. That is, Artaud's identified "malformation of thought" must be related to the terms in which his thought is able to express itself.

According to Artaud, "tous les termes que je choisis pour penser sont pour moi des termes au sens propre du mot, de véritables terminaisons"<sup>367</sup> (*Œuvres* 163). The words or expressions used by Artaud are at the same time the media and the termination of his thought. He describes being *vraiment localisé* ("truly located"), as well as *vraiment paralysé* ("truly paralysed") by these terms. The terms are equivocal in relation to his thinking, but they are also essential to it. According to Artaud: "en ces moments ma pensée, je ne peux que la faire passer par ces termes ... sous peine de m'arrêter à ces moments de penser"<sup>368</sup> (*Œuvres* 163). The interconnectedness of thought and language are at the core of the problem of expression, here presented in terms of a limitation imposed by language over thought, based on the abstract idea that the spirit can only express itself through language. This idea appears in a transformed form in other texts by Artaud around the same period, as discussed below. It also acquires a transitory sense in the light of the last phrase of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, presented in rather apocalyptic terms: by the time his work has been understood, the language has stiffed and silenced, and the spirits have dried up: "je n'aurais plus besoin de parler"<sup>369</sup> (*Œuvres* 166).

In the next sections of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, Artaud "stages" dialogues in which his description of his state is set against commentaries by other people, probably his friends and acquaintances. This device allows him to demonstrate the extent to which the situation he evokes is unique, at the same time as granting him an incontestable knowledge as "celui qui a mieux senti le désarroi stupéfiant de sa langue dans ses relations avec la pensée"<sup>370</sup> (*Œuvres* 164). In response to detached statements such as "mais c'est normal, mais à tout le monde il manque des mots, mais vous êtes trop difficile avec vous-même,"<sup>371</sup> Artaud answers: "vous êtes des cons ... je me connais parce que je m'assiste, j'assiste à Antonin Artaud"<sup>372</sup> (*Œuvres* 164).

In an aside to the dramatisation above, Artaud announces and details the broad categories of *cochons* ("pigs") in relation to which he states that "toute l'écriture est de la

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<sup>367</sup> "all the words I choose to think are for me terms, in the true sense of the word: terminations"

<sup>368</sup> "at these times, I can only make my thought pass through these terms ... otherwise I risk stopping thinking at these times"

<sup>369</sup> "and I won't need to talk anymore"

<sup>370</sup> "he who has really felt the most the amazing confusion of his language in its relations with thought"

<sup>371</sup> "but that is normal, everyone lacks words, you're too hard on yourself"

<sup>372</sup> "you idiots ... I know myself because I attend to myself, I attend to Antonin Artaud"



cochonnerie”<sup>373</sup> (*Œuvres* 165). The *cochons* are, for instance, literary people, those who possess their language, the spirits of their epoch, those for whom certain words have certain meanings, and for whom sentiments can be classified. In sum, Artaud despises all who view language as an instrument of peaceful thinking, able to analyse and guide. He ends his enumeration by announcing his negation of traditional notions concerning the field of writing: “Et je vous l’ai dit: pas d’œuvres, pas de langue, pas de parole, pas d’esprit, rien. Rien, sinon un beau Pèse-Nerfs. Une sorte de station incompréhensible et toute droite au milieu de tout dans l’esprit.”<sup>374</sup> (*Œuvres* 165). As mentioned above, the *Pèse-Nerfs* denotes a point at which the spirit engages with the calibration and production of a form of thinking. It represents the cohesion that Artaud apparently lacks. What follows is a nonetheless enthusiastic description of certain acts, intervals and imminent situations that occupy Artaud, while they escape “all the others.” Once again, impossibility is the opposite of renunciation: “je n’ai plus ma langue, ce n’est pas une raison pour que vous persistiez, pour que vous vous obstiniez dans la langue”<sup>375</sup> (*Œuvres* 166).

The last lines of *Le Pèse-Nerfs* describe a vague future in which Artaud’s propositions will be understood, in which his mystique will be so evident and accessible that it will be used “like a hat.” In this context, as mentioned above, all languages will have been pinned down and silenced, all spirits will have dried up, and the “lubrifiante membrane continuera à flotter dans l’air”<sup>376</sup> (*Œuvres* 166). This scenario suggests that the multiplicity of languages and spiritual products have to recede for absolute knowledge to emerge. The membrane, an element that encompasses both the connection and the separation of different types of matter, is a manifestation of the singular form of permeated segmentation envisioned by Artaud in relation to oneself, the spirit and its products, a theme that will be further analysed below.

“Fragments d’un Journal d’Enfer,” the short text that follows *Le Pèse-Nerfs* in the edition published by *Cahiers du Sud* in 1927, presents language in a slightly modified fashion. While Artaud also discusses paralysis in this text, he again evokes other people’s opinions, in the following: “on me parle des mots, mais il ne s’agit pas de mots, il s’agit de la durée de l’esprit”<sup>377</sup> (*Œuvres* 178). The theme of duration can be linked with the description

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<sup>373</sup> “all writing is crap”

<sup>374</sup> “And I have told you: no work, no language, no speech, no spirit, nothing. Nothing, except a good Pèse-Nerfs. A sort of incomprehensible station straight ahead amidst everything in the spirit.”

<sup>375</sup> “I no longer have my language, it’s not a reason for you to persist, for you to persist in language.”

<sup>376</sup> “lubricating membrane will continue to float in the air”

<sup>377</sup> “they speak of words, but it is not about words, it is about the duration of the spirit”

of *avoir de la pensée*, in *L'Ombilic des Limbes*, that of being able to maintain thought. In this context, the word is one of the threads through which life is connected with the spirit, but it is not sufficient to establish duration within thought. Here Artaud also introduces the idea that the soul fails language just as much as language fails the spirit, the important aspect being “que cette rupture trace dans les plaines des sens comme une vaste sillon de désespoir et de sang”<sup>378</sup> (*Œuvres* 178). The domain of senses is affected by this rupture, and it therefore also undermines the *l'étoffe des corps* (“fabric of the body”).

Artaud highlights the fact that, in the failure to connect between language and the spirit, no more than an *étincelle* (“spark”) is lost. The fact that it is a fragment, and also an “abyss,” does not prevent this spark from gaining “avec soi toute l'étendue du monde possible, et le sentiment d'une inutilité telle qu'elle est comme le nœud de la mort”<sup>379</sup> (*Œuvres* 179). The fragility of moments of indiscernibility within the separation is patent, even more in the designation of writing as a thread or rope. When this thread is able to find lines of passage from Artaud's intelligence and unconscious, in his own words, “c'est une vie nouvelle qui renaît, de plus en plus profonde”<sup>380</sup> (*Œuvres* 179). Artaud qualifies his own position in this context as that of someone “elected by a fatality,” despite the fact that the aspects he highlights, as mentioned above, cannot be restricted to his personal case. Having abdicated from clarity, Artaud describes himself as someone who has chosen “le domaine de la douleur et de l'ombre comme d'autres [ont choisi] celui du rayonnement et de l'entassement de la matière”<sup>381</sup> (*Œuvres* 180).

The field of language, in the writings of Artaud, is under constant scrutiny, as an intrinsic element of the (im)possibility of clarity, communication and thinking. Above all, these issues are problematised in terms of the relationship that they maintain or allow one to maintain with oneself. Artaud declares that he writes in order to prove the emptiness of his spirit, in order to explore a “body” that allows only fragile connections between separate instances in life. Whether the products of this exploration are debris, crap or portents of “new life,” they should never take the place of the *oeuvre*, from which another level of separation is established. Artaud's insistence on the need not to dispose of oneself through writing is no less than a testimony of the power of thinking in relation to language, and of the small, limited role of the individual in accomplishing such power.

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<sup>378</sup> “that this rupture traces in the plains of the senses something like a vast furrow of despair and blood”

<sup>379</sup> “with itself the scope of the possible world, and a sense of futility as it is like the crux of death”

<sup>380</sup> “it's a new life being reborn, and becoming deeper and deeper”

<sup>381</sup> “the domain of pain and shadow just like others [have chosen] that of radiation and crowding of matter”

### 5.7. Language and Experience

André Queiroz, in “O Teatro Artaudiano ou a Metafísica da Carne” (“The Artaudian Theatre or the Metaphysics of Flesh,” 1991), suggests an approximation of Benjamin and Artaud through the theme of the “primordial” and its remains. He sees, in both writers, an attempt to restore a previous state of affairs, identified with the integrity of language. While for Benjamin this means restoring linguistic nominative powers in relation to things, for Artaud it concerns the recuperation of language by “evading word’s evasion”<sup>382</sup> (Queiroz 122). The theme of original states is highly ambiguous in both Artaud and Benjamin’s writings. Queiroz touches upon a crucial point, that of the role played by language in the approach to experience of both authors. In relation to the idea of the primordial, while in Benjamin’s writings this must be understood in terms of restoration, but also of dispersion, for Artaud the origins of being can only encompass violence and chaos, despite his recurring fantasies of fusion, as Dumoulié observes (*Artaud* 12).<sup>383</sup>

As the texts approached in the last section suggest, language is a presence in the experimental forms of experience outlined by Artaud and Benjamin in their early writings. Benjamin privileges language as a model of experience since, together with religion, it transcends the divisions operating in the Kantian system, allowing for the emergence of a broader and more elaborate definition. According to Osborne and Charles, in Benjamin’s early essays “language serves a medium of experience that binds the ostensible ‘subject’ and ‘object’ in a more profound, perhaps mystical, relationship of underlying kinship.” As mentioned above, the theme of experience taking place in and through language is not alien to Artaud either. In his early texts, the act of writing is a dramatisation that allows the gaining of distance and some insight into thought. Language appears, once again, not as the promise of a resolution to the limitations of experience, but as the necessary path towards an attempt to overcome them, one that is explored at the crossroads of solitude and communion.

This section investigates the extent to which language is involved in Artaud and Benjamin’s definitions of experience, as expressed in their writings from the twenties and thirties. What is evident in the texts approached above is that language represents a genuine moment of experience, which touches on both the lost worlds of ancient experience and the

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<sup>382</sup> “furtar-se ao furto da palavra”

<sup>383</sup> The theme of origins, approached briefly in the chapter on magic, will be further explored in the last section of this chapter.

projected state of coherence from which new forms may emerge.<sup>384</sup> While in Benjamin this relationship is investigated through the thematisation of the human perception of similarities and the role played by sound in primeval and modern languages, in Artaud the topic of fusion between the spirit and its products, as well as the point of cohesion between separate spiritual dimensions, point to writing as an equivocal, but essential, “thread” of connection amid spiritual matters.

Between the early articles on experience and his writings from the thirties, Benjamin seems to have undergone a shift in perspective, related to a political analysis that privileges, through different approaches, a speculative concept of experience. This is the case in *One-Way Street* and the essay on surrealism, both from the late twenties. In the latter, as mentioned above, Benjamin evokes the sensitivity of the surrealists to forms of intoxication, which he urged should be part of a revolutionary experience, permeated by non-materialistic elements. In both cases, as suggested by Osborne and Charles, an “immersion into the depths of things” must first take place, the city furnishing the sensory, imagistic material to constitute experience.

In the articles on language discussed above, written by Benjamin during the thirties, the ancestor of language is to be found in mime. Speech mimics the gesture that it used to follow. Nowadays, the similarities that man used to draw on to establish the connections between words and objects are no longer part of ordinary awareness. They have been tucked away into the unconscious, and can only be accessed through the various ways this dimension can be brought to light: unintentionally, partially, and through transforming its character. Benjamin highlights reading as one form of access, due to the privileged position of sound midway between mimicry and modern language. Through reading, flashes of similarities may become momentarily perceptible, pointing to the role of the transmission of experience assigned to language. The unconscious is here an active and changing reservoir of awareness, like that revealed by clairvoyance.

The idea that spoken language is just another animal instinct, that of expressive mimicry, leads to some common ground in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin. In “Problems in the Sociology of Language,” it is as if Artaud’s testimony has found some correspondence in the academic understanding of language. In the approach of Paget to the potentiality of voice, the “high” point attained by literary production actually represents no

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<sup>384</sup> The notion of coherence, present in both Artaud’s and Benjamin’s texts, is further explored by Paul Ricoeur in relation to language and experience. Please see Hartmann S. “Walter Benjamin and Paul Ricoeur: Narration and Experience to Come” (2015).

more than “savage and uncultured” linguistic forms, a logical reversal that is analogous to Artaud’s designation of the great “spirits of the time” and their writings as *cochonnerie*. At the same time, Benjamin’s definition of language as a manifestation of being, rather than an instrument of it, goes beyond the propositions of his earlier “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” It suggests that the blend of spirit and life which, according to Artaud, is summoned, through the act of writing, is a radical manifestation of the conception of language as the communication of essences, here in terms of the individual’s relationship with her or himself and the world. In the words of Kurt Goldstein, language is “a revelation of our innermost being and of the bond linking us to ourselves and to our fellow human beings” (Goldstein qtd. in Benjamin *Sociology* 86).

It is no less significant that Artaud’s attempt to achieve, through language, an immediate utterance of life, takes the form of screams and roars. As in *Pour en Finir Avec le Jugement de Dieu* (“To Have Done With the Judgment of God,” 1947), the radio broadcast full of musical noise, language is treated as raw and living part of material of life. But while there are hints of overlap with ideas of Benjamin here, they are superficial compared to the significant differences in their approaches to language and experience. What connects them is more an “underlying kinship,” to borrow an expression from Osborne and Charles, than a “wordy” or “worldly” similarity.

Benjamin describes language, in “Doctrine of the Similar,” as a canon capable of expressing, albeit obscurely, extrasensory similarities. Traces of ancient similarities are still present in the acts of speaking and writing. They are the basis of the constitution of language, even though humans no longer perceive them. According to Benjamin, instead of magic rituals, “it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationship with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in their essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata” (*Similar* 68). Paradoxically, language seems to perform what was once considered impossible to perform, because it was an inherent feature of life.

The act of incorporating into language materials that were originally distinct from it points to the problematic constitution of this field. This problematic is expressed by Artaud through the question of how life can be expressed without overwhelming and replacing it in the act of expression, that is without allowing for the “dead bodies” that are words to dictate the contents of life itself? This is relevant to Artaud’s claim in *L’Ombilic des Limbes*, that instead of oeuvres, he proposes to exhibit his spirit, to offer a distillation of his life. This does

not mean the mere dissection of his personal case. Rather, he considers that spirit and life “communicate at all levels,” and that writing must be a porous intermediary, open to transformation by both the interior and the exterior worlds, or by nothing at all.

The concept of writing as an intermediary, pertinent to Artaud’s personal experience, also suggests it could be a sort of beacon in the context of the pain of separation, albeit an equivocal one. If, for Benjamin, language is the archive of a lost world of experience, that can reappear and transform present experience, for Artaud it is, at this point, the sphere in which the problem of expression and the possibility of its capture by language is dramatised, a sphere that nonetheless allows for the establishment of a provisory interjacent instance between spirit and life. Here words are defined as deficient before the “unconscious call” of the spirit, while they can still serve as evidence of Artaud’s supposed *n’avoir pas de pensée* (“absence of thought”).

In the section of *L’Ombilic des Limbes* entitled “Lettre à Monsieur le Législateur de la Loi sur les Stupéfiants,” Artaud details his ideas on dispossession. This is his inability to maintain the act of thinking, since “avoir de la pensée, pour moi, c’est *maintenir* sa pensée, être en état de se la manifester à soi-même et qu’elle puisse répondre à toutes les circonstances du sentiment et de la vie”<sup>385</sup> (*Œuvres* 115f). Even though his thought is conscious of its own weaknesses and discontinuities, he says, it lacks the minimum requirement for thinking life, the ability to reach the form of words, without which the soul is incapable of living: “penser c’est pour moi autre chose que n’être pas tout à fait mort, c’est se rejoindre à tous les instants, c’est ne cesser de à aucun moment de se sentir dans son être interne”<sup>386</sup> (*Œuvres* 116).

Artaud’s ambitious definition of thought, and its relation to language, is that thinking is much more than “not being dead”: the condition of being able to “re-join” oneself at any given time, which is essential to thought, seems to pass through language. Artaud’s proposition is that the minimum for thinking life equates to a minimum of material that can take the form of words. The question of duration comes to the forefront here: language must be consistent, or at least consistently tied up with reality, so that the access to oneself, however fragile, can be maintained. It is from a form of cohesion, and “personal consistency,” that Artaud expects to be able to *se répondre à soi* (“answer to himself”).

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<sup>385</sup> “having thought for me means *keeping* one’s thought, means being able to manifest thought to oneself, and that it can respond to all the circumstances of feeling and life”

<sup>386</sup> “thinking is for me something other than being not quite dead, it is to reach out to oneself at all times, it is to never stop feeling in one’s inner being”

In *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, Artaud attempts a definition of writing that includes these considerations, while outlining different moments at which life is transmuted into language. Writing arises initially from the “crystallisation” of spiritual contents, whose counterpart is the tenuous connection between the spiritual and the real. While this crystallisation provides the elements necessary for creation, their apparent “osmosis” with reality guarantees that the written products are not separate forms. This mode of functioning is apparently deficient in Artaud, so that what he produces is no more than “debris” of himself. As mentioned above in relation to the notion of the “trace,” debris here implies something reminiscent of a previous configuration, in this case of language. It is underscored by the attempt towards unity, even in the face of an incontrovertible fragmentation. Benjamin’s definition of language as the archive of a past experience, particularly of one that dispensed with language, also deals with the idea of traces.

A letter sent by Artaud to Dr. Toulouse in August 1923 contains some of the book’s most significant expressions. Here is an excerpt:

Maintenant comme alors je travaille dans la douleur et l’impossession de moi-même, et ma vie est tout aussi empoisonné. Toutes les discussions à ce sujet me paraissent stériles et sans porté. Que mon mal depuis lors ait avancé ou reculé, la question pour moi n’est pas là, elle est dans la douleur et la sidération persistante de mon esprit. Ce que vous prenez pour mes œuvres, n’est, maintenant comme alors, que les déchets de moi-même, ces raclures de l’âme que l’homme normal n’accueille pas.<sup>387</sup> (*Œuvres I,2* 103).

While the dialogical aspect of the book, that of an implicit “discussion” with the opinions of others, is visible in the letter, Artaud also expresses his personal pain and dispossession, in the context of which his writings are “scrapings of the soul.” He states, however, that he works *within* the pain and dispossession, denoting that this situation is part of the setting, if not the condition, of what he produces. It does not prevent him from working, while what actually appears as sterile and unprofitable are the discussions on the ups and downs of his condition. Artaud’s position on his situation does not express a determination to talk or write *about* it, but rather *from* it.

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<sup>387</sup> “Now as then I work in the pain and dispossession of myself, and my life is entirely poisoned. All discussions on this subject seem sterile and useless to me. Whether my trouble since then has evolved or retreated, the question for me is not there, it is in pain and the persistent stunning of my spirit. What you take to be my work, is, now as then, no more than waste of myself, scrapings of the soul that the normal man does not welcome.”

The book's title, on its publication in 1925, was dedicated to Toulouse: "Le titre de ce dernier petit livre sera: LE PÈSE-NERFS. Depuis l'ombre et la dejection."<sup>388</sup> (*Œuvres I,2* 120). The idea of dejection evokes a fall in relation to a "higher" state, as the Latin term *deject-* ("thrown down") indicates. The designation of "waste" where others see an oeuvre also assumes these connotations. The "shadow" evokes Artaud's proposition that he has chosen "le domaine de la douleur et de l'ombre comme d'autres [ont choisi] celui du rayonnement et de l'entassement de la matière"<sup>389</sup> (*Œuvres* 180). This is related to Artaud's concept of the *étincelle* ("spark"), which is lost with the failure to establish a thread between language and spirit. It is a spark that contains within itself "the scope of the possible world." Here the idea of trace recurs, in the form of a fragment, capable of connecting two different dimensions, pointing to another possible correspondence with Benjamin's notion of *Spur*. However, while in both cases the link is limited and fragile, in Artaud's text it points to a profound and immediate problem in the concept of language, in relation particularly to the expression of the "underground tides" of the spirit. Artaud's account of the fragility of moments of connection between the spirit and reality, attainable through the word, is a further example of the questioning of notions of subject and the possibility of knowledge that underscores his writings. For Benjamin, the "trace" is a possible connection between different temporalities. It presupposes a singular epistemological understanding, which it does not question.

For Benjamin, the definition of language as archive includes the idea of registers of traces from past experience in the unconscious. Language supposedly emerged from the process of decay of a certain mode of perception, the onomatopoeic element being is the closest aspect, within modern languages, of this perception. The traces appear, as mentioned above, as a limited form of access, restricted to a "time-moment" characterised by the emergence of similarities. While in Benjamin's writings they are qualified as precious remnants, providing the fleeting inspiration of a past moment in the present, and to be explored in the search for new forms of experience, for Artaud they are, as suggested by Pollock, "tout ce qu'il a pu sauver d'un 'effondrement central de l'âme'"<sup>390</sup> (22). The sense of surviving particles is connected with that of *déchets* ("waste") and *raclures* ("scrapings").

All this considered, the different foundations of the works of Artaud and Benjamin are perhaps particularly clear in their approaches to language. While Benjamin's notion of

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<sup>388</sup> "The title of this last short book will be: LE PÈSE-NERFS. After the shadow and dejection."

<sup>389</sup> "the domain of pain and shadow just like others [have chosen] that of radiation and the crowding of matter."

<sup>390</sup> "all that he could save from a 'central collapse of the soul'"



language is a hermeneutically-oriented notion, aiming, ultimately, at the restoration of an interpretation that allows the unveiling of other worlds within the present one, Artaud's is a tragically-oriented version, concerned with the irrecoverable fragmentation of the soul, preventing the formation of univocal meaning. Although Benjamin does not envision any ultimate resolution or restoration, and indeed at times expresses the fragmented dimension as the only experienceable one, and although Artaud recurrently nourishes ideas of recuperation and the joining of fragments into some new form of consistency, the thoughts of the two writers cannot be closely compared, let alone combined.

Corroborating this, in "Fragments d'un Journal d'Enfer," Artaud introduces the idea that the soul fails language just as much as language fails the spirit. The moments of accomplishment are represented by a thread or rope, while the "fabric of the body" suffers modifications from these accomplishments or failures. This is perhaps the meaning of a point of cohesion, equating to a "personal consistency," the ability to overcome the "paralysation" and "localisation" that Artaud describes as effects of the use of language. Artaud is unable to escape the "stupefaction of his language," that is, the amazement and oblivion inherent to his position, but he is also able to glimpse a unique form of knowledge. His writings remain "crap," his productions mere debris of himself. But the position *au milieu de tout dans l'esprit* ("amidst all in the spirit"), evoked in *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, seems to allow for the creation of a framework for the contents that occupy Artaud, and which escape all others.

Perhaps the concept described by Benjamin as "language physiognomy," related to the animal instinct for creating impressions, could serve as an interesting analogy for the original dimension of language that occupies Artaud's digression in the last lines of *Le Pèse-Nerfs*. In it, languages and spiritual products have hardened and silenced. If this passage can be read in terms of the retrocession of the multiplicity of linguistic and spiritual contents as a condition for the establishment of a unified form of knowledge in a vague future, one that is not dependent on Artaud having to talk, it also points to the conception of language as a return to the origin. Pollock discusses this impulse in relation to Artaud's *Le Moine* (1930), in which it is characterised by the presence, and eventual subsuming, of the mother figure. As the *finalité* and *fin* ("purpose" and "end") of sexual desire, the mother evokes both appetite and disgust. Stripped of its imaginary and symbolic determinations, however, the concept is

“un reste, un déchet ... le retour à l’anorganique; mais aussi ce dont le corps se sépare du fait de son organisation sexuée”<sup>391</sup> (Pollock 121).

Nothing befits to this definition so well as the theme of the membrane, the “lubricating surface” that, after all else has ceased, “continuera à flotter dans l’air”<sup>392</sup> (*Œuvres* 166). While alluded to by Artaud in terms of the separation and communication of different segments of life, it is a theme that hovers like a phantom around his writings, just as he describes it floating in the air, representing the “eternal” character of separation. This membrane, like the mother theme, can be characterised only ambiguously, since, in its origin, it donates life but also implies an individuated detachment from it. As Dumoulié highlights on the subject of the membrane, “tout ce qui vit doit se détacher d’elle pour exister, mais elle est la Vie et, cruellement, ce qui existe tombe comme mort”<sup>393</sup> (*Artaud* 23). There is, therefore, an “eternally living thing” that renders notions of life and death, subject and world, vain. In relation to this dimension, the theme of a return to the origin, implied in the regression of language and the reaching of the inorganic (the “original” dimension before life), assumes the feature of the blend proposed by Artaud of spirit and oeuvre. Once again, the term is also the termination, the aim is the end. The original dimension of language, as suggested by Benjamin, is the one in which language, strictly speaking, does not exist. Where one is removed from language, where similarities are fully perceived and immediately read. Gestures, and the resonant gestures that are sounds, are the last elements of this form of perception to disappear, and they constitute the closest approximations to the body’s original expressive abilities. As Artaud states, in the context of this form of retreat from multiplicity: “je n’aurais plus besoin de parler”<sup>394</sup> (*Œuvres* 166).

The passage between experience and language is far from smooth, and is marked by misapprehension. As Kaufmann suggests, while questioning the defining criteria of literature: “si l’écrivain voulait communiquer, il n’écrirait pas”<sup>395</sup> (8). Language, in the works of Benjamin and Artaud, appears more accurately as built on misapprehensions, on the disappearance of a form of perception, derived from the inescapable fragmentation of being.

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<sup>391</sup> “a remnant, a waste ... the return to the inorganic; but also the element from which the body separates, as a result of its sexual organisation”

<sup>392</sup> “will continue to float in the air”

<sup>393</sup> “all that lives must detach from it to exist, but it is Life and, cruelly, what exists falls down dead”

<sup>394</sup> “and I will no longer need to talk”

<sup>395</sup> “if the writer wanted to communicate, he would not write”

Artaud and Benjamin however assume different positions in relation to language, as well as in connection with what is described here as experience.

In Artaud's writings, language appears as intrinsic to the fragmentation of being. The most significant aspect of the relationship he sees between language and experience is expressed in the short sentence: "avoir de la pensée, c'est se répondre à soi"<sup>396</sup> (*Œuvres* 115). Here the necessary mediation of language into life reveals its importance, while at the same time, the *à soi* highlights the highly personal attachment taking place in thought, whose most precise form takes the form of accessing and reporting to oneself, and from which the abstract notions of pure thought, as well as, significantly, the expressions of unconscious undercurrents, derive.

As suggested by Dumoulié, in Artaud, "la souffrance vécue dans son corps et son esprit trouveront à se projeter, à se dépersonnaliser, en suivant une ligne de fêlure que permettra de hisser le drame individuel au plan de l'événement même de l'Esprit"<sup>397</sup> (*Artaud* 12). The creation of an attainable drama, particularly through writing, produces a distance that situates the individual sphere as part of the events of the spirit. These events — in the sense of *événement*, that is, an event that takes place within both the factual and the transcendental spheres (Deleuze *Logique* 172) — is perhaps that of the non-identification of thought with itself, that is, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, "de ce *manque* singulier qu'est la pensée" (qtd. in Dumoulié *Artaud* 19). While the "case of Artaud" cannot have its singularity effaced, what ails him, explicitly or implicitly, ails every spirit, so its absolute uniqueness is open to question. Artaud himself, as suggested by the essay on Lautréamont, situates his case as one more "act" in the general drama of thought, interpreted through many more characters (*Œuvres XIV* 34-5).

Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between language and experience, while receiving a privileged position throughout his work, appears most clearly in the early writings. In these, language plays a mediating role between the human and the divine. In the texts from the thirties approached here, language is assigned an ambiguous place as the archive of experience, offering and limiting access to various psychosocial dimensions, which Benjamin is increasingly inclined to valorise as he moves towards the development of his "philosophy of history." The notion of extrasensory or non-sensory similarities, defined in "Doctrine of the Similar," also mediates between past and future, passing through

<sup>396</sup> "to think is to answer to one's self"

<sup>397</sup> "the suffering experienced in his body and spirit will be able to project itself, to de-personalise itself, following the link of a crack that will raise the individual drama to the level of an event of the Spirit itself"

unconscious registers. It reappears in Benjamin's discussion of *correspondances* in the work of Charles Baudelaire. In the context of his work for the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin states, in 1939: "the *correspondances* record a concept of experience which include ritual elements" (*Motifs* 181). The ancient, vanished aspects of ritual experience re-emerge in modern urban life, which is undergoing its own crisis.

Fundamental differences and subordinate kinships underlie the approaches of Artaud and Benjamin to language and experience. This is also evident in a consideration of the relationship between their different conceptions of the idea of the image. Considered a form of language, it has an expressive relationship with the aspects of experience outlined by Benjamin and Artaud. The following section compares Benjamin's understanding of modern experience, and Artaud's suggestion that imagery is a form of "clear language." In Benjamin's description of the inaccessibility of traditional experience, and Artaud's of the emergence of a new awareness of his intimate loss, the notion of image emerges as part of new forms of experience arising in response to the absence or decay of the traditional ones.

### **5.8. Decay or Extinguishing of Experience?**

In parallel with his articles on language, Benjamin wrote a few essays in the thirties that elevated the concept of experience to a principal position in his work. In his discussions of surrealism in 1929, Benjamin had already praised the movement for championing a form of experience, relating to intoxication and to the precedence of image and language over the self (*Surrealism* 178-9). Benjamin's materialism has as its goal, in this context, a movement beyond the sphere of thought and towards the sphere of image, body and political action (Auerbach A.). This sphere would remain a lasting interest for Benjamin, as the writings explored in this section indicate. They are "Experience and Poverty" (1933) and "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936).

In 1933, twenty years after his first essay on experience, Benjamin wrote the short "Experience and Poverty," in which he discusses the decay of the value attributed to experience by society at that time. In contrast to his 1913 essay, Benjamin here assumes the position of valuing the experience transmitted by the older generation, "with the authority of age," "either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice" (*Poverty* 731). He then asks: "Where has it all gone? ... And who will even attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of their experience?" (*Poverty* 731). If in 1913 Benjamin had despised the use of the word "experience" by the adult, as a form of imposing "meaninglessness," in 1933 he

diagnoses a void in the meaning of the notion of experience, perhaps of the same nature as in 1913, which prevents the very possibility of accessing experience.

What Benjamin calls the decay in the valuing of experience is related to the fact that one generation had undergone, from 1914 to 1918, “some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world” (*Poverty* 731). Even as he was writing about the catastrophic effects of the First World War, Hitler and the National Socialist Party were being given “The Enabling Act” in Germany, a symbol of the path the country was to take in the years to come. This is certainly not a coincidence, even if it could not be known what the rise of Nazism would ultimately mean. In the last paragraph of the essay Benjamin makes clear that while discussing the events of 1914-18, he felt another war looming on the horizon. He states in 1933: “the economic crisis is at the door, and behind it is the shadow of the approaching war” (*Poverty* 735).

In the years that followed, the already venomous air of the interwar period began to rot further. Benjamin reviews the period in the following lines: “With this tremendous development of technology, a completely new poverty has descended on mankind. And the reverse side of this poverty is the oppressive wealth of ideas that has been spread among people.” (*Poverty* 732). The relationship between the poverty of experience and technical development, particularly the abundance of information that characterises mass culture, is a theme that Benjamin would deepen in his essay on the work of art, from the period 1936-39.

Benjamin asks, in 1933: “For what is the value of all our culture if it is divorced from experience?” (*Poverty* 732). The “valuable piece of experience” passed on by the old, the lessons to last a life-time, the ability to tell a captivating story: these vanishing scenarios suggest that the notion of experience outlined by Benjamin is tied up with the possibility of duration and the appropriation of living matter, of a sharing of sensations between giver and receiver. A culture divorced from experience becomes a culture devoid of collective meaning. According to Gagnebin, this type of *Erfahrung* (“experience”) presupposes a communion of life and discourse that the rapid development of capitalism has destroyed (*Prefácio* 10). Benjamin states: “Indeed (let’s admit it), our poverty of experience is not merely poverty on the personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Hence, a new kind of barbarism.” (*Poverty* 732).

The poverty mentioned by Benjamin being primarily related to the absence of valuable experiences, that is, living knowledge gained through a layered accumulation of practical wisdom, he announces his wish to “introduce a new, positive concept of barbarism”

(*Poverty* 732). The word had already been mentioned in his previous works, from the period around 1915-16, but without being closely explored. He now defines a positive barbarism, part of the attitude of “the best minds” of the period, as “a total absence of illusion about the age and at the same time an unlimited commitment to it” (*Poverty* 733). Barbarism is seen as the building of some form of humanity from profound poverty, which in itself also acquires a relatively positive connotation. The ambiguous attitude of disillusionment and commitment seen in those advocating this form of barbarism is the consequence of their rejection of former civilised ways of living, and their urge to construct something new from what little is left. These people, Benjamin points out, “reject the traditional, solemn and noble image of man, festooned with all the sacrificial offerings of the past,” turning instead to “the naked men of the contemporary world” (*Poverty* 733).

Benjamin’s use of the word barbarism to highlight a positive attitude on the part of the impoverished man, living in an impoverished society, seems to take direct inspiration from the avant-garde movements, and the general mood that they represented. Benjamin echoes the dadaist and surrealist gesture mentioned above, that of disdain in relation to the values of civilisation, which they envision as responsible for preventing man from having direct contact with life, amongst other things. The references to the consequence of the war, the material and spiritual misery caused by technical developments, the transformation of the hungry masses into consumers, all point to this link. Considering the context in which Benjamin was writing, as a German Jew in increasingly Nazi Germany, his defence of positive barbarism might appear to be an eccentricity, despite the fact that in his final lines he defines the “few powerful people” of the time as “more barbaric, but not in the good way” (*Poverty* 735). The essay as a whole has a tone of subdued desperation, with Benjamin exhorting the reader to find meaning in the facts he presents. The numerous questions he asks add to this impression.

The notion of experience evoked in the opening of “Experience and Poverty,” related to the authority accorded to the act of transmission, and the accumulated learning of shared wisdom, seems to be one of the most enduring ideas for Benjamin. His praise of the experience of poverty, as concerned not only with wealth, but more importantly with the qualities of possessiveness and secrecy of bourgeois society, takes the form of an attempt to give a positive allure to a condition that the essay begins by describing in negative terms. Benjamin states, in this second evaluation of the concept of experience:

Poverty of experience. This should not be understood to mean that people are yearning for new experience. No, they long to free themselves from experience; they long for a world in which they can make such pure and decided use of their poverty — their outer poverty, and ultimately also their inner poverty — that it will lead to something respectable. (*Poverty* 734)

While these lines evoke the 1913 essay on experience, they also point to the differentiation between two forms of experience that Benjamin proposes in “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov,” a differentiation that gathers together all of his writings on experience, even if it assumes various, and at times contradictory, forms. The particular sense of the terms “barbarism” and “poverty” proposed in “Experience and Poverty” would reappear in the 1936 essay in the context of discussion of the bourgeois experience of “internalisation,” whose correspondent narrative form is the novel, while an experience of transmission and collective engendering would be much more detailed.<sup>398</sup>

“The Storyteller” is concerned with the figure of the storyteller, described as being on the edge of disappearance, and identified by Benjamin in the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov. Leskov portrays the customs of small ethnic groups in Russia, with whom he made contact through various trips around the country. According to Buck-Morss (218), Benjamin decided to write about Leskov following a controversy in the Soviet Union, where an avant-garde artist had put a piece by Leskov to music, generating criticism on the part of leaders of the Soviet state. Benjamin’s position defended the contemporary artist, pointing to the nostalgic tone of the essay. Having been rooted in the working class, Leskov continued to be evoked by writers such as Gorky and Tolstoy as a major representative of the people’s voice.

The diagnosis of experience presented in 1936 is very similar to the opening section of “Experience and Poverty,” even resuming some of the positions presented in 1933. Benjamin relates the disappearance of the narrator figure to the vanishing of something “that seemed inalienable” to humanity: “the ability to exchange experiences” (*Storyteller* 83). A correlated fact is that the “communicability of experience is decreasing” (*Storyteller* 86), a process that Benjamin links to the dying out of the “epic” side of truth. This process, he highlights, has been going on for a long time, and can be described as a “symptom of decay” aligned with modernity. Benjamin’s diagnosis is, characteristically, double-faceted: it points

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<sup>398</sup> On the eve of the Second World War, Benjamin assigns a very different sense to barbarism in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1939). It appears in a negative context, as the necessary cost of all forms of civilisation.

to the perishing of a cultural form, and with it of interesting modalities of expression and experience, while also accentuating the opening up of new possibilities through the change.

In relation to the decrease in communicability of experience, Benjamin tells us:

It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing. (*Storyteller* 87)

These “secular productive forces” are related to the gradual process of secularisation that Lukács (*Novel* 30) identifies in the decline of the epic world view. At the same time, the situation evoked by Benjamin refers to his description of the traditional forms of narrative as being partially based on artisanal work environments or, as Gagnebin suggests, on “pre-capitalist forms of work organisation”<sup>399</sup> (*Prefácio* 10). The decline of the communal language and milieu, in any case, prevents the occurrence of traditional narrative forms.

As a “concomitant symptom” of these processes, Benjamin aligns the changes in experience with his approaches to modern art and cinema, part of mass consumerism and the reorganisation of the productive forces (*Work of Art* 223). His analysis again focuses on conceptualising the possible effects of change in terms of new ways of experiencing; he is particularly concerned with the progressive possibilities offered by these art forms. Here, as in the 1933 essay, “new beauty” assumes revolutionary features. While nostalgia does play a part in it, this “constructive” aspect of Benjamin’s writing prevents a fully nostalgic approach to his work (Gagnebin *Prefácio* 10). The recognition of a loss forms the basis for a new kind of experience, one that opposes the bourgeois sentimentalism in favour of a form of “objectivity.”

On another front, Benjamin relates these changes to the rise of the novel. This recalls Breton’s referencing of the novel in the first surrealist manifesto (*Manifestes* 19), and also partially coincides with the diagnosis of Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel*. Benjamin connects the novel with the decrease in the oral story-telling tradition, through its privileging of the printed form. While the storyteller tells from experience, and “makes it the experience of those who are listening” (*Storyteller* 87), the novel usually expresses isolated incidences of life, related to the solitary individual “who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns” (*Storyteller* 87). The experience expressed here is an *Erlebnis* (“lived experience”), concerning the thoughts, dilemmas and transformations of

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<sup>399</sup> “organização pré-capitalista do trabalho”



an individual life. The novel takes to the extreme the expression of incommensurable in individual life, it bestows on lived experience the power to give sense to life, in such a way that it speaks to readers, but transmits no form of instructive wisdom. It concerns the fullness of one life, or a few lives, in relation to which one engages with perplexity, but not with active learning. It lacks the practical orientation that Benjamin envisions in the traditional forms of narrative, while offering a self-contained world that is missing in collective life.

The decrease in the communicability of experience is compounded by the “explicitness” of information. The press, one of the most important instruments of developed capitalism, proposes facts as “understandable in themselves,” and allows for no differentiation between intelligent news coming from afar, and petty neighbourhood occurrences. In this form of communication, explanations abound, while, in turn, “it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (*Storyteller* 89). This does not imply, according to Benjamin, that traditional stories are vague. Instead, what is missing in storytelling is the psychological connections between events, which is never imposed on the reader. Analogously, the lifespan of information is very short, it lasts only as long as it is “new,” while traditional lessons can retain their power for a long time, and acquire new senses beyond their original context. Benjamin presents classic stories as an example of this power of preservation. Here explicitness is set against the durable meaningfulness.

The power of storytelling lies in its ability to become integrated with one’s own experience. For this to happen, Benjamin points out, something like boredom or self-forgetfulness is required, states of mind usually made impossible by the psychological engagement required by the novel. Another important aspect of this integration lies in the assumption of a certain authority for what is narrated, related to the above-mentioned epic facet of truth. Benjamin mentions the importance of the visibility of death to the authority of transmissible experience. That is, man’s knowledge and wisdom, like his life as a whole, “first assumes transmissible form at the moment of his death” (*Storyteller* 94). Just as the dying are taken away from the public view, the sanction of every possible story, connected with the authority of the dying, is also distanced away. On the other hand, the novel’s ability to present “the meaning of life,” which derives from the novel’s characters, is quite possibly expressed through the death of these characters. Benjamin states: “the novel is significant ... because this stranger’s [the character’s] fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate” (*Storyteller* 101). That is, we enrich

our lives through the explicit and recognisable meaning that we read about, isolated in the form of the novel, a type of meaning we will probably not experience in relation to our own lives.

In contrast with this one-to-one scenario, the storyteller is never alone in the act of telling a story. According to Benjamin, the story is, in itself, collectively constructed, from reminiscences of other stories and other storytellers. The relationship between the storyteller and the listener or reader is that of companionship (*Storyteller* 100). While the reader of the novel “swallows up” the contents of individual lives, making them his own, the reader or listener of a traditional narrative lets the story inhabit him or her, mostly in a distracted form, while remembering it, perhaps in order to communicate it further. The storyteller, therefore, expresses a collective experience, both in the sense of its multiple origins, and in the implicit creative act of transmission. Benjamin suggests the image of the ladder to describe the relationship of the storyteller to experience: “a ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image form of a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier” (*Storyteller* 102). The storyteller is the one capable of moving up and down the levels of experience, able to access even the most traumatic event experienced by the individual.

The transformation of personal experience into collective experience by the storyteller is an act that can only be questioned once this figure is threatened with disappearance, that is, from a perspective that perceives both dimensions, the individual and the collective, as distinct. For Benjamin, Leskov is this marginal figure, at the borders of two modalities of narration and experience. He says:

In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not that of a craftsman’s relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. (*Storyteller* 108)

Precisely through this activity, the storyteller joins the teachers and the sages. The novelist, in comparison, tells of the fullness of one or many individual lives, while suggesting a meaning to be found in them.

Benjamin’s article proposes that a transformation has taken place in the sphere of experience, one that is particularly perceptible in the disappearance of the art of storytelling, but he also suggests new forms that emerge with the novel and mass information, without

providing much detail about the experience to be found through these forms. The description of the solitary individual, concerned with the fullness of his life as the ultimate form of experience, is one image that seems to fit this new experience. It is evident that Benjamin perceives intricate connections between experience and the themes of narration, writing and literature.

Through the envisioning of the sphere of experience as being at a crossroads between disappearing traditional configurations, related to transmissible forms of wisdom, and a new impoverishment of experience leading to the possibility of a “start from scratch,” Benjamin explores the field of storytelling as the link between two different modes of experience, expressed in the words *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*. The future of experience remains in doubt, in both Benjamin’s work and that of his contemporaries. The construction of new basis for what Benjamin would call “synthetic” forms of experience, following the decay of traditional configurations, would be based in particular on literary experimentation.

### 5.9. *Un Abominable Savoir*

From 1922, in the letters Artaud exchanges with Athanasiou, he discusses the paralysis affecting him, which he relates to a “conscious obstacle” placed “between him and himself.” The separation that seems to be at the origin of such paralysis, as mentioned above, is not perceived as a momentary state, nor one that derives from an unproblematic state of union. It is instead related to what Artaud sees as the eternal divisions between man and world, spirit and flesh, life and death. As one of those who have been “elected by fatality,” he follows the path of separation rigorously, experiencing the suffering, restlessness and insight that it occasions. This section intends to approach some more texts of Artaud from the rich period around 1925, in which he attempts to identify the elements concerned with the emergence of a *conscience nouvelle* from the state of separation. They are “Nouvelle Lettre sur Moi-Même,” “Position de la Chair” and “Manifeste en Langage Clair.”

In “Adresse au Pape,” written in January 1925, Artaud states: “le monde c’est l’abîme de l’âme, Pape déjeté, Pape extérieur à l’âme, laisse-nous nager dans nos corps, laisse nos âmes dans nos âmes, nous n’avons pas besoin de ton couteau de clartés”<sup>400</sup> (*Œuvres* 133). In this context, the *couteau* (“knife”) seems to denote a schism in the spirit, as opposed to a state in which body and soul are identified with themselves. The “knife of clarities” also evokes

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<sup>400</sup> “the world is the abyss of the soul, misshapen Pope, Pope outside the soul, leave us to swim in our bodies, leave our souls in our souls, we do not need your knife of clarities”

the institutionalisation of spiritual matters, here represented by the Pope and the church. The theme of the conflictive dynamics between established conventions and new ideas of flux seems to be a constant in Artaud's writings, one to which the notion of separation, here figured by the knife, is related.

The conventional and fixed facet of this dynamic is also expressed by Artaud in terms of an "ordinary reality." In *Le Pèse-Nerfs* the theme of the segmentation of matters of the soul in the face of thought, discussed above, is expressed as a dispossession, a physical and essential loss. Surreality appears as a form of control, capable of questioning and holding ordinary reality at bay, allowing subtle and rarefied encounters to take place (*Œuvre* 159). Artaud's identified methods for dealing with dispossession also appear in "Fragments d'un Journal d'Enfer" as the emergence of new consciousness. He states: "je sens que des facteurs nouveaux interviennent dans la dénaturation de ma vie et que j'ai comme une conscience nouvelle de mon intime déperdition"<sup>401</sup> (*Œuvres* 175). From the experience of *néant* ("nothingness"), Artaud builds a more or less stable "architecture," which he names, at this point, metaphysics.

Later that year, in October 1925, the short text "Nouvelle Lettre sur Moi-Même" appeared in *La Révolution Surréaliste*. In it Artaud identifies what he calls *l'agrégat de la conscience*, that is, the assemblage of elements that constitutes consciousness, or at least the perception and idea of consciousness: "ce qui me fait rire chez les hommes, chez tous les hommes, c'est qu'ils n'imaginent pas que l'agrégat de leur conscience se défasse"<sup>402</sup> (*Œuvres* 145). Artaud testifies to the experience of "dissolution" of the different elements of consciousness. While consciousness is envisioned as a frail assemblage, easily dissipated, the activity of thinking, according to Artaud, does not result on any content in particular. The highest product of thinking is the act of thinking itself, which is not a tautology in terms of the functioning of thought: "ce qui est capable d'arracher les hommes à leurs terres, à ces terres figées de l'esprit enfermé dans son cercle, c'est ce qui sort du domaine de la pensée proprement dite, ce qui pour moi est au-dessus des relations de l'esprit"<sup>403</sup> (*Œuvres* 145).

Artaud suggests the existence of a dimension "outside" thought, capable of diverting it from its fixed tracks, a dimension that is also exterior to the dynamics of the spirit. Here he

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<sup>401</sup> "I feel that new factors are involved in the denaturation of my life and that I have a new awareness of my intimate loss"

<sup>402</sup> "what makes me laugh in men, in all men, is that they do not imagine that the aggregate of their conscience sheds itself"

<sup>403</sup> "that which can snatch men from their lands, from these fixed lands of the mind locked in its circle, is that which comes out of the realm of thought itself, which for me is above the relationships of the spirit"

introduces the theme of magnetism, the illumination or privileging of ideas, which he says he is unable to experience. Rather than seeing ideas as encounters between spiritual beings, Artaud sees them as “simples assemblages d’objets”<sup>404</sup> (*Œuvres* 145). The operation of the intellect, for Artaud, loses its necessity and novelty, and becomes simply the movements and operations of thought. In Artaud’s words, from the lack of clarity about what is thinkable, from the detachment from any cumulative effect of thought, what results is “une illumination *descriptive* du monde, et quel monde!”<sup>405</sup> (*Œuvres* 146). The dimension *au-dessus*, capable of shaking up the train of thought, is perhaps to be found in an exposure of its flaws.

A particular awareness seems to emerge from this turmoil. That is, “mais au milieu de cette misère sans nom il y a place pour un orgueil, qui a aussi comme une face de conscience”<sup>406</sup> (*Œuvres* 146). The *connaissance par le vide* (“knowledge through emptiness”) turns out to be an *abominable savoir* (“terrible wisdom”). Artaud expresses this knowledge as profoundly important:

Mon esprit s’est ouvert par le ventre, et c’est par le bas qu’il entasse une sombre et intraduisible science, pleine de marées souterraines, d’édifices concaves, d’une agitation congelée. Qu’on ne prenne pas ceci pour des images. Ce voudrait être la forme d’un abominable savoir.<sup>407</sup> (*Œuvres* 146)

In response to this unique science, related to the subterranean areas of his spirit, Artaud demands silence, “mais un silence intellectuel si j’ose dire”<sup>408</sup> (*Œuvres* 146). If the fragile assemblage of consciousness has been disrupted for Artaud, giving rise to a detached system of unattractive ideas, it is also the same process that allows for the emergence of a rare and uncommon knowledge, which he details with a certain pride. This particular form of *savoir* does not correspond to consciousness in any absolute sense, but contains elements of it, and perhaps allows for the disruption of the endless circle of impossibility of thought, in order that the thinker may continue living, even though, for Artaud, “le problème est justement que je vis”<sup>409</sup> (*Œuvres* 145).

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<sup>404</sup> “mere assemblages of objects”

<sup>405</sup> “a *descriptive* illumination of the world, and what world!”

<sup>406</sup> “but in the midst of this nameless misery there is room for certain pride, which also has as a face of conscience”

<sup>407</sup> My spirit opened itself up through the stomach, and is from the bottom that it piles up a dark and untranslatable science, full of underground tides, concave buildings, frozen agitation. One should not take these for images. This is the form of a terrible knowledge.”

<sup>408</sup> “an intellectual silence, if I daresay”

<sup>409</sup> “the problem is precisely that I am alive”

“Position de la Chair,” published in December 1925 in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, develops Artaud’s definition of this form of knowledge. It becomes clear that the experiencing of the limitations of thought is indispensable to this new consciousness. Artaud says: “il faut avoir été privé de la vie, de l’irradiation nerveuse de l’existence, de la complétude consciente du nerf pour se rendre compte à quel point le Sens et la Science de toute pensée est caché dans la vitalité nerveuse des moelles”<sup>410</sup> (*Œuvres* 146). The idea of a conjunction of sense and science is here equivalent to the inseparable presence, in human beings, of flesh and spirit, vitality and nerve. Dual “instances” such as these, for Artaud, can only be considered together. The highest expression of their inseparability is “le magnétisme incompréhensible de l’homme ... ce que, faute d’une expression plus perçante, je suis bien obligé d’appeler sa force de vie”<sup>411</sup> (*Œuvres* 146).

The forces that animate life, that provide humans with their magnetism, “ces force qui du dehors ont la forme d’un cri”<sup>412</sup> (*Œuvres* 146), are what Artaud calls *la Chair* (“the Flesh”). By this he means not a body separated from its intellectual activities, but the inseparability of thought and flesh. While here the magnetism of the body has a positive connotation, in “Nouvelle Lettre sur Moi-Même” it is what is lacking in Artaud’s perception of ideas. Even more, “j’en suis au point où je ne sens plus les idées comme des idées, comme des rencontres des choses spirituelles ayant en elles le magnétisme”<sup>413</sup> (*Œuvres* 145). If the ideas themselves do not have enough magnetism to make them attractive, this is the result of the detachment between life and thought, their absence of “fleshy” magnetism. On the one hand, Artaud testifies to a new form of consciousness that emerges from detachment, while on the other hand he points to the connecting function of this new knowledge and awareness, locating the core of this “savoir” in the flesh, that is, in the “dark,” “agitated” aspect of the spirit.

Having presented himself, in “Position de la Chair,” as “un homme qui a perdu sa vie et qui cherche par tous les moyens à lui faire reprendre sa place”<sup>414</sup> (*Œuvres* 147), Artaud situates his “position” in relation to the *théorie de la Chair* or *de l’Existence* as *l’Excitateur*

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<sup>410</sup> “one must have been deprived of life, of the nervous irradiation of existence, of the conscious completeness of the nerve to realize the extent to which the Sense and Science of all thought is hidden in the nervous vitality of the marrows”

<sup>411</sup> “the incomprehensible magnetism of man ... which, for lack of a more apt expression, I am obliged to call his life force”

<sup>412</sup> “these forces that from the outside take the form of a cry”

<sup>413</sup> “I’m at the point where I no longer feel ideas as ideas, as meetings of spiritual things with magnetism inside them”

<sup>414</sup> “a man who has lost his life and who attempts, through all means, to make it recover its place”

(“the Exciter”) of his own vitality. For Artaud, this vitality “m’est plus précieuse que la conscience, car ce qui chez les autres hommes n’est que le moyen d’être un Homme est chez moi toute la Raison”<sup>415</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). It is not evident what is meant by Reason in this context, but it might be analogous with “Flesh,” in the sense of the *complétude du nerf* (“completeness of nerve”) that can be attained through the special knowledge described above. It is precisely because a limitation to being takes place that vitality becomes an issue: Artaud, as the exciter of his own vitality, has to direct the one feature able to speak to spirit and body alike. Consciousness, here, is simply the grouping of different thoughts or, as Artaud would say, an assembly of objects. This notion brings together the elements that do not belong to the Flesh and, therefore, lack magnetism.

Due to his position in relation to the Flesh, Artaud is searching for paths that might lead to the strengthening of his vitality. The milieu in which this exploration takes place, he suggests, is “dans les limbes de ma conscience”<sup>416</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). This knowledge can only be “an indescribable science,” whose potential owners are ignorant of it. According to Artaud, “il faut aller à pas lent sur la route des pierres mortes, surtout pour qui a perdu la *connaissance des mots*”<sup>417</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). Language being lost, this knowledge can only emerge obscurely. Here the ideas of clarity and logic are rejected once more, in the same tone adopted in the surrealist texts, that is, through an affirmation of the necessity of obscuring important meanings. In fact, as mentioned previously, Artaud considers that “toute vraie connaissance est *obscure*”<sup>418</sup> (*Œuvres* 147).

Artaud ends by describing the forms of interaction between Flesh and Spirit, which are, at least partially, the contents of the knowledge gained through separation. According to Artaud, there is a spirit in the flesh, “mais un esprit prompt comme la foudre”<sup>419</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). The flesh participates in the higher functions of the spirit by bursting and shaking. As Artaud states: “pour moi qui dit Chair dit avant tout *appréhension*, poil hérissé, chair à nu avec tout l’approfondissement intellectuel de ce spectacle de la chair pure et toutes ses

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<sup>415</sup> “is more precious to me than consciousness, because that which in other men is no more than the means of being a Man is for me, all of Reason”

<sup>416</sup> “in the limbo of my consciousness”

<sup>417</sup> “one must go slowly on the road of dead stones, especially he who has lost the *knowledge of words*”

<sup>418</sup> “all true knowledge is obscure”

<sup>419</sup> “but it is a spirit as fast as lightning”

conséquences dans le sens, c'est-à-dire dans le sentiment"<sup>420</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). Regarding the last of these elements, sentiment is described by Artaud as "presentiment," that is, direct knowledge, a "communication retournée et qui s'éclaire de l'intérieur"<sup>421</sup> (*Œuvres* 147). The awareness effected by the Flesh is also appropriation "absolue de ma douleur à moi-même"<sup>422</sup> (*Œuvres* 147), that is, pertaining to the most intimate aspects of being. It results in a unique and solitary form of knowledge, defined as *la pensée*, in *Le Pèse-Nerfs*, as a method of responding to oneself.

"Manifeste en Langage Clair" was published together with "Position de la Chair." In the context of his discrediting of values such as good and evil, Artaud says: "s'il n'est rien dans l'ordre des principes à quoi je puisse raisonnablement accéder, le principe même en est dans ma chair"<sup>423</sup> (*Œuvres* 148). Disregarding reason, he professes to believe only in the evidence that emerges from his *moelles* ("marrows"). At the same time, the principles to be found through the flesh are intimately connected with the spirit, since this is not just any flesh, but "ma chair irriguée de nerfs"<sup>424</sup> (*Œuvres* 148). Artaud here details the formation of notions through the flesh:

Dans le domaine de l'impondérable affectif, l'image amenée par mes nerfs prend la forme de l'intellectualité la plus haute, à qui je me refuse à arracher son caractère d'intellectualité. Et c'est ainsi que j'assiste à la formation d'un concept qui porte en lui la fulguration même des choses, qui arrive sur moi avec un bruit de création.<sup>425</sup> (*Œuvres* 148)

The realm introduced here is characterised by troubled assessment of affections. It is interesting to note that the process Artaud describes as beginning with the nerves and ending in concepts takes place through images, produced by the nerves and immediately raised to the level of "highest intellectuality." The connectedness to the flesh seems to guarantee that the concept is the bearer of the "fulguration of things," and not a notion detached from

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<sup>420</sup> "for me to speak of Flesh is to speak, above all, of *apprehension*, bristling hair, bare flesh with all the intellectual depth of this spectacle of pure flesh and all its consequences in sensation, that is to say, in sentiment"

<sup>421</sup> "a returned communication clarified from the inside"

<sup>422</sup> "absolute [appropriation] of my pain to myself"

<sup>423</sup> "if there is nothing in the order of principles to which I can reasonably access, the principle itself is in my flesh"

<sup>424</sup> "my flesh irrigated with nerves"

<sup>425</sup> "In the field of the affective imponderable, the image provided by my nerves takes the form of the highest intellectuality, whose intellectual character I refuse to snatch. This is how I see the formation of a concept that carries in itself the very lightning flash of things, that reaches me with the noise of creation."



reality. Artaud says: “le conflit éternel de la raison et du cœur se départage dans ma chair même”<sup>426</sup> (*Œuvres* 148).

In relation to the role of images in the emergence of notions and concepts, Artaud suggests that “aucune image ne me satisfait que si elle est en même temps *Connaissance*, si elle porte avec elle sa substance en même temps que sa lucidité”<sup>427</sup> (*Œuvres* 148). The use of the terms “substance” and “lucidity” indicates that Artaud identifies in the images that emerge from his nerves the possibility of uniting features usually attributed separately to the flesh and the spirit. He sets these images in opposition to “mon esprit fatigué de la raison discursive”<sup>428</sup> (*Œuvres* 148), that is, they allow for the emergence of knowledge outside discourse. Since the images are not the medium but themselves the knowledge, this conception has much in common with Benjamin’s discussions of the *Denkbild* (“thought-image”) produced by literature, one form of *dialektisches Bild* (“dialectical image”) of surrealism. Images here are not the portents of contest to be described or considered elsewhere. They realise thought in and within themselves.

The relationship between images and reason is also approached by Artaud in this text. According to him, “Ce qui est du domaine de l’image est irréductible par la raison et doit demeurer dans l’image sous peine de s’annihiler. Mais toutefois il y a une raison dans les images, il y a des images plus claires dans le monde de la vitalité image.”<sup>429</sup> (*Œuvres* 149). Here he relates reason, on his first mention of it, with the *raison discursive* mentioned above. Submitting images to the order of discourse risks annihilating them. Images themselves possess reason, a form of clarity forged “inside” the pictorial field.

It can be supposed that the theme of “clear language,” as the title of the text indicates, concerns the language of images, through which *un nouveau Sens*, from “inside the spirit,” can emerge. It is in this context that the topic of the “knife” reappears. According to Artaud, the discovery of the new sense expressed through images is a kind of order in the chaos, logic amidst the illogicality of the spirit. Artaud says: “Je ne renonce à rien de ce qui est l’Esprit. Je

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<sup>426</sup> “the eternal conflict of reason and heart is decided in my flesh”

<sup>427</sup> “no image satisfies me unless it is at the same time *Knowledge*, if it carries with it both its substance and its lucidity”

<sup>428</sup> “my spirit tired of discursive reason”

<sup>429</sup> “That which comes from the domain of the image is irreducible by reason and must remain within the image under penalty of annihilation. There is, however, reason in images. There are clearer images in the world of pictorial vitality.”

veux seulement transporter mon esprit ailleurs avec ses lois et ses organes.”<sup>430</sup> (*Œuvres* 149). Artaud’s exploration of spiritual matters, therefore, takes the form of controlled automatism. In his words: “Je me livre à la fièvre des rêves, mais c’est pour en retirer des nouvelles lois. Je recherche la multiplication, la finesse, l’œil intellectuel dans le délire, non la vaticination hasardée. Il y a un couteau que je ne oublie pas.”<sup>431</sup> (*Œuvres* 149).

Is the knife, in this context, the tool that allows Artaud to find new laws of dreaming, a conceptual visual power through delirium? Or does it represent a previous state of chaos without order, of impossibility of sense and consequent suffering and pain? In other words: is the knife part of the emergence of a new logic, or of the immersion in the illogical? The image of the knife certainly contains the idea of cutting and selecting, but it could also express entry and penetration. The image seems to be located, for Artaud, in a remote past. He states, in “Manifeste en Language Clair”: “mais c’est un couteau à mi-chemin dans les rêves, et que je maintiens au-dedans de moi-même, que je ne laisse pas venir à la frontière des sens clairs”<sup>432</sup> (*Œuvres* 149). In the midst of dreams, this knife seems to lance the flesh, in a previous stage in the development of lucid images. It operates, as Artaud highlights, as a reminder, one that can perhaps be placed at the moment of *desordre*, before the “conquête de l’esprit sur lui-même”<sup>433</sup> (*Œuvres* 148).

As well as being an element that condenses the state of suffering and participates in the transition to an incarnated form of knowledge, the knife is a double edge that, paradoxically, operates far away from the boundaries of “clear sense.” This can be attributed to Artaud’s loyalty to the dimension of flesh or matter in relation to thought. As he expresses it: “La vérité de la vie est dans l’impulsivité de la matière. L’esprit de l’homme est malade au milieu des concepts. Ne lui demandez pas de se satisfaire, demandez-lui seulement d’être calme, de croire qu’il a bien trouvé sa place. Mais seul le Fou est bien calme.”<sup>434</sup> (*Œuvres* 149).

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<sup>430</sup> “I will give up nothing that is of the Spirit. I simply want to transport my spirit elsewhere, with its laws and its organs.”

<sup>431</sup> “I give myself over to the fever of dreams, but this is to draw new laws from it. I seek the multiplication, the finesse, the intellectual eye in delirium, not the ventured vaticination. There is a knife that I will not forget.”

<sup>432</sup> “but it is a knife at the halfway point in dreams, and one that I keep inside myself, one that I do not allow to come to the borders of clear meaning”

<sup>433</sup> “the conquest of the spirit over itself”

<sup>434</sup> “The truth of life is in the impulsiveness of matter. The spirit of man is sick amid concepts. Do not ask him to be satisfied, ask him no more than to be calm, to believe that he has found his place. But only the Fool is really calm.”

If separation is a constituent part of life from its beginning — an idea implied in Artaud’s dealing with the theme of death as something that “has already happened” (Dumoulié *Artaud* 20) — the path of separation is marked, as Artaud points out, by suffering, but not only by this. The pursuit of points of cohesion, of clear expression and existence amidst the segmentation of abstract concepts and the absence of magnetism of ideas are only small incisions, fragile escapes. They can, however, produce a new awareness, a terrible kind of learning. Language, as mentioned above, is one of these forms, intrinsically ambiguous like all others, that allows an experimental experience of separation. In its pursuit, Artaud suggests, calmness is possible only in the case of absence of awareness.

### 5.10. Synthetic Experience

In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940), Benjamin gives evidence of having maintained the reading of experience he professed in the mid-thirties, that of the break-up of a communal word and milieu, partially related to pre-capitalist work organisation. In 1940, he assigns the term “atrophy of experience” to “the replacement of the older narration by information, [and] of information by sensation” (*Motifs* 159). Benjamin’s statement is connected with the assumption, demonstrated by Karl Kraus, of the “great extent to which the linguistic use of newspapers paralysed the imagination of the readers” (*Motifs* 159). The isolation of information from experience means that the former is not a part of tradition. It does not engage in transmission or integration into long-established customs. In the same essay, Benjamin evokes the work of Marcel Proust to demonstrate the effort required to restore the features of storytelling, as opposed to information in the contemporaneous conditions — a restoration that can only take place under “synthetic” conditions.

Benjamin’s exact statement is: “Proust’s work *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* may be regarded as an attempt to produce experience synthetically, as Bergson imagines it, under today’s conditions, for there is less and less hope that it will come into being naturally” (*Motifs* 157). While the word synthetic etymologically means “place together” — from the Greek *sunthetikos*, based on *suntithenai* — it has developed into at least three meanings, all of them evoked by the use of Benjamin. The first of them can be derived from the etymology, the same to be found in “synthesis.” The second of them means producing something artificially by imitating a natural product. And the third meaning emerges in a philosophical context. It means, of a proposition, that the truth or falsity of it is determinable by recourse to experience.

The use of “synthetic” by Benjamin opposes “naturally” and appears in connection with Henri Bergson. Bergson defines the mental ability of intuition as the synthetic recovering of data that has been analysed by intelligence. Intuition, according to this understanding, can take place either in the term of an intellectual effort, or spontaneously (Coelho). Between the means at someone’s disposal to express a particular subject, and the intuition of it, there is a leap of incommensurable nature. Bergson describes the philosophical activity as intuitive par excellence. The sense of a synthetic production of experience can be described, therefore, as the act of combining different matters, and by that very act, exceeding the matters in question, while producing a form that does not derive naturally from them. Given that the conditions for experience are in decay, a synthetic production of experience takes place by the reconstruction of an artificial form of experience. It imitates the natural one, while exceeding the materials made available to it.

Proust’s operation in particular is described by Benjamin in the following terms: “where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past” (*Motifs* 159). Here the character of combination is explicit, while the materials are designated to be the individual and collective past. Considering the elaborations mentioned above, it is possible to see that this synthetic form puts together elements that belong, on the one hand, to the collective experience brought up by the figure of the storyteller, and, on the other hand, to the individual experience expressed most prominently by the novel. The synthesis, represented here by Proust’s novel, allows the crossing of the individual field of experience towards its opening to the collective dimension, all while maintaining the novel’s framework.

Some further elements of this construction can be found in Benjamin’s essay “The Image of Proust” (1929), published thus before the articles on experience from the thirties. In its opening lines, Benjamin describes Proust’s work as the “unconstruable synthesis” of different genres into one, that of autobiography. He then evokes the extremely unhealthy conditions in which this work was produced, to state that “the image of Proust is the highest physiognomic expression which the irresistible growing discrepancy between literature and life was able to assume” (*Image* 202). The title’s reference to image, therefore, points to a strange form of synthesis, that of a “physiognomic expression” related to the indication of a general character in Proust’s image. This character can be summarised in the following: while the French author draws a book from his lived experience, he offers an image of the growing separation taking place between literature and life. One could add that the vanishing

figure of the storyteller also gives a testimony of this growing separation. Benjamin envisions the work of Proust as the crossing of individual experience, referred to above as *Erlebnis*, towards the production of a new form of experience, which he describes as being synthetically produced.

In the texts of Artaud and Benjamin approached above, the emergence of new modes of experiencing takes place from the identification, set off much earlier, of the inaccessibility of the conditions of traditional experience. In Benjamin, this diagnosis is linked to the decay of a psychosocial configuration, related to both the epic world (Lukács *Novel* 30) and the magical relationship of ancient men with the cosmos (Benjamin *One-Way* 92-4). In Artaud, this diagnosis concerns the theme of separation, described as life's eternal power of detachment. In both cases, a form of individual experience is concerned; in Benjamin, as the term of the decay of traditional experience, and in Artaud, as the departing point of all experiencing, in the sense that "one always experiences oneself," even when it implies not having a complete access to one's own experience.

At the same time, both these individual experiences, presented by the authors as unconditional in the current historical period, have their inner limitations at times extrapolated in favor of other forms, which are ventilated with elements of traditional configurations. This is no surprise, considering, for instance, how Benjamin described traditional experience, in particular in the essay "The Storyteller..." as suffering a moment of decay, but not extinction. The same can be said about Artaud, for whom the character of separation does not completely prevent the occurrence of moments of fusion, as much evanescent and fragile as they are. In Artaud's writings, this is the background of the affirmation presented above: the author, in this case, Artaud, continues to live, when the problem is *precisely* that he lives (*Œuvres* 145). While being born implies separation from the original matter of life, identified above with the membrane, the fact of being alive also encompasses the possibility, and perhaps the necessity, of escaping separation.

A short access to the considerations of Didi-Huberman on the decay of experience, and the forms of pessimism and optimism related to it, are informative in this context. In his analysis, the author resumes the work of Benjamin, while criticising, in this context, the critical approach of Giorgio Agamben. For Didi-Huberman (65), the notion of decay of experience implies transformation and crisis, but not necessarily destruction and absence. In the diagnosis of decay of traditional experience, Benjamin would have made use of a catastrophic world view, in order to express the radical changes taking place in the interwar

period. This world view, however, was not an end in itself, but a means to reach another form of experience. Benjamin's exact phrase on this decay made reference to a decrease of value: "Experience has fallen in price"<sup>435</sup> (qtd. in Didi-Huberman 104).

Benjamin presents the conditions in which certain ways of seeing, narrating, wandering, in one word, experiencing, started to vanish, to give place to new forms. His attitude while describing these processes was not always free from nostalgia — perhaps, one should say, nostalgia was never completely absent —, but neither was Benjamin unwelcoming towards the emerging formations. He attempted to identify progressive tendencies among them. The argument of Didi-Huberman, on this concern, is that the process of decay is never complete. There are always remainders, rests of the previous configuration lingering in the current one. These surviving forms do not possess any redemptive power. They cannot restore the previous configuration. The best format to be assigned to them, in fact, is that of images, since they have the character of reminiscence, and never the completeness of an object (Didi-Huberman 72). Here Didi-Huberman borrows his definition from Benjamin's notion of dialectical image, that is, the one that renders a certain period of time visible, pointing to both its location in the past, and its reappearance in the present.

If the production of synthetic experience implies the conjunction of distinguished matters, and the imitation of a natural form, it necessarily draws from the aspects of traditional experience that remain somehow present in the modern experience. In the writings of Artaud, this experience appears at first under the sign of control, that is, the attempt to prevent life from consisting of mere encounters with ordinary reality (*Œuvres* 159). As opposed to this, Artaud is interested in subtle, rarified contacts, in connection to the invisible reality or *surreality*. Artaud's description reminds of the evocation of Benjamin on the distracted wanderer of the big cities, to which everything appears as a spectacle, allowing him or her to withdraw from any form of engagement (*Work of Art* 239). In this context, Artaud suggests that surrealism, in its appeal to an enlarged notion of reality — containing the material and the spiritual — prevents the subject from having no more than ordinary experiences. The synthetic experience of intoxication, the remarkable product of surrealism in Benjamin's view (*Surrealism* 179), could be described in the same terms. The theme of control evoked by Artaud would reappear under the name of cruelty in his writings from the thirties.

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<sup>435</sup> "Die Erfahrung ist im Kurse gefallen"

On another front, the above-mentioned assemblage of new factors that intervene in the *dénaturation* (“denaturation”) of Artaud’s life — an interesting term to be related to the *conscience nouvelle* (“new consciousness”) — point to the intimate loss that he experiences in relation to his own being (Artaud *Œuvres* 175). However, the theme of *déperdition*, which can be translated both as loss and fading, suggests that Artaud suffers from a transformation, a processual perdition that, as if to his own surprise, appears as a new form of consciousness. From the experience of nothingness, “c’est une vie nouvelle qui renaît, de plus en plus profonde”<sup>436</sup> (*Œuvres* 179). In this context, the evocation of a laugh at the vain human beliefs in the indestructible duration of consciousness, in the first lines of “Nouvelle Lettre sur Moi-Même,” points not only to Artaud’s pride, but also to the possibility of situating himself from another perspective, that of having gained a consciousness of his process of fading.

The synthetic character of this new consciousness is further suggested by the theme of magnetism. When ideas lack attraction, Artaud envisions them as no more than static objects and movements: a descriptive view of the world (*Œuvres* 146). This situation is evoked as *une misère sans nome* (“a nameless misery”). However, it is in the midst of this impoverished experience that emerges an *abominable savoir* (“terrible wisdom”). The process of this emergence is described by Artaud in terms of a *connaissance par le vide* (“knowledge through emptiness”), an evocation that aligns the themes of *néant*, *misère* and *vide* as the conditions for a new form of experience. Just like in Benjamin’s “Experience and Poverty,” Artaud suggests that new experiences are preceded by moments of absolute destitution. Benjamin stated that the unprecedented poverty brought up by the war and the economical crisis in the interwar period, a material but also spiritual form of poverty, created the extreme sense of disillusionment that could only make use of poverty in a positive sense (*Poverty* 734). This was related to the possibility to start from scratch after the failure of bourgeois values, and move towards a revolutionary experience. Once again, the radically personal character of Artaud’s writings, and the cultural analysis of Benjamin are at the same time confronted and reflected in each other.

The terrible wisdom described by Artaud as having emerged from the fading of his being demands no more than “an intellectual silence” (*Œuvres* 146). That is, this wisdom, as an untranslatable science, cannot be framed within the existing knowledge. It requires a new form of expression, apart from discourse and the metaphorical use of images. In “Position de la Chair” and “Manifeste en Language Clair” this position is clarified. The Flesh is described

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<sup>436</sup>“it’s a new life being reborn, becoming deeper and deeper”

as an instance in which elements are reunited that usually appear separated in society, such as thought and vitality. The nerves are understood as the instances irrigating the Flesh with material for the elaboration of notions. This material consists of images. In Artaud's words: "l'image amenée par mes nerfs prend la forme de l'intellectualité la plus haute ... et c'est ainsi que j'assiste à la formation d'un concept qui porte en lui la fulguration même des choses"<sup>437</sup> (*Œuvres* 148). Images, being in themselves the content seized by nerves and a form of intellectuality, participate in the formation of concepts, which, instead of being abstract signs of things, have kept the latter's sparkle.

Artaud's formulation evokes the description of Freud, mentioned above, in which the image is the privileged form adopted by all materials that intend to reach consciousness. In the dream-formation, for instance, the unconscious excitation or thought-formation has to associate with memories couched in visual form, close to the perceptive system, to be able to trespass the preconscious censorship (Freud *Dreams* 543). Images, in the Freudian theory, are somehow the most inoffensive form to be adopted by the psychic ideational content. At the same time, they correspond to a form of knowledge and language that, being richer in associations, allow the hiding of unconscious wishes in them. In the same logic, Freud suggests that the content of the dream should be transported to the narrative form, since images are not good for analysis purposes, for the amount of associations that they evoke. In the use of Artaud, the image allows the resolution of an eternal conflict between reason and heart, once the form of knowledge produced by it is material and spiritual at the same time. While both authors alluded to the richness of images, for Freud images are different from thought-formations, even if they are involved in thinking activities.

The image opens the possibility, for Artaud, of "possessing" his own pain, since it is a form of clear language that allows not only the gaining of a relatively distanced perspective of himself, but also of an obscure knowledge. Artaud's experience, as has been mentioned above, is an interrogation of experience. But this interrogation, just like Benjamin's catastrophic perspective in the thirties, produces nevertheless one experience, synthetic in relation to the supposed original ones. Moreover, while Artaud acknowledges that the activity of thinking is not given, that it suffers from intrinsic absence, discontinuity and misery, he attests to the great power of thinking in exceeding the given matters offered to it, and in extrapolating, as himself suggests, the very realm of thought (*Œuvres* 145).

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<sup>437</sup>"the image provided by my nerves take the form of the highest intellectuality ... this is how I attend to the formation of a concept that carries in itself the same fulguration of things"



If the notion of image is already present in the experience of intoxication, which seems to appear, in different forms, in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin, it is also remarkable that the space of political action revealed by surrealism, according to Benjamin, is the space reserved for images. These images are not destined to aesthetic contemplation, what would lead to a non-dialectical experience. When Benjamin identifies the need to organise pessimism, which can be related here to the vision of decay as destruction, this means, on the one hand, to abandon an anarchist attitude towards an organisation in the form of communism, and, on the other hand, “to expel moral metaphors from politics and to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images” (Benjamin *Surrealism* 191).

This space of images, it should be remembered, is also the one through which the mass acquires consciousness of itself, even if it is a limited one. When the technical development, particularly within fascism, allowed the production of images of the masses to somehow attest to their existence, and to prove the support of a political regime, the powerful sphere of images was being manipulated, from a potentially revolutionary consciousness, to a self-centred one (Benjamin *Work of Art* 251). This points to the importance of images in the processes of self-awareness and consciousness, personally and collectively speaking. Artaud, having somehow traversed the expropriation of his own experience, suggests that the form of knowledge brought up by images, even if it is an obscure and fragile wisdom, allows the gaining of new principles, of lucidity amid disorder.

If the sphere of images is that of survival, it must be due to the unconscious predilection for the imagery form. In his essay on Baudelaire, Benjamin states, while making references to Dilthey and Bergson, that “Experience is indeed a matter of tradition, in collective experience as well as in private life. It is the product less of facts firmly anchored in memory, than of a convergence in memory of accumulated and frequently unconscious data.” (*Motifs* 157). This data is precisely the one that appears in dreams, and in those rare moments in which an image is capable of giving someone hold of her or his experience. If that is so, even the images misused by fascism must have kept a trace of the class-consciousness they could have given rise to. This is the context in which both the collecting of images of intoxication by surrealism, and the elevating of psychic images to the level of valuable expressions of the spirit by Freud, gain their significance. However, just like the moment in which Freud realises that one cannot *explain* the psychic process taking place in dreams, “since to explain a thing means to trace it back to something already known” (Freud

*Dreams* 515), the explanation of new forms of experience, in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin, remain vague. Their openness does not weaken their importance. This importance is related to task of identifying, in the works of Artaud and Benjamin, a constructive character, in opposition to the common pessimistic interpretations.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The relationship between magic and experience in twentieth-century Europe can be understood as the perception of the limitations of enlightened reason and ideology, due partly to the culmination of technical development and the material and spiritual catastrophe brought by the wars. The emergence of the very notion of experience took place in two different contexts, that of perceptions and immediateness, and that of conceptions and processual duration. As previously discussed, experience, while it expresses the given facts of life, it also evokes what is not given: the transcendental and transformative dimensions of life.

The question of how to constitute transformative experience made use of aspects that were somehow repressed by the enlightened wave, though they did not completely disappear. Humanism and the traditional concept of experience were questioned, and there was a new interest in magic and mysticism. According to Grossman, the issue at stake was that of, “à partir de la mort de cette figure traditionnelle de l’homme ... réinventer — peut-être — un nouvel (un autre?) humanisme pour les siècles à venir, qui prenne en compte l’inhumain”<sup>438</sup> (*Déshumanités* 49).

The hypothesis proposed by this work is that Antonin Artaud and Walter Benjamin share a criticism of modern forms of experience, in particular those of the turn of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. Their criticism includes contemporary expressions of artistic, philosophical and private experiences. For Benjamin, the times were marked by a disconnection from the ritualised, shared forms of experience that had previously allowed the passage, from generation to generation, of living learning repeated, and transformed, across centuries. Artaud saw the multiple separations inflicted on consciousness and being as processes in which the mechanisation of the soul’s functions resulted in great losses of living wisdom, and a replacing of significative experiences with no more than caricatures of life.

At the time of his rupture with surrealism, Artaud was defending the importance of a transformation of life concerned primarily with the spirit, part of his insurrection against his perception that it was being restricted in various ways. Benjamin perceived that a decline in traditional experience would provoke irrevocable changes in our ways of referring to ourselves. The possibility of reconstruction that he saw in literature related to these changes,

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<sup>438</sup> “from the death of the traditional human figure ... reinvent - perhaps - a new (another?) humanism for the centuries to come, one that takes the inhuman into account”

and to the possibility of re-framing the present through contact with the past. Artaud's interest in experiences taking place outside mainstream European culture, in turn, points to the belief that modern reason had separated the elements of a world that a true culture used to hold together. This criticism of modern society resonates for both authors. From very different perspectives, they envisaged the unconscious as a privileged source of register and expression of alternative forms of experiencing. It is also the place where current and past magic perceptions, intuitions and engagements — such as practices of enchantment — can occur.

From the insertion of dreams into a schematic explanation of the functioning of the mind, Freud proposed that the activities of the unconscious are focused on the fulfilment of wishes, that is: the unconscious impulses move the psychic system in order to find discharge in consciousness (*Dreams* 542). Freud's schematic explanation of psychic life shows how the most complicated achievements of thought are possible without the assistance of consciousness. However, for Freud's assumptions to be accepted, as his own method exposes, one must feel comfortable to proceed by inference from a conscious effect, which is the only way to learn of the existence of unconscious formations, to the unconscious psychical process itself. In relation to approaches to dreams that had appeared before, Freud is responsible for a differentiation within the unconscious, one part of it being inadmissible to consciousness, and the other being able to reach the conscious mind after having fulfilled certain rules — namely, the unconscious and the preconscious. In this scenario, consciousness is presented as no more than a sense-organ, susceptible to be excited by contents emerged elsewhere but unable, like the perceptive system, to retain traces of alterations provoked by such perceptions. Thoughts are then occupied with the connections between different contents present in consciousness, and nothing more.

From these assumptions, Freud affirms that, since every conscious process could be traced back to its unconscious origin, the unconscious must be the larger sphere of psychical life, indeed “the true psychical reality” (*Dreams* 607). But due to the censorship imposed on this reality, it is as unknown to humans as is the reality of the external world; both of them accessing consciousness through certain filters. With this conceptualisation, Freud is isolating the psychological system in relation to both realities, the material and the psychical one, as if they were equally inaccessible to human beings. This seems to be a retreat from his previous positions, which veer towards a general relativism, in which everything outside consciousness is considered to be unknown, despite the fact that material reality had not

suffered any questioning of this kind, being in addition considered to be the ultimate source of dream-material, in the form of memories of experiences.

While the unconscious is at the centre of psychical life, it should not be held responsible for its actions, i.e. the expression of unconscious impulses must refer to the psychical reality, and not to the factual one (*Dreams* 95). This expresses the singular place assigned to the unconscious from the establishment of the Freudian theory: a special, limited and not entirely attainable dimension of life, which is nevertheless at the basis of all human actions. Therefore, if on the one hand, dreams, day-dreams, and other formations that give partial access to the unconscious are described by Freud as no more than a faint expression of an already transformed portion of such constitutive materials, on the other hand, within dreams and day-dreams one may, as some authors in addition to Freud have put it, have a taste of a life of the soul which is somehow free from the limitations and moral impositions from consciousness.

Freud, having started his book by opposing incorrect accounts of the world of dreams, counting amongst them the mystical interpretations, finishes the volume by giving an ambiguous account of the relationship between dreams and premonition: that there is similitude between past and future unconscious contents. He presents superstition and popular culture as “closer to the truth” than the ruling scientific approach. Freud’s intention to situate his theory within the patterns of nineteenth century science — which required the repudiation of superstitious beliefs — did not exclude the recurrent realisation, throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams*, of the similitudes between his own approach and pre-scientific accounts of the nature of human experience, together with a common basis for some of its deep sources. As a matter of fact, the unconscious is the dimension in which all these elements are to be found. Freud proposes, therefore, a new form of knowledge that differs from the ruling science, and relies on a dialogical process instead of an objective one. This suggests, as mentioned above, that there are two notions of science operating in Freud’s book. One of them concerns the “limited,” “fixed” science of the time, which is hostile to Freud’s theory. The second is Freud’s idea of science, which relies on scientific precepts, while also being open to new forms of scientific knowledge.

If there are two notions of science, there are also two ideas of mysticism operating in the book, that is to say, the one in which Freud finds the intuitions that are close to the propositions of psychoanalysis, and the one that inaccurately attributes sense to dreams as well as to other psychical phenomena, usually making use of fixed symbolism in the

treatment of signs. Freud's own "prescientific" beliefs were followed by his growing effort to integrate the "mystical" discoveries of psychoanalysis into scientific patterns. This gesture of integration is what dominates Freud's relationship with prescientific knowledge in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. It points to his recognition of a form of truth in it, while highlighting the need to submit it to scientific precepts. Freud's trajectory demonstrates that the process leading to the disclosure of the unconscious in the context of modern knowledge and civilisation has brought along traces of various non-modern beliefs.

And finally, the fact that Freud's theory is committed to the *expression* of the unconscious shows to what extent it belongs to the general trends of Western modernity, in which the pre-eminence of the subject, even if it is a non-conscious subject, is much emphasised. If on the one hand, Freud is referring to the rigidity of contemporary science, on the other hand, he acknowledges the lack of rigor in the statements of popular culture. The scientific work undertaken throughout *The Interpretation of Dreams* is not in complete accordance with the dominant science of the nineteenth century, making it wrong to assume that Freud's scientific intentions are completely superimposed on the sources coming from popular and ancient culture. At the same time, science being the field from which Freud expects the acceptance of his discoveries, he struggles for a change in its patterns. The two operative notions of science in the book can be summarised as the ruling science and the science practiced by Freud. The proposition advanced here, in relation to the emergence of the unconscious in Freud's theory, is that it is as close to nineteenth-century science as it is to pre-scientific knowledge on dreams and other psychic formations.

The ambiguous origins of the notion of unconscious, while it nearly disappeared in the subsequent appropriation of the work of Freud, is further explored in surrealism, as well as by Artaud and Benjamin. Freud represented, to the surrealist movement in general, a potential revelation, an important *espoir* ("hope"). As Breton states in 1924, Freud's work represented the end of an era of disregard for the dream in philosophical, physiological and even artistic spheres. Surrealism took part in this movement of rediscovery, but with a very different project. It proposed, on the one hand, to explore the unconscious beyond the boundaries of Freud's doctrine, the unconscious in its "pure state." On the other hand, it intended to submit these discoveries to reason, establishing a kind of method from the exploration of dark aspects of the personality. As Breton writes: "je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une

sorte de réalité absolue, de *surréalité*, si l'on peut ainsi dire"<sup>439</sup> (Manifestes 24). If surrealism contradicts Freud's theory, it also brings to the fore contributions from nineteenth-century parapsychology, different forms of occultism, and, after 1927, marxism.

As part to the European avant-garde current, this movement combined heterogeneous manifestations of the will to break with current cultural values. Together with the negation of certain modern ideologies, surrealism questions in particular the dominance of science in the quest for knowledge. It initiates a search for other sources that allow an appreciation of the "true value of life," sources lying outside the normalising framework of logic. In this sense, surrealism recovers, alongside Freud's official legacy and in spite of the psychiatrist's own methods, the kind of references he tried to subsume to science. The thematisation of occultism, madness and oriental culture, and the different approaches to the matter of otherness, can be considered a part of surrealism's exploration of pre-scientific knowledge.

The movement's attempt to enlarge the comprehension of the real and potential role of the unconscious in human experience, particularly in relation to waking life, proposed an interesting off-shoot of psychoanalytic theory. While Freud integrates the marginal contents of mysticism into his own scientific discourse, surrealism seems to be attempting the same in relation to occult practices, by engendering a discourse that is also self-instituting. However, while Freud focuses on getting his work accepted by a scientific community, and therefore promotes the submission of popular culture to the test of science, the surrealists seek the establishment of enlarged perception of reality, of which the unconscious, to some extent stripped of its scientific character, is an important source.

In the late twenties, the effort to prove the compatibility between the interpretation of dreams and a revolutionary perspective, undertaken by Breton in the second manifesto and in the book *Les Vases Communicants*, establishes some meeting points between trends of marxism and the surrealist elaboration of the legacy of Freud. At this moment, Artaud's vision grows incompatible with the position assumed by the surrealists, when the form of revolution becomes prescribed by the movement's appropriation of marxism. At the same, as mentioned previously, the distancing of Artaud seems to lie more in a change of perspective, on the part of the surrealists, towards Artaud, than towards the fundamental forms to be adopted by the surrealist revolution.

Despite its engagement with communism, surrealism judges there to be no need for it

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<sup>439</sup> "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak."

to review the methods it has used so far. Instead, it celebrates *la donné freudienne* (“the Freudian given”): the important contribution of Freud to the critique of the dominance of rational thinking. As part of this, the second manifesto testifies, as the First did in relation to dreams, to the importance of acknowledging supernatural powers, such as those of mediums, which, though rare, according to the surrealists, do exist. This rehabilitation of excluded forms of knowledge appears, for instance, in references to famous names in alchemy and hermeticism, alongside Sade and Lautréamont, in Breton’s writings in particular. The integration of occultist sources together with the other fields previously explored by the movement is part of the effort to enrich the revolutionary process with aspects that go beyond those experienced by consciousness. However, despite all of these trends, the idea of revolution occupies centre stage.

In a general sense, the notion of unconscious that emerges from the surrealist experience is detached from the cultural context in which it was conceived by Freud, that is, it is isolated from established scientific thinking as well as from the cultural milieu within which Freud’s theory sat. The “sacred enthusiasm” for the supernatural aspects of psychic life, prolonged by nineteenth-century psychiatry and still significant in Freud’s theory of dream interpretation, is refreshed by the surrealists in the form of practices that combined fabulous inspiration with automatic availability. The dictation of thought made men mere receptacles for marvellous contents, operating at the limits of reverie and concrete life. Dialectic materialism could enrich the meaning of concrete life, while itself being enriched by incursions into reverie.

The original and controversial conjunction represented by the approach of surrealism to the unconscious, psychoanalysis, unconventional forms of knowledge and the methods and ideology of dialectic materialism was an important influence on the works of Artaud and Benjamin. The comparison between the two authors allows for an understanding of the extent to which, in their works, these forms of “deviation” in relation to rational thinking play an active part in building the conditions for a transformative experience. Through the notion of magic as a trace, that is, the remaining inscription of a different, earlier mind-set to be found in current forms of living, the early texts of Artaud and Benjamin explore the access channels to a dimension that goes beyond both material reality and human perception. In voluntary as well as fortuitous actions — such as hypnosis, sleep and the act of reading — this access takes place through the dialectical relationship between different world views or configurations.



Artaud and Benjamin propose different locations where these traces have remained present and, therefore, "powerful, in contemporary experience. While Benjamin envisions traces of magic persisting in language, Artaud mentions actual magical practices as those through which a sense of another world can be explored. Having defended the existence of a remaining link between the human and the superior dimensions, he situates the *souffle* ("breath, spirit") as the connecting element. While this notion shares an "identical essence" with the other world, it also points to a connection with the material body. For Benjamin, the magical aspects of language represent a particular way of performing communication in modernity, which he describes as instrumental and "bourgeois." For him, the act of naming is the sign of a spiritual communication between men and things, the magic immediacy of language. The spiritual content of this denomination is its relationship to ancient meanings. Artaud, on the other hand, proposes the states of sleep and hypnosis as channels for the magical dimension, while remaining suspicious of the methodic incursions into these proposed by scientific approaches. He also evokes a set of "quasi-historical" figures, whose incantation practices are incomparable to the contemporary ones. The extent to which they can be actualised remains a question for Artaud.

While they point to a different psycho-social configuration, in which magic is assigned a prominent role, the writings of Artaud and Benjamin evoke the two different modes of civilisation proposed by Lukács (*Novel* 30), the integrated and the problematic, which are related, respectively, to the worlds of the epic and the tragedy in ancient Greece. Benjamin's description is close to the "rounded world" of epic configuration, but the dimension that the human spirit bridges, for Artaud, is not an epic one. It consists, more likely, of a recovered totality, made from heterogeneous elements. Here the seed of the fundamental difference between the writings of Artaud and Benjamin is already visible.

The idea of trace holds that the interaction between the two dimensions leads to the occurrence of inscriptions, which function as portents of magical experience. Therefore, as a remnant, the magic dimension is at the same time a sign of conflictive development and a trace that allows the reactivation of some of its aspects. The question of how exactly one should explore the remaining magical dimension, and for which purposes, remains relatively open, while the texts of Artaud and Benjamin suggest that contact with the magical dimension retains the meaning of an encounter with the unconscious, however in a varied form in relation to the Freudian text. Here the traces are the cultural imprints of a different world configuration which, despite being generally understood as historically completed, are

presented as constitutional elements of the present forms, and therefore in a constant dialectical relationship with them. The consideration of magic as a trace illuminates the importance and the role of this aspect in their works, while their points of convergence and departure with the work of Freud is of key interest.

Artaud and Benjamin's texts on surrealism, in turn, propose an interesting relationship between the notions of revolt and revolution, on the one side, and magic or the mystic dimension of experience, on the other. In Benjamin's approach, this subject takes the form of an analysis of the means through which surrealism is able to mobilise the energies of magic towards revolution. For Artaud it is the quest for a revolution of the spirit, and the issue of surrealism as a form of mystique or magic. For both of them, to advance towards revolution requires an engagement with the magic and mystic aspects of life. While Artaud explicitly refuses the limitation of the idea of revolution to what he calls "les cadres désespérants de la matière"<sup>440</sup> (*Œuvres* 238), the materialism that Benjamin envisions in surrealism is permeated with non-materialistic elements.

However, while the surrealists, in Benjamin's vision, approach the spiritual world from the standpoint of material reality, for Artaud the material dimension is secondary to the spirit. As the expression *une nouvelle sorte de magie* ("a new form of magic") denotes, Artaud and the surrealists possibly consider magic as a remnant of a different social configuration, in relation to which a *new* form of magic can be established, rather than magic itself. Despite the surrealist references to the Middle Ages, for Artaud, the ultimate status of magic must remain open. For Benjamin, as mentioned above, the intoxication to be found in surrealism is a re-enactment of the magical relationship between ancient man and the cosmos, a relationship that has disappeared in modern society.

In the profane illumination proposed by Benjamin, the material world, in its immediate presence, is united with the marvellous features associated with a remote point in time. The surrealist illumination proposed by Artaud and his colleagues, on the other hand, is connected with what they call "a state of fury." It expresses the spiritual insight and clarification gained through an exploration of the "eternal" aspects of the spirit, as well as through an attack on all instances of its oppression. As such, it keeps the same sense of a revealing an ecstatic inspiration, but without the explicit references to either cosmic experience or the material world in terms of places and objects.

Both Artaud and Benjamin identify in the pessimistic attitude of surrealism a

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<sup>440</sup> "the desperate frames of matter"

limitation to action. Artaud opposed materialism as offering a profoundly immutable and static notion of reality. He considers engagement with the “invisible” forces of the “spiritual centre of the world” to be indispensable in the pursuit of any form of revolution. The inclusion of these immaterial energies in the revolutionary cause is also a necessity for Benjamin, even if the realms of spirit and matter are not clearly distinguished in his essay. For Benjamin, surrealism should fully engage with the mobilisation of the “ecstatic energies” as part of its methodical preparation for the revolution, to take a full commitment to communism.

Conceptualisations of the magical, spiritual dimension of modern experience are envisioned, for Artaud as well as for Benjamin, in close relationship with an urge to transform both spiritual and material reality. A comparison of their views allows for a better understanding of the revolutionary aspect of Artaud’s thought, for instance, as a highly spiritual, but also material transformation. However, Benjamin praises the fact that surrealism allows for the loosening of individuality, and Artaud, that it allows the ultimate expression of one’s spirit. Both reveal surrealism’s nexus with the rich space of images drawn from its contact with spiritual energies, the act of “revelation” also being an important aspect in their own thought. That is, to organise pessimism, as mentioned above, means “to discover in political action a sphere reserved one hundred percent for images” (Benjamin *Surrealism* 191). This notion of image encompasses much more than optical perceptiveness, as suggested in the discussion on the consciousness of the masses through an image-based depiction of themselves. Images must be taken as impressions, representations and ideas in themselves.

After 1937, Artaud assigns magic a principal role in the practices that contributed, amongst other things, to the events leading to his internment. In “Lettre sur Lautréamont,” the masses or *la conscience générale* (“the general consciousness”) appear as engaging in the processes that preserve society’s status quo, particularly through the neutralisation of a few outstanding individuals. While in Artaud the masses are the agents of homogenising processes, for Benjamin they are, at the same time, the subjects and the objects of different social tendencies. Even if such notion appears only towards the end of Benjamin’s text, it assumes a rather important position, once it leads to the connection between his analysis on the work of art and the political context in which he envisages the analysis as a tool: the fight against fascism.

The notion of distraction in Benjamin’s essay establishes a connection with Artaud’s account of the forgetfulness of the masses regarding their own evil deeds, while bearing an

association with the “state of fascination” of the masses identified by Freud. However differently, Artaud and Benjamin both express the idea that the mass phenomenon precipitates an adjustment of reality, in which magic is assigned the role of the medium. The emergence of an understanding of the collective dimension of experience, particularly in terms of the masses, integrates their search for elements capable of revealing the true or revolutionary facets of reality. The question that remains open, in both Artaud’s and Benjamin’s account, is the form that this sought-after revelation or transformation should take. For Artaud, it concerns the content known by the extraordinary consciousness, the truth that the masses intent to erase. In the writings of Benjamin, the nature of change is related to an exploration of the dimension of images, in a way that enables the reconstruction, following the decay of traditional experience, of “synthetic” and aesthetic forms of living, taking into account bodies as important residues of social processes.

The sphere of magic, in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin approached here, appears as the dimension in which ancient, repressed, at times evil, but also potentially revolutionary aspects can be accessed and exploited. The unconscious is the dimension through which magic is present in the contemporary world. Magic is envisioned from the point of view of a residual position, in the sense that the authors do not consider it to be a dominant dimension of reality. An exception to this can be found in Artaud’s writings from the forties, in which magic, surreptitiously, is the means through which different aspects of life are managed and organised. However here the notion of magic is presented through incantation practices that take place, for the most part, unconsciously.

Perhaps this is the reason why Artaud states, in his 1947 letters to Breton, his disbelief in occultism and magic. Artaud’s statement comes together with the affirmation that acts of bewitchment take place continuously within civilised society. For Benjamin, in turn, magic is reminiscent in the sense that it used to be integrated into the very fabric of experience, but different material transformations caused the world view related to it to retrocede. The traces of this world view can be accessed, and can give a glimpse of the magic powers that are still contained, although in a repressed form, in the modern world. Artaud, in the same context as that quoted above, expresses the current status of magic in the following way: “il n’y a pas de cosmos et chaque homme est son monde à lui tout seule, à lui donc à s’y initier en le faisant vivre”<sup>441</sup> (*Œuvres* 1209). Here the themes of incantation practices and personal cosmogony

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<sup>441</sup> “there is no cosmos and every man is his own world alone; only he can initiate himself into it, and make it live”

are placed together.

Freud's theory proposed an ambiguous incorporation of pre-scientific forms of knowledge into his supposedly scientific understanding of the unconscious. The ontological aspect of his theory, even if it was not particularly elaborated, implied a notion of experience that was very different from the philosophical currents of the time. If the concept of the unconscious represented the almost complete inaccessibility of a part of the human personality, it also pointed to the larger, unexploited aspects of psychic life. In the early writings of Artaud and Benjamin, the notion of experience is, to some extent, established through contrasts. While Benjamin employs two different usages, one from a relatively informal context, the other from the philosophical field, Artaud expresses, in short essays and correspondences, the theme of a fundamental separation of being, a subject that he details through the example of his personal "case." Artaud and Benjamin's suggested methods for dealing with a turning point in the discussion of experience both touch on the ideas of incomparable solitude and forged communion.

In the writings of Artaud, the exploration of man's spiritual and material condition, particularly through epistolary writing, takes the form of a general criticism of the ideas of self-conscious, attainable, intelligible life. The experimental form that emerges from his questioning of the idea of the ownership of experience seems to take place through the act of writing itself, that is, in the dramatisation of the inaccessibility of being, through the particular form of exposition allowed by written composition. As Dumoulié (*Artaud* 5) points out, this in no sense means that the reflexivity of writing allows a recovery of the self for Artaud. If the expression of separation is favoured by the epistolary form, it is because it implies the act of establishing distance.

In fact, the theme of separation, in Artaud's writings, has the ambiguous feature of being able to recast, through the problematisation of what he sees as the corroded foundations of being, the artifice of creation. In "Correspondance avec Jacques Rivière" (1924), Artaud makes explicit the idea that literary artifice risks falsifying the true illness of being. Nevertheless, Artaud's proposition to remain true to the condition affecting him is in fact an essentially literary act. The "refusal to lie" serves to redouble the literariness of the writing, just as the original gesture of literature contains both separation from reality, and the promise of giving away its most precious secrets, perhaps the very cry of life. Artaud famously questions Rivière: "pourquoi mentir, pourquoi chercher à mettre sur le plan littéraire une

chose qui est le cri même de la vie”<sup>442</sup> (*Œuvres* 79).

Artaud’s position in relation to his *maladie* is, analogously, a unique possession and a radical dispossession, in relation to which he can only write, but only on condition that “le corps momifié de l’œuvre ne se substitue pas au corps vivant de son auteur”<sup>443</sup> (Dumoulié *Artaud* 5). For Benjamin, it is the ideal of a forged community that first emerges as an experimental form of experience. From the rejection of “experience as meaninglessness,” proposed by the adult, this community is necessarily of a spiritual nature, since the spirit is the very content of the experience of youth. The definition of spirit in this context is not made particularly clear by Benjamin. It is something to be awaited and actualised by the youth movement itself, whose “mission” is to remain attentive and open to it. The spiritual approach identifiable in the two texts of Benjamin that deal with experience centres on his criticism of the use of the notion in an instrumental sense. Despite being a constant in his texts of the time, the concept of spirit can be understood more as a virtual point around which his criticism turns than a dimension that he explores specifically.

Benjamin’s critique of experience centres on “enclosed living,” a fixation on one’s own triviality, a recrudescence of the bourgeois notion of individuality. This once more represents the highlighting of a form of instrumentalisation. In these terms, Artaud’s unique “testimony” partially coincides with Benjamin’s approach. Neither the implicit notion of reality as accessible and achievable, nor immediate psychological consciousness are to be found in their versions of experience. In general terms, Artaud and Benjamin criticise, from different angles, the notion of subject, and the correlated conception of knowledge, part of the inheritance of the enlightenment. While Benjamin makes the targets of his attack explicit without developing a positive formulation of experience, in Artaud the criticism is implicit in the description of a personal case that is anything but private.

If the spirit is not the ultimate dimension in which Artaud and Benjamin’s criticisms might find resolution, neither is the dimension of language. It appears not as the promise of resolution, but as the necessary form for an attempt to find a way out of the limitations of experience. As distinct as the approaches of Benjamin and Artaud are, they both point to a problematisation of the notion of experience that focuses on much more than just their personal views, and at the same time is out of step with the thought of others of their time, as Artaud’s correspondence, and Benjamin’s criticism of Kant, suggest. However, a comparison

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<sup>442</sup> “why lie, why seek to put on a literary level something that is the cry of life itself”

<sup>443</sup> “the mummified body of the work does not replace the living body of its author”

of their writings suggests that experience, far from being a given, is a highly problematic notion, in abstract as well as practical terms, particularly at that historical moment.

Language plays an important role in the approach to experience of both authors. It represents a genuine moment of experience, which touches on both the lost worlds of ancient experience and the projected state of coherence from which new forms may emerge. For instance, the idea that spoken language is just another animal instinct, that of expressive mimicry, leads to some common ground in the writings of Artaud and Benjamin. In Benjamin's "Problems in the Sociology of Language" (1935), it is as if Artaud's account of language had found some correspondence in the academic understanding. But while there are hints of overlap with Benjamin's ideas here, they are superficial compared to the significant differences in their approaches to language and experience.

While Benjamin's notion of language is hermeneutically-oriented, aiming, ultimately, at the restoration of an interpretation that enlarges the comprehensibility of the world, Artaud's is a tragically-oriented notion, concerned with the irrecoverable fragmentation of the soul, preventing the formation of meaning. As mentioned above, although Benjamin does not envision any ultimate resolution or restoration, and indeed at times expresses the fragmented dimension as the only experienceable one, and although Artaud recurrently nourishes ideas of recuperation and the joining of fragments into some new form of consistency, the thoughts of the two writers cannot be aligned, let alone combined.

The concept of writing as an intermediary, pertinent to Artaud's personal experience, also suggests it could be a sort of beacon in the context of the pain of separation, albeit an equivocal one. If, for Benjamin, language is the archive of a lost world of experience, that can reappear and transform present experience, for Artaud it is, at this point, the sphere in which the problem of expression and the possibility of its capture by language is dramatised, a sphere that nonetheless allows for the establishment of a provisory interjacent instance between spirit and life. The original dimension of language, as suggested by Benjamin, is the one in which language, strictly speaking, does not exist. In it, one is removed from language: similarities are fully perceived and immediately read. Gestures, and the resonant gestures that are sounds, are the last elements of this form of perception to disappear, and they constitute the closest approximations to the body's original expressive abilities. As Artaud states, in the context of this form of retreat from multiplicity: "je n'aurais plus besoin de parler"<sup>444</sup> (*Œuvres* 166).

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<sup>444</sup> "and I will no longer need to talk"

Fundamental differences and subordinate kinships underlie the approaches of Artaud and Benjamin to language and experience. This is also evident in a consideration of the relationship between their different conceptions of image. Considered a form of language, it has an expressive relationship with the aspects of experience outlined by Benjamin and Artaud. Benjamin described the new forms of experience that emerge from the decay of traditional configurations as “synthetically produced” experiences (*Motifs* 157). This form of engendering experience can be described as the act of combining different materials, and by that very act, exceeding the materials in question. Given that the conditions for experience are in decay, a synthetic form of production of experience takes place through the “artificial” reconstruction of experience. It imitates the natural one, while exceeding the materials made available to it.

In the texts of Artaud and Benjamin, the emergence of new forms of experiencing departs from the identification, begun much earlier, of the inaccessibility of the conditions of traditional experience. In Benjamin, this diagnosis is linked to the decay of a psycho-social configuration, related to both the epic world (Lukács *Novel* 30) and the magical relationship of ancient man with the cosmos (Benjamin *One-Way* 92-4). In Artaud, this diagnosis concerns the theme of separation, described as life’s eternal power of detachment. In both cases, a form of individual experience is involved; in Benjamin, as the location of the decay of traditional experience, and in Artaud, as the point of departure of all experiencing, even if that means not having complete access to one’s own experience.

At the same time, both these forms of individual experience, presented by the authors as unconditional in the historical period in which they found themselves, are formed from a contact with elements of traditional configurations of experience. This is no surprise, considering, for instance, Benjamin’s description of traditional experience as suffering a moment of decay, but not extinction. The same can be said about Artaud, for whom the character of separation does not completely prevent the occurrence of moments of fusion, as evanescent and fragile as they may be. If the production of synthetic experience implies the conjunction of distinct types of matter, and the imitation of a natural form, it necessarily draws on the aspects of traditional experience that remain somehow present in modern experience.

According to Benjamin, the constant stimuli offered by modern life produce immediate effects on consciousness. However, occupied as we are with our own survival, we cannot process such effects completely, but must deal with them as quickly as possible. The



result is that stimuli do not become a memory trace, are not fixed as deeper, unconscious memories, making it hard for them to become part of meaningful experiences. This is the *Schokerlebnis* (“shock experience”), the only possible experience for the modern subject, according to Benjamin. Modernity, in his work, is characterised as uncondusive to meaningful and transformative experiences. However, in the same essay, Benjamin points to Baudelaire in discussing the identification of a new situation, that of the reconstruction of conditions of experience through literary work (*Motifs* 193-4).

The idea of *déperdition* (“loss, fading”) in the work of Artaud, in turn, suggests that he suffers from a transformation, a processual perdition that, seemingly to his own surprise, appears as a new form of consciousness. Detailing the formation of notions through the flesh, Artaud states: “l’image amenée par mes nerfs prend la forme de l’intellectualité la plus haute”<sup>445</sup> (*Œuvres* 148). In Artaud’s usage, the image allows for the resolution of an eternal conflict between “reason and heart,” as the form of knowledge produced by it is material and spiritual at the same time. While for Benjamin significant and transformative images might emerge through literature, for Artaud this is a fruitless field. He wrote to Rivière: “vous avez mis le doigt sur une côté de moi-même; la littérature proprement dite ne m’intéresse qu’assez peu”<sup>446</sup> (*Œuvres* 78).

The notion of image is present in the experience of intoxication, which appears, in different forms, in the writings of both Artaud and Benjamin. The space of political action revealed by surrealism is, according to Benjamin, the space reserved for images. This space, it should be remembered, is also the one through which the masses acquire a form of consciousness, albeit a limited one. This points to the importance of images in the processes of self-awareness, both personally and collectively speaking. Artaud, having somehow traversed the expropriation of his own experience, suggests that the knowledge propitiated by images, while obscure and fragile, allows for the gaining of new principles, for lucidity amidst disorder. In Artaud’s later texts, it is the idea of cruelty that assumes the form of control and contact with the living forces. As a sign of excess, *la cruauté* is identified with the exigency of human existence.

Through their explorations of the magic or mystical dimensions of life, Artaud and Benjamin investigate and define a form of experience that not only suggests a radical reading of the conditions of experiencing in modernity, but also outlines the different forms taken by

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<sup>445</sup> “the image provided by my nerves takes the form of the highest intellectuality”

<sup>446</sup> “you have touched a portion of myself; actual literature interests me very little”

experience following the crisis of traditional definitions precipitated by the work of Freud. The unconscious in Artaud and Benjamin's writings, not always explicitly approached here, is present in the frequent recurrence of states that suggest the disintegration of individuality and established social forms, such as death, intoxication, bewitchment, dreams, boredom and ecstasy.

Benjamin envisions the unconscious as a fundamental element of modern experience, being the dimension in which the remnants of a magical past are contained and occasionally revealed in contemporary activities, such as in language, in images of inebriation, and in the products of technology that present previously unknown aspects of reality. These partially represent the experimental reconstruction of experience from the analysis of the decay of traditional modes of living.

In the writings of Artaud, the unconscious is a source, one that can provide as much release as restriction. For if full human experience is constantly prevented, it is because human beings themselves, partially through unconscious operations, deny it the possibility of plentifulness, as beings "qui eurent besoin de la mort pour savoir ce que c'était que vivre"<sup>447</sup> (*Œuvres XIV* 50). Artaud's vision is concerned, above all, with the possibility of authenticity in the face of inner and outer impositions on the spirit; hence he denounces the participation of the unconscious in manipulative actions.

The prevention of possession of one's own body, thought and experience, and, at the same time, the finding of one's inner voice and modes of action in the face of this absence, are some of the issues at stake for Artaud and Benjamin in the problematic scenario relating to the possibility of experience in the twentieth century. The other facet of this situation concerns the atmosphere of revolt and revolution that had been alive in Europe since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and assumed acute urgency immediately before the World Wars. Artaud and Benjamin express the necessary occupation, for twentieth-century authors, with both the negative and positive aspects of this context, that of a crisis of the rational mind, and the need to enlarge the human field of action, expressed through lucid diagnosis, disillusioned attitudes of disillusionment and constructive propositions.

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<sup>447</sup> "who would need death to know what it was like to live"

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